

Herald Sun

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Wave of change shakes Pacific

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THINK of the Pacific islands to our north and east. What images come to mind?

Sun-soaked white beaches, groves of coconut palms, bright hibiscus flowers and friendly, smiling locals?

Maybe, but a more accurate image would be a very long and very large invoice, made out to the Australian taxpayer.

Aid programs are essential if Australia is to be a good global citizen, but they are costing us a lot in the Pacific.

Take Papua New Guinea. Australia will spend \$332 million on aid there in the current financial year alone.

In the Solomons, we will cough up a further \$223 million for AusAID programs this year.

That is over and above the \$800 million spent on the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands since 2003.

Then there's Bougainville, where over the past decade Australia has spent more than \$200 million on the peace process and post-conflict resolution.

Add a further \$33.8 million on aid for Fiji, plus \$13.4 million for Tonga; not counting the recent deployment of armed forces there, the cost of which is still unknown.

And don't forget East Timor, which has received an extraordinary \$2.6 billion in aid and military expenditure since 1999.

The total bill is starting to look scary and what have we bought for our bucks?

PNG is a basket case, Bougainville, at best, is a devastated society, recovering from a secessionist war with PNG.

The Solomons is a failed state and Fiji faces its fourth destructive and divisive military coup in 20 years.

As for Timor, Australia's well-intentioned involvement has not been much more successful in delivering peace than Indonesia's brutal occupation.

And there's Tonga; rioting mobs called for democracy, causing tens of millions of dollars in estimated losses and needing Australian and New Zealand soldiers to bring things under control.

So, if we aren't even close to making the Pacific calm, what do we get for our investment?

Have we at least been able to use our economic clout to buy some influence, creating a sphere of interest?

Unfortunately, events suggest not. Australia's relationship with the West Pacific is conducted amid tension, difficulty and often resentment rather than co-operation.

Rightly or wrongly, we are seen as domineering and neo-colonial, arrogant and pushy.

Prime Minister Howard, for example, recently had to face down an angry reception in Fiji during the South Pacific Forum as the Solomons and PNG denounced his Government's treatment of their nations.

THE uproar stemmed from the attempted arrest in Port Moresby of Fiji-born Australian lawyer Julian Moti, named as the new Solomon Islands Attorney-General, but wanted on long-standing pedophilia charges.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare responded by accusing Australia of violating the sovereignty of the Solomon Islands.

To Canberra's chagrin, Moti, far from being extradited, was covertly flown to the Solomon Islands, in a PNG Defence Force aircraft.

To many Pacific leaders, using federal police in PNG as part of the assistance program to detain Moti was nothing short of neo-colonialism.

For Australia, Moti's escape was a corrupt abuse of government facilities.

So what to do? Should Australia just walk away?

That would be easy enough and would save a lot of money, but it is probably the one thing we cannot do.

Australia's security depends on a stable and prosperous Pacific, with effective channels for dialogue and negotiation.

Without this, our region could become a playground for criminals, illegal fishermen, people smugglers, drug dealers, gangsters and terrorists, all of whom readily exploit weak or isolated states.

We urgently need to find a new, more effective and co-operative approach to regional engagement in the Pacific, and we need to find it fast.

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