

# CLASS AND CULTURE IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

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## The Political Economy of Decolonisation and Nationhood in Small Pacific Societies

*Geoff Bertram*

To an economist with little previous experience in the Pacific region, two features of decolonisation in the very small Pacific territories stand out. The first is that decolonisation was colonial policy: the process of increasing the political "distance" between New Zealand and its dependent territories, or between the UK and its colonies, was promoted and designed more by the metropolitan powers than by local initiative. This is not to say that the latter was absent; simply that it was neither a *necessary*, nor the dominant, driving force in the process. Consequently, a study of the political institutions of the Island states tends to tell us more about the former colonial powers than about the indigenous peoples, their cultures or their aspirations.

The second feature is that the emergence of self-governing political entities in the South Pacific coincided with a sharp increase in the extent to which Island economies and societies were integrated with the metropolitan growth poles of the region — New Zealand, Australia, and the western coast of North America. Political superstructures are not necessarily direct products of the economic and social "base", but they are inevitably conditioned by it. Political systems ostensibly designed to embody and promote local autonomy for the indigenous peoples, have presided in practice over economic trends which point in a rather different direction. In the economic environment of the smaller South Pacific countries in the

1980s, the post-colonial state is an agency for the capturing and distribution of aid flows rather than an instrument for the development of autonomous indigenous economic systems. This is not necessarily a bad thing (quite the contrary, in fact) but it results in a good deal of ambiguity and some schizophrenia in debates over development policy. There is a wide gap between rhetoric and reality on the role of the political and administrative systems in small island states.

### Concepts of decolonisation

Discussion of decolonisation as a process in the small Pacific territories has been dominated by constitutional lawyers and their categories of analysis. It has been the *formal* transition to a new set of legally-established government institutions which has interested most outside observers; and this focus reflects a set of priorities which seem far removed from the nature of Island societies or the social and economic processes at work there.

In the case of both the British and the New Zealand territories, furthermore, there has been a tendency among both policymakers and observers to take for granted a "normal" historical transition through the stages of representative government, responsible government, self government and ultimately independence, with this last status comprising the logical culmination of the sequence. This sort of political development theory was a counterpart of the "modernisation" and "stages of growth" models of development economics during the 1950s and 1960s, and was firmly rooted in the British late-imperial notion of an evolutionary progress from colonies to sovereign independent states, with the dynamics both of history and of the colonial people's interests leading inexorably from one to the other.

This approach to political development can be schematically represented in terms of movements along a continuum, such as that presented in Figure 1, where forms of political organisation "between" colony and nation-state tend to be seen as inherently *transitional* and hence impermanent or unsustainable in the long run. The logic of history seems to run towards full independence, and much of the rhetoric of the decolonisation era has proceeded from this stance. In terms of constitutional design, an important implication has been that former colonies moving to the status of "self government in free association" have been equipped with all the paraphernalia required to operate a sovereign independent nation state, leaving them a mere stroke of the pen away from the final step along the road to independence.

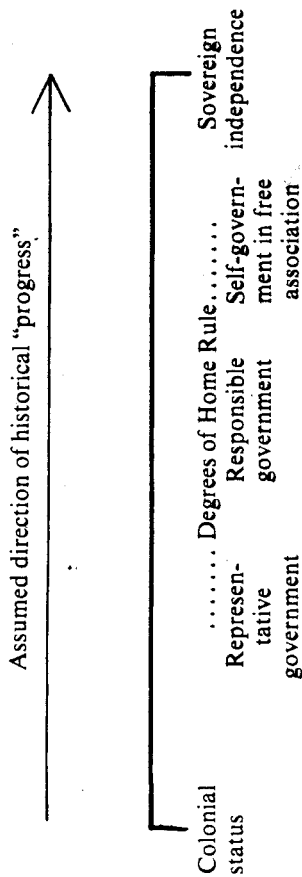


FIGURE 1: A continuum model of decolonisation

If, however, we take seriously at face value the options laid out by various United Nations resolutions over the past three decades, then the model presented in Figure 2 would be a more appropriate way of conceptualising the alternatives.

The diagram can be read as a map or compass dial, divided into "zones" each of which contains a distinct political "future". From the colonial starting point, a community may move in any of four quite different directions. To the "north" lies full sovereign independence, a state of affairs in which all formal ties with the previous colonial power are cut, and in which the relationships between the territory and the former administering power are thereafter mediated through the normal channels of international relations.

To the "south" lies political integration with the former colonial power, to form a single national unit in which the former colony and its inhabitants enjoy all the rights and privileges of other citizens, including the right to elect representatives to the national parliament or congress and the right to benefit from social security and other state-run schemes. The most important point to note about the integration quadrant of our compass diagram is that it is a full quadrant — in other words, "integration" covers a range of possible outcomes. Directly to the "south" (that is, diametrically opposite the fullest of full independence) is total assimilation, an option in which the separate identity of the colonial territory, and all its distinctively local institutions, are submerged in the larger nation of which it forms a part, so that there is literally no distinction nor discrimination between inhabitants of the former colony and those of the former colonial power.

Moving around the integration quadrant to the right, we pass

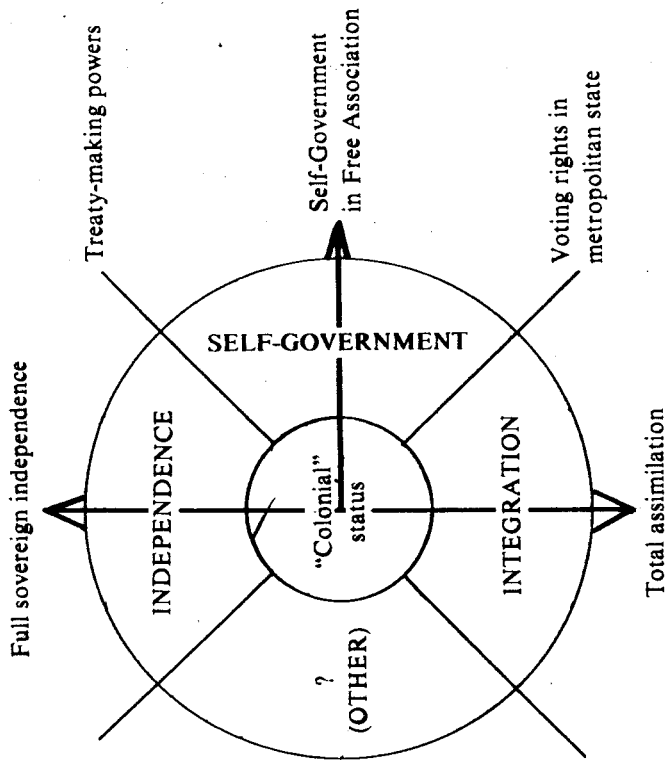


FIGURE 2: A "compass" model of decolonisation

through a series of options involving progressively greater degrees of local identity and autonomy within the integrated nation — that is, we move from the centralised unitary nation state of due "south", to a decentralised federation by the time the boundary between integration and "self-government in free association" is reached (southeast from the starting point). Federal arrangements are characterised by a large degree of local identity and autonomy, and are designed to deal with precisely the sorts of differences which would need to be taken into account in any serious proposal for integration of small island territories with mainland New Zealand.

On the "integration" side of this boundary lie political systems which combine the two key elements of local autonomy over local affairs, and formal (voting) membership of the metropolitan unit. On the "self-government" side of the boundary, local autonomy is more formally entrenched but the inhabitants of the territory are disenfranchised so far as the metropolitan system goes. Historically, it is noteworthy that in the days

when New Zealand was seriously interested in integration with the Islands, the proposed constitutional form was a federal one. Once New Zealand's interests dictated separation rather than integration, the option of self government in free association followed almost automatically for those territories too small to be credible as sovereign independent units.

To the "west" lie uncharted options, alluded to only briefly in United Nations resolutions under the heading of "any other political status freely determined by a people".<sup>2</sup> One obvious candidate for inclusion in this region would be the perpetuation of "colonial" status, perhaps under another name; or a voluntary switching by a dependent territory from one suzerain state to another.<sup>3</sup>

"East" from colonial status lies "self government in free association". This comprises a set of options which are, in one way or another, compromises among the three adjacent sets. Not surprisingly, therefore, this set is the most difficult to define clearly; ambiguity is the keynote. As the New Zealand representative at the United Nations put it in 1965<sup>4</sup> describing the new Cook Islands constitution, "the end result may not appeal to the legalistically minded or to the purist. It is neither fish nor fowl, neither sovereign independence nor dependence". A community located in this quadrant is not integrated politically with the former colonial power, since its inhabitants do not have voting rights in the latter's political system. On the other hand, the community is not classifiable as a fully independent sovereign state, since it continues to share in the international personality of the former colonial power, and its inhabitants retain certain rights, (such as citizenship and migration access in the case of the New Zealand-associated territories). For the political elite of the self-governing state, an informal balancing act is required, since they are not subject to the direct authority of the nation with which they are "associated", yet they cannot afford to act in ways which would render the association null and void.

This last point captures the essence of the distinction between colonial status and free association. As a colonial territory, a community is legally subjected to the dictates of the suzerain power, under free association it is voluntarily so subjected. In either state of affairs the suzerain power may choose to use its power with a light or a heavy hand, but in neither is that power extinguished. In neither state of affairs, furthermore, does there exist any direct means (such as the election of representatives to a central parliament) by which the inhabitants of the dependent territory can as of right, influence policy in the suzerain state; their influence on the policies of the suzerain state must be via representations by the dependent community to the executive (rather than the legislature) of that state.

If decolonisation is analysed in terms of Figure 2 rather than Figure

1, it is immediately obvious that self-government in free association is no longer to be seen as "almost independence" and is instead to be seen as an alternative state of affairs. A former colony embarking on the road to this situation is not moving "towards independence", and the design of institutions and policies cannot proceed on a basis which takes independence as the "ideal type". A self-governing state in free association may certainly opt to move from that status towards independence (or integration) but such a decision would involve a change of *direction* — not merely a change in the degree of independence. The point becomes especially important when we turn to development policy below.

In terms of our diagram, the five mini societies covered by this study are dispersed among three of the four regions. Tuvalu and Kiribati are fully independent nation states, having been moved by Britain through a swift progression first "north east" (to full internal self-government) and then, after minimal delay, "north" to their present status. Tokelau remains a dependent territory, finding formal colonial status preferable to the looseness of free association; any movement from the status quo is as likely to be "south" or "west" as "east". Niue moved "east" in 1974, with strong New Zealand encouragement, and has since followed a wavering course which seems likely to settle eventually against the "southern" boundary of the free association quadrant (i.e. as a candidate for possible political integration). The Cook Islands, in contrast, having moved initially southeast into free association in 1965, have since drifted steadily (again with New Zealand encouragement) towards the "northern" boundary of free association, with the emergence of an embryonic "international personality" of their own, and a very careful balancing act required to avoid inadvertent crossing of the boundary into full independence.

What is striking is the absence to date of any case of integration between New Zealand and its former dependencies. This immediately raises the question of whether the option was unattractive to the dependencies, or to New Zealand, or both. The short answer is that integration has hitherto been ruled out as an option by New Zealand's domestic political considerations.

New Zealand abandoned provincial government a century ago and settled for a strongly centralised state. The concept and institutions of regional autonomy have been, therefore, foreign to New Zealand minds. It was the absence of a vital tradition of local and regional autonomy in New Zealand that rendered unacceptable any constitutional arrangement which would have conceded internal self-government to the Island territories while binding them explicitly into the New Zealand nation. Reinforcing this was the fact that New Zealand in 1949 had abandoned its upper house of

Parliament (which had in any case never functioned as a means of giving weight to specific minority or regional interests, as upper houses in federal states are designed to do). One obvious means of providing the Island territories with a clear voice in the New Zealand legislature, by appointments to the upper house, was therefore lacking by the time decolonisation options came forward for public debate in the 1960s.

Under these circumstances, New Zealand politicians and officials made it clear to the inhabitants of the dependent territories that integration was not to be seriously entertained. Here, for example, is Leon Gotz, then Minister of Island Territories, speaking to the Cook Islands Assembly in 1962:

(Integration) would mean that you would receive the same treatment as, say, the province of Taranaki. All the laws of New Zealand would apply here — not only some which you would like, but also a number which you would probably not like. Under this system you would, in place of a Legislative Assembly of your own, have representation in the New Zealand Parliament. But what would that representation amount to? The Cook Islands on their own would not be big enough to have even one Member of Parliament — you would have to share one member with Niue and the Tokelaus. I think this one member would have a very difficult job trying to please nineteen separate islands so different from one another. I think, too, that his voice would sound very small in a Parliament of eighty members. . . . If you have a representative in the New Zealand Parliament and come completely under New Zealand law, you will immediately go back to the system we have just abandoned where all major decisions were made, not in Rarotonga, but in Wellington. I wonder if you would like that to happen. . . .

Mr McEwen (then secretary of the Department of Island Territories) said that I thought it was now time I threw you into the lagoon, to swim or to sink. I am sure you will be able to swim but let me assure you that I will always have a life belt and a rope handy. (Cook Islands Legislative Assembly 1962: 105, 118).

Cook Islanders and Niueans understood the message clearly enough.

New Zealand's policy objectives during the decolonisation era boiled down to two: (a) political integration was ruled out a priori as a post-colonial option, which meant that New Zealand was committed to increasing the formal constitutional distance between itself and its dependent territories; and (b) New Zealand wished to emerge from the process with a good reputation both internationally and at home.<sup>5</sup> The first of these meant that the entire "southern" quadrant of Figure 2 was ruled out virtually

without discussion. The second meant that (i) the "colonial" situation was unacceptable to New Zealand as a long-run outcome, largely because of UN pressure; (ii) New Zealand however would go to great lengths to avoid any appearance of twisting the arms of Island peoples to accept decolonisation; and (iii) New Zealand would ensure that living standards remained high in the post-colonial era. The idealism of many New Zealand officials and some politicians during the period fitted easily with these policy aims, and there was often genuine bewilderment at the reluctance of the inhabitants of the smaller dependent territories to accept formal self-government. Reading from their own history, New Zealand policymakers were often unable to see any difference between decolonisation and self-government.

The point is captured well in comments written in 1961 by an acute observer of colonial policy in the South Pacific:

Colonial policy is not really a matter of choice open to a metropolitan power, but a natural projection of metropolitan attitudes (which change only very slowly) onto a colonial situation. For example, there is really no choice open to the British Government between the kinds of policy which are represented by the words "assimilation" and "association": British traditions limit any choices to those of emphasis or method or technique within the latter kind of policy. . . . In exactly the same way, French colonial policy exists with a tradition of assimilation.

. . . It must be accepted that each of the . . . colonial powers has exported its own attitudes and institutions into the colonies because these are all that is available for export, and this projection of their values must be taken for granted (West 1961: viii).

Here, however, was the central issue of decolonisation for the very small territories. The smaller the "country", the less attractive the option of full sovereign independence, or even self-government in free association, seemed as an exit from the problems of colonialism. Western Samoa faced formidable problems in constructing an independent nation state after 1961; for societies only a fraction of Western Samoa's size, where dependent status has been the key to modernisation, not its antithesis (as so many slogans about "development or dependence" wrongly proclaim), sovereign independence was immediately recognisable as an unrealistic goal — and undesirable too, if it weakened the ties of beneficial participation in the metropolitan growth economies. With colonial status and integration both unacceptable to New Zealand, but full independence unattractive to the peoples of the three small territories, the option of self-government in free association provided the obvious compromise.

The fact that New Zealand initiated a "decolonisation" process in all its Pacific territories is revealing in itself. The smaller territories — Cook

Islands, Niue, Tokelau — had originally been annexed and declared by New Zealand to lie within New Zealand's borders. That is, they were described until the 1940s as "part of New Zealand", not as "colonies". Niueans, Cook Islanders and Tokelauans occupied a position vis-a-vis the New Zealand state akin to that of the Maori people of the mainland, with distinct ethnic identities, cultures, lands and land rights, and histories. The major difference was that voting rights in the New Zealand Parliament had not been extended to those peoples, whereas the Maori people had their own Parliamentary representatives.

In initiating policies aimed at self-government for these territories, Prime Minister Peter Fraser was unilaterally opting to treat them *as if they were not after all part of New Zealand*, but had the status of non-self-governing territories over which New Zealand held a form of trusteeship. In other words, the small territories were reclassified into the same category as Western Samoa. Ernest Beaglehole identified one key problem with this identification:

Western Samoa was never an integral or territorial part of New Zealand. It was always a mandate, held in trust by the mandatory power, with the explicit obligation accepted by the mandatory power to further the ultimate independence of the trust territory. The Cook Islands, by contrast, have been constitutionally an integral part of New Zealand since their annexation in 1901, as integral a part of New Zealand as Hawaii has been of the United States.... It would greatly clarify thinking about the immediate and future political and social status of the Cook Islands if all those concerned kept in mind the Hawaiian and not the Western Samoan example. Just as Hawaii has progressed over the past fifty years from a stage of nominal sovereign independence through stages of annexation and further phases of independent growth until today the territory is within sight of being admitted into the union as a sovereign state, so the Cook Islands might well look forward to a similar progression.... (1948: 396-7).

When the United Nations Charter of 1948 established mechanisms requiring administering powers to report on their stewardship in non-self-governing territories, New Zealand, having redefined the Cook Islands, Tokelau and Niue as colonies, became willingly subjected to UN scrutiny over its policies in the small territories. Decolonisation was later (after 1960) to become a necessary condition for "getting off the UN hook" — but the decision that the territories were colonies was one taken by New Zealand in the 1940s. Already at that time it was clear that mainland New Zealanders (both pakeha and Maori) were unwilling to embark upon the adjustments

which would be required of them if the aspirations of Pacific Island New Zealanders were to be accommodated as part of a programme of political integration.

Accordingly, New Zealand rejected at that time suggestions from (among others) the Cook Islands Progressive Association that the Island territories should gain representation in the New Zealand Parliament and move to a more formally integrated status as "part of New Zealand". Assimilation, as West notes in the quotation above, simply did not fit the mental set of New Zealand policymakers in the post-World War II era.

Through the 1950s New Zealand policy in its smaller dependencies was a relatively leisurely transition to representative government, motivated by a belief in the need (a) to reduce political dependence and associated low morale among the Island peoples and (b) to promote more self-reliance. The momentum of the process was certainly aided by Islander dissatisfaction with paternalistic attitudes on the part of some administrative personnel (attested to by, for example, the 1952 murder of the New Zealand administrator on Niue), and by the growing ambitions of an emerging political/administrative elite within Island societies. But in general both the design and the implementation of the policy took place in and from Wellington.

The pace picked up sharply in the early 1960s, under the impetus of strong United Nations pressure for immediate abolition of colonialism everywhere, and the move to independence by Western Samoa in 1961. A major push by New Zealand in the years 1963-65 succeeded in moving the Cook Islands to self-government, but made no impact on Niue or Tokelau. The following decade was devoted to picking off Niue, which finally moved to self-government in 1974. Attempts since then to coax Tokelau along the same road have been resisted tenaciously, although the powers formally exercised by the Tokelauan General Fono have been steadily increased.

Throughout, it has been the formal institutions of government which have been the target of both New Zealand policy and United Nations observers. It has been necessary to secure consent from local populations for institutional changes, but there is a world of difference between consent on the one hand, and control or initiative on the other. The new mini-nation-states which New Zealand policy has sought to create were Wellington's answer to a policy problem defined by Wellington: how to create a "respectable" political order in the New Zealand sphere of influence while keeping New Zealand's own liability strictly limited. Lip service was, of necessity, paid to "the wishes of Island peoples", but those wishes were carefully channelled by New Zealand: applause for Islander statements favouring self-government or independence, but stony silence or explicit

rejection of statements favouring the status quo or closer integration with New Zealand.

Since New Zealand's determination to secure formal political separation from its island territories was accompanied by other policies which strongly favoured the inhabitants of those territories — expansion of social services, continuation of New Zealand citizenship, freeing-up of access to New Zealand labour market, provision of subsidised transport links — the total package was a hard one to oppose. This, however, brings us to the second major feature of the decolonisation process: the divorce between base and superstructure which now faces policymakers with an obvious contradiction.

### Economic and social trends

As Ray Watters describes elsewhere in this volume, the era of political decolonisation was also the era of intensive economic and social integration of the South Pacific region. Policies adopted by the New Zealand and UK governments were generating a rapid economic and social transition in their small island territories, away from the relative self-sufficiency of the old colonial export economies. The new order was dominated by greatly-expanded local bureaucracies funded by grants-in-aid; extensive provision of government services as a major component in local living standards; and (in the case of the New Zealand territories) rapidly-increasing migration flows of Islanders to New Zealand to participate in the expansion of the industrial proletariat around Auckland and Tokoroa as the New Zealand manufacturing sector expanded.

These trends towards economic integration with New Zealand, alongside the move towards political self-government, were the two faces of New Zealand colonial policy in the 1950s and early 1960s. The overall package tended not to be clearly articulated by policy-makers at the time, despite Beaglehole's remark that "practical political change... needs economic underpinning (1948: 396)". On the contrary, official commentators then and since tended to suppose that in economic and social matters, as in the political sphere, New Zealand was promoting Islands autonomy from New Zealand, and thus the reduction of "dependence". The erection of a full-blown colonial welfare state was expected to be legitimated at a later stage by the emergence of a locally-produced economic surplus capable of sustaining that state.

This recipe — first creating a superstructure of social services and administrative systems which was quite unsustainable out of local resources, and then handing the system over to the local population to operate, with

homilies about the virtues of self-reliance — was the hallmark of New Zealand's decolonisation programme. Parallel trends, though on a much lesser scale, marked the British decolonisation of Kiribati and Tuvalu.

A commentary on Cook Islands self-government by Kolff, for example, argued that:

For as long as the Cook Islands continue to base their living standards not basically on the productive capacity of the economy, but on grants from New Zealand, political independence can mean relatively little... How then are the Cook Islands going to achieve economic independence?... Basically, the answer must lie with more rapid economic development. Consequently, the Cook Islands will have to concentrate to a much greater extent on increasing the productive capacity of the economy in order to help pay for a greater share of the social services... and so decrease dependence on New Zealand (1965: 121).

In a similar vein Haas suggested that:

... the real significance of the United Nations Declaration on Colonialism still lies in the future... For now that the umbilical cord has been cut separating the Islands from the powers on whom they have been forced to depend in the colonial period, the mini-states will certainly have to fend for themselves in a way which even the proponents of the resolution might not have envisioned (1970: 118-9).

Seen from the Islands side of the fence, the umbilical cord survived intact so long as they retained New Zealand citizenship and/or migration access, and the entitlement to New Zealand financial support. The divorce between political and economic autonomy was therefore less of a concern. Davidson points out in his discussion of Albert Henry's role as a Cook Islands leader that:

The aspirations reflected by his private life and public statements were those to prosperity, education and self-respect, rather than to self-government. To the Cook Islanders... the attainment of the latter was never the preponderant objective that it had long been to the Samoans and eventually became to the Nauruans (1971: 8).

The contradiction inherent in New Zealand's decolonisation strategy becomes most evident when we turn to the design of policies for economic development in the small island states. The conception which has guided much of the discussion has been that of sovereign independent states undertaking a drive for economic self-reliance on the basis of onshore commodity production. The reality has been of states which in several cases



are not fully sovereign (Cook Islands and Niue being the obvious examples); which lack several of the usual attributes of independence (for example, monetary and fiscal policy have no role in economies which use other nations' currency and fund their government deficits entirely through offshore grants in aid); and where the concept of "development in one country" is clearly a second-best strategy.

"Development in one country", if it is taken to mean the development of a commercially-viable non-subsidised economy, requires the state to impose substantial burdens on the resident population of the country. In particular, any quest for international competitiveness in commodity production requires that the real wage be forced down; this in turn would require both closure of migration outlets and intense pressure on the village economy, so that labour is forced to take employment in commercial ventures, and is prevented from escaping back to subsistence in the village. Such a model of capitalist "development" is profoundly unattractive, and would almost certainly be politically unacceptable in any territory retaining association with New Zealand.

Far more attractive is the development option which Islanders have pursued on their own initiative: the internationalisation of kin groups, with migrants and their dependents fanning out across the Pacific Basin to colonise niches of economic opportunity wherever they are to be found. The resulting higher incomes and widened horizons are, of course, benefits for the Island peoples rather than for the Island states, and it is this which poses the problem for New Zealand policy.

The underlying assumption of the decolonisation model was always that policy was to be made for the territorial unit of the former colony — not for the people of that unit. This assumption, in retrospect, seems profoundly mistaken. "Development for Niue", surely, must ultimately mean "development for Niueans" rather than an island bristling with accumulated capital and inhabited by Tongan labourers. "Development of the Cook Islands" similarly must mean higher incomes and wider horizons for Cook Islanders. In the real world of the 1980s, the role of the state in the self-governing small Island country is to maintain home base and support the outward thrust of the kin groups; not to thwart that outward thrust and slash income aspirations in pursuit of the chimera of self-reliance.

The ironic conclusion to this brief discussion<sup>6</sup> is therefore that Peter Fraser's declaration that the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau were not part of New Zealand has been rendered inoperative in practice even as it has been pushed to its logical conclusion institutionally. It is the rights and obligations of Cook Islanders, Niueans and Tokelauans as *New Zealanders* which still pose the central policy problems, even following a decolonisation process

which formally separated the Cook Islands and Niue (and but for Tokelauan commonsense, would have separated Tokelau as well) from New Zealand. For Tuvalu, where the British and the local elite together managed to push through a transition to formal independence, the key role for the new state will now be to recruit a new patron and to seek out new opportunities for Tuvaluan labour and capital to penetrate the rest of the world. Closed-country models, whether in the political or economic realms, simply do not fit the Pacific of the 1980s.

### Notes

1. I refer specifically to the Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau, Tuvalu and Kiribati, the five societies considered in a recent research project (Bertram and Watters, 1984).
2. UN General Assembly Resolution 2625, 1970, cited in Clark 1980: 6.
3. Tokelauans, for example, privately considered switching from New Zealand to US control in the early 1960s.
4. Statement on the Cook Islands made in the Fourth Committee of the United Nations by the New Zealand Representative, Mr F.H. Corner, on 17 November 1965, paragraph 10.
5. In more recent years, increasing importance has come to be attached to a third political objective — the doctrine of so-called "strategic denial" under which Soviet influence is to be excluded from New Zealand's sphere of influence, largely by maintaining a body of western-aligned governments in the Island states. In applying this doctrine, New Zealand (and Australia in its sphere of influence) now confronts issues very similar to those long familiar from US application of the Monroe Doctrine in Central America.
6. For fuller treatment see Bertram, G., 'Sustainable Development in Pacific Microeconomics'. *World Development* 14: 7, July 1986.