

11 ‘We are not ready’: colonialism or autonomy in Tokelau

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Predictions of global decolonisation have waxed and waned. In the 1960s, during the first great wave of decolonisation, it was widely assumed that there would be distinct limits to this process and that numerous places were too small ever to become independent. At that time, only Western Samoa (now Samoa), Tokelau’s nearest neighbour, was independent in the Pacific, and it was not until the 1970s that other Pacific island states followed. Even smaller states, such as Tuvalu with barely 10,000 people, did become independent despite warnings about their viability. In some there was local concern about uneven development, limited resources and infrastructure (as for example in the Solomon Islands), and many small states went to independence with trepidation as much as jubilation (Aldrich and Connell, 1998: 246). Nonetheless, the mood had shifted to the extent that it was loosely assumed that even the smallest colonial possessions would eventually become independent, or, at the very least, would take on a much greater degree of self-government.

Liberal academics, many of whom perceived colonialism with some degree of distaste, sometimes through familiarity with large continents, assumed that colonised peoples would eventually challenge and eject the colonial powers, as they had done throughout Latin America in the nineteenth century, and most of Africa and South-East Asia in the twentieth century. Indeed a wholly negative construction of ‘colonialism’ had become common parlance. Moreover, the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonisation had been set up in order to encourage the movement from colonialism towards independence, or something akin to that, under the assumption that colonialism would eventually be an anachronism (Aldrich and Connell, 1998: 156–161). By the end of the twentieth century, just sixteen territories remained on the formal United Nations list of ‘colonial’ territories.

However, it was becoming evident by the end of the 1980s that numerous sub-national (mainly island) jurisdictions, especially those that were relatively wealthy such as Bermuda (Connell, 1967, 2001), even though marked for decolonisation by the United Nations, were not anxious to challenge their colonial status, but rather preferred to remain within that framework (Aldrich and Connell, 1998). Despite relatively recent predictions of imminent decolonisation for a number of territories (e.g. Sutton, 1987), and the existence of the United Nations Committee, relatively little has subsequently changed. Even where there had been a violent struggle for independence, as in New Caledonia, there now appeared an ‘infinite pause’ in that struggle (Connell, 2003). And, as the era of decolonisation drew to a close, the only colony to be decolonised was East Timor, in spectacular, violent and unique circumstances (Hill and Saldanha, 2001).

In some respects this might have been predicted, at least in smaller Pacific islands and territories, where colonialism was sometimes belated, brief and superficial. It had long been evident, firstly, that only exceptionally had colonialism been as socially and economically problematic as it had been in some larger, resource-rich and more accessible states. Thus Simpson (1990) commented on colonialism in the Cook Islands, that the land escaped alienation and the material well-being of islanders increased as New Zealand provided welfare and protection. Knapman (1985: 83) wrote of the smaller outlying islands of Fiji that they had been ‘spared – by geography – the journey through Hell of some African states’, and similar statements were made of other possessions. Secondly, in contemporary decades, much of whatever prosperity existed in many remote islands and island territories came through overseas aid primarily from the colonial power and through international migration (almost always to the colonial ‘power’) and consequent remittances, and this migration was possible because islanders retained the citizenship of that country (Connell, 2007). Such circumstances in other very small Pacific islands held precedents for, and parallels with, Tokelau.

The political status of many colonies did evolve in the direction of greater independence and autonomy, but there were always limits. Thus both the Cook Islands and Niue moved to self-government in association with New Zealand, and came as close as seemed possible to independence, having a premier, diplomatic representation in New Zealand and membership of various international bodies, but the people never relinquished New Zealand passports, or the freedom to move (Aldrich and Connell, 1998). Nor did they gain seats in the United Nations General Assembly by maintaining a status that one journalist impolitely described as ‘a kind of adolescent version of nationhood’ (Parker, 2006: 68). This view, of course, presupposed that there was only one legitimate outcome of decolonisation, namely independence and a seat in the UN.

While small territories such as the Cook Islands and Niue (respectively with about 18,000 and 4,500 people when they acquired self-government) moved closer to independence, but chose not to take the ‘final step’, the third and smallest of New Zealand’s overseas territories – Tokelau – invariably ignored their evolution, sought to retain the status quo and largely resisted any movement towards greater independence. This resistance seemingly culminated in 2006 when, in a referendum on moving to self-government in free association with New Zealand, the necessary two-thirds majority was not gained and Tokelau continued to remain the only overseas territory of New Zealand. This chapter examines political change and stability in Tokelau and the basis for its minority rejection of political evolution towards free association.

A BRIEF GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

Tokelau is the smallest administrative unit in the Pacific, after the tiny British overseas territory of Pitcairn Islands, with a population of under 1,200. It consists solely of three small coral atolls, Fakaofu, Nukunonu and Atafu, some 500 km to the north of Samoa, from where it was administered after 1925. It is only accessible by sea, almost exclusively from Apia, the capital of Samoa. Nukunonu lagoon was once seen as a possible flying-boat anchorage, being well placed between Suva and Honolulu, but

that era came to an end before there was any possibility of such a connection. None of the three atolls are wider than 200 metres, no point is more than 5 metres above ground, and with a total land area of about 12 km² (though each has a large lagoon) population density is extremely high. None are within 60 km of another, thus they have had largely separate existences, despite sharing a language and a colonial history. Tokelau has historically never been a unified political entity and it was not until 1963 that there was the first official combined meeting of leaders from the three islands (Angelo, 2000).

Tokelauans are Polynesians who settled the atolls from elsewhere in Polynesia, mainly Samoa and Tonga. Atafu was unpopulated when first seen by Europeans in 1765, but inhabited at second contact in 1791, and the islands were probably some of the last in the Pacific to be settled (Hooper and Huntsman, 1973). Tokelauan social organisation is centred on extended families and is somewhat more egalitarian than the more chiefly, even royal, hierarchical structure of some other parts of Polynesia. This may be a response to the various relatively recent migrations of diverse Polynesians to Tokelau. Following settlement, there were acute tensions between the islands, warfare was long a problem and islands were often threatened by natural hazards (cyclones). One outcome of violence between the islands was the location of colonial administration in the 'neutral' centre of Apia in Samoa, an issue that had little importance until Samoa itself decolonised.

By the mid-1860s, missionaries had converted all the population of Tokelau. In the same decade the islands were devastated by the Peruvian labour trade, as half the population (almost all the men) were taken away and never returned. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that Tokelau again reached its pre-raid population total of about 500. During the twentieth century the population increased steadily to a peak of 1,901 in 1966, when significant emigration to New Zealand began to have an effect. The population began to decline equally steadily, reaching a new low of 1,151 in 2006, its lowest population for sixty years.

Concern with population pressure on resources has been long standing: as early as 1926, it was suggested that the islands had a maximum sustainable population of 1,250 and that it would soon be necessary to transfer a surplus population to Samoa (Hooper and Huntsman, 1973; Connell, 1983). Tokelauans did choose to migrate to Samoa, and there were 500 Tokelauans there at Samoan independence in 1962. Afterwards, disadvantaged in Samoa (for example, in access to employment), many moved on to New Zealand, preceding the most important migration in Tokelauan history, and the most significant example of state-assisted migration in the Pacific. New concerns of overcrowding led to the Tokelau Islands Resettlement Scheme being formally approved by the New Zealand cabinet in 1965. The scheme initially took many young, single Tokelauans, and later families, to New Zealand, so that by 1975 some 528 government-sponsored migrants had left. In that year the scheme was suspended at the request of the people of Tokelau who feared the continued diminution of the economically active population, a real problem given the selectivity of migration. The original aim of the scheme had been to take the entire population to New Zealand to reduce the economic burden of supporting Tokelau.

Private migration, however, continued so that as early as 1971 there were more Tokelauans in New Zealand (1,195 migrants and 950 born in New Zealand) than in Tokelau (1,640), and those in Tokelau tended to be relatively old or young (Connell, 1983). In 2006, there were 6,849 Tokelauans in New Zealand (1,599 of whom were

born in Tokelau) and 1,151 in Tokelau as the population balance had utterly shifted, with six times as many Tokelauans in New Zealand as in Tokelau – and others in the United States and Australia. Despite Tokelauans' longstanding wish not to experience a declining population like that of Niue, decline was now apparently established.

Most Tokelauans left for New Zealand for the same reasons as other Polynesians, centred on the limitations and marginality of the local economy but also drawn by the desire for modern secondary and tertiary education and health services, wages, and social mobility. That was accentuated for Tokelau by growing pressure on very scarce resources (most migrants coming from the two most densely populated atolls of Atafu and Fakaofu), and natural hazards (the 1966 cyclone being a significant factor, as was Cyclone Percy in 2005) and social pressures (Connell, 1983: 13–15; Wessen *et al.*, 1992). Migration was highly selective by age and also by education, resulting in the loss of better-trained and potentially trainable and educated islanders (Hoem, 2004: 79). A standard process of chain migration took the majority of Tokelauans to the Hutt Valley and Porirua, Wellington.

A TRANSNATIONAL ECONOMY?

Agricultural production is as limited as on most coral atolls, though islanders are also dependent on fisheries. The once almost wholly subsistence economy has never effectively evolved into an export economy but, rather, into one characterised by migration and remittances and a dependence on imports. In pre-war years there were trivial exports of copra and handicrafts and minimal imports, mainly of clothing, steel tools and fishing equipment. Copra exports continued in post-war years reaching a peak in 1975, but falling copra prices and new sources of income brought more rapid decline, and it is several years since there were exports. Efforts have been made to commercialise fishing; but income from fishing is almost entirely from the leasing of territorial waters. Isolation and inadequate infrastructure and communications have precluded tourism, one mainstay of several Pacific island states. Even the pretence of a self-reliant economy has been absent.

Tokelau is both a classic remittance economy and one of the prototypes of the MIRAB (MIGration, Remittances, Aid and Bureaucracy) economy (Bertram and Watters, 1985). Indeed, it is a 'copybook example' of the transition (Hooper, 1993: 242). During the 1950s, the administrative costs of the group, limited though they were, first exceeded locally generated revenue (Hooper, 1993: 244). At least since the 1970s, aid and remittances have been virtually the only two sources of income, with aid sustaining a large but limited public-sector economy. There is no private sector, other than one tiny hotel. By 1981 estimates suggested that remittances had already become the most important source of income in the islands (Connell, 1983: 15). New Zealand aid, mainly in support of wages and salaries, is about US\$6 million a year. In 2001, a Tokelau Trust Fund, similar to that in neighbouring Tuvalu, was set up partly with aid income and partly with revenue from the leasing of fisheries waters (that generated NZ\$0.7 million in 2001) to provide long-term support and to enhance self-reliance. By 2006, this fund stood at around US\$16 million.

The Tokelau public service itself had 149 employees in 1979 including doctors, nurses, teachers and tradespersons. As in other remote atolls in the Pacific, such as the outer islands of Micronesia (e.g. Connell, 1992), their wages were a major source of

shared income. From 1983 each atoll agreed to rotate these positions between households so that all households would have reasonable access to public service employment and wages. Incomes began to increase rapidly as more people gained wage employment (Hooper, 1982, 1993). Some form of government income reaches almost all adults; all men must make themselves available daily for the 'able-bodied workforce' which might then have such tasks as unloading a boat, fishing for the village or collecting garbage, and which entitles participants to around US\$200 a month. Effectively the choice for a high school graduate is between emigrating to New Zealand and modern-sector employment or largely withdrawing from the labour market (Parker, 2006: 73). Hooper had earlier predicted that those Tokelauans without public-service jobs would simply migrate to New Zealand (1982: 100), a situation that has effectively occurred in New Zealand's other former colony of Niue (Connell, 2008), while government incomes in Tokelau are much smaller.

Dependence on outside incomes has brought a similar dependence on imported foods, which incidentally reduced the longstanding concern over population pressure on resources. Remittances have substantially raised the material standard of living in the islands, enabling access to a considerable range of commodities and consumer durables, improved housing, and a new diversity of consumption and entertainment. However, remittances and the new public-service employment brought a parallel transformation 'from a cohesive community based on traditional exchange and an established customary order, to one dominated by salary and wage incomes and two openly competing principles of social order' (Hooper, 1993: 242). These principles divided chiefly authority from the new authority stemming from employment in the Tokelau public service, where local control was absent, wages enabled new inequalities in income distribution and where the most talented and educated worked. Paradoxically, becoming more politically self-reliant meant losing local autonomy and control.

A BELATED POLITICAL HISTORY

In 1889, the islands were formally placed under an uninterested British protection and were nominally and loosely administered from Samoa (Huntsman and Hooper, 1996: 257–258). There was no overall political structure, and apparently no perceived need for one, and each island was administered separately (Hooper, 1993). In 1916 Tokelau, then known as the Union Group, became part of the new Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony, and, in yet another phase of labour migration, some Tokelauans were recruited to work on the phosphate island of Banaba. The distance from Banaba made administration difficult and in 1925 New Zealand agreed to administer the islands from Western Samoa, a decision that suited the Tokelauans who saw Samoans as having similar cultural traits and from where their missionaries had come. A few trading ships called each year, the missions provided basic education and Tokelau was ignored. In 1946, the islands were officially designated the Tokelau Islands and included in the territorial boundaries of New Zealand, in turn an unwilling guardian (Huntsman and Hooper, 1996: 264–269). It only officially became Tokelau, the name by which Tokelauans knew it, in 1976. Formal administrative colonialism was in every way tenuous, belated, superficial and conducted from Apia rather than from within Tokelau.

As decolonisation occurred in other parts of the Pacific, Tokelau made its own slight accommodations with new political landscapes. Occasional meetings were held in the 1960s and 1970s to discuss relations between Tokelau and New Zealand but they did no more than ratify the status quo, where rare critical decisions were taken by New Zealand officials. It was another decade before change more effectively involved the atolls themselves, and more rapid change came in the 1990s. Real change followed the success of self-government in Niue and the Cook Islands, the broader understanding by Tokelauans of the wider world (a function of travel, migration and education overseas), the appointment of a full-time administrator in 1992 and gentle encouragement from a generally benign and supportive New Zealand government.

From the 1970s onwards islanders told visiting United Nations missions that they were not yet ready to manage their own affairs and wished to maintain their close ties with New Zealand. The 1976 mission was informed that the people wanted no immediate change in their political status, but wished for more 'development' and 'progress' to improve local conditions before that might occur (Hooper, 1993: 252). Broadly, that position was taken by almost all other colonies that have similarly sought to delay independence: they were 'not ready' (Aldrich and Connell, 1998: 245). The same opinion was reiterated by the General Fono (see below) in 1987 and again in 1992, as the option was repeatedly posed in one form or another. When the Ulu o Tokelau (Head of Tokelau), addressed a UN Decolonisation Committee meeting in 1993 his address was entitled 'From the Lagoon to the Deep Ocean' and, using a familiar Tokelauan metaphor of canoes (*vaka*), he argued that Tokelau would be embarking on a venture that might take it from the calm waters of the lagoon to the uncharted and potentially stormy waters of the open sea (Kalolo, 2007). The future always posed multiple uncertainties.

By the 1980s, there was growing interest in the administration of Tokelau, with the Office of Tokelau Affairs and the national public service being transferred from Apia to Tokelau itself. The 1981 United Nations mission to Tokelau, one of a series of missions that broadly sought political evolution, also recommended that transfer. Constraints to such centralisation included the considerable separation of the atolls, and tensions and poor communications between them and the outside world, whether physical or electronic.

Each atoll has long had its own local government structure with, until recently, relatively little being decided at two or three General Fono (meetings) held a couple of times each year to bring together the three islands. The leadership rotates each year between the three islands. The chief representative of the New Zealand Administrator on each atoll is the highest elected official, the *faipule*, who exercises executive, political and judicial powers. The three *faipule*, who hold ministerial portfolios, along with the three *pulenuku* (island mayors), constitute the Tokelau Council of Faipule, essentially a cabinet. It is the nucleus of the General Fono and the highest advisory body, and must be consulted by the administration on all policy affecting Tokelau. Indeed, its establishment in 1993 effectively represented what might be seen as the first 'national' government in Tokelau. The position of Ulu o Tokelau is rotated annually between atolls.

Political change was trivial until the 1960s when New Zealand first came under the obligation to offer self-determination to its three island territories, Niue, Cook Islands and Tokelau, and it was further emphasised by the independence of Western Samoa in 1962. Tokelau was offered the possibility of becoming part of an independent

Samoa or the Cook Islands but had no wish to do so. Indeed, as Western Samoa and New Zealand disengaged, Tokelau drew closer to New Zealand (Huntsman and Hooper, 1996: 317–318). While Niue became self-governing in 1974 following the Cook Islands in 1965, this meant little for Tokelau where change scarcely seemed imminent. Though New Zealand has long undertaken and sought to assist Tokelau towards greater self-government, there has been little enthusiasm for it and, over time, dependence on New Zealand has effectively intensified rather than weakened, especially in a crucial economic sense.

However, following Niuean self-government, the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs assumed administrative control over Tokelau (taking over from the Department of Maori and Island Affairs) and ‘the stage was set for the “decolonisation” of the atolls. The goal was self-government for Tokelau’ (Hooper, 1993: 251). More income was expended in Tokelau in a revival and efflorescence of ‘welfare colonialism’ to boost education and administrative capacity.

A slow and parallel process of constitutional change took place in the 1990s, providing an expansion of, and a wider role for, Tokelau’s political institutions. The relocation of the Tokelau Public Service from Samoa to Tokelau began in 1994 and by 1995 most government departments had been transferred. However the crucial Tokelau Liaison Office remained in Apia because of Samoa’s more developed communications facilities. Significantly, two of the six other government departments were located on each of the atolls, rather than being centralised.

In 1994 the General Fono, now meeting relatively regularly in Tokelau, adopted a National Strategic Plan that outlined Tokelau’s progression over the next decade towards increased self-determination and, possibly, free association with New Zealand. The executive and administrative powers of the administrator were formally transferred to the Fono and, when that was not in session, to the Council of Faipule. Two years later, in 1996, New Zealand approved a Tokelau Amendment Bill that gave the General Fono the power to enact legislation, to impose taxes and to declare public holidays. Though New Zealand retained the right to legislate for Tokelau, there was considerable uncertainty over the role of the General Fono, since there had never previously been a national institution. Nonetheless, it was an unprecedented phase of both decentralisation from New Zealand and Samoa and centralisation of power in Tokelau.

As limited power was slowly devolved to Tokelau the *vaka* (canoe) metaphor, that had accompanied and explained the acquisition of power, as elders (*taupulenga*) piloted the atolls towards a new destiny, gave way to a new metaphor: the ‘modern house’ of Tokelau. The planned ‘new house’ was equated with Tokelau’s future self-governing status, and the posts that supported it were the institutions that would take Tokelau forwards – notably the General Fono (elected in new ways), the villages, the elders and the Tokelau Public Service (in reduced form) – so that the ‘modern’ house was simultaneously new, traditional and modern, ‘marrying two or more cultural wisdoms’ (Pio Tuia, quoted in Field, 2006).

Centralisation slowly continued. Management of the islands’ public service was formally transferred to Tokelau in 2001, and in 2003 responsibility for the budget was transferred to the General Fono. In many respects this phase of restructuring was intended to be the prelude to Tokelau moving towards self-government in free association with New Zealand early in the twenty-first century, and the first stage in removing the ‘colonial yoke’.

REFERENDUM 2006

Following the changes of the late twentieth century, pressure for political evolution in Tokelau intensified in the present century when a United Nations mission visited the islands in September 2002. It was once again told that the majority of Tokelauans wanted to remain part of New Zealand and that the territory was far too dependent on New Zealand to change its status. Nonetheless, New Zealand continued to direct and encourage some momentum for self-government. Late in 2003, New Zealand signed a *Principles of Partnership* with Tokelau, at which time the Foreign Minister predicted that 'It's pretty clear that most of the people on the Tokelaus [*sic*] will go the same way the Cook Islands and Niue went. They'll become a self-governing territory in free association with New Zealand' (*Pacific Islands Report*, 24 November 2003). The *Principles* were seen as yet one more move towards self-government. Pressure for change gradually focused on a referendum in February 2006 when the population of Tokelau voted on its political future, and specifically whether it wished to become self-governing.

As the referendum drew nearer, there were renewed concerns. Mounting fears among islanders that New Zealand was seeking to loosen its ties with Tokelau had led the New Zealand Minister of Foreign Affairs to state (back in April 2000) that New Zealand would not impose independence on Tokelau and any change would only come with the consent of Tokelauans. In 2004, the Ulu o Tokelau told a meeting of the United Nations Committee on Decolonisation that it was the UN and New Zealand rather than islanders that supported any transition: 'Life as a New Zealand colony has brought many benefits to the country. There is no poverty, no unemployment, and full literacy. Although electricity does not run 24 hours a day, all houses now have internal flush toilets' (quoted in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 May 2004). Material change and improved wellbeing were not inconsequential.

In preparation for the referendum, a Draft Treaty of Free Association between Tokelau and New Zealand was composed in 2005. This covered such issues as the retention and development of Tokelauan culture and language, recognised that Tokelauans would remain New Zealand citizens, noted that New Zealand undertook 'to provide ongoing economic support and infrastructure development to improve the quality of life of the people' and covered such themes as defence, international relations and the Tokelau Trust Fund (Kalolo, 2007). In anticipation of the referendum, numerous public education meetings were planned to discuss these issues and also such concepts as 'self-determination, democracy, good governance, accountability and transparency, which have no direct equivalent in Tokelauan' (2007: 258–259) and which had little direct relationship to past politics and government. The meetings were never held.

The referendum, 'arguably the most important event in recent years in Tokelau's political development' (2007: 256), finally took place in February 2006. The 615 registered voters chose between whether Tokelau would become self-governing in free association with New Zealand or would remain a non-self-governing territory of New Zealand. The two-thirds majority required for change was not achieved, with 349 (60%) voting for self-government and 232 against. Short of 46 votes, Tokelau opted to remain a colony.

One of the much touted benefits of moving towards self-government was the somewhat paradoxical argument that Tokelau would then be recognised by other

countries who would offer assistance (Parker, 2006). Complex issues surrounding governance were also perplexing to many, in a context where many voters were elderly and poorly educated. Perhaps not surprisingly when voters were asked why they had voted 'No', many simply responded '*Ko au e he malamalama*' (I do not understand)' (Kalolo, 2007: 259). That same simple statement was repeated many times before the referendum, in terms of both the sense of the referendum and the voting conditions. One politician advised those who did not understand to vote against, and the local leaders had no consensus for change (Kalolo, 2007). Some people felt that Tokelau lacked the facilities required of a self-governing state: 'How can you love a country if it's without an airstrip or a ship?' and without other kinds of infrastructure and management skills (quoted in Parker, 2006: 71–72, 74). Others saw no reason to change: 'Only when I'm suffering, then I really want to change. I'm not suffering' (quoted in Parker, 2006: 75). Inertia offered greater certainty, as it had in earlier times; at the 2002 UN Decolonisation Committee meeting, the Ulu had pointed out: 'We are so small; we are afraid of any move to the future in case we make a mistake.' Finally, some of those who favoured self-government were seen as both self-serving and out of touch with Tokelauan tradition.

Voting was also caught up in the minutiae of island life and social issues that had more relevance to many than the seeming subtlety, complexity and irrelevance of political evolution. On Atafu, a bitter division emerged over a Congregational Church pastor who had earlier been caught up in a sex scandal and left the island, returning relatively recently to take up leadership in the church after a public apology. However, many islanders were unhappy and refused to attend the island's only church and part of the 'Yes' vote on Atafu probably came from those who felt that changing the political order would also mean changing the legal system (Parker, 2006). Bitterness was such that not only were there acute divisions within the island council but those who stopped going to church were referred to as *Al Qaeda*, houses were stoned and many left for New Zealand to wait for better times.

Overseas communities had no voting rights, having effectively been told that they had 'voted to leave' and so could not vote in Tokelau. This was deeply resented with overseas Tokelauans arguing that they supported Tokelau through remittances, and through their New Zealand taxes. Many Tokelauans in Australia and New Zealand lobbied for a 'No' vote, and visited Tokelau to support that position, mainly on the grounds that they feared losing New Zealand passports and more general contact with Tokelau (I. Hoem, personal communication, October 2006), and that self-government would place too much power in the hands of a few on the islands. Tokelauans in Samoa argued, as did many in Tokelau, 'Why change something that has worked well for Tokelau?' and, perhaps less frequently, 'I believe many people in New Zealand disagree with the referendum because if it is successful, unfettered power will be vested in a few people for their personal gain and not for Tokelau' (*Pacific Islands Report*, 1 March 2007). Such sentiments were similar to those in other places that had resisted the acquisition of more local political power. The notion that power corrupted held resonance. Ironically Tokelauan identity is minimal in Tokelau, and only significant in New Zealand (Hoem, 2004: 53). This in turn is ironic since Tokelauans perceive themselves as the 'real' New Zealanders amongst Polynesian migrants since they have always held New Zealand passports (Hoem, 2004: 54). The referendum forced new consideration of identity and nationality.

On the other hand, as the Ulu, Pio Tuia, said afterwards: ‘We feel ashamed that we cannot stand up and determine our own future. That really hurts us, we cannot be free men. We continue being a colony of New Zealand; it is very hard’ (quoted in Field, 2006: 30). Yet the subsequent Ulu, in his address to the UN Decolonisation Committee in 2006, took a rather different perspective on colonialism:

Mr Chairman, in this context why then did Tokelau appear to hesitate in its February 2006 Referendum? One reason may be that Tokelau’s situation is not a typical one. Tokelau is a colony, but has never known a coloniser’s presence on its land. Indeed the strongest presence of that kind was when the New Zealand Administration of Tokelau was based in Samoa. Even that was distant and, to use the usual phrase, ‘light handed’.

(O’Brien, 2006)

The referendum thus failed to deliver a new political status and tended to emphasise divisions within Tokelau rather than establish a consensus in favour of a new status. Named ‘the Union Islands’ by the British, Tokelau was anything but united.

ETERNAL COLONY?

Tokelau offers a poverty of social and economic opportunity with few parallels elsewhere, and has one of the most dependent economies in the world. Isolation and fragmentation have heightened concerns over economic development, political evolution and security. Tokelau would have been the smallest state after the Vatican City. Here as in other relatively small islands, such as Bermuda, though none so small as Tokelau, there was almost constant repetition of the mantras ‘we are not ready’ and ‘we need further explanation of the implications’ (Aldrich and Connell, 1998: 245). There was constant concern over the necessity for capacity building to enable the effective continuity, management and delivery of services. Only reluctantly, because of its overwhelming dependence on a single larger state, has Tokelau gradually moved towards greater control over its destiny, and established basic institutions of governance. After all a form of ‘welfare colonialism’ had early protected Tokelauans from such depredations as the labour trade and later brought services and a standard of living that would otherwise have been unimaginable.

Tokelau depends on both migration and comprehensive government services and thus on New Zealand’s willingness to provide both of these. Independence would probably reduce migration and threaten provision of services. Yet migration is a double-edged sword, as Niue has discovered. A visiting Tokelauan delegation in Hawai’i was told ‘The only guarantee is integration. Look at Niue, what good is free association if you don’t have people?’ (Ickes, 2007: 2). Aid and remittances have massively changed local lives, improved housing and other facets of development and reduced problems of depending on subsistence safety nets, though remittances have never been as high as in other parts of Polynesia, probably because of the role of the public service and perhaps because most Tokelauans do not wish to return, and hence do not use remittances as social insurance. Indeed, few Tokelauans do return, other than for visits, hence modern skills are quite limited.

It is one of the quirks of the United Nations Committee on Decolonisation that so much time (and income) has been expended on taking one tiny state a few steps closer to an improbable independence, and then triumphantly celebrating this process. As one journalist noted in 2004, 'As if its role in Iraq were not onerous enough, the United Nations is seeking to impose "regime change" on a tiny speck of land in the Pacific Ocean' (Mather, 2004). Another journalist stated that Tokelau was 'cursed' by being listed with the UN Committee so that both New Zealand and Tokelau were constantly under pressure for evolution (*Pacific Islands Report*, 15 September 2004). Between 1976 and 2002 the Committee made five official mission visits to Tokelau, more than to any other listed territory. Tokelau has been the focus of UN Decolonisation Committee meetings simply because none of the other fifteen territories listed by the Committee have any programme aimed towards 'an act of self-determination', and other contemporary 'colonial' powers, including France and the United States, do not even allow the Committee access to the other listed territories. Equally ironically, there is limited evidence that UN involvement had any impact on political change. More generally, the most trenchant criticisms of colonial powers in recent years have been of their neglect.

Paradoxically, as political institutions evolved and self-government came a little closer to Tokelau, 'the external influences that created the possibility of self-determination in the first place are the very ones which have also worked to erode the legitimacy of those traditional institutions that are called upon to provide a basis for future development' (Hooper, 1993: 262). Political evolution simply threatened other forms of local autonomy, and necessitated complex and lengthy processes to build a House of Tokelau that somehow combined the past and the present. Tokelau has thus acquired a status quite different from that of other former New Zealand colonies as the definition, composition and role of the local agency, the General Fono, has emerged from the wishes of the local people rather than being a transposition from elsewhere, and that recognises local authority, rather than results from a transfer of 'western' power by the colonial government (Angelo, 2000). Indeed, voting in the referendum was much influenced by local values and issues of legitimacy and tradition. All that has occurred under the close scrutiny of distant exponents of decolonisation.

Conflicts in authority, heralded in the establishment of education, emigration and the MIRAB economy, subsequently accentuated by some return migration, emphasised the disharmony that often existed in small islands and isolated communities, masked by a seemingly idyllic landscape. Disharmony existed within and between atolls where high population density could lead to friction. A unity partly imposed from outside has failed to congeal. Such local social differences, divisions, tensions and fears in a geographically fragmented state, with little contact between the three islands, a slowly declining population, and growing fears of sea-level rise, enabled solace, certainty and continuity in New Zealand status and citizenship. Aid and remittances are powerful conservative forces.

As Niue and the Cook Islands struggle with the economic burdens of self-government, and a substantial bureaucracy, and have been bailed out by New Zealand on more than one occasion, dependence has obvious fiscal advantages. Welfare colonialism may say little about dignity, and may overwhelm nascent tendencies towards nationalism, but it enables survival. As in other small colonial territories such as Montserrat, 'the people ... regard continuing dependence as a

safeguard against weak or corrupt government' (Taylor, 2000: 338), a guarantee of some degree of economic stability and standard of living, for which isolation, fragmentation and skill shortages offer little, and protection against the whims and uncertainties of global economic, political and environmental change.

Remarkably, another referendum was held a year later, in October 2007, and yet again Tokelauans rejected a change of status – with a marginal shift in favour of self-government, but again insufficient for the two-thirds majority required. Conservative fears have not been vanquished and the status quo may now remain for some time. In the end Tokelauans do and will have just as much self-government as they wish for. While Kofi Annan sent a message to the 2004 meeting of the Committee on Decolonisation that colonialism was 'an anachronism in the twenty-first century ... [and] ... decolonisation is a UN success story but it is a story that is not yet finished. We must see the process through to its end', that particular end is unlikely to reach Tokelau. Tokelauans accept 'anachronism', and are content to paddle the national *vaka* in the safe waters of the metaphoric lagoon with the certainty of overseas assistance, however much of a 'burden' this might seem to be to New Zealand. In its inflexibility, and its belief in the necessity of a particular form of evolution, it is increasingly the United Nations Committee on Decolonisation that appears the real anachronism. In this century, the apparent dichotomy between evil colonialism and virtuous independence is similarly an anachronism. Ultimately Tokelau has resisted the curious 'morality play' that seeks to shame players with doubts and uncertainties (however well-founded) into submitting inexorably to independence. The lesson from Tokelau is that real local choice and autonomy may lead to non-sovereign options, without the need to proffer excuses like 'not being ready' to ward off an insistent UN mantra of sovereignty and independence. The time when the constitutional choices of island communities need to be constrained by any such outdated 'morality play' is long past.

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