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The Democracy We Know and Love

ROBERT FOSTER'S METHOD is to hang a sophisticated theoretical discussion around publicity campaigns or pageants in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The campaigns include one by the government for the new national currency, the kina, and one by Pepsi, for the soft drink. The pageants are exemplary public ceremonies that provide opportunities for individual grandstanding. They include Law Week, a Fun Run, and an Olympic Torch Relay. The pageants themselves are rather, well, lame—but that's the point of the "banal nationalism" and everyday consumption that Foster is interested in. His discussion, in contrast to the pageants themselves, is deft, original, and generous-minded. The last chapter shifts the method slightly, as Foster draws on responses to a pilot survey of soft drink consumption he organized for Pepsi.

Reflecting its origins in journal articles, the book is oriented to the professional concerns of anthropology. Foster addresses professional debates in the anthropological discipline about "fetish" and "fieldwork." Concerns with the media and globalization also reflect his interest in cultural studies, and the book nicely joins these two disciplines. There is also a kind of background Marxism, expressed in the language ("capitalism" and "commodity") rather than the argument, and concerned with relations of consumption rather than old-style production.

In the Introduction, Foster also does a deft job on two staples of political science—"state" and "nation"—twin ideas that have framed much Australian worrying and exasperation about PNG since the 1990s. The Australian Prime Minister, taking his cue from Washington think tanks, has started talking about PNG as a potential "failed state." To stave off this possibility, Australia

has developed an Enhanced Cooperation Program (ECP) that put 150 Australian police back on patrol in Port Moresby and Bougainville, and 45 Australian officials in "line" (rather than advisory) jobs in the PNG government. They were meant to deal with sensitive subjects such as public finance, accountability, and border security. The ECP was unpopular with the PNG elite. It provoked an outburst of nonbanal, anticolonial nationalism, complaints about Australian arrogance and insensitivity, and deployment of "weapons of the weak." It all came to a head, or foot, when Sir Michael Somare, PNG's first and also current Prime Minister, transited through Brisbane airport on a private visit. A full-fledged diplomatic incident flared up after Somare refused to remove his shoes for inspection by airport security guards, and the Australian government refused to apologize for its officials' insistence that he did so. The incident was called, in Canberra, "Shoegate," though it had a distinctly post-9/11 character.

The ECP has since been put on hold after the PNG High Court found in late May 2005 that the immunity from prosecution granted to the Australian officials violated the PNG constitution. But the Program seems to have support of Port Moresby waiters and taxi drivers (the typical informants of the brief visitor). They cited more police patrols, tidier police stations, and fewer bashings of suspects inside them. The teary public farewells to the Australian police at Port Moresby airport provided another pageant, and another occasion for Papua New Guineans to feel bad about themselves. (Foster is good on this—especially PNG's evil twins of fuzzy wuzzy angel and crazed *raskol*).

I have been reading Foster's book on a brief trip to Madang and Port Moresby, turning on hotel televisions to check Foster's data. I can report that Boroko Motors is now selling customer service rather than "Wheels for the Nation." Bushell's tea is being sociably consumed by mixed groups of young and old in various provincial settings, as Foster's respondent, the schoolteacher Elizabeth Solomon, would probably have endorsed. However, Pepsi is still resolutely leering at teenage girls in tight jeans. I've also been hearing again and again about those 800 languages and other commonplaces of what Foster calls "the PNG we know and love." Foster was discussing two guys sharing a bottle of soft drink. In that case the anthropological commonplaces are the compulsion towards reciprocity, and anxiety about body fluids. Their political science counterparts might include election campaigns and clan voting. In the political science of "the PNG we know and love," multiple candidates campaign by mobilizing traditional solidarities, split their opponents' support by endorsing dummy candidates, and win with a small percentage of the vote.

But things have been happening to elections in PNG, in Bougainville, and more generally. Bougainvilleans have just been voting for the president of

their "autonomous government," which is the product of negotiations to end the long-running civil war (Francis Kabui won). The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) recently showed Francis Ona, leader of the Bougainville rebellion, on the campaign trail in Arawa. He has come down the mountain and is campaigning like a conventional politician—natty golf shirt, standing on the back of a truck, "loud yeller" in hand. The posters carried by his followers call on Australia (and "PNG") to leave the island. Later, he vigorously pushes the TV cameraman off the podium. So far so familiar—even the cult leader has to campaign. But he is actually campaigning against the election, indeed any election. He has become a king—His Royal Highness King Francis Dominic Dateransy Domanaa, King of the Royal Kingdom of Me'ekamui. He has a couple of weird expatriate monarchists helping him. Prince Jeffrey Richards of Rockhampton and Lord James Nesbitt of London flew in illegally from Australia last September. It is all somehow linked up to plans to restart mining in Bougainville, and a pyramid savings scheme run by Noah Musingku called U Vistract which has left Bougainvillean investors asking: Where's my money? This is a kind of perfect storm of the Melanesian cults, campaigns, and global scams we know and love.

Meanwhile, in Port Moresby the national elite has been trying some "constitutional engineering." Under the new Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC), minor, almost technical, changes are intended to ramify outwards to change the behavior of candidates, their relationships with each other and voters, and government policy. One change is "preferential voting." Under the "first past the post" system used in the last general election, and more recently in Bougainville, the candidate with the largest number of votes wins. With a large number of candidates courting very small blocs, that winning plurality can be quite small—as low, in one case, as 8%. By implication, 92% did not vote for the winner, who owes them nothing. Under preferential systems, like those used in Australian elections to the House of Representatives (but not the Senate), voters rank candidates, thereby expressing their preferences among them: first, second, third. (PNG has decided to limit preferences to three, which seems a little mean.)

If a candidate gets 50% or more of the first preferences, he or she wins. If no one manages to, then the candidate with the least number of first preferences is dropped from the count, and his or her votes distributed among the others according to their second preferences. Through several iterations, someone will emerge with a majority and, it is argued, that winner may take a wider view of his or her constituency responsibilities—looking beyond core supporters.

The argument for preferential voting is that it encourages candidates to look outside their local, primordial, or clan base to seek the second and third preferences of other voters, as these may become decisive as the count develops. It also encourages candidates to cooperate with each other. In Australia, it is called "swapping preferences": I will encourage my voters to deliver their second preferences to you, if you do the same for me.

The introduction of the new Organic Law on Elections and Political Parties was promoted by a rather lame, Foster-style advertising campaign, funded by the European Union and staffed by offspring of the national elite with public relations skills. The "grassroots" cartoonist was enlisted to explain the law's virtues. A bumper sticker enjoined against self-interested voting. The campaign was partnered by Transparency International, the anticorruption NGO whose chair, the late Sir Anthony Siaguru, had been a long-time advocate of electoral reform.

The new preferential system will be introduced at the next general election, but has been tried in by-elections since 2002. The level of election violence has certainly fallen sharply in these by-elections, but it is too early to tell how the successful candidates will use their mandates in a more expansive and cooperative way. A similar system introduced in Fiji for the 1988 election produced unexpected results—a single-party government, little support for cooperation across ethnic lines, and eventually another coup.

Foster discusses state and nation as a pair. A political scientist might add a third term: "democracy." Foster's engaging approach invites us to wonder what anthropology-cum-cultural-studies of democracy look like. Democracy does not appear much in the current book, except in its egalitarian sense. We have already had distinguished anthropologists writing about politics in the series of UPNG election studies. The election itself is full of the grandstanding and anxiety that Foster found in his pageants—indeed the Fun Run and Torch Relay already attracted opportunistic politicians and formed part of their campaigns.

Voting is of course individual, secretive, and supposed to be a matter of individual calculation. Election studies of PNG regularly show how the process is often in fact collective, out in the open, and coerced. (Indeed some of the formal apparatus of the election encouraged a communal approach: I remember the electoral roll in Enga in the early 1980s listing people by clan.) An ABC TV story about the recent general election in the Southern Highlands showed local leaders doing deals about how their followers would vote, candidates' offsiders cheerfully filling in voting papers in bulk, and ballot boxes set on fire. Yet elections are one of the enduring institutions in PNG. They intersect with another collective but individuating event, the national census.

Except of course they often contradict each other—many more people seem to vote than are recorded as adults in the census. The cynical interpretation is that people are voting more than once. The innocent interpretation is that the roll fails to keep up with people coming of age.

The introduction of preferential voting may also create opportunities for research on what Foster describes as the anthropological consensus on the Melanesian sense of self. Melanesians are supposed to see themselves not as individuals, but as a unique nexus of relationships. Rather than defining themselves as members of a reified "clan," and voting for that, how will people spread their three preferences around? Will preferences give a different, more inclusive, shape to what Foster, following Anderson, might call an "imagined community of voting?"