

Australia's Pacific Neglect: Distractions from Climate Change Security

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The hysteria in Canberra and Washington over the Sino-Solomon Islands security pact has shown, again, how irrelevant the individual affairs of Pacific Island states are in the chess game of geopolitics. The one thing conspicuously missing has been the issue of climate change, near and dear to those whose lands are gradually being inundated by rising sea levels.

In a desperate attempt to understand why Honiara courted Chinese interest in defiance of Australian wishes, opposition Labor figures pointed the finger at climate change. Australia's sniffly approach to such a vital issue was key in pushing the country into the arms of Beijing. According to the **Shadow Education Minister Tanya Plibersek**, Canberra had “left a vacuum” on the matter. **Senator Penny Wong** [stated](#) the obvious in remarking that Pacific leaders had been less than impressed by the Morrison government's indifference to climate change as the “number one economic and national issue”.

The indifference, even contempt shown by Canberra to that most existential of concerns has made itself present on several occasions. In September 2015, banter ensued between **Immigration Minister Peter Dutton** waiting alongside **Prime Minister Tony Abbott** and **Social Services Minister Scott Morrison**. Abbott recalled the rather casual approach to punctuality that had taken place at a Pacific Islands Forum meeting the previous day in Papua New Guinea. “Time doesn't mean anything,” [remarked](#) Dutton, “when you're about to have water lapping at your door.”

In August 2019, Fiji **Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama** was already giving signals that a turning might well be in the offing. After the Pacific Island nations summit held that month, Bainimarama [noted](#) how Morrison had been “very insulting, very condescending”, behaviour that had hardly been “good for the relationship” with Pacific Island states. The Chinese, on the other hand, “don't insult us.” They did not “go down and tell the world that we've given this much money to the Pacific Islands. They don't do that. They're good people, definitely

better than Morrison.”

Australia’s then Deputy Prime Minister, **Michael McCormack**, had also caught the attention of the Fijian PM for less than flattering observations. In [remarks published](#) in the *Guardian*, Morrison’s deputy made light of the environmental threats posed to the region’s states. They would continue to survive, he suggested, “because many of their workers come here to pick our fruit, pick our own fruit grown with hard Australian enterprise and endeavour”. Such states would also “continue to survive on large aid assistance from Australia.”

The comments drew criticism from the former Australian Prime Minister, **Malcolm Turnbull**, who [stated the matter](#) in terms the most simple, coal-loving politician could understand. “If you are a Pacific Islander and your home is going to be washed away from rising sea levels caused by global warming then this is not a political issue, it’s an existential one.”

Despite such remarks, the Morrison government remained deaf. In 2020, it was still hostile to the idea of committing to net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Fourteen Pacific leaders responded by [penning an open letter](#) to the Prime Minister. Made up of former presidents, prime ministers, archbishops and church leaders, the authors took issue with Australia’s “current Paris Agreement emission reduction target” as “one of the weakest among wealthy nations.”

The letter condemned Canberra’s practice of using Kyoto Protocol carryover credits “which legally cannot, and morally should not, be used to meet Australia’s 2030 Paris Agreement target”. As the children and grandchildren of the region faced “unprecedented risks due to climate change, now is the time to stand together and work together to secure their future safety and prosperity.”

Wilful blindness to the region on the subject of climate security has persisted, with Dutton, now Defence Minister, [adamant](#) that Canberra had “a fantastic relationship with the Solomon Islands”. Using the ugly, infantilising language of “the Pacific family,” which presumably is made up of hectoring parents and obedient children, who the children are is never in doubt. “As part of the Pacific family, it is obvious we want to work together and we want to resolve the issues within that family, within our region.” Some issues are just bigger than others.

While Wong and Plibersek are trying to squeeze every bit of critical comment about the Sino-Solomon Islands pact, it was only one aspect of the broader condescension that powers have shown to the smaller states in the region. In all the fuss and angst about the Honiara-Beijing agreement and whether it would permit the stationing of Chinese military personnel, the Pacific Elders’ Voice [had to reiterate](#) “that the primary security threat to the Pacific is climate change.”

The group also recalled the content of the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security: “We affirm that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific and our commitments to progress and the implementation of the Paris Agreement.”

For the elders, the major powers “including the US, Japan and Australia, are developing strategies and policies for the ‘Indo-Pacific’ with little, if any, consultation with the Pacific Island countries.” The Pacific region comprising states – known as the Moana – faced “a set

of unique challenges.” It was primarily those countries, not external powers, who should determine the security and future of the region. Accordingly, all nations were called upon “to respect the sovereignty of all Pacific Island countries and the right of Pacific peoples to develop and implement their own security strategies without undue coercion from outsiders.”

The observation is well-reasoned and well-meant; but those same external powers, goggle-eyed about nuclear-powered submarines, the establishment of rival military bases and geopolitical strutting, have long ignored the sovereign wishes of those in the Pacific. It is a nasty habit that persists, even as sea levels rise.

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