

Terms of Condescension: The Language of Australia's "Pacific Family"

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*When will this nonsense on familial connection between Australia and the Pacific end? In 2018, Australia's then Pentecostal Prime Minister, **Scott Morrison**, drew upon a term that his predecessors had not. On November 8 that year, he [announced](#) that Australia's engagement with the region would be taken to another level, launching a "new chapter in relations with our Pacific family."*

In an [address](#) to Asialink prior to attending the G20 Leaders' Summit in Osaka, Morrison was again found talking about the Indo-Pacific, which "embraces our Pacific family with whom we have special relationships and duties, our close neighbours, our major trading partners, our alliance partners and the world's fastest growing economies."

Such language had all the resonances of white European paternalism, ever watchful over the savage dark races who would only ever advance with the aid, and management, of civilised powers. It was a sentiment reflected in the views of British explorer and anthropologist William Winwood Reade, who opined in his 1872 work [The Martyrdom of Man](#) that, "Children are ruled and schooled by force, and it is not an empty metaphor to say that savages are children." While he accepted slavery as "happily extinct", he thought it wise for a European government "to introduce compulsory labour among the barbarous races that acknowledge its sovereignty and occupy its land."

The language of the family imputes the existence of stern, guiding parents and wayward, mischievous children who might dare show some disobedience. The parents, in the "Pacific family", are never assumed to be any of the Pacific Island states, who are seen as merely squabbling siblings in need of control.

Morrison's coining of the expression had the benefit of unmasking a Freudian truth. Pacific Island states had long been considered charity cases and laggards in development, useful only as a labour source for Australian markets or security outposts. Concerns about climate

change had barely been acknowledged. When needed, Australian police and military forces had also intervened to arrest any supposed sliding into instability.

The term became even more problematic in the wake of independent security decisions made by Pacific Island states with China. A central premise of the charity-child relationship between Canberra and its smaller neighbours has been of one compliant behaviour. We give you money and largesse from the aid budget; you stay loyal and consistent to Australian interests. Of particular concern, even terror, was the Solomon Islands-China security pact which had, on the face of it, the potential to facilitate the establishment of a Chinese military base.

In his April visit to Honiara, **Senator Zed Seselja**, Australia's Minister for International Development, proved unsparing in reiterating the familial script. He [told](#) the Solomon Island **Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare** that, "the Pacific family" would "always meet the security needs of our region." He would be wise to "consult the Pacific family in the spirit of regional openness and transparency, consistent with our region's security frameworks."

The concern from Australian security wonks at Honiara's willingness to go so far with Beijing caused an outburst of neo-imperial candour. The parent should take full control of the situation and [initiate an abusive, punitive invasion](#), ostensibly in the name of protecting the sovereignty of another state. A rattled Solomon Islands Prime Minister [rebuked such views](#) in parliament, claiming that "we are treated as kindergarten students walking around with Colt .45s in our hands, and therefore need to be supervised."

Australia's then opposition Labor Party, vying for government in the May elections, quickly fell in with the language, extending it and bending it to suit. In fact, it went so far as to [scold](#) the Coalition government for sending a junior minister to the Solomon Islands to argue against Honiara's signing of a security pact with Beijing. Instead of sending Seselja, Labor campaign spokesman **Jason Clare** [argued](#), **Foreign Minister Marise Payne** should have been on that plane. "What happened instead, the foreign minister went to a business function and some bloke called Zed got sent there." Then savages were simply not wooed.

Building on the theme of coaxing and pressuring Pacific neighbours to do the right thing by Australia's security interests, Clare insisted on a more aggressive pose. "You can't sit back on the deck chair in the Pacific and just assume that everything's going to be okay." The dark children, in other words, might play up.

The new Labor government of **Anthony Albanese** revelled in the same language of paternal condescension, letting Pacific Island states know that Canberra was keeping watch on any errant behaviour while still claiming to respect them. Just prior to visiting Samoa and Tonga in early June, Foreign Minister Penny Wong [boasted](#) of embarking on her second visit to the Pacific since assuming her cabinet post. "We want to make a uniquely Australian contribution to help build a stronger Pacific family - through social and economic opportunities including pandemic recovery, health development and infrastructure support, as well as through our Pacific labour programs and permanent migration."

Pacific states were also assured that parent Australia had heard their concerns about climate change in a way that the previous parent had not. "We will stand shoulder to shoulder with our Pacific family in addressing the existential threat of climate change."

The persistent use of the term “Pacific family” has not gone unnoticed among some Australian critics. Julie Hunt is [unimpressed](#). “If someone tries to inveigle themselves into our family, or continually tell us that we are part of their family, how would we feel? Isn’t it a bit presumptuous?” The utterance of such familial terminology brought with it a range of unpleasant neo-colonial connotations. For Hunt, the term would remain meaningless till “we show by our actions that we understand their perspectives and respect them. Dare I suggest that we wait until they return the feelings, and wait until they call us family?” And a long wait that may prove to be.

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