POLITICAL CULTURE, REPRESENTATION AND THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM IN THE COOK ISLANDS

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Abstract

Political culture, representation and leadership selection falls into four periods.

1. For the first 1,000 years or more saw only Austronesian precedents, and little contact with other parts of the Pacific. Some Austronesian precedents remain within the present political culture.

2. From the 1820s to the 1890s English Protestant Evangelical Christian principles became dominant. Missionaries were the most influential outsiders and heavily influenced the “Blue Laws”. Some of that remains in the present political culture.

3. From the 1890s, British-derived precedents gained in importance, even more so since independence in 1965 - mainly through the New Zealand variant of the English way of doing these things. This remains dominant in the structure but less so in the functioning.

4. In the present century, two major factors are being added. First, Northeast Asia is becoming dominant on many dimensions. Some are beginning to impact on the political process, and will later on the political structure. Second, global forces (until now mainly derived from “the West” but from now increasingly from Asia) and technological changes that have no necessary cultural referent, will reduce the significance of the Polynesian and the English-derived principles of political organization. This third phase is the important one – the earlier ones are of historical interest and relevant in so far as those precedents influence or are part of the political culture.

The paper outlines how the system evolved, the shape of self-government in 1965 and developments (and regressions!) since; the tensions and challenges (including the escalating costs of the way the system operates, the erosion of the integrity system of police, judicial process, audit, ombudsman etc due to political leverage and intimidation, distortions and possible corrections in the processes of candidate selection, and the reducing representativeness of members of parliament and ways in which that may be improved); and some future potentials and possibilities.

Geographical parameters and Austronesian precedents

What is workable depends in part on the physical context. The geographical base of the Cook Islands is 15 islands totaling only 238 sq. km., in 1,830,000 sq. km of sea – i.e. over 7,000 times more land than water. So unlike most Pacific Islands nations, most islands were visually isolated. The only exception is the Ngaputoru group (Atiu, Ma'uke, Miti'aro & Takutea) which consequently interacted and shared a common dialect. Manihiki and Rakahanga (atolls 44 km apart but not visible) also shared a common population and dialect. All other inhabited islands were visually isolated and a distinct dialect. Given the
distances, populations, technology and incentives, contact between islands of the group was limited. Contact beyond the group was even more limited.

Early Cook Islanders brought precedents from the Society Islands, the group with which there was most contact. Next most important was Samoa. Contacts with Tonga, Marquesas, Fiji and Rapanui may have also contributed to the evolving political systems. The political culture of each island was unique – deriving from original settlers, geographical constraints, leading personalities, and idiosyncratic circumstances.

Despite the diversity, several common features prevailed.
1. Political leadership was a matter for men.
2. First-born sons took precedence over others in leadership. Child-rearing and the social context reinforced the legitimacy of first-born sons.
3. But one had to be present in order to lead. One could not be a chief in absentia as many try to be today.
4. If the first-born son was "deficient in intellect or courage, the tribal oracle was sure to declare that the god had taken up his abode in another" Gill (1892:9). The next layer of leadership could replace him. If negotiations failed, matters could be decided by physical conflict.
5. A properly selected leader was usually accepted for life – or until retirement to a small house built for him behind that of his eldest son, who then took over. In other words, people were conditioned to tolerating the foibles of leaders. Only in extreme circumstances were they evicted.
6. There is a strong obligation on leaders to share resources, and for leaders and followers to defend each other from criticism or other attack from outside the unit.
7. Political units were small. Most islands were autonomous of all others. Even in the two exceptions (Ngaputoru and Manihiki/Rakahanga, explained above), one did not govern the other on a day to day basis – visits were periodic and Atiu’s power over the others was more of a suzerainty. The largest island, Rarotonga with 7,000 people, had no single government, but three districts each under its own ariki. For most affairs, however, the tapere led by a mata’iapo (of which there were over 40, with about 175 people in each) was largely self-governing.

Elements of all these principles still apply today, but so do many other principles in a more complex mix. Some ancient principles will still apply tomorrow, as will some that don’t exist today. Awareness of likely and feasible degrees of change is essential. [ ]

[For descriptions of Cook Islands political culture before European times, see e.g. items in the bibliography under Beaglehole, Borofsky, Crocombe, (1967), Gill, Maretu, Siikala, Te Rangi Hiroa (1932a,b,1934).]

Christian dogma, English custom and a little Ma’ohi (Society Islands) tradition
Big changes are only workable if there are equivalent changes in who holds power and the powers they hold. Missionaries of the London Missionary Society arrived in the 1820s with no physical power but enormous conceptual power – including about proper forms of politics. The assumed linkage between European technology and European religion, literacy (especially in the Bible), and catastrophic deaths from introduced diseases showing the power of the new god, enabled a paradigm shift in Cook Islands political cultures.

The missionaries were horrified by the practice in Rarotonga and Mangaia at least of eating the opposition for lunch (a hallowed custom that some present-day politicians do their best to emulate!), chiefs fornicating with close relatives and needing many wives or concubines to provide political linkages to their kin-groups (some politicians seem keen to revive this convention!). The mission had some success in suppressing these elements of the old political cultures.
The mission was pleased with other aspects of traditional political cultures, including respect for chiefs, the focal role of religion in politics, and tough punishment for disobeying political masters.

The English missionaries were few, but supported by Society Islander converts. Both confused their interpretation of Christianity with their understanding of English or Ma’ohi political culture (and none had much of either, being young men with little education or experience). They made compromises to fit the situation on the ground. The result was the Blue Laws - a mix of Biblical tradition, English custom as perceived by Victorian Protestant working class missionaries, and Ma’ohi and Cook Islands Maori custom (Council of Ariki 1879).

Each island had its own laws. Those of Rarotonga in 1879, for example, began by saying "Our law is no respecter of persons. The penalty, from the chief to the least, from the native to the foreigner, is the same. All people are alike before the law." That was the principle, but not generally the practice. Ariki (high chiefs) of Rarotonga acquired more power and immunity under the Blue Laws than they had under custom. For the ariki made the laws, appointed the judges, controlled the police, audit and ombudsman functions, and personally benefited from the fines and taxes they extracted from the public – all much like our cabinet functions today! Clause 11 prescribed punishments for any who “exalt himself above his leader”. That too sounds awfully like our cabinet! [ ]

[For the political culture of the mission era see e.g. Gilson, Maretu, Te Rangi Hiroa 1993.]

The strengthening of English political precedent and the weakening of Christian

Chiefs several times petitioned Britain for protection. They did not want to be colonized, but feared a French invasion. Polynesian refugees from conflict with the French in the Society Islands fled to Rarotonga. That all things French were evil was proven by the fact that they were Catholic, which English Protestants had taught them was the religion of the devil! (Although one chief who was married to a part-French man approved of the French.)

Britain declared a protectorate in 1888 reluctantly. There was nothing in it for Britain. Britain allowed New Zealand to select the Resident (the official appointed to administer the protectorate) provided New Zealand paid. It did, with enthusiasm, as New Zealand was a British colony with a booming economy. With the usual arrogance that goes with success, New Zealand wanted to be a colonial power too, with as many Islands as possible. They got only consolation prizes – the Cook Islands and Niue.

The British Resident persuaded the chiefs to set up a Government of Rarotonga, and then a Federal Government of the Cook Islands (excluding the northern atolls). The British Resident had only British precedents to go on – and his knowledge was mainly of the New Zealand variant. He had been a member of parliament (MP) in New Zealand, had lived in Fiji and traveled widely in the Pacific. He had to link the New Zealand experience with the Rarotongan version of Polynesian precedents as modified to that time, and Christian principles built in through both law and practice.

The chiefs generally accepted the advice of the British Resident because they had no experience of the new forces and wanted the promised rewards of "progress" - anything that made you more like the English was "progress". But Frederick Moss, that first British Resident, was ahead of the English, and some of his progressive thoughts would have been anathema in England, let alone Rarotonga. He wanted votes for commoners, including women. Radical stuff. The chiefs agreed in principle because they knew they could (and did) subvert it in practice - chiefs still ran the government at all levels. But Moss’ liberal ideas were too much and the chiefs asked Britain to remove him.

Bad luck for the chiefs, they got what they asked for! New Zealand appointed Colonel Gudgeon, who did not share Moss' progressive ideas or kindly disposition. Gudgeon was a judge of the Maori Land Court and a former colonel who fought the New Zealand Maori and won. New Zealand wanted control of the
Cook Islands (a protectorate gives obligations but not much control). Britain was keen to get rid of it, but feared the arrogance of the New Zealand politicians, who caused years of war with the Maori. Britain agreed on three conditions:

1. That there be no sale of land.
2. That Cook Islanders be given New Zealand citizenship, and
3. That there be a petition from Cook Islands leaders requesting New Zealand annexation.

Those conditions have had enormous consequences on the politics of the Cook Islands ever since and will continue to do so. (Niue was for several years in the early 1900s administered as part of the Cook Islands.) One is that the centre of Cook Islanders in the world from the 1960s became Auckland, and is now shifting to Sydney, which is likely to be home to more Cook Islanders than any other within a decade. Now 11,500 Cook Islanders live in the Cook Islands, 60,000 in New Zealand, and about 40,000 in Australia – both those are rising while the number in the Cook Islands is falling. 90% have gone.

The parliament Moss set up did not last long. World War I gave an excuse not to call it. The colonial government ran a direct administration, controlled from Wellington by a minister of the New Zealand government through a Resident Commissioner in Rarotonga and Island Councils. Each Island Council included high chiefs ex officio, elected members in majority, and the senior official (the Resident Agent) as chairman.

For most of the New Zealand administration the Minister for Island Territories was a Maori – Sir James Carroll (Timi Kara), Sir Maui Pomare and Sir Apirana Ngata – yet few Maori ideas got through to the colonial government. The most influential idea was from Ngata, who had seen too rapid change among Maori in New Zealand and advocated a policy of *taihoa* – go slowly, in the Cook Islands. Visits by Maori ministers, and the Maori Queen, entrenched relations between the Maori of the two countries.

The transition to self-determination – global pressures reach small islands

No significant change occurred until after World War II. Then a Legislative Council was formed with equal numbers of elected representatives from Island Councils and central government officials (including a few indigenous Cook Islanders), with the Resident as chair. Next a Legislative Assembly with mostly elected members and a few officials.

[The most prominent indigenous Cook Islander was Dr Tom Davis (Pa Tuterangi Ariki), Director of Health, who nearly 30 years later became Prime Minister.]

The changes had little to do with anything in the Cook Islands (though that is not the current mythology) and everything to do with changes in international politics and values, the rising cost and embarrassment of colonies, the emergence of communism as an alternative system. The changes followed the model evolved by Britain to decolonize, modified by New Zealand’s experience – particularly in Samoa where New Zealand gained politically as well as financially when Samoa became independent in 1962.

Albert Henry, who became the first premier, wanted integration with New Zealand with himself as the MP for the Cook Islands electorate. But the Cook Islands, with only 17,000 people, was smaller than New Zealand electorates, and would set a precedent for Niue (then 5,000) and Tokelau (2,000).

New Zealand offered the Cook Islands four options:

1. Integration with New Zealand (including New Zealand laws and taxes).
2. Constitutional independence.
4. Self-government in association with New Zealand (with the Cook Islands having the unilateral right to change the relationship).
New Zealand planned that the last option was the one to be chosen. It was. Since Cook Islanders have had the option to change it for 39 years now, it clearly was workable. It is often claimed that this associated state concept was new but Jersey, the Isle of Man, Monaco, and many others in Europe and Asia had been associated states for centuries.

How to design a government? Two New Zealand Europeans were appointed to design the system. The Cook Islands Legislature objected and said they wanted one of their appointees on the team. That was agreed, and the Cook Islanders appointed another New Zealand European! It indicated the lack of confidence at the time. The team met with Cook Islanders and wrote the plan. Cook Islands leaders accepted it unanimously. Neither they nor the three consultants had much knowledge of alternatives, and Cook Islanders did not have the confidence to demand fuller participation and exposure to alternatives before deciding on the form of government and electoral systems.

The transition shifted to goalposts on the conventional wisdom about what was “viable”. The magic number for “viability” had been three million, it tumbled to one million, to 100,000 with Samoa, and is still going down! With the decline went reductions in what was a “viable” size for an electorate.

For political culture and leadership selection in the colonial and post-colonial periods see e.g. Gilson, Scott. For the transition to independence and early self-government period see e.g. Aikman, Crocombe, Davis, Northey, Stone. For the current era see e.g. Crocombe, Jonassen, Rasmussen, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Short, Sissons, Stone.

The electoral system: Small enough for everyone to be able to contact the MP

Each island was isolated, communication limited and interaction low – e.g., when the system was established in 1965 there were no air services, no telephones, no television. So each island was given one representative – at least. Except for Nassau (then about 50 people), an outpost of Pukapuka with a rotating population and included in Pukapuka electorate; and Palmerston (about 90), and more of their people lived in Avatiu in Rarotonga so it was included with that electorate. As Aitutaki and Mangaia had about 2,000 each got two seats in a single electorate. Rarotonga has three traditional vaka (districts), so they were chosen as the electorate. The largest vaka was given four seats and the other two, three each. The reason for the high number of members per electorate on the same island was that outer islands with small populations had to have one each, so Rarotonga had to be reasonably proportionate.

In the early 1980s (what year??) the “large” electorates with multiple members were replaced by the same number of MPs each with his/her own electorate. This attracted more parochial politicians, and made all politicians more parochial than they were the larger the electorate. The motive for doing so, it is believed, was to give politicians more leverage in their smaller constituencies.

What is a Member of Parliament? Scraping the maximum from the public purse

What's in a name? From 1965 to 1980 they were (as in the constitution) Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). In 1980 they changed the name Legislative Assembly to Parliament, and themselves to MPs, enhancing their own status and rationalizing more payments to themselves. Once called MP and meeting others called MPs overseas they looked for models – and often spoke of those who got more pay and privileges, but never about the fact that they had a tiny fraction of the number of voters and responsibilities, and for ordinary members, worked little time on their MP role. MPs expectations of personal rewards, powers and privileges have gone up all the time while the population has gone down.

Most of what ministers do in the Cook Islands is done by middle or junior officials in larger countries, because of the difference in scale. But the point of reference is the name, not the scale.

Also as the population went down, the number of MPs went up. The reason each time was to advantage the ruling party. The only reduction was when the Overseas Seat was abolished from the 2004 election.
This had nothing to do with the virtues of that electorate. It was held by a member of the opposition who had switched party allegiances at least four times while an MP. He was likely to vote with those now in opposition and was formally a member of the opposition party. In response to the public call to reduce parliamentary seats from 25 to 17 or 19, therefore, cabinet decided to abolish the Overseas Seat to protect itself from the encumbent, and as a nominal concession to public demand.

Four changes of electorate: (1) The Democratic Party government added one for Mangaia in 1981 because they knew they could win it. This was not related to population as Mangaia was one island with 3 villages and,.. people) whereas Pukapuka/Nassau electorate was 2 islands, 4 villages and .. people – but they voted for the Opposition. (2) Cook Islands Party government added one in Akaoa (Rarotonga) in 1991 as they knew they could win it. (3) The Overseas Seat was unique. Emigration was so high that the 1978 election was won by the party that flew most Cook Islanders home from New Zealand and Australia for two hours to vote and fly back again. That party funded free flights by stealing government money, and the High Court disallowed those votes so the Opposition became the government. Once in government, and the court having blocked that route to a corrupt win, the new government created an Overseas Seat in 1981 for which the electorate was the world except the Cook Islands. However, restrictions on eligibility (three years absence and the intention to return to live) meant that very few overseas Cook Islanders could vote. In the latest election (1999) out of about 100,000 Cook Islanders overseas, only 1,200 were enrolled and only 700 bothered to vote – despite vigorous and expensive electioneering.

Likewise, changes in the term of parliament (except the latest, in 2004, to reduce the term from five years to four) have come about without public consultation and contrary to both public wish and interest.

As documented by Scott (2004).

The number of “ministers” was also effectively doubled by creating Assistant Ministers so that every MP who votes with those in power is either a minister or assistant minister. This led to a public outcry so the Opposition promised to do away with Assistant Ministers if elected. It was. It did – and immediately created Under-Secretaries with the same pay, conditions and lack of useful work as Assistant Ministers!

Along with numbers of MPs and ministers in inverse proportion to population, costs rose even more sharply in inverse proportion to need. Originally, MLAs were not paid salaries, but only sitting allowances for the short periods that the legislature sat. Now they have full salaries despite almost all MPs continuing other occupations (as business operators, private lawyers etc), plus sitting allowances and travel expenses. Parliament sat for 22 days in 2000 (usually four-hour days), 11 days in 2001, 24 days in 2002, 23 days in 2003, and 10 days in 2004.

Additional perks kept being added, including full superannuation for life after two sessions in Parliament. After years of pressure from the Asian Development Bank and other donors, this program was modified, but MPs had to be given a major handout (commonly known as “the superannuation bribe”) to get them to agree to the change. The next addition was of slush funds of ever increasing size and variety.

If “democracy” involves leaders doing what the public wants or at least what is in the public interest, we do not have it. In none of the changes above (in number of MPs, term of parliament, or perks) was the public consulted. Every indication is that most people opposed the changes made.

Who gets elected? From civil servants to business owners, and service to money

Electorates today average only 370 voters. When self-government began in 1965 politicians represented 500 (to check ??) voters. Money was a minor factor in electioneering – in fact in most cases there was no electioneering. Representation was of the electors – i.e.elected representatives lived in and participated fully in the community they represented. Those elected tended to be those with good performance records in the community, especially as doctors or teachers, and generous participation (in time more than money, but both) in local church, sports, voluntary organizations, weddings, funerals and community events. The teachers were more numerous but doctors got the power slots.
Doctors included Dr Tom Davis, Dr Pupuke Robati, Dr Terepai Maoate, Dr Joseph Williams, Dr Robert Woonton, (all five have been Prime Minister – five of the seven Prime Ministers ever). Dr Manea Tamara, was Deputy and Dr Teariki Matenga a minister. Teachers included Albert Henry and Geoffrey Henry (the other two Prime Ministers), Va’inerere Tangatapoto, Tangata Simiona, Ngatupuna Matepi, Mapu Tai’a, Teina Bishop (also business), Tiaki Wuatai and others. Some small-scale business people were among the early members (e.g. Pokino Aberahama, N.T. Napa, Harry Napa) but business is now the major source of politicians – see below.]

Local criteria and personal integrity tend to shrink as the important criteria become increasingly the amount of funds they can direct to the electorate, or key individuals within it, from external sources. These include central government funds, and funds from foreign governments, inter-governmental and private sources. Incidentally the first doctor to become Prime Minister was a civil service doctor as his only occupation. The last four doctors have probably earned much more from their private businesses.

Today, except on the capital island of Rarotonga, few MPs live in their electorates. Most live in Rarotonga, whether ministers or not, Government or Opposition. That reflects the shift of power over outer islands to Rarotonga. The MP mediates between the new power source and the island he (no she yet in any outer island) represents. Cabinet members are one step further removed. Their main leverage is over sources external to the Cook Islands – foreign governments, international organizations, foreign business (including criminal) interests. Increasingly the determinants of who gets elected are outside the electorate, outside the Cook Islander population, and outside the Cook Islands. Likewise, the commitment of politicians is decreasingly to the electorate and increasingly to those who funded his/her election and who provide "help" of various kinds. The rising cost of elections, including the coming of television, and the widening rich-poor gap, orients politicians further from their people and to the interests of richer, more foreign, more distant, clients. The rhetoric remains "serving the people". The reality increasingly serves the “other” category.

Money or other material resources (including jobs and contracts) have become much larger determinants of how people vote. The trend is to vote for those who pay – now – and as much as possible. Politicians feel they should be paid by the government for the rising expectations of electors from them – for weddings and funerals, clubs and reunions, tere parties, medical trips and personal wants. But that is a vicious circle, what causes the rise in expectation is the competition between candidates for the position, and the competitive payouts they make to get it.

During the campaign for the last election one MP got so far in debt to the local liquor wholesaler, that he had to hand over his business to the wholesaler for some months while the latter recouped his debt.

Voters respond to what can the MP do for each one personally. No one is elected at even the level of one island on the larger islands, no one is elected at a national level, and there are no incentives to take a national perspective. All incentives are to maintain a parochial stance.

Costs of the political process and operation as a % of GNP being sought and compared with other countries. [Appears to be 30 to 40 times the cost per person in New Zealand for example.]

Total eligible voters 8,900. Average electorate 370 eligible to vote.

For example the mayor and leading MP of Aitutaki are businessmen. At least some MPs from there and elsewhere have enjoyed free flights on Air Rarotonga for years. When the expatriate owners of Air Rarotonga (who also own many other things) want their support, they tend get it. When it comes to applying pressure for improvements in education for the public, or having a $3.5 million airport upgrade at Aitutaki to reduce Air Rarotonga's maintenance costs (and have it rationalized as a service to international airlines, none of which has used or is likely to use it), the airport upgrade won. Why does the airport upgrade get government’s priority over improvements in education or health, for which there is
a public demand? There seem to be two main reasons: 1. because the expatriate owners of the airline have more leverage on government than ordinary citizens (and the indigenous mayor is a business partner with some Air Rarotonga owners in a subsidiary business dependent on the airline), and 2. because politicians and the elite who fund them (including the owners of the airline) send their children to elite high schools and universities in New Zealand or Australia and go there for any serious medical need. They do not need better education, in fact, keeping those educated locally at a lower level results in the children of the elite having better employment prospects in the Cook Islands than the locally educated.

Today, the Leader of the Democratic Party (and a former prime minister), and four of the six ministers are the biggest business owners in their electorates. The most recent election, a by-election in Ruaau electorate due to the death of the incumbent in 2003, was contested by three people — all owners of businesses, and probably the three wealthiest people in that electorate.  

[The present prime minister owns a pearl farm, a jewelry business, property and other assets (until he went into politics he also owned a private medical practice). His challenger is another of the three or four wealthiest people of that island. The deputy prime minister owns a shop and petrol station, and has a reputation for positive community work, and for being generous with credit. The minister of finance owns ships and other enterprises. The minister for marine and agriculture is the largest businessman in his electorate. Two minor ministers are a former teacher and a former laboratory technician. ]

Two former heads of government did not have money of their own, but the first illegally misappropriated government money in collusion with a New York stamp dealer (who was the first American charged under the Lockheed Act of corrupting foreign governments, for this incident in the Cook Islands). Election of the latter was supported by the second largest organized crime figure in Australia. In late 2002, a convicted New Zealand drug baron came to the Cook Islands. The chief of immigration and the chief of police recommended that he not be allowed to remain. Both were over-ruled by the Prime Minister. A whistleblower last year exposed the fact that $150,000 had been paid into a bank account of a very influential MP who concurrently runs a private law practice. He declined a cabinet post to be Adviser to the Prime Minister — in practice the most powerful person in the nation, and more lucrative than being a minister. Once exposed, the Adviser admitted that $50,000 from the drug baron was for himself (as a “legal fee”), and the balance he described in the media at different times as a trust fund, a security, an investment, under control of the Law Society (later denied), and as a “gesture of good-will”. After public protest the $100,000 was claimed to have been returned but $50,000 retained. These are a few of many transactions and relationships that cause public concern about both political parties.

In short, who is elected in the Cook Islands today, particularly at the higher levels, has little to do with performance, and much to do with ability to finance the increasingly expensive electioneering process. And once in power, their ability to divert government funds to key individuals in their electorates, and making deals with foreign sources of funds with implicit obligations for reciprocal assistance. As the politicians constantly remind us, all they do is “democratic”, i.e. they won elections, they operate within the constitution and the laws – at least in so far as they have not been convicted for not doing so. The leading elected politicians are not representative of the public interest. Limits on campaign funds are unlikely to be effective as there are so many ways to circumvent them.

How local do you have to be? The significance of blood versus numbers

With only one brief exception in the 39 years since independence, all (about 150) MPs have been indigenous. Almost all also have blood ties to the island they represent, and the electorate within it. In the early years the MP also lived in the electorate. That no longer seems to matter, but blood ties do.[ ]

[The one non-indigenous MP was a trader on the island of Ma’uke. He was the wealthiest person on the island, and married to a woman of that island, but he was elected because his close personal friend, the premier (who did have blood ties to that island), wanted him in his cabinet and asked the electorate to vote him in. He lost his seat when it was revealed that he was negotiating a corrupt deal with an overseas stamp firm to give them a monopoly on producing and selling Cook Islands stamps. The money was to be shared between him and the Premier. The three
Cook Islanders who do not have blood rights in the electorate they represent have lived in them for a long time, are married to women of those electorates and have children of those electorates, are very active in community service, and had the benefit of other factors (e.g. one is the son-in-law of a retired long-term cabinet minister who was also the most influential person in the major church).

People also comment on the fact that those at the top tend to be the most ethnically mixed. [ Including the four leading ministers today and the most influential MP. This pattern has been evident for many years.]

The present electoral law allows any person resident for one year to vote. Almost all Cook Islanders prefer a blood criterion – as most Pacific Islanders do – but were persuaded not to by the European constitutional advisers. When it was drafted there were few non-indigenous residents, but now the number of Europeans, Asians and other Pacific Islanders is growing rapidly. Cook Islanders express concern about it but know that New Zealand, as an immigrant society, will support equal power for all residents.

Now that only 10% of Cook Islanders live in the Cook Islands, who represents Cook Islanders? Sir Barrie Curtis, mayor of Manukau, a suburb of Auckland, looks after many more Cook Islanders (and many times more people of 143 other ethnicities) than the Cook Islands government does. There is a growing separation between Cook Islanders overseas and those at home, but many overseas still want to vote at home.

First-born sons fading away but obligations to relatives, and reciprocity, remain strong
Traditionally, first-born sons were leaders. How many of today’s MPs are?? ….. [Seems to be a continuing tendency for the eldest resident son to lead, but many exceptions and certainly a much weaker tendency than it used to be – data being sought. One factor that has been commented on is that outer islands MPs tend to be physically larger than the average – we have no data on whether that is so, but if so it would confirm a widespread tendency in Polynesia to prefer leaders who are larger than average.]

Only one ariki (high chief) has been elected to parliament. He lasted only one term. Another ariki of the same island (the smallest) is standing for the 2004 election. Candidates from the lower levels of chief (mata’iapo and rangatira) have often been elected.

The House of Ariki was created to marginalize the ariki. Most of them had opposed the party that won the election at self-government, so it created and quarantined them in a House with dignity but no power. To marginalize ariki further, that party later created a Koutu Nui of mata’iapo and rangatira (lesser chiefs) many of whom had supported the party.

The House of Ariki and the Koutu Nui have little influence in the political process. Whereas most MPs are successful business people and/or professionals, none of the ariki is either. Most have limited education and experience. In the 1920s and 1930s selected ariki children were sent to elite schools in New Zealand, and returned as the most educated category. Chiefly influence and status has steadily declined. One of many factors is that chiefly leadership was more congruent with British than New Zealand tradition.

Nepotism was a key element in traditional government and fully accepted. Today it is controversial. The first premier made many of his highest appointments from his close family. The last Deputy Prime Minister appointed his son and his daughter, both attending full time schooling, as his government-paid security and house help to which he was officially entitled. Officials went to school to pay them! Now, as Adviser to the prime minister he appointed another son as the senior government-financed appointee in
his office. Such actions are increasingly criticized but often tolerated because people know many politicians do it.

Some chiefs use powers over land for personal income – which can be big money where leasing to hotels etc is concerned. Many of their people feel such income should be for the benefit of the tribe not the individual. In the meantime the extra income can be used for political purposes, but it also tends to alienate voters.

The original subsistence societies were based on reciprocity. That remains a much more important principle of action and allocation than in larger, more commercialized societies.

**Mothers and sisters: Becoming the professionals**

Women were not seen as equals in formal traditional politics. Yet the Cook Islands was the first country in the world to give votes to women – in 1891 (that was the law, at the instigation of an expatriate British Resident, but not effectively implemented). In the Legislative Council (1947-1958) there were one or two women at a time (three different women in total). All were high chiefs (ariki) but all appointed by the colonial government.

In the community, women became accepted as ariki on Rarotonga from 1853 because of strong advocacy of the London Missionary Society LMS) because Queen Victoria led Britain and became the LMS found women more responsive to their suggestions than men. All chiefs on the other islands, and mata’iapo and rangatira on Rarotonga, were men for much longer. Today on Rarotonga women are equally accepted as chiefs by most but not all families, but this is less so on the outer islands.

After universal suffrage was introduced in the Legislative Assembly, two Rarotongan women were elected – a businesswoman who lasted for one three-year term, and a teacher who resigned in her second year. Both were married to expatriates.

After independence in 1965 one woman was elected for three months, but that was a ploy. Albert Henry did not qualify to stand as he had been overseas too long, so he asked people to vote for his sister to enable the qualifications to be changed, then she stood down and he was elected. The next elected was in 1983 for the Overseas Seat, but she lasted only eight months. The next was elected in 1996 and is now Deputy Prime Minister. One was elected from 1999 to 2003 when she died in office. In total, women have been MPs for only 13 of the total of 845 (to confirm???) MP person years. The few others who have stood for election were all in Rarotonga except for two in 1999 in Aitutaki and Pukapuka (both women who had spent most of their lives overseas), but none in any other island. But a number (how many???) of New Zealand resident Cook Islanders has stood for the overseas seat. Most all women who have stood have been married to expatriates and/or spent long periods abroad.

The then prime minister told the annual conference of the National Women’s Federation in 1992 that God does not err, and made man first, and woman out of man, and not from the heart but from the side, and not the first rib but the third. Whenever women had tried to lead anywhere in the world, he said, it caused disaster. While a few of the more traveled and educated women seethed, the majority seemed to concur. That stance is changing slowly due to education, travel, women working and higher incomes.

In all top class of every high school in the Cook Islands, and for some years now, the majority of students are girls. The University of the South Pacific Extension Centre has … students enrolled as of May 2004 …% of them women. Young women occupy a growing proportion of professional roles. This will have inevitable consequences for the political process in the coming years.
Religious influences are waning
Church affiliation used to be important, and in the 1960s and 1970s some church ministers promoted their favoured party from the pulpit. But church affiliation seems to be minor today, except for Jehovah’s Witnesses and Baha’is, neither of which allows their members to vote. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, on the other hand, tells it members that they have a moral responsibility to be fully politically active. Whereas active participation in church affairs was probably universal, and essential, for Maori MPs, today a number participate only nominally.

The “secret” ballot is rather public!
In very small electorates, with vigorous house-to-house electioneering, very close personal interaction and constant discussion, how most people voted is well known. Quite unlike the situation in 1965, today voters are driven to the booths in festive (and coercive) spirit, entertained in tents beside the booth, and kept company at all times until the vote is cast. At least one case is known of officials cheating to find out how people voted, but we do not think this is common. Knowing how people vote is not a major legal issue, but it allows intimidation by MPs with power and bullying tendencies.

Do electors elect the government? In theory yes, in practice no
The last election in the Cook Islands, in June 1999 was contested by the Cook Islands Party (CIP), Democratic Alliance Party (DAP), and New Alliance Party (NAP). CIP/NAP formed a coalition government under a CIP Prime Minister. The next month the PM was thrown out and replaced by a maverick who has belonged to almost every party (and at one time set up one of his own). Four months later DAP/NAP plus one CIP member formed a new government with the PM a member of DAP but former member of CIP. Nineteen months later NAP was thrown out, parties were irrelevant as individuals and clusters jockeyed for power. Six months later parts of all three parties formed a new coalition with other parts in opposition. Eight months later another attempted coup failed. Two months later DAP/NAP reunite as Democratic Party (Demo) plus one ex-CIP. Eight months later a further coup attempt from within fails and those who promoted it are sidelined and cabinet reshuffled. The public expected another coup attempt last month but it was forestalled by a deal between the key players in power and those in opposition, the contents of which are not know for sure. In September we have the next election. A faction of Demo is alleged to have agreed to fight the election as Demo and then break off and set up a new party. No confirmation is available – or likely to be possible, for what happens after the election will be decided by who has most to gain from what possible combinations.

In no case was the public consulted or informed until the deals were over and the spoils shared. Individual MPs have a long life, and the public elects MPs. But what the MPs then do and the parties, groups, coalitions etc they support, bears little relation to the election. Laws have been proposed to ban “party-hopping” but the key players make it clear they will not allow them to be passed. The election is a required ritual, but a minor part of the cynical drama of political gamesmanship. The goal is to form gangs to capture the executive in order to capture the budget and other sources of power. Since those who benefit from the rules are those who make them, change becomes very difficult. Moreover, the widespread view of politicians bending rules for their own advantage provides a precedent for corruption more widely. Law, too, is amenable to interpretation and manipulation, and the rule of law in the Cook Islands has become more the rule of lawyers (both in politics and beyond). Information on the workings of government is more effectively hidden from the public. For example, the expenditure of politicians on travel and other expenses is secret. Members of parliament are determined more by manipulative talent than by integrity, service or efficiency. The concept of sovereignty is used to defend the powers of the political elite.

To quote Indian journalist Kunda Dixit “Democracy has become an excuse for the business and political elite to shuffle the cards every four or five years and cling to power without really devolving decision-
making to communities. Free elections and multi-party politics have thus legitimated the elite without really addressing the root of problems.”

**The politics of media: From government to private, and negligible to major**
The only media in 1965 were a government weekly newspaper and government radio. Both were laden with propaganda for the ruling party. This was probably one reason that one party won the first four elections. When television began in 198…?, it too belonged to government. The daily newspaper, radio and television were privatized in 199.. ?? The daily newspaper belongs to one company. The television, radio and three papers a week belong to another company, PMG. An FM radio station belongs to a third company. The first two companies compete vigorously.

The media is highly politicized. The government appointed the head of PMG as chairman of the board of Telecom Cook Islands, chairman of the electric power authority, employed his brother as a full-time media adviser while working also for PMG, provided land at what has been alleged to be below commercial value, and other gestures seen as favourable. During that time, the PMG media projected a very favourable image of government. When those appointments were changed, the image projected of government became very negative. Then government issued several defamation writs against PMG and its media criticism is muted. At the election due in September, much will depend on which party has most funds and other resources to spend on advertising and promotion. One new independent candidate, a Cook Islander businessman, has hired a full-time English publication relations expert. Money and its sources are likely to be a major factor in the election.

**Problems of today and tomorrow**
The mounting expenditure of the top-heavy political structure, more monetization, economic problems caused by promotion of foreign investment, pressures of tourism (with much the highest tourist density in the South Pacific – and higher than Hawai’i), over-fishing, offshore banking (with the Cook Islands as one of only three countries left on the FATF blacklist), social problems of migration (with 90% gone), cultural change and growing public apathy and cynicism towards politicians and the political system, underline the challenges in molding a more effective representative and electoral system.

Political leaders too often seek personal gain at the expense of public good. For example an advanced and expensive telecommunications station on the home island of the minister for telecommunications, despite a population of only about 200 and greater need elsewhere. The minister of works ignored national priorities to create roads in his constituency even though they were not requested by the public or considered priorities. Politicians create and scramble for free trips, free transport, free housing, free food and more money for less effort – all paid for by the small population of taxpayers. The infamous “Sheraton Hotel”, still not completed after 12 years and having cost Cook Islanders over $120 million, the “Wine Box” offshore banking scam and other examples of politicians having readily bought into spurious deals. Some private sector advisers on public boards have pursued self-serving policies and shown minimal accountability. “Elite” businessmen often seem to guide the policies of government.

To what extent does this legacy of poor decision-making reflect individual failings, corruption or a weak representation or electoral system? Some of each obviously, but the constitutional and electoral systems are inadequate to curb the individual propensity to misuse them.

To what do the problems reflect traditional norms conflicting with the dominant Western model? To a decreasing extent. The larger problems relate to inadequacies of the constitutional framework and the integrity system. The integrity system is too small to give officials objectivity and independence. The average Cook Islander is disadvantaged because most persons appointed to make decisions about them (judges, magistrates, ombudsmen, auditors, police chief, public service commissioner etc) are on short-term contracts and selected on political criteria rather than by an independent process by independent
people. Almost every criminal has a relative in the police and/or magistracy. Both are often accused of bias whatever the reality. Politicians decide who gets radio and tv licences and are not reluctant to threaten to cancel them. Newspapers are threatened with laws to control them.

Two ways improve the integrity system by overcoming the smallness problem include linking with a larger power (e.g. New Zealand or Australia) or with a Pacific regional system. We see some potential for both of these options.

Models come from places with power: The shift from “the West” to Northeast Asia
This applies to political systems as much as to other fashions. The Middle East 2000 years ago (as reflected in the Bible), then Victorian Britain, then 1900s New Zealand, then USA at times in the late 1900s, were the external models looked to in the Cook Islands. The context is changing.

For about 100 years almost imports to the Cook Islands came from New Zealand, almost all exports went to New Zealand, almost all foreign investment was from New Zealand. Now a growing proportion of imports come from Asia (e.g. vehicles and most technology is from Japan or Korea, much furniture and small equipment from China and Indonesia). Most exports now go to Japan (pearls, sashimi tuna) and elsewhere in the Northern hemisphere. The biggest sources of income are tourism and the money haven, both of which are mainly from the Northern hemisphere. The President of French Polynesia recently announced that they expect most of their tourists will soon come from Asia (Air Tahiti Nui already flies to Japan and is opening to Shanghai) – and what happens in Tahiti is often a fore-runner of what happens in the Cook Islands. The Cook Islands Prime Minister recently asked China Southern to extend its daily service from Shanghai to Sydney by three flights a week to the Cook Islands.

Economic, strategic and diplomatic power is swinging more to China and Japan. Aid to the Cook Islands was almost entirely non-Asian until 2004. This year China became the second largest of the 15 donor sources for the Cook Islands. With an election looming, and with a Prime Minister who has been strongly pro-China, China invited him there for a state visit and gave him an extra $4 million that is being used to support his re-election. The population of the Cook Islands contains a growing proportion of expatriates, with Asians the most recent but fastest growing present and projected element. China is now the most assertive country in diplomatic relations with the Cook Islands. It will be surprising if these influences do not lead to changes in the political processes. [ ]

[At least seven Filipino, 2 Indian and 1 Japanese businesses have opened recently, and a Chinese company is looking to become the major shareholder in the largest fishing company. Tuna boat crews are becoming mainly Asian. The only foreign staff recruiting agency in the Cook Islands is for Filipinos, and an informal recruiting agency has just begun for China. The government has given the proposed new Hilton hotel a permit for 300 overseas staff – much the largest permit ever. It is understood that they intend to recruit from Asia.]

A 2004 conference in the Netherlands was on the fact that the study of political science has been one-way, from “West” to “non-West”, but the paradigms, methodologies, theoretical references and sources of authority in the “non-West” are different. The conference sought to balance that. The Cook Islands political structure has been imposed entirely from “the West” but on a “non-Western” base. That was understandable when all the external influences were from “the West”. That is no longer so, but no one has begun to rethink the impact of the other forces on the political structure or functioning.

[“Roundtable on Competing Perspectives of the State in Developing Countries”, University of Neijmegen, Leiden, Netherlands 26 March 2004, convened by Richard Boyd and Tak-Wing Ngo.]

Likewise, the lateral search for ideas has been restricted to parts of “the West” in the past. The backwards search is vigorous as the House of Ariki fights to be made into an upper house, a kind of senate. That would double the number (and probably cost) of legislators for this nation of 12,000 people. The forwards search is almost non-existent, except in terms of tinkering with existing models. We can
do nothing about the past or the present, the only period we can do anything about it is the future. The “traditional” model and the “democracy” model were both designed for vastly different conditions from those of the 21st century, and it is time for us to think beyond those two restrictive frameworks, although aspects of them may have a place in a new paradigm. The nature of the new paradigm requires widespread and continuing brainstorming and consideration.

For example Roger Malcolm of Atiu notes that our present MPs are elected on a few issues but exercise power on issues electors do not support them on, and that electors have no power to instruct or change representatives between elections. He recommends consideration of a system in which (1) Electors nominate themselves or another to cast their vote; (2) In order of preference up to 10 persons who could represent them; (3) Be able to change nominations periodically. The Cook Islands Parliament would sit every three months and be made up of the 20 persons with most nominations one month before that sitting. They would vote according to the number of nominations they carried. Any proposals made by parliament would lie for seven days before the final vote was taken, and anyone not represented in parliament could add their vote. This process is already used in the Cook Islands in relation to land matters as most pieces of land have many (often hundreds) of owners. Other alternatives could allow one to nominate several persons, distributing one’s vote on economic issues to x and on social issues to y.

All islands of the Cook Islands are connected by line phone and cell phone, fax and e-mail (there are nearly as many Internet connections in the Cook Islands as there are households). The possibility of electronic communication in political processes has yet to be explored, although the potential (and the practice in some countries) is enormous (see e.g. McDonough 19...)

Main pressures will include
1. to reduce international influence of the Pacific Islands. Cf comments in Asian foreign ministries etc – why should CI or Tuvalu with 10,000 have the same vote as Japan or China – in terms of population, money contributions etc.
2. to penetrate within the political process within the Cook Islands – both foreign governments, and foreign businesses. And possibly foreign philosophies (no immediate replacement for Marx as an alternate set of organizing principles).
3. Pressure from the growing, and probably soon majority, non-indigenous populations, for equal rights, having already acquired unequal power through control of the economy. How to provide for indigenous rights? The external pressures on Fiji are to put everyone on a level playing field when the cultural conditioning predisposes the non-Fijians to win in economic and professional and political encounters. The Cook Islanders abroad will be a 2% minority in NZ and a less than 1% minority in Australia. How to allow Cook Islanders more effective representation?

In reviewing three levels of political culture (system, process and policy) some significant images emerge. Orientations to the political system typically include pride in the nation, national identity and legitimacy of government. Cook Islanders generally show more pride in the tribe or island than the nation. For example, people of the Aitutaki prefer to be called by their island (or even village) name than as Cook Islanders. Cook Islanders in New Zealand, Australia and Tahiti have built many community centers for each home island or even district, but few for the Cook Islands.

National sports, a typical basis for national pride, in mainly the Manea games of the Southern group islands (minus Rarotonga), Pura Pura games of the Northern group islands, and the Kumete sports of Rarotonga. This parochialism may influence MP’s behavior lobbying for constituency programs and projects – in addition to re-election. The system of selecting Cabinet from MPs gives Ministers access to the nation’s tax dollars for use in his/her constituency on the pretense that it is for the common good.

What does the public expect from the political process? What do they think of the political institutions? Most voters expect their MP to participate in community activities and sometimes even to provide for their personal needs. Receiving “community labeled” assistance that provides sand and gravel
for family roads, trees trimmed for private homes or extra-ordinary medical or other services. National policies and laws are secondary if considered. This inward personal-look tends to ignore the rights of those from the village who leave for overseas – except when they are fundraising for a project in the village, in which case they expect those overseas to contribute handsomely. Current efforts by landowners to cancel the land rights of those who live overseas is due in part to the increasing rental value of land and personal profit orientation. Beach sections that were once offered to family members for nothing have now reached the million dollar mark on the open market. The land court is rife with land and chiefly title disputes with individual politicians intervening with self-serving agendas, underlining the need for an overhaul in the political system.

The 150 (???) traditional chiefly (ariki) and subchiefly (mata’iapo and rangatira) leaders, , village elected councils and mayors (about 75???), and the 24 national MPs (not to mention 100 or more church leaders - orometua and pu oire) reflect a system of too many leaders for a population of 12,000. The loss of population reduces the pool of talent especially as many of the more educated and innovative emigrate.

How government sets policy priorities adds more intrigue and conflict to the many types and levels of leader making conflicting decisions. For example, government has encouraged air services to outer islands on Sundays to promote tourism (promoted by the airline and tourism industry) despite local leaders consistently objecting. Some years ago, the Prime Minister and the President of the House of Ariki objected to a proposed New Zealand military exercise in the Cook Islands. All Ariki in Rarotonga agreed with their President and the Prime Minister. The Minister of Foreign Affairs disagreed and sought approval from the Chiefs and leaders in the Southern Cook Islands. They accepted and the exercise took place in the outer islands.

Is the role of the Cook Islands government to extract resources, distribute money and resources, regulate human behavior, or simply to pursue symbolic policies? Government has given high priority to sea-bed mining and the billions to be secured from it. But despite much money spent pursuing that “dream”, nothing has resulted. Marine resources have been tapped to some extent and other creative ventures, such as off-shore banking have had successes and disasters. Rich potential economic benefits from cultural images, artifacts and creative arts and crafts have yet to be identified. Much of the distribution of money, goods and services is politically motivated and on inconsistent criteria. Laws tend to be inadequate and outdated. Many laws are not applied and when they are, punishments tend to be deficient.

Although government pursues privatization and creates private monopolies, it still increases its own budget, negating the logic of privatization. Accountability is never a great concern. Priority setting seems to be mainly responding to emergencies. Coupled with a lack of moral leadership, that is entrenched by an inadequate representation and electoral system, the country is poised for more disasters. To improve its alternatives, change is essential.

A presidential system may preferable, with the head of government selecting a cabinet of three, and directly accountable to the electors rather than to Parliament. Or some other means of isolating the legislature more effectively from the executive. A realistic system must be developed that reduces the cost to the public, uses fewer civil servants (now ...% of all persons aged 20-55 are civil servants), and free up funds and staff for the productive sector. This would enable a standard of living comparable with New Zealand and stem the outflow of Cook Islanders, reducing the need for the inflow from other countries that is already causing ethnic tensions and social problems.

Every inhabited island should be represented but related to population and productivity. Such a pattern could result in MPs (Mangaia, Aitutaki, Nga Pu Toru, Penrhyn/Palmerston, Manihiki/Rakahanga/ Suwarrov, Pukapuka, Takitumu, Puaikura, Te Au-o-Tonga – the last three Rarotonga). The possibility of
up to six members on a national electorate needs further consideration. The head of government could be elected on a national roll of all Cook Islanders including eligible voters living overseas.

Corrupt politicians, administrators and businessmen must be held accountable and adequately dealt with. As now constituted, the Cook Islands political representation and electoral system is an ill-fitted colonial creation that is over-priced and ineffectual – but there seems to be an effort to sell it on the black-market.

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