Elections, political culture and the Tongan mind


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Abstract
The Tongan milieu, in this and many other cases, invariably provides the exception to the rule. Although a modern system of government, along with institutions expressing that ideal, was installed by the 1875 Constitution, political development has taken on a different complexion to that found in most other Pacific Islands. I argue that in spite of Tongan experience with the trappings of modern government, political thinking and electoral behaviour are still shaped by factors that will be peculiar in other polities. In that case, elections function in accordance with those priorities. I rely, initially, on the expertise of a taxi-driver to articulate these ideas.

Taxi-driver: the ‘Tongan mind’
The conversation began\(^1\), as most conversations begin, with my enquiring after the state of the weather in Nuku'alofa in recent days. I was told that it had been raining, heavily at times. One of the times was at the particular moment that we had landed, I seemed to recall. But now, as is normally the case according to the driver, the rain had gone, only to be expected to return in the near future. So what we were left with, for our 36km drive to Nuku'alofa, was the humidity that is usually found between intervals of rain, when one felt that nature was not yet satisfied and was predisposed to even more of a deluge. What this lull usually produced was a state of drowsiness that was very conducive to sleep. Indeed, there were frightening moments when our vehicle would stray on to that side of the road which was reserved for oncoming traffic.

Luckily, there were not many vehicles on the road at this hour of the night, and the potholes on the road together with the noise emanating from our battered Nissan station-wagon combined to deny my driver and I any opportunity for slumber. In addition, if only to save our lives and for no other reason, I managed to engage my driver’s attention with a subject in which he was well versed: Tongan politics. Much in the same manner, no doubt, that a taxi driver in Wellington, New Zealand or Sydney, Australia would find New Zealand or Australian politics a topic on which his (or her, as the case may be), opinion was often sought by visitors, tourists and the like. It makes one wonder at the kind of interesting account that a taxi driver could spin in, say, the Gaza Strip, Sarajevo, 

\(^1\) This discussion took place on 7 January 1994 on the road between Fua'amotu Airport and Nuku'alofa. I was further informed by a different driver, along the same road, on the eve of the 2002 general election.
or Dili. At times, the account given by this particular driver aroused in me a fear that we were indeed driving down the main road of one of the most besieged and violent cities of the world. That is, if it was not for the sweet-smelling scent of the garland of *siale* hanging down the rear-view mirror of our car. It constantly reminded me that this was indeed the Kingdom of Tonga, and not Palestine, no matter how determined my driver attempted to convince me that we could just as easily be in some other, less peaceful, part of the world.

After we exchanged some further thoughts regarding the weather, I asked whether he knew of anything that the newspapers had not covered about the recent shooting in Nuku‘alofa in which two people died.\(^2\) I asked this question, incidentally, as we were making the left-hand, westward, turn at the village of Malapo heading in the direction of Nuku‘alofa. The driver seemed to awaken from his indolent state, when he heard my interest in finding out more about the case. It just so happened, said the driver, that he was related to one of the girls working in the office at the time of the shooting. The girl was a *tuofefine*\(^3\) of his. I took his statement, syntactically, to mean that the girl was his sister in the context of his *kāinga*. And if there was any doubt about the reliability of his informant, her story was authenticated by one of the drivers in the company who was a close friend of his. Not wanting to disagree with him, and because I was not as close, or as well-informed of the case as he was, I assured him that I believed his account, without question. But as it turned out, his description of the incident followed closely that which was reported by the newspapers in New Zealand, which I had read. The main difference was that, whereas he professed that he got the reports exclusively from his *tuofefine* and friend, I had simply read them. Having exhausted that topic, (we were then nearing the outskirts of Vainī), but hoping to maintain my driver’s interest and alertness, for our safety’s sake if not for anything else, I broached the subject that was foremost in my own mind, and for my part at least, the real object of our conversation. I queried after the work of the Pro-Democracy movement at the time. After the General Election of February 1993, and the proclamations of triumph by both government and reformist candidates, the demands and calls often made by the Pro-Democracy movement became more muted. By late 1993, farmers had found a new sense of prosperity from the export of squash to Japan. In turn, businesses did well because of people’s new buying power. It gave people an optimistic outlook, particularly as Christmas was approaching. But it meant that the often popular claims made by the Pro-Democracy movement were forgotten somewhat, or perhaps ignored, by people, at least until after the festive season. This was the reason behind my prompting.

\(^2\) In December 1993, Viliami Ngauamo, a former employee, shot and killed his boss, Tēvita ‘Ova, a prominent businessman, allegedly for having been wrongfully dismissed from his position. The ex-employee then turned the gun on himself. A shooting of this kind would almost be an unfortunate but everyday occurrence in the more ‘developed’ countries of the world. But this was the first time that a crime of this nature, in this circumstance, had occurred in Tonga. So, it naturally attracted a lot of interest within Tonga, and from overseas.

\(^3\) *Tuofefine* is what a male would usually call his sister within the nuclear family; it can also be used to denote one’s female cousin within the extended family as in, ‘*Oku ou tuofefine‘aki ‘a Mele,*’ literally, ‘I use Mele as my sister,’ as opposed to, ‘*Ko hoku tuofefine ko ‘Ana,*’ ‘*Ana is my sister,*’ referring to one’s sister in one’s own immediate family.
The driver stated that if the voice of the kau temo pe fa'ahi temokalati (the democrats or side of democracy), seemed to be waning in the media for instance, it was just because they were conducting seminars around the villages. The aim of the meetings was not only to inform people of their rights under the Constitution and the law, but also to spread the democratic idea as far afield as possible. He further pointed out that this was a good way of ensuring that they would be re-elected to Parliament in the next General Election. There was no cause for me to doubt this part of the driver’s account, because I had learnt as much from conversations with people close to the movement, and from the newspapers in New Zealand, on the rare occasion that they decided to say something about it. However, the next part of my driver’s ruminations aroused a lot more than a little doubt in me. He said that the recent shooting was a sign of the times - or something to that effect - and that it was a reflection of people’s manifest outrage, at how the government was running the country. There was corruption, nepotism and mismanagement of government funds by ministers, and the Pro-Democracy movement was justified in bringing these issues out in the open. He had often heard, he said, and sometimes seen with his own eyes, government ministers conducting themselves in a manner that was unbecoming their important calling as the overseers of the country’s affairs. He himself was fed up with this state of affairs, and he completely and absolutely supported the work of the Pro-Democracy movement. The government had no qualms about trampling on the me’avale and the masiva (poor or poverty-stricken class(es)). As far as the shooting incident was concerned, this was a harbinger of a more turbulent future for the government. People were now prepared to take up arms against it. It was also widely known, the driver went on with apparent anger, that a lot of people owned an unusually large cache of arms and ammunition around the country. By this time I realised that the driver was convinced in his own mind that the country was on the verge of civil war, no matter what anyone might do or say. I was also beginning to regret my decision to come to Tonga at this particular time, if what the driver said was anything to go by. It was later to seem to me that the driver had not separated the shooting incident from the subject of Tongan politics, as I had done, but had gone on to talk of the two as if they were one and the same topic. But at the time I was worried.

I let the driver collect himself again before asking my next question which, I must admit, was perhaps not a wise thing to do, under the circumstances. I tentatively asked, with not a little trepidation, about the role of the king in all this, as we were going down the dip in the road at Tonga College, ‘Atele, at the village of Ha’ateiho. What the driver said next took me by surprise. He could not fathom, he said, people’s disrespect for questioning with their ngutu ‘uli the king and his efforts to develop the country. If you look at the king’s life, he went on, he has always tried tirelessly to find some project, scheme or avenue whereby the country could benefit. Throughout his career first as a minister of the crown, then Prime Minister and now king, his foremost concern had been to develop the country, socially, economically and so on. He had been selfless throughout. ‘Look,’ the driver said, ‘the king has just recently built a house for himself after all these years. Can you imagine, he asked, a monarch such as Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain having to

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4 A derogatorily collective term for commoners. It literally means, ignorant, fool, stupid, idiot and so on.
5 Ngutu = mouth, ‘uli = dirty, therefore dirty mouth(s). This type of expression is used when one speaks to, or in relation to one’s social mores. It is a manifestation of humility and subservience on one’s part.
endure the same sacrifices that our king has made during his lifetime?’ I said I could not, and that the Queen of England has several palaces, if my memory served me correctly.

‘Well, then,’ the driver said, ‘it just goes to show that our king has more love for us, than Queen Elizabeth II has for her people. I am sure that you have heard of the king’s overseas travels, though you may live in New Zealand.’ I answered in the affirmative.

‘Right,’ he continued, ‘then you would have heard of the king’s excursions to such far away, and hazardous, places as the Middle East and South East Asia, all for the purpose of advancing Tonga’s development drive. Now you name one individual who has done the same for Tonga.’ I professed that I could not think of anyone off-hand. ‘There you are then. No one has accomplished anything that could be compared to what the king has achieved for Tonga, not the government ministers, nobles, any of the commoners or even the pro-democracy people.’ ‘It was an example,’ he went on further, ‘of the age-old tradition of, “Kai ‘a e manu vaivai mei he fāngota ‘a e lulutai.”’

Taken back by such swift interchange of loyalties, I allowed the driver to talk much in the same vein, while I pondered the difficulties of trying to extricate such a multidimensional opinion for analysis purposes. So lost in thought was I, that it took a gentle nudge from my well-informed driver to jolt me back to reality, and to tell me that we had arrived at our destination, Nuku’alofa. It was a little time later, after greeting my kinsfolk, that I found that not only had I over-paid my knowledgeable driver, but that I had also parted with a carton of cigarettes that was meant for someone else. I was not, however, overly worried about this as, in a way, it was perhaps additional payment for the insight that the driver had just imparted to me. And anyhow, where else and from who else could one obtain such valuable information, but from a taxi driver?

The conversation with the taxi driver was valuable for several reasons. It not only revealed certain aspects of Tongan public opinion, it also illustrated the way in which a Tongan understands political issues and more importantly, how he articulates his understanding of the issues. It confirmed, in addition, the fact that the Tongan’s opinion is not so one-sided as was once thought. It is not a ‘black or white’ configuration. It would be more useful to see it as either being two-sided, or even multidimensional. That is, it is both and black and white, with perhaps a touch of grey.

At a preliminary glance, the conversation is significant, firstly, because of the ease and speed with which the driver changed his opinion. To recapitulate: between the villages of Vainī and Ha’ateiho, a distance of around 6 kilometres separating them, the driver was passionately pro-democratic, while from Ha’ateiho to Nuku’alofa, about 15 kilometres apart, he was firmly on the side of the monarchy, though perhaps not necessarily on the side of the government. For whereas, the monarch was talked about with glowing admiration and respect, no mention was made of government ministers, or the government, except when he was being a pro-democracy supporter. However, one cannot be absolutely certain of his opinion of government ministers, because he was not asked to give it. And with his strong support for the monarch, it is possible that if he were asked of his opinion of ministers immediately after his account of the monarch’s activities, he could have also seen the ministers in a more favourable light. The ministers, that is, could

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6 A common metaphorical saying which literally translates as ‘The eating of the weak bird from the fishing of the lulutai (bird).’ It is an allusion to the way that Tongans benefit from the work of the monarch.
have benefited from being spoken about in the same breath as the monarch. Then again, the driver could have given an entirely different opinion regardless.

In addition to the mercurial nature, and the swift transformations in the driver’s opinion, he also demonstrated another dimension of how opinion can be formulated: by an ‘association of ideas.’ This association of ideas appears to have something in common with the thought of both John Locke and David Hume, though in a loose way. In the Lockean fashion, that is, ‘someone learning to dance in a room with a trunk, thereafter assumes that they would only dance well in a room containing the same trunk or one like it,’ so the driver seems to think that the shooting is somehow connected with the reform movement.\(^7\) The driver assumed, in other words, that armed violence (of which the shooting was a part according to the driver) would escalate to become part of Tongan political argument, so long as the government governed with injustice. Simply so it seems because there was a shooting, and it happened to occur in Tonga at a time when there was a struggle between the monarchy and democracy. Remove one of these factors, that is, the relativity of things in accordance with space, time and place and the logic of the argument falls apart. The main, but minor, difference between the Lockean and the Tongan conceptualisation is in the number of ideas being associated or connected. In Locke’s interpretation, there are two basic ideas: dancing (or dancing well), and the trunk. In the Tongan notion, there are three: the shooting (or armed uprising), the Pro-Democracy movement and the government’s ineptitude.

Hume’s association of ideas as governed by the concept of causation, also seems to be present. The government’s misconduct in the first instance, had given rise to the formation of the Pro-Democracy movement, and secondly, to their taking up of arms to realise their aim - namely, the reform of politics in particular, and society in general. Thus, as in the case of the comparison with Locke’s idea, where there was not a great deal of dissimilarity, the Tongan notion differs mainly from Hume’s causation in the sense that there is an ‘explicit’ double effect. Explicit, because Hume does not enumerate the effect(s), nor the cause(s). The other difference is the order in which the driver argued his case: he argued from effect(s) to cause. This is more in keeping with Francis Bacon’s ‘inductive’ logic, one might say, than with Hume’s thesis. But this is a petty issue, as the driver merely responded according to the sequence in which the questions were presented. More importantly, what this all means, to put it simply, is that Tongans form and express their opinions much in the same way as other people of other countries do, and are not that unique or insular. There are, of course, some subtle differences, as can be expected.

**Cyclic reasoning**

This method of thinking and expression of thought, in this case, are grounded on two principal premises. One consists of the desire to justify a singular argument by recruiting other contingent but not necessarily connected factors in support of one’s overall schema. The usual result of such efforts, because the factors do not naturally cohere, is what might

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\(^7\) Notice that I have used the terms reform and democracy interchangeably, because there is no other movement in Tonga with the aim of reforming politics and society besides the Tonga Human Rights and Democracy Movement. I also use the description Pro-Democracy movement to refer to the same thing.
be called ‘cyclic reasoning.’ It is nevertheless a form of argument since propositions have justifications, no matter how tenuous the grounds. The late Patricia Ledyard, author and long-time resident of ‘Utulei in the island of Vava’u in the northern part of Tonga, wrote of such an argument. The idea being justified is the occasion of the hurricane; a common and often destructive force, but it is seen here in a new light:

...Because of the hurricane, Mata’aisi was here in our house. Because he was here, we helped him go to Theology school. Because he was at St. John’s, he met Charles and Betty Buck. Because he met them, we came to know them. Because we became friends, Taimi and Tupou have an uncle Charles and an Aunt Betty, and a whole new life – which might never have been had it not been for the hurricane.⁸

Tongan thinking

The other premiss is the peculiar way in which Tongans frame their ideas, in both thought and diction. The method is partly a result of Tongan notions to do with heliaki and other cultural traits such as faka’apa’apa⁹ and tauhi-vaha’angatae,¹⁰ and partly as a result of individual orientation, which is a combination of elements, not always Tongan in nature. Consider the way a ‘typical’ Tongan might go about asking to use his neighbour’s spade.¹¹ Say for argument’s sake that Sione, a Tongan planter, lives and works beside his neighbour, Tavake, who is another planter. Sione, wishing to clear the weeds around his kava off-shoots finds that he has mislaid his spade or that someone has borrowed it and has yet to return it. He goes to his neighbour, Tavake, with the intention of asking him for a loan of his spade. Sione and Tavake, by the way, sometimes fish together with the other men of the village and they both belong to the same church. They dutifully observe their obligations to the nōpele¹² on whose tofi’a they live and extract their livelihood. They know and respect each other, but are not intimate friends. Sione, since it is early morning, finds Tavake at home about to leave for his own ‘ufi¹³ plantation. After the usual greetings, Sione enquires after Tavake’s yams and whether he thinks they will grow to his expectation. Tavake replies that he hoped so and that he was thinking of selling a part in Tonga and shipping the rest to his brother in New Zealand to sell there. They then talk of the Sunday sermon (since this was a Monday morning) and whether the minister was justified in rebuking the congregation during each service. They decide that he was, because they knew full well their shortcomings as pious Christians. It reminded them that the minister had reminded the congregation that it was nearly time for the annual misinale.¹⁴ Therefore, they made plans to go fishing for this expressed purpose. The talk next turned to rugby and the fact that the national team, ‘Ikale Tahi,¹⁵ was not doing well

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⁹ Respect.
¹⁰ Duty; doing one’s share.
¹¹ The following rendition cropped up as part of an informal discussion with anthropologist ‘Okusitino Māhina on the reasons behind Pacific island students failing to reach standards expected of them at tertiary education levels.
¹² Noble.
¹³ Yam.
¹⁴ Literally, missionary. It is also the occasion when the congregation contributes money to the church on an yearly basis.
¹⁵ Sea eagle.
Despite the good showing they put up against the All Blacks in the 1999 Rugby World Cup. At this point they begin to feel the rays of the sun, reminding them that time was getting on, and they must depart for their respective plantations. Sione is about to leave but suddenly remembers that he came for the spade. He asks Tavake for his spade; and it is given to him. We may include this way of thinking and doing things in the collection of elements that is known generally and loosely as fakaTonga, the ‘Tongan way.’

Thought and behaviour of this kind has both advantages and disadvantages, depending on one’s inclination and stance. The advantages are that, it seems that the ‘ordinary’ Tongan is open-minded enough to accept new ideas, though there has to be some doubt as to his capacity to evaluate them in a clear and logical manner. On the down side, and because of the possible incapacity to assess the merits or otherwise of new ideas, there is the danger of people being easily led, and insidiously influenced by others. This was illustrated in the taxi driver’s conversation, when he took the shooting and the reform movement’s cause to be directly related. One might object on the grounds that the driver merely answered the questions as they were asked. But this just confirms the earlier suspicion that the driver, and others like him, cannot evaluate novel ideas with any measure of dexterity.

There is evidence, albeit inconclusive as it is and not exclusively Tongan in nature, that seems to support the proposition that not only is the Tongan’s opinion on political matters fluid, it is so because his or her opinion is easily influenced as a result of an incapacity to competently assess new ideas, before accepting them. There are several sources whence Tongans draw, or inherit their intellectual makeup.

Sociocultural matrix
One of these is likely to be the Tongan sociocultural matrix (the familio-societal complex), where Tongans are taught how to act, and more importantly, how, and possibly, what, to think. One is taught about one’s duties and behaviour, firstly, within one’s immediate family, at the ‘api (household; the nuclear family), where the individual is instructed by the father and, more likely, by the mother. Then there is the kānga-wide context, where activities are overseen by the ‘ulumotu’a (literally old or mature head). Further learning occurs at the communal level which used to be controlled, predominantly, in traditional times by the ‘eiki (chief, who was usually a relative of the monarch), and in recent times by the nōpele, and his more influential compatriot, the faifekau (Protestant church minister). Behaviour, in the manner of thinking and duty, is regulated by two principles: age and gender. One’s behaviour, thought and duty is dependent on whether one is a man or woman, old, young, or middle-aged and so on. A young man, for example, is expected to provide food and shelter for his sisters and their offspring, whenever it is needed. An elder brother might also demand similar treatment. The same elder brother, on the other hand, is also expected to perform similar duties vis-

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16 Though, in the case of the taxi driver, he could hardly be regarded as an ‘ordinary’ person, since his worldview is shaped to a certain extent by the people he encounters in his occupation. So that he may well be regarded as an ‘enlightened’ ordinary person.

17 This is not as malicious an act as it may sound. All of us (but politicians in particular), at one time or another, indulge in it. It is only considered sinister when people are being led to an immoral or undesirable end, as judged by generally accepted standards of human conduct.
à-vis his sisters and their offspring as the younger brother. Among female members of the family, the eldest sister is expected to command respect from her other, younger, sisters. It might be thought that the mother would command the most respect within the family, as she would be the eldest among the female members. However, this is not so. Ultimate respect is paid to the father - the head of the family. This seeming imbalance (in the degree of respect paid to father and mother) is offset by the condition that the father is expected to perform the subservient role to his own sister(s); the mother can expect to be served by her own brother(s) and their children. This characterisation is perhaps an ideal, and one derived more from a traditional village-type situation than from urban practice. This does not mean, though, this kind of setting no longer exists, or is absent from urban-type settings.18

**Urban settings**

One might expect that in urban surroundings, one would find a more urbane type of personality and opinion. This is true, to a certain extent, but it would be a mistake to assume that most, and certainly not all, town-dwellers are sophisticated in intellect. Still, we can at least say that there is a difference between the opinion of the town-dweller and country resident. This is a result of the more flexible societal relations found in the cosmopolitan area, and because of the wide range of information provided by such institutions as the media, and by influential opinion-leaders with diverse ideas. The nobility is less of a force in urban surroundings, primarily, because they do not own any land there, and so are not owed any allegiance. Hence, the noble’s influence diminishes somewhat. But whereas the nobility suffers in the power stakes, the churches continue to be a formidable force. Both the ex-president of the Wesleyan church, the late Dr.S.’A. Havea, and the late Bishop P. Finau, former head of the Roman Catholic church were ardent supporters of democracy. Their influence on their respective flocks, have been seen as a great boost to the ranks of the reform movement.

**Religious influences**

The power of religious teachings should not be underestimated, as it does not only seek to control one’s thinking and acting, it also pursues one’s soul. The powerful influence of the church can be illustrated in this way. After a child’s birth, when the mother is perhaps still at hospital, the *faifekau, pâtele* (Catholic priest; padre) or other church leader, calls to share a prayer of thanks to God for having delivered the baby safely from its mother’s womb. Thanks also would be given for the mother’s good health. The mother and father’s families would have offered this same kind of prayer. Every new-born baby must be baptised by the church as dictated by custom. Failing to do so would not only constitute a sin but it would also be a source of ridicule by the community. The occasion of a child’s birthday from then on would see a prayer of thanksgiving for the life of the child. She or he would have also been required to attend Sunday service and Sunday school or other activities for the church’s youth. At primary school, even those run by the state, special classes are set aside for religious instruction. At secondary school, purely academic classes are supplemented by religious education. The need to instruct students on proper Christian behaviour is extended, for example, at Tupou college, which is run by the Wesleyans, to allow students to become lay preachers. The religious programme at the

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18 See Chapter Five below for a fuller discussion of these kinds of relationships.
schools are reinforced by the evening family prayers in the ‘api. By the time Wesleyans reach their twenties and thirties, they are expected to become, if they are not already one, a tangata malanga (male lay preacher) if they were male, and fefine akonaki (female lay preacher; instructor) if female. All the milestones in one’s life are marked by religious ceremony, such as in a birth, birthday, christening, marriage and death. Non-conformity with these religious norms attracts social ridicule and alienation for the non-conformist. This meant that one’s life, from birth to death, is regulated by, and lived out in accordance with religious piety. Religion, in the Christian form, pervades all areas of Tongan society, and it has continued to inform Tongan politics to a remarkable extent.

**Affluent classes**

There is also the power wielded by the monied and business classes. Although they have not chosen to occupy themselves with trying to win people’s minds, in a socio-political sense, they, nevertheless, could do so with little effort. One has only to think of the hold that an employer could have over an employee to appreciate this, or of a bank manager over a customer hopeful of a loan. In fact, the ‘traditional’ representatives of the people in parliament were procured mainly from this group. Businessmen such as Joe Tu’ilatai Mataele, Hale Vete, and recently ‘Ulimi Uata, come to mind. Then, there are the roles played by people of standing, and people with education. Although it is difficult to gauge the inclination of members of these groups, it is possible that if enough of them were dissatisfied with the government’s performance, they could do it real harm. It is well to remember that these are the people that one may have as a neighbour. Or, they might be your doctor, district nurse, shopkeeper, lawyer or insurance-broker. They are well positioned to influence opinion at the ground level. A rumour in circulation also suggests that some of them may be leaning towards the ideas of the reformers, but do not want to advertise it, either because they are employed by the government, or that they feel their position and livelihood would be adversely affected if their inclinations became known.

**Media influences**

A recent, but universal, channel for both expression and modification of opinion has been the media, both print and electronic. The call for reform is led by the Kele’a, a bi-lingual newsletter which is edited by Samiuela ‘A. Pōhiva, the number one People’s Representative in Tongatapu. It was begun in 1986 by Pōhiva and Viliami Fukofuka as a means of highlighting the government’s problems, and also to promote their solutions to the problems. Pōhiva’s efforts are well supported by the Taimi ‘o Tonga, a newspaper published twice a week. For the establishment, there is the government-owned newspaper, Ko e Kalonikali Tonga, which is bi-lingual, the A3Z radio station, and the Tonga Today magazine, where the staff are largely from Mormon backgrounds. There is also ‘Epoki Fo’ou, which is published by an expatriate living in California. In New Zealand the Tongan International, Taimi International, Tonga News Weekly, and the Tongan International Fakauite, have all been published by, and aimed mainly at, the Tongan community, though some editions have been sold in Tonga. Radio 531 Pi and

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19 Conch shell; symbolically, it was used in former times to summon attention or to pronounce something important.

20 Media legislation introduced in 2003 has since made it illegal to distribute Taimi in Tonga. It remains very popular among Tongans overseas.
Access Community Radio 810AM produce Tongan programmes that sometimes feature interviews with government officers as well as reformers; they also provide news from Tonga, with 531Pi broadcasting news directly from Radio Tonga every weekday. The churches in Tonga also have a hand in the newspaper/newsletter medium, either to supplement their Sunday sermons, and occasionally to instruct their congregations in their political behaviour. *The Taumu’a Lelei* is produced by the Roman Catholic church, the *Tohi Fanongonongo* by the Free Wesleyan church, and the Maama Fo’ou (New Light/New World) church produces the *’Ofa ki Tonga* newspaper. The Catholic and Wesleyan publications are what one may characterise as being moderate in tone, in that while they do not shy away from including materials considered to be ‘subversive’ in their contents, they have also been careful to give the government its due when it is worthy of such praise. The *Maama Fo’ou* paper is unabashedly for the establishment.

The print media, and particularly newspapers, have an advantage over others because not only are they cheaper to purchase, the nature of their publication means that they keep up with daily or weekly developments, and they offer space and privacy to both publisher and contributors because they do not have to front up with their ideas as one would expect to, say, on television or radio. There are several FM stations which are privately-owned, that concern themselves more with music than with anything else. There are also several television stations, that air mostly imported (mainly American) programmes. Although they contain some local content, they rarely deal with material that can be called controversial, or even political.

By far the most influential of the newspapers, are the *Kele’a* and *Taimi ʻo Tonga* which stand for change and democracy, and *Ko e Kalonikali* which stand for the monarchy and the status quo. The state-owned radio can claim similar (in some cases more) influence, as it is probably the most accessible, but it is not an effective vehicle for the exchange and diffusion of ideas or arguments.21 Television programming has not developed enough to enhance this aspect of the media as a public forum, mainly because Tongan broadcasters do not possess the power to influence programming, which is largely done by their overseas partners. Therefore, opinions are influenced, formed and expressed mainly via the newspapers.

Never in the history of political discourse in Tonga has an issue polarised public opinion to the extent that the idea of change and democracy has done. The battle over it has been fought in the media from the beginning. It began with Pōhiva’s controversial *Matalafolaukai* radio programme in 1981, for which he was discharged from his teacher’s post. And it reached a critical point in September 1996 when Pōhiva and the editors of the *Taimi* was imprisoned for publishing material that were deemed confidential to parliament. The debate between change and the monarchy has largely been fought out in the newspapers. The emergence of this kind of discourse was also spawned by, if not coincidental with the present profusion of the media, so that Tongan opinion was suddenly bombarded with an abundant array of ideas. This is in accordance with the conventional obligations of the media as both a mirror of, and an influence on public opinion. Nevertheless, in fulfilling this dual capacity the newspapers have sparked what might be termed a ‘paper war’ when the ordinary Tongan thought and spoke about

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21 The advent of talk-back radio would fill this gap, as it does in metropolitan countries.
politics at a level and to an extent that was unprecedented in Tongan political dialogue.\footnote{In fact Tongans have never really articulated their political opinions in a public way, prior to this period. In order to show this, I will draw materials largely from the Kalonikali and Taimi. The Kele’a, though it is the premier publication advocating reform, does not provide for debate as Kalonikali and Taimi do. Also, the Kele’a’s readership is exclusive mainly to people who are reform-minded. Conservatives, that is, are disdainful of its arguments and the way in which the arguments are framed. There is a rumour, however, that there was a government move to withdraw Pōhiva’s license to publish it, but the king having heard of the intention thwarted the move, saying people were free to speak their mind. Apparently, he reads it himself.}

In an interview with Sione Tu’itahi, Assistant Editor of the Kalonikali, in 1996 he pointed out what he perceived to be the Kalonikali’s and the media’s objective in nourishing and conveying public opinion in this way:

There is another thing [regarding the role of the media in the political debate]. Because of the freedom with which private newspapers, such as the Taimi ‘o Tonga, Matangi Tonga, Tongan Times International, discuss and criticise government affairs...it made it easier for the government’s tools [Radio Tonga and Kalonikali] to take part in the debate. There was not much criticism of the government and not much was said of things that portrayed government in a bad light...[But] we believed that it was our duty to tell the whole story, not just parts of it so that people could base their judgement on that...Our conscience were not clear to do this [convey government in a good way], but because of the work of privately-owned newspapers [in criticising government], it gave us heart to do this at work...I see the role of the media in Tonga today as following the traditional lines: the government-owned media support the government; the media that is free from the government put forward their own beliefs.\footnote{S.Tu’itahi, Interview with the author, Auckland, 18 September 1996. Translation.}

I also interviewed Kalafi Moala, Editor of the Taimi, in 1997. He characterised his and the media’s role in different terms:

Since we began I have always believed that the role of the media in Tonga is the same role that the media perform in other countries, there is no difference. There is a watchdog role and a responsibility to provide people with information. This is our basic approach. I did not intend to create conflict.... But after coming back here, I saw that information was one-sided. It was only the opinion of those on top that was being expressed.... The same could be said of the churches’ newspapers.... It was like a one-way communication. I strongly felt that the people’s side was not known and we tried to do this.... In the process of striving to do this we covered the activities of the Pro-democracy movement and the struggle for change and things of that nature to the extent that the Taimi was regarded as standing for democracy, a paper that supports change and a paper that attempts to overthrow [the government]....
Personally, I believe that there should be change....

Admittedly, there are similarities in the editors’ perception of their role in politics. Both Moala and Tu’itahi point to the need to provide information in a comprehensive manner. Tu’itahi gives the impression that this entails providing the government’s view in such a way that it enhances its credibility and legitimacy, and other perspectives that may not be conducive to the desired image, but nevertheless need to be set forward in the interests of painting the whole picture. Moala admits that he did not go out of his way to deliberately discredit the government, when he promoted the need for change. It just so happened that in trying to tell the whole story, he found it necessary to concentrate on the activities of the reformers, simply because the government’s side was already adequately represented by the Kalonikali and Radio Tonga. On the other hand, because of other contingencies (the government’s need to present itself in a good light and Moala’s belief in both the provision of information comprehensively and his own personal preference for democracy), the Taimi and Kalonikali find themselves on opposing sides. In their role as constructors of opinion, consider their views on democracy. First the view of the Editor of Taimi:

The attainment of an objective is dependent on the quality of that aim, and the persistence and hard work of those who devote themselves to the task...There was talk around 3 – 5 years ago that the change sought by democrats would take around 20 or more years to appear. And this generation of power-holders will disappear before change would come about. There is a small minority who still sing that popular song: Tonga is still Tonga and Tonga will always be Tonga. This is true but the question worth thinking about is what kind of Tonga will survive in the future. And the democrats think that it is a democratic Tonga that will survive in the future. The aim to change the system in Tonga will be carried out swiftly because the majority of the people want it to happen. And one of the factors that will hasten this, is the opposition that is carried out...The details of democracy in the future will have to be worked out, but what is clear is that the present system of government benefits a minority only, and it supports the fortunes of the few. The struggle for change is about freeing Tonga from that rule which is beneficial for a minority, and to allow people to share in the good fortune.

The Kalonikali does not have an editorial column as such. The reason for this is not entirely clear. Editorial columns were discontinued in the 1970s after litigation involving the paper and some of its readers over what the then editor wrote in his editorial column. The fact that the editor’s personal opinion was not representative of the paper’s collective view did not stop the Kalonikali from being liable in court. So to avoid other similar situations arising in the future, the government decided to stop the editor from writing his customary editorials. In the absence, therefore, of his concise and succinct view, I provide

a précis of the content of his paper in the table below. The edition is that of Thursday, 8 February 1996, in Tongan; that is, a day after the publication of the Taimi in which the editor of that paper gave his above view on democracy.

Table 1: Editorial choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page 1</th>
<th>a) The Minister of Police answers allegations that he deliberately sought to influence people’s opinion before the general election on 25 January; b) The Minister of Police designates the police conference hall as ‘Akau’ola Memorial Hall; c) His Majesty pronounces the merits of dieting.</th>
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<td>Page 2</td>
<td>a) Police minister on the need to improve the public image of the police; b) Continuation of the police minister’s answer above; c) Continuation of designation of conference hall above.</td>
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<td>Page 3</td>
<td>Pictures of: a) King shaking hand of diploma-holder at Tonga Teacher’s College’s prize-giving; b) Winners of the diet competition endorsed by the king; c) Minister of Police and king’s granddaughters descending the stairs from the ceremony above; d) Soldiers exhibiting exercise routines endorsed by the king; e) Aerobic trainers exercise; f) King receives gift from Tongan singer living in Australia.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Page 4</td>
<td>Letters to the editor.</td>
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<td>Page 5</td>
<td>Advertisement.</td>
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<td>Page 6</td>
<td>a) Discussion of King’s speech at Tonga Teacher’s College’s ceremony above; b) Result of survey of household expenditure and income; c) Trivia column.</td>
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<td>Page 7</td>
<td>a) News from the Ha’apai islands; b) Advertisement; c) Situations vacant.</td>
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<td>Page 8</td>
<td>Advertisement.</td>
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<td>Page 9</td>
<td>a) News from Vava’u islands; b) Advertisement; c) Situations vacant.</td>
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<td>Page 10</td>
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<td>Advertisement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Page 12</td>
<td>a) Notices; b) Advertisement; c) Situations vacant; d) Birthday greetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 13</td>
<td>a) News from ‘Eua; b) Notices; c) Birthday greetings; d) Situations vacant; e) Advertisement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Page 14</td>
<td>a) Price rise; b) News from the Prime Minister’s Office; c) US Ambassador intends to grant US citizenship by lottery; d) News from Tongans in Hawaii.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Page 15</td>
<td>a) More letters to the editor; b) Who won the Gulf war?; c) Television programmes and times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 16</td>
<td>Sports.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

There is evidence here of the pre-eminence of news that is primarily about the good work done by government and the manner by which government goes about this work. A great deal of time and space is allocated to the reporting of the work done by ministers and government officers. Prime slots are also given to the activities of the king in all aspects of society. These are then further enhanced by supplementary pictures that serve to highlight these activities even more. The content of the Kalonikali, in brief, is arranged and expressed in such a way that stresses the government’s activities while giving as little space and time as possible to the coverage of anti-Establishment ideas such as change or democracy. By this method, in comparison to the explicit pronouncements of the Taimi, the government uses both direct (it explicitly counters democratic ideas at times), and indirect (during the routine course of things) strategies in combating the spread and dissemination of ideas that it deems subversive. It amounts, in some ways, to an ignorant denial of any idea that is a contradistinction to the acceptable norms that are fixed by the government.
But how exactly do these views and messages affect the opinion of the average person? Mechanisms to measure this adequately are lacking in Tonga. There is not, for instance, the existence of opinion polls, referenda, surveys and the like that are standard measuring devices in metropolitan countries. One is therefore left with only two possible methods for researching public opinion: what writers of letters to newspaper editors say; and election results. They are indicators only of the general mood of the public. And even at that they are subject to certain conditions.

To sense the mood of the public, I take a closer look at the ‘Letters to the Editor’ sections of the Taimi and Kalonikali. I do this randomly below, looking at one letter each year from 1993 and 1996.

‘Unfair behaviour,’ Taimi, 28 April 1993

Sir,
I complained in 1991 to have the King charged for acting unlawfully. And this was disallowed by the Police department, Cabinet and the Privy Council. Instead I was charged for sedition. Extracting the bark from the koka tree is supposed to be done in a way that parts of the tree are left so that it may continue to grow. I say that in this court case it should be scraped from the young leaves down to the roots until the koka tree is left to wither. This should be done domestically and internationally...I filed my list of witnesses at the High Court and they are the following: The King, Prince ‘Aho’eitu, Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance, Minister of Health, Minister of Lands, Governor of Ha’apai, ‘Ofa Tu’i’onetoa, Busby Kautoke, ‘Eseta Fusitu’a, Maeakafa Aleamotu’a, Sinilau Kolokihakaufisi, Koli Afuha’amango, Teisina Fuko, ‘Akilisi Pōhiva, Saane Tupou. I am S. Foueti who is speaking. If the government does not do its job in accordance with clause 4 of the Constitution I will tell the world of the government’s unjust act...I will do my utmost so that we reach the best possible understanding.
Love to every Tongan,
Sione Foueti,
From Folaha, residing in Ha’alalo.

‘Etika’s proposals,’ Kalonikali, 3 June 1993

Sir,
Give me a Tongan whose heart was not warmed by His Majesty’s speech at the opening of parliament. And it is like parliament’s

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26 Translation.
27 Clause 4 states: “There shall be but one law in Tonga for chiefs and commoners for Non-Tongans and Tongans. No laws shall be enacted for one class and not for another class but the law shall be the same for all the people of this land.”
28 Translation.
Reply that the king has devoted himself for the betterment of his people. This is a path that is full of danger but the king is not discouraged in his efforts to develop the country...may God shelter the King and his house. It is with joy that we hear that this is the collective opinion of parliamentarians whether pro-democracy or pro-monarchy. There is a story that everyone in Tonga is related to the King. And if someone is too outspoken then he is called a foreigner because this is not Tongan behaviour. In the past the chiefs used to bring foreigners from Samoa, Fiji, the Solomons, ‘Uvea and Futuna, Niue and Tokelau in order to work as servants in Tonga. Some returned to their places of origin but people who are criticising the government are the descendants of these foreigners...It was easy to recognise people who were descendants of foreigners. At times when the kāinga or ha’a went to the Palace [to visit the monarch], there was a guard whose name was Pitoki and if Pitoki meets with some of the people, they usually end their visit there. This is the origin of our Tongan phrase “one can smell one’s blood.”...We can say that the critics are descendants of people from Futuna and if not then the branch of the Tongan family tree to which they attach themselves ends with Pitoki. I will continue.

Yours sincerely,
‘Etika T. Tonga,
Kolomotu’a.

‘Democracy has existed in Tonga for a century,’ Taimi, 15/5/1996

Sir,
I believe it is important for people who do not understand democracy to realise that the democratic way has existed in Tonga for a century. And it is apparent in associations, committees and the church. If we look at the way that the Free Wesleyan church runs its organisation...the members have just chosen Rev Lopeti Taufa to continue as President of the church. It is clear from that selection that the majority of people wanted Rev Lopeti Taufa to continue as president. Not only this but it is also clear that this is what democracy is - the rule of the many, and not just one person. Some people have said that those supporting democracy hunger after power and are atheists. But the question is, if this is true, then why do Christian churches, including the Free Wesleyans, choose to run their organisations democratically? It is because it is clear to Christians that given human nature’s tendency to do wrong, democracy is the only way to stop humanity from committing sin, in accordance with the will of God. Because the truth is, in a

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29 Pitoki was a pet dog at the Palace.
30 Translation.
democracy, leaders will have to act justly if they hope to be re-elected. I hope it is clear to those who oppose democracy that we do not attempt to dethrone the King and strip him of his powers. Our request is that the Constitution is amended by way of sharing his powers so that [people can] participate in running the Government...I want to make it clear here that democrats are not after power for themselves. The struggle is for all the people, so that they participate in government...

Yours sincerely,
Falisi Tupou,
Tatakamotonga.

‘Rule comes from God,’ Kalonikali, 8/2/1996

Sir,
Paul in his Epistle to the Romans chapter 13: Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whomsoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. If a democratic minister [of the church] interprets Paul’s words differently then tell us, but to me, the King is the one who is given by God to be our ruler, and He has ordained him as King. What the supporters of change are doing is that they are resisting the will of the King, so much so that you have more affection for people than for the King who was given by God as ruler of Tonga. The Kele’a has gone on consistently about the wrong that is done in government and the need for power to be shared and they [democrats] are more righteous and more just than anyone else. It is better for ministers to cater for the spiritual needs of their flocks and not concern themselves with changing the government. ‘Uliti Uata should have been contented with getting elected to parliament, and he should not have gone on about righteousness and honesty because it is like Kao and Tofua the way that he said that it was dishonest money before he went ahead and withdrew the money and gave it to the Ha’apai Development Committee. ‘Akilisi always goes on about honesty, yet he withdrew $500 from the $7,000 allocated for the trip to Taiwan, to cover his expenses before returning the money. He should have returned the whole $7,000. The 9,000 people who voted for ‘Akilisi are jubilant, but to me, they are just like the Jews. They screamed at Pilate to crucify Jesus and free Barabbas...These days, while you are benefiting from the efforts of the King, you

31 Translation.
32 Kao and Tofua are two mountainous islands in the Ha’apai group. It is a common form of expression to say this meaning that no one could hide, even if they tried, something that stand out like Kao and Tofua.
scream for his powers to be taken from him and given to ‘Akilisi and Futa [Helu]. A government employee who supports change should give up his job because he has rebelled against the King lest he is punished by God in line with His word. Change will not come about because it is an idea of humanity, but God shelters the King and his people.

Yours sincerely,
Salesi Maketi Kauvaka,
Fahefa.

The ‘typical’ Tongan opinion, if we take the preceding samples to be this, is rather multifarious and much in line with opinions elsewhere. It is expected that every reader or contributor to the Taimi and Kalonikali has their own individual opinion of things that occur around them, more or less. The extent to which the newspapers might have influenced these opinions is dependent on both the degree and nature of the opinion being formed. In other words, a lot depends on how well people understand the issues, which will determine to a large extent how successfully or poorly they deal with information – particularly information that prods them to choose a preference. But intelligent, independent and rational readers of this kind are a minority as they are likely to be in other countries. And they also tend to be members of a particular class. In Tonga, they are mostly the middle and educated classes. They are the individuals who take the time to write to the editor, take part in public discussions, attend public seminars and lectures, and the like. Also, they are likely to be the opinion-leaders. The majority of people, therefore, are likely to possess mixed and often conflicting views on issues such as change and democracy. And the extent to which they comprehend ideas and debates is not known for certain.

Sione Tu’itahi, Assistant Editor of the Kalonikali, believes that one cannot say for certain whether people understand democracy or not:

Some of the people who write in [to the Letters to the Editor column] understand the difference between democracy and monarchy...But it is only those people with good education who understand the whole picture. From what I see in the debate...the average Tongan who sends in his view does not really understand what democracy is. His understanding is influenced by his traditional loyalty to the hou’eiki, as well as culture and his religious beliefs. From the letters I get the impression that people are incapable of debating just one issue at a time. For instance, a writer may begin debating political issues but end up saying that Jehovah is the ruler of all things, which reflects the attitude of the average Tongan when it comes time to discuss large issues in-depth...I don’t believe the people really understand democracy. The simple things on the surface such as the people electing the whole
government are understood well enough, but if you start asking
them why should do this and so on, then they are lost...

Kalafi Moala, Editor of the *Taimi*, in contrast, believes that people have a fair idea of
what democracy stands for,

I do not believe that people understand democracy as a political
theory but I believe that people understand the democratic principle
well enough, such as accountability. For it is clear from women
putting money away as a group that they have a bankbook and keep
track of the affairs of the group efficiently. They have learnt this
from the church and government. People are also aware of, and
understand their rights. But to understand democracy as a system of
government is another matter...I have talked with people and some
of them told me that they did not understand what democracy was
about, but then they state things, which they took democracy to be,
that were democratic in principle...

The powerful role that these media play in shaping and expressing public opinion was
clearly seen during the run-up to the 1993 General Election. They also provided further
evidence of the fluidity of the majority of Tongan opinion - as symptomatic of the
indicators of public preference at a given point. Elections in the Tongan context are worth
studying for two reasons. Firstly, they are important because they reflect the mercurial
nature of opinion as a result of Tongan thinking about democracy and change, and as an
example of how the media impact on this process. Secondly, they exemplify a point that
has been largely missed in the literature: results of elections in Tonga are possible forces
for change, but not in the sense that has been accorded to them. I argue further that in this
way, elections are not very much different from the media, in that they are grounds for
contest, rather than assured victory: they provide the arena for competition only.

**Elections and campaigns**
The run-up to the 1993 election was regarded as the most foul election campaign ever to
be seen in the country. The pro-reform advocates opened their campaign with the most
forceful condemnation of the government since the birth of the movement. All the issues,
such as the governmental misconduct and the mismanagement of public funds, were
enlarged and pronounced in almost every issue. Such claims were answered by counter-
claims from the government to the effect that the reform-minded candidates were
insincere in their efforts, and that they only wanted to enter Parliament to receive the
salary and prestige that came with the job. (Indeed, some of the letters to the editor in
*Kalonikali* even suggested that MPs’ salaries should be cut, or abolished altogether.) Both
sides also managed to recruit, or already enjoyed the backing of several well-known
personalities. The prominent Tongan-born lawyer W. Clive Edwards spoke on the side of
the government, while the Rev Siupeli Taliai (former Principal of Tupou College and
critic of the government), among others, spoke of the virtues of democracy. But
notwithstanding the contribution made by Taliai and others, the most influential voice for

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33 Tu’itahi, Interview, 18 September 1996. Translation.
34 Moala, Interview, 18 February 1997. Translation.
democracy came from that section of society that is usually referred to as academia. One is not suggesting that the status quo has no champion(s) within academia. But it is difficult to identity these individuals for the simple reason that they have not spoken out. Further, it should not be assumed – as government supporters have done on a number of occasions – that those silent identities within academia are necessarily pro-government.

**Intellectual guidance**

A look at one such academic, Futa Helu, would suffice, as he has appeared to have swung public opinion to the side of democracy not once, but thrice. In the first instance, and just prior to the General Elections of 1990, Helu chose his preferred candidates, as well as those who should not be elected to Parliament. His preference was for those candidates who were reform-minded. The result of the election was interesting: in Tongatapu, the previous number one People’s Representative S. Matekihefuka Lemoto was rejected, along with 17 other candidates in favour of three reformers, ʻAkilisi Pōhiva, Laki Niu and Viliami Fukofuka. In Vava’u, sitting members were replaced by two new representatives, one of whom, Havea Kātoa, was at the time among the most vociferous in the fight for reform. In the Haʻapai electorate, the two sitting members, S. Teisina Fuko as number one and Viliami P. Afeaki as number two, both ardent reformers, were re-elected. The result in ʻEua saw the election of Moeakiola Tākai, a conservative, to the House. And in the Niua, both the sitting member and the reformist candidate were rejected to be replaced by Siaki Kata. Although the candidates favoured by Helu were not all elected, six of the nine that were finally chosen were from his list. The true measure of the weight of his influence is perhaps not in the final head-count, but in the manner in which his preference was carried out. Lemoto (absent from Helu’s list), for instance, having been previously elected as number one People’s Representative in the 1987 election, was now discarded with apparent ease, while Pōhiva who sneaked in with very little support in 1987 as the number three People’s Representative, was now number one, with almost twice the number of votes that Lemoto had acquired in 1987. It takes a huge movement of opinion for this to have happened. And although this has to be balanced against the results in the Niua and ʻEua, it nevertheless seems that Helu’s opinion counted for a great deal – despite the denials of his critics that it did. Some may argue that other factors could have caused the evident change in opinion. Still, he was easily correct in his predictions. Similarly, in the lead up to the 1996 elections, Helu discussed the merits of each candidate together with a list of characteristics that people should look for in a candidate. The results showed that Pōhiva, Fukofuka, Lauaki, Vaipulu, Paasi, Uata and Fuko were all re-elected, while Tupouniuapu, the new number two for Tongatapu (replacing Liava’a who had fallen out of favour with the reformers), was elected on a platform of change. ʻAisea Ta’ofi who replaced Fusiutu’a for the Niua was an unknown quantity. Thus, we may say that six, possibly seven, of the nine people’s

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36 Though Niu has since changed his mind.
37 Afeaki has since switched sides.
38 The full election results are found in ToT, 22/2/1990.
representatives were pro-reform. Helu, after the elections, gave an interview in which he stated that the successful candidates were exactly the type of representative that he had in mind.\footnote{ToT, 7/2/1996. Translation.}

But it is any case the 1993 General Election that is at issue here. Helu, as in 1990, again gave his list of preferences in December 1992. Among those he chose for Tongatapu were Pōhiva, Fukofuka, and new member of the recently-established Pro-Democracy movement, ‘Uhila Liava’a to replace Niu, who had had a change of heart after the 1990 election. For Vava’u, he chose Masao Paasi (unsuccessful in the 1990 election) and two others to replace Kātoa, who had, since the previous election, fallen out of favour with the pro-democracy movement. In the Ha’apai district, Helu thought that Afeaki, another who had drifted from the movement, should not be re-elected, but that people’s choices should be made from Fuko, ‘Uliti Uata and a few others. He rejected both of the sitting members of the Niuaes and ‘Eua. In their place people should vote-in Sunia Fili and Sōsefo P. Pongi, for ‘Eua and the Niuaes respectively.\footnote{ToT, 18/12/1992. Translation.} The results were as follows: Pōhiva, Fukofuka and Liava’a as representatives of Tongatapu; Paasi and Sāmiu K. Vaipulu to represent Vava’u; Fuko and Uata for Ha’apai; and Tākai, the conservative sitting member was re-elected from ‘Eua, while ‘Ofa-ki-‘Okalani Fusitu’a, (only the third woman MP ever to be elected to parliament), was chosen as the representative of the Niuaes. Again, Helu was successful with six out of the nine people’s representatives who were chosen. What is significant, as in the 1990 results, was the way in which sitting members, who previously had huge support, were voted out. Liava’a replaced the popular Niu in Tongatapu; Uata took over from Afeaki, a person with some standing in both the community and the Mormon church in Ha’apai; and Paasi wrested the number one mantle from Kātoa, in Vava’u. It was, again, in the Niuaes and ‘Eua where Helu failed to change people’s minds.

It is perhaps wise not to read too much into Helu’s influence over the electorate, as there were sure to have been other factors that acted in tandem with his activities, to affect people’s opinions. These factors may have included the escalating momentum in the activities of the reform movement, which was reflected, for instance, in the considerable coverage, both local and international, devoted to the Convention on the Constitution and Democracy, held in December 1992. Another factor that may have pushed people towards reform was the government’s intransigence in cases such as the illegal sale of passports; another, the seeming confusion over the proposed launch of the Christian Democratic Party, which was to be a forum for reconciliation; another, government inaction in dealing with the grievances (many genuine), that were being proclaimed by the reformers. Granted that these factors, and probably others, were all present, it is still remarkable that three times in a row, Helu had managed to convince a large portion of the electorate to see things as he saw them.\footnote{If the prophetic influence of Helu seems to be overwhelming, then the results of the 1999 election should help to put things into better perspective. Prior to the election, Helu had gone through his routine of selecting the candidates that he wanted people to elect to parliament. However, after the election only Pōhiva managed to hold on to his Tongatapu seat. The other eight people’s representatives were, Dr Feleti Sevele and ‘Esau Namoa for Tongatapu; Sāmiu Vaipulu and William Harris for Vava’u; ‘Uliti Uata and}
which Tongans can be influenced to alter their opinions with speed, then it, at least, demonstrates that Tongans can live happily within one, two or more camps. Further evidence of this content to wear more than one hat, is provided by the fact that, whereas it seems that a sizeable portion of society have wanted change for some time now they are still willing to live within the status quo, and have not tried to capture power by other means. Capturing power by violent means is a sign, incidentally, of a people who have but one, very strong and forceful, opinion of how politics ought to be conducted, and by whom, at a certain point and time in their history. Tongans are, overall, conservative.

This is essentially the reason that gives one to doubt whether elections in such a transitional environment should be taken to be more than a mere *sensing* of the mood of the electorate. Let me make my point in this way. Statistically speaking, there are two factors that stand out when assessing the result of the 1993 elections. The first is the low turn-out of voters on the voting day. Although 48,487 people registered to vote, on the day only 28,743 actually did so, while 41% or 19,744 did not (see Table 2). The worst turn-out was in Tongatapu where only 14,896 voters out of a possible 27,177 registered voters, went to the polls. Secondly, there seems to be a correlation between the numbers of those who registered to vote in an electoral district and the numbers of those who voted. Put differently, the fewer the numbers of those who registered to vote in a small electorate, such as the Niua where 74% of those who registered voted, the more voters turn out to vote. Conversely, the larger the numbers of registered voters, the smaller the turn-out on election day. I do not refer to the total population of an electoral district, but only to those who were eligible to vote in it. Some people, for example, live in Nuku'alofa, but vote in other electorates.

So why the low turn-out? Some have argued, as the Supervisor of Elections has done, that it is quite erroneous to say that voter turn-out was poor. He based his view on the increase in the number of registered voters together with increase in the number of registered voters who voted, compared with the 1990 election. However, although the number of those who registered to vote is important, it is more important to note the number of voters who actually voted. In addition, the number of voters who voted was reduced in Ha'apai by 92, and in the Niua by 35 votes, as well as 1,121 voters who registered but did not vote, in comparison with the election of 1990 (see Table 2). So the question remains as to the poor turnout. Both sides, government and reformers, have offered reasons such as the poor record being kept of Tongans who have migrated overseas (claimed to be 30% in 2002), or names of some who have died have not been struck off the public records, thereby creating the great difference in numbers between registered and actual voters. There were still other more conventional reasons being offered such as that some people abstained from voting because they felt their votes would not count in the overall result, and that some did not vote because they were more...
concerned with their daily lives and not with politics. Others, it is said, did not vote because they supported the status quo. (Some observers say people did not vote because of disenchantment with the candidates or perhaps the whole idea of politics, which I find to be too simplistic, for example, some of the candidates were able to increase their votes.)

Table 2: Voter turn-out in five elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Registered voters</th>
<th>Number and percentage of voters on election day</th>
<th>Number and percentage of non-voters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990 Tongatapu</td>
<td>25,340</td>
<td>13,644 (54%)</td>
<td>11,696 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vava’u</td>
<td>9,477</td>
<td>6,149 (65%)</td>
<td>3,328 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha’apai</td>
<td>6,827</td>
<td>4,482 (66%)</td>
<td>2,345 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Eua</td>
<td>2,857</td>
<td>1,941 (68%)</td>
<td>916 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niuas</td>
<td>1,503</td>
<td>1,145 (76%)</td>
<td>358 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46,004</td>
<td>27,381 (60%)</td>
<td>18,623 (40%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 1993 Tongatapu| 27,177           | 14,896 (55%)                                  | 12,281 (45%)                      |
| Vava’u        | 9,757            | 6,295 (65%)                                   | 3,462 (35%)                       |
| Ha’apai       | 7,068            | 4,390 (62%)                                   | 2,678 (38%)                       |
| ‘Eua          | 2,987            | 2,052 (69%)                                   | 935 (31%)                         |
| Niuas         | 1,498            | 1,110 (74%)                                   | 388 (26%)                         |
| Total         | 48,487           | 28,743 (59%)                                  | 19,744 (41%)                      |

| 1996 Tongatapu| 27,853           | 14,206 (51%)                                  | 13,647 (49%)                      |
| Vava’u        | 10,144           | 6,384 (62%)                                   | 3,760 (38%)                       |
| Ha’apai       | 6,745            | 3,996 (59%)                                   | 2,749 (41%)                       |
| ‘Eua          | 3,502            | 2,208 (62%)                                   | 1,294 (38%)                       |
| Niuas         | 1,586            | 1,159 (73%)                                   | 427 (27%)                         |
| Total         | 49,830           | 27,953 (57%)                                  | 21,877 (43%)                      |

| 1999 Tongatapu|                |                                              |                                    |
| Vava’u        |                |                                              |                                    |
| Ha’apai       |                |                                              |                                    |
| ‘Eua          |                |                                              |                                    |
| Niuas         |                |                                              |                                    |
| Total         | 54,912          | 27,867 (50.7%)                               | 27,045 (49.3%)                    |

| 2002 Tongatapu|                |                                              |                                    |
| Vava’u        |                |                                              |                                    |
| Ha’apai       |                |                                              |                                    |
| ‘Eua          |                |                                              |                                    |
| Niuas         |                |                                              |                                    |
| Total         | 59,239          | 28,953 (49%)                                 | 30,286 (51%)                      |

However, there was more to it than that. I hark back to my earlier notion of the

correlation between the numbers of registered voters and the turn-out in the actual election. This was the proposition that the parity between the registered voters and those who voted was based on the degree of difficulty or comfort in which a voter found themselves prior to, and including the election day. It was also based on the issues that candidates stood for. It should be kept in mind that it is rare for a voter to vote with a so-called open mind. At the same time, their preferred choices are always being challenged by other groups or other points of view. Hence it is very difficult for the voter to vote for her preference. Things are made much easier, of course, if her views are fixed and inflexible. For the majority, however, this is not usually the case. One of two things can then happen. Either, the voter turns a deaf ear to all other views, and follows his own choice, or he finds himself in a predicament from which he finds difficult to extract himself. He will then either vote differently to his own initial preference or he does not vote at all. The difficulty in voting is compounded by voters being asked to vote on new ideas, especially if opposing ideas make contradictory claims that further cloud the already difficult novel issues. If we apply this idea to Tongatapu, where there were the most registered voters but had the lowest turn-out in percentage terms, we may say that the voters in Tongatapu had the most difficult voting experience. There were added difficulties found only in Tongatapu. People in Tongatapu had access to more information; Tongatapu was the centre of Tongan life; the government was situated in Tongatapu; the king resided there too; the reform movement and most of its members lived in Nuku'alofa; there were more Europeans in Tongatapu; and modernisation was most manifest in Tongatapu. There were other factors that we could add to this, but the crucial point to remember is that Tongatapu is where the old meets the new – it is where the most confrontation is found. We can say, in sum, that the more people’s knowledge was increased about something the more difficult it was for them to vote. We can also say that the electoral system made it difficult to claim genuine victory or loss at the end of an election. And given, what we have discovered of the Tongan opinion, it is unwise to claim that the result of an election confirms one idea while discounting another.

Some conclusions
The driver’s opinion or political thinking, then, is a product of his environment and, possibly, some other debatable psychological traits that have not been included in the discussion. What seems to be emerging is a depiction of the Tongan’s opinion as a multi-dimensional entity. This is not the same as suffering from chronic indecision, or from a loss of identity. Instead, what it does mean is that, a Tongan’s opinion is conditioned by various elements emanating, as they do, from diverse and seemingly conflicting quarters. Add to this the unease with which new ideas are handled, and the picture gets clearer. So that what one has is an opinion that is pro-monarchy because of the way that one was brought up in the cultural complex (together with possible other reasons), and one that is pro-reform because of one’s constant exposure to pro-reform ideas (together with the probability that one may actually understand and believe in change). The driver may have also been a Christian, fisherman, farmer and a cricket player, which would have certainly affected the way he saw things. But the sketch is not complete. Throw in the axiom that institutions, such as culture, and processes, such as information technology, are in a constant state of change, then the scope and nature of the changes in opinion becomes clearer. The implication, then, is that not only is the Tongan’s opinion multi-faceted, it is
changing rapidly, and will most probably continue to do so in the future. It is also clear that political culture and behaviour impact on elections in ways that make them function in the way that they do. In that sense, elections buttress the status quo and are not a force for change. Rather, as I have argued, they are more akin to a polling device that seek out the mood of the electorate, but cannot put it into effect. However, if all this seems to be confusing, one at least could find refuge in the thought, that most of this account has been based mainly on how a taxi-driver chose to express his opinion.