

GUEST EDITORIAL

New Politics in Oceania

by Simon Batterbury, University of Melbourne, Australia

Dear readers,

As I have worked in the Pacific over the last decade I have been struck by its diversity of environments, cultures, and political economies, but also the importance of this geography for everyday life chances and livelihoods. In order to understand what happens locally, one has to scale back in time and out to wider orbits and scales, not only to see islands societies as embedded in distant economies through labour movement and kinship relations, but also to appreciate globally generated, but locally expressed, vulnerabilities. These come from altered climate and weather, sea levels and ocean acidity, but also from an adverse colonial and extractivist legacy (Connell and Waddell, 2006).

The articles in this issue of Pacific Geographies examine the scalar geopolitics of the region in several ways. Hasencamp's assessment of Pacific international relations claims the region is one of the "politically most dynamic regions in the world", showing how the machinations of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and its disputes with Fiji have led to unexpected heightening of international diplomatic efforts. The USA and the United Nations are showing renewed interest in the region. As Fiji flexes its political muscle, new partnerships have emerged, some linked with other Pacific nations to the emerging climate justice agenda, and the PIF has become much more interventionist as well. This is an important shift in pan-Pacific political culture.

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Pacific Geographies

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Please submit your manuscript to:

waibel_michael@yahoo.de or
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Association for Pacific Studies (APSA), in co-operation with the Department of Geography University of Hamburg Bundesstrasse 55 D-20146 Hamburg, Germany.

COVER PICTURE

John Kerry at Pacific Islands Forum, 2013

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U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry participates in a meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum in New York City on September 27, 2013.



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follow-up from page 3: The three French Pacific territories are a conundrum, and little understood outside the French-speaking world (Batterbury 2014). Infrastructure and services are at a level unavailable to most of the English-speaking island nations, which improves life chances, but with a higher cost of living. France is not decolonising – it doesn't want to lose its marine EEZ, resource rents, or its geopolitical presence and it still provides a flow of Euros. On the other hand, the Melanesian desire for independence, while placated since les événements in New Caledonia in the the 1980s, remains strong. Things are tense because New Caledonia has to organise a referendum soon, and the question of a national flag(s) is symptomatic of this tension. The simmering conflict echoes a troubled colonial past, and the spatial reach extends as far as Paris. It seems a parochial dispute, but it has led to political downfalls and dissent. Peter Lindenmann expertly navigates these political waters.

The "resource curse thesis" has some traction in PNG and New Caledonia, but in different ways. As Holtz and, and Kowasch note, it implies a (low) level of state capacity to capture and regulate the minerals sector. New Caledonia has its share of resource conflicts, and in 2014 these have been at the vast Goro Nickel plant. But the Province Nord's project to create an economic powerhouse distant from Nouméa are unique, since their KNS nickel project has majority Melanesian control through SMSF and the regional government. It is like a turbocharged flag dispute written on the landscape, this one involving billions of Euros, because mining has been enlisted in a struggle for political emancipation that dates back 161 years. KNS may be digging up ancestral land and polluting, and it lacks a universal mandate, but the risk of a 'resource curse' is managed. This contrasts with PNG, potentially much wealthier, where mining has a clearer influence over existing political and customary conflicts and especially those about royalties and land.

To return to my theme; the fate of Pacific communities described in these articles is dependent on much wider spatiality and deeper history, extending beyond the region. The national identity struggle in New Caledonia has its origins in French settlement in 1853, and in proximate dissent over complex governance arrangements and international mining projects. Efforts to scale up Pacific state power in the international arena, by contrast, date to recent ambition and dispute within the region itself. But all these struggles are produced by geography and history. They defy easy resolution. In the articles we learn of four issues to follow closely. These are, the restoration of democratic rule in Fiji; Pacific input into global climate negotiations; the New Caledonia referendum on independence; and the Kanak economic experiment in the Province Nord on Grande Terre. Watch this Pacific space.

I hope you enjoy this issue of Pacific Geographies.

Simon Batterbury
Associate Professor of Environmental Studies
University of Melbourne, Australia
www.simonbatterbury.net
simonpjb@unimelb.edu.au

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