

Mary Louise O'Callaghan

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"Australia as a Neighbour"

Mary Louise O'Callaghan is a journalist and commentator on regional Pacific affairs. She won a Gold Walkley Award in 1997 for her account of the controversial Sandline Affair on Bougainville in Papua New Guinea. Recently in the Solomon Islands she has been closely involved with the Winds of Change team, which is the name for Initiatives of Change in that country. Amongst other things she masterminded the communications strategy for their clean-election campaign in 2006. Mary Louise is originally from Melbourne, but she has lived for the last 20 years in the Solomon Islands. She is married to Joses Tuhanuku.

You have just heard that I am married to a Solomon Islander. What you might not know is that when you marry a Solomon Islander you marry their family as well. And not only their family, you marry their island, not only their island, you marry the nation, the Solomon Islands. Solomon Islanders come in a package. This has been most times for me over the last two decades a great privilege and a great blessing and not without a few challenges.

So I thought today, rather than concentrating on the headlines - mine and others - I would go behind them. And draw not only on my experience working as a journalist in the region, but also as a person who's been in a Solomon Islands family for the last 20 years, and a member of a Pacific island community – the insights and the things I hope I have learned as a result of that experience.

One of the reasons I want to go behind the headlines is that they are utterly depressing. When David asked me to speak today I struggled for a few weeks to think what could I say that would be positive about Australia's relationships in the region and our relationship as neighbours. The headlines are apt to leave an Australian, particularly one like myself living and working in the region, rather confused, frustrated, often embarrassed and ashamed. Headlines like the ones detailing the fiasco over Michael Somare's shoes and the security check – and more to the point Australia's refusal to acknowledge the embarrassment and disrespect that he felt as a result of that. Headlines detailing the expulsion of the Australian High Commissioner from the Solomon Islands, or recently the two Australian Police Commissioners who've been forced out of Fiji and then out of the Solomons. And, rather awfully, the death of a New Caledonian grandmother at the hands of a drunken Australian sailor. You look at those headlines and you know what we're doing wrong. It is harder to see how to change what we are doing to get it right. Australia is experiencing tensions with many of the countries in the region – Papua New Guinea, the Solomons, Fiji... very difficult government to government relationships at the moment.

So I thought I'd concentrate a little bit more on the person-to-person contacts that I've experienced or witnessed in the region, particularly in the Solomon Islands, because I thought they might give us a greater clue to a way forward and some ideas for steps we can take on this journey as a neighbour. Some of these steps are very small, many of them are very simple. One of the first things I learned moving to the Solomons, and I'd been working in the region for several years, and it didn't take me long to realise – and it came as quite a shock – to realise how little I'd got beneath the surface of these Solomon Island societies. Once I was in a Solomon Islands family and I began to see the currents and the depths and the history... that there was so much more behind events that I was reporting on. It was a salutary lesson and I hope it taught me a little bit of humility – which journalists generally aren't renowned for. I also realised after a few years that I was learning a lot more about myself and my own culture in many ways, and how much of what I thought was my personality actually were things my culture had shaped me to be. One of the areas in this respect that interests me is communications, because I see it again and again in the miscommunication that can go on. We white Australians tend to talk in headlines. We create a pyramid. We start off with the most important point we want to make and then we might fill in some details as we go. It's a highly competitive process and I wouldn't even call it a dialogue – certainly not in our household.

We all compete to get our point in. There's not a lot of disrespect felt if you cut in, and you can jump back.

Which is completely the opposite of the inverted triangle, or pyramid, of Pacific island and many indigenous peoples' way of communicating, where they will actually wait for the space, for the silence, - something that we are pretty scared of. We are hard-wired to fill that silence as quickly as possible – its embarrassing, we are not saying anything to each other. Our ability to enjoy and participate in non-verbal communication, in silence, is not something that is familiar to many white Australians or Europeans. Pacific islanders will give you the space. And if you don't give it to them they won't necessarily try and punch in that headline. They want to give you the context. They want to explain *why* something is important – even if it is just a small logistical matter – and depending on the issue and the circumstances that means you might not get to the heart of the matter for three sentences, or three hours, or three days – depending on how much time and patience and willingness you have to hear what they have to say. And certainly since the Regional Assistance Mission has come to the Solomon Islands - and I have been involved working with them in a community outreach program - I've been reminded again of how bad we can be at just sitting in that silence and waiting for the story and not cutting in.

I remember one of the first interviews I did in Vanuatu, and I was very happy with the interview. I felt I had a real meeting of minds with this person, and I raced back to the hotel to transcribe the interview so that I could use his quotes in the feature article. I thought that a lot of what he said confirmed the points that I'd wanted to make in the feature. As I was listening to the tape, the only problem was that all of his sentences were finished off by me. We'd agreed on a lot of things, but I hadn't actually let him finish what he was saying. So I didn't really have a lot of quotes I could use, unless I wanted to quote myself - which is not the point. And I had to discipline myself as an Australian journalist to actually stop and listen and wait. And I learned from colleagues in the region – I watched them. And I now find it amusing when the 'rat pack' descends on a South Pacific nation, because of a coup or because of a foreign meeting, to see the missing communication - missing completely the opportunity for the salient point to be made by one of the Pacific Island leaders. If only they would shut up, they might actually learn something!

So I guess one of the things we can do in our contacts with people in the region is to try and listen in that different way, because that is the only way we are going to hear the truth they might have for us, or the wisdom, or the pain, or any sort of information. And it's only in hearing that that we are able to learn. And that is actually what we need to do more than anything in terms of our relationship with the region.

In 2000 the coup occurred in the Solomon Islands. Joses and I were down here in Australia, Joses was studying and we'd brought the family down, I'd just produced our fourth child and we found we couldn't get back to Honiara – the flights had been stopped because of the security concerns around the coup. And I found myself camping with four children and a husband in my childhood bedroom – amply looked after by my parents, but rather depressed and frustrated by this turn of events. I felt very disenchanted both with the country of my birth and the country of my choice. I felt that the perpetrators of the coup had been very selfish - they'd imposed a culture of the gun on what had been essentially a very peaceful nation, very tolerant, and I knew that the majority of Solomon Islanders did not want this as their future. And I certainly didn't want this for myself or my family. As for the country of my birth it was the pinnacle of frustration that after 12 years of reporting on the region, that they were in denial about the role - quite significant role - they could play and eventually did come to play.

And it struck me when I railed against this in print, in the press and at home most nights, that Australia was treating Pacific Island nations a lot like our indigenous people here... small communities, black communities... we throw a bit of money, a few gestures, and hope they would kind of go away and not make too much noise. And certainly from my knowledge of the Solomons

I knew that that wasn't a long term answer. That, having had the gun imposed, the Solomon Islands would need assistance from a regional power, like Australia and New Zealand, to rectify that. And I feel that one of the things that casts a very dark shadow over our relationship with the region is our own relationship with the indigenous people of Australia. And that until we rectify that we can't be and won't be at ease with indigenous people in the region.

In 2003, RAMSI, Regional Assistance Mission Solomon Islands, led and funded by Australia arrived - really after events outside the region had changed Australia's perspective. You had September 11 and the Bali Bombing, I think, really brought home to the Australian Government concerns about how stable the region was. Happily that led to an approach to the Solomon Islands that was very much welcomed by the people there and seen, literally, as an answer to their prayers. They couldn't understand how they had been just abandoned to a group of basically silly men and guys with guns who didn't really have any great ideological issues to pursue, and a lot of criminal opportunism over those three years from the coup. And Solomon Islanders couldn't understand why these people outside, and particularly Australia, who had the resources and talked a lot about democracy, wouldn't come and help them restore a way of life and rule of law. When they finally did come they were greatly welcomed and they were very effective because the community got behind the effort and felt secure and safe with the forces they had to put pressure on their own people, and the majority of the guns were returned. And I myself, among others, were very surprised at the scope of the mission and the generosity of the mission, that they didn't come and try and just put a lid on the criminal activity and the problems with the weapons, but they actually recognised some of the systemic issues that had led to this, and were willing to put in people and the resources to work to rebuild government systems and Solomon Islands administration, and it's a great idea, a great concept. But unfortunately to do that you've really got to know what you're doing. And this is where we find ourselves now in something of a quandary in the Solomons, and again I find myself feeling rather frustrated with both countries and how they are handling the situation.

The riots in April last year – it was devastating to watch the DVD recording of that over six hours, to see the Australian police – not use force, not use violence, but just not understand what they were dealing with – which enabled the situation to be manipulated way out of proportion. And they couldn't communicate with the people who were so upset on the street. They weren't choosing to communicate with the senior Solomon Island police as to how best to handle this. We've had unrest in Honiara before. The Solomon Islands police found a way, often not with weapons, to calm it down. The implications of that failure have been great – for RAMSI and Solomon Islands – and we are all paying the cost of that now back in the Solomons as events unfold there. And it's greatly undermined not only the recovery of the country but also the efforts of the Mission and faith in the Mission by Solomon Islanders.

However I'd like to tell you a couple of stories – because I promised I wouldn't just dwell on what we are getting wrong – that I have witness, because as long as RAMSI has been in the country I have been working with them. This is the story of Joyce and Jimmy and Mohammed – three policemen who were working together as a result of RAMSI. Our family spent about 18 months on Josefs' island Bellona up until August last year and we had one of the few radios in the area, so often as police were visiting from the neighbouring island of Rennell they would ask if they could use the radio just to report back. And this particular week Jim, a young Bellona policeman who had graduated from the academy the year the coup took place - so that's not a great way to start your career in the police force to have elements of it lead a coup – anyway he was very keen and eager to learn and lapping up the fact that RAMSI police officers were there and he could learn from them. Enter a wonderful woman called Joyce, a community policewoman from Bougainville who was very experience both in the Highlands and the lowlands of Bougainville, and if any of you know the history of the region you'll know that if you can do policing in those two regions you are doing pretty well, and she was working in mentoring, advising role with Jim on a community policing awareness programme in Bellona – talking about tough issues, domestic violence, drug and alcohol

abuse, issues some elements in the community would be quite resistant to, and I watched her and she was a master at just stepping back and just giving him the confidence to move forward and work with his people. And they came in one day and wanted to use the radio to report back into Rennell where was a good Aussie lad, Mohammed, who was actually of Indo-Fijian origin, but born and brought up in Australia and speaking with the broadest accent I've heard for a long time on the radio. So there we have Mohammed, Joyce and Jim who were chatting away in Solomon Islands Pidgin. And I couldn't help feel that's what being a neighbour was. That RAMSI was the reason these guys had come together for the better of the Solomon Islands, and they were able to do it in that way, drawing on their own individual experiences across the region.

The other story I enjoy telling is about the outreach we've been doing in the last six months of last year, to try to reconnect with ordinary Solomon Islanders who'd been so welcoming of the Mission but found it hard to get a real understanding of what the Mission was doing as it changed and developed its ways – mainly because that information was going out in a very formal Western way to newspapers and radio and a lot of the community just didn't hear it, or have it adequately explained. So we set up teams of RAMSI personnel and on this particular day I think I had four Papua New Guinean soldiers, two Fijian Policemen and a couple of Aussies – one was working with witnesses, giving them support coming in for the court cases, because there had been a huge backlog after the tensions in Solomons and a lot of RAMSI's efforts focused on rebuilding the court system and funding extra judges and magistrates so that the justice system could continue at a reasonable pace, and the other was working in the tax department – inland revenue, on tax. And the meeting went ahead. And at the meetings what we do is we talk about what we do in RAMSI, who are families are, where we are from, and just connect as human beings and allow plenty of time for people to ask questions back so that we exchange not just information and hopefully sincerity, and people have responded very well to that. About a week later I heard from the tax man that one of the ladies had come up to him – this is in a small community on the outskirts of Honiara, it's a Seventh Day Adventist women's group on a rough edge of town, White River, where some of the ex-pats are not interested in going at night, but in fact a lot of these communities help each other out and work together – but anyway she had said to the tax man, I've got a problem – I've been running a small business for the last year, and I've been collecting the tax from the ten people that I'm employing but I don't know what to do with it. So he said, why don't you come in and we'll talk about this. Come into my office tomorrow. And he was very chuffed when she did turn up – not only to talk about how to pay her tax, but with a rice-sack full of 20,000 Solomon Island dollars that she was keeping under her bed. Now I like that story because it's not really about RAMSI, it's about a bridge of trust that we were able to build just through that small morning of sharing together about each other.

In 2004 Initiatives of Change helped us in the Solomons have a conference called the 'Winds of Change' and out of that came a group known as Winds of Change now. We didn't quite know what to do in the beginning – we were so focussed on having the conference – we felt that here, after the intervention forces had come, that Solomon Islanders really felt the need to work on issues of public integrity and also rebuilding trust and healing and reconciliation and that's a long task that's far from over yet. Eventually we decided that one of the first things we would do – and some of you have met the Winds of Change group at other conferences and know that many of them are very young and enthusiastic Solomon Islanders, and we decided on a clean election campaign, which is part of what I was doing last year, working with them to encourage people, following the Kenyan model, not to take bribes, but that if you want a clean election you start with yourself. And that's been a terrific experience for me. I think as a journalist and the wife of a politician I spend a lot of time with a lot of cynics, criminals and all sorts of people I didn't really respect – and it's been great to work with those young Solomon Islanders and to have them accept me just as part of their group and community – and it's one of the times I've really felt that some of my educational experience that I've gained as an Australian, I could share in a way that was welcomed and reciprocated. And I have also learned a lot about hope and redemption through them. It's a bit like what the immigration officer said to my husband once when he arrived in Brisbane and started to be asked a

few extra questions – what are you doing here? Why are you coming to Australia? How long are you staying? How are you supporting yourself? And Joses, who's not known for holding back from telling people what he thinks said “what makes you think I want to migrate to your country?” The officer said “We're not all that bad you know!” And we're not. We just have to be aware, and work at the fact that we don't know everything, as the former speaker was saying, we need to be willing to listen to others, to really listen, to go generously out to the Pacific, to receive information and contact with the Pacific, to go with open hearts, with open minds, and just to finish I would like to pay tribute to the late Alan Weeks – if you want a model for being a good neighbour you can't go further than Alan's work in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands – I always felt and witnessed him not only wanting to learn and to hear, but always willing to listen.

Thank you.