

**Decolonisation: Role Reversal**  
**The Hon. Bill Morrison, Min. External Territories (1972-1975)**  
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In this contribution I will explain briefly the background to the title, "Decolonisation - Role Reversal," and its relevance to a discussion on decolonisation and nationalism. I will then discuss some of the determinants of Papua New Guinea's national identity, culture and values.

In the twenty years that I spent in the Australian foreign service before entering Parliament in 1969, I observed that, in the decolonisation process, the colonial powers were reluctant to give up their colonies, the resources of which they were exploiting. In those days of the cold-war, the freedom fighters were branded as communist. Currently the epithet of terrorist is applied - a great comfort to regimes which themselves indulge in state terrorism. Independence was only achieved after bloody wars of national liberation. I felt strongly that Australia should not go down that path. When I entered Parliament in 1969, the view of the then Minister for External Territories was that an independent status for Papua New Guinea was twenty or thirty years away.

The Australian Government of the day was so critical of a United Nations Trusteeship Committee Report, which urged that a timetable for self-government and independence be drawn up, that it abstained on the vote in the United Nations. The Labor Party had a different view. On becoming the Government in late 1972, its policy was formally stated in the Governor General's opening of the First Session of the new Parliament on 27 February, 1973. He announced in unequivocal terms that "my Government will move with all due speed to the creation of an independent united Papua New Guinea." The time scale we had in mind was three years.

The Labor Government was the front runner in the decolonisation process. This was the reverse of the decolonisation process hitherto. In the Labor Party's view, there were two sides to the independence coin. The first was the acknowledged right of a colonial territory to become self-governing and independent. What was novel was the second side - a colonial power could not be forced to continue to govern and make decisions determining the values, including the culture and identity, of the colonial people.

In September 1975, the Australian flag was lowered and the Papua New Guinea flag raised. The decolonisation process had been achieved without the loss of blood on either side. But for Papua New Guinea, this was only the beginning. Papua New Guinea had to assume full responsibility for its own actions and policies. Independence, however, does not mean a blank page on which the new country can inscribe its own aspirations. There are limits to its free choice in determining its own identity.

All colonies carry into independence the inherited baggage of their colonial past. Australia, as an English colony, inherited the English language, Christianity, the monarchy, the Westminster system, legal institutions - even cricket. Some of us would have preferred a republic and the less adversarial old Scottish or French legal system. For Australia, this was not an option. Likewise,

Papua New Guinea was affected by the Australian legacy, which was in turn derived from the English model. On the recommendation of its own Constitutional Planning Committee, it opted for the Westminster system, but with a unicameral Parliament. I know that some of my Papua New Guinea friends were not comfortable with the government versus opposition confrontation inherent in the Westminster system and would have preferred to embrace a Melanesian consensus format. Some preferred a presidential system. After a heated, internal debate during which a “home grown” head of state was mooted, it finally opted for the British monarchy as head of state and dutifully joined the faded glory of the Commonwealth of Nations. It took on the main outlines of the English judicial system. It passed on cricket, but warmly embraced Australian rugby league.

Papua New Guinea had to accept other inherited features. Central to the notion of national identity is the territory over which the government exercises sovereignty. In common with many emerging countries in the twentieth century, the inherited boundaries of Papua New Guinea had been determined by the actions of nineteenth century imperialism. The island of New Guinea had been divided into three parts: Dutch in the west, German in the northeast and English in the south east. Britain transferred Papua to Australia in 1902. After World War I, the German possessions came through League of Nations mandate to Australia. After World War II, both territories came under United Nations Trusteeship arrangements for which region Australia was the administering power. Under the Trusteeship arrangements, Australia was obliged to bring the territory to self-government and independence as a unified country. Even if it had been so minded, Australia was not in a position to adjust the boundaries. Ultimately, Papua New Guinea inherited the boundaries which it now has. It was a *fait accompli*.

### Judicial System

In his address to the Waigani Seminar in April 1973, Michael Somare stated that “we want to build a framework of laws and procedures that the people of Papua New Guinea can recognise as their own, not something imposed on them by outsiders.” He went on to criticise the existing laws as having been transferred “word for word from old Australian statutes.” He saw the existing processes as slow, cumbersome and largely irrelevant to the values and needs of Papua New Guinea. I agreed with him. It reinforced our view that we did not wish to continue, as the colonial power, making laws from afar that were either inappropriate or irrelevant to Papua New Guinea society. Certainly the Australian legal practices and forms were not much help in resolving tribal disputes or questions of traditional land tenure. It was much less able to fathom the ramifications of the *wantok* system or codify bride price practices. Nonetheless, Papua New Guinea did inherit the broad outlines of Australia's own derived judicial system. The task for an independent Papua New Guinea was to move away from the inherited forms and develop a judicial system that embraced the conditions peculiar to Papua New Guinea.

### Christianity

Christianity is an imported theology. It was intended to bring light to heathens and supplant the traditional belief systems of the natives. Christian missions played an influential role not only in conversion but also in education. It had a quasi-official status. The first Legislative Council inaugurated in 1951 had three non-official members representing the interests of Christian

missions in the territory. The Mace of the House of Assembly presented by the Australian Parliament carries a motif representing Christianity. As far as I am aware, there has been little study of tribal belief systems and the extent to which a Papua New Guinea Dreamtime has survived.

### Element of National Identity

In some important areas of defining national identity, the Papua New Guinea House of Assembly made decisions not only before but prior to self- government. In response to the report of the Select Committee on Constitutional Development, the House of Assembly in June 1971, in a significantly named “National Identity Bill,” settled on the name of Papua New Guinea for the country, having rejected the Committee's recommended name of Niugini, which appeared exclusive of the Papua component. The House also approved the design of the national flag submitted by a young schoolgirl, Susan Kiriki, and the crest incorporating the Bird of Paradise with a spear and drum. This was the first sign of an indigenous approach to national identity. There was no genuflection, as in the Australian flag, to the former colonial power. Ironically, the Australian flag contains what we might call a pointed reference to Papua. In 1910, a seventh point was added to the Federation Star (which is placed under the Union Jack) to symbolise the Territory of Papua which, in 1902, had come under the new Commonwealth of Australia.

### University of Papua New Guinea

Another important institution associated with national identity and culture was the University of Papua New Guinea established in 1965. The University achieved autonomy before Papua New Guinea had achieved self-government and independence. Faced with the prospect of delaying the opening until the lengthy processes of planning, construction and recruitment had been finalised, the University authorities opted to start sooner rather than later and opened with 39 students and makeshift buildings. The approach was in some ways a template for the political development that followed ten years later. Papua New Guinea has a robust indigenous culture, which is tribally based. The splendid carvings, the resplendent but meaningful tribal dress, the unique architecture, the instrumental music and tribal songs, the paintings and weaving, are all part of Papua New Guinea's unique culture.

Belatedly, we in Australia recognised their significance. Soon after coming to Government, Mr Whitlam announced a cultural grant of \$5 million. The immediate objectives were to relocate and develop the National Museum, expand the Creative Arts Centre and develop an Institute of Papua New Guinea Cultures. It was a direct grant, outside the normal budget support aid. It was intended as seed money which an independent Papua New Guinea could sustain from its own resources. I note that the symposium proposes reviewing the present “state of play” of these institutions.

### Conclusion

I understand that one of the main objectives of this symposium is to ponder the extent to which Papua New Guinea has been able to make more relevant and meaningful the institutions which it

inherited and the extent to which it has been able to put its own stamp on its national identity and culture. Therein lies the real embodiment of an independent country.