

# Mekere on his Seventieth Birthday

Mekere was one of a small group of kids from Sogeri or Kokopo senior high schools who joined the University of Papua New Guinea 's first year in 1966.

To Sogeri from Kukipi, the place near the beach where the Lakekamu and the Tauri reach the sea. Land of barramundi and prawn and sago, of buai and coconut, and taro or pineapple where the river sand rises above the swamp. Where you travelled by canoe or stayed at home. Home near the water. Place of sago and fish.

There are a few such places in Papua New Guinea.

I remember seeing our Sepik friend Tony Siaguru with Mekere just before Tony's tragically early death. "You can't go yet, brother," Mekere said. "We are strong people; people of sago and fish".

Mekere's Mum, Morikoai, was a strong lady of the village. Secure in her own place; and defender and nurturer of all who were hers wherever they might go. Mekere and Louise and Ros and James and Stephen.

Mekere's Dad, Morauta Hasu, was steady in the old ways and early to master the new. When the post-war colonial Government brought the idea of cooperatives to the Gulf, Morauta made them work in Kukipi and along the Toaripi coast.

Mekere was known for writing the most eloquent Toaripi prose of his generation. On his way through Canberra on his way to Flinders University he wrote and I transcribed a letter in Toaripi from me to his friend and mine, Vincent Eri, later author of Papua New Guinea's first novel, *The Crocodile*, and later still Governor General. Vincent went to his own premature death praising the marvellous written Toaripi that, he thought, I had picked up in two short summers in Moveave Village.

Mekere was the most conscientious and best student of economics in the early years of the University. That is why his friend and mine, Anthony Clunies Ross, made arrangements for him to spend a year at an Australian University. Other friends at that time passed economics and graduated on time only because of Mekere's notes and cramming lessons in the three weeks before exams. Leo Morgan, clever person that he was, passed almost entirely on the Mekere cram.

The Toaripi were rugby enthusiasts. The town versus village contests in Moveave were fought with the partisan ferocity of state of origin. UPNG made it Union not League for Mekere. Mekere was the skilful, reliable, strategic, stalwart of the University team.

I am glad that Papua New Guinea's colonial experience, like India's, left Mekere with appreciation and love of the arts of the willow; and that unlike India's, it left him barracking for the departing Imperial power. About a decade ago, falsely anticipating that the Indian tour of Australia would be the Little Master's last, Mekere came south from Moresby and me north from Canberra to watch the first Test at the Gabba. After facing less than an over, the diminutive Tendulkar ducked beneath a low bumper and was given out LBW. The first and only LBW decision for a blow to the shoulder. We trudged in silent disbelief back to the ferry that would take us across the River to New Farm.

Lots of warm memories of the proud young father of two energetic, creative, clever boys. It is great to have James here today, now full of rare knowledge. My mind travels to Mekere knowing like a Toaripi the news of Stephen's death before it came from human voice and hand; honouring Stephen in Canberra and at home while carrying the heavy load of what Tony Siaguru was later to call the Reform Prime Ministership.

Mekere was appointed to the most demanding public service job in a new country at the age of 28—the age when young Australians today are starting to think about what they will do in life.

He saw at once the scale, complexity and responsibility of his great task, without being overwhelmed or daunted by it.

From the beginning there was steadiness under great pressure. Wisdom, especially about the complexity of human motivation. Sure-minded judgement of human character. The strategic approach to every problem; recognising that no matter how well things were going they could go wrong, no matter how bad things were they could get better or worse, that while there was a chance of a way out of an impasse, one worked through the best way of finding it and following it through to a chance of success. Finding the best people to do the things that had to be done. And then steadfastly holding to the chosen course, whatever the buffeting from outrageous fortune.

These qualities of Mekere gave Papua New Guinea a chance then, have given it a chance a few times since, and give it a chance now.

Of course Mekere learned from and was strengthened by the experience and pressure of early high office. But some things never changed.

The macro-economic policies and the department through which he built them gave PNG a decade and a half of economic stability, within which the young democracy was given the chance to grow.

John Crawford, then Chancellor of the ANU, mentor to a few of us in those distant days, once said to Mekere:

“What you have built is too good to last. I hope you are not disappointed when those who follow can't do so well”.

Mekere responded that a period of getting it right had its own value whatever might come next. It would show Papua New Guineans later and forever what could be done by Papua New Guineans.

There is no need now to go through the manifold blessings of that time.

Mekere's later time as Managing Director of the Papua New Guinea Banking Corporation and then Governor of the Bank of Papua New Guinea gave those two institutions professional strength and resilience for a while. They were both to lose them later; and Mekere's reforms as Prime Minister gave them another chance. After the last few years, they need another reforming Prime Minister.

Mekere and Rabbie were staying at our house in Canberra in 1998, when we watched together a Four Corners programme on the ABC in which an inebriated Bill Skate boasted of multifarious abuses of the power of the Papua New Guinea State.

The two friends had chosen to sit in Opposition to a bad Prime Minister. Now they decided that their country's peril required them to join the Government and to do what they could to share hands on the rudder and direct the ship away from looming reefs.

Mekere was Prime Minister within a year. He set about rebuilding the policies, the people, the institutions that would give development another chance.

It worked as far as it could in a few short years. Another year or two would have made a difference. But it was time enough to rebuild the financial institutions in a way that withstood the squalls of the next decade, but not, I regret, the gales of the last few years.

I spoke at the State Memorial Service of Mek and Ros's friend Jim Carlton, in Melbourne earlier this year. I referred to Jim's friend as the best of Papua New Guinea's Prime Ministers. John Howard came up to me afterwards. "I agree with you about Morauta", he said. "He was the best I knew, and daylight was the second best."

All of Mekere's sound judgement of character, wisdom, strategic sense and steadfastness have been necessary in his struggle of the past four years, to preserve for future generations at least some of the benefits of one of the carefully crafted institutions from his time as Prime Minister, the Papua New Guinea Sustainable Development Programme.

Regrettably, from the beginning and more than ever now, much of Mekere's rare talents in managing hard things has been devoured by resistance to the plundering of the State. Regrettably that it devoured so much time, but mercifully he has been there to do it and to show others what is possible. Constraining the misdemeanours of our friend Leo while maintaining the friendship—weaknesses that are small in comparison with what now seems commonplace. The struggle in partnership with others in the Gang of Four, Rabbie, Tony and Charles, to strengthen the Leadership Code—only partially successful, but a help today to the younger people who are making large sacrifices to preserve and restore the integrity of their young democracy. The constraint and then the replacement of Skate. The strategic reform of institutions as Prime Minister, to limit the role of Ministerial discretion with its opportunity for corruption. And now the preservation of the public interest in the funds accumulated in PNGSDP's long term fund.

For Jayne and I, and for many of us here today, the friendship of Mekere and Ros has been one of the reliable pleasures and reassurances of life.

Thanks, Ros, for arranging this occasion, bringing together many friends of yours, and we of each other. We admire and enjoy your great partnership of warmth, intelligence and wisdom. And appreciate, Ros, you keeping him out of the trouble into which our friend's incapacity to handle the mundane would otherwise have got him. Thanks for today, and the many occasions around a table of fine food and wine and conversation. And enjoying the Milne Bay islands, as the man from the water country goes back to boats and fish.

For these nearly 50 years, Mekere, it has been the honour and pleasure of a lifetime.

Let us stand to toast Mekere. A good man. A good friend. A great life only partly done.

Mekere.

Ross Garnaut  
Moreton Club, Brisbane  
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