

Ross Garnaut on Sir Julius Chan

The Australian National University's Development Policy Centre hosted the launch of "Playing the Game: Life and Politics in Papua New Guinea", the memoirs of Sir Julius Chan, former PNG Prime Minister. Ross Garnaut was an adviser to Sir Julius when he was Minister for Finance and he provided these comments for the launch event.

I regret that temporarily diminished mobility prevents me from joining you for the launch. Julius Chan is a great figure in the history of modern Papua New Guinea. His achievements as the first Finance Minister (then also encompassing the Treasury portfolio) go well beyond those mentioned in this book. Julius led the introduction of the whole system of public finance and monetary management and policy for independent Papua New Guinea. This gave Papua New Guinea development a stable foundation for more than a decade and a half after self government. Julius and the government of which he was part, and the public officials who served them, showed that the newly independent democracy of Papua New Guinea could take consistent and hard decisions in the national interest, explain them to the people and make them work.

It was my pleasure and honour to work closely with Julius and his Secretary for Finance Mekere Morauta in those formative years. This splendid book illuminates the person in ways that autobiographies often fail to do. It brings alive the people through whom the young man of mixed Papua New Guinean and Chinese descent discovered his identity as a Papua New Guinean in the fading days of Australian colonialism.

I myself relived many poignant moments as I read the book. I thought I knew a lot about Julius, but I learned a lot more—nothing more precious than the complex story of how Julius emerged from his early years between two cultures as a proud man of his country, determined that Papua New Guinea should make the most of its chances.

Less known than Julius' national role is his commitment in recent years to making the most of development in his home province, New Ireland. Half a dozen or so years ago, Julius invited me to talk to the public servants of the province about development. The meeting was scheduled for 8 am on a Saturday morning. The lecture theatre at the Fisheries College was full for the start of the meeting, with neatly dressed teachers and accountants and aid post orderlies and other officials. A major achievement of development leadership in itself.

The latter parts of the book express unhappiness about the corruption and institutional weakness of contemporary Papua New Guinea. Many of us share those concerns. Julius' reflections in this book show that it doesn't have to be that way—that it is possible for a government in democratic Papua New Guinea to govern in the public interest.

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