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Ross Garnaut

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Sir Mekere Morauta: a man of rare talents

Sir Mekere Morauta was a good man who spent his whole adult life thinking about and working towards what could be made better for his country. He showed Papua New Guineans that governance as solid as humans have made anywhere could be sculpted in their beautiful and troubled land. He was also a wise man, who knew that nothing was ever so good that it could not break down; or so bad that it could not be recovered. A man of strategic purpose and intent, he thought ahead, and made each move knowing what would come next as well as can be known. And above all, he was a generous man who knew that all people had faults as well as strengths, and that we can use the strengths in everyone if we build protection against their faults.

Mekere Morauta was born in the village of Kukipi, on the beach where the Lakekamu and Tauri Rivers reach the sea. He was one of a small group from Sogeri and Kerevat who joined the University of Papua New Guinea's first year in 1966. They were so few and so late that at Papua New Guinea's independence there were fewer graduates compared to population than in the neglected Belgian Congo.

Mekere was the most conscientious student of economics in the early years of the University. His Professor, Anthony Clunies Ross, made arrangements for him to spend a year at Flinders University in Adelaide. 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.

Mekere was the first graduate in economics from the University of PNG in 1971. He was soon appointed Deputy Secretary for the Department of Finance. After Self Government in 1973, Mekere at age 27 was appointed to the most demanding public service job in a new country: Secretary for Finance, covering the functions of both Finance and Treasury in the Australian and contemporary Papua New Guinean systems.

Mekere was widely trusted across government and across the nation. When influential Bougainville leaders announced secession late in 1975, Mekere was appointed to lead the national government's negotiating team, reporting to Minister for Provincial Affairs, Ebia Olewale. The settlement lasted for nearly a decade and a half.

Mekere's achievements as Prime Minister after the Skate chaos were of a historic dimension. The constitutional changes, in particular, still help. But there was no time to make all the difference Mekere had in mind, or to bed down for all time some of the reforms.

By then, Mekere had developed a distinctive approach to governance in a poor developing country with weak administrative resources. The approach shaped his reforms as Prime Minister and many of his efforts from that time on.

PNG had too few people with the background, experience and trained character to perform all the functions of a complex modern state. This allowed the emergence of a kleptocratic political culture. There were many good Papua New Guineans; no fewer than good Australians or Japanese or anyone else. But the institutional weakness, the

young public service traditions, and the political culture separated them from responsibility and stopped them from doing their best.

From the beginning and more than ever as time passed, much of Mekere's rare talents in managing hard things was devoured by resistance to the plundering of the State. Regrettably, it devoured so much time; but mercifully he was there to do it and to show others what is possible. As the former Prime Minister John Howard once told me, 'He was the best I knew, and daylight was second'.

The degree of difficulty and the values underpinning his choices are exemplified in an episode the day after he was elected Prime Minister. A representative of a foreign government came to explain an arrangement that had been agreed by his predecessor and which Mekere was invited to continue. An eye-wateringly large amount of money would be made available through channels so secure that there was no chance that anyone other than the principals to the understanding could ever know. All that was required was confirmation of change in some diplomatic arrangements. Plenty for the PM; and enough to fund his political party into long-term dominance. Mekere listened, interested to learn how such things worked. He then thanked his visitor and explained that his principals' intelligence must be poor to think that the offer might be accepted.

Mekere never gave up. One COVID-19 blessing is that my wife Jayne and I were in central western Queensland through most of Mekere's last months and were able to travel to Brisbane where he was. Speech was a struggle for Mekere. He would mouth the words that defined the thoughts of that teeming mind. Things were bad in his country. He outlined what had the best chance of improving things.

His duty was never done while he had breath. The breath has departed. Mekere can rest in peace.

Ross Garnaut

Professorial Fellow of Economics at the University of Melbourne

 ross.garnaut@unimelb.edu.au