
The central theme of this important book is summed up in its subtitle: “New Zealand’s Relations with Other Pacific Islands” (emphasis added). Ron Crocombe believes passionately that New Zealand—which he prefers to call Aotearoa, its Polynesian name—should celebrate rather than ignore the realities of its geography. It is a view that has yet to be widely accepted among the New Zealand public. Survey research has demonstrated a much stronger public identity with the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia than with the Pacific Islands. But Professor Crocombe has some powerful supporters for his view that New Zealand should come to terms with its Pacific identity. The title page of the book is followed by a quotation from New Zealand’s present Minister of Foreign Affairs Don McKinnon “that debate over whether New Zealand is a South Pacific nation is over. This is home.”

Population trends suggest New Zealand is fast becoming a truly Polynesian nation. Professor Crocombe quotes the startling statistic that in thirty to forty years more than half of New Zealanders will have some Polynesian ancestry, and comments, “A new people is emerging, and a new culture is being created.”

It is unusual, but refreshing, that what is essentially a reference book contains a strong political message: New Zealand must come to grips with its own neighborhood. No doubt some readers will find Crocombe’s personal views and informal writing style annoying, but what is lost in academic rigor is more than compensated for in the added credibility Crocombe’s personal experiences give to the book. As a New Zealand-born Professor Emeritus of the University of the South Pacific in Suva, who lives in the Cook Islands, and who travels almost continuously throughout the region, Ron Crocombe knows what he is writing about. Furthermore, the absence of jargon and the wide use of interesting photographs make it likely that the book will be read by nonspecialists.

Readers looking for facts and figures on New Zealand–Pacific Island relations will not be disappointed. The nearly three hundred pages are packed with details—including some thirty tables. Topics such as religion, education, communication, and sport are covered, along with the more standard measures of the economic and political relationship. The message from this mass of data seems clear: people-to-people contacts, as much as formal government relations, will determine the region’s future.

However, as Crocombe acknowledges, not all the indicators point toward closer regional relations. There are worrying signs that New Zealand’s commitment to the region is weakening rather than strengthening. The
Nevertheless, it is important to try to learn the lessons of the Fiji coups, as several countries in the region—including Fiji—are likely to experience periods of political instability. As Crocombe points out, difficult choices may have to be made. For instance, if political tensions boil over in Tonga, should New Zealand back the established government—a feudal monarchy—or the democratic cause?

Professor Crocombe concludes with a plea for recognition of the interdependence of the region, a subject that requires careful and sensitive analysis. It can be hoped that Crocombe will draw on his considerable experience and write another book outlining how he considers the region can work together as a community and resolve its own problems. The vital message of this book is the importance of New Zealand being part of this community.

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overall level of commercial involvement, as well as aid to the region, is declining. New Zealand is becoming a relatively minor economic player as the Pacific Islands look increasingly toward Asia in search of future prosperity.

The scale of recent Polynesian immigration to New Zealand also has the alarming potential to bring out the worst rather than the best features of both Pakeha and Maori New Zealanders. Pacific Islanders now outnumber the indigenous Maori people in New Zealand's largest city of Auckland. The small but rapidly growing Asian population adds a further ingredient to the potential for ethnic tension. How New Zealand governments deal with the sometimes competing demands of their country's indigenous and new immigrant populations will—as Crocombe observes—have a major impact on New Zealand's regional relationships.

Professor Crocombe is particularly critical of New Zealand's (and Australia's) very negative reactions to the 1987 Fiji military coups. As he points out, the other countries of the region—and several Maori leaders—put a higher value on indigenous than on democratic rights. But Crocombe's concern that New Zealand's insensitivity extended to seriously considering military action to reverse the coup is without foundation. The military preparations undertaken by New Zealand were to protect its citizens in Fiji (including those on the Air New Zealand aircraft that was hijacked in Nadi) and would only have been carried out with the cooperation of the Fiji military authorities.