

Political Reviews

*Micronesia in Review: Issues and Events, 1 July 2015
to 30 June 2016*

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COOK ISLANDS

The year under review was a pivotal one as the Cook Islands celebrated its fiftieth anniversary of independence. Over the last twelve months, immediate and longer-term concerns have seen old relationships revisited and new ones forged. In this review, particular attention is given to highlighting the leadership of women in advancing the Cook Islands across different sectors and issues as political powers continue to shift and take hold.

Although women are increasingly elected and appointed as parliamentarians, heads of government departments, chairs and directors of statutory bodies and private entities, and customary titleholders, there appears to be little progress made toward transforming the gendered nature of Cook Islands politics. Indeed, despite women's making up approximately 50 percent of the country's population and positions held in the public service, their representation remains low across positions of authority and leadership (Ministry of Finance and Economic Management 2012; Ministry of Internal Affairs 2011).

Nevertheless, key appointments have been made this year. Six women were appointed as heads of ministries among the thirteen government

departments. They include the first-time appointment of seasoned public servants who have worked their way up the ranks. Tepaeru Herrmann was appointed secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration, and Gail Townsend replaced the retiring secretary of the Ministry of Education, Sharyn Paio. Reappointments included Elizabeth Wright-Koteka as chief of staff for the Office of the Prime Minister, Elizabeth Iro as secretary of the Ministry of Health, Bredina Drollett as secretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Daphne Ringi as chief executive officer of the Office of the Public Service Commissioner (OPSC 2015).

This year also saw Teremoana Yala appointed as Cook Islands' high commissioner to New Zealand. With thirty-five years of public service experience, including fourteen years as a senior official at the Cook Islands High Commission in New Zealand, Yala is very familiar with Cook Islands' development and diplomatic representation needs (*CIN*, 3 June 2016). Although not the first woman to be appointed to the position, she is the first to take up the office; traditional leader and former head of the Koutu Nui (traditional leaders group) Te Tika Mataiapo Dorice Reid was announced in April 2011 to take up the role but passed away unexpectedly before being able to assume the appointment (*CIN*, 23 June 2011).

A less obvious but nevertheless

noteworthy appointment was also made with Caren Rangi taking up a directorship on the Board of Directors for the Cook Islands Investment Corporation (CIIC). Based in New Zealand and with ties to Northern and Southern group islands in the Cooks, she holds a range of community and national level governance roles. She is the national president of PACIFICA Inc, a pan-Pacific women's organization in New Zealand, and serves as a board member of the Creative New Zealand Arts Council as well as the Pacific Homecare Services and Charities Registration Board (PACIFICA Inc 2016). Responsible for the oversight of all government assets including land and a number of state-owned enterprises, CIIC makes use of Rangi's expertise in attending to its affairs. These include the development of seabed minerals and preparation of the contract with the United Nations International Seabed Authority, which gives the country mineral rights to a specified area of its exclusive economic zone, and a joint-venture agreement with GSR (Global Sea Mineral Resources NV). This allows the Belgium-based private company the opportunity to explore and mine the designated area held by the Cook Islands (CIIC, 15 July 2016; CIN, 26 July 2016). Caren Rangi's appointment can be seen as a reflection of the government's openness to looking beyond its geographical boundaries in making use of skilled Cook Islanders to provide expertise for the country.

As an example of Cook Islands women's leadership outside of the country, Teresa Manarangi-Trott was appointed to the new Specialist Sub-Committee for Regionalism supporting the Pacific Islands Forum Secre-

tariat implementation of the Pacific Regionalism framework (CIN, 6 May 2015). She provides the committee with a small island states perspective, supported by her private sector and economic development experience. Having served on the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Board of Directors for ten years, she is credited with transforming the agency's financial management (CIN, 3 Nov 2015). As an executive member of the national private sector organization, the Chamber of Commerce, she has also been instrumental in the capacity development of local businesses (CIN, 21 Sept 2015).

Recognition can also be given to the country's young women. Despite the controversy between the legitimacy of two pageant associations, Natalia Short was crowned one of two Miss Cook Islands. Having won the Miss Cook Islands Association title, Natalia has been an ambassador for key causes. A business management graduate, she attended the General Assembly of the Red Cross in Geneva as the youth ambassador of the Cook Islands Red Cross. She also supported the End the Violence campaign as the #ENDtheviolence Ambassador for Punanga Tauturu, a Cook Islands women's voluntary organization (CIN, 30 April 2016).

But concern about women's participation in politics is not just about increasing the numbers in leadership positions. As one of four women members of Parliament (MPs), Democratic Party MP for Titikaveka Selina Napa is active in her parliamentary work. She is a member of the select committee for the Family Law bill, which is set to table overhauled and outdated family

laws. More protection for survivors of sexual offenses is a part of the bill; this includes criminalizing marital rape, which is not an offense in current law. After two separate incidents of rape against young women were reported, and drawing on the 2014 report on family health and safety (Te Marae Ora and others 2014), Napa stated that “we are such a small nation, but the figures advise us that one in three women are subjected to some form of physical and sexual abuse” (*CIN*, 17 March 2016). Napa has called on all parliamentarians to support the bill, which is waiting to be tabled in Parliament.

This year also saw a woman challenge the prime minister’s position for the first time. Rose Brown, MP for the Teenui-Mapumai electorate in Atiu, became central to continued political maneuverings within the country and a failed coup to oust the current prime minister and his government. After winning her seat in the 2014 election, first-time MP Brown crossed the floor to join the Opposition coalition. In a bold move, the Opposition coalition sought to remove the Cook Islands Party (CIP) government when Parliament retired from its 17 June 2016 sitting. The Opposition members met at Parliament on Monday 20 June and asserted that the parliamentary session that ended on the previous Friday had not followed the procedure correctly, whereby no proper resolution to close the sitting was carried. Being of the view that Parliament was still in session, the members undertook to hold a no-confidence vote against Prime Minister Henry Puna, who flew out of the country to attend the inaugural Small Island States meeting being held

outside of the Pacific Islands Forum leaders group in Palau (PIR, 26 June 2016).

The parliamentary session was chaired by Brown, the Cook Islands Party’s only woman member and deputy Speaker of the House, and attended by the Opposition members. Democratic Party MP Albert Nicholas, who last year crossed the floor to take up a cabinet position with the CIP government, also attended the session (*CIN*, 22 June 2016). The members subsequently voted Brown as the prime minister; however, she was not sworn in by Queen’s Representative Tom Marsters. He upheld Speaker of the House Niki Rattle’s ruling of adjourning Parliament sine die (without a designated future date) (Pearlman 2016). While Brown may not be given the accolade of first woman prime minister, she is the first woman to be nominated by an Opposition coalition to be sworn in to the highest office in the Cook Islands.

In speaking out about the move to change the government, MP Brown as the current leader of the Opposition coalition expressed her shock at the dirty politics and failure of all politicians over the years to make necessary political reforms. In pointing out that the government has sat for only ninety-three days in the last five years, Brown is looking for political commitment to make changes. She stated, “I am not interested in the power, I am interested in helping my people, no matter what they think about politics or the people who continue to feed off the system” (*CIN*, 30 July 2016). Elected by the Democratic and One Cook Islands parties “as the leader of Unity in Parliament not as the leader

of the opposition,” Brown aspires to have the Cook Islands Party join and connect with efforts for a “real government of national unity.” This intention is particularly poignant at this time as Brown reported that the CIP executive had recently agreed to Henry Puna’s stepping down as prime minister (*CIN*, 30 July 2016). Overall, the diverse leadership of women expressed in the year under review highlights the quality of women’s participation in the country’s affairs despite the ongoing everyday challenges women face and the need for increased representation locally and further afield.

The celebratory nature of this year culminated on 4 August 2015 with the official commemoration of the country’s fiftieth anniversary of self-governance. The proceedings took place with full island-style ceremony and entertainment. Attended by a wide range of local and international dignitaries, the warm, cloudless day included commemorative speeches, a religious dedication, flag raising, cake cutting, and cultural performances. A flyover by an Air New Zealand commercial flight, a twenty-one-gun salute from a New Zealand navy vessel, and gift giving to the diplomatic corps also took place. In his Constitution Day speech, the prime minister acknowledged the challenges the country has faced in its journey as a nation. He paid homage to past leaders and partners who have shared and shaped the journey so far. Looking to the future, Puna noted that the key lies in embracing a cohesive and inclusive approach, as in the vision of the Cook Islands’ first premier, Papa Arapati Henry, in which “no one in

the tribe is left behind, and no one in the village is forgotten” (*Cook Islands Sun* 2015).

In reflecting on these words in real terms, the Cook Islands examined its relationship with its associated state partner, New Zealand. While the Cook Islands remains responsible for its domestic and foreign affairs, New Zealand provides development assistance through a traditional donor-aid recipient relationship. In 2015, a new aid agreement was signed between the Cook Islands and New Zealand. The performance-based agreement is touted as a historic arrangement because of the shift from project-based to the higher aid modality of budget support. This modality will see a working group set up, consisting of the two countries’ respective government representatives, to engage in higher-level domestic policy dialogue rather than deal with the operational details of projects (*CIN*, 7 Nov 2015). On the one hand, this kind of modality favors the country-ownership principle with the use of the Cook Islands’ own country systems to manage external development activities and funds. On the other hand, with increased levels of policy influence accorded a donor, budget support can be seen as eroding small island developing state sovereignty, whereby its policy space shrinks as external actors and mechanisms get involved in a country’s decision making (Khan 2007; UNCTAD 2014). Having this particular development partner at the Cook Islands’ policy-making table in this way reflects an “inverse sovereignty” effect (Murray and Overton 2011) wherein such a policy dialogue arrangement can be seen as an

increased demand and conditionality placed on the Cook Islands.

During a year that has also been about celebrating the new and not just what has happened over the past fifty years, another relationship has also taken a notable historic turn. In October 2015, a signing ceremony took place between the Cook Islands government and Te Kingitanga (the King Movement) at Tūrangawaewae Marae, in Ngāruwāhia in New Zealand. This Koreromotu (cultural covenant) gives recognition to the “historical, ancestral and cultural ties between the Maori people of the Cook Islands and Aotearoa” (CIN, 27 Oct 2015). Areas of cooperation include “environmental issues including freshwater, climate change and fisheries; economic development including investment and commercial opportunities; social and cultural issues including language preservation and development and health and social well-being” (CIN, 27 Oct 2015). Seen as strengthening ancestral ties and acknowledging the indigenous authority of both countries, the covenant also reflects the ability of the Cook Islands government to engage in partnerships that go beyond its sovereign state-defined relationship with the New Zealand government.

Closer to home, the government took to challenging its own indigenous leaders, the Ui Ariki. Prime Minister Puna invited the Ui Ariki to consider their roles, functions, and contributions to their tribes and the country as a whole in the twenty-first century before seeking more funding from the government. Puna pointed to the prolonged absenteeism of chiefs who reside overseas and are not physically

resident in the Cook Islands to lead, serve, and live among their people as a contributing factor to the diminishing mana (authority) of the Ui Ariki (CIN, 25 July 2016).

There are 23 Ariki in the Cook Islands, with 16 sworn in as members of the constitutionally formed Are Ariki (House of Traditional Chiefs). This is a parliamentary body that provides advice to the government on a range of issues. In September 2015, the Are Ariki undertook its first-ever tour of New Zealand and Australia since it was formed in 1966 (Radio New Zealand 2015). Taking advantage of this opportunity to connect and consult with Cook Islands communities, they held discussions on a range of matters. These included absentee titleholders; the role of the Aronga Mana (group of chiefs, sub-chiefs and heads of families) in granting Cook Islands residency to foreign nationals; and the occupation rights and vesting orders related to the land-tenure system (CIN, 21 Sept 2015). Also on the agenda were the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the establishment of the House of Ariki that would take place in 2016.

The three-year wait for Teina Bishop, the leader of the One Cook Islands Party, to have his day in court on corruption charges came to an end during this year of review. In November 2015, Chief Justice Thomas Weston granted leave to prosecute the former cabinet minister on two charges of bribery and corruption (CIN, 10 Nov 2015). Bishop was found guilty of corruption when he received funds from a subsidiary of Chinese fishing company Luen Thai toward the purchase of hotel accommodations

in Aitutaki. Bishop's sentencing will take place in August 2016. He could face jail time of up to fourteen years, ending his seventeen years of service as a member of Parliament and forcing another by-election to be held for the Arutanga-Nikaupara-Reureu electorate in Aitutaki (*CIN*, 30 July 2016).

In the face of the impending prosecution and subsequent verdict, Bishop continued to lobby to resolve marine resources management issues, which remained active throughout the year. Following on from the 2015 public debate and petition opposing purse seine fishing, the prime minister agreed with Bishop, who was Opposition coalition leader at the time, to establish a select committee to examine the issues, including the anti-purse seining petition especially concerned with the use of fish-aggregating devices (FADs) (*CIN*, 18 May 2016). The signing of the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement with the European Union is also proving to be a controversial part of the debate. Advice from Foreign Affairs Secretary Tapaeru Herrmann called for removal of a clause that was interpreted as undermining the government's authority: "This kind of text is objectionable and Pacific Islands countries have collectively resisted long and hard against such text appearing in any kind of access arrangement or Treaty Convention language in this region" (*CIN*, 7 June 2016). However, the advice was considered unfounded or lacking in substance according to the European Union and the Ministry of Marine Resources (*CIN*, 7 June 2016), with the European Union ratifying the agreement. The cabinet-endorsed agreement is now waiting for the

signature of the prime minister as the minister of marine resources.

Sadly, this year also saw the passing of two prominent artists who, through their creative work, reflected their dedication and advocacy for Cook Islands culture and authority. From Atiu and Rarotonga, Ian George worked as an educator and was a well-known painter and sculptor. In particular, he drew on Oceanic totems such as Tangaroa (God of the Sea) to provoke comment on the loss of Cook Islands and Pacific indigenous control and cultural imperialism (Art Associates 2016).

Eruera Te Whiti Nia was a filmmaker, sculptor, activist, and traditional titleholder from Ngati Makea in Rarotonga and Te Ati Awa in New Zealand. He safeguarded Cook Islands culture through his art, which included his sculptural and spatial responses to the concept of the Are Korero (house of history and learning) within the paepae Ariki (chief's palace) of Taputapuātea in Rarotonga (Nia 2010). He protested for political change as a member of Nga Tama Toa (an indigenous activist group as part of the Māori sovereignty and land rights movements of the 1970s and 1980s in New Zealand) (Ngā Taonga 2016; *CIN*, 13 June 2016). Both men were strong advocates for the collaboration of cultural and artistic efforts across Oceania.

Overall, the half-century milestone of independence was celebrated with much fanfare. The year's events have shown that old and new relationships can be established, redefined, and advanced. While the economic, social, cultural, and environmental matters continue to require attention, the

meaningful contribution of the country's women in these matters has been highlighted. Calls for political reform still remain at the forefront of much public opinion. It would seem timely then that a woman prime minister lead the 2017 elections as an option to pursue an inclusive approach where no one is to be left behind and forgotten.

CHRISTINA NEWPORT

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FRENCH POLYNESIA

In the often-turbulent recent political history of French Polynesia, the year under review was a relatively calm one. Against all odds, Edouard Fritch consolidated his power as the country's president, transforming his tenuous tenure in office into one based on a comparatively solid majority, and uniting under his leadership all political forces that oppose both independence and Fritch's predecessor Gaston Flosse. Meanwhile, for the first time in over a decade, the country hosted a French presidential visit, which made some hopeful impressions, but at the same time the French government continues to stubbornly refuse to engage with United Nations institutions to work with them toward the country's decolonization.

The review period started with yet another unfortunate change in the local media landscape. In August 2015, at the end of the summer break (as one of its many anachronistic colonial absurdities, French Polynesia follows the French metropolitan calendar and is thus the only country in the southern hemisphere to have its long "summer vacation" during the pleasant austral winter and not during the very hot season at the beginning of the year), the formerly monthly news magazine *Tahiti Pacifique* (TPM) became a weekly, after having been sold by its founder and editor Alex W du Prel to local Chinese business tycoon Albert Moux, whose company

Fenua Communication already owns the weekday newspaper *Tahiti-Infos*. Unsurprisingly this change in ownership transformed TPM, once feared by local oligarchs for its investigative reporting and scathing editorials, into a more docile publication. While du Prel continues to write good editorials occasionally and the magazine still contains investigative articles, the publication has clearly become more mainstream and now contains a lot of trivia, missing some of the intellectual depth of the old monthly edition. Also, for outsiders, the both reliable and manageable chronicle of important political and social events that TPM provided is being missed.

What remained the dominant topic in local politics for the first half of the review period, however, was the ongoing power struggle between President Edouard Fritch and his predecessor, Gaston Flosse, until it was essentially won by the former in early 2016. In September 2014, when Flosse was removed from office because of a definitive conviction in a corruption case, his longtime confidant and former son-in-law Fritch had routinely taken over the presidency with the understanding that Flosse would continue to hold the reins of power from behind the scenes. Fritch, however, developed his own taste for political power, and tensions between the two soon become apparent. In May 2015, the majority party *Tahoeraa Huiraatira* split when Fritch formed his own caucus in the local assembly named *Tapura Huiraatira*, and on Flosse's order all members of the new formation were expelled from *Tahoeraa*. Fritch subsequently formed a minority coalition government with