

Zoo in a sea of poop

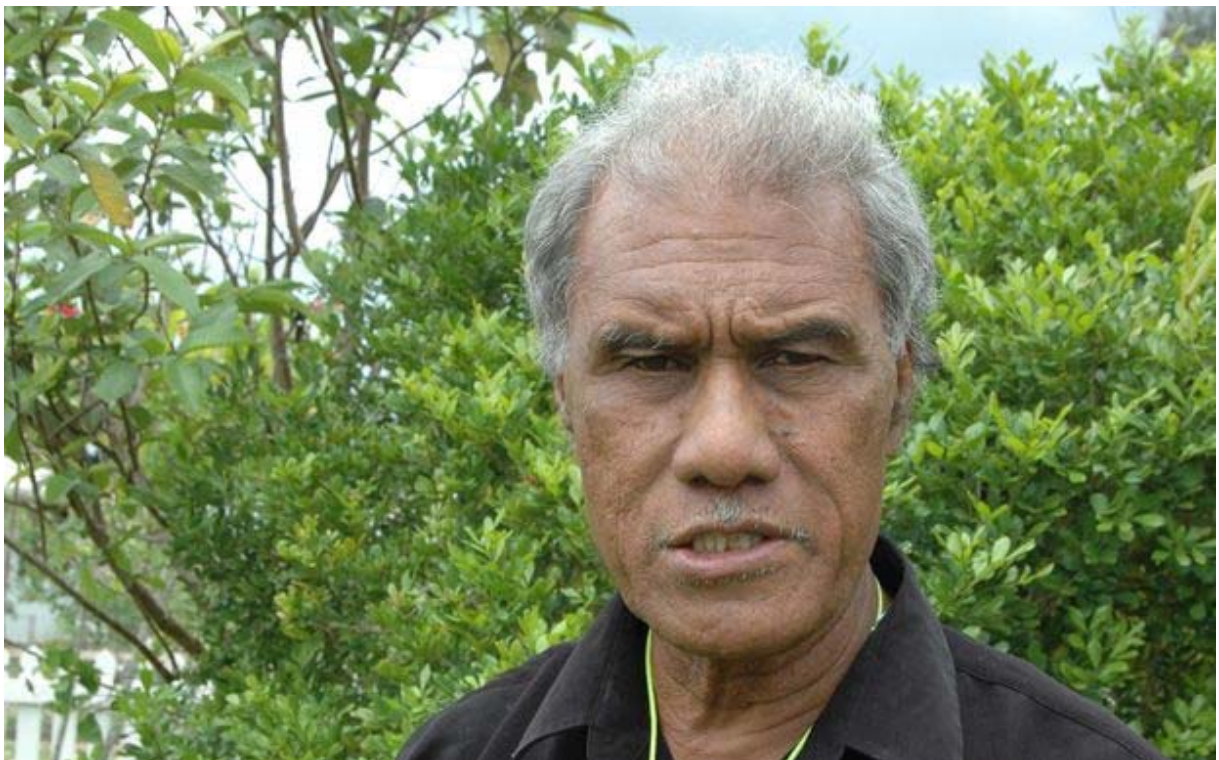
Teena Brown Pulu

The German physicist Albert Einstein defined insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. He could have been describing 'Akilisi Pohiva and certain ministers of his hand-picked cabinet who developed a condition of repeatedly exhibiting foolhardiness in politics. (Fonua, 2015a).

The zoo was behaving badly. Journalist Pesi Fonua wrote about “a screaming match” in parliament, one whale of a tale framed as a political commentary to inform media consumers. (Fonua, 2015b). What did Fonua’s colourful account reveal about the country’s state of affairs and quality of deliberation in the Tongan Legislative Assembly?

The debate then turned into a screaming match, to the point where it got out of the control of the Chairman of the Whole House Committee and he actually turned-off the sound system of the House. Then before the House closed for the day, the Prime Minister [‘Akilisi Pohiva] thanked the House for a good debate, and said that he believed “the people enjoyed what they heard.” (Fonua, 2015b).

Prime Minister 'Akilisi Pohiva looked hell-bent on turning the Tongan legislature into an amphitheatre of spectacle and illusion. Here was pure entertainment for the masses. Feeding the tedium of their toil and trouble lives with political drama to gossip about excited the poorer class, constituting the majority of the country. The Legislative Assembly gave the impression of holding a parliamentary debate, but frankly, there was little more going on than a low-level exchange of slights and slurs.



Tonga's Prime Minister 'Akilisi Pohiva whose cabinet portfolios include foreign affairs and education. Photograph of Australian Associated Press.

For Pohiva to exclaim “the people enjoyed what they heard” via Radio Tonga’s live broadcast of the House session on Wednesday August 26th, made a highly questionable assumption. (Fonua, 2015b). The Prime Minister whimsically expected the entire voting population were part of his fan club, and as he was

renowned for appealing to the uneducated sector of society – the underclass – he deluded himself into thinking rough-neck street tactics were acceptable to the public.

He was wrong. Worse than that, he did not realise how off the beaten track he treaded when it came to understanding the political interests of educated middle-class professionals and business people.

How dare the PM [Prime Minister 'Akilisi Pohiva] make accusations and warnings of neo-colonialism due to foreign investment. It's way to [sic: too] late to worry about that. It disgusts me and many others that Tonga holds it's [sic: its] hands out for donors and funders for all expansions and developments yet he can accuse foreigners of neo-colonialism. What an ugly racist position to take. If it wasn't for NZ [New Zealand] and Australia Tonga would be in deep trouble. What will he suggest next, burn out a few businesses saved by foreigners. (Public comment cited in Fonua, 2015b).

Cited above was a blunt reaction from a member of the public that Pesi Fonua published on his website for *Matangi Tonga Online*. To be brutally honest, the critic had not quite grasped the gist of what the Prime Minister had contended in the legislature.

Pohiva thought commercial trading banks such as ANZ [The Australia and New Zealand Banking Group] ought to be restricted to making no more than

\$2 million pa'anga profit a year. "The banks have a lot of money," he surmised, "but the people are reluctant to borrow because of very high interest rates." (Fonua, 2015b).



A small business owned by Chinese shopkeepers in Vaini on the main island of Tongatapu. Photograph by Associated Press.

The disinclination of Tongans to borrow money, Pohiva argued, had triggered an epidemic of small business closure across the country. Thus, Tongan "properties are taken over by foreign owners, which is a very dangerous position. It is colonialism but dressing [it] up differently," he decreed. His political chorus line rang out: "I move that we should do something, we can't let them go on collecting, collecting. Let's do something about it!" (Fonua, 2015b).

Pohiva definitely had a bee in his bonnet, but his argument was simplistic and crudely ill-conceived. The crux was ordinary Tongans used their property holdings as collateral for bank loans. Many were unable to pay back high-interest loans. As part of the foreclosure procedure, the bank shut down businesses and took the security, their properties, to sell as a means to recover the cash. What was his answer for stopping trading banks collecting Tongan properties for unpaid loans, and selling the security to foreigners?

[The Prime Minister 'Akilisi Pohiva] suggested that the House should ask the Reserve Bank to tell the commercial banks that to collect profits of more than \$2 million a year is too much, and "if not, tell them to go." He also suggested for the National Retirement Fund, which has collected about \$110 million should set up a bank. (Fonua, 2015b).

Stop the test Prime Minister Pohiva who doubled up as the Minister of Education: epic fail of introduction to fifth form economics. The more he dithered in the House, the more it became blatantly obvious the Tongan head of government was *not* an economist or financier by trade. Way out of his depth, he had no clues about the damaging consequences that would abound from what he was proposing.

For a start, putting up property holdings as collateral for bank loans was the standard practice throughout all countries of the world. Was Pohiva

advocating Tongans should be exempt from the rules and regulations of borrowing money from the bank?



The ANZ Bank in Nuku'alofa, Tonga's capital. Photograph of The Fletcher Construction Company, New Zealand.

Second, aside from Pohiva's desire for Tonga to resemble a quasi-socialist state, the one other country in the world that would obstruct trading banks from operating inside its borders by making business economically unviable, was North Korea under the dictatorship of supreme leader, Kim Jong-un. What head of government in this day and age of trade liberalisation and the open-market economy attempted to over-regulate monetary policy?

Third, borrowing cash to pay-back a loan dug the debt hole deeper, seldom getting the borrower out of arrears. (Lavelle, 2015). The common sense solution was for the state and citizens to build savings and produce wealth for the country, and the practical way to do that was to create trade and jobs for the large unemployed youth population. (Juleff, 2015).

If Pohiva did have a financial worry to mull over, it was the August recession of 2015 triggered by China's economic slowdown. In effect, "trillions of dollars

have been wiped off global stock markets” due to China’s declining growth. (Weldon, 2015). How did that impact on the Asia-Pacific economy, especially the Pacific Islands states dependent on aid *not* trade for their governments to stay afloat? (Keen, 2015).



The Chinese Embassy in Nuku'alofa, Tonga's capital. Photograph of Wikipedia.

Opinion columnist for the *New Zealand Herald*, Brian Gaynor, noted “that information about the Chinese economy is sparse and somewhat unreliable.” (Gaynor, 2015). Although Gaynor’s argument may be true, he also noted China is the leading emerging economy of the world. China – more than any other state including America – was responsible for propelling economic growth “since the global financial crisis” of 2008, the vexing catastrophe to cause monetary setbacks for countries since the 1930s depression. (Gaynor, 2015).

The performance of the Chinese economy – together with other emerging economies – is extremely important because this group has been the main driver of global growth since the global financial crisis. However, the converse of this is that a Chinese slowdown will also have a negative impact on other emerging countries and this group has contributed over 50 per cent of global growth in recent years. (Gaynor, 2015).

Tonga's Prime Minister was wrong to prattle that when overseas trading banks foreclose on local businesses and properties due to unpaid loans "it is colonialism but dressing [it] up differently." (Fonua, 2015b; Radio New Zealand, 2015). If 'Akilisi Pohiva was truly anti-colonial he would have made a definite stand in favour of the Fiji-led Pacific Islands Development Forum as the "islands-only" regional body. But he would never do that for the simple reason he was *not* anti-colonial whatsoever.

Pohiva not only coveted New Zealand Aid and Australian Aid dollars to supplement government salaries in his ailing and failing budget, he also wanted to remain under the authority and power of a Western sphere of influence. As Tonga's foreign minister, he had no policy foresight for building sustainable relationships with China and India, the world's emerging economies.

For the Government of Tonga to stay blindly attached to New Zealand and Australia's rule dictated by American foreign policy meant giving a lower

profile to the pressing predicament affecting the Pacific Islands region – climate change. This was to be the match decider for small island developing states. (Lauano, 2015; United Nations, 2015).



Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama opening the inaugural meeting of the Pacific Islands Development Forum in 2013. Photograph of Xinhua.

Journalist Nic Maclellan penned an article on the matter called *How to annoy the neighbours*, the big neighbour being Australia. By Maclellan's analysis, the sub-regional split between the Melanesian Spearhead Group versus the Polynesian Leaders Group would hinge on "differences over climate policy." (Maclellan, 2015).

Under its current secretary-general, Dame Meg Taylor of Papua New Guinea, the Pacific Islands Forum is trying to address the global

challenge of sustainable development, promoting a new Framework on Pacific Regionalism and improvements to the operations of the Forum Secretariat in Suva. But differences over climate policy threaten that momentum, and will reinforce the growing debate over whether the region might be better served by an “islands-only” Forum. (Maclellan, 2015).

On paper, the Pohiva regime thought “a more progressive Tonga” in the *Tonga Strategic Development Framework 2015 – 2015* meant that from the seven national outcomes, two would explicitly address managing human and environmental resources in relation to climate resilience.

- *a more inclusive, sustainable and balanced urban and rural development across island groups.*
- *a more inclusive, sustainable and effective land administration, environment management and resilience to climate and risk.*
(Government of Tonga, 2015, p. 18).

In practice, however, a different story unfurled. “Australia was Tonga’s largest development partner.” (Australian Government, 2015). This factor weighed significantly on Pohiva’s unwillingness to push climate funding as a national priority to aid donors, Australia and New Zealand, who were the dominant players in regional politics and trade.

In 2013-14, Australia was Tonga's largest development partner. Foreign development assistance, such as Australia's, is a critical component of Tonga's economic and social infrastructure development. (Australian Government, 2015).



The Australian High Commission in Nuku'alofa, Tonga's capital. Photograph of Wikipedia.

Nic Maclellan pointed out Australia's Liberal Party Government led by Prime Minister Tony Abbott had slashed Australian Aid for its four-year term in office. A severe budgetary cut-back to the aid industry of "\$11.7 billion" amounted to zero dollars for Pacific Islands' climate funding. (Maclellan, 2015).

The abandonment of a bipartisan target for Official Development Assistance has led to proposed cuts of \$11.7 billion from Australia's aid budget over four years, restricting the ability to pledge substantial climate funding. While aid cuts in this year's budget focused on Africa and Asia, the Pacific islands will not be spared in next year's budget, with another billion dollars to be slashed. (Maclellan, 2015).

An international thrust by United Nations organisations to get the big polluter states of various regions geared towards climate funding and a legally binding agreement on reducing carbon emissions, was thwarted in the South Pacific. Alan Simcock for the United Nations World Oceans Assessment explained this scenario in a Radio Australia interview with broadcaster, Michael Walsh.

The South Pacific is not as well organised as the North Pacific, yet. But one can but hope that eventually the resources will be found. One of the difficulties is that so much of the Pacific is under the jurisdiction of small island states. They're often referred to as small island states, but in fact, they're probably better regarded as large ocean states. You have small populations with limited resources responsible for managing large parts of the Pacific, and providing them with the capacities to do so is an urgent and important task. (Alan Simcock cited in Walsh, 2015).

Here was the guts of the dilemma. Tonga was an independent sovereign state with jurisdiction over an ocean territory of 700 thousand square kilometres. This small island developing state did *not* possess the financial means and technical know-how to manage the natural resources and protect the borders of a large sea terrain. Without a regional governing body setting rules and regulations “for managing large parts of the Pacific” Ocean, as well as monitoring the performance of countries and lobbying for an equitable distribution of climate financing, Tonga had insufficient support structures to keep it on track. (Walsh, 2015).

Left to its own devices, Pohiva’s government forfeited on standing for climate justice. Instead, Tonga’s Prime Minister played a game of popular politics roulette with his countrymen and women, jumping from one random matter to the next to keep up his public image as a man of the people.

He was far from it, a man of the people that is. The zoo was submerged in a sea of poop because ‘Akilisi Pohiva failed at carrying out definite government policies which ensured national outcomes in the *Tonga Strategic Development Framework 2015 – 2025* amounted to anything, but empty talk on paper.

About the Author

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