

Paper for Ron Crocombe Workshop Rarotonga

Ron's writing on Corruption and Ethics

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Ron was a pioneer in the study of corruption in the region, and he paid increasing attention to it in his writing. The book he wrote with Marjie and others on *Cook Islands Politics*, was particularly concerned with nepotism and political favouritism. The series of editions of *The (New) South Pacific* gave increasing space and references to corruption. In the first 1973 edition there was half a page on 'Hungry Bureaucracies' and no reference in the index to corruption. By 2008 there were 30 pages on 'Corruption: Stemming the Rot' and 7 references in the index (the 2001 edition had had 48). It included a long section on examples of 'corruption camouflaged as tradition' (2008: 486-491).

Table 1

Growth of References to Corruption in Successive Editions of *The (New) South Pacific*

Edition	Date	Heading in text	Number of Pages devoted to Corruption	Number of References to Corruption in the index
1	1973	Hungry Bureaucracies	0.5	0
2	1978	Hungry Bureaucracies	1	1
3	1983	Hungry Bureaucracies	1	2
4	1987	Hungry Bureaucracies	1.5	3
5	1989	Hungry Bureaucracies	2.5	5
6	2001	Corruption: Stemming the Rot	28	48
7	2008	Corruption: Stemming the Rot	30	7

Ron devoted a whole chapter to corruption in his 2007 book on *Asia in the Pacific Islands*. Here he linked corruption to crime, particularly organized crime: 'in the early years of independence, the criminals were mainly unscrupulous speculators from the USA and Australia' (think of the shady characters bankrolling the election in Cook Islands Politics). However 'in recent years, along with investment generally, organized crime has been mainly Northeast Asian' (2007: 178).

The chapter draws on newspaper reports, government enquiries, and conversations with knowledgeable officials. Ron shows how Asian based organised crime is linked to logging, fishing, immigration, drugs, gambling and prostitution. Some of this activity is legal, or semi legal, or poorly regulated. For example 'in the timber industry it is difficult

to separate actions that are criminal from those that are exploitative but within the law, and from those that are simply short-sighted and ‘discounting the future (2007: 182). Corruption enters as the criminal gangs buy off influential Pacific Island politicians and officials to allow their semi-legal activities to continue. Those that refuse to be bought off are intimidated.

The debate about whether corruption is caused by ‘bad people’ or ‘bad systems’ has a long history, which Alatas (1968) – whom Ron often quoted - traces back to ancient China. It has practical consequences for public service reform. A believer in ‘good people’ will focus on character, biography, selection criteria, and training. A believer in ‘good systems’ will focus on procedures and risks, assuming some people are always going to behave badly.

Ron had a strong belief in the capacity and influence of what he would call ‘Quality’ individuals (eg 2008: 479). A related idea is ‘integrity’, which in English implies coherence and wholeness. Ideas of ‘integral human development’ appear in PNG’s Constitutional Planning Committee, and the work of Bernard Narokobi (1983), and the thinking of Frank Bainimarama, Fiji’s coup leader. Ron’s implied contrast was with often ‘structural’ or ‘cultural’ kinds of determinism that let leaders off the ethical hook: ‘I had no choice’.

Corruption (the bad) and ethics (the good) are in many ways two sides of the same coin. Anthony Van Fossen characterised Ron’s approach to the future in distinctively ethical terms. Fossen (2005) identified five strands of thinking about the future in Pacific Studies, two of which were identified with particular individuals: Epeli Hau’ofa and Ron Crocombe.

Economists (for example in the Pacific 2010 scenario¹) tend to be gloomy about the future, unless island governments liberalise their economies.

Islander intellectuals, such as the late Epeli Hauofa are more optimistic about cultural revival, and the role diaspora can play in the region.

More historically inclined Marxists see the islands becoming more dependent, marginalised and exposed to the vagaries of the world economy.

Geographers have argued that the islands’ small size and strategic significance mean that they may still be able to rely on migration, aid, remittances and employment in bureaucracies (MIRAB)

In the fifth approach, Ron argued that while the region would be under pressure from Asian political and economic interests, its future depend on the ethics of regional leaders.

¹ Cole R. V. (ed), 1993, *Pacific 2010 Challenging the Future*. National Center for Development Studies, Research School of Pacific Studies. Australian National University, Canberra.

They would have a choice. Fossen summarised Ron's approach as 'Asia plus ethical decision making'.

Ron spelled out his general ethical position in a paper for the seventeenth Waigani Seminar (a PNG institution which he helped create). While he 'never belonged to any religious system' (1987: 21) he saw ethics 'constraining the biological tendency to self interest in favour of the interests of others' (ibid: 10). He was a realist about the effects of power:

Religious and value systems particularly serve the interests of those with power who can generally interpret the rules in situations of doubt '(ibid) and

While no ethical system can stop all excesses of the powerful, they can constrain and channel them. Almost any ethical system is better than none (ibid)

Corruption can be seen as bad in at least three ways – first as a violation of rules, second as bad in its consequences and third as an absence of personal virtue. The first predominates in law enforcement – corruption is bad because it is against the law, and needs to be investigated and punished. The rules may be formal or informal. It is a '10 commandments' kind of approach. It is tricky in the Pacific Islands, where often more than one set of rules coexist. Formal laws may say one thing, but informal custom may say another. Corruption often presents itself as a dilemma about which set of rules should apply (helping my family, for example, rather than serving the public).

The second is well expressed in a speech given by Sir Peter Kenilorea to Solomon Islands 'International Day Against Corruption'. Corruption means "goods and services are misallocated away from the general public, toward a few often wealthy individuals'. Corrupt governments, he said, become preoccupied with staying in power, rather than implementing policies, and are open to bribery from 'foreign interests and corporations to allow operations or undertakings in this country which may not be in the best interests of the public' (*Solomon Star* 10.12.08 p 10). Similarly aid donors or development banks justify their new interest in corruption because of its bad consequences for development. If corruption is seen to be bad in its consequences we can see all sorts of processes being corrupted, not just those of governments. Plagiarism in universities, for example, undermines the value of accreditation. In the Pacific, aid may have become corrupted by being used to politicians to buy support for themselves in elections (the consequence of which is that it is more difficult to persuade individuals in rich countries to support it). The process of paying compensation in Melanesia seems to have been corrupted by excessive demands over minor slights.

A third approach to ethics is close to Ron's emphasis on 'quality' individuals. It talks of 'virtue' rather than rules and consequences. Virtue is an individual, personal characteristic. Honesty, for example, is a virtue, and the New South Wales Independent Commission Against Corruption defines corruption in terms of dishonesty (and partiality). Following scandals in the UK, a Committee for Standards on Public Life (the Nolan Committee) came up with an influential set of principles that dealt mostly with individual characteristics: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness,

honesty and leadership. The reports of Vanuatu's first ombudsman commissioner, Marie-Noelle Ferrieux Patterson were also particularly critical of the lack of virtue of politicians and officials – their imprudence and dishonesty – as much as their breaking of the law, or the utilitarian consequences of their actions. Frank Bainimarama was arguing in terms of virtues (rather than rules or consequences) when he accused Fiji's leaders of 'lack of moral strength or incompetence or abuse of power and privileges: Basically they were corrupt' (quoted in Larmour 2007).

We might hope people would behave honestly not merely because there were rules about it, or because the consequences of dishonesty are bad. However, some philosophers argue that rule-and consequence- based approaches to ethics cant provide a compelling reason why we should obey the rules, and avoid the consequences, especially if we stand to gain personally and get away with it (Lynch and Lynch 2003: 370-374).

Virtue ethics finds that compelling reason in the achievement of personal happiness through living a good life, as Ron did. Personal characteristics, such as honesty and trustworthiness are, in this view, not given, or determining of how we should behave in all circumstances. You can't inherit 'quality'. Rather, they are the result of leading a reflective, prudent life. (Ron's personal simplicity comes to mind here. His writing was intensely reflective of what he saw and heard around the region, rather than driven by theory). Virtue ethics may be particularly relevant to leaders, who are in a position to make their own rules, and may not have to suffer the consequences of their corrupt behaviour.

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