

Solomon Islands' parliamentarian denounces WSWS during debate on Australian intervention force

By Patrick O'Connor
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The growing nervousness of the Solomon Islands' and Australian governments in the face of escalating opposition to the Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) found peculiar expression on the floor of the country's parliament last month, with prominent parliamentarian and former finance minister Peter Boyers denouncing the *World Socialist Web Site* in a lengthy address. While not formally a member of the Solomons' government, Boyers voted for its installation in December 2007 and has described himself as a "silent supporter" of Prime Minister Derek Sikua's administration.

Boyers is chairman of the parliamentary Foreign Relations Committee and headed an inquiry conducted by a subcommittee into the domestic legislation underpinning the Australian intervention force, the Facilitation of International Assistance Act (FIAA). The subsequent report was a whitewash. An article posted on the WSWS on November 17 (later reprinted in the *Solomon Star* newspaper) titled "Parliamentary report rubberstamps Australian-led RAMSI intervention force" characterised the document as "nothing but a rubberstamp for the ongoing operations of the intervention force" which "brushes aside many serious questions regarding the compatibility of the legislation with the Solomons' constitution and international law—including the highly contentious issue of the legal immunity enjoyed by RAMSI personnel."

On December 7, Boyers moved a motion to have the parliament endorse the Foreign Relations Committee report. A substantial part of his two-hour speech consisted of an attempt to reply to the WSWS, the only media outlet to publish a critical review of the document.

Boyers' outburst was highly defensive and evasive. "I wish to clarify some allegations that have been raised in the media by one Patrick O'Connor, writing from a socialist website regarding the origins and nature of our inquiry..." he began. "It has been suggested that our report was influenced by Australian officials, and that since I was at one point supposedly Australia's preferred finance minister I somehow favoured Australia and RAMSI in the report. I categorically reject the suggestion that Australian officials played a major behind-the-scenes role in the Foreign Relations Committee Report."

Immediately contradicting himself, Boyers then admitted that two Australian officials—described as "technical assistants" from the New South Wales Legislative Council—had assisted with the report's preparation.

Whatever the precise role of these individuals, there is no question that senior RAMSI and Australian diplomatic officials in Honiara closely followed the development of the Foreign Relations Committee

inquiry and were prepared to take whatever steps necessary to ensure the final report delivered the desired outcome. The Australian government has spent more than \$1 billion on RAMSI since the neo-colonial intervention force was first deployed to Solomon Islands in July 2003, taking effective control of the impoverished country's state apparatus, including the police, courts, prisons, central bank, treasury, and finance department and other public service sectors. The operation has long been promoted as a model for potential interventions in other Pacific countries—primarily as a means for Canberra to secure its economic and geo-strategic interests and to shut out rival powers from Asia and Europe.

The Facilitation of International Assistance Act legislation was drafted in Australia and then rammed through the Solomons' parliament shortly before the first Australian troops and police landed in the island country. It provides a critical legal fig-leaf for the real purposes of the intervention and ensures the continued immunity of RAMSI personnel from local laws. While the Act is supposed to be renewed annually by the Solomons' parliament, the Foreign Relations Committee inquiry marked the first time that RAMSI's highly dubious legal foundations have been formally examined by Solomon Islands' authorities.

Efforts by the previous Solomons' government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare (in power from May 2006 to December 2007) to review the FIAA and potentially revoke RAMSI's legal immunity were met with bitter hostility by Australian officials, who feared that any alteration to the legislation may threaten the operation's collapse. Sogavare was subjected to a sustained regime-change campaign that culminated in the installation of the cravenly pro-Australian Solomons' government of Prime Minister Derek Sikua.

The parliamentary inquiry only proceeded under Sikua because Australian and RAMSI officials were confident that there would be no serious legal or political examination of the issues involved. The WSWS has previously reviewed the political record of Peter Boyers. A leaked April 2006 correspondence between an Australian RAMSI official and Australia's High Commissioner in Honiara described the MP as RAMSI's "effective voice in cabinet", guiding "economic and fiscal policy".

That the WSWS highlighted this memo in the context of the Foreign Relations Committee's activities clearly struck a nerve. Boyers responded in parliament that the April 2006 episode was "a completely separate matter that only a paranoid socialist can draw innuendos from". He absurdly attempted to portray his characterisation as RAMSI's "voice in cabinet" as "recognition by

the Australian government, and by the World Bank I might add, of my contribution to the economic situation of the country”, insisting, “that does not in any way mean that I would be so overwhelmed that I would become Canberra’s puppet”.

Boyers made no serious attempt to address the substantive issue of the compatibility or otherwise of RAMSI’s legal underpinnings with the Solomon Islands’ constitution and with international law. This was consistent with the report itself, which for the most part simply reiterated as good coin the defence of the status quo advanced by Australian and New Zealand diplomatic officials, RAMSI personnel, and senior police in their lengthy submissions to the inquiry. Instead, he desperately resorted to red-baiting: “Some outside commentators, such as Patrick O’Connor, still claim even now after reading our report that there are inconsistencies between the FIA Act—especially in respect of the powers and privileges of RAMSI personnel—and our local laws. I find such comments over-simplistic and without any supporting evidence. I wonder whether Mr O’Connor or any of his socialist colleagues have ever studied our local laws before they start criticising... Members should not take any view or advice from a website that appears to champion socialism; an ideology that we in this country keep a wide berth of.”

This diatribe was intended as a diversion from the serious questions that have been publicly raised in relation to the FIAA’s legality. For example, the final report of an official Commission of Inquiry into rioting in Honiara, released in April last year, concluded: “[T]he issue of liability, immunity, and accountability of any visiting contingent is fundamental in a democratic society, and should be re-examined in any review.... Immunity of policing is not an option in a democracy. The rule of law cannot have armed police who are unaccountable to the courts.” Boyers and the Foreign Relations Committee simply ignored this finding and have attempted to act as if the Commission of Inquiry was never held.

Boyers told parliament that RAMSI’s privileges and legal immunity were legitimate and necessary because of “ethnic tensions” between rival militias from Guadalcanal and Malaita that broke out in 1998-1999. “If he understands the root causes of the ethnic tension and the passion with which the people consider this issue, Mr O’Connor might appreciate that RAMSI, as the one deterrent force, still needs the privileges and powers set out in the FIA Act,” the MP declared.

In reality, RAMSI has exacerbated communalist divisions in the Solomon Islands and is presiding over a social and political time bomb. None of the complex issues underlying the ethnic tensions—directly bound up with the legacy of British colonialism and the country’s ongoing impoverishment under the domination of Australian imperialism—has been addressed. Moreover, Australian officials have utilised “divide and rule” tactics to shore up Canberra’s position. The most flagrant example was the issuing of an “open letter” to the Solomons’ people by then Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer in February 2007, which was accompanied by baseless accusations that Prime Minister Sogavare aimed to install the Malaitan Eagle Force militia in power. This extraordinary provocation raised the spectre of a revival of Guadalcanal militias and an armed revolt against the elected government.

Boyers concluded his speech by denouncing “leftist ‘neo-colonialism’ theories” and “old and tiresome” arguments about RAMSI effectively junking Solomons’ sovereignty. He argued: “[B]y 2008, the Solomon Islands Government and RAMSI have made every effort to ensure that RAMSI’s assistance do not interfere with the

government’s priorities and authority. In other words, since the arguments raised by Mr O’Connor were raised, much has changed and now, especially under the SIG [Solomon Islands government] - RAMSI Partnership Framework, both the government and RAMSI are much clearer on who should be doing what.”

This part of Boyers’ address amounts to an inadvertent and devastating admission. According to the MP, it was only in 2008—five years after the Australian intervention force was deployed to Honiara—that arrangements were made to supposedly ensure that RAMSI did not improperly interfere with the “sovereign” government’s authority. His claim that the recent signing of various “partnership” documents has resolved these issues is simply absurd; as everyone is well aware, RAMSI continues to call the shots in Honiara.

Boyers’ speech was followed by a point of order raised by opposition leader and former Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. Sogavare insisted that parliament should debate the Foreign Relations Committee and not the WSWS article, declaring “we should not drag parliament too low to consider issues that are raised by people who have other agendas”. While Sogavare subsequently declared that the article did “highlight issues that are pertinent to the principles and issues carried in the report”, and added that “as a matter of fact I find the writer’s defence of the country’s sovereignty as a foreigner admirable”, his initial concern to differentiate himself from the positions advanced by the WSWS underscores his complicity, together with that of the entire Solomons’ elite, with the Australian de facto occupation. For all Sogavare’s criticisms of RAMSI’s operations and its legal immunity, and despite his own government falling victim to Canberra’s dirty tricks campaign in 2007, the opposition leader remains a supporter of the intervention mission.

The acting parliamentary speaker ruled that debate should be restricted to the report on the FIAA. The next day, December 8, the acting speaker spoke at length on the issue, explaining why he was not going to allow the WSWS article to be formally tabled before parliament, as had been demanded by several MPs. “I believe by now members are fully aware of who the person is and what his views of the report before us were,” he declared. “Now that we are all aware of their origins, there is no longer any need to discuss the article... While the Honourable Chairman [Boyers] had every reason to respond to criticisms made by a journalist about the motives of the chairman and his committee, that was his right as a matter of privilege, but I will not allow debate on the committee’s report to be sidetracked by one article written by some unknown journalist.”

The debate on the FIAA report is to continue, with a vote taken on the renewal of the legislation when parliament resumes later in the year.

The author recommends:

Solomon Islands report demands legal immunity of RAMSI occupation force be revoked
[1 May 2009]

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>