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Curtain Call

Jack Corbett

This interview was conducted by Jack Corbett at The Australian National University (ANU) on 9 February 2015 for the purposes of the present volume. It offers a chance to reflect on the 15 years between Brij Lal's discussion with Vilsoni Hereniko in 2000, including political events in Fiji and the 2006 coup and 2014 elections in particular. Lal also reflects on the future of the discipline of Pacific History, particularly at ANU.

JC: The last time you did one of these interviews it was with Vilsoni Hereniko (see Chapter 2). You'd just been involved in the 1997 constitution process. And, aside from being a scholar, you were a participant in history. Over the last 15 years, your role seems to have changed, particularly in relation to Fiji. My first question is why, and what difference do you think that changing role has made?

BVL: Well the last 20 years have been years of—how should I put it—turbulence in Fiji's political history: the 1987 coups and then the coups of 2000 and 2006; and this period has seen enormous change in Fijian society. In terms of the demographic balance, the Indo-Fijian population has declined substantially, largely through emigration, to about a third of the total population while the indigenous Fijians have increased to about 60 per cent. This has enormous implications for the course of future developments in Fiji, including for the conduct of politics. Space has now opened up for debate on issues that were once simply impossible to imagine.

And then there is the whole question of a nascent coup culture in the country. There was a time when we believed that the proper process—the proper way—was through the democratic process, through elections and respecting the verdict of the ballot box. After 1987 people began to think that we could change our politics through the shortcut of military intervention. Having spent all my academic career studying the history of Fiji, the history of other developing countries, and the role that individuals played in trying to develop a political culture that respected democratic values—I am talking about people like A.D. Patel and Ratu Mara and Jai Ram Reddy later on—and to see democratic processes and values so blatantly subverted distresses me. I still feel that there is an obligation on me as a student of Fijian history to take a stance.

The second aspect of this was that given the state of repression, the denial of freedom of speech silenced a lot of people in Fiji. The country became an area of darkness as far as the freedom of expression was concerned. I was in a position to articulate a line of thought, whereas people living in Fiji were scared to voice their opinion because of fear of persecution for the temerity of speaking out. What distressed me considerably was that people I had expected, educated people, leaders of moral communities, to take a stand in defence of the rule of law and of democratic principles did very little. I could not do that, stand on the sidelines and do nothing. I felt that I had no choice but to take the stance I did and I don't regret that at all, despite being chucked out of Fiji and banned from returning. I would not call myself a public intellectual; that is too grandiose a claim. Rather, I see myself as someone who took a stand on matters of principle. And that is what I have done.

JC: Has it made a difference?

BVL: I think it has made a difference in the sense that I receive emails and messages from people who keep saying, 'Doc what you're doing is inspiring. We believe in what you are saying—but we can't say this ourselves'. Even people who publicly criticise me would say privately, 'Well what you are saying makes sense'. Mind you, I also get a quota of hate mail. And I think there is in a sense a disquiet among the powers that be in Fiji that I am weaving a separate narrative that a lot of people in Fiji silently find convincing. So I think there is that aspect to it. One should never underestimate the power of the pen—or the word processor.

It is very tempting to succumb to the attractions of power or proximity to power. It is far more difficult to stand your ground, to draw a line on the ground and say: this far and further.

But I write not because I want to make a difference or bring about change—I suppose I do—but because that is the only thing that I can do. I see myself as having no alternative, no choice in the matter. Something terrible was happening and I couldn't be a bystander. But I now want to write about the world that matters to me, that helps me better understand my past. I want to be a witness to the time and place in which I have lived. And I want to be able to leave my footprints—it sounds very egotistical—but I want people who come later on to know that some people did stand up and were prepared to be counted when it mattered.

JC: And you've paid a price.

BVL: I paid a price and it does hurt.¹ There is no denying it. It's hurting not to be able to return to one's place of birth. It's hurting because as the oldest living family member of my extended family, I have certain responsibilities and obligations which I can't fulfil. For example, attending funerals and marriages and being at the celebration after a birth. And I am very conscious of the passage of time. The shadow is lengthening. I do hope that one day I'll be able to go back just to be on the Fijian soil again. But if it doesn't happen then it doesn't happen.

I'm truly grateful to Australia. I can't say how grateful I am for the opportunities that this country has given me. And I am at home in Canberra. At least my immediate family members, my siblings and my children and others are now in Australia. So the sense of loss to some extent is mitigated by that fact, but it is still there.

I hope that one day I can say to the authorities in Fiji: 'Look, I've lost. You have won. The sanctions against Fijians travelling to Australia have been lifted, so why don't you reciprocate? And at least tell me why I can't go back. What wrong did I do? I stood up for certain principles and certain values. And you stood up for something that you believed in. The battle is over in a sense.' Unfortunately, I detect a sense of vindictiveness in

1 Lal is referring to 2009 when he was banned indefinitely from returning to Fiji (Lal 2011: 303–306).

all of this, this indefinite ban on my wife, who has never commented on political matters, and myself. And maybe fear as well, I don't know, the sense that the pen is mightier than the sword.

JC: Speaking of those principles and values. One of your biographical subjects and I suspect heroes, A.D. Patel, stood up for things like a non-racial franchise and so forth. These things have come to pass in Fiji. Why don't the ends justify the means in this context?

BVL: Many things that A.D. Patel stood for are now a reality: a common name, equal citizenship, non-racial designation of public institutions, particularly schools and the like. But in public life, means are just as important as ends. When you're talking about the project of nation-building, getting people behind the idea is vital, through consensus, dialogue and discussion: that is the way in which you will convince the people about the value and the importance of supporting something as big as this. What you have in this situation is that important institutions, particularly Indigenous Fijian institutions, have been unceremoniously dumped—for example, the Great Council of Chiefs. There is anger among many Fijians, there is frustration that is not articulated publicly but it's there, seething beneath the surface. The sense of humiliation is palpable. It won't go away.

I just hope that the government of the day will show more sensitivity and understanding. I welcome many of the developments that have taken place, such as the adoption of a common name for all citizens, equal citizenship, the end of racially discriminatory affirmative action programs. And I suspect that these changes are irreversible. But the way these changes have been brought about leaves much to be desired. The process is just not right. Violence as an instrument of public policy will always be counter-productive. And I also see a problem here. The problem is that you have an ethno-nationalist institution, the Fijian military, being the champion of multiracialism and the guardian of democracy. There's clearly a contradiction here. I also don't know to what extent Commodore Bainimarama's multiracial vision, as he has articulated it, is shared by people who are in his corner now because many of them were coup supporters. I'm talking about people like Inoke Kubuabola. Their support for Commodore Bainimarama is opportunistic. I am not sure that there has been a genuine change of heart.

This is partly because of the manner in which change has been brought about, without public consultation. There was a façade of consultation, nothing more. It is said that Fiji has returned to democratic rule, which is true but in a very limited way. The parliament is really a pliant institution. There is hardly any robust debate on important issues. There is no consultation with the opposition at all. The government has all the answers. ‘This what I want and expect’, and it gets done double-quick. But this is not how democracies work. Compromise and consultation are an integral part of the democratic process. Given that we live in a very complex world, stable government requires some give and take and preparedness on the part of all stakeholders to live with less than the optimal outcome.

JC: So what’s the prospect for the future then?

BVL: Fiji is not out of the woods yet by any stretch of the imagination. The country is passing through a very, very critical period. I get the sense that one era in Fiji’s colonial history—the twentieth century—with its assumptions and understandings about how politics ought to be organised, which interests should be given priority over others, has come to an end for a whole variety of reasons. One is the demographic transition I talked about. The fear of Indian dominance that so coloured Fijian political life and thinking in the twentieth century is gone. The second thing that has changed, in recent decades, has been the passing on of those paramount chiefs and those who believed in the racially organised political structure. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, who died in 2004, was the principal architect of that order, but even before his death his handiwork was being eroded by the forces of modernity.

One era has come to an end. But we don’t yet know what the new one will look like. At the moment the rhetoric is about building a genuinely fair and equal multiracial society, levelling the playing field for all citizens, fostering a sense of national cohesiveness. All that is good and to be welcomed. What worries me, though, in this new dispensation is the role of the military. The kind of guardian role they have got in the constitution would give them the constitutional right ‘to intervene in politics if they don’t like it’. They have got the veto power, so to speak, over the political process. They can’t be touched. Their budget can’t be touched, so I think we just have to wait and see over the next maybe decade, to see how things progress. Those who supported the coup and all that followed may one day realise that they are riding a tiger they cannot dismount at will.

The second point I want to make is that the present order is dependent on the goodwill and whim of one or two individuals. We're not talking about representative democracy. We're talking about strongman democracy here. Today Commodore Bainimarama is around and so he will guard this structure. But what happens when he's gone? I don't see anybody on that side of politics who has the charisma, and the profile, to be able to see these things through and I don't know how seriously committed they are to his stated vision. Fiji First, the prime minister's political party, is a political party in the technical sense. Most people would agree it is in fact run by very few people. Stability will come to Fiji if there is a solid foundation based on the rule of law and genuine participatory democracy. While I can see the end of one era, I really cannot see the shape of the one that is going to come.

JC: Yeah, it's interesting. The question I have in regards to that is that for much of your life you've been associated with the National Federation Party (NFP). Are you still an NFP man? And do you see a role for those old parties in this new future?

BVL: I've never actually been a member of NFP. What attracted me to the party was the kind of inclusive, democratic, non-racial principles that it enunciated in the 1960s. I found that attractive. I strongly felt the political edifice constructed on the pillars of communalism and racial separation was bad for Fiji. There was a vision for the country which, as you've said, has been realised in part although not in the way its founders intended. I found that attractive. I found the vision of the leader of the Indo-Fijian community throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, Jai Ram Reddy, attractive. He realised that indigenous Fijians were not prepared to move to a common roll at all. They totally opposed it, and promulgated the 1990 constitution instead. So, he opted for the model of consociationalism—power sharing through group representation, but always respectful of democratic values, and always respectful of the sensitivities of the indigenous population. People, I hope, will see me as someone who has consistently believed in certain principles—of democratic values, the sanctity of the ballot box, the importance of dialogue and discussion in resolving difficulties. These are the kind of things that A.D. Patel and Jai Ram Reddy articulated. And in the process they lost. Both of them lost. But I think they were the right values and that the approach was right.

Now I am in a situation where a lot of indigenous Fijians write to me and say, 'Doc, you stood for principles and you never personalised issue'. That is endorsement that I have an attachment to certain values, and as it happened, in Fijian politics, it was the NFP which articulated those. I thought the Alliance party's approach of racially compartmentalised politics was inappropriate for Fiji. But the kind of party politics of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s is gone. Old fears and phobias are gone. Now, every political party is required by law to have a multiracial membership. And that's a good thing. You already see, for example, in NFP the sort of things which I hadn't thought would happen. Credible Fijians, professional Fijians, are standing for what was once perceived to be an Indo-Fijian party. Once for Fijians to stand for an Indo-Fijian party like the NFP was tantamount to treachery and betrayal, but now, you don't have that sense at all. Now the president of the party is a young Fijian lawyer, and that's a good thing. That is the way of the future.

JC: That segues nicely to your scholarship and legacy as a scholar. For much of your career you've written about racial politics. Do those old ways of making sense of Fijian politics still hold?

BVL: I wrote about those issues, about the role of race in Fijian politics, because that is what situation was on the ground at the time as I found it. To be sure, there were cross-cutting issues that united communities across the communal divide but because of the institutional structure of politics, everything had to be put in racial terms: so many Indians in parliament, so many Fijians in parliament. Affirmative action was seen in purely racial terms. Race was not simply false consciousness. It permeated the very sinews of our important institutions. You were asked for your racial identity when you left and re-entered the country, when you opened a bank account, got your driver's licence, applied for scholarship, were considered for promotion. Its pervasive effect is difficult for the younger generation to imagine but it was palpable to those of us who lived through those times. I wrote about what I saw; it wasn't a figment of my imagination. What is happening now is a positive development. And it's partly because the architects of the old order are gone, the demographic situation has changed, old barriers and boundaries have collapsed from the impact of modern technology. Fiji is a much more open place now than it was two decades ago. As I have said before, Fiji is an island, but an island in the physical sense alone.

JC: Could you describe the experience of writing about issues of race in Fiji? If you were to start your career today as a young scholar of Fiji, what do you think you would write about?

BVL: Not all my work is about issues of race as you would know. I have written on a whole range of other subjects as well. If I were starting now, I would stay clear of politics and contemporary history. One thing I've learned writing about Fiji in the last 30 to 40 years is that it's been a really painful process, emotionally and intellectually draining, gut-wrenching. I keep revisiting those missed opportunities. I see with great clarity the mistakes we made and we haven't learned from those mistakes. Every time I revisit the past it's like opening a wound afresh. I sometimes wish I did not write about Fiji at all, that I worked on some other Pacific island or on some other topic in the remote past, rather than on something that is so close to the bone, as a writer, as a scholar, and as a participant. I enjoy writing about the past creatively and imaginatively. I think one can better capture the truth of the human experience through creative writing if it is properly done, and that is something I would have started doing much earlier in my career than as a part-time hobby. Stories have a way of connecting with people that dry social science scholarship cannot.

JC: Over the last 10 to 15 years there has been a notable shift in your focus. Not just on Indo-Fijians but on Indian diaspora more generally. What brought that about?

BVL: Two things. One is that I have continued to write about contemporary Fiji. I've done the historical part, I've written my books, I have lived at the interface between scholarship and practical action. Engagement and attachment are important to me, not detached and disinterested scholarship. The head and the heart have to meet. That's where I live. I use that scholarship to illuminate the present. So that's one strand in my work.

The other one came about quite unexpectedly. My first book was on the Indian indentured labourers to Fiji. And after that I wrote a series of articles on women and suicide and protest on the plantations. That work was finished by the late 1980s and around that time it began to be discovered by scholars working in different parts of the world—in the West Indies, in Mauritius, in South Africa. There was a revival in aspects of the work that I had done. It was my article on the experience of Indian indentured women on the plantations that aroused the initial interest, but my other

work also began to get noticed by this broader constituency. A reinforcing factor was the emergence of the concept of an Indian diaspora. Before the 1990s there was no sense of such a thing but it suddenly came into vogue and became the focus of far-flung and loosely organised scholarly network. One result was invitations to conferences and to publish in this wider field, culminating in my editorship of the *Encyclopaedia of the Indian Diaspora* (2006), which was such a success. My interest in the Indian diaspora developed in a haphazard way, but it has now become an important part of scholarly work.

JC: I want to press you a little bit on the views of some of your critics. The first accusation would be that Lal is too Indian focused; his take on Fiji is very much an Indian view. How do you respond to that?

BVL: What is an Indian view? That is too simplistic a characterisation and very misleading. I would happily plead guilty to the charge of having a democratic point of view but not a racial point of view. When you talk about an Indian view of Fiji, essentially you are talking about views that are broadly concerning things like equal rights, equal citizenship, democratic space and equal opportunity for everybody. These have been associated with one community in Fiji. But in fact they are universal values. And that is what Indo-Fijians have been asking for all along from the 1920s onwards. Let's have a common roll, common citizenship, equal opportunity. And I happen to agree with that. So what is identified as an Indian view is in fact fairly broad concerns of people everywhere.

Let me give you a specific example—of the 1987 coup. I took a very prominent role as a commentator—and a book came out of that, *Power and Prejudice* (1988). A lot of people were saying at the time that I was taking the anti-coup stance because I was an Indian. The world saw events in Fiji through the lens of racial stereotypes: Indians were out to usurp the rights of the Fijians and the Fijians had no choice but to oppose that by force. It was seen as an indigenous versus immigrant issue. I argued that the coup was not about race only but about recovering power by a group that had lost it; race was used as a scapegoat for other interests and motivations. Issues of class and regional politics were involved. The quest not to give up power lay at the heart of the issue, especially by people who thought they had the right to rule by virtue of who they were, an entrenched elite. I am not sure I convinced many people at the time, but now most people agree with that analysis. It's become part of the mainstream thinking on the subject. I opposed the 2006 coup even

though many Indo-Fijians supported it. A lot of people were perplexed. Some Indo-Fijians in Sydney wrote to my vice chancellor, Ian Chubb, to fire me because I was bringing disrepute to the university because of my opposition to the 2006 coup. My worst hate mail was from Indo-Fijians.

I acted the way I did because there was a commitment to certain principles. I wasn't doing it because Indians were the target in 1987. I felt then, as I do now, that the coup was wrong, that it was not about race but about other interests. I don't believe coups solve problems. As I have said so many times, coups compound problems. I believe passionately in the rule of law, in the values of democracy, in the sanctity of the ballot box, and in the processes and protocols of constitutionalism. I opposed coups not on ethnic but on moral and ideological grounds.

The second thing is, yes, if you look at my more creative writing, my fiction, I write about my own community. And I do it because I am a part of it. I do it because I understand their background, I understand what makes them tick. I can feel the community's heartbeat. And I do it because I want to be a witness to my time and place. I am afraid I do not think I can write about other communities with the same degree of confidence and intimacy. I haven't written about the inner lived experience of the Fijian people because I don't have that intimate familiarity with Fijian culture. Their concerns and interests, I can see, I can understand, but I don't think I am in a position to articulate them with the same kind of confidence that I am of the world that formed and de-formed me. I would accept that I began my work looking at Indian indentured labourers but I branched out looking at the broader political history of the country. One of my great regrets really is that you don't have a substantial Fijian scholar from within, writing about changes taking place within Fijian society, profound changes. I mean Fijian society as it was in 1970 is not what it is now. There has been a fundamental transformation. What is going on? And I think this where I regret that after 30 to 40 years of university in Fiji we haven't produced many scholars that can tell us about the internal dynamics of the society. There is not another Rusiate Nayacakalou, Isireli Lasaqa or Simione Durutalo on the horizon.

JC: Postcolonialism is a frame for understanding some of these issues, why did you never take to it in your work?

BVL: Well, two things. One is that the time when I entered the academy way back in the early '70s, postcolonialism wasn't around. I read a lot of that literature in subsequent years and I am aware of the pertinence of some of their concerns and relevance to my work. But I have not been overtly postcolonial or postmodern in my work. This is partly because I want to create my own text. I don't want to be a footnote in somebody else's text. I had this rich field to explore, you know multiracialism, nation-building and so on, and I wanted to see it through my own eyes. I strongly believe that theory should emerge out of the data that you collect rather than the other way around. There is something of the literary scholar or artist in me, I suppose, who thrills to the particularities of the human experience in all its maddening diversity and complexity, and I am comfortable with that. History is a mansion with many rooms, and there should be room for all kinds of scholarship. Postcolonialism has a place in it, to be sure, but it should also know its place in the broader scheme of things. Among the scholars whose works I enjoy reading, and who were once my colleagues, all nontheoretical in the narrow sense, are fine writers of prose, such as Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Hank Nelson, Bill Gammage, Ken Inglis. Further afield a whole host of great American historians, from C. Vann Woodward to Arthur Schlesinger Jr, and in Britain, from E.P. Thompson to David Cannadine. But a short answer to your question is that I am egotistical enough to believe that my work should have my signature on it, not someone else's.

JC: So then you touched on this briefly. But the criticism would be that that text is still relatively atheoretical. Can you articulate why or what it is about your work that makes a theoretical contribution?

BVL: I am not sure that framing the question that way is very helpful. What matters in the end is not whether your work is theoretical or not, but the quality of the imagination and insight you bring to bear on it, whether your work opens a new window on the broader field. That, in the end, should be the true test of any piece of scholarship. Theory informs my work but I do not let it smother it. That is a choice I made a long time ago. I am not interested in the arcane debates about methodology and theory that take place in a discipline. I leave that sort of navel-gazing to others who have a taste for it. My main concern is to tell a story in a way that I connect to readers beyond the halls of the academy. I write to get read, not simply to get ahead. Look at historians whose works have altered our perceptions of the past, Henry Reynolds on Australian Aboriginal

history, Eugene Genovese and Kenneth Stamp on American slavery, E.P. Thompson on the emergence of the English working class, and I think you will see what I mean.

JC: You mentioned before the absence of a sort of Fijian equivalent to yourself as a scholar. I wonder if you can reflect a bit on your generation of Pacific intellectuals. Both where you fit and what contribution that generation has made to our understanding of the region.

BVL: A lot of Pacific Islanders of my generation went to USP—the University of South Pacific—founded in 1968, to be trained to provide for the manpower needs of the newly independent countries or countries about to become independent. When they finished their studies they got absorbed into the bureaucracies of their countries. Some, very few, stayed on at the university to pursue academic careers, such as Rajesh Chandra, Vijay Naidu, Simione Durutalo [1956–1994], Vilsoni Hereniko. The older generation included Pio Manoa, Raymond Pillay, Satendra Nandan and Subramani.

But many USP graduates did not go into academia, though, of course, they made profound contributions in their own countries and regionally as well. The opportunity was there but other things intervened. One of my regrets is that more of us are not doing the kind of solid academic research that is needed. And I really would like to see more Pacific Islanders in Australia and New Zealand universities as well so that the Islander voice is represented. But now, the environment in the universities is very different. It's more outcome-driven, externally funded, project-oriented research. The bright ones go into consultancy or international civil service. And maybe that is the nature of the beast. I tried to train PhD students, to come up through the ranks, but other attractions intervened. So there is that regret. But I think that people of my generation have made a contribution, not in academia necessarily but more broadly to society.

JC: I guess the nature of things, particularly when reflecting on people who have come to the end of their careers, is to wonder where the next generation comes from, where the next Lal comes from. Does USP produce another Lal?

BVL: I certainly hope so, but I don't see any evidence of that for the moment. I think the pressures, the incentives and opportunities have changed. The idea of devoting an entire lifetime to scholarship on one country, let's take Fiji for example, that's not likely to be the case in the

future because you don't have too many positions which encourage that kind of commitment, or support that kind of endeavour. You are forced to apply for research grants and research grants are determined by national priorities. You work on projects one after another. And who is there to say that these things are less relevant, to themselves and to the societies in which they work. I am not prepared to make that judgement that the kind of work that I have done is necessarily better than what other people are doing. We are all making our contributions in different ways, to the broader field and to the improvement to the lives of our people. But I do think that it would be good to have a few more people from the islands, breaking into the top echelons of Western academy and they're not doing it now.

JC: Part of that story is also that the nature of the academy, even at ANU, is changing. There are very few Pacific historians left at the ANU, for example. There's a question of whether your own position will be filled when you're gone. Are the opportunities that you were afforded going to be around?

BVL: The short answer is no. And now with the shrinking budget it means that you have got to reprioritise where you want to focus your energies. In this new order, Asia has become much more important than the Pacific Islands. So what you had in the '60s and '70s and '80s and '90s—a cluster of Pacific historians here working on the region, that's gone and I don't think I'll be replaced. Many Pacific historians are now well into their 60s. And I don't see new ones coming up. Yes, there are some in New Zealand, Damon Salesa, for example. But Judy Bennett and Jacqui Leckie at Otago or Clive Moore at Queensland are getting on in age. Many have retired: Ian Campbell, Peter Hempenstall, Hugh Laracy,² Doug Munro, Stewart Firth, Donald Denoon and Deryck Scarr come to mind, although some remain active researchers and writers. Hank Nelson and Alan Ward have died. So that cohort which came of age from the mid-1960s through to the late 1960s and early 1970s is gone, or is on its way out. And it's not for lack of trying but we have not been able to build or to get people in the discipline who will take the field further. Maybe it won't be history, but some other disciplines that will fill the void.

2 Sadly, Hugh Laracy died on 6 October 2015 (Salesa 2016).

But the discipline of history itself has changed. Now we have got to take a broader approach. Historians have to be more creative, to engage with cognate disciplines, to be prepared to retool to engage with other disciplines. But the old model of graduates coming out of ANU and then populating the provinces has gone.

JC: The question is to what extent this is in part a failure of your generation to cultivate successors or to what extent the humanities have suffered particularly in recent years. And whether we are going to see a vibrant historical scholarship on the Pacific—or just in general—in years to come?

BVL: Perhaps to some extent we are responsible. But I think that given that there are so few positions in Pacific history, for example, a lot of people didn't see any future in this. And many people trained at ANU in the 1970s and 1980s could not find academic employment. They went into high school teaching or into public service, people such as Andrew Thornley and Penny Lavaka. The necessities and the requirements have changed. I don't think Pacific history will die, only it will be done in a different way. But I think that the culture of the academy is such that it is not conducive to a lifelong kind of career in one field. That's the nature of the beast. We'll just have to wait and see.

JC: As you look back on your journey through Fijian history of the twentieth century, what would you say was the major challenge in writing it?

BVL: Fijian history is a deeply contested terrain. There is no unifying narrative about it. What one group viewed as good and desirable, another thought the opposite. One thought that on balance colonial rule was beneficial, the other thought it was baneful. One wanted primordality as the foundation of Fiji's political culture, the other advocated ideology. One wanted common roll, the other communal. One was the landowning community, the other was primarily tenants. One deployed the metaphor of Fiji as a harmonious three-legged stool, the other rejected it. The list goes on. Unlike some other Pacific Island nations such as Tonga and Samoa with a homogenous cultural tradition, where history could be deployed in the project of nation-building, Fiji had no such advantage. Inevitably, what one writes is seen through a particular ethnic and ideological lens. That is why people shy away from examining too closely the contours of our history lest they discover a huge void.

So, we use warm and fuzzy catch phrases such as ‘Fiji: The Way the World Should Be’, and used to portray ourselves as the model of a functioning multiracial democracy, although we all probably knew in our hearts that things were not as rosy as we wanted the world to believe. Our task as scholars is to explore the corners and hidden crevices of our past, to force ourselves to look at the mirror. It is very easy to be accused of being biased. Inevitably, you are accused of taking one side or the other. The best thing to do in the circumstances is to declare your hand. As I have said on another occasion, value is a matter of judgement, and there can be no finality in matters of scholarly discourse. The most important thing is to be true to the evidence before you. I find it encouraging that there is more openness now, more willingness, to acknowledge the complexity and contradictions of Fijian history, but this wasn’t the case when I began my journey.

JC: That brings us to your retirement, or pending retirement. Why now?

BVL: Well, many things. One is that I have been in this business for over 30 years, 25 of them at the ANU. I’ve seen the best. I’ve worked with the best. They’re all gone. So there’s a sense of isolation and a definite sense of loss. I’m talking about my colleagues in this corridor. I feel that the world which formed me is now gone. The sense of community, the sense of being together in the same business, of looking out for each other, is gone. We are a much more atomised group now, harassed and hassled, all furiously chasing the research dollar. I don’t find the present culture of the academy satisfying any more. To justify your existence every year to academic bean counters is not what I joined the academy for in the first place. To tell the truth, I find the whole thing repugnant. We historians don’t operate on an annual cycle, nor should we. The value of our work will be judged in the fullness of time, not tomorrow or the day after. I refuse to accept the bureaucrats are the best judges of the value of the work we do.

I have other things I want to do. I want to do volunteer work in the community, to give something back to this generous land which has been so hospitable to me and my family. I am actively exploring options in that regard in relation to remote and Aboriginal communities. I want to read and write more widely. As I mentioned before, I am really taken in with the idea of writing about the past creatively, imaginatively. I have been doing that on the side for some time, but I now want to make creative writing the centrepiece of my work. I have a novella in mind which I want

to complete. It is about the autobiography of a tree, and how the tree has seen changes taking place around it over several generations. And I come back to the question of bearing witness to my time and place, to create a memory bank for future generations because the world I come from is unwritten, where memory is not neatly archived.

I have had a good innings. Now there is no retirement age, and I could go on for as long as I like. But when does fresh blood come into the system? We have a responsibility, I think, to prepare the ground for younger people to come up through the ranks. I'll still keep on writing. I'll still keep on doing the work in different ways maybe. But I don't have to be on full pay to do that. I will continue my association with the university or with the academy in some form but less constrained by the need to be on the treadmill all the time. And I really want to read more. A lot of my colleagues unfortunately don't see things that way. After 40 years they still want to write the book they never wrote that they know they will never write! But I am more than the sum total of words I have written. I have other obligations. I hope 'I have done the state some service', as the great Oscar Spate used to say. It's time to move on, to get off the treadmill.

JC: Well on that note, good luck! And thank you.

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