

SEAN DORNEY'S COLUMN

"FROM THE SIDELINE"

For "The Independent" January 20, 1996

30. "TWO AND A HALF MILLION KINA FOR THIS? ERRORS!!"

How many of you Papua New Guineans realise you voted in a national election in 1993? None! Yep. You all know that the last election was in 1992 and the next is in 1997. But that's not what the 20th Anniversary book the Government is paying K2.5m for says. "Destination Papua New Guinea" claims Pias Wingti called a "snap election" in 1993 - and won.

Unfortunately, this is just one of a series of appalling mistakes and errors of interpretation in the book that make you wonder just what this PNG Government expects of the media, the media it claims has no sense of responsibility to the truth. Is the media supposed to do what K2.5m worth of tax-payers money seems to have been committed to - forget being accurate but don't worry as long as you please the Government?

"Destination Papua New Guinea" is at odds with the facts almost right from the start. The third sentence of its "Overview" claims that when Independence came in 1975 "almost 500 years had passed since the first Europeans arrived and it was nearly a century since the country last had full authority over its affairs". That's absolute rubbish.

John Waiko, PNG's leading historian, says in his book that a permanent European presence began in a very limited way less than 150 years ago and that "before the time of European contact no tribesman would have been admitted into the territory of another tribe unless invited" and that modern PNG was formed from a "physically and culturally fragmented pattern of societies".

But "Destination PNG" was not written by Papua New Guineans. No, the publishers boast that they imported people from England to do it. And, it's sad, but these Britons seem to think they are writing about Africa.

That possibly explains why they understand so little. For instance, how could anybody who knows anything about the history of PNG write ... "Freedom was not only the removal of oppression and interference, it also meant the right to regain possession of the land ..." Regain possession of the land? The people of PNG never lost possession of 97% of it. It is one of Papua New Guinea's great strengths. But "Destination PNG" claims all the people had their land stolen off them for a hundred years.

This "Overview" is only two pages long but I found no fewer than nine mistakes or misinterpretations that any serious student of PNG history would have difficulty with. It claims the recent Constitutional Amendments replaced Premiers of the Provinces "with centrally-appointed Governors". You know, and I know, the new Governors are the Provincial Members who were elected by the people. "Destination PNG" just gets it wrong.

One of the most amusing sentences in this "Overview" is the one in which the authors get the traditional village

method of decision making confused with what goes on in the National Parliament. So, to anyone who has witnessed the PNG Parliament in session the following is quite hilarious:

"One of the most significant and distinctive characteristics of PNG politics is the concept of consensus ... a consensus must be reached on all matters and discussions will generally continue until all Parties are satisfied and their interests have been protected and their views represented"!! Whoever wrote that was not in the Parliament when the Government of the day gagged the Opposition and rammed through the budget - something I have seen happen twice.

The next two pages of "Destination PNG" deal with the Prime Ministers since Independence. And, goodness, don't they have trouble with condensing history here! We find out that Rabbie Namaliu became Prime Minister after the 1987 elections (he didn't, it was Pias Wingti - Rabbie defeated Pias in a Vote of No Confidence in 1988). Then we are told that "first Namaliu and then Wingti tried to keep their coalition governments together". Sorry, it was the other way round!

The extraordinary claim that Wingti "called a snap election" in 1993 comes on these pages. And then the book misquotes the Supreme Court! Referring to Wingti's surprise resignation and re-election in the Parliament (not at a general election) the book claims "the Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional for a Prime Minister to resume office after having tendered his resignation".

That is not what the Supreme Court ruled! It ruled that the Members should have had more time - that Wingti was perfectly entitled to contest the Prime Ministership again but the Members should not have been forced to vote that same day.

Right at the back of the book there is a page of "Acknowledgements and Credits" but John Waiko's "A Short History of Papua New Guinea" (Oxford University Press) does not rate a mention. Only white authors are acknowledged and I am one of them. But I wish they had read my book a little more closely. They just can not seem to get the detail right.

In the brief two pages on the Defence Force they quote Ted Diro as saying that in the preparation for the Vanuatu exercise in 1980 the soldiers training "was such that they could hit rats and bandicoots at night if they moved". Ted did say that. But he did not say what they go on to quote:

"Led by Huai clutching an Israeli sub-machine gun, the men leapt out prepared for trouble. They were in full battle dress, armed with automatic rifles and heavier weapons. They had the dark visors of their battle helmets pulled down over their faces and fearsome-looking, long-bladed bush knives strapped to their waists. They secured the airport. ... With the arrival of the Papua New Guineans the British and French soldiers packed up and left, having picked up no honours but excellent suntans."

That is word for word from my book. But Ted Diro did not say it. I did. It was from my report from Santo in 1980. However, "Destination PNG" would have you believe it was Ted Diro speaking. I could go on and on and on.

The Fridrikssons who produced "Destination PNG" are proud of the "Letter of Commendation" they have received from Arnold Marsipal, the Minister for State Assisting the Prime

Minister. Mr Marsipal praises the book as being "a historical document that will go down in the history of this country as the document that recorded our short history, as the best recorded script of our last 20 years of our socio-economic and political system ... "

That had me perplexed for a while considering how many basic facts "Destination PNG" has not got right. But then I turned to Page 14 and came across this description of the Honourable Minister after it has quoted him as saying his office was in charge of administration of the PM's Department: "But he was being modest. His office is often in the front line dealing swiftly with problems, implementing decisions and negotiating political settlements." Really! Oh, Yes. And:

"The Minister deals with grievances against the government from Papua New Guinea citizens. It may mean dealing with irate leaders of a student demonstration surging outside the building. It may mean calming landowners, angry and frustrated by delays in what they see as rightful compensation. It involves being able to talk in common terms with many different people. It requires tact and high level public relations ..." Whew! Arnold, I never knew! No wonder you like "Destination PNG". But, I suppose, it does do justice to one of your dilemmas.

"One of Arnold Marsipal's most trying jobs," the book claims, "has been Chair of the Implementation Committee. It looks at all the projects over the last twenty years and asks why they have not been completed."

Perhaps, Arnold, all the people's money was wasted?

NEXT WEEK IN THIS COLUMN: Two views on "Destination PNG" - one from a Print Production Specialist and the other from a Publisher who examines what such a book should cost.

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