

Hon. Luamanuvao Dame Winnie Laban
Pacific Public Service Fale
Working with Ministers and Political Neutrality
Webinar
A Former Minister's Perspective
30 September 2020

E muamua ona ou ta le vai afei ma ou fa'atulou i le paia lasilasi ua fa'atasi mai. Tulou ou ponao'o Samoa i le afio o Tupu ma E'e. Tulou ou Faleupolu. Tulou auauna a le Atua. Ou te fa'atalofa atu i le Paia ma le Mamalu o le aso.

Kia Ora, Talofa, Kia Orana, Taloha ni, Fakalofa lahi atu, Ni sa bula vinaka, Malo e lelei, Gude tru, Halo olgeta, Alii, Mauri, Lenwo, Ekamorwir Omo, Bonjour and Warm Pacific Greetings to you all.

Talofa lava to all the Pacific Public Service Commissioners participating in this webinar.

You work, day in, day out, to make sure that public sector agencies throughout the Pacific can serve our people well. You have a tough job trying to satisfy the demands of your political masters and doing the best for your people. Thank you for your leadership and working to improve the public services of your country. I acknowledge your

contributions to the development of your nations.
Fa'afetai, fa'afetai tele lava.

I have been asked to discuss the topic of 'Working with Ministers and Political Neutrality' from the perspective of a former Minister. (Some of you may know that I held a number of ministerial portfolios in Helen Clark's New Zealand government.)

Let me begin with the 'big picture'.

The details of governance are set out in Law, often in a Constitution. This may vary between nations, but certain principles of democratic governance are held in common.

In New Zealand, the Cabinet Manual states that: 'Ministers are part of the 'Executive' arm of government. Their powers rise from legislation and the common law.

Ministers are supported in their role by the Public Service.'

The Legislature and the Judiciary are the two other arms of government. An important principle is the 'separation of powers' between the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary.

A key point is that 'Ministers are supported in their role by the Public Service'. So, a good relationship between Ministers and Public Servants is essential for good governance.

We all understand that Ministers gain their roles through a process of elections by the people and appointment (by the Prime Minister or President), Ministers' roles are 'temporary' and subject 'political' factors.

On the other hand, Public Servants are members of a 'permanent' public service and recruited for their particular skills and knowledge and are obliged to provide politically neutral advice to the Minister, 'without fear or favour'.

So that is the theory of how governments work. Let me now place that in the context of the Pacific.

A Samoan proverb says: '*O lei i'a vai a Malo*'. Meaning 'government power is like a slippery fish'. In the Pacific all relationships are 'political'.

What I mean by this, is that in our small island nations we are often related to many of the people we work and interact with daily. Our uncle, cousin or *wantok* may be our

Minister, Prime Minister, or hold a senior Public Service position. The degree of separation in the Pacific is very close, and often 'slippery'.

As Pacific Island people we come from communal cultures. We do not stand alone. We identify closely with our *'aiga*, families and extended families; village communities and districts; those that speak our languages, our *wantoks*; and those that share our island homes. Our connectedness can be both a strength and a point of vulnerability.

Managing 'conflicts of interest' and being 'neutral' in our political relationships is a daily challenge.

The size, scale and intimacy of the public services and political communities of our island nations are quite different from the situations found of larger nations such as New Zealand and Australia. This provides Pacific Island Public Servants with some particular opportunities and challenges.

Furthermore, the history of the 'Public Service' of some our nations is relatively short in comparison to the traditional cultural structures that have provided support

for our people for millennia. And because many of our Pacific nations achieved independence in recent times, the Public Service is sometimes conflated with earlier colonial administrations.

Our Pacific island nations are also rapidly modernising and women are now taking senior positions in Public Services and as Ministers. The advancement of women into leadership positions is a particular challenge in societies that have been traditionally patriarchal.

These comments set the scene and provide a context for managing political relationships in the Pacific.

Perhaps the most important political relationship that Public Service Commissioners have to manage is the relationship with their Minister. This may be the Minister for State Services, Minister for Public Services or a similar ministerial title. In some cases the Prime Minister may hold that portfolio. In most cases this will be a senior Minister, and sometimes a person who may have previously held senior public service positions.

Establishing a politically neutral and professional relationship with the Minister that you report to, with the

objective of protecting the Public Service from political interference and ensuring the political neutrality of the Public Service, would be in my view an important first step for any Public Service Commissioner in managing this important political relationship.

The key words here are: professional, independent and neutral.

By being explicit with your Minister, by stating that your relationship is to be based on these principles, of professionalism, independence and neutrality, puts you in good position to provide 'free, frank and fearless' advice to your Minister.

Being 'professional' includes being respectful and courteous and understanding the clear difference between 'personal' and 'professional' relationships.

Having some 'ground rules' or clear 'understandings' helps the relationship between Public Service Commissioner and Minister go smoothly; particularly if the Minister is new to his or her role.

When I was a Minister, I asked my senior Public Servants to provide me with 'timely' advice on important matters in my portfolios, and to ensure that there were 'no surprises'. There is nothing worse than your Minister reading about something in the newspaper, or on social media, that they should have been briefed about beforehand. 'Forewarned is forearmed' should be your motto. No surprises.

Setting up your relationship with your Minister on a sound basis from the 'get go' will help to establish trust, confidence and respect between you. I always found it useful to start the relationship by having a conversation about what I wanted to achieve, as a Government Minister, and stating my expectations of how we can work together. I always encouraged senior public servants to participate in the conversation and to contribute their ideas. With trust and respect you will be in a good position to manage this important political relationships when the going gets tough.

It is in the nature of things that there will be crises and problems that will have to be managed. Having a well-established, professional, independent and neutral relationship with your Minister will be an important foundation for crisis management.

This goes for other political relationships too.

Public Service Commissioners are required to relate to 'opposition' politicians, and 'would-be' politicians, in an even-handed manner. We have to keep in mind that yesterday's opposition may be tomorrow's government. This is particularly important during the period running up to a general election, when there may be heightened political tensions that can test the 'neutrality' of the Public Service.

Public Service Commissioners have an important task in promoting the role of an independent, neutral and professional Public Service as a key foundation of a democratic society.

Managing political relationships is not restricted to Ministers, Members of Parliament or other elected officials. In the Pacific Islands the leaders of our cultural communities, our traditional polities, our 'chiefs and orators', and other leaders of civil society, including women leaders, are very important.

I would like to talk briefly about the tension between managing political relationships, good governance and cultural leadership, and how we can, as Pacific public sector leaders, manage that tension.

Let me illustrate through a personal reflection.

I have been a Minister of the Crown, a Member of Parliament, a politician. I have also been a senior public servant in New Zealand and worked for non-governmental organisations throughout the Pacific. Now I am a Professor at Victoria University of Wellington.

But in the village of Vaiala, in the district of Vaimauga, Samoa, I am Luamanuvao, the daughter of Emi and Ta'atofa, the niece of high chief Patu, the granddaughter of Tunupopo and Vasamalelagi, the sister of Fauono.

All of you have important job titles that identify what you do in your working world; but your Pacific identity, your place of belonging, is defined by your family and the community and culture that you came from.

Like all the people in the Pacific Public Services we live in two different worlds: the world of our family, culture and

traditions, and the world of our working life as public servants in a government agency.

Both worlds have their own rules, regulations and practices, and often use different languages.

There is a tension between the governance of modern, independent democratic states, with institutions that provide checks and balances on power, and the traditional governance of communities based on familial and kin relationships.

This is the tension we see when a Senior Public Servant or a Minister asks for a relative to be given preference for a job; or when we are encouraged by *wantoks* to appoint a member of our own extended family ahead of a better qualified candidate for a job.

Pacific Island communities are small, we know each other, we are often related to each other, and, we often say: "It's who you know, not what you know."

Family members, *'aiga*, *wantoks*, can test our loyalty, integrity and responsibility; our professionalism, neutrality

and independence. But corruption and unfairness erodes our public services and our democracies.

So what can we do when we are faced with this problem?

We can start by talking openly and honestly about the problems we face, and we can change the organisational culture and practices of our public services so that Codes of Conduct, Best Practice and Ethical Behaviour are established, encouraged and enforced in the workplace. And by being explicit about how we manage 'political' relationships.

Performance Management is another important instrument in this regard. Setting clear goals and standards for performance and training staff to improve personal and organisational capacity are important to achieve an ethical and high functioning, neutral and independent public service.

Performance management, training and capacity building are important, but I believe that the most important factor in developing a quality public service is good, ethical leadership.

Good leadership that combines the strengths of your culture, with clear systems of accountability, to build an ethical organisational culture in your Public Service and ensure that political relationships are managed professionally.

There is a proverb that summarises the Samoan view of leadership: *O le ala i le pule le tautua* – “The way to authority is through service”.

This is what is sometimes called ‘servant leadership’, it is a style of leadership that sits well with our Pacific cultures.

We all have systems of accountability in our cultures. We know what is right and what is wrong. We must have the courage to speak up when we see something wrong. We should not use ‘culture’ as an excuse for something that we know is unfair. But we can use cultural processes for ensuring that there is accountability.

Some people, like the Father of Economics Adam Smith, see the ‘dead hand of tradition’ as something that holds back progress. In contrast, I see the living heart of our Pacific cultures, traditions and communities as a great strength. Our cultures provide us with a place of belonging

and sense of identity anchoring us safely in the stormy seas of the twenty-first century.

I will conclude my remarks with another Samoan saying:

'E le taua le tofi ae taua le fa'amaoni'.

'It is not the position or title that is important but the will to serve others.'

Fa'afetai lava.