

July 26, 1979

Dear Bernie and Mike,

Having briefly telephoned Bernie last night on arrival here in Australia, I wanted to rush a short estimate of the situation to you both. My 11 days in the Hebrides, where I interviewed scores of people of all descriptions on all sorts of subjects for my article on the area, gave me some feel for a very complex situation in rapid transition. I shall put together a detailed report from my notes at a later date. This letter, however, will attempt to summarize where things stand now.

1. The Refugee Situation

As you both know, the Hebrides are heading for early independence. At this moment, thanks largely to French insistence in which the British concurred, a drafting committee is working overtime to produce a constitution which will set the parameters for the later general election. The Vanua Aku Party had pushed hard for elections first, constitution later, but the French were firm. The French resident commissioner, Robert, stated flatly in a press conference that France would not deal with or support financially any new Hebridean government which had a "totalitarian" style of constitution. The elections are scheduled for October 17, but no one believes that this schedule will be kept. November or December are more likely dates.

The importance of this timing as regards the refugee issue is this: None of the parties who will be contesting in the elections is about to touch the refugee issue with a ten foot pole until the election is over. Jimmy Stevens might, but it would be a political disaster for him, giving the opposition a political tool with which to rally everyone against him. After the elections, ~~the~~ and after independence has then officially granted (which both Condominium powers have formally committed themselves to grant without delay), the situation will be entirely different. You will be fascinated to know that Jimmy talked a few weeks ago with none other than Walter Lini, head of Vanua Aku, on the subject of refugees. Jimmy says Walter told him that he, Walter, was also inclined to invite refugees to the Hebrides, but that "outside advisors" had strongly urged the Party to defer this issue until after the election. Lini wanted to know, if the issue was raised at a later time, whether Jimmy would still make good on his offer of custom land where the refugees could stay. Stevens replied that his offer would remain good. (More about Jimmy and Walter Lini below.) Thus there is a distinct possibility that the new government of the Hebrides may itself suggest, or be amenable to outside suggestion, that refugees come openly and officially to the Hebrides, probably to the Big Bay area of Santo. This would be the best solution for all concerned: UN support could be laid on for the trip and maintenance in the Hebrides; the refugees would not be a political football, subject to attack by powerful groups in the islands who could rightly claim they had never been consulted. For example, although the eastern half of Big Bay and north Santo comes within Nagriamel, the western half in Vanua Aku country, as are South Santo and other enclaves in the island, refugees coming openly and by invitation would not be caught between these forces. Secondly, after independence, if Stevens did not find the situation to his liking, he could again opt for his independence move, and this time not have the Condominium powers to contend with. Then he would issue a more credible invitation to the refugees.

The suggested option of running refugees in "black" now would, in my view, spell disaster. It would cause immense bitterness and uproar in the islands, present an enormous political gift to Vanua Aku just at election time, bring down the wrath and power of British, Australian and other interests. Jimmy could end up in jail again, and, finally, the practical situation of the refugees could be desperate. No real logistical

arrangements are in place, or could be put in place without alerting everyone in sight. The whole thing could be another "Bay of Pigs," and I believe would be. Far more sensible to wait until after the elections and go one or other of the two routes mentioned above. The best would be the open invitation by the new Hebridean regime, whatever it is. Jimmy would in any case get much of the credit because he would be providing the land. He would also get the power, because the refugees would be in his domain. The UN could, and would, intervene to prevent the operation from failing. In this connection, Jimmy is due to meet again with Walter Lini in Vila on July 27, and this matter will be discussed at this time. Finally, I tried to meet Lini myself, but he was too tied up with the constitutional convention, so I sent him a letter outlining both the Christian duty and also the advantages to the future Hebrides of helping the refugees after the new government is formed.

2. Political Realities

Vanua Aku is the most broadly based and best organized and supported part in the Hebrides. Indeed it is the only really modern political machine in being. Its leader, Walter Lini, is widely respected as a patriot and idealist by virtually everyone in the Hebrides, including Jimmy Stevens. Lini, besides wanting independence for the Hebrides, also has a feeling for the rights of local groups in the islands. Jimmy says he can work with Lini and vice versa. The greater problem lies in the more radical and less conservative wing of Vanua Aku. This is composed of people like Kalkot Matas, Barak Sopo and, to a less important degree, people like Lini's kid sister, Hilda. They publish the Vanua Aku "Viewpoints", as you know, and all received their tiresome socialist training and jargon at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji. They receive support from the World Council of Churches, Australian and New Zealand leftwing groups and lightweight socialist ideologues and carpetbaggers rally around them, including types like the Irishman Wally O'Shea. A lot depends on whether Vanua Aku in the future remains under the control of Walter Lini and George Kalkoa, the respected Minister of Public Administration in the present interim government, or whether it is taken over by the "Young Tui". Jimmy Stevens should cultivate close ties with Lini, which would strengthen both their hands, and tend to weaken the radical wing.

But even assuming the worst, that the forthcoming elections show a clear Vanua Aku victory and that the radical wing of Vanua Aku takes over that party, and that they try to impose a centralized socialist bureaucracy on the islands, Jimmy Stevens and the moderates would still have a lot going for them. The islands are dispersed. Custom traditions and the habit of local self-rule will die very hard indeed. The 112,596 (latest census) people of the islands speak 130 different languages. One language is spoken by only three people! On south Malekula, 4000 people speak a total of 23 languages. Furthermore, local groups have distinct identities which they will not surrender ~~lightly~~ lightly to a handful of tin socialists in ~~Vila~~ Vila. One cannot imagine the people of Tanna exchanging John Frum for Marxism-Leninism in the near term without a war. Nor are Jimmy Stevens and the moderates (who are not always "moderate") letting the grass ~~grow~~ grow under their feet. Shortly before my visit to Vanafo, Stevens had hosted a meeting of moderate delegates ~~from~~ (53) from as far north as the Banks and Torres islands to Tanna, Erromango and Futuna in the south (July 2 12). The next meeting will be at Vila on August 1, then August 15 on Aoba, August 25 Maewo, and so forth. During my last visit to Vanafo, Jimmy introduced me to a custom chief named Pascal, from Port Orly in NW Santo, who had come in to switch from Vanua Aku to NaGriamel. In short, Jimmy is doing fairly well. And the regular meetings are being financed by Guy Prevot, Minister of Finance in the interim government. (Lest I forget, Jimmy is putting out passports like McDonalds puts out burgers.

He asks Mike to send him 3000 more as soon as possible.) Now, in the long term the clock is not going to be stopped or turned back in the Hebrides. Custom chiefs can also be little rural Hitlers with their passel of "custom wives" running around underfoot (or under something). For better or worse, time is on the side of modernization. But the Vanua Aku is not going to have a monopoly of the modernization package forever, and will not be able to impose it in the short run even if they take power in Vila (unless, of course, they invite in Cuban advisors, etc. which could provoke incalculable French, Australian reactions). So the Hebrides have some time on their side too. My ideas about strategy I will reserve for later talks. The above is about where I think it's at now.

All the best

Ad -

PS Contrary to my earlier note to Bernie from Vila (did you get it), I do not think pressure by our State Dept., assuming that could be laid on, would have any result at this time toward getting refugees admitted now. The condominium powers would merely say that the Hebrideans were in the very process of setting up their own government, and that the question should in all logic be deferred until the new regime was in place to decide on it. I think it would be wasted effort at this time. However, after independence, if the Hebrides have not come up with an offer on their own, as I urged Mini to support, then representations coupled with promises of UN aid could be made to the new Hebridean regime, with some real chance of success.