

Ashley Wickham



Ashley Wickham was born on Hobuhobu an island on the fringeing reef off Munda, New Georgia, in 1947. He grew up amid the detritus of WW2 as Munda had been the scene of major battles in the air, on land, in lagoons and on the sea. His mixed parentage includes Bougainville, Roviana (SI), Marshallese, Kiribati, English and French. How this combination of peoples got to meet and spawn the large Wickham extended family in Solomon Islands is described in a forthcoming publication he is writing.

After schooling at St. John's Primary School in Honiara, he went to St John's College Woodlawn, a Catholic secondary school in Lismore, New South Wales, Australia. His schooling was curtailed for lack of funds and he returned to the Solomons and started working at the age of 17. His first job was as a shop assistant after which he joined the Ports Authority before being recruited by the Posts and Telecommunications Department. Trained for maritime communications, he was later sent on a civil aviation course in Brisbane where he trained to handle aircraft movements. On return, bored because there were only two or three flights a week in 1969, he transferred to the Information Service of the Department of Broadcasting and Information where he found his niche. He was mentored by British, Australian and New Zealand journalists and in 1972 was attached to city and country newspapers in NSW. He actually began in the print medium then moved into radio. He has travelled extensively in Solomon Islands mainly by boat.

In 1972 he became the first Solomon Islander Information Officer. In June of that year he escorted Governing Council members of a Constitutional Select Committee on a tour of the central Pacific, visiting Fiji, Samoa and Tonga. Very active in civic affairs, he was a co-founder of the Honiara Consumers Cooperative which began operations in 1973 with \$3,000 worth of borrowed stock. In 1988 it recorded a turnover of more than SBD\$22m. At its peak the Cooperative was owned by several hundred Honiara residents, mainly public servants. It collapsed due to corruption two years after Ashley left to work in Fiji in early 1986.

In 1972/73 he was also President of the Civil Servants' Association, and Secretary of the national Rugby Union Committee. In 1973, Ashley was elected to the Governing Council as the Member for Honiara and was in the delegation to London that negotiated the transition to self government. His motive was for the new leaders to control self government and thus the pace to independence. He was among five representatives who visited east African and Asian countries on study tours. Self government was attained after which the Council's term was shortened to three years to prepare for Independence. In the last six months of his term, he was Minister for Communications. He lost the 1976 elections and resumed his media career.

While working in the media successively as an interpreter, journalist, editor, head of programs and eventually Manager of SIBC in 1977 he attended to other civic responsibilities such as from 1978 to 1984 he was Chairman of the Board of SI Ports Authority Board. He was also a member of the Public Service Commission for two years until 1984.

In early 1986 Ashley was recruited by the then South Pacific Commission (now Secretariat of the Pacific Communities) as its Educational Broadcasts Officer in which role he was a trainer and advisor in news, programming and management in public service radio and available to the regional broadcasters. In this capacity he travelled to most Pacific capitals. He retired from this job in early 1996 and continued his self funded university studies in Education.

Upon returning to Honiara he was persuaded to set aside his postgraduate studies to take on the role of Secretary of the Public Service in the administration of Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu in late 1998. His task was to maintain SIG's human resource management function while reforming the public service under an ADB/World Bank economic reform and restructuring program funded by Australia.

In late 1999 he was deployed to the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development as Permanent Secretary for the Department of Women Youth and Sport which in May 2000 was host of the Commonwealth Youth Minister's Conference, the largest conference of Ministers ever held in Honiara until then. One week after the Conference, elements of the RSIP together with a Malaita militia group staged a coup which forcibly removed Prime Minister Ulufa'alu and his Deputy Sir Baddeley Devesi and forced a change in government.

Ashley left the public service and returned to his home province to help restore order as the police command and leadership had broken down. Working alongside other community leaders in Gizo to keep the peace and people calm while agitating for overseas intervention, he helped publish a newsletter "PeopLe" distributed nationally and regionally by email which had a limited circulation of hard copies in the Gizo and Munda areas.

With law and order restored by the entry of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands in 2003, he began consulting and among various other projects he worked on was the setting up of community radio stations utilizing low power FM transmissions in eight communities in Isabel with funds sourced by UNDP. For a brief time he ran a Community Education project for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. He consulted for the SPC, the National Peace Council, the UNDP, an EU Education Project and the World Bank Rural Development Program.

In early 2008 he was appointed by newly elected Prime Minister Dr. Derek Sikua to head his Policy Evaluation office and when new elections saw a new Prime Minister appointed, he went to work in the Office of the Leader of the Opposition (Dr. Sikua) in April 2011. In May 2013 he was asked by the Board of the Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC) to rejoin the Corporation as Interim General Manager to restore financial viability and rejuvenate broadcast operations.

Footnote:

Ashley has had several papers published in his name and contributed to a book about broadcasting in distance education in the PICs. A number of his op-ed pieces have been published on-line and in Honiara newspapers. He is not afraid to 'tell it as he sees it!'. He can be found on Facebook.