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Professor H.E. Maude
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CANBERRA ACT 2603

Your reference

Our reference

Date 27 January 1977

Dear Professor Maude,

You may have heard that, following the recent judgements in the English High Court on the cases brought by the Banabans, Ministers in London have asked me to undertake a special mission to the area. The object, broadly, is to try to determine how best to find a settlement, including the constitutional issue of Ocean Island, which would command as wide support as possible among the Banabans and the Gilbertese, and the agreement of the Fiji and Gilberts Governments. I shall be setting off shortly for the Pacific and I hope that before winding up my tour I may be able, probably in the early part of March, to visit Australia to have some informal discussion with the Australian authorities in Canberra.

Knowing of your long association with these problems I should be very glad if I were able to take that opportunity to have a talk with you personally. The purpose of this letter is to let you know what I am up to so that if towards the end of February you were to hear from the British High Commission about my impending arrival it would not take you entirely by surprise.

With kind regards

Yours sincerely
John Posnett
RN POSNETT

77 Arthur Circle,
Forrest, A.C.T. 2603,
3rd April, 1977.

Mr David Tilling,
British High Commission,
CANBERRA, A.C.T. 2600.

Dear David,

Dick Posnett asked me to return Braine and Lee to you for forwarding to him in one of your bi-weekly bags. This I now do, together with a letter to him enclosing the comments which he requested.

I have not sealed them in an envelope in case you need to take a copy for your files - unlikely, I suppose, as the High Commission must be sick of the Banaban business by now.

Anyway I'd be grateful if you'd have the whole assemblage put into one of your own envelopes and sent to London, where he has no doubt been wondering what has happened to it.

We have just been sent a typed copy of the script of 'Go Tell it to the Judge' - quite unexpectedly - so please don't worry any more about borrowing a copy of the film. If one comes your way, of course, we'd be glad to borrow it and could probably arrange for it to be projected in one of the National Library's two private screening rooms; or failing that at the ANU. But if not no matter, for the script is really all that is essential.

From a casual glance through the text doesn't contain more than a few factually inaccurate statements, though from the way it is slanted and distorted one might be forgiven for concluding that it had been prepared by the KGB.

I keep thinking of your remark that Canberra costs about twice as much to live in as the UK and wonder why we continue to live here, surrounded by millions of sheep and maybe a dozen humans with our interests. I suppose, at our age, it is due to sheer inertia: its more trouble to move than to stay put.

Yours,

Harry M. Wade

77 Arthur Circle, Forrest,
A.C.T. 2603, Australia,
3rd April, 1977.

R.N. Posnett, Esq., O.B.E.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office,
LONDON SW1A 2AH, England.

Dear Dick,

Thank you for letting me see the report by Braine and Lee on the Banaban problem, which I am now returning with such comments as occurred to me when reading it through.

I am sorry not to have sent it before but, as you know, I was in the middle of the first draft of an effusion on the Peruvian slave trade in Polynesia during 1862 and 63 and was waiting for Clio to dry up, which she has now done.

Newspaper cuttings on the British Government's allegedly iniquitous treatment of the Banabans continue to arrive in batches, thanks to my friends at Australia House and in Fiji. Many of them are so factually inaccurate that I marvel at the FO's forbearance in not putting the record straight.

What worries me sometimes is that the reiteration of fallacious statements and arguments, left uncontradicted, may lead public opinion to conclude that they are, in fact, unimpeachable, whereas to anyone who remembers, or takes the trouble to look up, what actually happened they are in many cases palpable absurdities.

But here I go again on my hobby-horse, and must dismount before I start to quote examples from the at times tendentious pens of James Cameron, Christopher Sweeney, Sylvia Clayton, Jeremy Thorpe, Emyln Hoosen, Jenny Barraclough, and the like.

I shall keep what must by now be a unique collection of newspaper cuttings, with the script of 'Go Tell it to the Judge', as I believe that when the issues are less emotive they will form valuable source material for a paper on the manipulation of opinion by a small but vociferous lobby. No doubt you have many better examples in England but I can think of none better in my own field of the Pacific Islands.

It was most enjoyable having a talk with you in our remote antipodean hide-out, and we hope that you may be able to spare time for another visit should you ever venture so far from civilization again. The yellow autumn crocus, of which you saw the vanguard, are now in full glory all over the garden.

*Yours ever,
Harry Manda*

Comments on 'Report of a Mission to the South Pacific, 31
March to 16 April 1975', dated the 21st April, 1975,
by Sir Bernard Braine and Mr John Lee.

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1. Introduction

No comment.

2. Background to the Banabans' Complaint

Para. 3 (ii), lines 1-2. See my memorandum on 'Pre-annexation contacts between Banaba and the Gilbert Islands', a copy of which is in your possession.

(ii), lines 7-8. Since only 703 Banabans settled on Rabi in 1945 it is presumed that the definition of 'Banaban', which has always been a political one made by themselves, has once more changed.

(iii), lines 1-2. Ocean Island was discovered by Gardner in 1801 - see my Of Islands and Men (Oxford University Press, 1968), pp.104-6.

(iii), line 3. The year is 1899.

(iii), p.4, lines 3-5. As the Gilbert Islands had been a Protectorate since 1892 it had to be annexed as a Colony by an Order in Council which came into force on the 12th January, 1916. As Ocean Island had been annexed since 1902 it naturally could not be included within the boundaries of the new Colony by a further Order in Council until the Colony itself existed. There was nothing sinister in this and in fact Ocean Island had been the headquarters of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Protectorate since 1908.

(iii), p.4, lines 8-12. It would be surprising if Captain Tupper did not ask the Banabans in 1901 whether they wished to be annexed, since Captain Davis and Captain Gibson certainly asked the inhabitants of each of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands in 1892 whether they wished to be included in a British Protectorate. But as I have never succeeded in locating the report of Captain Tupper's visit I cannot state whether he consulted the Banabans or not; nor do I think can Sir Bernard.

(v), lines 1-3. It was not 'the most fertile part of Ocean Island' but the 'Karrenfeld' on the raised interior where, as on the similar area on Nauru, the coconut trees 'are not only more scattered and sickly but do not bear well and are apt to be the first to cease bearing and even to die off in periods of drought' - see my memorandum on 'The Formation of Ocean Island: with special relation to the growth of

trees on the Karrenfeld'. In 1851, or half a century before the discovery of the phosphate deposits, Webster wrote that: 'the trees nearest the beach bear abundantly and are the most luxuriant' but that 'on the summit of Banaba there are stunted trees, with laurel-shaped leaves, and a few beautiful flowering shrubs', add the fact that the best coconut-bearing lands were on the coastal perimeter was never disputed when I conducted the lands settlement of Ocean Island in 1931.

(v), p.5, lines 3-6. It was the Banabans, led by Eri, the Chief of Uma, who pleaded for a new and better home, recognizing that Ocean Island was essentially infertile, drought-stricken and small. Destruction of the environment by phosphate extraction was not a major issue at the time.

(vi), lines 8-10. It was purchased from Provident Fund money accumulated for the purpose of purchasing a second home, and with their consent. However, the High Commissioner approved its purchase initially as an investment, on the understanding and assurance (which I gave him) that it could be sold at a profit if, after the war, the Banabans so desired.

(vi), lines 19-21. It was quite impossible for the Banabans to return to Ocean Island at the time because there was no food and no housing on the island. Rather than remain temporarily in the Gilberts scattered in groups wherever food and housing could be found for them it seemed to them and to me far better that they should go (again as a temporary measure, unless they subsequently desired to stay on) and prospect their own island of Rabi. I explained to them carefully that after two years, when food and housing could be made available, there was no reason why they should not return to Ocean Island if they so wished.

(vii), lines 1-2. Why should they give up hope when there was nothing to prevent them returning at any time? In fact they did return, to demarcate their boundaries; but Mr Maynard, who accompanied them, stated that they could not wait to get back to Rabi and not one decided to remain behind.

(vii), p.6. Major Kennedy, who was chosen by the Banabans themselves as their adviser, did tell ~~the~~ them shortly before the war that it would be easier for them to obtain legal advice in Fiji than on Ocean Island. Probably this was a motivating factor in Mr Rotan's decision to go to Rabi, although it is remarkable that he took no steps to procure any legal advice until, I think, 1948. Since then, of course, the Banabans have spent large sums on legal assistance; not always with a commensurate return.

(viii). It is Sir Bernard who has been misinformed; not the Banabans.

(x), lines 1-3. Naturally, since they elect to reside outside the Colony.

(x), lines 3-6. I understood that the Fiji Government have treated them no differently from their other subjects but if there is a difference it must presumably be by virtue of some agreement between the Government and the Rabi Island Council.

(xiii), lines 10-12. I understand that, as in the case of Nauru, it has now been realized that rehabilitation is quite impossible at an economic figure and would serve no practical purpose if it were effected. If more land were to be needed by the Banabans it would be far cheaper to buy it near Rabi.

3. What the Banabans want

Para. 8 (i). This is only true for a few of the older people. The vast majority of the younger people have no feeling towards Ocean Island, except possibly of dislike.

(ii), lines 1-3. There is no real analogy between the positions of the Ellice Islands and Ocean Island vis-a-vis the Gilberts.

(ii), lines 3-4. Can it be seriously considered that Ocean Island, which may well be abandoned by the Banabans once the B.P.C. leave, should attain the dignity of an independent state associated with Fiji, while Rabi remains an integral part of the Dominion? Even if 100 heavily subsidized inhabitants could be induced to live there in isolation it would still be farcical to call it an independent state.

(iv). The partial rehabilitation of Ocean Island and the development of fisheries or other economic activities there are useful debating points with the Banabans. They are unlikely, however, to waste money on any such fanciful and uneconomic projects.

4. The British Government's view of the Banaban case

(iii). I have never heard this view expressed by anyone. In my submission, based on a lifetime of association with the Gilbertese and Banabans and a year spent on examining the land and other non-phosphate resources of Ocean Island when Lands Commissioner, is that the island should remain as part of the Gilbert Islands administration but that it is politically desirable that the decision should be announced as near to Independence Day for the Gilberts as possible. The vociferous Banaban lobby in Great Britain, as well as public opinion in Fiji, can be readily marshalled to attack the British Government for such a decision with a view to having it rescinded, but no one is going to attack the

Gilberts Government, since to do so would savour of persecuting a small newly-emergent state and thus prove counter-productive, especially as the decision was not theirs in the first place.

5. The case for Banaban self-determination

(ii), lines 1-8. There are indeed some significant differences in the culture, and in particular the social structure, as found on Ocean Island and the Gilbert Group in pre-European times: in particular as regards the relative importance of the kainga and the boti. However in several instances historical reasons can be postulated to account for these. The relative absence of crimes of violence, for example, is not unusual in the case of small societies where everyone is more or less related.

Mr (ii), p.15, lines 3-7. His attached statement is not 'the most recent statement' but a preliminary draft prepared for Professor J.W. Davidson and forwarded, at his request, to Mr Tebuke Rotan. When it was noticed that excerpts from the draft were being published, with all the pencilled queries and alterations deleted, I prepared a final and more detailed version and forwarded copies to Mr Rotan and the Chief Minister of the Gilbert Islands, requesting the former to regard it as in substitution of the skeleton draft which was originally intended merely for Professor Davidson's consideration and criticism. You have a copy of the final text in your possession.

(iii). I am in complete agreement with Sir Bernard Braine when he says that the Banabans today consider themselves as a separate people. What is less certain is whether or not this is due in the main to self-delusion engendered by years of regarding their interests relating to the phosphate revenues as being in opposition to those of the Gilbertese. My own view is that the Banaban autochthones were probably a different people, if not a different race, but that, due to being conquered by Gilbertese invaders from Beru and inter-marriage with Gilbertese during the past one and a half centuries, their blood must by now be predominantly Gilbertese.

(iv), lines 10-11. Whether or not the Banabans have a reasonable future on Rabi they certainly have none on Ocean Island, which can only be a drain on their financial resources without being of any economic benefit to them.

(v). So far as I am aware no one has ever suggested that the natural resources of Rabi Island would support an unlimited population and I should be surprised if in any case many Banabans would wish their descendants to be solely engaged in farming or fishing. What Rabi does provide is a secure home for those content to live off

the land and sea and for the rest (an increasing majority) a base from which they can take full advantage of the opportunities offered in Fiji and elsewhere for professional, vocational and technical education at secondary schools and universities. Like the Nauruans, the modern Banabans make excellent white-collar workers and technicians and it is as doctors, nurses, teachers, civil servants, salesmen and the like, as well as technicians and mechanics, that their future lies secure.

(vi). Some of the older Banabans undoubtedly wish to return to Ocean Island to end their days and to be buried there; and nobody is stopping them. In my submission the younger generation feel no such nostalgia, but rather regard the place with positive aversion as a possible domicile, though I have no doubt that they told Sir Bernard and Mr Lee whatever it was desired that they should hear.

(vii), lines 4-5. I doubt if it could be termed a 'self-sufficient existence' when one considers that in 1850 Ocean Island contained some 1,500-2,000 inhabitants but that the cyclical droughts had reduced their numbers to 75 starving people by 1874. Admittedly they had recovered to 400 by 1900 but their standard of living was amongst the lowest in the Pacific, lower even than the Gilbertese of Nonouti.

(vii), lines 12-15. This is not quite true. When I spoke to the Banabans not one person evinced a desire to return to live on Ocean Island; they certainly would have done so had this been their wish. The falsity of this statement, which I heard voiced for the first time 30 years later, is conclusively shown by the fact that, when I went to Rabi Island in 1947 for the express purpose of making arrangements for providing free passages for all those Banabans who desired to return to Ocean Island, again not one person came to give me his or her name, and this though I waited two extra days on Rabi for the purpose.

(vii), line 19. 'Returned to them' is an emotive phrase but none the less meaningless in this context since the 'Statement of Intentions', signed on the 12th May, 1947, by the British Government and the Banaban Elders makes it quite clear that their ~~Ocean~~ Island homeland is theirs and will remain theirs in perpetuity.

(viii). In between the cyclical droughts Ocean Island could conceivably maintain 500 people at a subsistence level of existence, if they could be induced to live there and provided that they were kept alive by imported food and distilled water during the long drought periods, but I should be sorry to see the Banabans wasting any money on such an unproductive and purposeless experiment. I doubt, in fact, if they would ever make more than a token attempt.

(ix), lines 1-2. If this is such a 'herculean task' why should the Banabans 'deserve every support' should they attempt it, when there are so many more productive uses in which their capital could be employed; particularly on the better education of the generation now growing up?

(xi). Apart from the final sentence I am in agreement with the sentiments expressed in this sub-paragraph.

6. The wider problem of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands

I take it that no comment would be proper on para. 12, which has only an indirect connexion with Banaban issues.

7. What needs to be done

Para. 13 is concerned with matters of policy, on which it would be impertinent for me to comment.

8. The Relationship between the Banabans and Gilbertese

As already stated, this summary has long been superseded by my memorandum entitled 'Pre-annexion contacts between Banaba and the Gilbert Islands', of which you have a copy.

9. The Affidavits

The three affidavits made by Gilbertese married to Banabans and living among the Banaban community on Rabi prove nothing except that Gilbertese fortunate enough to gain an entrance by marriage into the, by comparison, far wealthier and normally endogamous social group on Rabi are likely to adopt the viewpoint of their hosts. Most of the comments made are basically true, if at times expressed in somewhat exaggerated language: Banaban culture does differ in many of its traits from the Gilbertese norm.

An example of exaggeration to the point of absurdity is Mr Eria Ribiea's para. 7. By physical differences Mr Ribiea presumably refers to skin colour, for we found no somatic differences observable to the eye. Their darker pigmentation, however, was probably due to the Banabans being expert fishermen rather than to inheritance since it was seen mainly in males and in particular those engaged in outdoor pursuits. As to linguistic differences the Banabans, at least in 1930, spoke normal Gilbertese with only a slight dialectical difference in vocabulary.

I see little exceptionable in Mr Bose's opinions, and his remarks on behavioural differences are very true indeed, though they are probably attributable to the isolation and homogeneity of the small community.