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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION BY RABI ISLAND COUNCIL

At meetings in Sydney in January 1969, the Rev. Tebuke Rotan explained to Ken Walker and myself the bitter disappointment felt by the Banaban people over the refusal of the British Government to recognise Banaban rights for a greater return from Ocean Island phosphate.

We feel just as badly about this as you do. You had a good case, it was well presented, and there can be no excuse that the British did not understand the true position. In effect Lord Shepherd has said that the British are not prepared to recognise Banaban rights, but that they do recognise the Banabans' need to develop Rabi "to its fullest possible potential". The grant of £80,000 sterling, with no strings attached, was to be used for development, and Lord Shepherd hinted (but did not promise) that more funds would be made available for development as time went on.

Tebuke has told us that the Banaban people do not want to accept any more development grants because

- (i) the Nauruans succeeded in getting their rights so why shouldn't the Banabans,
- (ii) your case is just and should eventually be recognised,
- X (iii) even if you fail you would rather accept defeat than change your just case,
- (iv) accepting "lollies for children" might delay full recognition of your rights

Tebuke has asked us to give our opinions on these matters, and also what is the best way of continuing your fight for your rights with the British.

DISCUSSION OF YOUR PROBLEM

I now intend to give you our thoughts on each of these points. We fully understand and sympathise with your reasons, and admire the honest Christian principles on which your thinking is based. However as your advisers we must be honest too, and tell you that some of the things which you hope will happen will not necessarily turn out the way you expect.

(i) Comparison with the Nauruans

We agree that your rights are basically the same as the Nauruans, but you are making a mistake if you think that you have an equal chance of obtaining all the phosphate money. This can be illustrated by comparing your situation compared with theirs.

NAURUAN SITUATION

1. The Nauruans stayed on Nauru.
2. All Nauruans live on Nauru.
3. Nauru is a separate island not part of any island group or Colony.
4. Nauru was a U.N. Trust Territory.
5. Nauru administered by Australia, which felt bad about exploiting Nauru.
6. Australia needed Nauru phosphate and was prepared to pay for it.
7. Nauru phosphate deposits had a life of 30 years.
8. Australia did not need much money to pay for administration of Nauru.
9. No other race was claiming any benefits from Nauruan money.

YOUR SITUATION

1. Banabans made mistake of moving to Rabi.
2. Few Banabans live on Ocean.
3. The British annexed Ocean and called it part of G.E.I.C.
4. Ocean is administered by the British.
5. The British do not feel bad about exploiting Ocean.
6. Australia buys Ocean phosphate at the right price, but Britain doesn't care if it gets any phosphate.
7. Ocean deposits have a life of eight years.
8. Britain needs a lot of money to pay for administration of G.E.I.C.
9. The Gilbertese are claiming a big part of your money.

Hence our honest opinion is that Banaban rights might have started out the same as the Nauruans, but that the Banaban people would be quite wrong if you hope that you will win your case merely because the Nauruans won their case. I will go further and say that the Nauruans would not have been so lucky if the British had been administering Nauru instead of Australia under a United Nations Trusteeship. In other words you may think your case is the same as the Nauruans, but in fact the circumstances are very different, and you are mistaken if you think that the circumstances will not alter the outcome of your case.

(ii) Your case is just and will win in the end

We admire your strong belief that right will prevail in the long run. All we can say here is that we doubt if you have sufficient time to change the attitude of the British Government before the phosphate runs out in eight years time. Your Chairman has been fighting for Banaban rights since before the last War but without much success. He has claimed that the British would change their attitude if the top people knew the facts, but this has been proved wrong.

Hence we agree with the determination of the Banaban people to go on fighting your case, but we think you are mistaken if you believe that you will regain all your rights. Even the Nauruans did not get all their rights (they wanted compensation to restore Nauru and did not get this part of their claims).

(iii) You would rather accept defeat than change your case

I can understand exactly how you feel on this point. I feel the same except that you have to think of your children and your children's children as well as of yourself. The Council, the Church elders, and the landowners (who are the leaders of the Banaban people) should not be too proud to change their

case if their pride will cause severe hardship for the Banaban people after they themselves have passed on.

For eight years there will be royalty money to keep the Banaban economy from collapsing. After that you will need jobs if your people are to survive. So the real task of the leaders of the Banaban people is to plant many more coconuts than you have the money for now, and to start a bigger fishing industry than you have the money for now, and to build roads and to educate your children better than you can afford now.

Hence I believe that you must keep fighting, but I do not agree that you should accept defeat rather than change your case. More money must be found to create more jobs.

(iv) Accepting further development grants would delay full recognition of your rights

Unfortunately there is an element of truth in this thought. The British originally offered the £80,000 grant and disgracefully tried to trick the Banaban people into signing away their rights in return for this relatively small sum of money.

You are right to refuse any development grant if it has any strings attached, but we do not see why you should not take every penny you can get as long as it leaves you free to go on fighting your case.

It is important for the Banabans to realise that this is the same advice as we gave to the Nauruans. They did not say "Give us all or nothing". They said "give us something now and we will make a case for you to give us more later". In 1964 they received 3/8, in 1964/65 we got 13/6, in 1965/66 it was 17/6. Then came a big breakthrough to 45/- in 1966/67 and finally they received nearly all that they had claimed. We tell you now, and it is important for you to remember it, that if the Nauruans had refused to take the early small increases that were offered, we doubt if they would be getting the full benefit now. The Nauruan technique also had the advantage of keeping the talks going in a reasonably friendly spirit, whereas a refusal might have brought bitterness and a refusal by the Administration to bother talking with us. In your case this would be particularly dangerous as you only have eight years to go, and the United Nations cannot help you as much as it did the Nauruans (because Nauru was a U.N. Trust Territory).

For all these reasons I believe that you should continue to press your case, but I am afraid that if you try to force the British into an "All or Nothing" position you will finish up with nothing (because you are not in the strong position the Nauruans enjoyed with a sympathetic Australian Government).

We must be honest here and say that your present leaders may be proud enough to accept nothing, but future Banabans, particularly those who are now babies, will blame the present leaders if they cannot get jobs, and they may even leave the island to find work thus causing gradual extinction of the Banaban people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. I agree that you should continue to press your case as hard as you can.
2. I recommend that you should tell the British Government that you want any further money in the form of a bigger royalty (which is your right) rather than in the form of development grants.
3. However I also recommend that your case for more royalty should not be based on your rights alone, but also upon the need to develop Rabi for the Banaban people. We did this for the Nauruans, and are prepared to do it for you if you will allow us. The Nauruans claimed their need for more money was great because of their growing population, their need to restore the island, and their need to develop jobs after the phosphate ran out.
4. I recommend that you tell the British that if you get more royalty you are prepared to set it aside in a Development Fund (as the Nauruans have done) in order to create jobs for future Banabans.
5. If the British refuse all these requests and offered you a grant instead, my recommendation would depend on the amount of the grant. If it were very small and not very helpful in solving your problem of creating jobs, then I might agree that you should refuse it. If it were not "lollies for children" but big enough to help you I would probably suggest that you accept it (with no strings attached) but put a further case to them that you really want more royalty.
6. I agree that you need to do something in London to keep your case alive and bring it back to the attention of the British Government. I also agree that you should work from within Britain rather than trying to bring pressure to bear from without (through the U.N.). The British have clearly indicated that U.N. action does embarrass them but is more likely to make them vindictive rather than sympathetic to your needs.
7. The difficulty is how to bring pressure on Britain from within. Dr. Greet would probably be unwilling to play politics the way you would want him to, and I do not believe that any Member of Parliament or journalist would know enough about your case to be helpful. It would also be very expensive to appoint a really good agent in London even if you could find one. What I fear is that you might find a man who costs you a lot of money but does you no good. I therefore suggest that you might get better value for your limited money if you sent Tebuke Rotan occasionally. At least he could make press statements as the accepted spokesman for the Banabans, which is more than a paid agent could do, and he could continue to press your case with the appropriate Government officials.

I hope the Council will accept my ideas in the friendly spirit in which they are offered. I understand your problem, but I am not sure that Council fully understands what I have been trying to tell you. As your Economic Adviser I must give you my honest opinion whether you like it or not, and my honest opinion is that the Banabans should follow the same tactics as the Nauruans (which is to take all the money you can get as long as it leaves you free to continue fighting your case).

I do not think you will get as much as the Nauruans, but you can probably get enough to develop Rabi properly so that your grandchildren will remember today's leaders as the ones who made their jobs and their good life possible.