

Masalai i tokaut

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Forest Minister beyond the law

There was no surprise that the Minister for Forests avoided the chop when the Prime Minister swung his axe in the recent cabinet reshuffle. Obviously logging interests run very deep in the current government.

But there are interesting parallels between Patrick Pruaitch's growing catalogue of deceit and the invincibility of his predecessor Michael Ogio.

While Ogio was repeatedly humiliated in the media for a series of illegal tax concessions for logging companies, illegal timber permits and unlawful attempts to interfere in the administration of the forestry sector, his staunchest ally was the Prime Minister himself, Sir Mekere Morauta who ignored the many calls for his loyal lieutenants head.

Now we see that Patrick Pruaitch is rapidly building his own portfolio of dodgy deals and questionable actions (though it seems that the media is now less vigorous than it was once in detailing the misdeeds of our Ministers for a wider audience). And again there seems no danger of the Prime Minister stepping in and dealing decisively with his errant Forest Minister.

David Nelson, the currently suspended Managing Director of the Forest Authority is universally derided for his management of the forestry sector. He has been involved in illegal logging deals, the infamous Kiunga Aiambak Deed of Settlement and numerous examples of financial mismanagement.

But lest we not forget, David Nelson was re-appointed by this government after he was removed in the last days of Morauta's regime. Appointed against the advice of the National Forest Board, with no transparent recruitment process and he has been staunchly supported by his Minister.

When the pressure finally became too great, and at the insistence of the Department of Planning and the Chief Secretary, Pruaitch had to sack his man, he ensured that the removal from office was so incompetently managed that Nelson confidently predicted his return and used the Courts to overturn his dismissal.

Let us also not forget that it was Yagi Lawyers who, on behalf of Concord Pacific, negotiated the appalling and illegal Deed of Settlement for Kiunga

Aiambak that so infuriated the Chief Secretary and the Chair of the National Forest Board.

Just days after the National Court had been misled into accepting the Deed and the State had agreed to pay out K150,000 in legal fees to Yagi Lawyers, who should pop up in Wewak to defend Minister Pruaitch's election petition? Joseph Yagi!

The Minister has also presided over the complete whitewash of the findings of the Review of Disputed Allocations. The review was conducted in February and March this year. It found all six logging permits and extensions that were investigated were illegal and that there had been a conspiracy between logging companies and officials to avoid the law and proper process.

The Review recommended the closure of several illegal logging operations, the seizure of logs and deregistration of several logging companies. But when these recommendations were presented to the Minister he refused to sign a cabinet submission endorsing the recommendations and sent the matter to the Forest Board where all the teeth were removed from the submission.

In the manner of his predecessor, Patrick Pruaitch is now also interfering in the allocation of the timber permit for East Awin. The Forest Authority and the Forest Board recommended some months ago that the permit be given to G.L. Niugini, but this is not the Minister's own preferred developer. Although he has no legal power to ignore the recommendation of his Department, the Minister has tried to send the matter back for 'reconsideration'.

The Forest Minister has also been a staunch supporter of the disgraced and currently suspended Secretary of DEC, Wari Iamo. Although Iamo has been clearly implicated in facilitating illegal logging permits and extensions by both the Ombudsman Commission and the Review of Disputed Allocations, the Minister has been happy to have the suspended Secretary working from his office and he even lent him his mobile telephone.

Meanwhile the Minister was trying to broker a deal where Iamo would be appointed Managing Director of the Forestry Authority and David Nelson moved to Environment and Conservation.

Once again the Nation is being held to ransom by corrupt overseas logging companies and their political allies while we weep with our brothers and sisters over a country destroyed by greed.