



Settler Colonialism in New Guinea: Or Why Australia, not Indonesia, Set Papuans Free

Lachlan McNamee

Website

Publish date

The history of late twentieth-century New Guinea confounds conventional accounts of decolonisation. On the one hand, Indonesia – which at the 1955 Bandung Conference famously committed itself to ending alien subjugation, domination and exploitation – has seemingly replaced the Dutch as a colonial power in West Papua. Seeking to flush out the Free Papua Movement (OPM), its military killed 10,000 West Papuan civilians in security operations over the late twentieth century (Amnesty International 2018:18). Indonesia also controversially resettled almost 300,000 farmers to West Papua in the 1980s and 1990s. Indigenous people are now a minority in much of West Papua beyond the highlands.

The tensions raised by Indonesia's colonisation of West Papua deepen once we turn our attention to the eastern half of New Guinea. For if West Papuans have been seemingly recolonised by a state ideologically committed to decolonisation in Indonesia, then Papua New Guineans were decolonised in 1975 by Australia – a state typically regarded as ideologically committed to colonisation.

Australian elites in the early twentieth century had indeed dreamed of realising their own 'Pacific Ocean destiny', which entailed the colonisation of much of Melanesia. But this destiny would remain unfulfilled; the Australian Government ultimately set Papua New Guinea (PNG) on the path to independence in the 1960s. The decolonisation of PNG was not due to a mass movement for independence on the ground; indeed, despite key pockets of anti-colonial activism, there was a distinct lack of mass pressure from Papua New Guineans for independence.

Juxtaposing the modern history of West Papua and Papua New Guinea forces us to confront an uncomfortable question: why did Indonesia and not Australia fulfil the colonisation of New Guinea? Or, put differently, why has Australia but not Indonesia set Papuans free?

The standard answer to this question is ideology. Indonesia sees West Papua as a 'core' part of their nation-state, whereas the same was not true for Australia in PNG. This answer, however, is wrong, because it misunderstands the initial intentions of Australian officials in New Guinea. Just like Indonesia, Australia's leaders initially saw New Guinea as an inalienable part of their new nation-state. And just like Indonesia, Australia's leaders sought to secure control over New Guinea by settling large numbers of farmers

there. Unlike in Indonesia, however, these efforts failed. To understand why Australia and not Indonesia ended up decolonising New Guinea, this In Brief, which draws upon a larger study (McNamee 2023), examines why Australia's settler colonial project there failed whereas Indonesia's succeeded.

Australia's failed colonisation of Papua New Guinea

Almost immediately after Federation in 1901, Australia had assumed control over Papua from Great Britain as part of its aspiration to create an 'Island Empire' in the Pacific. Edmund Barton, Australia's first prime minister, for instance, spoke of the 'long centuries for which I hope [Papua] is to be a territory, perhaps a State of this Commonwealth' (Hansard 12/11/1901:7090). There was an obvious tension, however, between Australia's annexation of some 300,000 Papuans and its ideological commitment to keep the nation white. The solution to this dilemma was to whiten Papua. Australia's second prime minister, Alfred Deakin, established a royal commission in 1906 to report on the prospects for white settlement there. The commissioners were enthusiastic upon their return, reporting that the 'hour has struck for the commencement of a vigorous forward policy, as far as white settlement [in Papua] is concerned' (Australia 1907:x).

Following this report, an ordinance was passed in 1907 to encourage white male settlers to obtain land in Papua. The 99-year leases were extremely generous. There were no legal or survey fees, and, in the cases of leases longer than 30 years, there was even no rent charged for the first decade. However, even needing to pay no deposit or rent, few whites came for land and those that did soon left for two principal reasons (McNamee 2023:82–88, 96), neither related to factors like climate or indigenous resistance. These, though present, were not emphasised by colonial administrators.

First, commercial agriculture was unviable because of extremely high transportation costs, which made farming uncompetitive relative to mainland producers. Second, white settlers were unwilling to engage in subsistence agriculture. Papua, unlike much of mainland Australia, was never a penal colony. European settlers would only emigrate there if they wanted to, and life in Papua was relatively unappealing. By the early twentieth century, Australia had become one of the wealthiest and most industrialised societies on the planet. Europeans emigrating to Australia were

attracted by jobs and services in its urban centres, not the 'free land' on offer on its frontier. Urbanites make for poor colonists.

To get whites to move to New Guinea, the government had to make life there more attractive than on mainland Australia. But this could only come at great cost. In 1950, for instance, Australia's minister for external territories, Percy Spender, visited PNG and reported back to parliament that, given its importance during World War II, 'there can be no doubt that we must ... hold the area' and 'some scheme of land settlement for ex-servicemen should be formulated for the territories. I favour such a proposal and it will be examined' (Hansard 1/4/1950:3635, 3641).

However, the report commissioned by Spender estimated that to attract 300,000 whites to PNG would cost the equivalent of US\$300 billion today — an eye-watering figure that made white colonisation a non-starter, and led to the recommendation to instead focus on 'native development', which became the government's overriding focus in PNG in the 1950s (McNamee 2023:64–74). Facing rising international pressure to end legal inequalities between whites and non-whites, but being unwilling to grant statehood and full citizenship to indigenous Papuans, Australia then recast Papua New Guineans as aid-dependent foreigners in 1975. Australia's hasty decolonisation of PNG was, in other words, preceded by the failure of its once-preferred settler colonial alternatives.

Indonesia's successful colonisation of West Papua

The absence of decolonisation in West Papua, on the other hand, is the direct result of the success of Indonesia's settler colonial project. In response to a major incursion from insurgents based in PNG in February 1984, Indonesia began to scale up the settlement of West Papua, settling 300,000 people there in 15 years (McNamee 2023:64–74). Indonesian settlers, or 'transmigrants', were given free land in low-lying border areas to prevent incursions, as well as in the most resource-rich areas. This transformed indigenous peoples into a minority along much of the borderland with PNG. Although the West Papuan independence struggle continues to draw local and regional support, the large number of non-Papuans in cities and along the border has made a clean break with the rest of the Indonesian archipelago much more difficult to achieve.

What is critical to recognise is how Indonesia, unlike Australia, had no trouble altering the demography of New Guinea in this way. Indonesia

settled 300,000 transmigrants to West Papua at a mere cost of US\$5,000 per family (\$1.5 billion in total). Transmigration was inexpensive precisely because Indonesians were poor. For example, in 1992, the average income of transmigrants was approximately double that of all Indonesians. Given the large number of destitute, land-hungry people in Java, all the state needed to do was provide transport, seeds and plots, and this was a sufficient incentive for large numbers to relocate to its outer reaches. Indonesia's poverty, in other words, is precisely what made it such an effective settler coloniser in New Guinea. Australia's wealth, on the other hand, is precisely what made it such an ineffective coloniser there.

Decolonisation as the highest stage of capitalism

The history of twentieth-century New Guinea reveals that economic development in the metropole is a surprisingly powerful force for indigenous self-determination. For if we are to understand why — exactly contrary to the expectations of Bandung's participants in 1955 — Indonesia colonised West Papua and Australia decolonised PNG, then we must understand why Indonesians and not Australians were willing to emigrate to New Guinea for free land. By making settler colonialism expensive and futile, urbanisation in mainland Australia confounded its early plans to subjugate Papuans permanently. Wealth, not ideology, explains why Australia and not Indonesia ended up decolonising New Guinea.

Author notes

Lachlan McNamee is a lecturer of politics at Monash University. He received his PhD in political science from Stanford University in 2019. His first book, *Settling for Less: Why States Colonize and Why They Stop*, was published by Princeton University Press in 2023.

References

- Amnesty International. 2018. *'Don't Bother, Just Let Him Die': Killing with Impunity in Papua*. Jakarta: Amnesty International Indonesia.
- Australia. Royal Commission. 1907. *British New Guinea: Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Present Conditions, including the Method of Government, of the Territory of Papua, and the Best Means for Their Improvement*. Parliamentary Paper No. 6.
- MacWilliam, S. 2013. *Securing Village Life: Development in Late Colonial Papua New Guinea*. Canberra: ANU Press. doi.org/10.22459/SVL.05.2013.
- McNamee, L. 2023. *Settling for Less: Why States Colonize and Why They Stop*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.



Pacific Research Program An Initiative of the Australian Aid Program



Australian National University

Department of Pacific Affairs

Development Policy Centre


LOWY INSTITUTE

The Department of Pacific Affairs (DPA) is the leading international centre for applied multidisciplinary research and analysis concerning contemporary state, society and governance in the Pacific. DPA acknowledges the Australian Government's support for the production of the In Brief series. The views, findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Australian National University or the Australian Government. The Australian Government, as represented by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), does not guarantee, and accepts no legal liability whatsoever, arising from, or connected to, the accuracy, reliability, currency or completeness of any information herein. This publication, which may include the views or recommendations of third parties, has been created independently of DFAT and is not intended to be, nor should it be, viewed as reflecting the views of DFAT, or indicative of its commitment to a particular course or courses of action.

dpa@anu.edu.au

dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au

 [DepartmentofPacificAffairs](https://www.facebook.com/DepartmentofPacificAffairs)

 [@anudpa](https://twitter.com/anudpa)

 [DepartmentofPacificAffairs](https://www.linkedin.com/company/DepartmentofPacificAffairs)

ISSN 2209-9557 (Print)

ISSN 2209-9549 (Online)