

Queen stays out of Solomon Islands coup

THE British monarchy provided no constitutional safeguard in this month's Solomon Islands coup.

Father John Ini Lapli, the Governor-General and representative of Queen Elizabeth II on the Solomon Islands, refused to step into the constitutional crisis that escalated from the Malaitan Eagle Force's kidnapping of Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu.

The Governor-General eventually accepted, "with regret", Ulufa'alu's resignation.

The Solomons crisis was a sharp reminder of Sitiveni Rabuka's seizure of power in Fiji in 1987, when Fijian Governor-General Ratu Penaia Ganilau refused to intervene, and eventually accepted a leadership role in the new regime.

The Republican Movement of Aotearoa New Zealand said the Solomons crisis was an unfortunate example of the bind created by an off-shore head of state.

"Nobody wants a remote, uninformed head of state on the other side of the world to intervene in domestic politics," said movement president Dave Guerin. "The Queen's representative did just that in Australia in 1975, when Governor-General John Kerr sacked Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in a fit of pique."

"But neither is it useful to have a head of state whose very remoteness makes them fear to intercede," Guerin said.

"Unfortunately that creates the scenario that we have seen in Fiji and now in the Solomons — an ineffectual head of state."

Replacement for Buckingham Palace?

THE Queen took the rare step this month of rebuking a British minister of the Crown who had called for the royal family to move into "a good modern building".

Cabinet minister Mo Mowlam received a right royal putdown from the palace, where a spokesman for the Queen reminded her that Buckingham Palace was a working building.

"We are not entering the debate," the spokesman told *The Guardian*. "We just want to make clear that Buckingham Palace is a working building — it is the seat of the head of state where 550 people work and receptions are held most days."

Mowlam compounded her difficulties, in the eyes of royalty, by coming close to advocating a republic: "I am no great fan of the monarchy," she declared.

Buckingham Palace was originally bought by King George III in 1761, and later transformed into a royal home for King George IV. Parliament agreed to a budget of £150,000, but eventually granted £450,000 at the King's demand. However costs escalated so much that the King offered the palace to Parliament as a new home, when Westminster burned down in 1834. The offer was declined.

A spokesman for British Prime Minister Tony Blair said he valued his friendship with the Queen: "He feels the royal family plays a central role in our national life ... I don't think she's intending to move and the prime minister doesn't think she should."

But Labour MP Tony Wright praised Mowlam for opening up a debate on the monarchy. "The monarchy is that last taboo in Britain, but we have to let daylight in because if we do not reform the monarchy the Windsors will become a soap opera."

spoken

"Probably within my lifetime, New Zealanders of European descent, who are overwhelmingly British, will barely number 50 per cent of our population. Will not this new New Zealand, sometime in the 21st century, pose the question of why we maintain as head of state a hereditary monarch who resides 12,000 miles away? And some will allege that even posing that question shows disrespect. That, of course, is nonsense."

— Prime Minister Helen Clark

"The Prime Minister is an ardent supporter of the monarchy. He values his relationship with the Queen and he feels the royal family plays a central role in our national life."

— spokesman for British Prime Minister Tony Blair

"The key issue here is the use of reserve powers to maintain stable government, not the title of the person in Government House. There are no grounds for serious dissatisfaction with the Crown's performance of this role ... This is not an issue of sovereignty. New Zealanders are already free to govern themselves as they are already fully sovereign."

— Telecom chair Rod Deane

"If we are to fight the wrongs imposed on us ... The answers lie in facing up to the colonial past, in taking responsibility for it, and in developing a collective commitment to restitution and to a new non-colonial, mutual and negotiated relationship between Maori and immigrant peoples."

— Maori lawyer Annette Sykes



Support for monarchy hits new low

BRITISH support for the royal family has fallen to its lowest level in modern times, with only 44 per cent of the public believing that Britain would be worse off without the monarchy.

The Guardian/ICM survey suggests, however, that it is a growing indifference to the royal family rather than a rise in republicanism that is responsible for the spectacular slide in royal popularity since the late 1980s and early 1990s.

A comparison of the poll results with previous surveys over the last 13 years shows that the royal family is now held in less affection than the previous low point in their fortunes in August 1997 when their support fell below 50 per cent for the first time, just before

the death of Diana, Princess of Wales.

The survey shows that despite the efforts of Buckingham Palace's "way ahead group" to try to reinvent and modernise the monarchy for the 21st century it is still in deep trouble.

The poll also shows that in time solid support for the royal family will "die out" with only the 55-and-over age group showing a clear majority who believe that Britain would be worse off without them.

The rise in hostility is sharpest among the young. Some 40 per cent of 18-24 year olds, the highest ever, believe that Britain would be better off without the royals and only 24 per cent say the country would be worse off if the monarchy were abolished.

But the level of republicanism in Britain appears to have changed little in the last six years, with between 25 per cent and 30 per cent of the population saying they think Britain would be better off without the royal family.

The survey also shows a continuing unhappiness among a significant minority at the idea of Prince Charles becoming king.

Not quite a majority — 48 per cent — say that when the Queen abdicates or dies the crown should pass to King Charles III, but one in three of the public rejects this view and believes the monarchy should skip a generation and Prince William should be crowned king. Support for this idea is particularly strong among women. —*The Guardian*

Where are our monarch's priorities?



Reg Esyde

ISN'T it a crazy old world: Liz deems it inappropriate — and rightly enough — to step into the Solomon Islands crisis, as head of state, when a bunch of rebels kidnap the prime minister.

But she feels quite happy to intervene when Cabinet Minister Mo Mowlam suggests a move from Buckingham Palace into "a good modern building".

I guess that's a fair bit closer to home, really.

The contrast demonstrates that Liz, at least, knows her place — even if there are some on the other side of the world who insist on subjecting themselves to her whims and her family's whims.

Ever since the royal family opened the doors of Buckingham Palace to a BBC documentary crew in the 1970s, they have been looking increasingly like an English version of the soap opera *Close to Home*, not a source of leadership.

Traditionalists have decried the

House of Windsor's "downward slide" from aloof elegance to the topic of comic condescension.

But the royals do at least seem to be gradually recognising that in a democratic, meritocratic western world, their prime role is as a tourist attraction, a reminder of English heritage — not as leaders.

Leadership, these days, stems from the people.

If the Solomons had a president who was democratically elected — or even appointed through the traditional Pacific practice of recognising and grooming talented young adults — then that president might have been in a position to act confidently and effectively.

But Liz, thousands of miles away in Buckingham Palace, had neither the mandate nor the knowledge to provide the leadership that the Solomon Islands desperately needed. What they needed was a leader, close to home.

● *The views expressed in this column do not necessarily represent those of the Republican Movement.*

the way forward

Dave Guerin

The high drama of the Building the Constitution conference is now behind us, but the event spurred us into doing a lot more background work on our own ideas.

Our discussion paper for the conference has now been complemented on our web site by a review of key republican resources — books, articles and major documents, such as the US Constitution. This has already proven helpful for a couple of graduate students who are doing research essays on republicanism.

Next issue we will be reviewing the results of the last year, during which we have gone from a dormant organisation to a reasonable little advocacy group. We'll also suggest some ideas for the future, all to be covered at our annual general meeting in August.