

OBITUARIES

Vale Peter Lomas – a checkered journalism legacy

Abstract: Tributes flowed for the death of New Zealand-born *Fiji Sun* publisher and chief executive Peter Lomas. He spent much of his life in Fiji and the Pacific and, according to his newspaper, ‘He was an industry pioneer and one of the last surviving old school “newspaper men” of the Pacific, someone who lived and breathed the news business and practically lived his life in the newsroom’. He was a former editor of *Islands Business*, the *Fiji Daily Post*, and worked as a training consultant on the *Samoa Observer*, *Solomon Star*, and Elijah Communications in the Cook Islands. In 2001 became the fulltime media development training coordinator for the Suva-based Pacific Islands News Association (PINA). This obituary by a Fiji-born media consultant offers a more nuanced profile of his *Fiji Sun* tenure.

Keywords: accuracy, balance, credibility, editors, fairness, Fiji, *Fiji Sun*, integrity, newspapers, obituary, PINA, publishers, Samoa, Solomon Islands

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THERE was lavish coverage in the *Fiji Sun* and in the wider Pacific in March 2022 on the death of its publisher and CEO, Peter Lomas, who died at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital in Suva after what the newspaper described as a short illness and whose funeral took place on March 15 (Delai-batiki, 2022; Doviverata, 2022; Ligaiula, 2022). Yet in true *Fiji Sun* style, its readers didn’t get the full story about Peter Lomas any more than they get the full story about anything (Davis, 2022).

In Fiji more than most places, the principle of not speaking ill of the dead often means that the more contentious aspects of people’s lives are invariably buried along with the person. The staff of the *Fiji Sun* can be forgiven for being sentimental about a man to whom many of them owed their careers and who had some tremendous personal qualities that have been reflected in their tribute cover- age. Yet as Shailendra Singh—the coordinator of journalism at the



Figure 1: Fiji Sun publisher Peter Lomas: ‘The wrong turn he took threatens his legacy, if not destroyed it.’

University of the South Pacific—observed in the *Grubsheet* column when his death was announced, Peter Lomas’s ‘key role in the development of journalism in Fiji since the 1970s had both positive and negative’ aspects. While he was ‘a fine newspaper man’ who ‘trained generations of Fiji journalists’, Dr Singh observed that ‘the wrong turn Peter Lomas took threatens his legacy, if not destroyed it’. His full statement:

The end of an era which had both positive and negative sides to it. Peter Lomas was a pioneer of the print media industry in Fiji. A fine newspaper man. He played a key role in the development of journalism in Fiji since the 1970s—in both positive and negative ways. No one in Fiji knew the print media industry as well as he did. He trained generations of Fiji journalists. A Kiwi who made Fiji his permanent home. Regrettably and unfortunately, the wrong turn he took threatens his legacy if not destroyed it. I am sad to learn of his passing. (Singh, 2022)

While the foremost journalism educator in Fiji did not elaborate, every journalist in Fiji outside of the *Fiji Sun* newsroom knows precisely what Dr Singh is talking about. And that is the manner in which Peter Lomas—in a conspiracy

against his readers—abandoned his duty to them to report without fear or favour and secretly handed over the columns of the *Fiji Sun* to the FijiFirst government.

The only hint of this in the *Sun's* coverage was the following passage in Rosi Doviverata's hagiography: 'Foreign journalists and governments, Peter believed, were fixated on the history of coups and would never acknowledge, even after free elections saw Frank Bainimarama win in a landslide, all the good things that were happening in Fiji, including corruption being largely rooted out' (Doviverata, 2022).

There is a supreme irony in that statement. Because Peter Lomas was at the centre of one of the most glaring examples of corruption in the Bainimarama era—a conspiracy involving the FijiFirst government and the CJ Patel group to deceive the Fijian people by portraying the *Fiji Sun* as an independent newspaper when it has long been controlled by the Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum. Worse, there is money involved. Public money.

The AG gave the *Fiji Sun* an exclusive and lucrative contract to carry government advertising, including notices of vital public interest that also ought to be in its competitor, *The Fiji Times*. And in exchange, the AG tells the *Fiji Sun* which stories to cover, which stories not to cover, and actually dictates content to his main conduit at the paper, its managing editor news, Jyoti Pratibha, who he also appointed to the Council of the Fiji National University.

When *Fiji Sun* readers access these stories, they do not know that they have been placed on the instructions of the AG. And, worse, the *Fiji Sun* routinely ignores coverage of the opposition to the extent of it being a propaganda organ for the ruling party. When there is public money being exchanged as part of this arrangement and the quid pro quo is kept secret from the Fijian people, that is corruption, pure and simple. This makes a mockery of Peter Lomas's claim that corruption had been largely eradicated under the Bainimarama government and significantly taints his legacy.

So by all means, acknowledge the *Fiji Sun's* tribute to its late publisher and celebrate his contribution to Fiji. But the truth demands a more balanced accounting of his legacy. Lomas's brother, the New Zealand television journalist, David Lomas, said Peter always believed in 'the ABCs of journalism—*accuracy, balance and credibility*. These were his mantra' (Ligaiula, 2022). Yet the truth is that in the final analysis, Peter Lomas failed to meet the standard he set for himself.

'Accuracy' in the *Fiji Sun* has long been accuracy as seen by Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum. 'Balance' in the paper has been non-existent for many years, as it slavishly favours the FijiFirst government, ignores or attacks the opposition and turns a blind eye to all manner of stories the government doesn't want publicised, such as the influence of the Grace Road cult in Fiji (Tahana, 2019). All of which means that the 'credibility' of the *Fiji Sun* as an accurate reflection of the 'facts of the matter' in Fiji is non-existent. It has sold its soul to Aiyaz

Sayed-Khaiyum in arguably one of the greatest betrayals of journalism and of public trust in Pacific history.

I happen to have had a great deal of time for Peter Lomas on a personal level. As many Fijians can attest, he was mild-mannered, kind, recognised talent and promoted it, and had a great love for Fiji. But like Shailendra Singh, my duty as a journalist of four decades' standing is to accurately reflect the facts. And these are the facts that you will not read in the *Fiji Sun* or anywhere else for that matter in the collective 'isa' that accompanied his death:

1. Peter Lomas created a parallel universe for his readers in Fiji—the 'facts of the matter', according to Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum as opposed to the true facts of the matter. What you read in the *Sun* has never been an accurate reflection of events in the country. And that is a betrayal of journalism and its overriding principle of the public's right to know.
2. He blurred the lines between news and opinion in the *Fiji Sun* so they are one and the same—all pro-FijiFirst—when in any credible newspaper, the division between straight reporting and opinion is clearly defined and alternative views are sought and reflected.
3. He took orders from Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum not only to promote certain stories, but to bury others. In the lead-up to the 2018 election, he even took orders to bury the results of the Western Force opinion poll that showed a collapse in the government's support. He told me this personally at a meeting we had at the Grand Pacific Hotel in the election aftermath at which the columnist, Nemani Delaibatiki, was also present. I was shocked and expressed strong indignation, not only for the blatant corruption of the journalistic process, but because suppressing the poll was counterproductive. When Fiji was hit by rain on election day, FijiFirst supporters stayed at home, assuming the government was a shoe-in when it barely scraped back into office with 50.02 percent of the vote.
4. Peter Lomas developed a relationship with the Chinese dictatorship that was bad for journalism and bad for Fiji. He facilitated the publication of stories in the *Fiji Sun* from the Xinhua news agency that were favourable to China when its assertive, sometimes belligerent conduct in the region requires proper scrutiny, not propaganda. In yet another glaring instance of journalistic corruption, the *Fiji Sun* turned a blind eye to the Chinese assault on a Taiwanese diplomat at the Grand Pacific Hotel (GPH) on Taiwan's national day in October 2020. They knew the facts but suppressed them.
5. Worse, Lomas sent *Fiji Sun* journalists to China for training when the entire world can see that the Chinese practice of journalism is to reflect the will of the Chinese Communist Party, not the will of the people.

This practice—which has grave long term implications for journalism in Fiji—must be reversed if there is to be any hope for the preservation of proper standards at the *Fiji Sun*. Combined with its chronic political bias and lack of balance, the *Fiji Sun*'s editorial conduct under the ownership of the CJ Patel Group deserves to be the subject of an independent investigation in the event of a change of government.

So farewell, Peter. You were much loved by many and admired for your personal qualities by many, including me. But I have to agree with Shailendra Singh—the foremost journalism educator in Fiji—that later in life, ‘you took a wrong turn that threatens your legacy, if not destroys it’. And that is very sad indeed.

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