

Pacific Islands ignored under Australia's 'short attention span'

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Australian foreign policy often overlooks the Pacific and the post of Minister for Pacific Island Affairs should be re-established, University of Melbourne research has determined.

Dr Jonathan Schultz analysed Australia's treatment and policy attitudes to the Pacific under the Hawke, Keating and Howard governments (1988-2007).

"A pattern has emerged of repeated phases of invigorated engagement and stagnation. We keep making similar mistakes and having to relearn

the same lessons," he said.

His study, 'Overseeing and Overlooking', finds periods of engagement often occur in response to a natural disaster or political crisis, or on the 'whim' of the Foreign Minister or Prime Minister.

"Australia lacks a strong, long-term policy orientation in the Pacific, and our level of engagement therefore fluctuates wildly," Dr Schultz said.

The "volatile and reactive nature" of Australian involvement in the Pacific undermines the effectiveness of its policies, the report finds.

Dr Schultz said the situation was exacerbated by the low level of importance placed on Pacific issues within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

"Within the bureaucracy, [Pacific island](#) desks have rarely been considered prestigious places to work and have consequently attracted few ambitious staff," he said.

"Diplomatic postings in the Pacific islands have historically been offered to personnel who are either young or approaching retirement.

"Australia needs to find a way to maintain strong and ongoing relationships with Pacific island nations that will withstand the inevitable disturbances that occur.

"One first step would be to upgrade the status of Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs, Richard Marles, to that of a dedicated minister, with greater departmental resources and a higher public profile," Dr Schultz said.

More information: dtl.unimelb.edu.au//exlibris/d...

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Provided by University of Melbourne

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