

## **Closing remarks #ZenAI Conference 2026**

### **Nigel Cooper; Chair, Board of Trustees, Initiatives of Change New Zealand**

In the 1960s, I spent three years in Papua New Guinea before it gained independence from Australia. When copper was discovered in Bougainville, Conzinc Riotinto of Australia (CRA) wanted to mine it and set up Bougainville Copper Ltd to negotiate land purchases. Australia controlled the negotiations, excluding Bougainvillean residents.

Violence erupted over the mining proposal. 150 armed police camped on the land needed for a port site, ready to take it by force. The people refused to sell and armed themselves with bows, arrows, spears, and machetes. The police used tear gas and batons but were withdrawn before blood was shed.

Paul Lapun, the Member of the House of Assembly for South Bougainville, learned meditation and listening to his inner voice through Moral Re-Armament (MRA, now Initiatives of Change). Lapun and a village leader, Raphael Bele, went to Australia to seek a High Court injunction to stop further land actions. They were cared for in Sydney by MRA people. Before the High Court, they had a quiet time, and Paul thought, "Go for solutions, not headlines," and to hold off legal proceedings until they saw people who could change policy. He declined 42 interview requests from newspapers and TV.

In an interview with Prime Minister John Gorton and Minister for External Territories Ceb Barnes, Paul shared two thoughts from his meditations: land is like our skin, inheritable and unsellable, and God put the copper in the ground, and He can guide us how to extract it. He asked if landholders could directly negotiate with CRA. After an hour, the politicians agreed.

During two hours with CRA's top three men, Paul explained that Bougainvilleans don't own land privately, so they can't sell it. They suggested leasing, a new concept for Paul and Raphael. They returned to Canberra for talks with Ceb Barnes, who agreed to allow negotiations between CRA and the Bougainvilleans directly.

Upon returning to Bougainville, Paul faced opposition from the people. The situation was deadlocked. They didn't understand leasing and feared their land would be stolen. Paul showed them an MRA film, Freedom, about Africans fighting for freedom from colonialists and bitterness. He advised them to forget their anger about the tear gas and batons and find a peaceful solution that could be an example to the world.

After a few days, the people agreed. The mine went ahead, 8000 people found employment, and the mine's income brought in over 40% of PNG's export income. Peace prevailed. Lapun became the first knight of PNG and a cabinet minister in the first independent government in 1975.

By the late 1980s, many younger Bougainvilleans turned to violence, wanting to secede from PNG. The mine had caused significant environmental damage, including poisonous tailings that killed fish. Power pylons were blown up, leading to an internal war with many deaths. A state of emergency was declared, and the PNG army blockaded the island, closing hospitals, shops, banks, schools, shipping, and air transport. Phones, electricity, oil, and petrol ran out, and the provincial government disbanded. Talks were proposed, but a suitable venue was not found until August 1990, when the NZ government offered three navy ships, including *HMNZS Endeavour*. I was one of three MRA people invited as bridge-builders.

The Bougainvilleans' faces showed fear and distrust. Was this a trap? The talks began with prayers and hymns led by a Navy Padre to set the tone of reconciliation. Over six days, both sides tried to find common ground but failed. Some Bougainvilleans wanted independence, some wanted services restored, and some wanted peace first. We shared their food over lunch, and showed them the film *Freedom*, which Paul Lapun had been showing around the island 20 years earlier. We had similar private times with the government delegates, including prayers.

On the last day of the talks, both sides were deadlocked and divided. With one hour to go until the ships left, it seemed like failure. No peace, no services restored, and no independence was agreed. The war would resume the next day. Bernard Narokobi, the Attorney General and Minister for Justice, who had invited us to help, went outside and quietly asked God for guidance. When he returned, he found the Bougainvilleans divided and unable to propose any ideas to the government. He read out four proposals he had written down outside on a serviette. He and his chief negotiator, Michael Somare, the country's first Prime Minister and 'Father of the Nation', proposed these as the basis of an agreement. Astonishingly, the 20 Bougainvilleans, who had been so divided, got up and spoke in favour of accepting the proposals. The talks were saved and a swift completion of the Endeavour Accord followed. Relief, handshakes and hugs were shared. The inner voice Bernard Narokobi heard that day was felt by all to be of divine origin.

However, some government officials in Port Moresby and Bougainville Revolutionary Army members refused to accept all terms. The blockade remained for seven years, causing 10,000 deaths. In 1997, NZ offered help again. Talks in Burnham near Christchurch resulted in a peace agreement accepted by both sides. NZ Army monitored the agreement. Brigadier Roger Mortlock sent soldiers without guns but with guitars, which was successful. In 2019, a referendum voted 98% in favour of independence. Talks continued, including in NZ last June. Bougainville expects PNG to agree to independence on 1 September next year.

Frank Buchman, the initiator of MRA/Initiatives of Change, said, "When people listen, God speaks; when people obey, God acts; when people change, nations change." At 21, God revealed a situation in my family that deeply hurt me, making me bitter and blaming. I was amazed. I apologised to my parents, building a deep trust with them.

Later, I felt called to build bridges across divisions in the world, wherever I was led. I gave up my plan to be a computer programmer and worked voluntarily for 26 years

with MRA on three continents, including multiple visits to Papua New Guinea. I believe the power of the inner voice can reach every human heart, regardless of background. Perhaps we should meditate daily to let the inner voice speak to us.

Nigel Cooper, 26/2/26. [foranewworld.org](http://foranewworld.org) has the stories of Lapun and Narokobi.

[youtube.com/watch?v=p1vG3jLNa20](https://youtube.com/watch?v=p1vG3jLNa20) is a film by Will Watson, Soldiers Without Guns.