

Abstract

This article is a small part of the author's PhD study. While in-depth interviews were conducted, these are not utilized in this paper given the memorandum of agreement signed with the HR Manager of the case study of a government commercial company, namely Post Fiji Limited. Respecting this, this paper is based only on various relevant publicly available archival data of annual reports, business magazines, newspaper articles and staff newsletters. These past data relates much to the episode under investigation which is during the period the first CEO (at that time the title was Managing Director-MD) held office at the subject case study and thereafter. Not only is this entity one of the best performing government commercial companies in Fiji, it is also one of the very few profitable government owned postal operations worldwide. The paper details and analyses the top-management and certain Board member actions, revealed corrupt by an audit. Post the departure of the said MD from the entity, he was alleged to have accepted payments not entitled to. A few other executives were exposed as those engaged in corrupt practices as well. The paper used the theoretical debate between Agency and Structure to give an empirical backing on which of the two holds in a real life institutional setting. The paper concludes that even when all looks well in a good performing government entity from afar, there are gaps for supposed corruption at the highest levels. Nonetheless, hats off to those who conduct the audit and do a good job of revealing all who engage in suspected corrupt practices which may remain undetected in successful entities if otherwise. In terms of Agency versus Structure theoretical arguments, this paper agrees with Cockerham (2005) who elaborates that while agency can allow individuals to reject or modify their lifestyle patterns and to carry out self benefiting activities, structure can cut back and restrict the behaviour options that are available to individuals (Cockerham, 2005).

Keywords: Fiji, public enterprise, Post Fiji Limited, corruption, government commercial company, Agency versus Structure Theory

1. Introduction

1.1 Country Background

Located in the heart of Pacific Ocean, southwest of Honolulu and midway the equator and New Zealand, Fiji is a coup ridden yet one of the most developed of Pacific Island economies. With a multicultural population mix, it is endowed with forest, mineral and fish resources with a large subsistence sector. The country, at present operates under military rule of the self-appointed Prime Minister - Commodore Josaia Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama after the December 2006 bloodless coup.

The most recent infamous 2006 coup has dimmed the business climate attractiveness. The preceding coups of May and September 1987, and May 2000 had already diluted investor confidence, dented the country's tourism image, led to trade bans and shrunk international funding. GDP fell by 6.4 per cent in 1987 and 1.7 per cent in 2000 (ADB, 2008).

Fiji, thus due to its pendulum regime syndrome (going to and fro in terms of political stability conditions) has caused political indigestion amongst most of its donors and neighbouring countries. December 5 coup was all in the name of democracy, claimed undemocratic by many. Following the coup-de-tat, Fiji suffered a year of negative economic contraction of 3.9 per cent

given declines in tourism, sugar, construction and gold mining earnings (ADB, 2008). A number of funding agencies suspended most new aid proposals, but many existing projects have continued (ADB, 2008).

1.2 Aim and Contribution of this Paper

This paper covers the episode of the period the CEO (the first Managing Director - MD) held office at a government commercial company in Fiji, namely Post Fiji Limited. From hereafter, CEO will be referred to as MD. Not only is this entity one of the best performing government commercial companies in Fiji, it is also one of the very few profitable government owned postal operations worldwide. In the main, the prime interest of the paper lies in the explanation of the top-management's corrupt actions using Agency-Structure debate. Post the departure of the MD from the entity, he was alleged of having accepted payments not entitled to. A few other executives were exposed as those engaged in corrupt practices as well. All in all, the paper gives an account of what transpired during the time the MD held office and soon after his departure.

The paper used the theoretical debate between Agency and Structure to give an empirical backing on which of the two holds in real life. One of the weak points of past studies on Fiji's public enterprise reforms is the absence of theory needed to put empirical studies into perspective. Accordingly, one of the aims of this paper is to address this apparent gap. It also contributes to the ongoing Agency-Structure debate.

The paper is divided into separate sections. This section introduced Fiji and informed of the paper's aims and contributions. The following section discusses the theoretical underpinning. Method is discussed next followed by the case study discussions. The paper closes with conclusion.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

According to Yesilkagit and De Vries (2004), theoretical balance is required. Yesilkagit and De Vries (2004: 952) argue that "... , most [studies] display either too much theory and too little description or too much description without proper theoretical underpinning". Brinkerhoff (2008) comment that there is an ongoing need to build bridges between theory and practice. There is also a need to transmit lessons of both theory and practice to a wider audience. This, in turn can give rise to new research questions (Brinkerhoff, 2008).

"The agency-structure issue has been the central sociological question since the beginning of the discipline" (Cockerham, 2005: 54). While, both structure and agency are widely applied concepts in social science, these are among the most difficult to define (O'Neill et al., 2004: 154).

The Agency Theory can be explained as follows. The principal pays the agent for some good or service. Principal is the party that pays the agent for either a) the agent to act on behalf of the principal or b) the agent to provide some service to the principal (International Energy Agency-IEA, 2007). For instance, an owner or employer (principal) pays an employee (agent) to act on his or its behalf. The employee is required to provide the service such as production of goods for sale (IEA, 2007). The key assumption of the Agency Theory is that the interests of the agent and the

principal differ. Because of this, different mechanisms and contracts are created to handle such diverging interests to a certain extent (Yamak and Süer, 2005).

Structures can be defined using rules and resources (Giddens, 1984). Giddens (1984) defines rules as generalisable procedures which can be applied when enacting or reproducing social life. In other words, such rules can be extended to or put into practice in different situations (Sewell, 1992). Resources can be of two types, allocative and authoritative (Giddens, 1984). "Allocative resources refer to capabilities – or, more accurately, to forms of transformative capacity – generating command over objects, goods or material phenomena. Authoritative resources refer to types of transformative capacity generating command over persons or actors" (Giddens 1984: 33). Put simply, allocative resources control material objects while authoritative resources control individuals (Sewell, 1992). In his Theory of Structuration, Giddens argued that while structures inform agents' actions, agents as well can change structure overtime. Another theory, namely the Institutional Theory views agents as acting within structures. Brief mentions of Structuration and Institutionalization is made here given that these theories involves structure and/or agency. However, the focus of this paper is on Agency-Structure debate.

According to Cockerham (2005), the debate between Agency-Structure is more about which one of these two is more dominant. The proponents of Structure emphasise on the power of structure as affecting the way individuals behave within the prescribed guidelines (Cockerham, 2005). In contrast, the advocates of the Agency Theory argue that individuals have a choice on how to behave regardless of structural influences (Cockerham, 2005). But none of the present-day theorists deny the importance of agency or structure (Cockerham, 2005).

Cockerham (2005) argues that agency is no doubt important but structure can act back on individuals affecting their lifestyle patterns in particular ways. Cockerham (2005) elaborates that agency can allow individuals to reject or modify their lifestyle patterns. However, structure can restrict the behaviour options that are available to individuals (Cockerham, 2005).

The findings of this paper will reveal more on which of the two is more dominant in the case of Post Fiji Limited.

3. Method

While in-depth interviews were conducted, these are not utilized in this paper given the memorandum of agreement signed with the HR Manager of Post Fiji Limited. Respecting this, this paper is based on various relevant publicly available archival data of annual reports, business magazines (The Review magazines, Fiji Island Business magazines), newspaper articles and the staff newsletters (Postel and Posnews) available at the University of the South Pacific library and internet. These articles exposed much on the 'as and when' occurred entity-specific events with published interviews. These past data also relate largely, to the episode under investigation which is during the period the said MD held office at Post Fiji Limited and thereafter. His name is undisclosed for ethical reasons. The paper employed Gillham's (2001) analytical framework for verification and analysis of the collected data. The research is a qualitative study and is

particularly based on content analysis which helped document, explain and understand the data gathered. As per Gillham's (2001) analytical framework, substantive information was highlighted while irrelevant materials were ignored upon the first reading of all collected data. The same data set was revisited to highlight substantive statements that might have been missed out in the first reading. The highlighted information was then categorised as major events to recount what transpired in Post Fiji Limited.

The paper next discusses the core aspects of this article by way of sub-titled sections.

4. Post Fiji Limited (PFL)

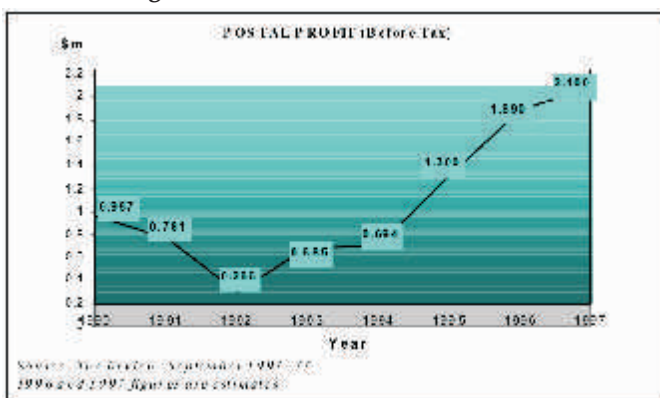
4.1 Background

Since its inception until 1989, Fiji's postal operations was a division of a government department, namely the Department of Posts and Telecommunications (PFL, 2005). Later in January 1990 the department was corporatized as Fiji Posts and Telecommunications Ltd (FPTL). This marked the entities' rebirth with the intention that the two will be separated when the time is right which meant when both entities become independently feasible (Waq, 1996a). Subsequently in June 1996, the much awaited separation of Post and Telecommunications was formalized resulting in the establishment of two new entities - Post Fiji Ltd (PFL) and Telecom Fiji Ltd (TFL).

While pro-Post enthusiasts lamented that the focus in the past was always Telecom and Post was almost always ignored, industry skeptics commented that the Postal arm was always subsidized by Telecom and would not survive the parting. Some even highlighted Post as the 'poor cousin of the FPTL' which was given step brotherly treatment before its separation from Telecom (Chaudhary, 1996b: 131). Despite the 'step-child' treatment during the days of FPTL, the Postal arm made profits annually, raking in a profit of almost \$1.2 million before the professed split (The Review, 1997: 32).

Figure 1 below gives details on profits made by the Postal department from 1990 to 1997.

Fig 1 : Profits Earned from 1990 to 1997



With Fiji Government as its wholly shareholders, PFL was registered and incorporated under the Companies Act on 9 May 1996 as a private company. It commenced operations as an independent entity from 1 July 1996 (PFL, 1998: 1).

The principal activities of PFL are message communication in letters, and distribution of courier and parcel items. It is responsible for the collection, processing and delivery of letters, parcels and urgent documents to some 56,000 letterboxes and 15,000 residential addresses in Fiji.

Despite its commercial status of a government enterprise, PFL is also required to fulfill its community obligations to ensure a reasonable access to the letter service, including the delivery of standard letters at a uniform price Fiji wide, even if this means a higher than price, cost of delivery. The extensive infrastructure of 'being located everywhere' (Chaudhari, 1999) with more than fifty post offices and ninety-seven postal agencies across Fiji, allows this access (PFL, 2006).

4.2 The Board and Top Management

The company is led by a government nominated Board of Directors. All directors aside the MD or the CEO (the recent arrangement) have been outsiders (not the insiders - company employees) who are exemplary experienced individuals from various business sectors having served at various other Boards. In combination, their backgrounds involve, being active members of Provincial Councils, farmer and community worker, business and training consultants, former senator, Justice of Peace, former company secretaries and legal advisors of several government owned enterprises, chairman and CEOs of known organizations, recipients of honourable awards, business owners, lawyer, policy advisor, educator, trainer and Non Governmental Organization (NGO) activist (PFL, 2005). The small Executive Management and the MD team is made up of individuals who are well versed with postal operations. These individuals have been with the company for a long time (as early as 1967) and rose through the ranks from very humble positions. A number of them also took up studies towards bachelors and even Masters degrees (PFL, 2005).

The visionary former and PFL's first MD was a MBA graduate from the Melbourne based Monash University. His career with FPTL dates way back 1968. He worked in various capacities at PFL Fiji-wide as a Postmaster in Suva, Lautoka, Lomaloma in Lau, as Head of Bureau, Manager Operations (Post) and Manager Retail Business (Postel, 1996d: 1). He also served on various committees which played a vital role in the growth of FPTL following corporatization (PFL, 2005). New Zealand Post was his role model, a past loser which turned around and became an award winning corporatized postal business. This MD hoped to create a mini version of the New Zealand Post out of Post Fiji (The Review, 1997b).

The following section details on how PFL not only became one of the best performing government commercial companies in Fiji, but also one of the very few profitable government owned postal operations worldwide during and post the reign of the first MD.

4.3 Overtime Performance

The solitary authority of conveying letters from one place to another and performing all the incidental services of accepting, receiving, collecting and delivering letters as afforded to Post Fiji by the Post and Telecommunications Decree 1989, does not mean nil competition. This virtual letter monopoly (Chaudhari, 1996a) does provide some protection from direct competition but over the years, competition against PFL's core business has

burgeoned owing to the rise of courier operations and the substitutes of electronic communications. In Fiji, letter writing is not everyone's favourite past-time and many prefer talking to writing, explained the then Mail Operations Manager (Chaudhary, 1996c: 135). According to a former Executive Manager Mails, "on average, a person in Fiji writes thirty-three letters per annum, compared to 238 in Australia, 285 in New Zealand" (Motufaga, 1996: 25) and 600 letters in United States (Chaudhari, 1996a: 45). No doubt, the physical letter has to compete with electronic communication technologies such as telephones, faxes, emails and electronic banking, not forgetting the drawn-out and tedious mail process of sorting and dispatching to different towns, island and overseas countries (Chaudhary, 1996c). Demand for letters is thus primarily influenced by technology, social patterns, communication needs, marketing, prices and so forth. While use of emails is intensifying, mail volume has shown growth but slow growth, hence changing the time-honored role of post offices globally. The then positive minded MD argued that companies cannot send parcels and packets through emails and they do still use postal services to advertise products and to send bills, parcels and packets (Chaudhari, 1999: 16).

Letters aside, PFL does not have a legislated advantage in the parcels market. It faces unrestrained competition from large and small courier companies. Even when it comes to financial services and agency services, it competes with banks and other operators. As for retail merchandise in Post Shops (the brain child of the MD - discussed later), PFL competes with stationery shops and bookshops. Nonetheless competition has not dampened the efforts of PFL. Ever since its 1996 separation from TFL, PFL invested \$21.5 million in fixed assets in order to upgrade, build, and acquire buildings, plants, machinery and information systems (PFL, 2006).

January 2001 saw the much awaited increase in postal tariff. Yet, despite this increase, Fiji's postal charges remain the cheapest in the Pacific. PFL argued that while this increase is a relief, for increase in business growth and returns, postal tariff needs to be removed from Prices and Incomes Board (PIB) control. The year 2002 did just that. In December 2002, PIB approved the removal of international postal tariffs and other miscellaneous charges from PIB regulation while domestic postal rates were only affected by an increase in Value Added Tax. This allowed PFL to better align its fees with costs (PFL, 2002). Clearly postal charges were set below costs in the past. Later, albeit the Commerce Commission's approval of a request for an increase in domestic postage to 20 cents from 16 cents, effective 16 October 2006, the public stand to gain given that the cost is 52 cents against the postage charge of 20 cents (PFL, 2006).

All in all, PFL has not been the commonly tagged 'sit back' reactive government entity and proved its industry critics

wrong. Advantageously, PFL differs from other communications and distribution media owing to its universal accessibility to all. Then again delivering to everyone is not without challenge because of vast distances and remote conditions as well as airline and shipping schedules. PFL not only took the challenge to compete head on. It has also been consistently innovative and pro-active. Innovation and diversification has been their strategic solution and competitive edge if not their saviour. Innovative ideas and trends have been adopted from successful overseas postal companies. Diversification was and is seemingly the only way to supplement the core business – Mail. PFL has thus made significant steady progress little by little to come up with value added, speedy and convenient services to customers. Dressed in its new look, including the interior as well as the exterior of offices and friendly atmosphere, PFL promises customers better services (Motufaga, 1996). In yesteryears, customers were often taken for granted (Fiji Business, 1996b). In years prior to 1996, marketing of the post offices and postal services were given zero attention. But in the years that followed, funds were set aside for marketing efforts. In addition, the official Post Fiji website, www.postfiji.com.fj was launched in 2001.

The aforementioned activities reduced the sole dependence on the core business and at the same time helped PFL expand its revenue streams. Against the 10 per cent government benchmark on rate of return on shareholders funds, PFL stood at 9.51 per cent in year 2004 (PFL, 2004). Given its commercial status, PFL is expected to operate at an arms length and seek funds on its own accord such as from banking institutions like ANZ Bank. Government provides grants to PFL for social obligations as it meets social obligation related costs until breakeven.

On the service provision front every now and then, a delegate from PFL attends and participates in the Asia Pacific Postal Union organized workshops. The delegation also attends and participates in Universal Postal Union (UPU) Congress organized every four to five years. With its headquarters in Berne, Switzerland, UPU is an independent body looking after the member Postal administrations worldwide. It is globally funded through its 189 member contributions, payable annually by the government of each member country.

The factors of diversification, disciplined cost management and government support in continuing tariff negotiations, not forgetting marketing are supposedly the strong success factors leading to PFL being among the very few successful government owned Postal operations worldwide (Chaudhari, 1999). Yes, PFL has always been profitable. However, out of the many years of profitable performance, 2006 was deemed the most challenging. This was so because for the first time in its entire existence since corporatization, PFL recorded an operating loss of \$2.711 million before tax, \$1.749 million after tax. This was particularly due to

Table 1: Key Financial Figures for Years 1997-2006

	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999	1998	1997
	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000
Total Revenue	35743	40113	37588	31772	30793	26691	22567	21719	17480	12931
Profit After Tax	(1,749)	914	1270	1054	1030	1109	936	1281	1483	1565
Dividends	-	457	635	527	309	277	187	256	297	448

Source: Post Fiji Ltd (1998, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006)

condensed revenue (in fastfone, telecards, agency commission and philatelic business) and the huge \$3,012,491 staff redundancy package payout (PFL, 2006). The following table displays total revenue, after-tax profit and dividend figures for years 1997 to 2006.

From all innovative changes, the most significant of all contributions of the first MD to PFL was 'Post Shops'. Born in 1992, the post shop idea popped out of Post's diversifying bin. It was the brainchild of the MD. At that time he was the Manager Retail Shop. Upon his return from Australia, he made additional changes by widening the product range from the previously existing range of cards, envelopes and other postal related items sold over the counter. Post shops have proved popular. So much so that they grew from a mere \$400,000 in 1995 to a noticeable \$6 million by 2004 (PFL, 2004). The popularity of the post shops with customers is basically due to the convenient wide range of products it carries such as school and office stationery, greeting cards, magazines, even clothes and perishables such as groceries in rural areas.

The MD also contributed towards culture change of staff towards commercial orientation, to some extent. To move his staff on the right track and to make them market driven, he had to break the 'old die-hard habits' instilled since the civil service days which very much gave Fiji's postal service 'a slow coach reputation'. The MD admitted this as his biggest problem at that time. In an attempt to change for the better, he tried to widen professional training opportunities for his staff. Workers were continuously groomed into thinking 'commercial' through above mentioned trainings and briefings (Waqa, 1996a). This encouraged fifty staff to pursue bachelors degrees. This was the first of such an initiative. But when staff failed the courses undertaken, they were to refund the company (Waqa, 1996a).

At the same time, PFL organized sports days for employees. These events brought the employees together and created an atmosphere of friendship (Posnews, 1997a).

Training, education and keeping staff informed has been seen as what can develop the right concept from the onset; from product development to product launch and a follow-through on the products (Fiji Business, 1996b).

On 23 March 1998, PFL revised and restructured its organization structure for efficiency, cost effective and accountability reasons in order to adapt a deeper commercial approach to enable sustained growth in the current economic market. Increased delegation of tasks, training, a vision and decentralized authority gave sufficient power to each departmental manager. The success factors for enhanced productivity were clear objectives, accountability, risk-taking, and staff recognition and rewards (Fiji Business, 1996b). In addition, because the MD was not too happy with the bureaucratic mentality that existed from the time of FPTL, he attempted to create a correct mix of human resources by recruiting skilled private sector individuals in key positions (Fiji Business, 1996b).

The above actions and activities do reveal the MD's effective leadership style. Such descriptions are required since good performance can often lead to the belief that corruption is absent

in organizations. But the recount below surprisingly expose otherwise.

4.4 All was not so Good – Audit Reveals Corruption

While the brilliant performance of the entity cannot go unnoticed, what also cannot go unnoticed is the year 2007 allegations made at the former top management and the Board (names undisclosed for ethical reasons). Four former Post Fiji executives were charged with various offences ranging from abuse of office, extortion, aiding and abetting abuse of office, and false certificate by public office (Fiji TV, 2007).

The Post Fiji audit report resulted in serious allegations of malpractice by the MD. It is claimed that upon his resignation in February 2007, he was paid a gross compensation of \$246,479.89 and a net of \$122,481.39 after deductions plus \$24,000 as gratuity, a payment he was neither entitled to nor allowed for in his contract. It is further claimed that this payment was not even approved by the Higher Salaries Commission. Even the then Board Chairman was alleged to have taken allowances not entitled to. Two other executives were also reported of corruption (The Fiji Times, 2007). Court proceedings on this allegations continue.

Due to the above fiasco, a new Board was appointed. The Chairperson and three new Board members were appointed in May and June 2007. Only one of the previous Board members continued while three others resigned in December 2006. The five member Board was told to seriously consider the recommendations in the company's audit report during the Board induction. This induction makes the individual directors aware of their role in the Company and informs them on what the government expects from them as the company's shareholders. Representatives from Ministries of Finance and Public Enterprise also sit in Board meetings.

In 2007, an Acting CEO was appointed by the new Board following the exit of the MD on 28 February 2007. In January 2009, a former executive from the finance sector - the Colonial Bank group was appointed as the CEO of PFL.

5. Concluding Remarks

The findings no doubt signal towards effective leadership style of the first MD. He did make significant changes during his time in office. The tune however changed post the departure of this MD from the entity. He was alleged to have accepted payments not entitled to. Three other executives were also reported of corrupt practices including Board members.

A point worth noting is that, even when all looks well in a good performing government entity, there are indeed gaps for supposed corruption at the highest levels. Nonetheless, hats off to those who conduct audits and do a good job in revealing all who engage in suspected corrupt practices which may remain undetected in successful entities if otherwise.

In terms of the Agency-Structure arguments, Cockerham's argument makes much sense. Cockerham (2005) argues that agency is no doubt important but structure can act back on individuals affecting their lifestyle patterns in particular ways.

Cockerham (2005) elaborates that agency can allow individuals to reject or modify their lifestyle patterns. However, structure can restrict the behaviour options that are available to individuals (Cockerham, 2005).

The case of PFL reveals that even the exemplary top officials can engage in agency with the support of other top officials. For until it goes undetected, agency is enjoyed. However, structure strikes back by way of audits which expose such activities. While structure may take time to unveil and take to task those involved, it surely does catch up with agency. All the same, there has to be such an objective structure in place which can expose agency. But should structure such as an audit requirement be weak or allow for agency between its officials and the employees of the focal organization then agency may continue until found out later when audit officers change.

Single case studies disallow generalisation. This paper acknowledges this weakness. Hence it suggests similar empirical case discussions to contribute towards the ongoing Agency-Structure debate and to test its conclusions in other settings.

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