In this article, I want to share the experience of presiding over and participating in a Legislative assembly established as part of a political settlement of the worst violent conflict ever to have occurred amongst Pacific Islands peoples. This was the Bougainville conflict. From 1988 to 1997, this conflict caused thousands of deaths, many more injuries, displacement of more than a third of the population, and destruction of Bougainville’s productive capacity. It also resulted in the June 1990 suspension of Bougainville’s elected provincial government, which occurred just a few weeks after rebel leader, Francis Ona, had made a Unilateral Declaration of Bougainville’s independence on May 17, 1990.

Even before the experience of this terrible conflict, Bougainville had a history of resisting colonial control. As the territory forming most part of the Solomon Islands, Bougainville has long been a reluctant part of Papua New Guinea. It was a part of German New Guinea from 1884 to 1914, but the first German administrative station was only established in 1905. During the 20th century, Bougainvilleans for the first time began meeting with people from elsewhere in Papua New Guinea.

During the period after World War Two, political concerns became associated with that identity. Resentment of apparent neglect of Bougainville by the Australian colonial government that took over from Germany after the First World War, and links to their cousins in the neighbouring western parts of the Solomon Islands saw some post-Second World War discussion of the possible separation of Bougainville from Papua New Guinea. From the late 1960s public calls began to be made for a referendum on independence. This push by young educated leaders was soon diverted into demands for autonomy within Papua New Guinea, and for a share of the revenue from the huge Panguna copper and gold mine that had then begun operating in Bougainville in 1972. The demand for autonomy led to the 1973-74 agreement by the Papua New Guinea government on establishing a provincial government for Bougainville. But arguments between Bougainville and the National Government over Bougainville’s share of mining revenue saw frustrated Bougainville leaders making their first Unilateral Declaration of Independence on 1st September 1975 – just days before Papua New Guinea itself became independent. When no international recognition was forthcoming, six months of negotiation saw a agreement on a stronger provincial government system, and the transfer to Bougainville of the mining royalties previously received by the Papua New Guinea Government.

Bougainville’s provincial government – the North Solomons Provincial Government – was generally quite successful. It operated under its own provincial constitution, which included provision for a Legislative Assembly, and for a position of Speaker selected by the Legislature from outside of the elected Members. The aim of this arrangement was to ensure the neutrality of the Speaker. The North Solomons Provincial Assembly was well regarded. However, by the mid-1980s, frustration was growing amongst many Bougainvilleans about the lack of power of the North Solomons government in relation to mining, the environmental damage of mining, land issues, and the impacts of the many non-Bougainvilleans going to Bougainville because of the strong economy there, but also simply being cut out on customarily owned land. It was the widespread belief that this situation had led to the conflict that began in 1988, and the June 1990 suspension by the Papua New Guinea National Government of the North Solomons Provincial Government.

The suspension occurred a few weeks after Papua New Guinea security forces withdrew from Bougainville under a March 1990 ceasefire, that left the rebels, now known as the Bougainville Revolutionary Front (BRF), in control of Bougainville. Although the suspension of the Provincial Government meant that there was no longer a Bougainville government operating under Papua New Guinea law, there were important efforts to establish government arrangements. In particular, the BPA soon moved to establish its own government, which eventually became known as the Bougainville Interim Government (BIG). The BIG was led by Ona (who was a Panguna landowner), but his Deputy was the premier of the suspended provincial government. The BIG had limited control over large parts of Bougainville, largely because of internal conflict amongst Bougainvilleans that had begun to emerge from the time the Papua New Guinea forces withdrew from Bougainville in March 1990. By September 1990, the intensifying internal conflict saw communities that were suffering from the internal conflict calling on Papua New Guinea security forces to return. When this happened, local BPA elements began supporting the Papua New Guinea security forces, eventually becoming known as the Bougainville Resistance Forces (BFR).

The conflict was costly – in terms of lives lost (estimates vary from 3,000 to 20,000), people displaced, destruction of government infrastructure and private property, and trauma suffered by many peoples. Deaths included that of the Premier of the Bougainville Provincial Government, after it was re-established in 1995.

After an inconclusive peace conference in October 1994, a former National Court Judge from Bougainville, Theodore Mimung, emerged as a moderate leader trying to unite Bougainvilleans in negotiating a political settlement with Papua New Guinea. He was also working towards re-establishing the basic institutions of self-government for Bougainville. In terms of his work towards a political settlement, in early 1995 he persuaded the National Government to lift the suspension of Bougainville’s provincial government, which was transferred from the Transitional Government (BTG). So this meant there was a provincial government established under Papua New Guinea law and a rebel BIG which was still the government for rebel-controlled areas. There was no equivalent of the position of Speaker in the BIG, but the BTG had a Speaker.

Mimung became the Premier of the BTG, and was a major player in moves to get the two governments and the leaders of the opposing Bougainvillean armed groups – the BIG and the BFR to take part in peace talks in Cairns, Australia, late in 1995. Unfortunately, BRA and BIG leaders returning for the second of those talks were ambushed by Papua New Guinea forces, and the conflict escalated in the next 12 months. Then in 1997, the action of the Papua New Guinea Army to rust the Sandline mercenaries that the Papua New Guinea government engaged in an attempt to end the conflict, helped change BRA attitudes towards the army, and provide the space for moderate leaders on both sides of the internal Bougainville conflict to renew the talks that had begun in Cairns, Australia, in 1995.

The renewed peace process began with talks amongst Bougainvilleans held at the Burnham military barracks in New Zealand. There the opposing Bougainville groups established a degree of trust and agreed to negotiate with Papua New Guinea for a political solution to the conflict. In October, a second round of talks at Burnham, this time involving Papua New Guinea as well as the opposing Bougainville groups resulted in a truce, and to an agreement of an intervention by an unarmed regional force to monitor the ceasefire.

Then in a third round of talks in New Zealand, this time at Lincoln, an agreement was reached on a ceasefire, and on an additional international intervention, in the form of a small United Nations Observer Mission. The Lincoln talks also agreed on establishing a Bougainville ‘reconciliation’ government, intended to bring together the opposing Bougainville factions into a united government. There were some difficulties in establishing the reconciliation government. First, Francis Ona, leader of the BRA and the BFR, refused to support the whole peace process, claiming that the Bougainville government was already independent under a unilateral declaration of independence or that he had made in 1990. Second, three of Bougainville’s four national level MPs linked with some BRF leaders and some leaders from Buka Island opposed initial steps towards establishing the reconciliation government. They did this mainly because of a complicated set of problems involved in setting up the Bougainville Reconciliation Government. Nevertheless, progress towards establishing the reconciliation government continued, through elections in May 1999 for a body called the Bougainville Peoples’ Congress (BPC). The BPC had more than 100 members, who represented all areas and most factions. It had no basis in law, but rather was established under an agreement between the Bougainville leaders and the National Government. The BPC had a Speaker, who demonstrated a renewal of commitment to a parliamentary body being vested with the authority to make decisions on behalf of the people. By December 1999, the split of the 3 MPs and their supporters was resolved, this time in part through a court decision that ended a complex dispute about the legal basis for the Bougainville provincial government. That dispute had been one of the reasons for the 3 MPs and their supporters splitting off from those supporting the establishment of the BPC. The court decision saw one of the MPs, John Moris, becoming the Governor of the re-established provincial government, now known as Bougainville’s Interim Provincial Government (BIPG). The leaders of the BPC and the BIPG agreed to work together. The partnership between the BPC and the BIPG continued from the end of 1999 until June 2005. During the first part of this process, in the two years...
from mid-1999 to August 2001, the parties negotiated for a comprehensive political settlement. The negotiations were difficult, but eventually reached agreement on a complex set of compromises in the Bougainville Peace Agreement (BPA).

The long and detailed agreement has three main pillars. The first is autonomy for Bougainville. The second is constitutional arrangements for Bougainville. The third is a referendum for Bougainvillians on independence which must be held before mid-2020. The third party is the Bougainville House of Representatives. The Constitution to the composition of the ABG's of former combatants and women. Bougainville Constitutional the Autonomous Bougainville Bougainvilleans were given Constitutional Laws that give for under Papua New Guinea is autonomy for Bougainville. The long and detailed agreement that it ‘s the point where their constituency can be declared ‘referendum-ready’. This status of ‘referendum-ready’ includes a national vote where all major relocations required in the independence have been completed, and that full disposal of all weapons in the constituency has occurred. Members are required to report regularly to the House about their ‘referendum-ready’ activities. The vote on the independence referendum makes no specific provision for an opposition group in the House of Representatives, though in fact there is a group, the Bougainville House of Representatives, which is anticipated to give the important role played by women in having three regional seats for women are significant, reflecting the women’s role in Bougainville. The Bougainville Constitution was not explicitly stated by the Bougainville Constitution was intended to promote better understanding by the House of the Bougainville Post-conflict situation, as does the referendum also puts pressure on the House to be as fully aware as possible about the referendum arrangements, so that they can each take the lead in ensuring their own constituencies are referendum-ready.

As Speaker, I see the time line adding pressure to the roles of Members, and contributing to sometimes heated debates, where I have to keep order, while also ensuring that all Members are given adequate opportunities to speak on the important matters of their constituencies. The political and procedural challenges of a post-conflict Parliament are diverse and complex. They call for a President who is not only neutral, but also able to be balanced and fair, to have a lot of knowledge and experience of the Bougainville conflict and the post-conflict situation, as well as knowledge and experience of Parliament.