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INTRODUCTION

Roland Seib

At independence, Papua New Guinea adopted the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy. In Britain, this system has developed over more than seven centuries. Its main characteristics are strong political parties, each with large followings and different opinions and solutions regarding contemporary issues, a high level of political participation, and a legal guarantee of certain civil and political liberties. Even though Britain does not have a written constitution that systematically outlines government procedures and institutions, its long history lends legitimacy to its political institutions, which can be changed by legislation as well as through informal understandings (Johnson 1977). The practices and power relationships of British political institutions have evolved gradually as British society has increasingly adopted the democratisation of political opinions and attitudes. Over centuries there have been congruent developments of a democratic political culture and complementary institutions. As a result, people are willing to respect the political power of the national institutions and accept the authority of state decisions.

By contrast, Papua New Guinea has grafted the Westminster system onto a traditional political system that served other purposes and thus has developed with different characteristics. For example, Papua New Guinea never had a centralized political system that organized all the people into anything resembling a state. Instead, the traditional political units were predominantly very small, clan-based entities separated by difficult terrain and by a multitude of languages and a variety of customs. Political leadership was closely linked to day-to-day communal activities as well as ritual procedures such as initiation, the acquisition and ceremonial distribution of community wealth, and the organisation of defense (cf. Bettison et al. 1965).

A leader had power only insofar as people were economically and socially obligated to him personally. He had influence only as far as his voice was heard and his advice taken. A leader maintained his position only as long as competing leaders did not defeat him in