

## **Democratic innovations and the challenges of parliamentary oversight in a small state: Is small really beautiful?**

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**Abstract:** It is commonly asserted that, when it comes to democratic politics, ‘small is beautiful’. This assumption harks back to antiquity and is employed by advocates of participatory and deliberative democracy to justify innovations that ‘scale-down’ decision-making in large states. Despite their obvious relevance, this literature fails to account for the democratic experience of the world's smallest states. In this article, I bring small states in to this discussion by examining recent democratic innovations in Tuvalu. Rather than ‘scaling-down’, in this instance Tuvalu is attempting to ‘scale-up’ its democratic institutions due to the challenges posed by its small size. The lesson for advocates of decentralisation in large states and the orthodox view that ‘small is beautiful’ is a cautionary one: size matters but not necessarily in the manner democratic theory predicts or in ways that fulfil normative desires.

**Keywords:** democratic governance, democratic innovations, parliamentary oversight, small states, Tuvalu, Pacific Islands

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### **Introduction**

As the tasks of the state have become more complex and the size of polities larger and more heterogeneous, the institutional forms of liberal democracy developed in the nineteenth century – representative democracy plus technocratic bureaucratic administration – seem increasingly ill suited to the novel problems we face in the twenty-first century (Fung and Wright, 2001, p. 5).

Modern representative democracies are said to be facing a ‘crisis’, usually defined as a combination of declining voter turnout and party memberships, and rising disaffection with politicians and democratic institutions (Dalton, 2004; Stoker, 2006; Hay, 2007; Flinders, 2012). Much of the literature offering solutions to this malaise draws its inspiration from antiquity and the belief that when it comes to democracy ‘small is beautiful’ (Laslett 1956; Schumacher, 1973; Dahl and Tufte, 1973). The argument is that large size and the distance it creates between rulers and ruled has caused ‘the erosion of democratic vitality’ which ‘is an inevitable result of complexity and size’ (Diamond, 1999; Fung and Wright, 2001, p. 6). The effect of this deficit, proponents claim, is increasing disenchantment and disillusionment among citizens about the performance of their governments and the processes and practices of democratic representation (Dalton, 2004; Stoker, 2006; Smith, 2009).

Democratic theorists working in participatory and deliberative traditions offer the democracy-enhancing possibilities of small polities as a potential cure to the problem of large size in countries ranging from the United States to Brazil and India (Fung and Wright, 2001; Smith, 2009; Pateman, 2012). Making democracies more ‘face to face’ (Laslett, 1956), they argue, will deepen citizen involvement in decision-making. Typically, advocates champion reforms to decentralise, devolve or localise representative institutions to increase participation

(Stoker, 2004; 2006). Or they favour deliberative opinion polls (Fishkin, 1991; Ackerman and Fishkin, 2002), citizen juries (Smith and Wales, 2000), citizens' assemblies (Barber, 1984; Fung and Wright, 2001; Warren and Pearce, 2008) and participatory budgeting (Pateman, 2012; Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2014) to improve deliberation.

This article investigates democratic reform in one of the world's smallest sovereign states, Tuvalu, whose size (population 10,800) is comparable to the old Greek cities. Tuvalu represents a 'most likely' case (Eckstein, 1975) from which to explore the much-vaunted democratising effects of smallness (Veenendaal and Corbett, 2015). Specifically, I examine a recent democratic innovation by the Parliament of Tuvalu whereby the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) – the most active parliamentary committee in Tuvalu – co-opted a least one citizen (but often two or three) to work alongside three Members of Parliament (MP) to review the government budget. The innovation lasted for roughly a decade—the mid-2000s to mid-2010s. By asking how and why this institutional change came about in Tuvalu, and how effective the actors involved considered it to be, I provide a critical focal lens through which to interrogate perennial questions about the relationship between size and democracy.

This article is premised on the assumption that the experience of the world's smallest countries is central to any discussion about the ideal size of a democratic polity (there are currently 21 UN member states with populations under 250,000 and 39 under 1 million). Many of the most innovative departures from institutional orthodoxy have occurred in the world's smallest states (Wettenhall, 2001, p. 183; Wettenhall and Thynne, 1994). And so, based on this logic, any holistic understanding of the impact of size on democracy must, almost by definition, pay attention to their experience (Veenendaal and Corbett, 2015).

To unpack the effects of institutional change in this case, I use the framework developed by Smith (2009) for assessing the participatory and deliberative potential of democratic innovations. Drawing on both the public record and in-depth interviews, I find that political actors in Tuvalu recount persistent challenges with adapting institutional features ostensibly designed for large states, to a small state context. This predicament presents an inversion of the scalar problem as identified above: rather than 'scaling-down', the challenges of small size have underpinned a desire to 'scale-up' the practices of democratic politics so that they function more like how they are said to work in large states. The lesson from the Tuvaluan experience for scholars interested in the potential for democratic reform to emulate the characteristics of smallness in large states is a cautionary one: small size bestows mixed blessings (cf Corbett, 2015). Specifically, the Tuvaluan case illustrates that 'scaling-down' politics does not necessarily deepen community engagement in the way the existing literature suggests; while it also serves to remind us that being small also creates challenges of its own. That is, while my aim here is not in any way to denigrate how politics is conducted in Tuvalu, the case offers important cautionary insights for scholars interested in the democratising potential of small size.

The article has six parts. First, I briefly unpack the longstanding debates about democracy and smallness. Second, I provide a concise summary of Smith's (2009) framework for assessing democratic innovations. Third, I summarise the methodological approach I adopt and the data I have collected. Fourth, I offer a brief background of democratic institutions in Tuvalu so as to situate the recent PAC innovation. Fifth, I provide an in-depth case study of recent changes to Tuvalu's PAC by drawing on the views and experiences of the political actors involved. Finally, I conclude by revisiting the theoretical implications of this case and discuss the more general lessons that the experience of small states offers.

## **Theorising democracy and smallness**

As outlined, extolling the normative potential of small polities has a rich theoretical tradition in Anglo-European scholarship. Indeed, the global spread of democratic norms and values, which locates popular sovereignty at the heart of political and social life, places the spatial dimensions of representation at the core of its normative appeal. Invariably, calls to modify existing institutions and power structures, be they 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century empires or 21<sup>st</sup> century representative democracies, make the case for change on the grounds that ‘scaled down’ polities more authentically reflect the will of the people and thus allow citizens to more deliberately construct the common good. Be it decolonisation, separatist movements or more recent ideas like participatory and deliberative democracy, the outcome of this move is a historical shift to smaller and smaller political units (Lake and O’Mahony, 2004). The history of Tuvalu is symptomatic of this global trend and yet its experience with democratisation does not fit neatly within the assumptions that participatory and deliberative democrats in particular make about the democratising potential of small-scale representation.

Scholars interested in the democratising effects of small size on democratic innovations have largely overlooked the practice of politics in small states: Humphreys, Masters and Sandhu (2006) and Oppong (2016) are notable exceptions. Despite drawing inspiration from the famously democratic Greek cities, the temporal and institutional differences between ancient and modern states mean that comparisons with democratic life in antiquity provide limited insights into the challenges and possibilities of contemporary democratic institutions in large states (although this has not always stopped the comparison being made). To get around this problem, proponents of ‘scaled down’ democracy bolster their argument with work in comparative politics where scholars identify a strong positive correlation between small size and sustained democratic transition (Ott, 2000, Anckar, 2002, Srebrnik, 2004). And yet, despite placing this link at the centre of their argument (Diamond, 1999) they tend to ignore how politics *actually works* in these settings (Baldacchino, 2012; Veenendaal, 2014; 2015).

The turn towards questions about scale by critical democratic theorists has been paralleled by a turn away from the statist (territorial and institutional) features of democracy by political geographers (Mountz, 2013). Increasingly, scholars working in this tradition have sought to displace state-centrism by focusing instead on the scalar dimensions of globalisation and associated non-state movements (Brenner, 1999; Marston, 2004; Pugh, 2009). As a result, the critical insight that this literature offers democratic theorists – that spatial labels are socially constructed and sustained – has been overlooked. While acknowledging that the label ‘small state’ – considered here as a polity with a resident population of one million or less – is defined in reference to ‘large states’, I nevertheless employ the term as a lens through which to interrogate and ultimately critique appeals to the normative desirability of distinct scalar types by deliberative and participatory democrats. In so doing, I acknowledge that these are diverse literatures. However, given that they often make similar presumptions about the benefits of smallness, this Tuvalu case offers important insights for both.

## **Democratic innovations: Smith’s framework**

Smith (2009, p. 1) defines democratic innovations as departures from the traditional institutional architecture that we normally associate with democracy (elections, opinion polling, focus groups, and so forth). Specifically, he is interested in mechanisms that seek to involve ‘lay’ or ‘non-partisan’ citizens in decision-making processes and asks whether they realise ‘democratic goods’. Smith (2009, pp. 12-13) specifies six ‘goods’ that democratic innovations should seek to engender: 1) inclusiveness; 2) popular control; 3) considered

judgement; 4) transparency; 5) efficiency; and 6) transferability. No single innovation is likely to incorporate all of these criteria equally; but by assessing democratic innovations in this manner, we can determine whether they enhance citizen satisfaction with democracy.

## **Data and methods**

I draw on two forms of data to assess the Tuvaluan case against Smith's (2009) framework. The first is the public record – a range of government documents, including committee reports and legislation, combined with consultancy reports and other secondary material – about the PAC. The second is 10 in-depth interviews conducted in 2014 with political actors directly involved in the work of the PAC.<sup>1</sup> At a glance, the number of interviews is relatively small; but, given Tuvalu's size and the number of people involved, it is, in fact, quite a large sample. Certainly, despite not canvassing the views of every actor, when combined with the public record, the number of interviews is sufficient to gauge the diversity of views and opinions about the way the PAC operates. Interviews were conducted both in Tuvalu and with Tuvaluan politicians living and travelling overseas.

This article adopts an interpretive approach to data analysis (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003; 2006). Interpretive research is typically based on constructivist-subjectivist rather than realist-objectivist propositions. In a case like this, interpretive researchers would anticipate that there would be a diversity of views about the purpose of co-opting citizens onto the PAC, and how effective this innovation has been (Hendriks, 2009). Rather than seeking to establish which is the correct view, the aim of this approach is to probe these reflections in order to make sense of the normative 'traditions' in which they are 'situated'; actors are not autonomous but construct the world inter-subjectively by (re)negotiating existing 'traditions' in the face of contemporary 'dilemmas' (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003; 2006). As such, the divergent 'meanings' and 'beliefs' that actors ascribe to what they do is not just part of this story; they are central to it, and the goal of this article is to bring these views to light and to reflect on what lessons they offer to prevailing theory.

Where appropriate, I have drawn on quotes from actors and documents to establish these views. In order to solicit interviews I gave assurances that, as far as possible, I would suppress the identity of interviewees. In some cases interviewees requested that I refrain from quoting them altogether (these informants were typically civil servants). Given the political sensitivities that surrounded the PAC, and the relative ease with which even unnamed informants can be identified in a small country like Tuvalu, I have taken care to meet this request. As a result, throughout the case material I often paraphrase the views obtained during interviews using expressions like 'some' or 'most'. While not ideal, this approach is the only appropriate course that I could have taken given the dynamics outlined above.

## **The context: democratic institutions in Tuvalu**

Tuvalu is a geographically diverse country whose 10,800 citizens are spread across eight inhabited islands. Formerly one half of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony, the group of islands we now call Tuvalu (the name translates as 'cluster of eight' or 'eight standing together') became independent in 1978 after more than 80 years of British colonial rule. The desire of Tuvaluans to separate from the Gilbert Islands (now Kiribati) was underpinned by a strong belief that they would be overwhelmed by the more numerous Gilbertese should they achieve independence together (McIntyre, 2012). Distinct language, history and culture were

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewees included a former speaker (1), PAC chair (1), parliamentary (3) and co-opted members (1), successive clerks of parliament (3), and a representative of the audit office (1).

also cited as reasons for separation. Initially, Whitehall was against the spilt, arguing that Tuvalu was too small to function as a viable country in its own right. The United Nations committee on decolonisation backed this view on the grounds that, as far as possible, they wanted to avoid the fragmentation of colonial administrative units. In the end, both acquiesced to Tuvaluan demands.

At independence, Tuvalu's institutional arrangements were largely the product of elite negotiations. Ultimately, in drafting a constitution, the Ellice Island representatives to the legislative council of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands opted for a Westminster-inspired constitutional setup that included a 12-member unicameral parliament, now increased to 15 members (Levine and Roberts, 2005). Wider public consultations about these arrangements took place (more than 90% of the population voted in favour of separation) but, Murray (1997, p. 262) argues, did not affect the design. Tuvalu thus represents an example of Wettenhall and Thynne's (1994) assessment that a common experience among decolonising small states is the survival of colonial bureaucratic structures.

Democratic systems typically adopt a combination of three types of veto that provide a check against executive authority: bicameralism, presidentialism (or separation of the executive from the legislature) or federalism (Shapiro, 2003). Tuvalu, like most small states in the Pacific (Ugyel, 2017), has none of these and, in the absence of political parties, post-colonial politics has been characterised by perpetually shifting coalitions and executive instability. Disproportionate costs are one rationale for the existence of this streamlined institutional architecture (discussed further below), but, the adoption of Westminster style government was also a price Tuvalu paid for its independence (McIntyre, 2012).

Since independence, Tuvaluans have attempted to alter these transferred institutions to better suit their circumstances (Levine, 1992). Section 111(2) of *The Constitution of Tuvalu* provides for bills to be sent for 'consideration' and 'comment' to each of the island councils following their introduction into parliament. Here is one Tuvaluan politician's (author interview) description of how this system works in practice:

And our system [is] very democratic . . . the bills from parliament . . . they come out to the people on each island to scrutinise. So, the MP takes the Bill and explains it to them, and they say "No, no" do it this way and they make the amendments as they want. So, it is not the second house like the House of Lords . . . the second house is everybody on the island who comments on the Bill.

Councils cannot block bills but they can propose amendments. However, as Taafaki and Oh (1995) concede, bills are written in English and use complex legal language, and so communities often find their contents hard to understand, thus restricting scrutiny. Moreover, tradition dictates that women and youth (generally younger than 30 years of age) are largely absent from both island and national decision-making forums (Fraenkel, 2006; Huffer, 2006; Kofe and Taomia, 2006) and so, much like the ancient Greek *polis*, these councils tend to be presided over by senior men.<sup>2</sup>

In the mid-1990s, the Tuvaluan government began a review of local government administration, with technical assistance from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (Larmour, 1996, pp. 91-92). This process included the establishment of a Peoples' Congress of local councillors, traditional leaders and NGO representatives who recommended

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<sup>2</sup> Custom dictates that the eldest person (male) in the family makes decisions on behalf of the group. Exceptions obviously exist and there are variations between islands.

greater devolution of power from Funafuti, the capital and urban centre, to island councils. This culminated in the *Falekaupule Act 1997* which gave local assemblies on each of the eight islands full jurisdiction over their administrative affairs, and, as a result, local government fulfils many of the powers typically ascribed to the nation state in Tuvalu (Panapa and Fraenkel, 2008, p. 6; Oppong, 2016). For our purposes, the important point is that politics in Tuvalu is both small *and* devolved, which is why it represents such an important case for scholars interested in the normative potential of small size for democratic politics.

There are no institutionalised political parties in Tuvalu that reflect crosscutting social, ethnic, geographic or ideological cleavages (Panapa and Fraenkel, 2008; Paeniu, 2012, p. 6). Following Westminster conventions, the group that commands a majority on the floor of parliament forms government with the remaining MPs forming a *de facto* opposition. Personal connections, including those from school and work, along with long-standing disputes and rivalries, all influence how coalitions rise and fall, as does the allocation of ministerial portfolios (Panapa and Fraenkel, 2008; Corbett and Fraenkel, 2016). Like elsewhere in the Pacific, in the absence of institutionalised political parties, governments formed on the floor of parliament are regularly toppled by votes-of-no-confidence. In Tuvalu, coalition numbers are particularly precarious (usually the parliament is split 8-7) and so the decision of one MP to switch sides can bring down the government.

Attempts to combat this trend and ensure a more stable executive have included increasing the number of ministerial portfolios so that they match the numerical threshold of a minimum winning coalition. However, for the most part, these reforms have failed to substantially alter existing dynamics. The prevailing view is that the constant manoeuvring of members has a negative impact on parliamentary proceedings. In the aftermath of the *Falekaupule Act 1997*, the 1999 *Report of the National Workshop on Accountability for Leaders of Tuvalu* (Panapa and Fraenkel, 2008, p. 2), parliament had ‘failed miserably’ and was unable to hold ‘officials and public institutions to account for the use of public resources in a timely manner’ (Clements, 2000; Taafaki, 2004, p. 19; Paeniu, 2012, p. 11). It was against the backdrop of this sentiment that changes to the function of the PAC were adopted.

### **Democratic innovation: the case of Tuvalu’s Public Accounts Committee**

The function of the PAC is outlined in a number of pieces of legislation, including the *Public Finance Act, 1978*, the *Audit Act 2007*, and the *Parliamentary Rules of Procedure 2008*. In practice, the committee has primarily operated as a forum for ‘ordinary members’ (those without ministerial portfolios) to review the annual report of Tuvalu’s Auditor General, inquire into its contents, and report back to the parliament. The Auditor General is responsible to the Office of Parliament and reports directly to parliament through the Office of the Speaker. The Clerk of Parliament acts as the secretary for the PAC while the Auditor General provides technical advice. Parliament does not have the resources or staffing capacity to run the PAC’s secretariat function and so the Audit Office undertakes this task. Section 49(3) of the *Rules of Procedure 2008* states that ‘The committee may at any time co-opt one non-voting member to assist it in the performance of its functions under this Rule’. Between the mid-2000s and the mid-2010s, this position was a regular feature of the PAC’s membership.

The Parliament of Tuvalu has four standing committees; but the PAC is the most active. The Speaker appoints its three parliamentary members with the co-opted member appointment made on the advice of the PAC chair. There is a legal conjecture about whether the co-option is actually permitted by the *Rules of Procedure 2008* as, in contradiction to Section 49(3), Section 45(7) states that ‘A select committee may co-opt as non voting members persons who

have been but are not Members up to a limit of two-third of the Members of Parliament on the committee.’ On 11 April 2013, the Attorney General provided an opinion at the request of the Auditor General that the practices described below are in contravention of the *Rules of Procedure 2008*. This development is particularly important in relation to the payment of co-opted members (again, discussed further below) but also attempts to create new legislation that governs the operation of the PAC.

### Inclusiveness

In line with the belief that democracies with deep citizen engagement make better decisions, the first criterion Smith (2009) outlines is the capacity for democratic innovations to overcome unequal participation. In the absence of direct democracy, purely based on its population size, it is hard to imagine a more inclusive or ‘face to face’ representative polity than that modelled by Tuvalu. As Dahl (1998, p. 110) argued, small political units are supposed to naturally beget greater citizen participation, and, as we saw with the *Falekaupule Act 1997*, despite its small size, and setting aside prevailing traditions that appear to side-line women and youth, Tuvalu has a history of further decentralising decision-making to ensure that the views of all its citizens are included. Yet, MPs are still subject to many of the same criticisms that they attract in large states (Stoker, 2006). The UNDP’s Legislative Needs Assessment, for example, found that members of the public were critical of MPs for being too distant from their island constituencies, for not seeking their views aside from at election time, and for not actively consulting them about key decisions before parliament (Loney, 2009; also Spina, 2014).

Putting this apparent paradox to one side, the prevailing view is that the decision to co-opt members of the public onto the PAC was not primarily taken in the interests of inclusiveness, but rather to boost technical capacity. As discussed, by the late 1990s, there was growing concern that parliament was not functioning as well as it should be (Loney, 2009). This matched the outlook of international aid donors – substantial contributors to Tuvalu’s revenue – who increasingly sought to promote ‘good governance’ reforms in the Pacific by improving public financial management in particular (Oppong, 2016). One of the problems identified during this period was the ineffectiveness of Tuvalu’s parliamentary committee system and in particular the capacity of the PAC. In both cases, the small size of the parliament underpinned the perceived capacity deficit. The view was that there were not enough MPs with backgrounds in accounting or public finance to provide robust scrutiny of government policy. As one MP outlined (author interview): ‘We just needed somebody with the knowledge who can help out with the process’. Moreover, because governments are regularly toppled by votes of no confidence in Tuvalu, former ministers were often in the awkward position of being asked to review their own budgets. I will discuss this latter phenomenon below but, for now, the important point is that parliament resolved to use the co-opted member function primarily in the interests of boosting the technical capacity of the PAC not to increase inclusiveness or participation.

In the first instance, three members were co-opted onto the committee (two former government officials with Treasury experience and one church pastor). I will discuss the politics of the selection process further below – it is a matter of some contention – but for now the important point is that the co-opted members have tended to be senior men. Again, prevailing cultural norms aside, size underpins this trend. Co-opted members cannot be drawn from the largest pool of technically trained citizens – the civil service – whose budgets are being reviewed, and so candidates with the necessary expertise are largely restricted to retirees, clergy (more than 90% of Tuvaluans are members of the Tuvalu Christian Church, see

Goldsmith, 2005) and the (very small) private sector (skills shortages in small states commonly require the importation of expatriate labour).

So, the lesson in relation to Smith's (2009) framework is that small does not always mean inclusive or egalitarian as certain groups, including women and youths, remain marginalised from both the PAC and other representative processes in Tuvalu. Indeed, while inclusiveness has featured as a rationale for institutional reform in the past, it was not the driving motivation behind changes to the PAC, which are largely concerned with improving the technical performance of parliament.

### Popular control

The second criterion in Smith's (2009) framework is the capacity of innovations to empower citizens: do citizens have effective control over significant elements of decision-making? That is, recognising that all representative institutions, no matter how inclusive their design, do not meet the ideal of direct democracy, Smith (2009) asks us to consider whether citizen's views are being increasingly taken into account on the strength of these reforms. Again, Tuvalu presents us with a mixed picture.

Popular control is a watchword in large states where the bureaucratic machinery has become 'depersonalised'. Conversely, echoing Laslett (1956), in small states 'everybody knows everybody' and leaders are called upon to play multiple roles; managing real or imagined conflicts of interest is a perpetual concern. In such circumstances, some interviewees believe that the public has too much control over decision-making. Conversely, as we saw with the *Falekaupule Act 1997*, despite its size, a desire to increase popular control is manifestly apparent in Tuvalu and, according to the UNDP (Loney, 2009), this desire persists notwithstanding the mid-1990s reforms. Indeed, one of the features of small societies is that a small elite group continues to dominate public life because its skills make it a critical contributor in a range of settings (Richards, 1982, p. 157; Corbett and Veenendaal, forthcoming). For MPs, serving constituents means being able to preferentially channel resources, usually obtained via access to ministerial portfolios, to island communities (Paeniu, 2012, p. 11). As Larmour (1999, p. 159) highlights, central governments (and individual ministers) in small states will take a much more detailed interest in the location and activity of government vehicles, ships and other equipment, as well as the design and construction of things like clinics and sea walls, than they would in large states. More generally, the civil service is the main employer in Tuvalu (most extended families have at least one member in the civil service) and these moneyed 'elites' are expected to subsidise numerous community activities.

In relation to the PAC, the public has little control over the agenda, which is largely determined by the Auditor's report and committee members. Co-opted members cannot vote on the PAC; however, this is generally seen to be of minor importance as decisions are usually taken on the basis of consensus with all members fully participating in deliberations. The process of appointing and sacking members is another way to indicate control and, again, there is some conjecture over where this power lies. The Attorney General's opinion (6 February 2013) is that the Speaker has the power to select and (potentially) dismiss members; but calling meetings is the purview of the chair. In either case, the co-opted member's position is largely contingent on the tacit support of both the Speaker and the Chair. They do not have the protection of a secure parliamentary term afforded to MPs, nor the popular mandate, but they are not faced with the regular uncertainty of elections either.



So, the lesson in this case is that while small size can deepen community participation in the way that participatory and deliberative democrats presume, it can also lead to instability, deep factionalism, and, as I will discuss further below, personality politics and patronage-based appointments.

### Considered judgement

Smith's (2009) framework is not only interested in deepening citizen participation and control of decision-making; it is also concerned with how innovation fosters an environment where informed judgements or an 'enlarged mentality' can be realised. Arguably, this rationale is the most important criterion for understanding innovations to the PAC process in Tuvalu. Successive UNDP reports argue that MPs and PAC members should receive more training about committee rules and procedures (Morgan and Hegarty, 2003; Loney, 2009). Moreover, the high rotation of MPs, either during elections or votes-of-no-confidence, is said to limit the development of effective institutional memory on the PAC.

Whether the co-opted members improve the capacity of the committee to make informed judgements is a matter of considerable contention. Some interviewees agree with the view that the co-opted member provides continuity, stability and institutional memory to what is otherwise a fairly fluid membership. Others argue that while the co-opted member is contributing, problems relating to the capacity of the committee to understand complex financial matters remain, as one MP outlined (author interview, 2014):

The current member ... is contributing ... especially on issues that are of interest [or] he has some knowledge ... [But] its quite difficult for him to understand as well.

Perversely, a similar point is made about one of Tuvalu's other main democratic innovations – sending bills to island communities for comment and amendment – as this MP argued (author interview):

We already requested the Office of the Speaker and the Attorney General that a legal person from the Attorney General's office should be available when each island discusses this legislation, because, as I see it, it is a waste of time. ... People do not understand it ... the decisions are so complicated and [they are] not even in the local language.

In the case of the PAC, the *Rules of Procedure 2008* provide for the Auditor General to act as an adviser to the committee – and this is a practised convention – which, in theory, should aid informed deliberations. Moreover, the Audit Office briefs the PAC on the contents of its reports prior to the commencement of hearings and assists with drafting the final report. The advantage of this arrangement is that Audit Office staff are well-versed in the subject matter. The disadvantage is that it takes them away from their core role. Ideally, parliament would fund its own secretariat staff but, given resource constraints, this has not been possible. So, the lesson is that small size creates capacity problems that, despite innovative reform attempts, make it difficult to retain the skills required to run institutions created for large states.

The question of informed judgement then turns on the selection of committee members with the necessary skills and expertise to make use of this advice. The Speaker decides on the required three from the pool of 'ordinary' MPs. In most cases, this pool is made up of former ministers from the previous government or, after elections, new members. The general view is that selection of the co-opted member was highly politicised. In small states, strong cultures of compliance and community activity often operate alongside deep factionalism; community

bonds run deeper but so do enmities (Richards, 1982, p. 160). In this vein, Hassall (2012, p. 225), for example, notes systemic problems with the nature of committee appointments in the Pacific, including their use as a vehicle of political patronage.

Personal loyalties and antipathies are central to political practice in Tuvalu, including appointments to the PAC, with most interviewees asserting that the position of co-opted member became a spoil of office to be distributed by the winning majority and the Speaker in particular, and that this practice has undermined the initial intent of improving capacity. In response, there is some discussion about creating criteria against which a merit-based selection could be applied. However, when ‘everybody knows everybody’, all such processes attract critique from the unsuccessful party. Supporters of particular co-opted members, for example, believe that regardless of political affiliations they were the best person for the job. Moreover, alliances change and so while a co-opted member may be appointed by a particular parliamentary faction, the fact that some co-opted members, for example, stayed longer than the government who initially appointed him suggests that either the position was not as highly politicised as some interviewees claim, or, that co-opted members were themselves adept political operators.

### Transparency

By transparency, Smith’s (2009) framework seeks to ascertain how open processes are to outside observers: do citizens know what is going on? How are proceedings communicated? Like inclusiveness, small states are said to have a natural level of transparency in that the highly personalised nature of daily life means that little can be hidden from public view (Wettenhall and Thynne, 1994, p. 68; Corbett, 2015). Values often described as ‘traditional’ include reciprocity, status, gift-giving and family ties, are all central to social relations in Tuvalu. Naturally, this spills over into elections, although, in such circumstances, gift-giving is usually intentionally conspicuous with prospective candidates making presentations to influential leaders, key supporters and the community as a whole (Taafaki, 2004). So, transparency is high but impartiality, independence and strict separation between public and private is blurred, spawning accusations of corruption (Larmour, 2012), and interminable speculation and gossip about what might remain concealed (Besnier, 2009). Taafaki (2004) argues that cultural norms dictate that senior community figures receive deferential treatment, with customs officers declining to inspect their bags, for example. And, as we saw, accusations of political interference are common, including in relation to the function of the PAC.

Formal oversight mechanisms are largely absent in Tuvalu; the PAC is the main oversight body. This has been of particular concern to donors interested in fiduciary control of aid funds. The *Leadership Code Act 2007* outlines the conduct expected of holders of public offices and makes provisions for an Ombudsman, but this position was only filled in 2014. PAC reports are rarely debated in parliament. There are some exceptions – the late 2000s are cited as a period when opposition members pushed to have the reports debated – but conventionally reports are tabled but not discussed or revisited.

In theory, with around half the population located on the main island of Funafuti, information about the PAC should naturally disseminate among citizens, with the co-opted member aiding this process. As one MP somewhat flippantly commented (author interview):

[The co-opted member is there so] ... that when people ask about the report he can explain to them ‘they have gone through that, these people have done their work’. It seems as though he is a spy [laughter].

However, while the co-opted member could function as the ‘people’s spy’, the accusation of patronage, discussed above, works against this interpretation, while most interviewees argued that the work of the PAC was not well understood outside parliament:

I think the knowledge stops with the member because unless the report is debated in parliament, then the public will [not] be in a position to know what’s happening with the public accounts discussion. But otherwise there is no avenue where the co-opted member can disclose the issues discussed. (Tuvaluan politician, author interview)

Parliament attracts a great radio following in Tuvalu and so issues raised in debates reach a wide audience. Conversely, Transparency International’s National Integrity Systems Study (Taafaki, 2004, p. 22) describes the media environment as ‘ruthlessly censored’ on the grounds that all media is government owned and economies of scale work against the establishment of an independent press.

So, the lesson is that small size can provide a natural level of transparency but it also works against the clear lines of accountability (including an independent press) so prized by the liberal democratic tradition.

### Efficiency

Since the 1980s, decentralisation has been championed by donors seeking to increase efficiency, and by extension economic development, in developing countries (Snyder, Ludi, Cullen, Tucker, Zeleke, & Duncan, 2014). However, while Tuvalu’s population is a little over 10,000 living on a land area of 26 km<sup>2</sup>, it has a vast oceanic exclusive economic zone (900,000 km<sup>2</sup>). Interviewees argue that this combination of small population, archipelagicity and large water expanse works against the efficiency that donors prescribe elsewhere. Recent research by The World Bank finds a strong negative correlation between optimal public financial management performance in the Pacific and the small size of the countries concerned (Haque, Knight and Jayasuria, 2012; Pelizzo, 2010; O’Brien, Stapenhurst and Prater, 2012). In this view, small polities suffer from capacity constraints.

Tuvalu’s parliament generally only meets a few times a year for a period of five days at a time. In relation to the PAC, it can be a logistical challenge to disseminate background material and hold meetings outside these periods if MPs are in their constituency (aside from the capital, all islands are serviced by ship). Secondly, resource constraints mean that Tuvalu’s parliament has no permanent facilities but rather meets in a multi-purpose meetinghouse or *maneaba* (Loney, 2009). Apart from physical facilities, support services, including for legislative drafting, library and research, committee secretariats, Hansard, management of human and financial resources, and the establishment and maintenance of information technology and internet services, are either absent or irregular (Hassall, 2012, p. 214). And, as we have seen, costs prohibit parliament employing its own committee secretariat and work against the establishment of an independent press.

The ubiquity of questions about efficiency in this context is further highlighted by the controversy over whether and how much co-opted members ought to be paid for their work on the PAC. MPs are entitled to a sitting fee of US\$70 per day (US\$75 for the chairman), which, in Tuvalu, is a reasonable amount of money. The PAC sits for between 2-4 weeks per year. However, the PAC report for the financial year ending 2012 (tabled on 13 January 2014) notes that officials and co-opted members were not getting their sitting allowances and recommends a future budget line to rectify this.

Interviewees were divided over the question of remuneration. Some felt that co-opted members should be paid in line with MPs (this had been the established practice). Others argued that, as the position had become increasingly politicised, co-opted members did not provide value for money. The Attorney General's opinion of 11 April 2013 is that co-opted members are not entitled to allowances on the grounds that the *Prescription of Salaries Act* only provides for the payment of the Governor General, Prime Minister and MPs. According to Section 45 (7) of the *Rules of Procedure 2008*, co-opted members must be MPs and only then can they collect allowances.

In either case, the important lesson is that small size can be costly and inefficient due to the absence of economies of scale.

### Transferability

The question of transfer permeates the history of democratic institutions in Tuvalu, and so, in many respects, it is difficult to know where to start with Smith's (2009) final criterion. As we saw, Tuvalu's institutional architecture could be described as an example of ill-conceived transfer of political institutions ostensibly designed for and by a large state (United Kingdom) onto a small one. From this perspective, the changes discussed here can in part be construed as an attempt to overcome the shortfalls of the initial design. As Wettenhall and Thynne (1994, p. 83) argue, smallness 'sensibly propels' governments to innovate and the best solutions usually emerge from within. By this logic, Tuvalu's experience is very much a product of its distinctive history and scale, and as such has little to offer other states interested in these questions. This may be true in the sense that all such reforms are products of a particular history; but that does not stop us considering how aspects of the Tuvaluan approach might be applied elsewhere. Certainly, given that organisations like UNDP have been central to existing reform efforts in Tuvalu, we might expect them to consider whether the transfer of these arrangements to other countries is worthwhile.

The most obvious form of transfer would be to other small states where similar capacity deficits are apparent. While much of this article is concerned with the question of whether 'small is beautiful', the spirit of that phrase nevertheless recognizes that the experience of small states can contribute to our wider understanding of political and human affairs (Murray, 1981, p. 249), and the most immediate practical lessons are for countries of a similar size. However, while other small states might be interested in aspects of this innovation, the case study has shown that the process has not been without its challenges. Indeed, while this particular 'solution' may have partly emerged from 'within', actors continue to debate whether it worked

There is no obvious reason why the type of innovation trialled by Tuvalu's PAC could not be transferred to large states, but there are numerous arguments for why it is unlikely. Most obviously, the rationale for co-opting members would be entirely different in large states where parliaments are less likely to lack MPs with specific technical expertise.

Moreover, the problem of ministers reviewing their own budgets can largely be avoided in larger parliaments by simply selecting former government backbenchers as committee members. As such, in large states the rationale for co-opting members of the public would more likely stem from a desire to deepen citizen participation in decision making. However, while it may be normatively desirable to have ordinary citizens rather than professional politicians overseeing government expenditure, selection still poses a problem. 'Ordinary citizens' would have to be defined and identified. As in Tuvalu, this process would be highly politicised, and, eventually, calls for greater democratisation would follow. This might take two forms: 1) a

nation-wide ballot, like jury service or citizen juries (Smith and Wales, 2000), in which selection was random; or 2) an election. The problem with the latter option is that it is not entirely clear how these elected ‘ordinary citizens’ would be different to the average MP.

In either case, the Tuvaluan experience suggests that democratic disaffection remains despite changes to the PAC and the longer running reforms initiated via the *Falekaupule Act 1997*. In turn, this poses key questions for those advocating ‘scaled down’ democracy in large states.

### **Conclusion: reconsidering the normative potential of small size**

The ‘small is beautiful’ proposition assumes that large states have much to be gained by ‘scaling-down’ their institutions in order to deepen and strengthen citizen participation. The Tuvaluan case is an inversion of this logic as the co-option of members of the public onto the PAC might best be described as an attempt to ‘scale-up’ its procedures by increasing the capacity, and by extension authority, of parliamentary oversight regimes. Rather than large size being a problem, the consensus among the actors canvassed here is that being small is a barrier to the performance of the Parliament of Tuvalu. Using Smith’s (2009) framework, I identified the following challenges that arose from Tuvalu’s PAC innovation:

1. Small does not always mean inclusive or egalitarian: certain groups, including women and youth, remain marginalised from both the PAC and other representative processes in Tuvalu;
2. Small size can provide a natural level of transparency but it also works against the clear lines of accountability (including an independent press) so prized by the liberal democratic tradition;
3. Small size can create capacity deficits that, despite innovative reform attempts like those outlined here, make it difficult to retain the skills required to run institutions created for large states (especially across vast territories);
4. Small size can create a deep sense of community of the type that participatory and deliberative democrats extol, but it can also lead to instability, deep factionalism, personality politics and patronage-based appointments;
5. Small size can be costly and inefficient due to the absence of economies of scale; and
6. Small size does not necessarily reduce democratic disaffection, despite extensive attempts to reform institutions in the ways that deliberative and participatory democratic theorists suggest.

When seeking general lessons from the Tuvaluan case, we might argue that, as an extreme example of smallness, there is little to be learnt aside from emphasising that somewhere between ‘small’ and ‘large’ exists the ideal size of a democratic polity. Haque et al. (2012, p. 24) argue that a population size of 500,000 represents such a threshold in their study of public financial management performance, where citizens no longer seek to adapt democratic institutions on the grounds that they are too ‘small’ and instead focus on problems of ‘largeness’, namely by prescribing devolution and decentralisation. The problem with this argument, however, is that it is not borne out in Tuvalu where the *Falekaupule Act 1997* was

explicitly designed to decentralise decision-making so that it better reflected community opinion. Elsewhere among the small states of the Pacific, a similar dynamic unfolds, with citizens demanding ‘grassroots’ institutional reform to address the perceived failure of governments to meet their needs (Larmour, 1999). Nauru (population 10,000) has both a local and national government (Wettenhall and Thynne, 1994). And Palau (population 20,000) has a federal presidential system along the lines of the US: it has a 25-member bicameral parliament and each of its 16 states has a legislature, governor, lieutenant governor, bureaucracy, Council of Chiefs, etc., including the state of Hatohobei (population 100) (Veenendaal, 2016).

As a representation of this more general trend, the Tuvaluan case asks us to consider whether there is a naturally optimal size of a democratic polity, as all governments, no matter their size, face pressures to decentralise (Veenendaal and Corbett, 2015). Theoretically, this interpretation supports recent moves by political geographers to critically examine the ways we present different scales as static and reified categories. Practically, the lesson for large states seeking to ‘scale down’ and small states seeking to ‘scale up’ democratic institutions is a cautionary one: normative appeals to ideal scales of decision-making do not disappear, no matter how small or large a polity is. As we have seen, ‘scaling-down’ may ameliorate some of the problems that scholars identify with the practice of politics in larger states, including the creation of a polity where ‘face to face’ interactions are the norm, but the Tuvaluan case illustrates that these same advantages inevitably generate problems of their own (Veenendaal, 2015; Erk and Veenendaal, 2014).

So, when it comes to democracy, is small really beautiful? At the very least the Tuvalu case shows that (like large states) in practice the situation is more complex than it appears at face value; and much of this complexity stems from the interplay between size and institutional design. As we have seen, many of the challenges actors see as confronting the practice of democratic politics in Tuvalu stem from ‘smallness’. We might argue, as many interviewees have, that the PAC initiative was poorly conceived and requires amendment. We could also argue that the PAC innovation was limited by factors other than size, including economic capacity and community education. The UNDP, for example, has recommended a community education campaign about the role and function of parliament, which falls in line with the deliberative democratic focus on ‘rationality’, so that confidence in the institution might be enhanced (Loney, 2009). However, these additional factors can also be directly attributed to the problem of small size, and so they do not solve the broader theoretical question. Small may be beautiful to some, especially when looking in from the outside, but from the inside it provides constant challenges of the type that large states often manage to avoid.

So, the lesson for deliberative and participatory democrats from one of the world’s smallest states is: size matters; but not necessarily in the manner theory predicts or in ways that fulfil normative desires.

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