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My friend Fa'anānā Efeso Collins was a highly educated and principled man. He wove a political path that navigated modern normativity in Auckland, Samoan Christianity, Samoan cultural values, and with deep respect and acknowledgement of Māori Indigenous rights in New Zealand. Respect and equity - as difference rather than assimilation - were his core values that he actively promoted in a myriad of ways throughout his political career.

I met Efeso when we were both elected to the AUSA student executive in 1995-1996. He was the first in his family to attend university. He had already been identified as very able in academic terms, and was offered a place at Auckland Grammar School, but disliked the culture there, and after only two weeks returned to his former school, Tangaroa College in Otara. That early activist initiative - the ability to analyse the situation combined with a recognition of the importance of community and ethics, is what always stood out about Fa'anānā Efeso Collins. He could see through the obfuscation and make decisions, without being offensive about it. Efeso shone.

His psychology was among the healthiest of anyone I've ever known. Efeso is the youngest child of six, from a Samoan-Tokelauan family. His working-class, first-generation immigrant parents have close Indigenous cultural roots and strong Christian faith. His warm family adore him. Efeso made the most of the solidness of Otara's large wooden houses and open spaces. He thrived in his community. He understood the poverty, discrimination and poor educational and health outcomes that permeates the Polynesian community. He was consistently determined to help the community through better policies, better education and other opportunities. From his school days, already identified as in the top academic echelon of his community, Efeso wanted to leverage his education and gain democratic leadership positions, where he could best help the Pasifika, Māori, and New Zealand communities that helped create him.

Several years ago, he was recognised with the Samoan Matai title of Fa'anānā for his mother's village in Satufia, Satupaitea, in Savai'i, in Samoa. He was a politician, a university lecturer in Education and Youth Development at Auckland University and designed and ran youth development programmes for a variety of organisations for South Auckland youth, over many years. In many ways, Fa'anānā Efeso has been a pathfinder, paving the way for subsequent generations to thrive in the modern diaspora.

In my opinion, Māori and Pasifika cultures are the lodestone for genuine values in Aotearoa. They are not only a unique and core element of New Zealand's identity. Pasifika and Māori cultures put the highest priority on relationships: family, community, and ecological relationships. In Māori, this is called whakapapa. It is fundamentally about whenua, which has a dual meaning in English, both land and womb. Whenua symbolises the intimacy and equity that permeate Māori and Pasifika engagement with the environment, where essentially, everything is related. In Samoan, whenua is fenua. The basic elements of relational values, spirituality, and norms are very similar.

Fa'anānā Efeso saw himself as a bridge between Pacific people and the whole of Aotearoa. This bridge involved raising the value of Pasifika people. Polynesians in the 1970s and 1980s were often seen as 'overstayers' who were coloured and working class. Fa'anānā Efeso has been an important figure in embracing the opportunities provided by the modern State, education, and hard work, and at the same time bringing respect for deep Indigenous cultural values and a responsible, sophisticated, forward-looking approach to contemporary society and future generations.

When we first met, Kilani, Efeso and I were some of the most independent thinkers on the AUSA Executive, and not unrelatedly, we were each representing 'minority' groups; I was the Women's Rights officer, Efeso was Pasifika and Kilani was Māori. The three of us made up our own minds about issues, and refused to get drawn into the Party line, dictated by the Executive Secretary. For me especially, this caused a lot of strain. Efeso though, had a calm and sweet personality, that belied the iron fist within the velvet glove. He would always hear out the dominant white liberal voices, so sure they were correct in their advice and governance, and then he would quietly make up his own mind about what was good for his constituency. Efeso was a tall and well-built man with an open, ebullient smile. He took up a lot of physical space. But his warm, kind disposition meant that a lot of longstanding Exec members underestimated his determination, character and ambitions for Indigenous people. Whereas I lacked patience in my 20s for dealing with racist, ignorant, and opinionated fellow politicians, Efeso was an exemplar of quiet, effective self-assurance. Fa'anānā Efeso was only 19 when he was elected to the Student Executive. But his maturity was already monumental. He had really good boundaries, which he held in a non-confrontational way. Unlike me, he did not let himself get in his own way.

The three of us achieved a great deal in those few years. Our major concern was the debate about equity. We wondered about the dominant concept of assimilation: the assumption that equality assumed that everyone needs to be exactly the same, and the role of difference and equity. If you accept that we are all different, is it better to make an 'equal playing field' or is the goal equity of outcomes? For Efeso, Kilani, and I, the goal was the latter. I joined forces with Jan Logie, and we organised large student hui all over the country. As part of the shared passion for equity shared with Efeso and Kilani, I gave speeches about equity of outcome versus equality of opportunity at very large meetings at nearly every university across the country. I made lots of room for feedback, both at the events and through written submissions. Students were asked to give me ideas about how minorities could thrive.

Despite being over 50% of the general population, women were between 30 and 40% of the student population at that point. Māori were about 10% of the general population but merely 2 or 3 % of the student body, and Pasifika were even less. At the end of the year, I wrote a 'Blue Skies Scenario' with the Union lawyer, Becky Beller. We looked at the very hierarchical university organisational chart and imagined it in an entirely new way. With the input from thousands of students from across the country ringing in my ears, we rearranged the hierarchy of university committees so that the 'equal opportunity committee' which sat at the bottom of the heap, was transformed into two, and placed at the top of the hierarchy.

We posited one committee for gender equity and the other for Indigeneity, and every other committee in the entire university had to get any new initiatives signed off by both of them. It was revolutionary. The presence and voice of Efeso and Kilani had a big impact on this proposal. At the

end of the year, I tabled the proposal to the low level 'equal opportunities' committee at the University of Auckland. The Chair tried to stop me from submitting it, and successfully stopped me from speaking to it. But I submitted 'from the floor.' I also sent the proposal to the New Zealand University Vice Chancellor's Committee.

Only a year or two later, a new Vice Chancellor, Kit Carson, took over the University of Auckland. The first thing he did was restructure the university with two equity committees at the top of the hierarchy. Having two high level equity committees in the University structure has made an extraordinary difference to educational outcomes for Indigenous people, students of colour, and women in New Zealand. The transformation, perhaps by coincidence, has made an impact across the world. Kilani, Efeso and I contributed ideas and support to each other, not just for that initiative, but across multiple issues. The measured, kind, compassionate, and humorous support from Efeso and Kilani, along with their wisdom and perspective, were vital for the struggle to get this initiative through.

Two years later, I left student politics to focus on my Master's degree. Efeso moved forward and became the AUSA Student President in 1999. This was one of many elected leadership positions that Efeso campaigned for. At every opportunity, he opened up space for Pasifika and Indigenous leadership that was inclusive, generous, thoughtful, and well planned. His Executive loved his leadership, and the student body thrived during his years there.

He also finished his Master's degree in Education. For 15 years, Fa'anānā Efeso ran a Pacific Student Outreach Programme, encouraging and supporting the Pasifika community to thrive in tertiary education. He also ran various volunteer youth outreach programmes, like MATES, aimed at school students.

Fa'anānā Efeso followed up his student politics with a political career in the Labour Party. But he met similar resistance to more equitable policies there, as I had at the Equality Committee. Despite his serious work ethic and his generous and far-reaching ideas, and the respect that he was proffered by the wider community, Fa'anānā Efeso was never fostered by the Labour Party to become an MP. Eventually, he decided to run for the Mayoralty of Auckland. Again, the Labour Party were loud in their silence and refused to endorse his candidature until the last minute.

I was a senior member of the Greens and a little earlier had joined a drive to widen the Party from its middle-class white roots to a more diverse and inclusive membership. This did not come without hiccups. One Matai who joined the Greens with a large number of his aiga at that time, had countless run ins with the erstwhile co-convenor of the Auckland branch, who could not cope with the 'bloc' voting. In reality, there was no bloc voting. Merely that the Samoan group discussed policies from their own community and environmental kin perspective and came largely to a consensus about them. The Greens were set up to optimise consensus decision making, so this should never have been a problem. But to some, it prevented politically expedient policies going through. The conflict was so aggressive, that sadly, the Matai and his followers all left. Nevertheless, lessons were learned by the Green Party, and the leadership changed to reflect a desire for more openness to Indigenous voices. The Labour Party is much older and larger and has not had such quick and versatile response to the demands of new voices like Fa'anānā Efeso. No doubt though, he has had a lasting impact there and opened the way for other Pasifika people to thrive.

But the resistance to marginalised voices has not been limited to political parties. Fa'anānā Efeso also had to put up with enormous amounts of hate mail. Like women who enter the political sphere, Indigenous people bear the brunt of reactionary, vicious, and anonymous mail from the public. Since the advent of the internet, this has become a world-wide problem. Labour leader, Jacinda Ardern, left her role as Prime Minister and began research and advocacy on how to address hate mail.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Fa'anānā Efeso and his family were very exposed to this kind of hatred. The worst of it was a bomb scare at their apartment in South Auckland, when his wife and two

daughters had to be evacuated. In 2021, bomb threats were made after Fa'anānā Efeso had criticised the TV show *Police Ten 7* for negatively stereotyping Māori and Polynesian people. He opened up about this incident to a large church gathering. As he explained to *The Spinoff*, "There's a cost when you're trying to make a difference, and I wanted to share that with them. But also, that having a faith has reminded me I can turn to a source that's beyond me, and I can find strength from that." He managed to find a lot to be grateful about, in the midst of severe and ongoing hate mail.

I have no doubt, that Fa'anānā Efeso's community orientation, responsibility, generosity, and openhearted personality meant that he was affected by it as a signal of hostility from a large sector of society. In Germany in 2024, Karamba Diaby, the first African born politician, stepped down because of the extent of hate mail. It contributed to the resignation of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. Fa'anānā Efeso received another death threat in September 2023, but he kept going in a society he was deeply committed to helping. I agree with many of the Samoan community who regarded this level of hatred as a large contributing factor in his premature death at just 49 years old.

In the short period he was in Parliament, Fa'anānā Efeso Collins was already showing up as a key Green Party speaker in Opposition. He began his maiden speech in fluent Māori, and in another speech, challenged the National Party on their attack of the Treaty of Waitangi. He challenged the reintroduction of 90-day trials eroding workers' rights, and in support of public transport. He has been outspoken on the lack of direction and commitment to addressing climate change.

Fa'anānā Efeso has already had a profound impact though, on the wellbeing of his community, and his leadership in the wider social and political community. In particular, he embraced Māoritanga and te Tiriti o Waitangi and put respect and whanaungatanga at the centre of his policies and perspective. This was not merely an engagement with Māori as Indigenous hosts, but a highly sophisticated and well-educated approach to diversity and the intra-relationship of people and environment. He was deeply concerned about climate change, and trying to implement policies to do something about it. Fa'anānā Efeso was emerging as a thought leader, as we navigate through the meta-crisis that dominates the contemporary world.

There is a sense that Fa'anānā Efeso was struck out before he really had the chance to get much done. He joined the Greens and immediately made it high on the Party list. Fa'anānā Efeso had finally made it into Parliament after trying to gain traction for so long. He had only just given his maiden speech and was such a promising MP. It takes a lot to have the intelligence, wit, and perseverance to gain university qualifications at a time when brown faces were only 2 or 3% of the student body. But Efeso rose and lead the entire Student Union. He did it out of a strong sense of service, of fairness and equity. He took those skills, values, and education out into the public but found the liberal normativity of New Zealand politics withstood all his charisma and expertise, until his late 40s. The respect he held for environmental and Indigenous thought is sorely needed in political leadership, and carved out a pathway for others to follow. And the practical and compassionate care he had for South Auckland will have a long-lasting impact.

Thank you, Efeso, for having the courage and audacity to be the person you were. Your friendship meant a great deal to me.

## Notes on contributor

**Ruth Irwin** is the author of the new book *Economic Futures: Climate Change and Modernity*, Rowman & Littlefield (2024), and 5 other books: *Heidegger, Politics and Climate Change* (2008), *Philosophy and Climate Change* (2010), *The Handbook of New Zealand Education Policy* (2010), *Beyond the Free Market* (2014) and *Wild Pedagogies* (2018). She was Professor of Education at the University of Aberdeen and the University of Fiji.

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