



Government of the Cook Islands

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Australian National University Public Lecture – hosted by the Coral Bell School of Asia and Pacific Affairs

## **Australia, the Cook Islands and future co-operation**

### **Remarks delivered by the Hon. Henry Puna, Prime Minister of the Cook Islands**

*Monday 11 November 2019, Canberra*

*[Pe'e and Salutations]*

Noku ei toku purotu

No roto i te kutikuti o te rangi e

E Rongo e, ka turuturu o te kauariki ki runga

Ka turuturu o te kauariki ki runga

Kia Orana and Good Morning

May I first pay my respects and acknowledge the traditional custodians of this place and on whose traditional lands we meet, the Ngunnawal (NGOO-NA-WAL) people. To elders past, present and emerging, kia orana and greetings.

Can I acknowledge members of the diplomatic corp, academia and government officials – thank you for being here today.

To the Australian National University family - Vice-Chancellor Professor Brian P.Schmidt AC, Director of the Coral-Bell School of Asia-Pacific Professor Toni Erskin – thank you for the warm welcome and the invitation to visit today and share a few words about the Cook Islands, our relations with Australia and the future.

*[Armistice/Remembrance Day Respects]*

On this day, over a century ago in 1918, the guns of the Western Front fell silent after four years of continuous warfare.

May I on behalf of my Government and all of the people of the Cook Islands, join with you, and the Government and people of Australia in paying our deepest respects to the memories of all those brave men and women, sons and daughters of Australia who paid the ultimate sacrifice during the Great War and all wars since so that we may all enjoy the freedoms and blessings that we have today.

May we also on this Remembrance Day pay tribute to the sons and daughters of the Cook Islands and elsewhere in the Pacific – from Niue, Tonga, Tuvalu, Fiji, Samoa and Kiribati, who a century ago, and in years since, heeded the call to serve alongside New Zealand and Australia in the Great War and other wars since.

Between 1915 and 1918, almost 500 men, drawn from across all 15 islands of the Cook Islands voluntarily enlisted in the New Zealand Expeditionary Forces. They went on to serve alongside allied forces on the Western Front, at the Somme and Passchendaele, and in Egypt, Palestine and Gaza. Known as the Rarotonga Company of the NZ Expeditionary Forces, they were for the most part dispatched to unload supplies from surfboats off the Mediterranean Coast and carry ammunition for the Royal Artillery Eastern Force Unit. From historical accounts, they were “formidable workers, faster and stronger than others for the tasks they were allocated”.

While the quantum of 500 able bodied, Cook Islands men may seem miniscule compared to the thousands that perished from Australia and New Zealand, these 500 men constituted almost 6% of the total Cook Islands population at the time - a significant contribution by any standard and all the more remarkable given geographic isolation, transportation limitations and the islands of the Cook Islands spread over 2 million square kilometers.

We stood side by side on the battle field of the Great War and worked together a century ago, to secure the peace and security our peoples enjoy today. It was a bond that was forged on the battle fields of war and which endures to this day and is an integral part of the foundation upon which our countries and people should draw inspiration from for the future.

Though the battles of World War One were far from our islands shores, our contributions, voluntarily made, were significant. Our sacrifice keenly felt by our small island populations, and it is our collective duty to ensure those contributions live on and are woven into the fabric of the countries we were called to serve then, including Australia.

Auraka rava ratou kia akangaropoina ia – we will never forget them.

The pe'e, or traditional chant that I opened with is well known among my people. It pays tribute to the values, traditions and culture as passed down from generation to generation by our ancestors and implores our people to hold firm to those values, traditions and culture in charting the way forward and propelling ourselves into a future of enduring peace, security and prosperity.

And it is a chant which I draw inspiration on for our future relationship with Australia.

Just as our separate and collective security and prosperity was intertwined a century ago, so too will the separate and collective security and prosperity of Australia and the Cook Islands be intertwined into the future. So long as we continue to be guided by the Oceanic and Pacific Islands Forum co-operation values of past decades, we will ensure economic stability and prosperity, and strengthened security and resilience for the people of Australia, the Cook Islands and our Blue Pacific. Those values being open and genuine relationships,

inclusive and enduring partnerships, balancing our conservation stewardship responsibilities with our development imperatives and regional collective action that is respectful of independent and sovereign states.

*[The Cook Islands and Australia- historical beginnings]*

The ties between the Cook Islands and Australia predate colonial contact and stretch far into the depths of our shared oceanic history. Indeed, history records vibrant trade, movement and exchange between and amongst members of our oceanic family including the First Peoples of this land.

Since initial settlement of Australia and the Cook Islands millennia ago, there has been an intimate relationship between our peoples and the surrounding ocean, as we call her, Te Moana Nui a Kiva.

Since the beginning, Te Moana has been both a highway and a source of sustenance for countless generations of Cook Islanders and peoples of the Pacific.

*[The Cook Islands and Australia- contemporary engagement]*

In similar respect, the concept of Te Moana has expanded beyond traditional and literal definitions. The connectivity of peoples through the internet, a digital Moana if you will, has seen enhanced and unprecedented levels of information exchange, knowledge creation and resources, both tangible and intangible.

In considering contemporary engagement between Australia and the Cook Islands, educational exchange provides but one example of ongoing cooperation and people to people links.

I myself completed my Bachelor of Laws Degree at the University of Tasmania before coming here to the ANU, my alma mater, in 1980 to complete my prescribed six-month Professional Law Course for admission to the Bar.

My experience in Australia and the education I received in your great country have proven invaluable over the years, and an important part of my pathway to becoming Prime Minister of the Cook Islands in 2010. Witnessing the remarkable growth and development of the ANU since I was a student here reminds me of how the Cook Islands too has grown and developed over the years.

In 1965, through an act of self-determination witnessed by the United Nations, the Cook Islands became self-governing in free association with New Zealand. Unlike most other former colonies which shed their dependent status to become independent on one particular day, the Cook Islands political evolution is following a path much closer to that of Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Constitutional conventions play a key role in that regard, as they did here in Australia.

Under the Cook Islands Constitution Act 1964, New Zealand had certain responsibilities for the external affairs and defence of the Cook Islands. Through the crystallization of Constitutional conventions, however, it has long been accepted by both the Cook Islands

and New Zealand that those responsibilities are in the nature of obligations assumed by New Zealand to assist the Cook Islands when requested to do so rather than rights of supervision and control. That understanding was enshrined in the 2001 Joint Centenary Declaration signed by the Prime Ministers of the Cook Islands and New Zealand, as was recognition that in the conduct of its foreign affairs the Cook Islands interacts with the international community as a sovereign and independent State.

Over the years, the Cook Islands has established formal diplomatic relations with a multitude of states and a number of diplomatic envoys accredited to the Cook Islands are based right here in Canberra. I warmly acknowledge a number of the Ambassadors in attendance this morning.

Since 1965, the Cook Islands has also become Party to a wide range of regional and multilateral environmental, disarmament, economic and other treaties and become a full member of over 42 international organisations.

Together with Australia, since 1971, the Cook Islands has been a founding member of the Pacific Islands Forum and other significant regional bodies including the Pacific Community (SPC) and the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA).

The Cook Islands growing participation in regional and international affairs reflects the growth of the country itself and its expanding needs and interests. From humble beginnings in 1965, the Cook Islands has grown, its economy strengthened and various initiatives undertaken to promote the nation's sustainable development.

In the environmental area, for example, my Government established a 200-mile Marine Protected Area, our Marae Moana, and legislated into Cook Islands laws in 2017, to protect and manage sustainably our oceanic resources. To further highlight the often unseen and unspoken linkages between our nations, I acknowledge the contributions of Australians from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Protected Area offices in Townsville, Jon Day and Darren Cameron who availed experience sharing and technical advice during the Cook Islands early considerations of Marae Moana in 2011.

*[The Cook Islands evolving landscape]*

On the economic front, spearheaded by the tourism sector and facilitative legislation and policies, our economy has developed to such an extent that, under criteria set by the OECD, the Cook Islands will graduate on 1 January 2020 from developing to high-level income status—the first Pacific Islands country to do so. This is noteworthy given the financial hardships endured by the Cook Islands in the mid-1990s when Government was declared bankrupt.

While graduation is a noteworthy accomplishment for the Cook Islands, it presents new challenges given the Cook Islands will no longer be eligible for bilateral Official Development Assistance as provided by OECD member countries including Australia. However, the many vulnerabilities and challenges confronting the Cook Islands as a Small Islands Developing State (SIDS) do not miraculously evaporate upon ODA graduation to

“high-level income” status. In many respects, those vulnerabilities and challenges become even more acute post-graduation with climate change and the increasingly frequent natural disasters we are all grappling with, including here in Australia.

In the interests of time, I will not dwell on the notable shortcomings in the OECD’s assessment criteria for ODA eligibility being limited to GDP per capita. These are well documented and the Cook Islands remain proactively engaged in global discussions to reform global development finance modalities.

What we have particularly focused our efforts on in recent years is recalibrating our development approaches through greater use of blended financing and deliberately projecting outwards our sustainable development priorities, sharing where relevant our best practice development advances. We have also recalibrated and reinvigorated our international persona, away from “small and vulnerable” to “large ocean island states”. We are employing our limited international engagement resources in a more targeted and expansionary manner pursuing constructive bilateral, regional and international engagements, based on enduring partnerships, pragmatic co-operation and ensuring our national interests remain paramount.

In the latter regard, my Government welcomes the commitment of the Government of Australia to opening a diplomatic mission in the Cook Islands within the next couple of months. The establishment of this mission will greatly facilitate the further development of our bilateral relations as well as provide a mechanism to cooperate in addressing regional and global challenges facing both of our countries.

*[Geopolitical dynamics]*

As has been observed in many quarters and recorded extensively in current discourse, recent years have witnessed an evolving geopolitical environment in which many actors are competing for influence to further their own interests. External influencers are not new to the Pacific and we have been through numerous iterations of explorers, colonizers, world wars, nuclear testing, a cold war and globalization to name but a few. Resilience is part and parcel of our very existence.

The Cook Islands will continue to carefully navigate regional ebbs and flows although our prevailing perspective is that the Pacific need not be a zero sum game. There is time and space for many partners to address the challenging development needs of the region and jointly harness with the region the many opportunities that present.

Australia’s lengthy commitment and experience with the Pacific region underpins our relationship as a like-minded and long-term partner of choice. In this context, I applaud Australia’s policy initiative to “step-up” in the region. The results of the step up are clear in our engagement with Australia through initiatives such as the new diplomatic mission in Rarotonga, the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility, the Pacific Fusion Centre, the new Colombo Plan, and additional climate change financing. Our relationship with Australia is as strong as it has ever been and going from strength to strength.

For the Cook Islands, we must forge ahead, in the interests of furthering the development of our nation, with integrity, candor and maturity, collaborating where our interests align and offering constructive feedback and honesty where they diverge, but always grounded in fundamental respect for the sovereign right of nations to determine their own development paths whilst upholding the international rules-based order.

Given time constraints, I can only mention a few important areas in which my Government will focus its efforts in the months ahead for its co-operation with Australia.

*[Cook Islands future priorities]*

While the tourism sector in the Cook Islands has done well for a number of years, my Government recognizes the importance of growing and diversifying the economy. In that regard, we see Australia as being an increasingly important trading partner and source of investment. In fact, the very first commercial operation in the Cook Islands was established by a Sydney merchant on the island of Palmerston in 1811 and today, a number of prominent tourism related businesses are Australian owned or managed. Australia's development assistance to the Cook Islands is \$3.7 million per annum currently, delivered through a delegated cooperation aimed at improving economic prosperity and security. The Cook Islands imported from Australia in the 2016/17 period some \$8.4 million of merchandise goods and growth has continued since. The tradition of openness to international commerce has been part and parcel of the Cook Islands economy for decades and my Government sees such openness as key to the Cook Islands' future growth and prosperity. For that reason, the Cook Islands is looking to shortly ratify PACER Plus, the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations Plus. We see PACER Plus as a framework for the cultivation and further deepening of economic and investment relations between the Cook Islands, Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific Island Countries in the years ahead and we welcome Australia's commitment and investment.

For many years, security has been of great concern to the Cook Islands and other members of the Pacific Islands Forum, including Australia. A historic step forward in promoting regional security was taken in 2018 when I, together with other Pacific Islands Forum Leaders including Australia adopted the Boe Declaration on Regional Security. In our Declaration we identified climate change, human security, environmental and resource security, transnational crime and cybersecurity as areas of particular concern. In fact, Leaders "*reaffirm[ed] that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific and [their] commitment to progress the implementation of the Paris Agreement*".

The views of Forum Leaders were echoed very recently in a warning from 11,000 independent scientists that "*planet Earth is facing a climate emergency*" and identified the need for "*bold and drastic transformations regarding economic and population policies*".

As a large ocean state with islands scattered wide across our nearly 2million square kilometer EEZ, climate change has severe, existential consequences for the Cook Islands. In

the case of my home island, Manihiki, a coral atoll, for example, the highest elevation is only a few metres above sea level and a rise in sea level could have drastic consequences. Other Forum Island Countries are in the same—if not, more—fragile position. For that reason, at this year’s meeting of Pacific Forum Leaders, climate change was the subject of considerable discussion and resulted in the strongest statement made by Leaders in the “Kainaki II Declaration for Urgent Climate Action Now”. This is concrete progress and Leaders called for actions to be taken by each Forum member, both domestically and internationally. For our own national security we are taking mitigation and adaptation steps to give effect to the decision of Forum Leaders and we are looking to other Forum members to do likewise.

A few weeks ago we jointly celebrated with Australia the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Te Kukupa. Te Kukupa is our Pacific-class patrol boat provided by the Australian Government and is a source of great national pride. It is an invaluable national security asset which our people have immense appreciation of and is a cornerstone of an enduring and comprehensive security and defence co-operation with Australia stretching back decades.

National security is of high concern to the Cook Islands and we are in the process of formulating our own, very first national security policy and consultation and collaboration with relevant Australian institutions and agencies would be welcome. In that regard, threat assessments will be vital. The Cook Islands welcomes Australia’s initiatives to promote regional security information sharing to enable my Government and other Pacific national governments to make informed security decisions. However, such initiatives, intended for the Pacific, must build on existing, well established and Pacific governed regional security related institutions, arrangements and networks. Only then can we ensure relevance, strengthen information sharing and secure the future of our Blue Pacific.

Of particular significance for our future cooperation with Australia in my view is people-to-people connections.

I commend and welcome the leadership of Prime Minister Morrison and his government in prioritising Leader to Leader engagements with the Pacific. This is putting substance to Australia’s Pacific Step-Up.

The multitude of reciprocal high-level engagements between Australia and the Pacific of recent months is unprecedented and goes a long way to affirming Australia’s commitment to genuine partnerships with and securing the future of the Pacific. It is imperative going forward both governments work actively to strengthen people to people connections be they in diplomacy, security, business, education, health, sports, the creative industries, culture and the arts and other areas of interest. Without concerted reciprocal investment by both governments in social capital, we cannot build the necessary trust and understanding essential to translate political and economic aspirations into tangible development outcomes. People ultimately are the key to unlocking the potential of the Blue Pacific and our co-operation.

A few weeks ago, with transport support by the Australian Defence Force, a small contingent of Cook Islands cultural performers participated alongside hundreds of other Pacific and international performers to deliver the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo right here in Sydney. Yesterday morning, our national rugby league team flew out of Sydney for Florida, for a world cup qualifier match against the United States. Most of the team are professional players competing in Australia's National Rugby League competition. On Friday, I will join hundreds of Cook Islanders who now call Australia home for the annual Maeva Nui cultural celebrations. Over the last 3 years, more than 100 Australian tertiary students have undertaken study and research opportunities in the Cook Islands in fields of music, education and health and further placements are planned for the years ahead. These are but a few examples of current people to people links between Australia and the Cook Islands. More than a century later, our peoples continue to work together, our separate and shared national security and prosperity interests as intertwined as ever.

Let me close with a word about the Australian National University. Having spent some time as a student at ANU, and observed its evolution over the years, I consider ANU in many respects one of the world's leading centres for the study of Asia and the Pacific. However, I would respectfully suggest that ANU has some way to go yet in Pacific Islands research and studies. The Pacific region has had a profound influence on Australia's past and will play a major role in Australia's future. For ANU to have credibility as a premier academic institution on Pacific studies, it is imperative ANU be at the forefront of embracing greater Pacific Islands content in its research endeavours and teaching. It would do well to support greater numbers of Pacific Islanders study and teach at ANU. Closer and deeper engagement and partnerships with Pacific Islands educational institutions like the University of the South Pacific is also recommended. Such an evolution by Australian education and research institutions like ANU would in my view give greater substance to the academia aspect of Australia's stepped up engagement. It would also avail to the Australian Government critical Pacific Islands insights and perspectives within ANU resources which in turn support government policy consideration. In this regard, may commend Honorary Associate Professor Greg Fry for his multi-decade engagement with Pacific Islands students, academics and teachers and the launch of his publication tomorrow "Framing the Islands: Power and Diplomatic Agency in Pacific Regionalism". Congratulations Greg.

Thank you for listening and my gratitude for the wonderful hospitality availed my delegation this morning. My Government welcomes the Pacific Step-Up Engagement initiative of the Australian Government and looks forward to deepening our cooperation in the coming months across the full spectrum of Australia and Cook Islands societies.

Thank you for listening. Kia orana and kia manuia.