



PARLIAMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS

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SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

Hon. Mark Brown
PRIME MINISTER

FROM - THE PRIME MINISTER
HONOURABLE MARK BROWN
GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS
**OPENING OF PARLIAMENT – KINGS REPRESENTATIVE SPEECH
FROM THE THRONE**
22 MARCH 2023.

Honourable Members Of Parliament,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed my honour to be here today to exercise the prerogative of His Majesty King Charles III, Head of State of the Cook Islands, to open this Eighteenth Parliament of the Cook Islands.

Following the general election held on the 1st of August 2022, this Government was formed between the Cook Islands Party and the independent members of Parliament for the Teenui-Mapumai, Tengtangi-Areora-Ngatiarua and Mauke constituencies.

Having established a command of confidence over the majority of the 'Members of the Cook Islands Parliament', the Honourable Mark Brown, leader of the Cook Islands Party and the Member of Parliament for Takuvaine-Tutakimoo, was, pursuant to the Constitution,

appointed on August 12 as Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, thus becoming the 12th Head of Government since 1965.

Yesterday, on the 21st of March 2023, the first day of the meeting of Parliament, and in accordance with the Standing Orders of the Parliament and the Constitution, Mr Tai Tura was nominated, elected and sworn in as the 11th Speaker for the Cook Islands Parliament. Speaker Tura becomes the 8th person to hold this office, a role he first assumed on the 22nd of March, 2021.

The unimpeachable integrity of the Cook Islands judiciary remains under the firm stewardship of the Honourable Chief Justice Patrick Keane, CNZM. Justice Keane is one of New Zealand's longest serving judges, and was appointed to the High Court of the Cook Islands in 2016.

On the 27th of July 2022, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, just mere months before her sad passing on September 8, signed the Commission letter to reappoint myself, Sir Tom John Marsters, KBE, to serve as the Sovereign's Representative for the Cook Islands.

I join four other highly esteemed individuals to hold the Office of the Sovereign Representative, a role which I was firstly appointed to on the 27th of July, 2013.

So formed, and with the petitions behind us, My Government is ready and prepared to represent and serve the Cook Islands people to the very best of their abilities.

Honourable Members,

As we all know, the previous term has been a turbulent time for our country, our communities, our people – and the entire world as well.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic brought with it a number of unprecedented challenges, the likes of which no prior government has yet had to face – challenges perhaps not even considered possible by any past administration.

I do not wish to repeat or rehash the tests and trials of Covid-19. We all know them, because we have all lived through them – along with our families, our friends and all others who call the Cook Islands home.

And yet, with My Government at the helm, we have steered our way through these challenges. Never have we shied away from making tough calls or difficult decisions when necessary, and all with the welfare of our people first and foremost in mind – turanga memeitaki, wellbeing for all.

Protecting and sustaining our people and their livelihoods throughout this period has come at a cost however.

Due to our heavy dependency on tourism, the impact on the GDP, the Gross Domestic Product of our small nation, was amongst the highest levels suffered ~~by the developed nations of the world.~~

My Government borrowed \$130 million to fund our response to Covid-19, bringing with it an associated increase in debt servicing, forecast to reach in excess of \$30 million per year by the end of this decade – three times our current servicing costs.

These figures may seem alarming to some, but the decision to extend our debt levels was not taken lightly. If My Government did not do what was needed to help keep our businesses and people afloat and alive, then the consequences would have been much worse.

And even under these exceptional conditions, we have of course never abandoned our principles of fiscal responsibility – along with our fellow Pacific Island countries, we continue to talk with funding partners about restructuring our debt so that debt servicing can be maintained to sustainable levels.

As a result of these decisive and carefully planned actions, we can see now that our vaka is steady and our people secure.

Already our cash position has markedly improved from 2021 and our tourism numbers are steadily rising, our economy reigniting and recovering.

But all the tourists and the dollars they bring to our country are not the be-all and end-all of our economy – we know we cannot rely on tourism alone to grow our economy over the longer term, and we know that economic diversification is essential to long-term growth. We also know that to support our private sector to invest in new industries, we first need to have the right economic foundations in place.

This means providing better internet connectivity in the Pa Enua, taking more business online, and ensuring our business and investment laws encourage a fruitful environment for all types of businesses.

It takes time, but my Government has been, is, and will always continue to work towards providing a solid foundation for economic diversification.

Fortunately, we are a nation blessed with an abundance of natural resources, with strong values and respect for our traditions and Christian principles, and with a keen sense of entrepreneurship. Successive Governments have been able to boldly charter 'waves' of development pathways because of these strong foundations for growth.

In the 1950s and 60s we were the fruit bowl of the Pacific and earned millions of dollars in agricultural exports. Men, women and children banded together in the planting, harvesting and shipping of produce from our fertile soils to markets abroad.

In the early 70s we opened our international airport to the prospect of tourism. Today we are one of the premier holiday destinations in the Pacific and our tourism industry earns hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue for the country.

The product that we have in tourism was developed over time and is today led by Cook Islanders. It took some wise decision making and a good understanding of our tourism product and the markets that were available for us to develop.

We were highly questioned for even thinking of going tourism. Why would people in New Zealand and Australia or other countries want to come to the Cook Islands for their holidays when they have beautiful beaches and other scenic? was the question. We have seen over the years that people travel for various reasons – experiencing different cultures and peoples, are but, just a couple.

Today, My Government believes that we could do the same with our seabed minerals programme, with our own Seabed Minerals Authority recently celebrating its tenth anniversary.

Our deep-sea polymetallic nodules are a vast resource that our Government has been profoundly aware of ever since we first became self-governing in 1965.

~~Again we have our critiques questioning our aspirations to move in this direction.~~ It is My Government's hope, that our aspirations to move in this direction will eventually receive the kind of support necessary to allow this brand new industry to develop and to flourish for the benefit of our people.

Over the past 10 years and more, My Government has been preparing our laws, our regulatory authorities and agencies, and most importantly our people, for the development of a sustainable and environmentally responsible seabed minerals sector that will operate for the benefit of all Cook Islanders.

One year ago, we granted our first-ever seabed minerals exploration licences to three different companies, valid for five years.

Over the past year and upcoming four years, significant millions have been and will be spent on exploring and gaining knowledge of our deep ocean, with some of that investment already spilling over to our domestic economy as we enter year two of the five-year exploration licence period.

As we embark on our journey of knowledge, My Government does not underestimate the broader value of ocean exploration and the discoveries it may reveal to us. This exploration and research process provides the experience and knowledge necessary for us to become effective stewards of the ocean and its resources, and sets a course for future generations to navigate.

All of this, and everything else My Government has achieved over the past term, are accomplishments that we can justifiably be proud of.

And all the while, the spirit of unity that binds us together as Cook Islanders has endured throughout what has been a long period of disruption and uncertainty.

Yes, there have been disagreements and differences of opinion, as there always will be, but nothing anywhere close to the division many other countries around the world have suffered through.

And as we look out across the globe, it becomes apparent that here in the Cook Islands we have much to be grateful for.

My Government has continued to invest in essential infrastructure, both in Rarotonga and across the Pa Enua.

We have built roads, constructed new facilities and developed key projects like the Arutanga Harbour revitalisation in Aitutaki and other Pa Enua works programmes.

We have funded a number of initiatives aimed at growing the economy by reducing barriers to competition, growing our labour force, making Government more efficient, and focusing our capital

investment plans on projects that can offer a greater level of economic stimulus.

These capital investment projects include things like developing our government buildings in Rarotonga – the National Stadium and our Health, Justice and Police ministry buildings for example – and also work in the Pa Enua, where CIIC and ICI have been developing public infrastructure in Mangaia, Tongareva, Manihiki, Rakahanga, Pukapuka, Nassau and Palmerston (the Hurricane Shelter).

And with all of this significant government investment we have integrated climate-change risks and opportunities into the design, operation and management of public infrastructure – focussing on and planning for the long term instead of instigating mere band-aid solutions.

We have also built hospitals and medical centres, increased our spending on healthcare, and enabled our health ministry Te Marae Ora to deliver a world-class Covid response.

We have overseen an increase in the minimum wage of more than 20% from 2018 to 2022, we have increased old-age pension payments,

and, in the wake of Covid, we instituted an unemployment benefit for those who lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic.

We have invested in the future prosperity of our country.

Honourable Members, My Government will also continue to invest in the future resilience of our country.

On the international stage, at events like the annual United Nations Climate Change Conference and the Green Climate Fund Global Programming Conference, we have continued to press our case with regard to climate change and its effects, always reminding those developed nations whose actions have contributed most to global warming of their responsibilities to the rest of the world and the Pacific in particular.

On November 8 My Government addressed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change at COP27 in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt. We delivered an irrevocable message:

“Me kare e enua, kare o te tangata turanga vaevae.”

The literal translation of these words is *“when land is lost, man has nothing to stand on”*. But as we explained, this means so much more for our Cook Islands, a nation of two million square kilometres in area, but with 99.99% of that ocean. Our small islands provide us with a

place in this vast world upon which we can stand, and this is so very important to us and our existence.

At other regional and international meetings around the world, we have also been pushing for organisations like the International Monetary Fund and Asian Development Bank to recognise climate debt as separate from national debt and treat it as such.

Climate financing for adaptation purposes is vital for countries like ours, on the frontlines of climate change – and it cannot be a debt cumulative model, leaving us paying for the global effects wrought by the excesses of others.

Our small and fragile islands are amongst the most vulnerable to climate change and the science is warning us to expect devastating consequences should temperature level rise exceed 1.5-degree Celsius. Already these changes are happening – it is incremental, it is insidious and it is now becoming inevitable.

Honourable Members, even under current levels of pledges to reduce carbon emissions, our planet is on a pathway to 2.7 degrees of temperature rise by 2100, which represents a real threat to our nation. More concerning is a recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report which states that if those pledges are not

implemented and we continue along the course of the current emissions trajectory, we will face a world with a median global warming of 3.2 degrees by 2100.

And yet, as a collective, our Pacific region contributes less than 0.03% to global emissions, the equivalent of a burning match stick in a forest fire.

While we are doing our bit on mitigation efforts, and reducing our emissions, there is only so much impact our national and regional actions can have. It is the G20 countries – who are responsible for 80% of global emissions – that we are beholden to for survival.

Our very existence is highly vulnerable due to the unwillingness of those larger countries to act, despite their ability to do so.

This year, My Government will host the 52nd Pacific Islands Forum, led by our own Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown as the Forum Chair.

This occasion will bring together the leaders of our Pacific nations to discuss regional priorities. Climate change will be at the forefront of these discussions, and we will advocate for tangible, fit-for-Pacific solutions to address the climate threat our Blue Pacific Continent faces.

Each of us in the Pacific, individually and collectively, will do what we can to safeguard our futures.

Honourable Members, My Government will continually strive to ensure that our voice and influence is taken abroad to assert our rights and place among the league of nations.

Our diplomatic efforts are attuned to the security, wellbeing and prosperity of our people, against an increasingly polarised and complicated mechanisms of international relations. Accordingly, we must maintain a firm hold on the course that we want to charter with our neighbours and partners.

In October 2022, during a visit from the New Zealand Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Honourable Nanaia Mahuta, My Government signed a new Statement of Partnership with Aotearoa-New Zealand. Named *Waka Hourua/Vaka Purua*, this statement reflects a commitment to work together on issues of shared interests and importance, recognises our countries special links, and elevates our relationship to a new level of expanded cooperation.

The imagery conjured up through the agreement, likening it to a double-hulled canoe, perfectly describes the relationship between Aotearoa-New Zealand and the Cook Islands. It symbolises our two

countries working in unison, each hull lashed to and dependent on the other to move forward.

A week after Minister Mahuta's visit, the Australian Foreign Minister, the Honourable Penny Wong, also visited and signed the Oa Tumanava Partnership Agreement, or Enduring Friendship Agreement.

This agreement is based around five pillars: people-to-people linkages; enhancing security cooperation; greater prosperity; strengthening regional and international cooperation; and closer educational institutional connections between our two countries.

My Government was also represented at the US-Pacific Islands Country summit hosted by US President Joe Biden at the White House in Washington DC in September.

Among the announcements made by President Biden during this summit was the recognition of the Cook Islands as a sovereign state, following appropriate consultations. This announcement was amplified by a visit soon after by the US Diplomatic Envoy to New Zealand, His Excellency Thomas Udall, in December.

We will work proactively in moving forward from this announcement to further develop the relationship between My Government and the Government of the United States of America.

And in November 2022, My Government was also able to host the Ambassador for the People's Republic of China to the Cook Islands, His Excellency Wang Xiaolong, to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of our diplomatic relations.

The many grants and concessional loan facilities availed to us by the People's Republic of China over the years have supported several key public infrastructure projects, and on this occasion My Government was able to affirm our continued bilateral cooperation agenda, including collaboration in the regional and multilateral fora in the years ahead.

These recent notable engagements aside, My Government has grown our foreign affairs to link with over 50 countries and numerous international organisations. These relationships are critical to our maturity as a nation, which will serve us well if we progress these to the next level.

Honourable Members, there is much more that My Government could speak on with regard to what has been achieved over the past term – the initiatives put in place, the continuing development, the support provided to our people and communities, the careful and considered plans that have been laid.

Over the coming weeks, months and years we will continue to move forward with all of these things and more, always with one goal in mind – the betterment of our people and a Cook Islands nation bursting with opportunities, prosperity and an increased standard of living for all.

There is much to do, and unfortunately this year we have been much delayed, so I am sure we are all looking forward to getting on with our work and enacting real change for the Cook Islands and our people.

In preparation for the next session of Parliament, My Government will be working with the Crown Law Office and Parliament to prepare the sequencing of Bills to be tabled.

Exchanges on the order and timing are being discussed and the current list of Bills includes the Crimes Amendment Bill, three Tax Bills, the Income Tax Amendment Bill, the Departure Tax Amendment Bill and the VAT Amendment Bill. In addition, My Government also has

under consideration the Solid & Hazardous Waste Bill and the Public Health Bill.

My Government is also considering a proposed amendment to the Constitution to allow Parliament to sit even as petition hearings go on, so as to avoid in future the unfortunate situation we have been subjected to over these past few frustrating months.

As I said, we have much to do, and this is but a fraction of the work that awaits throughout this year and beyond.

To the Parliament of the Cook Islands – you are the elected representatives of our people and as such the duty of responsibility and care placed in your hands is of the highest magnitude.

Let us work together to achieve those outcomes we know will be of most benefit to the Cook Islands people, uplifting us all on a journey of prosperity and opportunity.

And at all times let us remember that government does not exist for its own sake. Nor does it exist to create dependencies – instead it exists to help our people across all fronts.

At the end of the day, our Government is for the people. It exists primarily to provide an improved standard of living and wellbeing for all of us who call the Cook Islands home.

I pray for God's guidance upon you all in this session and in the sessions to come. May God bless us and may God bless the Cook Islands.

ENDS

King's Representative

Sir Tom Marsters