



OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER  
GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS

**Prime Minister Speech in Parliament**  
**Monday 17 February 2025**

**Our evolution as a Nation – the story of our Statehood**

Kia orana e te iti tangata o te Kuki Airani,

As we gather today for the first sitting of Parliament this year, we do so at a historic moment. This year, we commemorate 60 years of self-governance, a milestone that reflects the resilience, vision, and determination of our people.

We have experienced many milestones and catalysing achievements in our journey as a nation—from the visionary determination of our tupuna to enter into an arrangement of self-governance in free-association with New Zealand in 1965, to the building of the Rarotonga Airport, to the economic hardships of the 1997 financial crisis and the rebuilding of our nation in the decades that followed. We endured the devastating impact of COVID-19 where we closed our borders for 2 years, yet we emerged with an economy that has recovered stronger than ever, reaffirming our place as the first Pacific Island nation to achieve high-income status.

These defining moments remind us of an undeniable truth: we are a nation that navigates our own future with vision, grace and determination. We have never been afraid to make the bold decisions, to forge our own path, and to take control of our destiny. That is why, today, as we mark the beginning of this parliamentary year, I stand before you with the same commitment—to lead with confidence, clarity, and conviction in the best interests of our people.

**Strengthening our economy**

Mr. Speaker,

Our economy continues to evolve. Tourism remains the backbone of our prosperity, bringing in over 170,000 visitors in 2024, a near-record number. But we must not rely on a single sector alone to drive our development agenda. The lesson we learned through the experience of COVID-19 is that we must diversify our economic landscape. Diversification of our economy is critical to ensure our economic resilience and sustainable development.

We are actively developing our seabed minerals sector under a world-leading regulatory framework, ensuring we strike the necessary balance between responsible resource

management and environmental protection. Our financial services sector continues to provide a strong foundation for growth, bringing new opportunities for investment and trade.

Alongside these efforts and through our international partnerships, we are expanding access to global markets, positioning the Cook Islands as a leader in sustainable development and economic innovation. Our recent engagements, including with China, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States, reflect our strategic approach—one of openness, collaboration, and sovereign decision-making. We can choose to be a country that relies on handouts and is dependent on others or we can choose to be a country that can stand on its own two feet and can engage in constructive partnerships of mutual benefit.

We have been through a lot together. Over the past 60 years, we have fought for our place in the world. We have built a nation that stands tall, proud, and sovereign. And we have done that as Cook Islanders. Our country stands as a beacon to many others on the Pacific region. Let us be proud of who we are and what we have achieved as a nation and as a people.

### **Our role in the global arena – multilateralism and diplomacy**

Our journey as a self-governing nation is not one of isolation, but of partnership and engagement. As we look outward, we reaffirm our commitment to multilateral agreements, a recent example is the Paris Agreement and our regional climate leadership.

Climate change remains one of our greatest existential challenges, and we will not stand idle while larger nations debate their responsibilities. The Cook Islands will continue to lead in climate action, advocating for stronger commitments from global partners while securing vital resources to support our resilience. In this time of change with the USA again pulling out of the Paris Agreement and its commitments, the Pacific countries now look to other countries to fill the gap and do more. It was reassuring in my discussions with Premier Li that China will step up in terms of meeting their carbon emission targets and also supporting SIS with to build resilience against the impacts of climate change.

At the same time, we are strengthening economic diplomacy through initiatives like our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China, which provides structured opportunities in trade, infrastructure, and the blue economy. This does not replace our longstanding relationships with New Zealand, Australia, and others, but rather complements them, ensuring that we have a diversified portfolio of partnerships.

### **Rebalancing our relationship with New Zealand – a partnership of shared success**

The Cook Islands and New Zealand share a deep and enduring bond—one built on shared ancestry, history, family, and mutual respect. Our relationship has evolved over the decades, and while New Zealand has been a valued partner in our development, it is also important to acknowledge the significant contributions that the Cook Islands has made to New Zealand.

Tens of thousands of Cook Islanders have helped shape New Zealand's economy, workforce, and cultural landscape. Our businesses continue to support New Zealand industries, and our economic ties remain strong. This is not a relationship of one-way support, but rather a partnership of shared success.

We are grateful for New Zealand's ongoing engagement, and we recognise the many ways in which we work together for mutual benefit. The rights and obligations codified in our

relationship of free association are mutual, and while we may at times find matters in which our views diverge, it is imperative that we uphold the reciprocal nature of our relationship.

As we look ahead, we do so with a commitment to strengthening this partnership—ensuring that it remains grounded in respect, understanding, and a shared vision for the future. I look forward to my next discussions with PM Luxon in due course to promote and strengthen our collaboration whilst recognising and respecting the sovereign status of both our countries.

### **Addressing concerns – a government that listens**

Mr. Speaker,

I am aware that some in our community feel unheard in recent decisions. I know that today is not just about one issue. It is about many. It is about the future of our country. It is about trust. It is about ensuring that every Cook Islander feels heard. I see you. I hear you. And I respect you.

Let me say this. We are all Cook Islanders. We all want the best for our country. We must never allow division to weaken our people. We must never let fear be stronger than our hope for the future.

I want to be clear: this government values transparency, consultation, and open dialogue. Our engagement with international partners, including China, has always been conducted in the best interests of our people.

I welcome robust discussion, and I assure our people that every agreement we sign, every partnership we enter, and every step we take is guided by a single question: Does this serve the long-term interests of the Cook Islands? I have full confidence in the ability and capability of my Cabinet and of our senior officials, to effectively advance and protect the Cook Islands interests.

### **Celebrating 60 years of self-governance**

Mr. Speaker,

This year, we celebrate more than a milestone—we celebrate our identity, our resilience, and our future.

For 60 years, we have built a nation that stands proudly on the world stage. We have shaped our own destiny, strengthened our economy, and forged meaningful partnerships that serve the interests of our people. But beyond policies and progress, this anniversary is about something deeper—our sense of belonging.

"Kua kite au i toku turanga, e avaiki toku - I know my place, I have a homeland."

This theme is not just a reflection of our past, it is a statement of who we are today and what we carry forward into the future. It speaks to our deep connection to our land, our people, and our culture. No matter where Cook Islanders may be in the world, we have a home. We have an identity. We have a nation that we continue to build together.

Over the past 60 years, we have:

- Overcome economic challenges and built a strong, growing economy

- Strengthened our global partnerships that advance our national sustainable development agenda
- Led the Pacific in areas such as climate action, finance and sustainable development
- Created opportunities for Cook Islanders, at home and abroad

And as we look ahead, we do so with confidence.

Our 60th anniversary is a time to reflect, but also a time to recommit—to ensuring that every Cook Islander, wherever they are, continues to feel the strength of their homeland, the pride of their heritage, and the certainty of their place in our shared future.

Kia orana e kia manuia.

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