

Remarks by the Honourable Mark Brown, Prime Minister of the Cook Islands and Minister of Foreign Affairs & Immigration
Celebrating 30 years of diplomatic relations between the Cook Islands and Australia (26th January 2024)

Meitaki maata your Excellency, your good husband, and your family

Staff of the Australian High Commission

Kia Orana and thank you for the warm welcome to your new home

Nga Ariki e toru i rotopu ia tatou

Te tu'anga o te Evangelia, kia koe e te Orometua

Opposition leader Mrs Tina Browne and Mr Richard Browne

Senior Officials and business community & civil society representatives

NZ High Commissioner HE Tui Dewes

Ladies and gentlemen – Kia Orana

It is an honour to be here this evening, on this Australia Day to join with you High Commissioner, the government, and people of Australia to reflect on the past, respect the rich history of the First Nations people and celebrate the common bonds shared by Australians the world over, including within our society here in the Cook Islands.

I'm sure, just as we are gathered here in Nikao – Australians in Australia and beyond, including our Cook Islands communities who have over decades made Australia their home, would've taken the time yesterday to reflect on stories of sacrifice, family, resilience, and survival that are hallmarks of the Australian story.

Yesterday marked a significant milestone for the Cook Islands and Australia with the 30th anniversary of our formal diplomatic partnership.

There is much to celebrate – but much more can be done.

As you rightly pointed out High Commissioner, I have on several prior occasions spoken about the voyaging DNA of Cook Islanders. Voyaging over vast areas of ocean to new lands in the times of our ancestors, and through the skies in more recent times.

Our real estate has extended well beyond the maritime zones of our little island nation to Australia and well beyond, with Cook Islands community pockets spread across the breadth of Australia.

Some 30,000 Cook Islanders have made their homes in Queensland, NSW, Victoria and Western Australia – almost double the population here at home.

Our people have assimilated into Australian communities adding cultural and social richness to the fabric of Australia society.

Our people have contributed significantly to enriching Australia's economy through their work in primary industries, construction, manufacturing, tourism, trade, sports, education, health, government and beyond.

I welcome the launching tonight of the Stories of Friendship initiative and look forward to celebrating the many individuals, Australians, and Cook Islanders, who have contributed to the bonds between our nations.

Over a year ago, on the 22 October, during the visit to Rarotonga by Foreign Minister the Hon. Penny Wong, our two governments articulated our shared aspirations for future co-operation through the 'Oa Tumanava Partnership.

The 'Oa Tumanava Partnership listed five key pillars for future co-operation:

- Strengthening our people-to-people links
- Enhancing our security cooperation to address shared regional challenges.
- Achieving greater prosperity for our people and our region
- Cooperating in regional and international issues
- Fostering closer institutional linkages, including in support of resilience and inclusive societies

Thank you, High Commissioner, for your recap of recent highlights.

Those highlights serve as affirmation of the beneficial outcomes our peoples can derive when our governments have shared vision aspirations and determination.

While we welcome those outcomes, and Australia's continued partnership, with three decades of co-operation behind us, we must elevate our ambitions and our efforts if we are to meet the current and future development needs of our peoples.

As we look to the future, 'Oa Tumana provides a framework to further expand our co-operation by focusing on select initiatives under the five pillars.

Under Pillar One – strengthening people-to-people links. Our shared passion for sport and health provides a strong foundation for expanded co-investment in both sectors. We would welcome equal opportunities for Cook Islanders, to those being afforded to nationals of other Pacific countries, for further support to our athletes, coaches, sporting exchanges and competition between our sports teams.

We welcome the positive overtures relating to reciprocal superannuation portability arrangements and hope in the year ahead, we can bring those shared aspirations to full fruition.

Under Pillar Two – enhancing our security cooperation. In the margins of the G7 meeting in July last year, raised with both Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles, and New Zealand’s former Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta, the value in a trilateral defence and security co-operation arrangement between the Cook Islands, New Zealand, and Australia.

Such a trilateral arrangement would in our view encapsulate the existing multi-decade areas of security cooperation including through the Defence Cooperation Program, the Pacific Maritime Security Program, and regional mechanism such as the Pacific Transnational Crime Network. It would support expansion of cooperation in cyber security and air and maritime border security. It would in our view enable access to Australia’s already existing security and defence infrastructure investment financing mechanisms, not presently available to the Cook Islands.

Under Pillar 3 – Achieving greater prosperity. Our return on investment from the underwrite on the Sydney 3 flights a week is paying dividends. We are confident our tourism operators will continue to grow the Australian market – much like the Ozzie battler, our private sector epitomises resilience and innovation. What would be a game changer for shared prosperity would be co-investment in infrastructure. The Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific has not and will not work for the Cook Islands. What would work is affording the Cook Islands access to Australia’s grant funding facilities already available to other Pacific Islands Countries.

Earlier this week, Cabinet met and amongst the immigration policy changes approved was an amendment to enable Australian passport holders a 90-day visitor visa and permit on arrival.

Under Pillar 4 – regional and international cooperation – we welcome Australian’s funding commitment to the Pacific Resilience Facility and look forward to continuing to work with Australia and our Pacific Islands Forum family to raise the remaining capital required to operationalise the PRF as soon as possible.

Under Pillar 5 – fostering closer institutional linkages – we would welcome Cook Islanders being eligible for Australian scholarships, that are offered to nationals of all other Pacific Islands. Australia tertiary scholarships have not been available to Cook Islanders for almost 2 decades – such a co-investment would pay dividends for both Australia and the Cook Islands.

High Commissioner – looking back 30 years, there is indeed much to celebrate.

I am excited about the prospect for our future partnership and encourage you to continue working closely with Secretary Herrmann and the team at MFAI so we can together, bring to fruition, our governments shared aspirations for our peoples as articulated in ‘Oa Tumanava.

Have a great evening everyone. Kia orana, and kia manuia