

## **High Commissioner's Address at the Australia Day Reception**

**Australian High Commission Chancery, Port Vila**

**25 January 2018**

*The Honourable Esmon Saimon, Acting President of the Republic of Vanuatu*

*The Honourable Charlot Salwai Tabimasma, Prime Minister of Vanuatu*

*The Honourable Vincent Lunabek, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court*

*The Honourable Joe Natuman, Deputy Prime Minister*

*Ministers and Members of Parliament*

*Chief Sinemao Tirsupe, President of the Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs*

*Ambassadors, High Commissioners and representatives of the Diplomatic Corps*

*Representatives of government, civil society, church leaders, business and media*

*Invited guests and fellow Australians*

Gud evenin long yufala evriwan mo tankyu tumas blong kam long ofisol 2018

Australia Day selebrasen long Vanuatu.

I extend a very warm welcome to you all and thank you for joining us to celebrate Australia's national day.

I would like to especially thank the Acting President and the Prime Minister for coming this evening.

This is a special year for Australia in Vanuatu.

Almost exactly forty years to the day, on 28 January 1978, the Australian Government, with the Hon Andrew Peacock as the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, requested the Consul General to Noumea, Bill Fisher, establish an office in the (then) New Hebrides.

Our office was located temporarily in the Intercontinental Hotel, now the Holiday Inn, then downtown in Melitco House. Bill Fisher was confirmed as the first Australian head of post and built the house where his successors, including me, have lived to this day.

Bill is immensely proud of having served in Vanuatu in this formative period and is sorry that he could not be here today. He has, however, been generous in sharing his recollections of that time, which I have drawn on for this occasion.

Our first employees were Agnes Kaltonga, Michael Kalkaua, both from north Efate, and the wonderful Marilyn Tahī, who is now head of the Vanuatu Women's Centre. Both Marilyn and Michael also played active roles in the independence movement.

For a diplomat, it was an exciting time to be in the New Hebrides. The struggle for independence was still unfolding.

Australia was involved in supporting independence of the New Hebrides in the troubled months leading up to July 1980. Australia worked hard to encourage international support for independence diplomatically, including at the United Nations.

Australia championed the case for independence at the Pacific Forums of 1979 and 1980. The concerted support and the strength of the Forum countries, mobilised by Australia, was of fundamental importance.

Australia was also active diplomatically in 1980 by supporting the Government of the New Hebrides to defeat the attempt at secession on Espirito Santo.

In July 1980, the world bore witness to the birth of a new nation. Formal diplomatic relations between Australia and Vanuatu were established soon after the independent Republic of Vanuatu was proclaimed. In 2020, as Vanuatu celebrates that important 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we too will celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our diplomatic relations.

Since 1978, Australia has worked consistently to nurture and grow this relationship, based on mutual trust and respect, and to be a good and reliable friend. Fifteen Australian heads of mission have served here during that period.

From a small mission the Australian High Commission has grown substantially to work on a wide array of issues that make up the modern bilateral relationship.

Our presence here over the past 40 years, and the depth and breadth of our relationship, demonstrate our long-term commitment to Vanuatu and to the Pacific more broadly. The stability and prosperity of Vanuatu and other Pacific Island countries are of fundamental importance to Australia.

We are your neighbours. Our ties with you are long standing and will endure. We are bound by geography, migration, education, economic and historical ties.

I have often been reminded of this during my first year here in Vanuatu. Many ni-Vanuatu across the country have told me that we are like family – like brothers.

As I have come to understand the importance of family and clan to this country, I have been ever more humbled that Australia is regarded by ni-Vanuatu as family. This is a great honour. But Australia also recognises that the anchor of our relationship is common interests.

Stability and prosperity in the Pacific is vital to all of us. There is no more important long-term goal for Australia than ensuring the region evolves peacefully and without an erosion of the principles that underpin cooperative relations.

Democracy, the rule of law, respect for the rights of all states, open markets, transparency and non-discrimination are in our mutual interest.

Our new Foreign Policy White Paper launched in December last year sets out Australia's approach to advance our security and prosperity in a contested and

competitive world. It reflects our values and our foundations of freedom, equality, the rule of law and mutual respect.

Values that Australians have fought for, including in theatres of war in the Pacific and further afield. Values that we hold dear.

With other Pacific countries, Australia will continue to work to advance the interests of the Pacific in regional and international fora, including the Pacific Islands Forum and the United Nations. The Pacific's voice will be strengthened over the next two years as Australia serves a two-year term on the UN Human Rights Council – the first country from the Pacific to do so.

Many countries in the region, including Vanuatu, face significant challenges and capacity constraints that hamper their ability to grow and to deliver services effectively and efficiently to their people. These challenges also make it more difficult to respond to external threats like transnational crime, disasters, climate change or disease outbreaks.

These threats are significant, and no single country or organisation can tackle the challenges in the Pacific on its own. Strong bilateral and regional partnerships are necessary to achieve shared goals.

At the Pacific Islands Forum in 2017, my Prime Minister announced that Australia would step up its engagement with its Pacific Island neighbours, including Vanuatu, to implement practical responses to their economic, security and development challenges.

Our focus will be on

- stronger partnerships for economic growth
- stronger partnerships for security
- and stronger relationships between our people.

The step up offers practical initiatives to bolster regional cooperation on security challenges and increase economic integration. It builds on the strong foundation we already have in Vanuatu and provides an opportunity to further deepen our cooperation in a range of areas.

Australia values its relationship with Vanuatu as the country's principal strategic partner. Our cooperation on defence and policing, transnational crime, humanitarian response and maritime surveillance are helping to keep our region safe and secure.

For example, in September last year, Australia responded quickly to Vanuatu's call for assistance to evacuate Ambae following the eruption of the Monaro volcano. Australian military assets – the HMAS Choules and the HMAS Huon – helped distribute life-saving humanitarian supplies including water, shelter and hygiene kits. We provided funding to transport people to safety and supported the government to conduct needs assessments on Santo, Pentecost and Maewo.

We worked closely with New Zealand and France through the FRANZ arrangement to coordinate our assistance, and it worked very well.

Further support for the most vulnerable people, including the disabled, children and the elderly, is now being provided with assistance from local and Australian non-government organisations.



Our defence cooperation continues to help Vanuatu to protect its borders, its valuable fisheries, and to enhance its capability. The RVS *Tukoro* was one of the busiest in the Pacific Patrol boat fleet with 119 days at sea conducting maritime surveillance and protecting your exclusive economic zone and your fisheries. The new Pacific Maritime Security Program will further enhance regional cooperation and boost Vanuatu's capabilities to protect its territory.

Australia and Vanuatu's economic relationship also continues to grow. Two way trade between Australia and Vanuatu is over \$250 million per year [*latest figure is for 2015*] and Australia remains a main export destination for Vanuatu.

Vanuatu is now sending more seasonal workers to Australia each year than any other Pacific country except Tonga. This is providing thousands of Ni-Vanuatu the means to better support their families and communities, and learn new skills to improve their circumstances. This is helping their children gain a better education, opening up new business opportunities for ni-Vanuatu, bringing solar power to people's homes and making a range of other improvements possible.

The PACER Plus trade agreement will bring further benefits to Vanuatu by better connecting Vanuatu with key markets in Australia and New Zealand.

The agreement also includes a range of assistance to support the Vanuatu Government implement and make the most of what the agreement has to offer. We look forward to the agreement being ratified and entering into force.

Following Tropical Cyclone Pam, Australia has helped to reinvigorate the tourism sector by assisting small operators to repair their bungalows on Tanna, providing training for local operators and supporting Vanuatu's tourism marketing campaigns. I am pleased to announce that we have provided a further \$1.3 million for tourism marketing, bringing our total contribution to over \$2.5 million to help bring tourists back. And tourists are returning to Vanuatu, including Australians. Many businesses have told me that 2017 was a good year. We hope that recovery continues.

We are Vanuatu's largest development partner, currently investing \$73 million in development cooperation through bilateral, regional and global programs.

We have recently started to implement new programs in law and justice, governance and skills development, and this year we are developing new programs in infrastructure, health and basic education.

Our programs will continue to support the Government of Vanuatu to deliver its vision for the future, including under the National Sustainable Development Plan, and prioritise approaches that consider climate and disaster resilience, gender equality and disability inclusion.

We are working hard with our partners to end violence against women through our support to the justice sector and policing, the Vanuatu Women's Centre, Wan SmolBag and other NGO partners. The incidence of violence against women and girls is still too high. I applaud the leaders who are speaking out, including the President and the Paramount Chief, Ministers and the Commissioner of Police. This issue requires action at every level and the commitment of the whole community.

At this time last year, I announced that 2017 would be a year of delivery for our Cyclone Pam recovery program. I am delighted we have made good progress.

Our contribution to the TC Pam recovery program was the largest of any donor, and almost all of our support has been delivered through government systems.

For the Government of Vanuatu, this has been a very ambitious program of recovery and reconstruction. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Government for its leadership of the recovery effort.

With Australia's support essential health services, including at Vila Central and Lenakel hospital, will be restored. We will complete new wings for radiology, pathology and surgery in Port Vila and a Tuberculosis Ward in Tanna.

The repair and reconstruction of around 150 double classrooms in schools across TAFEA province will provide scores of Ni-Vanuatu children with a quality education environment.

Over 50 public buildings in SHEFA and TAFEA provinces will be finished, including the Vanuatu Society for People with a Disability Building in Port Vila, the Vanuatu Christian Council Headquarters, and 21 police houses in Port Vila and Tanna.

I know that 12 March 2015 is firmly etched in the memories of many of you and your fellow ni-Vanuatu. Ahead of the third anniversary of Tropical

Cyclone Pam, I want to reaffirm Australia's commitment to finishing the job we started together in 2015.

Our people to people links also continue to grow.

This year, the Australian Government awarded 214 additional New Colombo Plan placements for Australian students to study and do internships in Vanuatu. This is crucial to enhancing Pacific literacy in Australia. It encourages a two-way flow of students between Australia and Vanuatu, enhances skills and knowledge, builds cross- cultural competencies and develops professional, and personal, networks that can last a lifetime.

We will place around 40 volunteers this year in select organisations including government, non-government and the private sector, where they will make a development impact. I thank our Australian volunteers, many of whom are here tonight, for their contribution.

Through the Australia Awards program, we continue to offer scholarships for high performing ni-Vanuatu to study in Australia and in the region to enhance their skills and expertise. Our alumni network, with around 300

members and growing, includes ni-Vanuatu men and women who are serving at the most senior levels of government and in a range of professions.

Our 40 year presence demonstrates the relationship between Australia and Vanuatu is strong and enduring,

founded on the belief that each can depend on the other, in good times and in hardship

that we won't always agree, but we can resolve our differences cooperatively and peacefully

and that we can rely on our friendship when disaster strikes.

The values that underpin our relationship with Vanuatu have much in common with the values that we celebrate on our national day: friendship, honesty, and looking after each other.

Tomorrow, 26 January, Australians around the world will come together to celebrate, in a multitude of ways, what it is to be Australian and what we love about Australia. What has shaped our nation: our people, our geography, our history, our indigenous heritage, our shared values.

Together we have built a nation that represents almost 200 nationalities of all faiths, cultures and backgrounds. Together, we live in peace. Together, we have built an economy that has grown for 26 consecutive years. We are an outward looking country, engaged with the world, innovative and committed to the advancement of our people.

To my fellow Australians here tonight, I wish you all a very happy Australia Day.

And in the words of our Prime Minister, 'be proud of what we have achieved and confident that even greater achievements are ahead of us.'

And to all of our distinguished guests, thank you for joining us to celebrate our national day.

I wish you all a very happy New Year and hope that it is a year of peace and prosperity for Vanuatu, for Australia and for our region, the Pacific.

Tankyu tumas.