

AUSTRALIA AND FIJI: LOOKING AHEAD

Australia Day address by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Senator Gareth Evans, Trade Winds Convention Centre, Suva, 4 February 1992.

The foundation of Sydney on 26 January 1788, which we are celebrating today - more than a week late (but that just shows we're learning to relax in the Pacific way!) - was more than the establishment of the first European settlement in Australia. We should remember that the arrival of the First Fleet in Sydney Cove on that day represented the first sustained European presence in the wider South Pacific. That presence impacted upon the societies of the South Pacific in various ways and to various degrees. But for all the many differences today between Australia and our island neighbours in the South Pacific, we are bound together by ties of history, sentiment and interest.

For Australia, those long-established and wide-spread ties make only natural a policy of what I have labelled "constructive commitment" to the South Pacific community. Such a policy means that we are committed, as a partner, to observing the practices and traditions of the South Pacific, in which consensus and mutual respect play an important part.

Our commitment to the South Pacific, which will continue undiminished under Prime Minister Keating, means that we have a particular interest in ties with Fiji, as the communications, educational, commercial and diplomatic hub of the South Pacific island states. We need to get along with Fiji. And I believe that among the inhabitants of Fiji of all races a similar feeling exists about Australia.

Of course, real and sharp differences can occur within any community, even one so close-knit as that formed by the states of the South Pacific. Australia and Fiji have experienced such differences over recent years. The Australian Government has made clear enough our continuing concerns about the new constitution and I don't need to repeat them here.

What it is very pleasant to be able to acknowledge on this occasion is that elections are scheduled to take place in Fiji in the near future, and that they will be contested by most of the major political parties. I have already expressed the hope that those elections will attract the widest possible participation. The re-establishment of representative government is too serious a matter to be allowed to become a football between parties.

Certainly the holding of elections will be a major step on the road back to fully representative government. It means, I hope, that we shall see the return to Fiji of lively but constructive parliamentary debate in the best of South Pacific traditions.

A further significant aspect of the forthcoming election is that it will reduce the likelihood that the South Pacific island states - for which Fiji remains very much a trend-setter - will become exceptions to the world-wide swing to the observance of democratic values.

While there will always be variation from country to country in the way in which democratic values are institutionalised and expressed, the important thing is that we all recognise, as we do, that in this region, as everywhere else, democratic values are the best guarantees of long-term stability.

Similarly, our region is not, and should not, be immune from the growing expectation that all governments observe widely held standards of human and democratic rights.

The re-establishment of a significant degree of representative government will help enormously in getting relations between Australia and Fiji fully back to normal. My visit to Fiji is an important step in that process - which has been going on for some time - of resolving the differences between us. I want to say here how pleased I am to be back in Fiji after an absence of more than three years. It has been a much longer absence than I would have wanted under normal circumstances. Of course, I have already had useful talks with Prime Minister Ratu Mara and Trade Minister Vunibobo at last year's South Pacific Forum and with Deputy Prime Minister Jo Kamikamica during his visit to Australia last June. And my colleague Neal Blewett visited Fiji last September as Minister for Trade and Overseas Development and had good discussions, again, with our friend Ben Vunibobo. But there is nothing to replace a personal visit for catching up with old friends in frank, friendly and constructive discussions.

As we make up lost ground in relations between Fiji and Australia, we should remember that we have always had important common interests that have been largely unaffected by political differences. Public comment has tended to focus on the political aspects of relations between Australia and Fiji, on the rows and the reconciliations. But I want to look ahead at the development of those other practical ties that have traditionally bound our two countries together.

In the first place, economic links between Australia and Fiji are growing strongly. Two-way trade was worth \$320 million last financial year, following several years of steady growth. The narrowing of the trade imbalance, traditionally in Australia's favour, has continued. Australia is Fiji's largest supplier and we provide Fiji with its second largest export market. We are the largest foreign investor in Fiji, with stock valued at more than \$700 million. We have a profitable Pacific partnership worth further development.

I am confident that trade between Australia and Fiji will continue to grow as each country pursues its program of economic restructuring and liberalisation, and as each makes the best use of its comparative advantages to win new markets in the other. We in Australia know and appreciate the difficulties of making such economic adjustments, so I feel

qualified to congratulate the interim Government of Fiji on its program of economic liberalisation, its efforts to move away from import substitution industries and to reduce its reliance on the mainstays of sugar, tourism and garments. And we, like Fiji and our other Cairns Group partners, are exerting every effort to ensure that the multilateral trade negotiations of the Uruguay Round, now in their final, crucial stage, produce a fairer international trading environment in which our economic reform programs can win the trade gains they deserve.

The South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement (SPARTECA) has in the past helped Fiji manufactures gain a larger share of the Australian market. In the future the scheme should continue to put Fiji firms in a good position to benefit from the further opening of Australian markets to outside competition.

For our part, we don't see ourselves as assured of retaining the number one position in the Fiji market without real effort. We understand the desire of the Fiji Government to diversify its sources of supply. We shall certainly not try to use any influence to hinder that. All that Australia asks of Fiji is that Australian firms be allowed to compete on equal terms with other suppliers and that the outcome be decided by price, quality, reliability and efficiency in delivery. On those terms, Australian firms will continue to offer good value for money.

Australian development assistance provides a second important element in our relations with Fiji. With bilateral assistance worth about \$14 million last financial year, we remain Fiji's largest overseas aid donor. I know that there is some concern in Fiji and elsewhere in the South Pacific that the attention of Australia and other Western countries, as donors and investors, will increasingly focus on the economic needs of the countries of Eastern Europe and the successor republics to the Soviet Union. I want to assure you that Australia will continue to give the first priority in its assistance program to the development needs of the South Pacific, including Fiji. The very real needs of the South Pacific and its importance to Australia clearly justify that priority. Despite our own economic difficulties, we have maintained our levels of assistance to the South Pacific, including Fiji, this year.

Apart from the three pillars of political cooperation, trade and investment, and development assistance, the other key element in our relationship has been defence cooperation. Let me on this simply say, as I have said on a number of occasions before, that we shall be happy to consider the resumption of defence cooperation after the parliamentary elections. It is important for Australia that Fiji and other South Pacific island states are able to maintain their security, particularly to safeguard the resources of their large maritime areas.

It is difficult to give a comprehensive overview in just a few short minutes of the diverse

and long-standing relationship between Australia and Fiji. If time permitted I would say more about Australian initiatives in the private sector, in alerting the region to the danger of chemical weapons proliferation and in regional cooperation on the environment. All of these underline just how much we have, whatever our differences, to bring us together. And, as we work to bridge our political differences, that list of cooperative activities will grow ever longer and larger.

So, let me finish on that note by proposing a toast: to His Excellency the President, to the Government and people of Fiji and to relations between Fiji and Australia.

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