

WELCOME TO PAPUA NEW GUINEA PRIME MINISTER, THE HON BILL SKATE MP

Address by Gareth Evans, Deputy Opposition Leader, representing the Leader of the Opposition, Parliament House, Canberra, 3 August 1998.

When that terrible series of tidal waves crashed against the West Sepik shoreline last month - taking the lives of over 2,000 men, women and children, with 1,000 more still missing, and leaving thousands more injured, many grievously, and thousands more homeless and grief stricken - the shock from those waves was felt almost as immediately in Australia.

As a nation and a people, our hearts went out to yours, as you would have hoped and expected them to do. Our Government, defence forces and aid agencies responded in support of your own disaster relief effort as quickly and comprehensively and as efficiently as it was possible to do - and of course did so with the total and unequivocal support of the Opposition. Ordinary Australians responded by donating faster and in larger amounts than for any other overseas disaster appeal in recent years.

None of this response was for any calculated reason of Australian national interest - trade, security or anything else. It was a *human* response to a human tragedy - and it was as strong and immediate as it was because Australia does have a very special and intense relationship with Papua New Guinea, born of the history that bound us so totally together for so many years, and all the familiarity and recognition and personal experience and personal friendships that have gone with that.

It is vitally important for both our countries that we maintain that sense of familiarity and commitment and specialness in our relationship. I have to say in that respect that I have been for a number years concerned at the way in which that spirit has seemed to be gradually eroding.

I am one of a great many Australians of my generation or thereabouts who had built up, in our students days in the 1960s or in other ways, and have happily maintained since, a whole network of close friendships with Papua New Guineans who have been of what might be called the *transitional* generation - who were active in public and political life during the period before independence and in the decade or so immediately after.

They were relationships based on confidence and optimism, and a lot of close contact and mutual affection - and I think on the Australian side we neither were, nor were we seen to be, either paternalistic (in the way that earlier generations of Australians had tended to be) or patronising.

As the years have gone by it has been less easy, for a variety of reasons, to maintain that atmosphere. New generations of political and civil leaders have come to the fore on both sides, with a much less substantial background of personal contact and friendship - which is an issue in itself that both, sides I think need to address, through the development, for example, of young leaders exchange programs.

I think it is fair to say that the absence of such contact, together with an acute sensitivity on the PNG side to the need not to be, or seen to be, dependent on Australia in any way, has been a significant contributor in recent years to those bumps and grinds in our relationship with which we're all familiar.

Bougainville has been a terrible running sore, now hopefully at last on its way to peaceful resolution. Our defence cooperation relationship has been under strain. And it hasn't been easy to negotiate development cooperation arrangements acceptable to both sides.

But somehow all these things *do* get put into their proper perspective, and have been put there, by the tidal wave disaster, and how we have all responded to it. Following on, as this has, from our work together last year to address the worst drought in Papua New Guinea's living memory, I think there should be put at rest in Papua New Guinea any lingering doubt about the extent to which Australia and Australians care, and care *passionately*, about Papua New Guinea and its people.

I hope that of all the messages you receive, Prime Minister, during this very welcome and timely visit to Australia, that's the one you remember most and take home with you.