

Democratic Party

Rarotonga Cook Islands

Open Letter to NZ Prime Minister John Key



James Beer, NZ PM John Key and Tama Tuavera

4th August 2015

To the Rt Honourable John Key Prime Minister of New Zealand..

Obviously with the 20 minutes allocated, the Cook Islands Opposition Democratic Party, while grateful for the opportunity to meet, will be unable to effectively address the many issues that concern us in the administration of the Cook Islands. Accordingly, I have taken the liberty of setting out in this open letter our principal concerns.

But before that, can we say how much we enjoyed your off-the-cuff speech last night at Ngatipa and want to extend our sincere gratitude to the generous gift the people of New Zealand have given to our future leaders and to the Cook Islands as a whole in the way of the \$11.7 million pledge to upgrade the largest college in the country. This is an immensely wise gift and is

fully supported by all MP's for the Opposition and certainly that of the Government. We applaud your recognition of the importance in the development of the future business owners and stakeholders of the Cook Islands in making this generous gift.

Our principle concerns noted below have taken the form of subject headings and brief supporting comments. Where applicable I have attached relevant documentation and, if you have no objection, would like to release this letter to the media.

1. Seeking Membership of the United Nations -The Cook Islands Opposition Democratic Party is totally opposed to Prime Minister Henry Puna's ambitions in this regard. We do not subscribe to his fanciful notion that UN membership and the retention of NZ

citizenship are realistically possible or acceptable and we stress that he has no mandate from the people of the Cook Islands to even be pursuing such an objective. In this connection we bring to your attention that it is the view of many of us that the Cook Islands is moving further and further away from the standards and values expectation so eloquently articulated in the 1973 Kirk/Henry Exchange of Letters and that either New Zealand is unaware of this drift or has adjusted its view as to what it is prepared to tolerate. We feel it would not be inappropriate to perhaps review this position and remind the Cook Islands Government, in an assertive way, that there are limits. The Opposition maintains New Zealand has an excellent international reputation and much more resources and represents

our interests within the UN far better than the quality of leadership and governance we are experiencing here at present.

2. External affairs and defence -The conduct of our external affairs, and by association potentially also our defence, have acquired a new twist since the signing of the 2001 Joint Centenary Declaration by our then two Prime Ministers. There has been some public discussion that New Zealand has contributed to the current UN fracas through a loosening of the interpretation of Section 5 of the Cook Islands Constitution Act 1964 wherein, in an entrenched provision, it was declared that those responsibilities (were) to be discharged after consultation by the Prime Minister of New Zealand with the Prime Minister of the Cook Islands. The Cook Island has, with

your Government's blessing, seen a shift develop which has encouraged the Cook Islands government to believe it is entitled to pursue an international personality of its own beyond that originally conceived back in 1963 and indeed recommended by the then constitutional advisers and eventually enshrined in the just (partially) quoted provision. In so doing we believe it has allowed the said Section 5 to be misconstrued to the point that the entrenchment is being undermined and the control envisaged to Parliament, and ultimately Cook Islands voters, is abrogated. There are also conflicting official pronouncements as to which government accepts responsibilities for the consequences of Cook Islands' unilateral action on the world stage and the Cook Islands Opposition Democratic party is uncomfortable with this uncertainty.

3. Parliamentary democracy-Like those critics of recent happenings in Nauru, we feel there are similarities here in the Cook Islands ... yet they go unnoticed or unreported. As you are aware, representative and responsible government have their roots in an effective parliamentary institution. We do not enjoy that in the Cook Islands. Parliament seldom meets and when it does it is for short durations and is manipulated by government so private members' business, petitions, appointment of Commissions of Inquiry or Select Committees, scrutiny of the annual Appropriation Bill, etc. are given little opportunity, if at all, to receive the attention they deserve. As a recent example, our attempts to place onto the Parliamentary Order Paper a motion to spot

light the current Government UN motivations was not permitted by a the Speaker. This motion is attached, which you'll discover bluntly outlines our concerns and those of a good majority of the people of the Cook Islands regarding UN membership.

4. New Zealand Superannuation - In our view the qualifying 5 years after 50 criteria is indirectly contributing to depopulation in the Cook Islands. It is also counter-intuitive to the extent that it has the potential to add more cost to NZ tax payers. To illustrate this best we are currently observing qualifying Cook Islanders taking up residence in New Zealand for the 5 years after 50 and some quite a bit older than 50 also moving to New Zealand to qualify. Some of these may not have the skill set required by New Zealand businesses to attain gainful employment (a lot has changed since they were last in New Zealand); these under-qualified citizens then ultimately seek assistance from WINZ. Many are of the age that they require medical care and ordinarily use the public health system of New Zealand because they neither have medical insurance nor are financially equipped to use private hospitals. It is too early to say what those numbers are. Would you be receptive to doing an analysis within 12 months or so of the anniversary date of this legislation, giving consideration to what the analysis discovers with respect to Realm countries and in particular to the Cook Islands and the anecdotal indicators we've touched on above? We think such measures may give NZ Parliamentarians a better understanding of costs if this was not factored into the recent debate and select committee findings.

5. The economy - The Cook

Islands Opposition Democratic Party takes the view that a hand up rather than a hand out is the best option for economic sustainability and the self reliance that all Cook Islanders urgently seek. We have seen well- intentioned but misdirected aid projects. In one case, millions of dollars of donated heavy machinery with over \$1 million expended in transportation costs was generously donated. But it was not tied to any national development plan and as a result has been permitted to sit in our sister islands fast becoming a rusty monument to poor planning.

By the same token we are under no illusions as to what a large undertaking it will be to bring about coherent economic reforms. We understand the link between economy and societal challenges both in the public and private sectors. We also understand that economy done right will begin to take care of the costs of living which form a large part of our depopulation equation and the many other challenges we face.

The importance of being able to develop industry, jobs and wealth for our people and to use tax revenue from this to assist the most vulnerable people in our society, to invest in our health systems and educational facilities is very much at the forefront of our thinking.

Our discovery is that the skill sets and business capacities sorely needed to lead, develop and coordinate the identifying areas of our national economy are not evident and likely unavailable. Finding non-partisan advisors with deep expertise is important for every government. This isn't big news: it's true in every government in the world. The difference in the Cooks is our leaders are too proud to admit

that, sometimes, they don't know how to manage issues and need external advice. And the core of the matter is that in the Cooks, our small population sometimes means non-partisan "domain experts" on areas of importance simply cannot be found. We intuitively know this: the government and the civil service travel constantly, valiantly attempting to discover the best models from elsewhere. But this attempt at skills acquisition almost always fails, and instead diverts the attention of the government from the problems at hand. If you're away from home,

things at home go untended.

Teach a person to fish: We very obviously need expertise to develop our economy and government. We need to grow this expertise within our own people, but we need to find advisors and mentors to help do this. We need to be able to draw on a bank of talent as needed, talent with experience in legislation, government administration, and corporate business. Just as we need assistance to attain financial independence, we need assistance to develop operational competence. These are nothing but the sort of normal channels of advice and expertise governments in larger countries always have, but that are not available to such a small island nation. In some cases, these mentors and advisors might come from governments in New Zealand and abroad, and in other cases might come from the private sector. But we desperately need advice and assistance from your government in learning how to do this. As they say, "teach a person to fish".

Kia orana and kia manuia.
James Beer
Member of Parliament
Murienua.
Opposition spokesperson
on Economic Development
Energy and Finance.

A marvelous event



By Poko Utia

This year marks 50 years of self governance, to think how much effort was put into the preparation of this event was just breath-taking. On Tuesday at Constitution Park, the new name for the reclaimed land at Avatiu, everyone was enjoying themselves especially the kids, although NZ PM John Key and our PM showed up a

bit late. People were told to sit then stand again what shocked me the most was when it came to sing the national anthem not everyone stood up for such a sacred ceremony. But none the less the birthday cake prepared by the Chefs at the Edgewater Resort, was huge and everyone got excited once they saw people finally bringing it out. The cake came in a refrigerated container

and was about 2m long and a metre wide and featured the Cook Islands flag.

The performance by all the schools and dance group was what the young will say on-point. Vendors were doing exceedingly well from what I could see. Despite not being able to see the fireworks and the floats, people told me from their points of view of

what they thought about it and most said it was great fun. The kids loved it and for the first time ever the fireworks went for what seemed a long time. One said that it was good but unfortunately once the fireworks was over everyone left and not all the floats had been through town yet. I 'am grateful that I was blessed to be part of this marvelous event.



The best night



By Courtney Matai

On Tuesday night, my family and I headed down to the Te Maeva Nui celebration at Constitution Park across from the St Josephs Catholic Church for a fun night of food and entertainment. There were great performances from past performers and live string band which got people on their feet and dancing. The crowd very much loved the entertainment on the night including the little ones who

were dancing to the music in front of the camera and can be seen on the Rongohiva Screen. The music was great and enjoyed by those who were there sitting about waiting and those who were buying food from the food vendors on the night. It started to shower for a short while but once it stopped, a few people grabbed their seats and moved it to the front of the stage to get a better view of the band playing really good music.

Quite a few people were leaving their seats, so I looked to see what it was and it turned out to be the neon light floats. I too got of my seat and stood by the foot path and watched as each beautifully illuminated floats passed by on the road. The one I liked best was the Laser tag float because the people who were a part of that float were wearing the laser tags gear, paintball guns and the teen zones go cart vehicles. As the

floats came to a stop, flashes of multi-coloured lights lit up the night skies. It was the fireworks! Everyone had their eyes to the skies because the fireworks that took place last night was more enjoyable and longer than the ones that they have on New Years. Once the fireworks ended, the remaining neon floats continued and processed through the streets till the night came to an end. This was by far, the best night of my 3 weeks holiday.

