

Speech to launch Australia Week
Ian Kemish AM, Australian High Commissioner
5 March 2012

Welcome to the launch of the 6th annual Australia Week.

I acknowledge Education Minister Zurenuoc, Sports Minister Subam, Bougainville Affairs Minister Pirika, Mr John Pundari MP, PNGDF Commander Agwi, Electoral Commissioner Trawen, Chief Ombudsman Manek, representatives of the business community including Mr Ernie Gangloff of the PNG Business Council, and my diplomatic colleagues.

Australia Week is a celebration of the friendship between Papua New Guinea and Australia

It is an opportunity to showcase Australian culture and our close links with PNG.

These links are strong and diverse: we share a history and geography; we share a love for sport and our sporting heroes; and we are all interconnected through people-to-people links.

There are many Australians whose lives are intertwined with PNG.

Australia has been closely involved in PNG since the latter part of the 19th century. But when we think of our common history, we are celebrating a particularly important anniversary this year.

2012 is the 70th anniversary of the Papuan campaigns in World War Two, including the series of battles that has become a totem for our friendship – the Kokoda campaign.

The kindness shown to Australian troops by Papua New Guineans during that bloody war, along Kokoda and throughout Papua New Guinea, will never be forgotten.

Mipela no inap lusim ting ting long em.

The campaign in the Pacific was arguably the beginning of the modern bond between Australia and PNG.

We are also partners at the government-to-government level. The bilateral relationship with Papua New Guinea is, and always has been, one of our most important. We are near neighbours and old friends.

We speak often of sovereignty, but it's important to think about what that really means.

Sovereignty is mentioned often, of course, in the context of our bilateral relationship.

This reflects respect, of course, for a proudly independent nation.

It also reflects a fundamental understanding that PNG's future is for PNG to make.

We share PNG's determination to maximise the benefits of its promising economic outlook. Papua New Guinea's resource wealth, if used wisely, will have a hugely positive and transformative effect over the coming decade.

We also want to support PNG to become a stronger, more stable, leading democracy in the region. The general elections to be held in June this year will be a test in this regard. We are providing considerable assistance to ensure they happen on schedule. Appreciate the additional support being considered by some of our partners.

Respect for sovereignty has also underpinned Australia's approach to PNG through difficult and turbulent recent months. When we have had a view, we have spoken quietly and as friends.

I have heard the word sovereignty being used in a different way over the last few months. As we all know, there has been a debate about who is sovereign under the PNG constitution – Parliament, the courts and so on.

When I heard on the weekend that the Prime Minister, the Hon. Peter O'Neill, and his party had signalled so clearly, at their meeting in Goroka, the importance of the elections happening on schedule, I reflected that the PM clearly understands who really is sovereign in any democracy, including PNG.

And that, of course, is the people.

Australia is PNG's largest development partner: through the Australia-PNG Partnerships for Development, Australia is working with the PNG Government to progress its development priorities, focusing on health, education, transport infrastructure and law and justice.

And we have enduring partnerships through the Defence Cooperation Program, the PNG-Australia Policing Partnership and the Strongim Gavman Program.

In 2012 Australia Week is bigger and better than ever. There are programs available today if you would like more information. We will be hosting a Flickerfest Short Film Festival, the Restless Dance Theatre – Australia's leading dance company featuring disabled and non-disabled dancers - and a collection of Australian and Papua New Guinean artists, who will be performing in our Australia Week Live Concert at the Lamana Hotel on Thursday night.

And no Australia Week would be complete without a focus on sport. We have a number of sporting events featuring NRL stars, a cricket 'Battle of the Nations', a netball skills workshop, and an AFL Showcase at Amini Park on Saturday 10 March.

Our Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs, the Hon. Richard Marles MP, and I will be playing.

I can't comment on the standard of our footy but the main game between the PNG AFL Academy and the Emerging Mosquitoes will be of an excellent standard.

Of course, Australia Week would simply not be possible without our generous sponsors and I would like to acknowledge them this morning.

Our Platinum Sponsors are SP Brewery, Pacific MMI Insurance, Westpac, Ela Motors, Lamana Hotel, Airways Hotel and Air Niugini.

Our Gold Sponsors are Australia Network, the Australia Papua New Guinea Business Council, Rio Tinto, Newcrest, Curtain Brothers, ANZ, the Lae International Hotel and Hastings Deering.

Our Silver sponsors include Trukai, CHM and Gadens Lawyers; and our In-kind sponsors are Digicel, City Pharmacy Ltd, Retail Bakery Limited, and Brown Brothers and De Bortoli Wines.

This is in addition to all of the wonderful organisations such as Cricket PNG, PNG Netball, PNG AFL, the PNG NRL Bid Team and UPNG that partner with us to make the week a success. A very big thank you for everyone's support.

Last, but definitely not least, I'd like to mention our Australia Week Exhibition, which will feature art work from Australian artist John Gould and Papua New Guinean artist Ratoos Gary.

The exhibition by Gould and Gary opens today and will show at the Australian High Commission from 5 to 9 March from 8am to 4:30pm.

I'd now like to invite John to make some brief remarks about the exhibition, after which I would like to invite the Hon. Theo Zurenuoc, Education Minister to address us and formally launch Australia Week.