

20 February 2013

Speech by the Australian High Commissioner, Ian Kemish AM, on the occasion of his farewell reception in Port Moresby

Apinun tru olgeta.

Friends. You have done me, and Roxanne, a great honour coming here to the High Commission this evening. I reflect on who is present, and I think about what you all have in common.

In our minds at least, there's a thread that binds together their Excellencies the Governor-General and Lady Esmae, Prime Minister O'Neill and Ms Lynda Babao, the Chief Justice, those former Prime Ministers present, [Sir Rabbie Namaliu and Paias Wingti], the Foreign Minister, many other current and former Ministers of the cabinet, Vice President Patrick Nisira, Governors, and Members of Parliament. It unites the PNGDF Commander, Police Commissioner, Secretaries, Bishops, Priests, my diplomatic colleagues, business representatives, and people working – some of them voluntarily – in the health and education sectors, as well as playmates from childhood.

In our perspective what you all have in common is that you have become our friends. And we have invited you this evening with one purpose in mind - to thank you for your friendship.

Also present this evening are some senior members of the Parliament of the United Kingdom who are visiting PNG. We thank them for their interest in this region and welcome them, too, among friends.

I'm not sure if she quite realises, but somewhere along the way in the last three plus years my wife Roxanne Martens has been initiated into membership of a special tribe. It's a tribe of people I have spoken about before, including in my public presentations in Australia – a surprisingly numerous tribe of Australians for whom Papua New Guinea is part of their personal history, for whom PNG is in their blood.

Roxanne has shown her own commitment to this country in many ways – through her involvement in the Safe Motherhood Alliance, the Cancer Relief Society, and the Special Care Nursery. Several villages have water tanks and schools have toilet blocks because of her role in our Head of Mission Direct Aid Program.

So Roxanne too is a member of this special tribe of Australians. My sister Debbie Kemish and I – Debbie is here this evening – were initiated at an early age, when we came to this country as small

children. Our younger brother Peter was born here. We have arranged this evening for a collection of family photographs to be displayed on the walls, commemorating our personal, pre-independence connections with this place. We hope they will cause you some interest and amusement.

There are countless other examples of this tribe that I speak of. The Australians who came on a six month contract and never left, business people working on the commercial relationship who find it difficult to get the country out of their system, professionals who keep returning for one more project, one more posting. I am happy to say that there are several repeat offenders at the Australian High Commission in Port Moresby – people on their second, third and in one case (the Head of Aid, Stuart Schaefer) fourth posting.

When you ask these Australians about this strange spell they seem to be under, they say that it is the charm and warmth of Papua New Guineans that binds them to this place.

You've been working your magic on us for a long time. You have a special place in the minds of many Australians whose forebears fought and died at places like Milne Bay, Sananda, and Isurava on the Kokoda Track. Three thousand of them walk the Kokoda Track each year. And indeed, those veterans of the Papua New Guinean campaigns who are still with us. One of the high points of the last three years was, during the 70th anniversary of the Kokoda campaigns, watching a group of former Australian diggers reunite with their former Papuan comrades, the famous Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels. Further back still, this country and its people captured the imagination and hearts of Australians who came here as missionaries, prospectors, traders, administrators, kiaps and didimen.

Human nature being what it is, I think we can confidently say that, in their engagement with this country, none of these Australians got it 100 per cent right. But many of them strived with the best possible motivation, to be friends to this country.

When I look back at my predecessors – people many of you will know like Chris Moraitis, Michael Potts, Nick Warner, David Irvine and Bill Farmer – I am, sure that they, too, each worked hard to get it right. I am proud to be counted as one of their number. Soon Deborah Stokes, the first woman to take on the role of Australian High Commissioner to PNG, will join our ranks.

The Governor-General and Prime Minister of Australia, both women, intend to visit this country in coming months. We hope that the women of PNG, who as the leaders of this country have pointed out, continue to suffer under the burdens of maternal mortality and domestic violence, take inspiration from their examples. They should also draw inspiration from people like Dame Carol Kidu, Loujaya Toni,

Julie Soso, Dellilah Gore, Lucy Bogari, Phoebe Sangatari as well as others whose work is not of the same profile but is nonetheless fundamental – like Sisters Joyce Kairi and Maria Bernard of POMGH.

While I am paying tribute to individuals, I want to say that I have worked with the very best team of Australians and locally-engaged colleagues that I have had the pleasure to work with in my 25 years in the Australian Foreign Service. There's something about the self-selection process that leads the best Australians to apply for Port Moresby, and we seem to be attracting the best of Papua New Guineans through our recruitment. I will have an opportunity to thank my colleagues, but would like, before you all, to pay tribute to my colleagues John Feakes and Margie Adamson for their sterling leadership in the role of Deputy High Commissioner.

As I reflect, from the High Commission's perspective, on the experiences of the last three plus years in the Land of the Unexpected, the term seems to divide up into three clearly defined periods.

In the first year or so, Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare was Prime Minister of this country. I paid respect to him this morning, calling on him at Parliament House before he departed for East Sepik Province. Like others here, my sister and I remember him as the driving force of Independence and the first Prime Minister of this country in the early 1970s. A man who has given a great deal to his country.

But it was clearly not time, when we first arrived, to dwell on the past. After decades of sustained economic difficulties the economy was growing, the nation-building LNG project had begun, and the first whiffs of optimism were in the air.

The focus of this mission during this period was to continue to rebuild relations as recent difficulties in the bilateral relationship receded into the past, and to support a substantial reorientation of the Australian aid program. I believe this process has helped bring about today a new kind of development partnership – one which I believe all Australians and Papua New Guineans should be proud of, which delivers text books by the millions, life-saving drugs for all remote aid posts, provides infrastructure from classroom blocks to refurbished hospitals, and trains hundreds of midwives and women magistrates. We also helped PNG develop the framework for Sovereign Wealth Funds to help the country unlock its own potential.

Then came a phase of political crisis, constitutional challenge, generational transition and confusion. As you might imagine, I was not short of advice on how the Australian Government should conduct itself during this period. We stuck to our judgment that it was for PNG to resolve what was essentially a political problem, while not shying away from speaking directly to the parties as a concerned neighbour. But we left the megaphone in the cupboard. And we put

our military and civilian resources at the disposal of PNG as part of unprecedented surge support for the elections which Papua New Guineans clearly wanted to have.

But I do not want to over-state our role. Then, as in all times, the most important thing was for Papua New Guineans to show the way, not foreign representatives. And that is what happened. The country ultimately managed an extraordinarily difficult period with maturity and restraint. And in the end, in true PNG fashion, reconciliation and consensus emerged.

And now we find ourselves in a new phase. The country is led by a representative of a new generation of Papua New Guineans. I said to Prime Minister O'Neill during my call on him this morning that I have been honoured to work so closely with him over the last few years. I looked back in my diary this morning, and I saw that we arrived in PNG on the 1st of February 2010, and that my first meeting with Peter O'Neill was the following Friday, when we invited the then Public Services Minister to the residence for lunch. I did so because my predecessor and colleagues had encouraged me to, saying that this was a man with real potential. How right they were. Roxanne and I are proud to call him and Lynda our friends. I rejoice that this is true of our personal relationships with so many others in the PNG Parliament, in both Government and Opposition.

In this new era PNG is playing an active regional and international role, and its voice is being heard clearly by its neighbours and friends. At home, the current phase sometimes seems to me to be the hardest one, because it is the time when the obstacles have been stripped away, and the Future is demanding change with a coherent, consistent voice. PNG has a Government and Parliament clearly impatient to make a difference, the prospect of leadership stability, and a strong economy to underpin it all. The challenges may seem overwhelming but it is truly a time of Hope.

We Australians share this sense of hope with you. We have, for better or worse, been part of the story until now, and want PNG to succeed – not just because it is also in our interests for this to happen, but because so many of us feel so strongly an emotional bond with you. We hope that Australia will continue to play a positive role in Papua New Guinea's story of Hope.

So Banoho Namu Namu. Tenkyu long harim. Lukim yupela bihain.