

**OPENING ADDRESS BY
THE PRESIDENT OF THE GOVERNMENT OF FRENCH POLYNESIA
FIRST CONFERENCE OF THE PACIFIC COMMUNITY
TA'IMOANA CONFERENCE
6 DECEMBER 1999**

To express the sense of honour and, sincerely, the very great pleasure I feel in delivering the Conference opening address would be a somewhat vain endeavour, although that is what tradition would certainly require.

It is, therefore, more with suitable humility that I address you and thank the heads of delegation for according me the chairmanship of this First Conference of the Pacific Community.

We say farewell together today to the South Pacific Commission, which has lived a very full life for the past 52 years. Between the venerable Pentagon buildings at Anse Vata to the present outstanding headquarters architecture, lies a great span of our history, our problems and our meetings to look back upon.

Of the three broad areas of activity identified by the founding fathers of the SPC, the third, considered the least urgent, was to address "problems relating to nutrition, conservation of the nature heritage, the influence of modern civilisation on native societies and work conditions for natives so as to bring them into harmony with the recommendations of the International Labour Office".

Half a century on, in re-reading these objectives, we can measure, I believe with relief, don't you?, how far we have come.... Other milestones too have been passed during this long period.

One example was the 1983 Saipan Resolution, which at last gave full force to the participation of the non self-governing territories.

More recently, we experienced the unpleasant surprise of the United Kingdom's withdrawal, which many of us feared as a sign of ill omen.

We would salute the return of this country, with its extensive overseas experience.

Happily, we now seem to be together for the duration, at least into the foreseeable future. For us, this is a source of great satisfaction.

It is fair to say today that a single, united commitment is now manifest in our organisation, which in itself justifies our new name of "Community".

"Welcome" to you all.

Maeva and Manava.

Our sympathy goes out to our ni-Vanuatu friends, whose country, after Papua New Guinea last year, has just been struck by a series of disasters which, alas, have left casualties in their wake.

Honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs of Vanuatu, a country which is our friend, please be assured of our compassion.

Our congratulations are due to the new team that the electorate has just chosen to lead New Zealand.

We are sure that this generous neighbour will continue to nurture our organisation with its proposals and indeed contributions, which, in fact, have been constantly maintained. We also know that the New Zealand Director of the World Trade Organisation will be sensitive to the fragile state of our islands.

On your behalf, I would greet His Excellency, the Governor of Rapanui, and the Mayor of that island, which is dear to our hearts.

Our organisation is extending a welcome to them, as observers, for the first time. Therein, we would hope to see an encouraging sign for more institutionalised relations in the future.

The very recent landing on our shores of the *Hokulea "vaa"*, or double-hulled Polynesian voyaging canoe is, in addition, a highly symbolic coincidence, as we all sense and as everyone here understands.

And since I am also President of the Government of your host country, I wish to say to each and every one of you that you are indeed in the "Friendly Isles" as Hon Langi Kavaliku so kindly described our country yesterday.

May I also convey to you the warm and friendly greetings of the President of the French Republic, Mr Jacques Chirac, who, in the same spirit, on a number of occasions, has demonstrated that he was receptive to our region's concerns. And the presence of Mr Masseret, the Secretary of State for Defence, who has just arrived from East Timor, reflects the value and importance that the Government of the French Republic attaches to our region. Allow me, on this occasion, to also convey to you greetings from the Prime Minister, Mr Jospin.

The Programme prepared for you will enable you, over and above our collective deliberations, to gain a better understanding of French Polynesia, which is proud to be your host.

You will be aware that we have chosen an original form of destiny, autonomy within the French Republic. Our autonomy will be celebrated on 24 January next year when the Parliamentary Congress meets at Versailles to pass our Constitutional Act.

This choice, inexorably reiterated at each ballot, is both emotional and sensible. Emotional because, despite distance, we have so many reasons to be close that I cannot see how we could repudiate what we are, fully French and fully Polynesian.

Sensible, because we only seek new responsibilities when we have the human and financial resources to exercise them.

Which is the reason why, as you know, our priority is our country's development.

We have succeeded in moving from an economy dominated by the expenditure of the Pacific Testing Centre to an economy in which our own resources are beginning to achieve their fulfilment.

Many projects are emerging, not only in Tahiti but also in the outer island groups.

And our people are harnessing their initiative and inventiveness to build tomorrow's French Polynesia.

In the near future, and at our request, the Pacific Islands Forum will be sending a special committee here to report on current developments. My wish, distinguished Forum Director-General, is that this mission look at us specifically rather than taking a comparative approach, that it be open to differences and not take a stereotyped view and that it take the measure both of our achievements and of the tasks that still await us.

In this way, it will be acknowledged that our country can legitimately put forward its claim for full recognition.

Cherished Pacific Island Friends,

Our age-old traditions of welcome and hospitality, I believe you will agree, are above all expressed with warmth in our daily lives, in the way we enjoy each other's company and sometimes even connive in a manner characteristic of our instinctive sense of brotherhood.

We only meet irregularly, of course. But our real empathy lies elsewhere, in the spontaneity we bring to our way of life.

Our way of life has another special feature, the art of looking on with some surprise at other kinds of behaviour, the echo and often the effects of which find their way to our shores.

When they do, we look at each other, wonder, smile and take quiet amusement together.

Such is this Pacific Way, described by he who first coined the expression, His Excellency President Ratu Mara, as a way of seeing things, a way of being, a state of mind, more questioning than militant, more introspective than aggressive, turned more towards consensus than open conflict. May I on your behalf, salute this man as a great source of inspiration for our region.

But let us realise that the time for shoulder-shrugging, elegies or passive lamentation is over. Because the time of worrying uncertainties has come.

On a previous occasion, the fourth Pacific Leaders Conference in 1993 here in Tahiti, I drew my distinguished colleagues' attention to the distressing probability that the stunning pace of development in the Pacific Rim might leap over and exclude the central basin of this great ocean and reduce it to a soft underbelly, with no plans for itself and perhaps devoid of hope for a viable future.

To human impacts should be added the damaging whims of the elements, climate change, sea level rise and global atmospheric warming, in other words all those things which, since the generous but academic proclamations of the Rio Conference, followed by those of the Kyoto and Barbados meetings, have fuelled speculation on the chances of survival of island communities and the sustainability of the natural environment they live in.

And if we add the obstinate obstacle of poverty, stuttering health systems, lagging education and training structures, the difficulty of acclimatising to globalisation and the scarcity of financial resources, it is fair to say that the future cannot be looked into with total optimism.

As it was my honour to say to my distinguished colleagues at the PIDP Standing Committee meeting last March, for the moment the Pacific Community is no more than a misty and unsure concept, a geographical term, surely quite fascinating, but disconcerting and sometimes elusive.

I might add that this remark was also made by the incumbent chairman of the Forum, His Excellency the President of the Republic of Palau, in Koror in October this year.

Please permit me to quote his words: "Every member of the Forum shares a history of colonization and dependency.

It is time to rely more fully on the shared strength of our Pacific Island nations."

Strong words and strong words that, I believe, should be dwelled upon. The real message is that our Pacific Island region has yet to fully emerge into the common consciousness.

These words also hammer home the hope that the Oceania we aspire to can at last surge forth from the myths, the images and the fairly widespread feeling of conservatism, sometimes indeed chauvinism, to claim a shared destiny it can truly call its own, forged in diversity.

Our task and duty is to pursue a common destiny but not an inward-looking one, rather one of sufficient resilience for us to cope with the tremors reaching us from the outside, when they affect our own vision of ourselves.

The new knowledge and information technologies are bursting like a tidal wave into our region.

These events could be a welcome opportunity for imparting new skills to our young people, in keeping with the hope formed by the Conference for Pacific Youth in Tahiti in 1998.

From this could also flow the required impetus to tighten the bonds between our peoples, scattered as they are over a vast ocean, but perhaps now less isolated since communication has become such a rapid commodity and since talk and thought can be exchanged almost at will.

In this same room just a few days ago, there was extensive discussion on the METUA project, an ambitious endeavour on our part aiming to propel our country into the virtual arena, to learn how it operates and to offer its potential benefits to the greatest number. You will be hearing in more detail about this project tomorrow.

At this stage, tribute should be paid to His Majesty the King of Tonga, for alone and before anyone else, His Majesty had the impressive foresight to perceive that very fundamental aspect of globalisation-satellite communication. Tonga-Sat (I trust that my friend the Deputy Prime Minister of the Kingdom will excuse me for "borrowing" this project to illustrate my point).

In the immensity of space, Tonga-Sat has become our regional signature in a way; that is not insignificant and we can share your pride.

And now the time has come for all of us, with a heady feeling, to move on to the information highway.

The path we now tread, however, is not without ambiguities, far from it. Because the new universe which is superimposing itself in a disorderly way over our own through these new tools is itself being pulled in so many directions that it is not sure where it is going.

Change is coming with great speed and sometimes a harsh edge.

Our message, whether heard or even just distantly perceived, runs the risks of not being heard at all amidst the storm of noise and images invading the World Wide Web.

The poster we are giving you as a gift this year is commemorative of this first Meeting of the Pacific Community. It also sums up the troubled and questioning stance I believe we are now taking. A new-born baby looks on with ingenuous surprise at the family, already ensconced in the virtual world which is sending out its signals.

The sacred drum of the Taputapuatea Marae also transmits, in its age-old way, these unusual signals. The two messages are almost symbiotic, as the infant child would seem to desire.

Disturbing messages, regrettably, are reaching us in more prosaic form: Sparteca is being wound up, European Union funding is being reviewed in a worrying way and a range of initiatives is targeting structural reforms and governance.

The combined effect of all this brings the fear of unfortunate consequences, including stagnation or even shrinkage in island economies. The Asian Development Bank has just recognised this publicly in connection with the situation in our nearest neighbouring country, Cook Islands.

Sudden changes, through the headlong pace they set, often have a deleterious and almost paralysing effect. Island rhythms are slow, as we all here know.

Yet what is needed is to gradually set in motion the decisive energies, especially those of youth and the private sector.

That is something that we leaders very well know and sometimes experience to our detriment. It takes time, a great deal of time.

We do not want to be satisfied with being viewed affectionately by others.

Just to be packaged for tourism would diminish our countries and us with them to nostalgic showcases, a lost dream, sad images of a part of humanity resigned to a destiny in shreds scattered over an ocean of indifference.

With quite remarkable perspicacity, the distinguished Representative of Papua New Guinea, speaking at the distinguished forum of the United Nations, relevantly referred to an attitude he called "island fatigue". He was not of course referring to the fatigue of islanders, but to the feeling of weariness with the islands, as if helping them was like the futility of pushing the rock of Sisyphus uphill.

In the more recent past, at the special United Nations session on Small Island States, which followed on from the Copenhagen meeting on the same issue, an even more debilitating image was given of our islands.

Uncertainty prevailed over their fate, torn between natural disasters, migrating populations, natural resources disappearing through pillage, imprudent management, technology lag or the attraction of outside products, amplified by the tempest of change commonly referred to as globalisation.

Honourable Minister of Health of Samoa, in this regard we have noted the judicious remarks made by your country's delegate at the fifth session on climate control in Bonn, Germany, on 26 October this year.

The discussion was about whether it was people or economies that needed protection; and whether the precautionary principle should be applied even before the production of any irrefutable scientific evidence. Now that it is a debate, it would be worth engaging in fully.

We must see this clearly. Great upheaval is occurring. For much of it there is no easy explanation. Some of the events of change happen so fast, so fleetingly but have such instant consequences that they counteract any inclination to respond appropriately.

But this should not prevent us from taking up the challenge, from where we stand and in a united way on some issues.

Shall we just concentrate our minds on one fact. Having outstanding people is not the privilege of great nations alone; accordingly we must show together and on our scale that competition genuinely exists.

A huge effort needs to be made to respond to the high mobility of capital. This will only happen if, one day, our human resources are respected, and as early as possible, as a reservoir of talent, singularity and creativity.

Such is the new culture, which brings together versatility, difference, qualifications, innovation and enterprise.

In Palau, last October, the Forum endorsed the principle of a free trade area.

Would this be an adequate response? That is debatable.

Recently, at the Maui meeting on 11 November this year, the Forum Secretary-General highlighted the difficulties inherent in this scheme which would, probably, have phased implementation over two decades or more.

Because the decline in aid in real terms and the erosion of the beneficial effects of the Lome accords as well as the requirements of the World Trade Organisation, are formidable constraints.

Is the embryonic example of the Melanesian Spearhead Group valid for the region as a whole?

It is no doubt too early to come to any conclusion at this stage.

The obstinately high costs caused by our remoteness and small scale will be with us for a long time to come.

Six million theoretical consumers might be able to give credence to an imaginary development model.

Our region's fragmentation dashes our unreasonable longing for a single entity.

Surely only the new information technologies, together with better communications and air and sea transport systems, could offer relatively encouraging prospects for the future.

As its mandate states, this is our organisation's concern. And very illustrative of this is the comprehensive and voluminous report on programmes which has just been drafted and which is being submitted for our consideration by His Excellency the United Kingdom Ambassador to Fiji Islands, as Chairman of CRGA.

It bears witness to the efforts being made to be specific, to gain a proper perspective on things and to patiently seek the least inappropriate solutions to the problems facing island member countries. This task is immense, as no-one would deny.

Testimony to this also is the regular letter from our Director-General, a praiseworthy initiative and very useful reference document. At this stage, I would restrict myself to three important remarks.

In the first place, our organisation has experienced change and almost transformation in recent years.

We owe Bob Dun our recognition for the work he has done. The changes he has made are remarkable because, on the one hand, they have happened in a gentle and almost imperceptible manner; and on the other, because these structural adjustments were the result of a thorough search for weak points and remedies and of skillful human resource identification and assignment, a very tricky job; lastly, because the scale of the reform has enabled our organisation to manifest the ambitious aim of undertaking the large-scale coordination of major programmes in the region.

Further, and particular testimony to this, is the proposed pelagic resource management regime, as the conclusion of the Multilateral High-Level Consultation process looms up, in which our organisation can perform the vital mission of providing scientific advice in what is unarguably a colossal endeavour to regulate a living resource which is of prime importance for the well-being of our peoples.

Secondly, the Land Resources and Social Resources divisions are now operating under an evaluation system based on performance-related criteria.

This is a welcome innovation and makes it possible to adjust when necessary and reassure our funding partners, as we should be able to.

Lastly, the relative but well controlled stability of the core budget is very noteworthy. The significant growth in non-core contributions demonstrates that the rigorous process of design and management of the core budget is being recognised and also that the investment in programmes is producing conclusive results.

We can rightly salute this remarkable achievement. It augurs well for a favourable general environment in which to pursue our goals.

This does not of course mean that all the difficulties will be overcome or miraculously evaporate.

In these times of generally tight financial circumstances and often unpredictable dangers, many unsuspected factors will continue to impact upon our ability to honour our assessed contributions. And even the SPC's present 24 million XFP unit budget, which would appear to guarantee effectiveness, pales into significance in comparison with the huge task at hand.

Should we perhaps think of persuading the private sector to support us in our efforts?

At this stage, I would restrict my remarks to the recommendation that an *ad hoc* committee be set up to report to the 2000 CRGA.

An approach such as this can no longer be overlooked, because one of the definite features of tomorrow's global culture will be the new pre-eminence of intellectual capital.

To successfully master these unprecedented events, we need not only to revolutionise our thinking and also our institutions and our educational systems but even more relevantly perhaps to extend our traditional range of human excellence. As we look on in wonder, technological innovation and magic have become determining factors in prosperity.

But neither would amount to anything without the active contribution of the outstanding human resource that it is our responsibility to bring forth as soon as possible and very fast.

Such is the exalting task that awaits us.

I have no doubt that all of us here need no convincing.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, our proceedings will set the course that our refurbished and rejuvenated organisation will be following for the next two years.

It is up to us to make it an example, based on the need to be open to the outside world, but also on a strengthened sense of belonging to an Oceania that was a long time emerging into the light cast by the new millennium on our doorsteps and on the clear awareness that our common future must be one that those watching us today will take responsibility for, to continue tomorrow the work we are starting today.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I declare the First Conference of the Pacific Community open.

Ia Orana.