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AUSTRALIA PROPOSES CHANGES TO SOUTH PACIFIC COMMISSION

Australia has proposed changes in the functions of the South Pacific Commission, aimed at revitalizing the organisation.

These were outlined in an address to the South Pacific Conference in Guam yesterday by Australia's Special Minister of State, Senator Willesee, who is leader of the Australian delegation to the conference.

Senator Willesee proposed that from 1975 there should be a de facto merger of the South Pacific Commission and the Conference sessions.

At present, membership of the Commission comprises Australia, New Zealand, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Fiji, Nauru and Western Samoa. The Conference sessions are attended by all the territories and independent island States, as well as the metropolitan powers, but the latter do not vote.

Senator Willesee said that since 1947, when the Canberra Agreement had led to the formation of the South Pacific

Commission, the Pacific "has been washed by the tides of change."

"In 1947 no island entity in this region was a State," he said. "None could be a signatory to the Canberra Agreement. Today three are full members of the Commission - Western Samoa, Nauru and Fiji - and one or two more such as Papua New Guinea could, if they so desire, be shortly."

Senator Willesee continued: "Today we face the fact that we are meeting here under the terms of an Agreement which has been of considerable value but which is increasingly anachronistic."

He said that the 1947 Agreement, seen retrospectively, was and remained a paternalistic document. It saw the Pacific world was divided between controlling metropolitan powers and their subject colonies, and had not even foreshadowed the possibility of any of those colonies becoming independent and hence members of the Commission.

The Australian Government believed that the time had come to bring the provisions of the Canberra Agreement - or if that should prove impossible - its practices, up to date.

It was against this background that Australia had proposed changes in the Commission's functions.