



DEPARTMENT OF
FOREIGN
AFFAIRS

NO

M/141

DATE

27 September 1973

File

REPORT OF AUSTRALIAN DELEGATION TO SOUTH
PACIFIC CONFERENCE

Attached is a copy of a statement tabled in the Senate on 26 September 1973 by the Minister Assisting the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator Willesee, who was Leader of the Australian Delegation to the 13th South Pacific Conference at Guam, 11-20 September 1973.

As leader of the Australian delegation, I attended the first four days of the 13th South Pacific Conference which was held at Guam from 11 to 20 September 1973. The delegation included two Members of Parliament, Mr A.S. Luchetti and Mr P.E. Lucock, who were nominated at the Prime Minister's request by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

Twenty nine years ago the Labour Governments of Australia and New Zealand signed the Australian-New Zealand Agreement (more popularly known as the ANZAC Pact), which included articles proposing the establishment of a regional organisation known as the South Seas Regional Commission. This was the genesis of the South Pacific Commission (SPC) which was born of the Canberra Agreement of February 1947.

Since that time the South Pacific has been washed by the tides of change. In 1947 no island entity in this region was a state. None could be a signatory to the Canberra Agreement. Today, three are fully independent - Nauru, Fiji and Western Samoa - and have taken their place as members of the South Pacific Commission. Tonga re-entered the comity of nations in 1970. Papua New Guinea is now on the threshold of full nationhood.

The 1947 Canberra Agreement was a paternalistic document, based on a separation of the controlling metropolitan powers and their subject colonies. While the Agreement played a significant and valuable part in the economic, social and political development of the region, it has become increasingly out of step with the times. It is anachronistic that we have a South Pacific Commission, comprising the metropolitan powers, plus in recent years the independent Island states of the region, sitting in judgment over recommendations of the South Pacific Conference, at which only the Pacific Island states and territories have a vote.

Against this background and having in mind the Government's

policy that Australia should seek to play a co-operative and helpful - but not a dominating - role in the South Pacific, our delegation went to the South Pacific Conference at Guam this year with three positive ideas. Two were proposals and one a suggestion.

The first proposal was that from 1975 the South Pacific Commission should be financed on a part voluntary basis. The second proposal was that there should be a de facto merger of the Commission and the Conference sessions. The suggestion was that the Conference should be remodelled so that it could be shortened in length and its focus placed on the development process in the entire region.

Australia and New Zealand had launched the voluntary contribution principle by announcing at the South Pacific Forum held at Apia in April this year voluntary contributions of \$NZ250,000 each towards the 1974 SPC Work Program. France made a voluntary contribution of \$A50,000 at Guam.

A preliminary Session of the Commission, which met prior to the opening of the Conference in Guam, accepted the principle of part voluntary financing. As a result, the SPC's technical assistance work, its prime function, should in future be able to draw on greater financial resources.

Our main proposal for a de facto merger of the Conference and a Commission sessions - de facto because of the difficulties in amending the Canberra Agreement - received the unanimous support of all the voting members of the Conference. The non-self governing territories thus voted for equal status with the metropolitan powers.

The Conference then set up a special "future status committee" of Islanders which reported to the Conference on possible changes in the constitution and functioning of the South Pacific Commission. The report included a recommendation that the Australian Government initiate discussion immediately with all participating governments at the highest appropriate level to revise the Canberra Agreement so as to reflect the needs and aspirations of the Pacific people.

Consideration is now being given to the holding of a Conference early next year for this purpose.

This result is even better than we had hoped. Our ideas went with and strengthened the tide of Island opinion. The "future status committee" report also incorporated the main elements of our suggestion for remodelling the Conference. The implementation of the recommendations will, of course, depend on the results of the meeting of the Commission governments next year.

However, the Conference debates did not all run smoothly. The French delegation walked out of the meeting on 17 September, when the Cook Islands introduced a draft resolution condemning French nuclear testing in the Pacific. That was unfortunate. Despite our differences we value French participation in the SPC. The support given by Australia to the resolution on this matter - one not normally dealt with by the SPC - must be seen in the light of France's disregard of the interim order of the International Court of Justice and on the detection over a widespread area of Australia of radioactive fallout from the French tests.

The Cook Islands resolution, amended by Fiji, was sent by the Chairman of the Conference to the Secretary-General of the United Nations with the request that the views of the Conference be made known to the United Nations General Assembly and the Security Council. The resolution was adopted 10 votes to 5. Those opposing were American Samoa, the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, New Caledonia, Niue and the New Hebrides. The Wallis and Futuna Islands were not present and the French Polynesian delegation had returned home.

The voting figures might give the impression that some delegations did not believe that the nuclear tests were a cause of concern. This was not so. Every delegation, including that of

New Caledonia, indicated opposition to the tests in one form or another. The negative votes reflected more the concern of some island delegations that acceptance of the resolution might provoke the withdrawal of France from the Organisation.

The South Pacific Commission has clearly reached a turning point. The 13th South Pacific Conference marked an important milestone in the political development of the South Pacific. Australia went to the Conference this year seeking changes, not kudos, and we achieved that result.

If the recommendations of the "future status committee" of the Conference are adopted, the South Pacific Commission should remain a useful regional organisation for many years to come.