

Address by Meg Munn M.P., formerly Parliamentary Under-Secretary and Minister responsible for the Pacific

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Has the UK forgotten its friends in the Pacific?

It's a commonly held wisdom that the world is getting smaller, that with the internet, satellite TV and mobile phones we are becoming more and more connected. There is truth in this – the terrible events in Mumbai, brought to us in real-time, are a recent example.

However my experiences from my time as the UK Minister with responsibility for the Pacific region go part of the way into telling a different story. It's a long way to the Pacific. When you get there you're dazzled by its beauty and the welcome from your hosts, but your mobile phone doesn't work and the internet connection is not always great. But whilst there I did grow to understand the value that many Pacific people place on the connection to the UK, despite these difficulties of distance and communication.

This connection comes from the history that still binds us. It created the countries we live in and the relationships we enjoy. Many of the Pacific Islands were once British colonies, some keep our Monarch as head of state, and some are part of the Commonwealth. The political and legal systems of the UK influenced the structures in many of the new states, with a number using English as well as their local languages.

The links between royal families are strong, with royal representation at the King of Tonga's coronation and a royal visit to the Solomon Islands earlier this year. For many of the older generation in the UK, the mention of Tonga invariably leads to the telling of the story of how Queen Sulheti danced in the rain at our own Queen's coronation.

Mutual benefits

Of course the UK benefits from our links with the Pacific Islands. For instance, all Commonwealth citizens are entitled to apply to join the British Armed Forces. This is valuable for the UK, and we enjoy the fact that Fijians are relatively numerous in the forces and perform vital service. This regular employment also provides a financial boost to Fiji when these soldiers send home their

remittances. The skills they acquire in the army can subsequently be used at home following their discharge.

Fans of rugby will also be aware of the importance of players from the Pacific to many of our clubs. Players also gain the benefit of being able to play during our winter season. I know many club managers want to know how the Pacific can produce for their population size so many world class players.

However many of the younger people in the UK have no real sense of our shared history. I think one reason for this comes from the fact that the UK is now an overwhelmingly urban society, with many who live in rural areas travelling to work in towns and cities, or have moved there following retirement. This urban outlook means the similar societies in Europe or the USA are easier to make sense of, in contrast to many of the Pacific states who are both small and not urban at all.

Questioning

Some questioning of the UK's role in the Pacific stems from reductions in diplomats and the closure of diplomatic posts. Many of these are the consequence of the improvement in communication between islands: we no longer need people on the ground in every place where we used to have them. Also many of the issues that arise are concerns mainly for the islands and their immediate neighbours – Australia, New Zealand and, more widely, Asia.

But at the main gatherings for the region the UK is involved. This August I attended the Pacific Islands Post Forum Dialogue. Early in the morning I flew from Auckland to the island of Niue – which apparently means “Behold the coconut”. We had to fly in and out the same day as the island didn't have accommodation for us to stay. So a plane load of politicians and diplomats from around the world landed at 8.30am for a full day of meetings and discussion before flying back to Auckland. By the time I was back in my hotel room I had crossed the International Date Line twice in less than 24 hours!

But I should say that islands do come in different sizes – my first experience of the Pacific Islands Forum was in 2007 in Tonga. There I was able to spend 3 days on the island, most of it working but I have to admit I got a bit of sightseeing in as well.

The Forum appears to be working well in bringing together the countries of the region, with the Post Forum Dialogue letting 'outsiders' like the UK take part. For instance, we fully supported the Forum in its pressure on Fiji to move back towards democracy. During the last year we've provided

assistance on legal matters relating to the constitution through the visit of a respected UK legal expert.

The UK also continues to provide aid to the Pacific region, but it is now combined with aid from other European Union countries and awarded by the European Commission. In this way bigger and more effective work can be undertaken, instead of small amounts of aid being channelled through specific projects which create expensive overheads. There are two EU countries represented in the region, ourselves and France, and we work hard to ensure that the local knowledge we have is used when making grant allocations.

Working together on vital issues

Some issues, such as climate change and the Millennium Development Goals, can only be tackled internationally. Being serious about them demands we work across the globe, not just in areas close to home.

On vital issues our strong relationship with Australia and New Zealand offer important opportunities. Because of our long-time and strong links, these two countries look to us to be a bridge to Europe, and we look to them as co-operative partners in our work in the Pacific region.

The election of the new government in Australia late last year led to significant change. Kevin Rudd appointed a Minister with specific responsibilities for the Pacific – Duncan Kerr. With their Port Moresby declaration, Australia set out its ambition for the region and embarked on a new era of cooperation with the Pacific, based on shared development aspirations. Australia's declared ambition is to "... enable the countries of our own neighbourhood to share in the benefits of increased trade and economic growth."

Helen Clark, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand, was a strong supporter of the Pacific and made significant contributions to the Pacific Island Forum. John Key's new Government has a Minister whose portfolio includes specific responsibility for Pacific Island affairs. The new Government has stated its commitment to increase engagement with its South Pacific neighbours, and to maintain the level of Overseas Development Assistance but with an even greater focus of aid effort on the South Pacific.

Climate change

I mentioned climate change as an issue demanding international effort. There is no question that with this issue the Pacific Islands are on the front line. We can think it a deliberate overstatement

when we read that one Prime Minister is planning for the end of his country. The truth is, however, that some islands are perilously close to being underwater and some people have already had to move.

As well as the Pacific I was also Minister for the Caribbean. On a visit to Belize I became fascinated by a model in the Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre. Most climate change modelling is done at a level too big to be of use to small islands so they produced a model which demonstrated the effects on the islands of the Caribbean. Through a link with the UK Meteorological Office, Hadley Centre, this information can be shared with the Pacific. More knowledge about the expected consequences of climate change is an important part in helping the islands to prepare.

Supporting Pacific countries in international gatherings is a role the UK has taken up. It was Papua New Guinea at the international climate change conference in Bali that pushed the United States into taking some responsibility and promising some action. They bluntly stated that the United States should either come on board with the international consensus that action was needed or they should get out of the way.

Friendships need maintaining

We have strong links of history, language and values. But all friendships need maintaining and keeping relevant for today's world. What should our relationship be now and in the future?

The UK needs to have a diplomatic presence in the region and shouldn't reduce beyond its current level. But rather than focus on numbers we should look not just at bilateral relationships but how the UK can work on regional issues. We should build on the strengths in the relationships that New Zealand and Australia have with their Pacific neighbours.

The Pacific Islands need to do more to promote themselves in the UK. Building on the benefits that the UK gets can be the first step – for instance, most people know about the Gurkhas serving in the armed forces, why do they not know about the Pacific Islanders?

The Pacific Islands peoples are relatively small in numbers, but they have a unique perspective on a number of issues that affect us all. We can help and support them in international gatherings when they want to explain their viewpoint. Continued dialogue at a number of levels is required if we are to make effective progress on issues of concern.

On my visits to the Pacific Islands I have been impressed with their beauty and unique environments. I have also been privileged to meet people from a wider range of countries and to learn a little about the fascinating histories of the Polynesian, Micronesian and Melanesian peoples. Faced with the challenge of climate change and their possible disappearance we have a duty to act. They left a lasting impression on me and I hope that I will continue to be counted as a friend of the Pacific.