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## **Joint Press Conference with Foreign Minister Stephen Smith and New Zealand Foreign Minister Murray McCully**

**Subjects: Australia-New Zealand bilateral relationship, Fiji, Samoa.**

STEPHEN SMITH: Can I officially welcome to Australia New Zealand's Foreign Minister Murray McCully.

Each year Australia and New Zealand do two Foreign Ministerial meetings. One in Australia, one in New Zealand. So in the time that Murray and I have been Foreign Ministers we've had a formal Australia-New Zealand Foreign Ministers meeting in Perth, in Wellington, in Canberra and in the second half of this year we'll meet in Auckland.

And this of course is separate from the regular and ongoing contact that we have at any number of regional and international forums. We most recently saw each other together at the London conference on Afghanistan.

The relationship between Australia and New Zealand is of course of great importance to both our countries. As I've said before, and repeated, the relationship that Australia has with New Zealand is the most comprehensive we have of any of our relationships.

That's a reflection of our geography, our shared history, our common values, our like mindedness. And one of the startling figures which reflects the people-to-people exchanges which underpin that relationship. Every year now we see a million New Zealanders coming to Australia to visit and a million Australians going to New Zealand to visit.

The strength of people-to-people exchanges, the strength of the nation-to-nation contact is in very many respects quite extraordinary. We have a very strong economic relationship indeed. The closer economic

relations which has now been in existence for over 25 years – for a quarter of a century. We have I think the most successful free trade agreement between any two nations.

We're now building on that with our work for a single economic market. And the work on that project, the practical applications on making it easier for Australians to travel to New Zealand and visa versa is underway. It's a very good economic project that our two Prime Ministers and our two nations are committed to. We of course also work very closely in regional and international forums. We are close partners in the Pacific. We are close partners in the Pacific Islands Forum and in development systems matters we work very closely together in the Pacific.

We are also both strong and active Commonwealth members. In Port of Spain the most recent Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, Australia joined New Zealand as members of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG).

So for the next couple of years both Australia and New Zealand will be represented on CMAG which will see Murray and I meeting even more regularly in the course of ensuring that the Harare Declaration so far as the Commonwealth is concerned is fully observed. We also of course have shared peace keeping and peace and security interests. We work together in the Solomon Islands. We work together in East Timor and of course as our joint attendance at the conference in London on Afghanistan showed we both have a contribution and a commitment to Afghanistan. Of course in different provinces but we share the same commitment.

There is one particular announcement that Minister McCully and I want to make in respect of Fiji. But what I'd like to do is to hand to Mr McCully for his opening remarks and then I'll make some remarks about Fiji which Minister McCully will follow and then we're happy to respond to questions on those and other issues. Murray?

MURRAY MCCULLY: Can I just briefly just thank Stephen Smith for hosting what had been a very productive and positive talks again this morning. The relationship that New Zealand and Australia have is unlike any other relationship and that's reinforced at a formal level by the fact that we have these six monthly Foreign Minister meetings. Informally it's reinforced by the fact that we seem to confer so frequently and work so closely together and as Stephen Smith has said we spent some time together in London last week. I think we were on the phone together the week before that. Most of my cabinet colleagues are convinced that I spend more time with Stephen Smith than I do with my colleagues themselves. So, it's a relationship that is unlike any other in both the formal and an informal sense. We work closely together as Stephen Smith has indicated in the councils of the world. We have now a shared interest in the CMAG process which I think is going to be important for the Commonwealth. There's been a Commonwealth conversation underway about the need to refocus on the principles and values that underpin the Commonwealth.

CMAG is in many ways the upholder of those principles and values in the fact that New Zealand and Australia will have the opportunity to work well there is going to be good for that organisation and for the greater

Commonwealth. In terms of the region, Minister Smith has talked about the different areas in which we participate, particularly the Solomon's and Timor Leste. But we keep close in terms of the work we perform generally and anywhere where there were challenges to be found. As we saw last year with the tsunami in Samoa and Tonga the cooperation between the two couldn't be closer. Looking at the ten compact principles of donor cooperation I think the response to the tsunami, particularly in Samoa showed that sort of cooperation in action. Stephen Smith's talked about the bilateral relationship that's ebbed the flows of people and the importance of the economic cooperation that occurs and I simply endorse those warm sentiments.

This has been a good discussion. It's our turn next to host, and I've just taken the opportunity of officially inviting Stephen Smith to join me for those talks in Auckland in six months time.

STEPHEN SMITH: Which, if I need to, I officially accept. It would be rounding off the great cities of Australia and New Zealand, well, Perth, Canberra, Auckland, Wellington. Can I make some remarks about Fiji. Of course we spoke this morning at our meeting, at length, about Fiji. We reaffirmed our commitment to the unanimous declaration of the Pacific Island Forum leaders. We want Fiji to return to democracy on a much shorter timetable than the interim government is currently indicating. We want there to be full and free and fair participation in the political process in Fiji which, in our view, is not occurring, and we remain strong on our joint commitment to see Fiji return to democracy. And the sanctions and travel restrictions respectively and variously apply on members of the regime, we propose to continue and we propose to let our views about the current arrangements in Fiji continue to be known to our neighbours and friends in the Pacific and in the Commonwealth.

In December last year, Minister McCully and I had a conversation about how we would deal diplomatically in a professional diplomatic sense with Fiji, given what we regarded as the unfortunate expulsion from both Australia and New Zealand of our High Commissioners and the subsequent expulsion of the Fijian High Commissioner to Australia and Fijian High Commissioner to New Zealand.

Australia has a large mission in Suva; over 20 people. New Zealand has a much smaller mission. Murray gave me the courtesy of discussing with me the suggestion that New Zealand and Fiji would get together to talk about the need to apply additional resources, both to New Zealand's mission in Suva and Fiji's mission in Wellington. And those discussions took place in early January in Fiji, I think from memory 8 or 9 January. Murray has kept me fully informed with the discussions between Fiji and New Zealand about adding to their respective diplomatic resources.

At the end of last year, interim Foreign Minister Kubuabola, Fiji's interim Foreign Minister, approached me and Mr McCully to have a meeting to discuss these matters, both in a trilateral sense - Australia, New Zealand and Fiji - but also in a bilateral sense with Australia. Later this afternoon, this evening, interim Fiji Foreign Minister Kubuabola will meet in Canberra with Minister McCully and I to discuss these diplomatic issues. We are not proposing to discuss those matters which go to Pacific Island Forum's decision in respect of Fiji, nor indeed the

Commonwealth's decision in respect of Fiji, but to see if it is possible to put the formal diplomatic relationship between Australia and Fiji, and New Zealand and Fiji onto a better footing. It was more in sorrow than in anger that we responded to the expulsion of Australia's High Commissioner from Fiji. I think a lot of water will need to go under the bridge before those respective High Commissioners can be reinstated but we do want to start that dialogue. And I've always made the point clear that despite our very strong disagreement with Fiji over its return to democracy, its freedom of expression of thought in Fiji, and its freedom of lawful activity, we do want to continue to have a dialogue with Fiji. We see our joint meeting with interim Foreign Minister Kubuabola as being part of that process. So those private discussions will occur this evening in Canberra.

I'll throw to Murray and then we're happy to respond to your questions.

MURRAY MCCULLY: Thank you. Very briefly, we share Australia's very strong views about the position in Fiji, our concern about the lack of concern for human rights, the crackdown that we've seen on some elements of Fijian society. We have not changed our policy in respect of that situation nor have we changed the sanctions which are in place in relation to Fiji.

But what's become apparent to us is that we're not going to see progress made in dealing with those substantive areas of difference unless there's a vehicle for conversations to occur. From New Zealand's perspective that conversation has to be reasonably serious with three heads of mission sent packing by the interim regime.

And so we had a conversation, Stephen Smith and I had a conversation about the need for New Zealand to conduct some sort of discussion initially with Fiji about the capacities that should exist at our respective missions, in Suva and Wellington, and whether we should beef them up.

I therefore welcomed the initiative of Stephen Smith in proposing that a trans-Tasman discussion should also occur. We share common issues in relation to the appointments of High Commissioners. We of course would want to move on those matters together. The fact that we were going to be here in Canberra today afforded an opportunity to have a conversation. I therefore welcomed the initiative, supported it and, on the basis that Stephen Smith has outlined to you, look forward to conducting that further dialogue this afternoon.

STEPHEN SMITH: Thanks Murray. In your hands.

QUESTION: Is this a concession perhaps that at least in part Australia and New Zealand diplomacy has been too loud, perhaps, and has driven a wedge there?

STEPHEN SMITH: I'd like to go first. Both Australia and New Zealand have always made the point that, whilst we do not propose to resile in any manner or form from the strong view we have about the essential need for Fiji to return to democracy, we've also always made the point that there's a need to have a dialogue. One of our

difficulties in the past has been it is very hard to have a one-way dialogue. But the expulsion of the respective High Commissioners left us, frankly, bereft of the usual capacity to initiate or have that dialogue. Australia has, as does New Zealand, formal diplomatic relations and the presence of either High Commissioners or Ambassadors in countries where we have significant and substantial disagreements about democracy, human rights or other issues. We have those substantial issues with Fiji but we do need to have a conversation, we do need to have a dialogue. The last occasion I spoke with Commodore Bainimarama and with interim Foreign Minister Kubuabola, was in the margins of the General Assembly in New York in September last year. And I made the point to them advisedly, which I have previously put on a number of occasions on the public record, that when the dust had settled from Fiji's suspension from the Commonwealth and Fiji's suspension from the Pacific Island Forum, that we had to have a dialogue, there had to be a way back into a conversation to enable Fiji to return to democracy. Not having respective High Commissioners doesn't help. We don't want Fiji to be isolationist, and we've always held ourselves out as willing to have a dialogue.

Minister McCully and I have gone to Fiji both on two occasions as members of the Pacific Islands Forum ministerial contact group, and the things that I've said to you today, are things that we've said directly on a number of occasions to the Commonwealth colleagues.

MURRAY MCCULLY: On the various times that I've held this position, the media in New Zealand have asked me under what conditions would we conduct the dialogue in Fiji, and I've been very clear that there are no conditions, that they have my phone number, and I'm happy to talk any time there's something constructive to discuss.

I met Minister Kubuabola on the margins of the General Assembly in New York, he was in the early stages of his position. Then he made some contact with me subsequently, and I've kept in contact with him since that time. I might say even during the build-up to the occasion of the expulsion of our High Commissioner because I believe that that's the sort of job that we have, we need to keep talking when we can, and the discussion I had with Nadi.

QUESTION: What about a greater re-engagement with the Bainimarama regime though, do you think we might have to consider that to make any progress and to persuade him towards a return of democracy?

STEPHEN SMITH: Well, time will tell. As I say, in terms of professional diplomatic engagements, we very much would like to have a High Commissioner reinstated to Fiji. But I suspect that a fair amount of water will need to go under the bridge before that. I've also made the point that we remain open to have a conversation with the interim regime about a pathway back to democracy, and a pathway to respect human rights, and freedom of movement, freedom of association, in Fiji. I'm not expecting that all of those issues or problems will be solved in one meeting, but we do want to start that process.

QUESTION: Is this the first member of the regime to come to Australia since the travel restrictions were put in place, and will there be more?

STEPHEN SMITH: We'll take it case by case, on previous occasions, I'm happy to have the records checked and precise details provided, but on previous occasions I have authorised a waiver of travel bans to enable some members of the regime to transit through Australia, the interim Foreign Minister Kubuabola is caught by our travel bans, and as a consequence of my citation to him today, I've waived the travel bans in his case, and in the case of a small number of his officials.

QUESTION: What chance do you think there is that Neumi Leweni will end up being the extra consular official in your country?

STEPHEN SMITH: I think that's one for you, Murray.

MURRAY MCCULLY: New Zealand's position is quite clear, that we don't discuss or propose doing that [indistinct] engagement of discussion [indistinct]. There are many ways we've got to improve our capacity to agree to disagree. Throughout history countries have managed to maintain diplomatic missions with serious differences occurring, and we need to get to a point with Fiji where we can maintain missions, regardless of serious disagreements we have on matters of strongly held and that is not something that is accepted yet, we're going to have to spend some time trying to get to that point.

From New Zealand's point of view, it's reasonably serious, we've had three heads of mission sent home, even the capacity we had to similar services, many of those services are of benefit to the people of Fiji.

So that's the sort of conversation we've been trying to have today.

STEPHEN SMITH: Mr McCully made a very important and fundamental point there, which is, there's no point in Australia, there's no point in New Zealand, no point in Fiji, reinstating our respective High Commissioners, if the first disagreement about policy position, received a repeat of the recent events. Murray's made I think a very fundamental point, there has to be an understanding on the part of Fiji, that if we go through a period into the future, there will continue to be strong disagreements between Australia and Fiji, between New Zealand and Fiji. That should not get in the way of the formal, professional, diplomatic exchange. It did get in the way when Fiji expelled Australia's and New Zealand's High Commissioners. So there is a threshold point there, which Murray has quite rightly, I think, stated.

QUESTION: Mark Dodd from The Australian. You've talked about the close relationship between New Zealand and Australia. Could you explain the back flip on taking the Oceanic Viking asylum seekers, and whether this was a result of any pressure from Australia, and any plans to take any more?

MURRAY MCCULLY: I can't explain that, because there wasn't one. The New Zealand position has always been that we believe that this is, you know, a serious problem that needs to be dealt with through a multilateral process. The UNHCR are the agency that manage that process and, in relation to the Oceanic Viking, they have tendered some individuals through their process. We have a quota, and they will form part of that quota. So it doesn't involve a change of policy in any sense.

Were there any discussions between the Australian Government and the New Zealand Government? Of course there were. Stephen Smith and I talk frequently, and of course that featured in our conversations. This is not just Australia's problem. New Zealand has a huge interest in trying to find a solution to the people trafficking issue which is why we support the process by which we seek to find those solutions.

We are a little further away, geographically, but it's been clear for some time that we are the target of people smugglers as well. And we share the problem, and try to share the burden of finding solutions.

QUESTION: Just back on Fiji. I understand you're saying that you're not expecting an outcome from this meeting to be that High Commissioners will be restored in the mission. What are you hoping to achieve from this meeting today?

STEPHEN SMITH: Well to start dialogue, to start dialogue in the nature that we have outlined. And to make the point we would love to restore our High Commissioners, but we think we're a fair way from that. Part of the restoration of the High Commissioners is, as Murray has identified, an acceptance of the reality that there will be issues about which we will strongly disagree.

And there's no point restoring our High Commissioners if strong disagreement about democracy, about election, and about human rights is then seen as an excuse or a reason to expel High Commissioners again.

That's one of the fundamental points we have to get over.

But what is the significance or importance of the day's meeting is the actual having of the dialogue. It may well be that all we agree as a result of the day's meeting is to speak again in the future.

Frankly, I'd regard that myself as progress.

QUESTION: Why do you think Fiji has accepted your invitation?

STEPHEN SMITH: Well I don't want to put words into either Mr McCully's mouth or Fiji's. That's a question that you may want to address to the interim Foreign Minister. But I suspect that the interim Foreign Minister also has the view that there is no point not exhausting every possibility in terms of having better formal, professional, diplomatic engagement.

QUESTION: Australia's - expects a population of 36 million by mid-century. Representing a country that provides lots of the immigrants to Australia, are you concerned by that target?

MURRAY MCCULLY: No

STEPHEN SMITH: One...

QUESTION: Can I ask you a Samoa question, sorry?

STEPHEN SMITH: Just one little known statistic about the population traversing between Australia and New Zealand is that a larger number of Australians are these days settling and residing in New Zealand than has previously been the case. Samoa?

QUESTION: [Indistinct]... Samoa. There's been some concern expressed by people who are still living under tarpaulins after the events of, you know, four months ago; that the Samoan bureaucracy is being very slow and perhaps destructive in administering aid and getting houses built, and so forth.

Since Australia and New Zealand have put the lion's share of cash in there, how much monitoring of that are you doing, how concerned are you that those individuals are saying they should have houses now?

STEPHEN SMITH: Murray had a meeting with Bob McMullan this morning. So I might let Murray go first.

MURRAY MCCULLY: Well again, we've worked very closely together in this area. A strong feature of the support that has been given has been the use of the existing Government institutions in Samoa to deliver much of the support. That's a strong statement of our confidence in working with the government of Samoa to perform effectively.

I think it's in the nature of tragedies like this that there will be those who feel that they haven't been given the support they deserve, or haven't received the priority that they would like you follow up in those cases where there were serious complaints to see whether there's anything that we can do to move things in a more positive direction.

Our High Commissioner, as I'm sure is Australia's, are keeping close to the edge. If there are particular cases, we're happy to look into it. But quite frankly, I think the Samoan Government has done a good job in dealing with a very serious tragedy, and a substantial management challenge.

QUESTION: So you haven't seen any evidence to support these people's claims that there's a bureaucratic obstruction?

MURRAY MCCULLY: I've heard the claims. We look into them where we can. We're working closely with the Samoan Government to try and find your way through any roadblocks, if there are. It's in the nature of these things that there were going to be roadblocks sometimes. We try and get past them.

STEPHEN SMITH: I strongly endorse those remarks. I think Australia and New Zealand responded quickly, generously, cooperated and worked closely together, both in the aftermath of the tsunami in Samoa, and also in Tonga.

I think the Samoan Government responded very well in terrible, terrible, difficult and tragic circumstances.

Murray makes the point, and we're seeing it now in a different context in Haiti, in the face of these terrible natural disasters and human tragedy, we always find some of these examples. It's then a matter of the particular individual cases being chased down by the appropriate and relevant authorities, but in the face of a terrible situation, I think the Samoan Prime Minister and the Samoan Government and the Samoan nation did a very, very good job. Right, thanks very much.

[ENDS]

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