

Hon Mark Brown

Speech at the launch of Air Rarotonga commercial flights to French Polynesia

Saturday 13 August

“Our future is in our Past”

Ladies and Gentlemen - Kia Orana e la Orana

In May this year, I led a small motivated team to Tahiti with one aspiration – to bolster our connectivity with French Polynesia – in the air, by sea and through people to people ties.

This aspiration for closer ties with French Polynesia is one we’ve had for decades. COVID impact was the catalyst that reminded us the importance of French Polynesia. COVID impact reminded us “our future is in our past”.

It was simple really.

Tourism has been the lifeline of our economy for a decade. Since March 2020, we as a nation have preserved at great cost our investment of a decade in the tourism industry.

As we emerge from COVID and re-connect with the world, it is tourism that will drive our economic recovery, assure our economic and social prosperity and provide necessary investment for the diversification of our economy into the future.

Significantly reduced service delivery by Air NZ post COVID impact required our immediate exploration of alternative links.

Guided by and in close partnership with our private sector, your government, through our Tourism Corporation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration (MFAI) and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Management (MFEM) have been closely engaged with multiple airlines and governments for more than 2 years now. Working with haste and determination to resume and expand our airtlinks with our key markets and innovating to open links to new markets.

In French Polynesia – our future is in our past.

For decades, our key trade links were with French Polynesia.

Decades ago, my grandfather, amongst our foremost Cook Islands entrepreneurs, would load his Chevrolet onto one of his ships in Avarua, sail to Tahiti with his family, conduct a month of business whilst visiting with family in Tahiti and return to Rarotonga with a ship laden with goods that fuelled our early days of commerce.

In more recent decades, it was through Tahiti that we would fly to the United States and Europe. It was through Tahiti that we would bring our international visitors to Rarotonga and through Tahiti send our ei maire to the US (Honolulu) and our fish, black pearls and TAVs to the likes of Japan

And so it is today – that we look to Tahiti – our future is in our past.

With innovation, courage and fuelled by survival desperation, hallmarks of our economic evolution as a nation, off we went in May. In May – as it has done over the years, our Government followed private sector commercial acumen – we followed Air Rarotonga.

In the 2 missions I led to French Polynesia in May – comprising Air Rarotonga leadership and senior government officials, we were assured of our private sectors business acumen, their courage and their innovation.

We were assured of our political relationship with the government of French Polynesia cultivated over the last 10 years through the Polynesian Leaders Group and the leadership role we played in bringing French Polynesia into the Pacific Islands Forum in 2017.

Importantly, we were assured of our history, our people to people ties with Tahiti. Bloodties which transcend commerce and time. The future is in our past.

My discussions with French Polynesias President Edouard Fritch during those two visits to Tahiti in May not only highlighted the joint desire of our governments to bring our nations and people closer together, those discussions emphasised the mutual benefits we could both derive from expanded air links, to be followed by sea links.

For months now, we have been working closely with the government of French Polynesia, behind the scenes to lay the foundation for future opportunities.

First and foremost providing support to Air Rarotonga to realise this commercial airlink between the Cook Islands and French Polynesia that we launch today.

In May I signed a joint letter of exchange with President Fritch cementing our joint commitment to concluding an Air Services Agreement (ASA). We have jointly committed to conclude negotiations for an ASA which we intend to sign during the Council of Tourism Ministers Meeting to be hosted here in November this year.

When we arrive in French Polynesia this afternoon, President Fritch will be at the door of the plane to officially welcome us. We then move straight into bilateral discussions to advance the remaining work we started in May. The future is in our past.

I want to particularly commend the political leadership of President Fritch and his government. I commend his friendship with our government and our people and his unfailing belief in our ability as Maori people to govern and provide for our peoples.

My government has worked very closely with the government of President Fritch for a number of years now and together with Samoa and Niue we have delivered Manatua Cable – which has improved our digital connectivity significantly. Manatua is going to be a game changer for the Cook Islands. In May I joined with President Fritch here in Pape’ete to support and garner international support for the Blue Climate Summit. Today we launch this inaugural commercial flight for Air Rarotonga and we have further plans for air, sea, digital connectivity that will drive trade and economic opportunities for both our peoples. We intended stronger people to people ties so we can reconnect families and grow sports, culture, education and health co-operation. I look forward to welcoming a high level delegation from the Government of French Polynesia in November, together with business leaders of French Polynesia so we may together explore how and where we might do more business.

But for now, here at the Rarotonga International Airport, as we embark this first commercial Air Rarotonga flight to Pape’ete, let’s take a moment to celebrate us.

I acknowledge our Religious Advisory Council, Aronga Mana and Ta’unga who are integral in our celebrations and blessing ceremony.

To the teams at MFAI, MFEM and CI Tourism – thank you for pushing through, small steps to achieve big dreams.

To Ewan Smith and team Air Rarotonga – congratulations! Another milestone to add to a proud legacy of innovation, resilience and success. The journey has just begun and on behalf of our people and our government we celebrate with you and commit to continuing to fly with you as we navigate this new and uncharted adventure.

To our industry and community – just as we have weathered the COVID storm together, so too does our security and prosperity require our continued unity and solidarity in the months ahead. The future is in our past.

You have kept the faith. We will overcome - we must continue to back ourselves, work hard, be bold then the future will be ours. Ka akamaroiroi tatou

Kia Orana e Kia Manuia