



Opening Statement by

**Hon. Peter O'Neill CMG MP
Prime Minister**

**Opening of the Pacific Islands
Conference of Leaders**

**31 August 2016
Honolulu, Hawaii**

WELCOME

Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning,

It is my pleasure to officially call the Tenth Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders to order.

We have an impressive agenda for our Conference, and a full substantive day and evening ahead of us.

The timing of this conference is also important as well.

Soon, a new President of the United States will be elected and sworn in.

Over the past eight years, Pacific Island nations have enjoyed a very positive relationship with President Obama and his administration.

As a group, and individually, we will all soon begin to build relations with a new administration.

This conference will provide a stronger platform as we move forward after the November elections and establish relations with an incoming US Administration.

RELEVANCE OF PICL

We have the opportunity at this conference to further build a single united voice, to work together with our United States counterparts, and strive for action on matters that are important to the region.

There is a lot that we gain from engaging through this conference – as we have done since it was established in 1980.

It is a focal point for raising our region's profile in the US Government, and for ensuring continuity as elected Governments change.

One of the other important features of the PICL is the access that it facilitates to some of the best research scholars in our region.

I recall the last time we met at this forum here in Hawaii, we were briefed by Dr. Tarcisius Kabutaulaka.

Originally from the Solomon Islands, but based in Hawaii, the doctor presented in-depth analysis of the RAMSI program.

This was very useful in adapting our policy development in relation to RAMSI as that operation has been drawing down.

Through this forum we have been able to access information and debate other critical regional topics.

This includes China's presence in the Pacific, the future of deep seabed mining and other regional matters of significance.

REGIONAL CO-OPERATION AND ARCHITECTURE

Today, we have a number of important topics before us.

One of these is connected to supporting the Pacific Islands Forum's major initiative on regionalism – under the Framework for Pacific Regionalism.

Today's Pacific regionalism is driven by a shared desire to harness collective resources, streamline a regional agenda and mobilise political attention in the interests of the peoples and countries of our region.

Today's Pacific regionalism is rendered more successful when our Post-Forum Dialogue partners stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Pacific on issues of mutual interest – whether here in our region, or on the global stage.

We will hear from leading scholars, as well as the heads of two regional organisations, the Pacific Islands Forum and the Pacific Community.

UNITED STATES NAVY

We will also receive a briefing from the Commander of the United States Pacific Fleet, and considering the attention given to maritime issues in our region, that will be a very interesting session.

US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Over lunch, the East-West Center President, Charles Morrison, has kindly agreed to provide his perspective on the upcoming US elections, and what this might mean for our region

Regardless of who is sworn in as US President in January – there will be implications for the Pacific islands region.

We must be prepared for a different approach from a new Administration.

I am sure we have all been watching the Presidential campaign closely.

There has never been a time in living memory where we have candidates of such significant difference of opinion – at least while they are on the campaign trail.

This is in areas that include trade, international security and climate change.

CLIMATE CHANGE

It is this latter issue, climate change, that we will have the opportunity to discuss in the second session of the day.

Through President Obama – the Pacific has had a friend and an ally in the fight against climate change – an issue he has taken very seriously.

During one of the APEC Leaders' meetings last year I shared the bleak outlook that many of our communities are facing.

I told APEC Leaders that in our own lifetime a number of Pacific countries will be wiped out as countries if nothing is done.

President Obama took me aside and asked to have a special meeting on the sideline of COP 21 with island nations that are at risk.

We can be eternally grateful for this interest from President Obama, and we hope this will continue with the next President.

SECURITY

During our discussions today we will take a look at security issues in our region.

There is no doubt that the international community is in unsettled political and economic times – all of which impact on security.

We see maritime tensions, a growing terrorist threat out of the Middle East and frustrations between the strongest political powers on the planet.

On the economic front we continue to face significant financial pressures with low commodity prices, an economic slowdown in China, and uncertainty in the European Union with the British exit vote.

There are some observers who draw parallels to the global uncertainty of the decade immediately before each of the World Wars.

Leaders of the world must learn the lessons of history and not repeat mistakes.

We must manage current political tensions through dialogue.

And, we must manage current economic challenges by sticking to sensible financial management and exploring innovative trade opportunities.

At this table we must bring our Pacific Islands perspective to current issues, and share these with the United States and other powers.

We must look at how we can all be more effective in engaging with United States and its agencies through a whole of Government approach.

We must also recognise that the strength of Pacific Regionalism is in our unity.

CONCLUSION

In concluding, I am confident that all of these sessions, run under Chatham House rules, will help us to learn from each other, and gain insight from our guests.

I would now like to recognize someone I always enjoy meeting with when he is in Port Moresby, Dr. Charles Morrison, the President of the East-West Center.

Dr. Morrison I invite you to make your welcoming remarks.

Thank you.