

SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER HON. JAMES MARAPE, MP, TO THE
NATIONAL PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA, CANBERRA
08 FEBRUARY 2024

Mr Speaker, The Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Leader of the Opposition, President of the Senate, the Honourable Sue Lines, Honourable Members of Parliament, and The People of Australia,

I want to begin by appreciating and acknowledging the Ngunnawal and Ngambri People, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we are gathered. My People and I pay our respects to your Elders and people, past and present.

I bring warm heartfelt greetings from my People of Papua New Guinea to you all today. And to your constituents – the wonderful and kind People of Australia. Let me congratulate you on your 236th national anniversary, Australia Day, celebrated two weeks ago. And I thank the Government of Australia for according me a ‘Guest of Australia visit’ and the warm reception accorded to me, Rachael and my delegation on this visit.

I would like to begin by a past reflection. The leader from the highlands of my country was invited to Australia in the 1950s. His name was Kondomo Agaundo. Chief Agaundo could not speak one word of English so he spoke in his language. This drew some humour from his audience, to which he replied: “You may laugh at me now but one day, my sons will come and speak to you in your language, and you will listen.” This prophecy is being fulfilled at the highest, in the National Parliament of all Australians. . Today I come to you as a son of Papua New Guinea, the chief servant of my diverse tribes of people and languages but one nation.

Mr Speaker,

I am very deeply honoured to be accorded this rare privilege, being the first Prime Minister of my country to address the Australian Parliament. It is a high privilege I do not take for granted, and my People and I will treasure this as a moment of honour to the PNG-Australia relationship.

Thus, with a profound sense of humility and responsibility that I am addressing your Parliament today.

This is truly a historic moment for my country. And as I stand today and gaze upon the halls of this magnificent building, I am reminded of the long journey that your people have taken to arrive at this point, at this place.

This is a magnificent Parliament House, a truly impressive architectural and landscape marvel, that carefully blends the atmosphere of a modern, thriving Australia with the revered traditions of your indigenous people. A proud testament to the resilience and tenacity of settlers, migrants and indigenous people to survive and flourish – and of you, their descendants, who continue to uphold Democracy and its freedom-enriching Way of Life that we have all come to love and cherish.

It was from this Parliament, the 98th act of 1975 called the PNG Independence Act of 1975 cut the umbilical codes from the womb of Australia to birth PNG.

It was from this Parliament that many decisions made that has helped and shape PNG before 1975 and way after 1975.

Thus, Papua New Guinea has a very special, very unique relationship with Australia. We are the only country Australia birthed.

But to PNGeans and younger generation Australians I say this; Barely out of colonialisation herself when the six colonies merged into a federation and became independent from Britain in 1901, Australia officially took over what is now PNG as its own colony. This began in 1906 until she granted us our sovereign Independence in 1975.

Through those years, our two people were under one Australian administration. Together, we passed through World War I, the Pandemic of 1918, global economic depression of 1920s and 1930s, and World War II, where in defence of our shared territory, the Kokoda Spirit was birthed.

After World War II, your public servants, teachers, health care workers, Christian missionaries, business folk, and many, many more continued to work over the 1950s and 1960s until our Independence in 1975. Many of these people also lost their lives in the cause of duty; some remained to continue serving after 1975.

The amount of work Australia put into the administration of Papua New Guinea can never be ignored. History holds all the details but the greatest, most profound impact of Australian rule is the Democracy you left with us. Our Constitution, our democratic system of government, our judiciary, the public service, education system, our financial and banking system, and our Christian worldview.

These are the imprints of Australia, your legacies. And there is no greater imprint than Gough Whitlam Labour Government agreeing to our Independence when it was proposed by Michael Somare Pangu-led Government.

I pay homage to the memory of Prime Minister Whitlam for being the most socially-progressive of his time, for his policy of self-determination for the indigenous people of Australia, and for heeding the cries of our Founding Fathers for our own self-determination.

I do not know about you in Australia, but every PNGeans ever lived and will live when James Marape is gone will for ever revere Gough Whitlam and may his soul rest in God's bosom. And it will be unfair of me not to echo his words that Minister Penny Wong passed to me last night; it goes like this" if history were to obliterate the whole of my public career, save my contribution to the independence of a democratic PNG, I should rest content ".

Rest content great man.

Now, here we are – on the eve of 50 Years of Papua New Guinea's nationhood. How have the 49 years been? Of course, you know most of our anguish, and whatever joys that have found us.

It is true that our challenges are many; and our systems, fragile. It is true our people need greater empowerment in many aspects of their lives.

But, not all is bad.

Nearly 50 years on, our Democracy remains strong; our Constitution as bold as it was on 15 August 1975 when it was launched under the Australian Administration. We have

not fallen to the barrel of the gun; and Democracy in the land of a thousand tribes is still intact.

Despite the huge challenges of land, cultures, languages, and a weak economic starting point in 1975, our Thousand Tribes are still keeping on as “one people, one nation, one country”, in total allegiance to the Constitution. Our people are resilient and continue to draw strength from their traditional social support system refined over thousands of years.

Since 1975, we have run 10 elections. Yes, many of them have had their share of challenges, but we have unfailingly produced governments. Yes, there might have been way too many Votes of No Confidence, and stress of politics, but we have not failed to observe the values and principles of democracy as enshrined in our Constitution. Many people forget the huge disadvantages we started with, and the natural obstacles we continue to face.

Ours is a country comprising 462,840 square kilometers of land – land that is much bigger than Japan or England or New Zealand, to give you all some context. It is one of the most rugged and inaccessible country in the world, because of its impenetrable terrain, thick jungles, open valleys, vast swamplands, complex river systems, isolated islands, and far-flung atolls.

Throw in at the Starting Point a K5 billion economy, against a 3.5 million population, 95 percent of whom are illiterate, all diverse and living in rural areas; a country with no modern infrastructure reach, with only small scattered towns, and a very small percentage of people in formal employment. My own Huli tribe, for example, first came into contact with government and Church workers as late as 1952! This was our starting point in 1975.

These have all been our challenges. But as I visit with you in Australia today, I ask of you “Please, do not give up hope on Papua New Guinea”. We have always bounced back from low moments and we will continue to grow, learning from past experiences. In this regard, we are making structural reforms and trying our best to improve public sector efficiency to carry the country for the next 50 years.

These reforms and changes include our governance and public service structure. Changes are also being carried out into our Courts and the Judiciary, and the Police Force. We are also strengthening our anti-corruption laws and environment.

For our economy, we have made a number of progresses over the last couple of years. From that humble starting point of K5 billion, our national economy had reached K80 billion when I took over in 2019. Today, the IMF and World Bank will confirm that our economy has surpassed K111 billion. We working hard to reach a K200 billion within the next 10 years.

Mr Speaker, Honourable Members,

I want to take this time to appreciate all governments of Australia which have assisted our governments since 1975. I want to thank all Heads of Missions and staff of Australian High Commission who have served in PNG.

Thank you for continuing to support us throughout the life of our nationhood. Your assistance in Education, Health, Infrastructure development in ports, roads and telecommunications continue to a play a crucial role in our development as a country. I appreciate, also, all Australian investors, who, to date, comprise the biggest pool of

investors in Papua New Guinea.

For my Government, I acknowledge the Liberal-led Government under my good friend Scott Morrison for its support, as I acknowledge and thank this Labour-led Government under you, Prime Minister Albanese.

With the Comprehensive Strategic Economic Program that we mounted in 2020, our PNG-Australia relationship is elevated even further. This program entrenches the direction I am taking for my country, which is to move PNG away from being an aid/donor-recipient nation to becoming an economic-partner nation.

I want to also appreciate Prime Minister Albanese and the Labour Government for the Bilateral Security Agreement. This holds the blueprint that reflects my focus on Papua New Guinea becoming a strong economically-resilient nation. A strong, economically-empowered Papua New Guinea means a stronger and more secure Australia and Pacific.

Mr Speaker and Honourable Members of Parliament,
Next year 2025, Papua New Guinea will celebrate 50 years of nationhood. I take this opportunity to invite the Australian leadership to join us in our celebration.

The key institutions of our society that you have helped us establish have been turning 50 as well, heralding our National Golden Jubilee. Last year, we celebrated 50 years of our Central Bank; and our national airline, Air Niugini; and our national broadcaster, National Broadcasting Corporation. This year, we will witness that of our National & Supreme Courts, and several others. We thank Australia for the profound work that have gone into setting up these institutions of our country.

I also take this opportunity to formally thank all the People of Australia who have helped to shape and build my country – the politicians, public servants, missionaries, members of NGOs, businessmen and women. And a very special group of people – the Patrol and District Officers, known simply as Kiaps. This special breed of men patrolled our country well into its interior in the 50s and 60s after the War, many of them losing their lives from the challenges of this occupation.

It is on this note that I acknowledge some of our surviving Patrol Officers or Kiaps as we call them. Graham Watts who served in Rabaul, Bill Sanders who served in Simbu and John and Morag Hocknull who are present in the Public Gallery.

In 1975, Mr and Mrs Hocknull were at Komo Station in Southern Highlands Province, where he lowered and received the Australian flag as the PNG flag was hoisted. I also acknowledge some fathers of my country who are also up in the Public Gallery today. They represent the Somare generation that worked with Australian public servants to prepare, lobby and push for independence.

Sir Rabu Kumara from Western Highlands, Sir Yano Belo from Southern Highlands. These gentlemen come from the time when all that most Papua New Guineans knew of the Outside World was Australians. These gentlemen are among the last surviving of their generation.

These generations of Australians and Papua New Guineans planted the seed of sovereign democracy and political independence.

Prime Minister Albanese,

Last year, you addressed our National Parliament in Port Moresby in a most heartfelt speech. You spoke of Papua New Guinea as an “equal”, a co-development player in the Pacific with Australia and New Zealand. And you gave the assurance that Australia would help PNG in our focus areas of security, labour mobility and youth empowerment, and downstream processing of our renewable resources to help us get there sooner. You also saw our call for national unity through Rugby League. I am very grateful for this assurance, Mr Prime Minister. Your call is in the right direction to complete the naturing of PNG to be also economically independent and strong.

Papua New Guinea must not continue to be a grant/aid receiving nation, one who depends on borrowing money every year to survive. We must become a country standing on our own two feet, economically-independent and strong, so we can help Australia maintain Democracy, preserve peace, and ensure stability in the Pacific. As the country on the western fringe of our region, we view this with a sense of urgency and responsibility.

Papua New Guinea appreciates the assistance to become safe, secure and free from transnational crimes of drug trafficking, firearms trade, money laundering, terrorism and others. We aspire for a safe, clean country and a robust economy.

Honourable Members,

You will note my underlying tone of deep gratitude. Australia has been a huge pillar of support to my country and my people.

Ours is a relationship that is also shared in ethnicity through your Torres Strait islanders and our people of Western Province; also, the indigenous Australasian and Melanesian people that has lived in this part of earth for thousands of years. We are also locked deep into the Earth's crust on the Indo-Australian Plate, which we share. One might say, we are “joined at the hip”!

Our shared modern history of over a century, and maybe more, makes us uniquely related. Many of us in PNG see Australia as our big brother or sister, who took care of us while she was still a teenager, nurtured us into a young adult, and continues to support us to this day.

If Britain was our imperial “mother”, as they say, this certainly holds a lot of truth. We are cut from the same democratic cloth. One can choose one's friends, but one is stuck with their family. Our two countries are stuck with each other....and joined at the hip forever!

Mr Speaker and Honourable Members,

Today, I carry the humble and deep, deep gratitude of my people, the Thousand Tribes. On behalf of my people, I thank Australia for everything you have done and continue to do for us.

We realise our success as a nation will be the ultimate payoff for the work put in by many Australians. Thus, I commit my generation of Papua New Guineans to augmenting the sanctity of our democracy and progressing our economy.

We pledge to work hard to ensure that PNG emerges as an economically self-sustaining nation so that we too help keep our region safe, secure and prosperous for our two people and those in our Indo Pacific family.

In a world of many relations with other nations, nothing will come in between our two nations because we family and through tears, blood, pain and sacrifice plus our eternal

past our nations are constructed today.

A Greek Proverb goes like this and I paraphrase, "a society grows great when old man plant trees whose shade they shall never sit under".

The Whitlam Somare Generation have planted the trees of democracy and free market economy under the shades of these trees we enjoy today.

The question I ask myself as the chief servant of my country and maybe you too can ponder on for our two nations, two people, two economy is, are we planting the trees that can give enough and satisfying shade to our children if Jesus Christ does not come back soon?

As I reminded our Ngunnawal elder sister Serena Williams and family yesterday that we cannot change the past but we can construct the future, I appeal in Canberra the meeting place of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people and now modern Australia; our shared past we cannot change, they must be tail winds to shape our collective future. Our future is certain when we find common grounds to preserve and protect each other.

Thank you so very much, Australia for what you have done for Papua New Guinea May God continue to bless and enrich you, as you continue to bless those around you.

God bless Australia and God shall bless PNG too.
Thank you, Mr Speaker.

