OVERCOMING THE BIG CHALLENGES FOR A SMALL PARLIAMENT: THE COOK ISLANDS

In 2015 the Cooks Islands celebrates 50 years of self-governance. With a population of around 18,000, the challenges facing the island and its Parliament are constant and ever-changing, as conveyed by its Speaker in her speech made at the Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of the Commonwealth in January 2014.

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This article is based on Mrs Rattle’s speech given at the Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of the Commonwealth that took place in Wellington, New Zealand in January 2014.

Kia orana. "Kia orana" is the greeting of the Cook Islands, which means "May you live long." "Kia ora" is the greeting of the New Zealand Māori, the natives of New Zealand. With such similarities between the two countries, it’s not surprising that the Cook Islands and New Zealand have a very special relationship.

The Parliament of the Cook Islands was built in the 1970s for the workers who had come from New Zealand to build the national airport in Rarotonga. Originally a dormitory it was transformed into a Parliament building. Given we are about to celebrate our 50th year, this small place of business has served us well. So, as small as it might be, it does the work of the country that it committed to do many years ago. Do not be fooled by small; small can also be very good.

The Cook Islands began as a British colony but later became under New Zealand rule. It was in 1964 that talks began for Cook Islanders possibly to look after their own business.

Hence two options were presented: become independent or self-governed. The option of self-government appeared the most attractive because you could become citizens of New Zealand. This included enjoying the comforts that New Zealand provided, but be responsible for your own business, except in some matters with foreign affairs, where we do not have a military.

The first election in the Cook Islands took place in 1965. Albert Henry was the man responsible for forming the Cook Islands Party. He left New Zealand, and with the help of his sister, stood for election in Atutaki. After asking her to give her her seat in the constituency, he made a deal he would help her if he won. Albert Henry did win, and his sister, Mrs Marguerite Story, became the first non-member Speaker in our Parliament.

As Speaker, my position is somewhat on and off. This is because it depends on the government of the day and whether they want a member of Parliament to be the Speaker or a non-member to be the Speaker of Parliament. Being a New Zealand citizen with a New Zealand passport is the result of our becoming a self-governing country in free association with New Zealand.

However there is a downside, because our population is now so small. Most Cook Islanders live in
New Zealand—maybe about 50,000 or 60,000 of them. We like to say we have 18,000 people living in the Cook Islands, because the rest of them are in Australia. And so while it is a very good arrangement, it also has a downside. We cannot offer Cook Islanders that live overseas to come back and support the country, because we do not have the money to pay them. They get more money being overseas. In 2015, we will be celebrating 50 years of self-governing in the Cook Islands.

Parliament has a Prime Minister plus 24 members of Parliament. There are 15 islands in total – 12 of which are inhabited, and represented in Parliament. The Prime Minister is the leader of the ruling party, which is currently the Cook Islands’ Party (CIP). Each of those islands are so far away from the main island. I come from one of the far north islands and it takes me four hours to get to Parliament, and costs $NZD1,300 one way. So when you begin to think later about engaging with the community, those are some of the challenges for a very small country. It may be small in numbers of people, but there are very big challenges divided by the Pacific Ocean.

In order to achieve a stable government in the Cook Islands, it was thought that party-hopping legislation would fix all the problems and stabilize the Government. However there were problems with this, and legislation was put in place to fix it.

It has not however really fixed the problem because with a majority CIP, and with the Opposition Democratic Party, we do not know where a Member legally fits. One of the problems that I have had to deal with in Parliament is: “Point of Order, Speaker, I am a Democratic Member”. And I respond, “well, I did not know what to say, actually, to be honest. It is not clear. What is he? He sits there, but he voted from here”.

Although the constitution of the Cook Islands that was made by New Zealand in 1964 spells out the three governance areas of Judiciary, Parliament, and the Executive, people do not know what that means in practical terms.

So what does this mean for Parliament to be an entity with its own powers? It is not very clear. What I have found is because things are done a certain way year after year, people just tend to do things without really questioning “is this the right thing to do?”

We encounter difficulties in the separation of powers, in that we are instructed on how we will function, but still have to “provide the best you can, and we will take it from there.”

The streets of Rarotonga, the main island of the Cook Islands.
and provide all the services that are required to be done.

Impartiality is something that can maintain a stable government. I have learnt as a Speaker that you cannot take sides with either. I don’t belong to any side, nor do I have an opinion for either. I just sit in the middle and do my work, which I enjoy very much. Sometimes I can see the difficulties that exist if you belong to one side.

I think it is very important in Parliament for the Speaker to be equal, and for the staff to be equal with everybody how we treat people. It’s important for the Parliament to support everyone, whether they are government or opposition Members. It is very easy to deviate and think “oh, that’s the Prime Minister. I think I should do this or do that, because—I don’t know.” In Parliament we cannot afford that. We need to stick to what we are there to do.

As I mentioned we only have two parties. Rather than making things easier, it makes it difficult because there are no other opportunities for people to take these governance roles. There have been a couple of independent Members who have stood. It’s a difficult position however given that citizens do not trust them as they don’t really have a big mandate.

We have an Act in the Cook Islands regarding the governance, management, and the role of the Speaker, that is currently under review. I would like to thank our Commonwealth partners, particularly the Parliament of Western Australia, and we receive a lot of assistance through the New Zealand office. The review is really necessary because we have got caught up in management because the Act is so old. While today we are demanding performance from people, we do not have the legislation to support the work that we are trying to do. We are required to make a business plan every year.

I have come to realize you can spend hours doing a business plan and present it, but you get nothing for it. You cannot have new initiatives. You cannot do anything different. It is just status quo from year in, year out, and it does not allow you to do anything new.

I took the opportunity to ask some of my colleagues from the Pacific what are some of the big challenges we have, and the first thing they said was “money.” I came to this meeting by myself, given that unlike my fellow delegates, our Budget says “we don’t have any money.” This takes away the opportunity to go and learn from other people. This is the challenge for many of us in the Pacific, because we are given so much money, but you have to struggle to be able to make do.

I am here because New Zealand paid for me to be attend and because I am making a presentation. In normal circumstances it would be really difficult. The Cook Islands is planning a staff development training course in March, and while we have the funds for our staff, they have to pay...
their own affairs. I know it is a shared struggle not only for the Cook Islands but also for my friends in the Pacific and maybe other smaller countries.

In governing and managing our Budget in the Cook Islands, we have the Public Accounts Committee. We failed miserably in the assessment that was just done a few months ago. It is the only committee that works in the Cook Islands Parliament, mainly because everybody is busy doing their own things, and this is a requirement for the committee to do its job. People simply do not have the time to sit.

Two things were asked to be done: review the audited accounts of the year before, and review the budgets that were passed to make sure the ministries were doing their work. The audits are three years behind, making it ultimately difficult to maintain good governance and good management.

I am the only appointed Member in the Cook Islands. I originally trained to be – and still am – a nurse. I worked for the Red Cross and did lots of community work with women. For almost 20 years carrying out my nursing and Red Cross work, I visited every island in the Cook Islands. I knocked on every Minister’s door in that time looking for help. I came with a purpose for the people who voted them into Parliament; not for myself, not for the Red Cross, but for the people. So they began to know me.

In 2011 I was invited to be the chairperson of the international conference of the Red Cross in Geneva. I attended the meeting with our Prime Minister, and he sat in the audience while I sat in the Speaker’s seat as Chair.

In April 2012 I was called to the Prime Minister’s room, and he asked me if I would take on the role of Speaker of Parliament. Given the current Speaker at the time was ill, the position needed to be filled. After watching me chair the meeting in Geneva, he told me “I figure if you can chair a meeting with 2,000 people, you can chair a meeting with 24 members of Parliament.” Although I told him I knew nothing about politics, he compared the values.

He said: “What do you have to do for Red Cross?” I said: “Humanitarian, first, impartially is a principle of Red Cross. Neutrality is a principle of Red Cross. Independence is a principle of Red Cross. Unity, universality.” He said: “Those three things are all you need to know. The rest you can learn.” That is how I became the Speaker.

So I went home. I said: “I cannot tell you my answer now. I have to go home and talk to my family because this is different. I have never ever lived in this life before.” I went and talked to my children first and talked to my husband. They all said to me: “Mum, with the work you have done in the community—and sometimes we hear you complain about what can be done.” They said: “You do not have to complain now; you can go and be part of the fixing if you want something done differently.”

So I took the job on. I finished a Red Cross building that cost a million dollars, which was my biggest project, and I was going to retire that May because that was my 20th year. I left Red Cross on 6 June and became the Speaker the next day, and straight into the Budget. It wasn’t easy but I had great support from New Zealand, the Parliament here, and support from Western Australia.

I have been discriminated as an appointed Member. I have had a Member of Parliament stand and say: “You cannot tell me what to do because you are not an elected member.” I said: “The Standing Orders are very clear, if you would like to refer to them. There is no difference whether you are elected or not. The role of the Speaker is exactly the same.” Only one thing I cannot do: I cannot have a deliberative vote; I can only do a casting vote. Otherwise, I can do anything, and everything else.

There are many benefits, the salary not being one of them! I was at one point the lowest paid member of staff in the Parliament. Well, I am happy to say that in the last fortnight I was paid a better pay, so a bit more than the staff in Parliament. I guess you can say that is a benefit, but the main benefit for me is working in such a way that I can make a difference to many people. This is where I love my job about being a Speaker. I go back to being a Red Cross woman in working with the community.

I know the community of the Cook Islands. I already know where the vulnerabilities are, but where politics was involved it was a bit different. And gender—I have worked with women groups for a long time and I know how I can do that in Parliament.

Our stuff tuned away the opportunity to be trained in gender equally a little while ago because they are nervous about it. There is nothing wrong here. Speaker, We do not need to go down there. We are all right!” I say: “How can we be all right? We are about to celebrate our 50th year and the most women we have had in Parliament is three to four out of 24 members.

So how can you say there is no problem? We are working in it the Pacific women in Parliament project with the AusAID programme. We are succeeding. I spoke to the Speaker of the Parliament of Australia, Hon Bronwyn Bishop, MP, who knows the programme really well. We are going to start training with our staff and getting them involved in gender equality.

Women of the Cook Islands say: “We do not have a problem. You win on your own merit. We do not want any special things happening.” I disagree. I think that our traditional voting system needs to be reviewed because culturally there is a way of thinking. There is a mindset of doing this and women do not feature. I think that is going to happen.

The other thing about connecting with the community is our broadcasting. In the constitution it says all our Acts in Parliament have to be translated into Cook Islands Maori and the sessions are done bilingually. It is great because the people of the far north say “I was listening to Parliament today and this happened and that happened”, and it is really encouraging.

However the problem is that it takes twice as long. Nevertheless, it is a way to connect with the people of the outer islands.

I have taken my challenge of a small Parliament with the big challenges. Thank you, meitaki maata, for your attention.

SMALL PARLIAMENTS: COOK ISLANDS

The Parliamentarian | Issue One | 31