



**SENATOR THE HON PENNY WONG
LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN THE SENATE
MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

**ADDRESS AT WELCOME DINNER IN THE REPUBLIC OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS
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[Acknowledgements]

Good evening. *lokwe*.

Can I say how deeply honoured I am to be here today, as Australia's Foreign Minister, to mark the 35th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the Republic of the Marshall Islands and Australia.

In 1987, Australia was the second country to establish diplomatic relations with the Marshall Islands.

This recognition was quickly followed by support for your entry into the Pacific Islands Forum.

In the early 90s, we established our joint maritime partnership with the Australian Navy, for support and mentorship.

And last year, we opened our Embassy in Majuro, and appointed Ambassador Batley, our first ever resident Ambassador.

We've come a long way in 35 years!

This is my first visit to your country as Australia's Foreign Minister.

I have had the privilege of visiting once before – in 2018, before COVID-19 swept across our globe.

Can I acknowledge the exceptional work that you have done in protecting your people during the pandemic, and offer my condolences for those lost.

I know that in such a close-knit community, every loss is keenly felt.

The Marshall Islands have had one of the most successful responses to COVID-19 in the world – a true testament to your leadership.

And of course, this leadership extends beyond the pandemic, including:

Ocean issues, particularly your excellent work in sustainable fishing.

Human rights.

Climate change.

Today, I am here to mark 35 years of diplomatic relations.

But equally, I am here to mark 35 years of friendship, trust, and respect.

And I am here in the Marshall Islands – home to the best navigators in the world – to work with you to jointly navigate a course for the next 35 years.

So, as Australia's Foreign Minister, representing the new Australian Government, I'd like to start by saying this:

We will listen.

We will hear you.

Earlier this year, three days after taking office, I addressed the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

There, I acknowledged that in the past, Australia had ignored the calls of our Pacific family, and neglected its responsibility to act on climate change.

No longer.

31 years ago, President Amata Kabua stood before the United Nations General Assembly and warned the world's biggest emitters that they needed to take climate change seriously.

As long as you have been an independent nation, you have led the way on climate change.

Standing up for your own nation, and for so many other small island states.

As His Excellency President Kabua said in New York last month, the sea is rising – and many of the atolls here will be among the first to face serious flooding risks over the coming decades.

Australia has heard you.

And we are stepping up to join you, and our Pacific family, in responding to the climate crisis.

We have already enshrined a carbon emissions reduction target of at least 43 per cent by 2030, and net zero by 2050.

We have announced an Australia-Pacific Climate Infrastructure Partnership to support climate-related infrastructure and energy projects in Pacific countries and Timor-Leste.

And we will bid to co-host a future UN Conference of the Parties with Pacific Island countries.

If that bid is successful, we would be honoured to establish a meaningful role for the Marshall Islands, who have led the way for so long, and who have so much to lose in a warming planet.

We need your expertise.

We need your voice.

As one of the driest countries on earth, Australia wants to work with you on the challenge of water security among other climate change adaptation needs.

Today I am delighted to announce Australia is contributing \$2 million to a multi-partner effort, led by UNDP, to address water security and deliver safe drinking water across all the neighbouring atolls and islands.

I'm also pleased to announce a new five-year, \$2.5 million climate initiative between Australia and the Marshall Islands.

This will help implement components of the Marshall Islands' National Adaptation plan, with a focus on strengthening water and food security, and supporting climate governance and advocacy.

Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters – we face a vexing set of circumstances.

Climate.

COVID.

Strategic contest.

The illegal and immoral invasion of Ukraine, and President Putin's warning of nuclear attacks, is particularly troubling.

The Marshall Islands, more than most, understand the danger of even allusions to the use of nuclear weapons.

And your leadership as co-chair of the Group of Friends of Accountability in New York is a wonderful example of the ways in which small and medium sized countries like us can exercise influence in the world.

Australia has been proud to work with you in global and regional forums – such as on two signature RMI initiatives during your productive term in the Human Rights Council:

The Special Rapporteur on Climate Change.

And the recent Resolution on technical assistance and capacity building support for those who bear the impacts of the nuclear legacy.

Can I thank you also for your continued leadership on regional unity in the PIF.

As you stood up for your values on regionalism this year, including in the Parliament just this month with Resolution 77, we will stand up for ours by following through on our promises.

And we have faith that the agreements in Suva will make our region stronger.

We'll continue to listen to you and work with you to build prosperity in our region, to build the skills of our people, to build our institutions.

To support the civil society, the media and judiciaries, which will all help to face emerging challenges.

To working with you on maritime security, to protect your resources and sovereignty, and to build new capabilities for Sea Patrol.

We will do this transparently, as equals and without strings attached.

And we will do this with mutual friends like the United States, who play such a critical role in the North Pacific.

Australia is an active development partner, focusing in particular on climate adaptation; youth; scholarships, and supporting women and girls.

We have proudly supported organisations like WUTMI – Women United Together Marshall Islands – to broaden the options open to women across all the neighbouring atolls, including support for survivors of violence.

Women and girls' full participation in all spheres of life will be a vital part of the recovery from COVID.

We know that societies work better, economies work better, communities work better, when we remove barriers to the participation of women and girls.

When all have an equal place in national life.

Here too, the Marshall Islands leads.

And can I take a moment to recognise former president Hilda Heine, who of course was the first female Head of State in the region, and only the fourth in Oceania.

Australia also looks forward to the Marshall Islands hosting of the 15th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women, in 2024.

We stand ready to advance your ideas to shape our region for the better.

And can I say that it's such a pleasure to work with a fellow female Foreign Minister on this.

Australia will remain a critical development partner for the Marshall Islands in the years ahead.

But we are more than partners – we are family.

That's why we worked to keep our region connected during the pandemic, and why we are building our links across the Blue Pacific.

I am delighted that the first flight between Majuro and Brisbane since the pandemic will take off this Sunday.

Rebuilding this air connection will provide our two nations more opportunities for trade, tourism and travel.

And it will give our peoples and our communities more opportunities to connect with each other – from church leaders to climate experts; from musicians to youth; from traditional leaders to members of Parliament.

I hope we'll see that air connection get a workout next year for your hosting of the Micronesian Games.

We know you'll pull off an incredible event, and I think Australians will be especially captivated by the 'Micronesian All-round' event – particularly the coconut husking!

Our nations share a love of sport.

We also share heritage, and culture.

Today I was honoured to meet with Iroij Jimata Kabua to learn more about the traditional council.

We have a lot to learn from you in this space.

On taking office earlier this year, the Australian Government committed to telling the full story of our nation's identity.

It's a story of our modern diversity, with 270 plus ancestries represented in Australia.

And it's a story of the rich heritage of First Nations peoples, the oldest living culture on the planet.

In 2017, more than 250 First Nations delegates signed and delivered the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

It was a generous offer from First Nations peoples to all Australians, to move forward in reconciliation.

The Australian Government is committed to implementing the Uluru Statement in full. Voice. Treaty. Truth.

Like you have already done with the Council of Iroij, we will work to enshrine an Indigenous Voice to Parliament – so the perspectives of First Nations peoples are more directly and comprehensively included in our legislative process.

We will also develop a First Nations approach to foreign policy, and appoint Australia's inaugural First Nations Ambassador.

Australia is proud of its diversity and heritage, and the rich cultures and traditions of the Pacific.

During my visits, I've had the opportunity to admire Marshallese handicrafts – some of the most beautiful in the region.

And I know that earlier this year, our Embassy in Majuro showcased a Torres Strait Mask exhibition.

I'm delighted that the exhibition will be travelling to Ebeye – which I was fortunate enough to visit in 2018.

Because we have so much to share, so much to learn from each other, and so much to show the rest of the world.

Today, we signed an agreement between our national broadcasters to allow for the immediate royalty-free sharing of the ABC's Pacific content here in the Marshall Islands – from news and current affairs to cultural content and children's shows.

Because the more we understand each other, the better we can work together.

And to that end, I am pleased to have spoken with Foreign Minister Kitlang Kabua on establishing regular bilateral partnership talks.

These talks will be an opportunity for our senior officials to discuss issues of mutual importance and build our cooperation on development and security.

In 1987, our diplomatic relationship began.

In the 35 years since, it has become a real friendship.

I hope that the next 35 years sees our friendship deepen even further, based on the fundamental principles of respect, trust and commitment.

We should both be proud of our many joint achievements.

And Australia is proud to work with you as we try to improve our region, and our world, for the next generation.

Kommol tata.

Thank you.