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“Good Governance and Accountability – A Code of Ethics”

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Kia Ora tatau, and good afternoon. And although this is Wellington, I am a Manukau MP so first of all I want to bring the greetings of Manukau. I feel at home here with you because, like most of you, I serve as a Member of Parliament. When I visit your countries I also feel very much at home. For I am entering my 20th year as the representative of the richly multicultural district of Manukau East, which includes Otara, home of many Pacific Island groups in New Zealand. We have a proud and active community of Pacific kiwis, who have a precious commodity which researchers in the West call ‘social capital’. I trust that we can convince them that Parliament is the place where we have time and inclination to listen to them rather than being too busy, mired in Machiavellian calculation and mudslinging.

I am inspired by William Wilberforce, who showed that you can make a difference and alter events around you if you do not give up, and are persistent in advancing an ideal that you believe in. In his case it was the abolition of the slave trade, and he also led a charge for decency and respect for others. He believed that all people of authority should set an example, and that they should match conduct to words. I liked that

determination and those ideals – as such, I’m driven by a desire to improve the standing of our House among the people we are supposed to serve.

I note that ethics are of concern around the world, and that the CPA UK Branch sponsored in January 2006 a Seminar on *“Restoring Faith in the Political Process”*. New Zealand was represented by Ms Maryan Street and Ms Sandra Goudie. The former, on reporting back from the workshop *“Has democracy the strength to mount the challenge?”*, said that it was the responsibility of Members of Parliament as legislators to show leadership, integrity and example. Ms Goudie, reporting back from the workshop *“Eradication of corruption: the role of parliamentarians”*, said that parliamentarians should be seen as role models and lead by example.

You and I daily strive to ensure delivery of democracy; we do that by sustaining a culture of engagement of ideas that puts aside private interest and personalities, and we call on the character of MPs to highlight the unique characteristics of each of our societies. We are leaders by example in Parliaments serving and hopefully growing, with our community, a sense of parliamentary service. I say *by example* – for if we do not lead *by example* we have only got threats or bribes left, or silly sideshows of the divide or dismay and rule type. In many jurisdictions there is a rising sense of a rift between the leaders and the led. This is expressed in low turnouts at elections, trivialisation of vital issues and the turning away from service by capable people who abhor the ugly public face of parliamentary culture. We must work as MPs to ensure the reinstatement of integrity and service for all citizens.

I also wish to share with you some of my experience as the Chairman of the International Council of the organisation Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA), an organisation that is endeavouring to improve governance throughout the world.

For many the Pacific Islands are touted as a pleasurable holiday escape, but for each of us there is the urgent awareness of a real challenge; a universal decline in the sovereign power of democracy. Some governments are prepared to wage war in the name of spreading democracy – but to do so when democracy is crumbling at home ends up spreading more distrust than a spirit of service. In the US Harvard researchers led by Joseph Nye (1997) have collated a series of studies under the heading ‘Why People Don’t Trust Government’.

Italy’s recent election was reported as a more-than-robust round of scurrilous character assassination rather than a sober tour of the pressing issues. Israel recently held an election amidst one of the most vital set of circumstances confronting civilisation and there was a poor turnout.

The current UK Conservative leader David Cameron placed improvement in parliamentary behaviour at the core of his contribution to his adoring followers as he nailed his standards to the Westminster mast – having just won the leadership poll. He said in December last “We need to change, and we will change, the way we behave. I’m fed up with the Punch and Judy politics of Westminster, the name-calling, backbiting, point-scoring, finger-pointing”. Fed up is an apt description for the feedback I get about parliamentary trends. The mausoleum for the first New Zealand Labour Prime Minister (Michael Joseph Savage) extols that ‘there is no fame to rise above, the crowning honour of a people’s love’. Modern politicians do not need to be loved but we do at least need to be respected. Sadly, research shows a decline in affection for and participation in democratic processes throughout the western world. In 2005, ‘did not vote’ finished third behind the Labour and National parties in the New Zealand election. The minor parties were well behind.

Throughout my parliamentary service I have been concerned about the public perception of our profession. I have petitioned my colleagues with my draft Code of Ethics, and discussed it with my PGA colleagues who held a parliamentary forum on Ethics & Accountability in the US Senate in June 2004. We concluded that transparency, ethics and accountability are pre-conditions of good governance. For me, ethics and values are the most important issues facing the survival and development of democracy in this current century.

I have discussed these ideals with the Global Organisation of Parliamentarians against Corruption, of which I am a member, and one of our three main activities is the development of Codes of Conduct and Ethics for parliamentarians.

When I embarked upon this quest for the restoration of manners, for integrity and accountability, I was reminded of the Speech from the Throne delivered when the newly-elected government led by Helen Clark took office in 1999 - *“My government recognises that there is deep public concern with a number of aspects of the operations of our political system in recent years... (we will) restore public confidence in the political integrity of Parliament and the electoral process.”*

Robert Kennedy’s most memorable statement – the words inscribed on his tomb – also inspired me. *“Each time a man stands for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing over from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”*

As with any novel idea, initially some of my colleagues were doubtful, suggesting that all of my colleagues would become my enemies (not just those sitting on the other side of the House). Then they were chastened by the referendum that cried out for a significant reduction in the number of MPs (120 down to 99). My Prime Minister declared in the clarion Speech from the Throne upon our election (1999) that we would achieve an improved relationship. My work is one step on that journey of many miles.

The question was asked of me recently by television presenter and ex-MP Willie Jackson: “Do you think a Code of Ethics is needed, and why?” My response was “Yes”, and the reasons two-fold: first, that there were no specific guidelines about how members should conduct themselves from an ethical point of view, and that we needed a standard against which conduct can be measured; and second, “trust” – politicians worldwide are the least trusted profession. The following are just some of the comments which appear in a recent poll published by Readers Digest in July 2005:

- In the list of most trusted professions, politicians were number 30 of 30, behind even real estate agents, car salesmen and psychics;
- Respondents voted Parliament the second least trusted Government body in New Zealand today;
- There is no doubt that politicians have demeaned the House of Representatives in the public mind, particularly among home-owners, nearly half of whom have no belief in the institution.

These are disturbing comments and figures. Such beliefs and perceptions may, or may not, be based on misunderstandings, but they still matter. They are the public’s perceptions.

The Code that I have proposed is deliberately modest, declaratory rather than mandatory. There is no evidence in New Zealand of the sort of corruption that has plagued other parliaments from time to time, or that is endemic in some other countries. The principles on which the Code is based include integrity and accountability, for it is accepted that these qualities are prerequisites to maintaining confidence and trust in politicians.

By beginning simply and not sanctimoniously, we recognise that most members are hard-working and sincere. The future of the parliamentary system is in our hands, and we want a document that those hands can mould in harmony with the community.

We are all keenly interested in sharing our understanding of our professional home – Parliament - the home where we seek to summon the common sense, concerns and commitments of our communities. Community literally means ‘together we serve’. Parliament should be the pinnacle of public service where we ensure the frank and free flow of critical analysis of the values, visions, ideas and actions of our people.

Recently I made my third attempt through submissions to Parliament’s Standing Orders Committee to persuade my colleagues to adopt a Code. It was my third strike. I am hopeful that I might have more success on this occasion – time will tell - but if not, some of my supporters have suggested I consider legislation by way of a Private Member’s Bill.

In conclusion, New Zealand has an obligation in the Pacific to lead with good governance in such things as transparency, accountability, equity and efficiency in the management and use of resources. By adopting a Code of Ethics and following it

according to its spirit and purpose, we can once again become known as a developing model democracy.

Tihei mauri ora – behold the spirit of life.