Kia Orana, Taloha ni, Fakalofa lahi atu, Ni sa bula vinaka, Malo e ilele, Talota Lava and Warm Pacific Greetings to you all.

Thank you for your warm welcome, thank you for your kind invitation to be with you today and participate in Sixth Pacific Parliamentary Retreat - Centre for Democratic Institutions.

I have been asked to talk about Tradition and Modern Parliamentary Democracy - Accommodating Diversity in New Zealand Parliamentary Practice.

I thought I could do this best by discussing how I balance my role as an Electorate MP with the expectations of Pacific Peoples in New Zealand. My story will show the tensions between Tradition and Modernity and how the New Zealand Parliamentary system accommodates diversity.

I will start by talking about my role as a List MP from November 1999 to July 2002. Then I will outline my current role as an Electorate MP from August 2002 to the present. Finally, I will reflect upon the challenges of local and national constituencies and how I balance them.

First, a little history - When I went into Parliament, as a List Member of Parliament, I did not have a geographical constituency. The Pacific Island community became my constituency.

Strengthening Pacific Island communities was my number one priority.

As a Member of Parliament I aimed to serve the Pacific Island community through:

- Identifying and meeting the needs of Pacific Island constituents.
- Strengthening Pacific Island participation in the political process.
- Representing and advocating for Pacific Island concerns in Parliament.

As a Wellington-based, Pacific Island List MP my primary constituency was the Pacific Island communities of the greater Wellington region and the Pacific Island communities located in the lower North Island (Palmerston North, New Plymouth, Masterton and Levin) and in the South Island (Nelson, Christchurch, Timaru, Oamaru, Dunedin and Invercargill).

The two Auckland based Pacific Island Labour MPs (the Hon. Taito Philip Field and Mark Goshe) were better located to service the communities in Auckland and the top part of the North Island. However, as time went on, I ended up doing a lot of work in Auckland and other parts north. Many Pacific Island organisations are women's groups and they wanted 'their' Pacific woman MP to meet with them.

Constituency work traditionally involves a local MP, assisted by an Electorate Secretary, meeting constituents and addressing their concerns case-by-case. Rather than employ a 'case work' approach to constituency work, I used a 'community development' approach with Pacific Island communities.

I ran Pacific Island community meetings throughout the country. I had an electorate office in Wellington to cover the North Island, and an office in Christchurch to coordinate my work in the South Island.

These electorate offices and community meetings aimed to meet the needs of Pacific Island constituents, strengthen Pacific Island participation in the political process and assisted me, and other members of the government, to represent and advocate for Pacific Island concerns in Parliament through work on Select Committees, in the House and in lobbying key stakeholders.
As a member of the Finance and Expenditure and the Government Administration Select Committees I had many opportunities to advocate for Pacific Island issues.

In the house I was involved in some important debates that impacted on Pacific peoples.

My maiden speech still remains a highlight of my first term, as it was the first time that the Pacific Island community came to Parliament en masse and were able to feel that this was their place too.

The subsequent establishment of the Pacific Room in the Parliament building helped Pacific peoples feel that they had a place of belonging in Parliament where their voices could be heard.

One of my greatest joys was working with young Pacific People. I organised for the senior Pacific Island students of 23 local secondary schools to visit Parliament. And we had two representatives from each school attend a special meeting to establish the Wellington Regional Pacific Island Secondary Schools Council. Later a nation-wide Council was organised.

As a List MP I worked to strengthen and build the capacity of the Pacific Island community in New Zealand.

In my maiden speech I said that "Strong independent communities contribute to the social and economic development of a strong independent nation."

I never came to Parliament just to represent Pacific peoples. The central message in my Maiden Speech was: "While I am in Parliament I will pursue a permanent interest in advocating and promoting the interests of, women, Pacific people, Maori, the elderly, ethnic minorities and all New Zealanders, who are struggling to live a life of dignity."

I think that there is a danger that Maori, Pacific People, ethnic minorities and women can get marginalised into single-issue politics.

When I entered Parliament there was a lot of pressure on me to be involved in the social services, because most of my working life had been in that area, and in Pacific Island Affairs, because I was a Pacific Islander.

I decided that I did not want to work in the 'soft' areas that were easy for me. So I put myself up for the Finance and Expenditure and Government Administration select committees. More recently I went for Foreign Affairs, Defence and Overseas Development Assistance where I am the only woman and now Deputy Chair.

Whilst there are an increasing number of Maori, Pacific Peoples, ethnic minorities and women in New Zealand's Parliament, some contend themselves with working on single issues and as a consequence become marginalised, and sometimes are not taken seriously.

I believe that Maori, Pacific Peoples, ethnic minorities and women need to be in the 'hard' areas of politics, where the tough decisions about money and other resources are made. I think that we should work in the mainstream. That way we do not get marginalised. That way the voices of Maori, Pacific Peoples, ethnic minorities and women are heard when the important decisions are made.

That is one of the reasons why I took the opportunity to run for a general electorate.

The Mana electorate, I now hold, covers a wide range of communities. Retirement communities and lifestyle blocks in the north - New middle-income housing estates, multi-cultural communities, state-housing areas, the city centre and farming communities. Throughout the electorate there are over 60,000 New Zealanders in all our difference and diversity.

As a List MP in Parliament, I learnt how to operate effectively on behalf of my national constituency through lobbying ministers and government departments, advocating for local issues, speaking in the House and working on select committees.

I served my parliamentary apprenticeship as a list MP and I was ready to serve the Mana electorate.

One of the challenges I have faced as an electorate MP is to redefine what is a New Zealander. What does an Electorate MP look like?

I was born in New Zealand - along with more than 60% of Pacific people living in this nation. I am a Kiwi.

Each of the Pacific Island MPs in Parliament holds an electorate seat - Taito Philip Field in Mangere, Mark Goshe in Maungakiekie and myself in Mana.

Whilst I am making that point, there are also Maori holding electorate seats - Georgina Byer, Winston Peters, add to that Clem Simich and Jill Pettis who are part Maori.
22% of the Mana electorate are of Pacific origin, 20% of Maori descent, 5% ethnic minorities and 53% are Pakeha.

As New Zealand’s population changes the colour and ethnicity of our representatives in Parliament is changing too. We are a diverse, colourful, multicultural society and our parliament is reflecting our differences.

I now have a geographical constituency and I attend many local events with all the groups in the electorate. I open bowling seasons, yacht clubs, visit schools, talk to Rotary clubs and go to all sorts of local events. Most important I keep myself grounded by spending a lot of time in the community, listening to the people.

At the same time I still have many demands from the wider community.

I have responsibilities as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Ministers of Trade, Environment and Overseas Development Assistance. I often have to substitute for the Ministers and undertake a range of other duties.

I am still very involved with the Pacific Island community, and continue to work on many issues that involve the Pacific.

As Deputy Chair of the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Select Committee I have active involvement in matters relating to Pacific Island nations overseas and in New Zealand.

It is my view that a politician is a representative of the people, a servant of the people. To serve our people is a great honour.

The form that service may take will vary during a political career. In the beginning, as a list MP, I focussed on the Pacific community. But I have aimed to avoid the trap of being a ‘single issue’ politician and always kept engaged with a wide range of issues that affect all New Zealanders.

I do not think that narrow, issue-based politics is particularly helpful in a multi-facet, multi-cultural society like New Zealand.

We do not live as individuals we live in partnerships, families and communities.

Our sense of community gives all people a place of belonging.

Albert Wendt said: “Cultures and communities are building blocks towards nationhood.”

Men and women, the elderly, children and young people, Maori and Pakeha, Pacific people, Asian and other ethnic minorities all people have a place of belonging in New Zealand.

Fairness in the workplace, social justice, peace, equity, acceptance of diversity and difference, honouring of tangata whenua, finding room for immigrants, standing up for what is right. These are the values that drive my work as an MP.

As an electorate MP I serve the wide range of people in Mana and I have to balance the needs and interests of all the people of my electorate. That does not mean that I cannot also serve a wider constituency of Pacific people and all New Zealanders.

MMP has changed the face of New Zealand politics and New Zealand politicians. MMP has broadened the range of representatives in Parliament and brought more Maori, Pacific people, ethnic minorities and women into the House. MMP enables political parties to bring in new people to serve a political apprenticeship as a list MP, or cover a national constituency, before running for an electorate seat. MMP gives the opportunity for senior cabinet ministers to undertake the duties of a heavy portfolio without electorate responsibilities.

I have been a list MP and an electorate MP. Both roles have tremendous challenges. Both roles have great satisfaction. Both roles provide the opportunity and privilege to serve your fellow citizens.

I want to conclude with some brief comments about Tradition and Modernity.

Adam Smith talked about “the dead hand” of tradition that holds back progress and is a barrier to becoming modern.

The Liberal idea of the 19th century idea was that you had to give up your culture, and your traditions to become modern.

It need not happen that way.
I like to talk about “the living heart” of the fa'asamoa, and the fakatonga and our other Pacific traditions. It is the strength and flexibility of our cultures and traditions that have allowed Pacific people to adapt and change - and to thrive in the modern world. We do not want to give them up.

In the same way, the New Zealand Parliamentary system has been flexible enough to accommodate diversity.

The strength of our Parliamentary system is in its tradition and its flexibility. Our Parliamentary system has had to change to work in a modern world, and we have to change too. It has not always been easy, but it is possible. And our democratic system is stronger for it.

Thank you, and good luck for the rest of your retreat.