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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

COMMITTEES

**Foreign Affairs, Defence
and Trade Joint Committee**

Report

SPEECH

Wednesday, 1 September 2021

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner	Responder
Speaker O'Brien, Ted, MP	Question No.

Mr TED O'BRIEN (Fairfax) (16:18): On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the committee's report entitled *One nation, one family, one future: deepening relations with the Pacific nations through trade*.

Report made a parliamentary paper in accordance with standing order 39(e).

Mr TED O'BRIEN: by leave—Before I go into the nuts and bolts of this report, can I just reflect very quickly on the title—one region, one family, one future—because it encapsulates not a summary of the report's recommendations per se but the outlook of the committee when deliberating on and formulating this final report. You see, together with Pacific island nations, we of course do share one region. We are their backyard as much as they are ours. But we're more than neighbours that just happen to live close to each other. Indeed, we have an affinity between our people that goes far deeper, something that is more akin to a family, and as a family in one region, indeed, we have a shared destiny—thus one future.

After 56 submissions and eight public hearings, including round tables with diplomatic representatives of Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and Kiribati and also with many businesspeople within the Pacific region who are trading and investing, the inquiry looked at both the challenges and the opportunities. We as a committee have therefore together put forward this report for government consideration. In doing so we make five recommendations to government.

Firstly, we recommend the government prioritises its support for the Pacific region to recover from COVID-19 by increasing development assistance, providing vaccine coverage and assistance in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak and assessing opportunities to restore international trade and travel when it is safe to do so.

Secondly, we recommend the government prioritises activation of greater trade and investment with countries of the region by considering measures and reforms to the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations, known as PACER Plus; providing support to make it easier for Pacific islanders to access the Australian market; supporting further research into trade and investment; supporting the establishment of national standard bodies; supporting the Pacific Quality Infrastructure Initiative; promoting pilot investor tours to Pacific island countries; and assisting countries wishing to join Australia's kava commercial importation pilot.

Thirdly, we recommend the government improves travel and mobility between Australia and countries of the Pacific region by establishing a Pacific travel bubble subject to health advice and related processes; investigates potential for improving infrastructure; introduces a Pacific travel card: that is, a Pacific business travel card; and improves labour mobility arrangements.

Fourthly, we recommend the government works towards deepening people-to-people ties between Australia and countries of the Pacific region through sport, churches and media. In particular, a centrepiece of this recommendation, and indeed of the report, is a proposal to introduce a new program called Team AusPac, which would be spearheaded by the Australian government and, in partnership with relevant sporting organisations, would create a special program for Pacific island athletes as part of the Australian Institute of Sport; expand the number of sports to receive special focus under the PacificAus Sports program; build greater capacity for sporting coaches and trainers; and lend support for consideration of a team from a Pacific island country to enter the Australian rugby league competition, the NRL. Team AusPac would also maximise opportunities for Pacific island countries to be closely associated with, and actively participate in, the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Australia, in South-East Queensland, which we have branded as Brisbane 2032.

Fifthly, we recommend the government recognises the important role played by Australian states and territories in our relationship with Pacific island countries, in particular the state of Queensland, which acts as a gateway to the Pacific. It follows, therefore, that the committee recommends the government analyses the outcomes in this report within a Queensland context; undertakes a feasibility study on expanding the services of a Pacific focused

office of DFAT, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, in Queensland; and engages the Queensland government and its relevant local government authorities to work collaboratively on aspects of this report.

I thank all witnesses and those who kindly shared their insight and advice with the committee, in particular the diplomatic and government representatives of Pacific island countries. I also thank my deputy chair, Senator McCarthy; chair of the joint standing committee, Senator Fawcett; and my fellow committee members. I also say thank you to the dedication and professionalism of the secretariat, in particular Andrew Dawson.

This report does not pretend to be an all-encompassing report or a roadmap about deepening ties with Pacific island countries across all areas. Rather it builds on the great work that the Australian government has been doing in this field and focuses in particular on areas of trade and investment. While we make these recommendations for how we might deepen relations with Pacific island nations and their people, we do so believing that we are indeed one region and one family with one future. With that, I'm happy to commend the report to the House.