

Statement of Hon. Tu'ivakano, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Tonga and Guest of Honor at the Ombudsman Launch, Wednesday 15th March 2017

*Greetings

As Thomas Jefferson proclaimed “The care of human life and not its destruction...is the FIRST and ONLY legitimate object of good government”.

It is a pleasure to be present at this very important occasion in the launching of the Office of the Ombudsman.

Ombudsman is a worldwide concept that is recognized by most of the democratic countries around the world. Its functions are crucial to ensuring that government works effectively and efficiently.

Since 2010, remarkable changes have been made to our Constitution, notably that the Monarch has relinquished some of his powers to the Cabinet and Legislative Assembly. This was a landmark political change to our form of government, retaining Constitutional Monarchy whilst recognizing a more democratic structure for both Parliament and the Executive arm.

Prior to this, in 2001 the Commissioner for Public Relations Act came into force, championed by the late King George Tupou V when he was Crown Prince. This Act gave effect to the appointment of the Commissioner for Public Relations by His Majesty in Council. The Commissioner's statutory functions were to carry out works similar to that of the Ombudsman in other countries. The Office's fundamental function is to promote good governance in public administration by government, standing as a watchdog in ensuring that fundamental rights of its citizens are safeguarded from being unreasonably violated, including abuse of power and processes by government officials.

Since 2001, this Office has undergone developments both in its form and functions. Significantly, in December 2016, King Tupou VI assented to the Commissioner of Public Relations Amendment Act 2016 which encompasses major changes to the structure of this Office. The key change in the 2016 amendment was the recognition of the 2010 change by changing the authority to appoint the Commissioner from His Majesty in Council to the Speaker of Parliament in the Legislative Assembly. In addition, the name changed from Commissioner of Public Relation to Ombudsman as is the internationally recognised title since the Ombudsman

movement began in Sweden in 1809. In Tonga's context, democracy is still in a premature stage, however the existence and independent operation of the Office of the Ombudsman helps anchor secure our confidence in its current and future progress within our government.

Today's occasion marks the recent developments that this office has undergone since 2001. These developments have and will contribute to a more inclusive, progressive and sustainable government for Tonga. We have been reminded again today by the Former UN Secretary General that suffering anywhere concerns people everywhere.

We further recognize the rights of vulnerable members of our society, being women and children as well as persons with disabilities, persons behind bars and those whose voices are not heard within in public service. The Office of the Ombudsman is there to ensure that your voices are heard, you are treated with courtesy when being served by your public officials, and most importantly, that you are included in the decision making of our government. This office is an independent complaint body, where citizens can resort to when they are not satisfied with any decision, action, omission and recommendations by decision makers of government.

In my capacity as the speaker of Parliament, I highly acknowledge the international relations of the Office of the Ombudsman, Tonga and its membership in the International Ombudsman Institute, the only global organization for cooperation of independent Ombudsman around the world.

I acknowledge that this Office has advanced its cooperation in the region by being a member of the Pacific Ombudsman Alliance.

I further recognize the recent developments of this Office and commend the collaborative efforts between this Office and the other government ministries and public enterprises in trying to monitor the rule of law, fight against corruption and good public administration in our government.

To conclude, we cannot emphasize the significance of the work that this office holds. We hope that this office continues to uphold its integrity, maintain its independence and act to promote good governance in our Government and society.