

It is with great honour that I accept the invitation to deliver this speech which marks the re-establishment of the former Commissioner for Public Relations as the Office of the Ombudsman here in Tonga.

In the Pacific context, Tonga is the latest sovereign nation to adopt the title of Ombudsman with the passing of the Commissioner for Public Relations Amendment Act 2016 in the Legislative Assembly.

As you all know, Tonga is a very small island nation with a population of approximately 100,000* covering 170 islands governed by a Constitutional Monarch with a democratically elected Government serving for a period of 4 years.

The purpose of the Ombudsman Office is intended to provide open and accountable democracy to the citizens, government department and public enterprises in an informal and mediation kind of way. It is the human condition that each person wishes to be treated fairly and reasonably having regard to their identity.

With a developing Tongan society, it is vitally important for a modern government to realise that establishing and protecting the rights of its citizens is a hallmark of a democratic and robust Government.

It has fallen to be the purpose of the ombudsman worldwide that they are perceived as one of the mechanisms by which a system of government is reasonably subject to checks and balances on the system of governance. This can only be achieved with the support of the Government.

I supported the change from the Office being under Government and Cabinet to now being under the Legislative Assembly. This ensures the independence of the Ombudsman. By achieving independence, this has added greater reliability, authenticity and credibility to the work of the Office and brings you on par with your international fellow Ombudsman Offices worldwide.

Under your current Act, the Prime Minister can direct any matter with the consent of the Ombudsman as a matter for investigation and I understand the Prime Minister has exercised this discretion. This means that I have the utmost confidence in the Ombudsman processes – investigative processes to achieve a fair and respectable outcome.

The services of the Ombudsman are recognised as being a check and balance against the abuse of administrative powers and discretion. The services are available to the citizens without fear or favour and most importantly without any costs regardless of position or wealth, everyone should have free and reasonable access to its services.

The existence of your Office means that my Ministers and their ministries should and have taken note of their performance and the way in which they deal with the people of Tonga. It is an old relic to say that those from that particular Ministry have the final say. Today, if need be, the Ombudsman has the final say in cases where it finds abuse of administrative powers.

I believe the Ombudsman Office will serve to improve our service from the Government for the people. Government Ministries and public enterprises should not fear when the Ombudsman comes knocking. The Ombudsman is there to help and to make recommendation on how to improve their service delivery. That way, the people restores their trust back in our Government ministries.

Just walking in here, I noticed the slogan on the Ombudsman banners: GOOD FOR YOU, GOOD FOR GOVERNMENT and GOOD FOR TONGA. This slogan encompasses everything that I have said in my delivery.

In closing, I wish the current Ombudsman of Tonga – 'Aisea Taumoepeau, the CEO – Linda Folaumoetu'i and all the staff at the Office of the Ombudsman my best wishes in your work and reiterate Government's commitment to Good Governance.