

From: NOUMEA

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Subject: FORMAL MESSAGE: FRENCH POLYNESIA: GENDER EQUALITY AMBASSADOR (PACIFIC) VISIT AND PARTICIPATION IN LGBTQIA+ CONFERENCE “OUR RIGHTS, OUR VOICES, OUR PACIFIC WAY”

[IN CONFIDENCE]

FORMAL MESSAGE: FRENCH POLYNESIA: GENDER EQUALITY AMBASSADOR VISIT AND PARTICIPATION IN LGBTQIA+ CONFERENCE “OUR RIGHTS, OUR VOICES, OUR PACIFIC WAY”

ĀPITIHANGA – ATTACHMENTS

Final communiqué from French Polynesian Government on the Our Rights, Our Voices, Our Pacific Way conference.

RĀPOPOTO – SUMMARY

At the invitation of the French Polynesian Government, Ambassador for Gender Equality (Pacific)/Tuia Tāngata Louisa Wall visited Tahiti from 6-8 November alongside her Australian counterpart Stephanie Copus-Campbell, and France’s Ambassador for LGBT+ rights, Jean-Marc Berthon.

At the centre of the visit was participation in French Polynesia’s first conference on LGBTQI+ rights. Entitled “Our Voices, Our Rights, Our Pacific Way”, the conference was one of the first concrete measures demonstrating the new French Polynesian Government’s commitment to advancing LGBTQI+ rights. The attendance of Ambassador Wall and her Australian and French counterparts was highly appreciated by the government of French Polynesia and gave a significant boost to the profile of the event. Ambassador Wall’s interventions and approach to the issues discussed also clearly resonated strongly with the French Polynesian Vice President (on whose initiative the conference was organised).

A final statement was issued at the conclusion of the conference (attached). Versions in French and Reo Tahiti were also released.

On the margins of the conference, Ambassador Wall also undertook a number of joint calls with her Australian counterpart, including meeting with the French High Commissioner, the President of the CESEC (French Polynesia’s Economic, Social, Environmental and Cultural Council), a policing unit tasked specifically with handling domestic violence, visiting a local shelter for women and children, and meeting with the French Polynesian Women’s Council.

HOHENGĀ – ACTION

Hei titiro māu – For information.

PŪRONGO – REPORT

In response to an invitation from the Vice President of French Polynesia, Eliane Tevahitua, Ambassador for Gender Equality (Pacific)/Tuia Tāngata Louisa Wall visited French Polynesia from 6-8 November to participate in the territory’s inaugural conference on LGBTQI+ rights “Our Voices, Our Rights, Our Pacific Way”. She was supported by DHOP who travelled from

Noumea. Australia's Ambassador for Gender Equality, Stephanie Copus-Campbell, and France's Ambassador for LGBT rights, Jean-Marc Berthon, also attended as invited panel speakers. Copus-Campbell was accompanied by DFAT's Director, LGBTQIA+ Equality and Inclusion, Samuel Lucas.

French Polynesia's new Government flying the flag for LGBTQI+ rights

While there are generally strong protections for LGBTQIA+ rights in French Polynesia, owing in large part to the extension of French laws to the territory (e.g. decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1985), conservative views (often the result of the heavy influence of religion) persist in many communities and violence against LGBTQIA+ individuals is not uncommon as well as challenges in accessing education, employment and adequate health care.

2 The Tavini Huira'atira party, which was voted into power in the last elections in April this year, has set the promotion and protection of LGBTQI+ rights, and advancing gender equality as policy priorities as part of a focus on social justice issues generally (see [policy manifesto document](#) released during the election campaign). In an important symbolic move demonstrating this commitment, the newly elected Government chose [to raise the Rainbow Flag at the Presidency](#) for the first time on 17 May – the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT).

3 The "Our Voices, Our Rights, Our Pacific Way" conference, held on 7 and 8 November at the University of French Polynesia (UPF) in Tahiti, is one of the first concrete measures under the new Government to move forward on LGBTQI+ rights in the territory. Other measures include the establishment of an official seat in the Conseil Économique, Social, Environnemental et Culturel (CESEC) to represent LGBTQI+ community views as part of the legislative process in French Polynesia.

LGBTQI+ rights conference – Our Voices, Our Rights, Our Pacific Way

4 The two-day conference was an initiative of the Vice President (who also holds the portfolios of culture, higher education, environment, lands and handicrafts) and was organised by the Government, the CESEC and the University of French Polynesia (UPF) in close collaboration with the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA World) and Cousins Cousins (a local LGBTQI+ advocacy and support association).

5 In her opening address, the Vice President of French Polynesia, Eliane Tevahitua, highlighted the priority the new Government placed on advancing equality for all. This conference, the first of its kind in French Polynesia, would allow the Government to better understand the state of LGBTQI+ rights in the territory and what changes needed to be made to better support their protection and advancement. She thanked partners Australia, New Zealand and France for their participation at Ambassadorial level.

6 Other panellists included academics as well as specialists working in different sectors in French Polynesia such as health care, education, and tourism. Representatives from regional/international advocacy groups including Equality Australia and the Pacific Sexual and Gender Diversity Network (PSGDN) were also present and spoke on a number of the panels.

Day one

7 Ambassador Wall was a speaker on two of three panels on day one of the conference – one entitled “Culture and the Pacific Way”, and the other “Human Rights and Decriminalisation of Homosexuality”. The third session of the day was “Society and Religion”. The **impact of colonisation** (and particularly the ongoing influence of the Church) was a strong theme throughout the discussions on day one with speakers highlighting the existence of pre-colonial expressions of gender and sexual fluidity across the Pacific. Panellists agreed there was a need to reclaim and revitalise traditional Pacific views of diverse gender and sexual expressions.

8 On **decriminalisation**, participants acknowledged that changing legislation does not automatically change societal attitudes but it was the first step to changing culture. In tackling decriminalisation Ymania Brown (a leading activist and Samoan Fa’afine who has worked with ILGA World and Equality Australia), stressed the need for a culturally appropriate approach to raising this issue in the Pacific – quiet conversations around the kava bowl may ultimately be more effective than international pressure or “all out war” with authorities. She also called on Australia, New Zealand, France and other partners to offer support with technical expertise (e.g. on writing submissions or legislative change proposals or through partnerships with universities to provide data on the value of decriminalisation).

9 For the final session of the day, the conference organisers achieved a significant feat in securing the **participation of representatives from all the major churches** in French Polynesia – Mormon, Catholic, Protestant, and Sanitos (also known as Community of Christ and previously the Reorganised Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). Despite general acceptance of *māhū* (French Polynesia’s traditional “third gender”) in many families and communities, as in other parts of the Pacific (and the world) religious groups and “Christian values” continue to hold enormous influence in the community.

10 The Sanitos church was by far the most advanced on LGBTQI+ issues (the conference followed a recent vote by members to allow the Church to officiate same-sex marriages and LGBTQI+ individuals to serve as priests). While representatives of other denominations acknowledged the damage done by religious views and reiterated familiar lines on welcoming all individuals as children of God, they confirmed that full acceptance of LGBTQI+ individuals was likely still some way off.

11 Ambassador Wall applauded the representatives for their willingness to engage, noting that in all her meetings across the Pacific to date, never before have religious representatives participated in discussions like this. She urged them to take what they had heard at the conference back to their colleagues in French Polynesia and across the Pacific. In subsequent email exchanges between Sanitos Church President Arnaud-Tchong (who was present at the conference) and Ambassador Wall, Arnaud-Tchong undertook to coordinate with Community of Christ church leaders in French Polynesia, Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii and New Caledonia to raise the rainbow flag.

Day two

12 Day two discussions covered “Health and Well-being”, “Education and Acceptance”, “Economic and human development”, and “Media and influence”. Panellists again highlighted the ongoing challenges faced by the LGBTQI+ community, and particularly the transgender community, in accessing health care, and having their gender identities accepted in schools.

13 The panel discussion on “economic and human development” focused on Tahiti’s image as a “gay friendly” destination. The presentation by representatives of Tahiti Tourism and Air Tahiti Nui focused on the value of the LGBT travel market and their efforts to attract these travellers. Subsequent points raised by the audience highlighted the gap between the lived experience of LGBTQI+ individuals in French Polynesia and the image these companies sought to project internationally. For example, President of local LGBTQI+ rights association Cousins Cousines pointed out that while Air Tahiti Nui and Tahiti Tourism were promoting French Polynesia at Tokyo Pride, Cousins Cousines was still looking for a partner to help establish French Polynesia’s own Pride day.

Bilateral calls

14 Prior to the conference, Ambassador Wall and Ambassador Copus-Campbell undertook joint calls with key figures and groups concerned with gender equality and women’s rights issues in French Polynesia.

French High Commissioner

15 French High Commissioner, Eric Spitz, welcomed the Australian and New Zealand Ambassadors for a breakfast meeting at the official residence. Discussion focused on our respective goals for the conference, as well as views on the current status of gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights in each country. ^{s6(a)}

[Comment: French Polynesia has autonomy to consider whether to introduce or to modify certain French state laws approved in Paris. Implementation in some instances may be impacted by resourcing or funding constraints, however there has in the past been political resistance to French proposed laws regarding LGBTQI+ rights. For example, in 2013, French Polynesian representatives in the French Senate opposed France’s proposed marriage equality bill on the grounds that it was contrary to French Polynesia’s values.]

16 The High Commissioner also reflected on the political shifts globally that were putting liberal democracy and human rights under greater threat. In this context, he welcomed New Zealand and Australia’s engagement on gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, noting that there was strong alignment between us and France on these issues.

CESEC President

17 Ambassadors Wall and Copus-Campbell met with recently elected President of the Conseil Economique, Social, Environnemental et Culturel (CESEC), Voltina Dauphin. The CESEC is a consultative assembly and one of four institutions in French Polynesia (the President, the Government, and the Assembly being the others) and is tasked with providing civil society views on proposed legislation.

18 As noted above, French Polynesia’s new government established an official position within the institution to represent LGBTQI+ views. Dauphin said that it was still early in the CESEC’s new term and it was yet to be seen how this new role would work. She commented that although the māhū community was generally widely accepted in French Polynesia, “extravagance” was still likely to receive negative reactions and there was still a lot of opposition from the Church regarding LGBTQI+ recognition and rights. Ambassador Wall

encouraged Dauphin to consider how the role could be used to support direct engagement with LGBTQTI+ communities, for example by having representatives come to speak to the CESEC about their lived experiences.

Police domestic violence unit and Pu o te Hau women's shelter

19 Ambassadors Wall and Copus-Campbell also met with the Maison de protection des familles (family protection unit) within the French Polynesia police. The unit was established in 2021 to enable the police to provide better responses to incidences of domestic violence, and includes a number of social workers to support interventions.

20 The Ambassadors were hosted at the Pu o te Hau women's shelter by the French Polynesia Women's Council. The meeting was a good opportunity to learn more about the domestic violence situation in French Polynesia, and Ambassador Wall noted strong similarities between the experiences of French Polynesia and New Zealand. The women's shelter itself is currently being extended and looking for funding to help furnish the new rooms. A suggestion by DHOP that New Zealand may be able to assist with HEF funding was very well received.

TĀKUPU – COMMENT

21 In her speech closing the conference, the French Polynesian Vice President indicated her strong commitment to further promoting the rights of LGBTQTI+ community both in French Polynesia and the broader Pacific region. In French Polynesia, the conference discussions will be used to inform a programme of work (to be coordinated by the Vice President's office) and new policies intended to better protect LGBTQTI+ individuals and support them to better access health care, education and economic opportunities. Post can provide further reporting on these proposals as appropriate.

22 The Vice President also indicated her strong interest in advancing regional/international work in this space at the third Pacific Human Rights Conference, organised by the Pacific Sexual and Gender Diversity Network, scheduled to be held in Suva in April 2024. She also announced French Polynesia's intention to bid to host the following Pacific Human Rights Conference.

23 Wall's interventions at the conference were very well received and her focus on re-indigenising gender identity clearly resonated strongly with the French Polynesian Vice President (on whose initiative the conference had been organised). This approach fits well within the Tavini Government's general focus on revitalising traditional Polynesian identity, culture and language.

24 The Tavini Government in French Polynesia has a significant majority in Parliament and will likely be in place for a full five year term. New Zealand should consider what opportunities may exist to further support this Pacific Government-led advocacy on LGBTQTI+ issues in the region.

25 From a bilateral perspective, this was a good example of effective coordination between France, New Zealand and a French territorial government s6(a)

and could prove a useful model for other topics on which we share the same agenda across Paris, Papeete and Wellington.

MUTU – ENDS

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