

Speech to Sister Cities conference

Speech to New Zealand Sister Cities Conference

Speech notes for opening address at New Zealand Sister Cities Conference, Michael Fowler Centre, Wellington

Thank you for the invitation to open this 2006 New Zealand Sister Cities Conference. Two years ago the conference was held in Christchurch, and it is a pleasure to be here again.

I extend a warm welcome to all delegates, especially those who have travelled from our sister cities in other countries to be with us. Your presence with us is a strong indication of your cities' willingness to promote friendship and co-operation with New Zealand, and we deeply appreciate that.

We hope you will return home inspired by the potential for your cities' and your countries' relationships with New Zealand.

I am myself a great advocate of sister city relationships, and have warm memories of visiting sister cities where strong links have been made with New Zealand.

I think, for example, of:

- Waipa District's links with Le Quesnoy, a very small town in France which was liberated by New Zealand soldiers shortly before the end of World War One. Le Quesnoy commemorates ANZAC Day in style, with, when I was there, the Mayor hosting every New Zealand visitor, including backpackers to lunch. There are also New Zealand place names in the town. I thank Waipa District for its role in keeping these historic links alive.
- Wuxi City in China, which has long had links with Hamilton, and where everyone I met in the city organisation seemed to have visited our country because of the friendship with Hamilton.
- The great port city of Pusan in Korea, which is a sister city of Auckland. New Zealand and Pusan are also linked by history. During the Korean War Pusan played a pivotal role, and many New Zealand Defence Force personnel passed through on their way to the front. New Zealand graves lie in the United Nations War Cemetery in Pusan, and only last year we dedicated a memorial to our fallen there.
- The city of Hatsukaichi-shi, over the river from Hiroshima in Japan, which has sister city links with Masterton. One of Masterton District's major employees is the Juken Nissho wood processing plant. Its company headquarters which I have visited is, as I recall in Hatsukaichi-shi, and I met New Zealanders from Masterton on exchange there.

These are just some of the many sister city relationships built by New Zealand local authorities over the past 25 years. This conference is especially important because it

celebrates the first quarter century of our sister city relationships.

The theme of this year's conference "Capitalising on the Gains", invites us to focus on the mutual benefits of sister city links, and look at applying best practice in taking these relationships forward.

The conference will also consider how the relationships have developed and matured in the last 25 years, and what direction they might take in the future.

It was in Wellington 25 years ago that a small group met to establish the New Zealand Sister Cities organisation.

It was also 25 years ago that Hastings signed New Zealand's first sister city agreement with Guilin in China. Mayor Lawrence Yule understands the link started with a scientist who was looking to develop and grow the Chinese gooseberry, or kiwifruit.

Twenty five years ago this was unheard of. China was slowly emerging from years of relative isolation. New Zealand had many government-to-government contacts with China, but people-to-people contacts were very formal and highly organised.

In the past 25 years, New Zealand and China have developed a comprehensive relationship which extends far beyond the formal and official to flows of tourists, students, and migrants. As well, China has become our fourth biggest trading partner.

All those cities and districts which forged links with China over the past quarter century have played a role in growing our country's relationship with China to the large and important one it is today. In much the same way, extensive sister city links with Japan have made us much more familiar with its people and culture, and rounded out our very substantial relationship with Japan - our third largest trade partner.

It is a highlight of this week's conference that another very important sister city relationship is being signed: between our capital city, Wellington, and Beijing, the capital city of the People's Republic of China.

I understand that planning is well underway for Wellington Mayor, Kerry Prendergast, and a significant delegation to visit Beijing and other cities in China in November.

That month we will also see the first flights in the new direct air service between Auckland and Shanghai, making it easier to travel between sister cities in New Zealand and China.

I have made three visits to China as Prime Minister, and have hosted President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao, and other senior Chinese visitors in New Zealand

I am delighted at the enormous work done at local government level on the relationship with China, which substantially augments the relationship at central government level, as do our sister city relationships across fourteen countries.

The purpose of the Sister Cities programme is to "increase international

understanding and foster world peace by furthering international communication and exchange at the person-to-person level through city-to-city relations”.

Sister City links also contribute in their own way to New Zealand’s economic growth and transformation – a top priority for our government.

Through economic transformation we build our prosperity and our international competitiveness. Strong international links at all levels help us do that.

Greater interaction with the rest of the world exposes us to different perspectives and new ideas. It also improves our knowledge of the markets for our goods and services.

Sister City links not only build social, cultural, and economic links, between cities; they also contribute to the partnerships which exist between New Zealand and other countries. They are a key part of our vital web of contacts world wide.

Indeed Sister City links are bringing direct economic benefits to our local, regional, and national economies through trade and tourism.

A New Zealand Institute of Economic Research study has been done to quantify these benefits. And, believing in those benefits, our government last year launched a new project to support Sister City links with Japan as a way of carrying through the benefits of our participation in the Aichi Expo.

Auckland City Council too recently commissioned research to assess the economic benefits of its Sister City relationships. The study concluded that the Sister Cities programme is a successful operation, which generates a large financial contribution to the Auckland economy and builds valuable intangible assets.

For example, approximately one third of international students are said to come to study in Auckland as a direct result of Sister City relationships. The economic impact of this to Auckland is estimated at \$109 million annually and would sustain around 3000 jobs.

The ideals of the Sister Cities Movement, global peace, tolerance and understanding, are ideals with which New Zealanders readily identify.

In the modern world, as communities grow and develop, they also diversify. We in New Zealand have seen our country become much more culturally diverse.

The values we adhere to in the Sister Cities programme are values we need to live by in our own diverse communities as we strive to build social cohesion and a strong sense of nationhood. I have every confidence that we can do that in a uniquely New Zealand way, and be a haven of relative tranquillity in a troubled world.

I also believe that the community building our councils are dedicated to is an important foundation for nation building. Without strong communities and local leadership, nations cannot be strong. In New Zealand our local government legislation of 2002 empowers local leadership to find the solutions and pathways which meet their communities needs.

Next year in March, New Zealand has the honour of hosting the Commonwealth Local Government Conference in Auckland. The theme for the conference will be “Delivering development through local leadership”. I believe New Zealand can offer new models of local leadership.

Both this Sister Cities Conference and the Commonwealth Local Government Conference are important forums for promoting sharing of best practice, and learning from the experiences of others. We all benefit from the networking which these meetings make possible.

I would like to thank all our city and district councils which promote the many Sister City relationships New Zealand has. What you do has very direct benefit to New Zealand.

Thank you once again to our international participants for your commitment to good relationships with New Zealand.

I wish you all a memorable and productive 25th anniversary conference for Sister Cities New Zealand here in Wellington.