

SPEECH BY HON MISA TELEFONI, DEPUTY PRIME

MINISTER AND MINISTER OF FINANCE TO THE

SPEAKERS CONVENTION HELD IN APIA

12 JULY 2005

Culture: That Which Makes Life Worth Living

In his 1948 Notes, “Towards Defining Culture” – the poet T.S. Eliot described culture this way:

“Culture may even be described simply as that which makes life worth living.”

We are the creatures of our own culture.

Samoa was caught in the middle – embroiled in a bitter battle concerning the various theories of cultural determinism.

On the one side, we have Margaret Mead. For decades every 100 level Anthropology student around the world had an image of Samoa as a country where young maiden nymphs frolicked around, scantily clad, making frequent and casual love, with every man they met.

It brought many visitors to our shores who all departed bitterly disappointed. They soon learnt that courting a young Samoan maiden meant getting her father’s permission first, a constant escort of her ever vigilant sisters and other female relatives, and brothers who stared at him in such a way that his libido was frozen into a state of total impotency by his fear and trepidation.

I actually wrote a novel “Love and Money”, which is a deliberate fictional debunking of Mead’s myths!

I have tried to get some of you copies. It is a simple cross-cultural love story and my Samoan heroine, although well educated and articulate, makes a conscious decision to remain a virgin until her wedding night, at the age of 24.

Not only Samoan women, but I believe all women deserve to be put up on a pedestal. Hon Speakers, I am not advocating that all Speakers should be women, I did not mean the literal lofty pedestals where most of you sit, lording it over us MPs (the common folk). I meant the more important pedestal of being first, in and out of the home, and most importantly – first in the hearts of man!

The fact is only another woman, Hon Margaret Wilson, could order Prime Minister Helen Clark, out of the chamber of New Zealand's Parliament!

The rest of us mere men, would not be overawed so much by her position of Prime Minister, but by the fact that she is a lady! Although "Madam Speaker, Hon Margaret Wilson, is she not by implication, having been ordered by you from the Chamber, a fallen lady?"

That leads me to my second point, not only must all your decisions be culturally sensitive, but your decisions must be both fair and consistent. I am told Hon Margaret Wilson had just ordered another MP from the Chamber for a similar offence, so in the interests of consistency, poor meek and humble Helen Clark, had to go!

Dare I say it, it is my respectful view it is better to be fair and consistent, than to be correct. You can always apologise for being incorrect, but your integrity will take longer to recover from the revelation that you have been inconsistent or unfair.

So, is it all about power? How to seize it? How to wield it? In all exercise of all power, you must determine whether it is your primary desire to be feared, or to be respected.

It was Alexander Solzhenitsyn who said in “The First Circle” – when you have robbed a man of everything, he is no longer in your power, “he is free again.”

We have often been regarded as a race, we Samoans, that produces the best “bouncers” in the security industry. This is true even in New Zealand, Australia, and Hawaii for that matter.

So I asked a prominent night club owner in Sydney once, “Why are Samoans such good bouncers?”

He answered, “whenever there is a trouble maker, a Samoan will go over, talk to him nicely, and make him feel it is time to leave”. “The key”, he explained “Is never to make him lose face. Even the tiniest person comes out swinging when they feel belittled in front of their friends.”

The art of skilful manipulation is founded on skilful diplomacy. “Speak softly, but wield a big stick.” I am not sure who to credit with that expression. The point is power is much more forceful by the implication of the threat of its exercise, than its actual use.

The Samoan expression is: “E le aoaia e Laupua Tamafaiga.” Loosely translated, “it is neither my place nor my right to advise you”, but be wary of the rebel who seeks notoriety by the exercise of your sanctions, especially your power to remove an MP from the Chamber.

The best tactic would be to ask them point blank – “Does the Honourable member seek to create a headline by being removed from the Chamber? The Standing Orders direct me to indulge you, but I would rather just direct you to “grow up and behave!”

The exercise of tact and diplomacy is an essential ingredient in the exercise of not just power, but effective power.

What then is the ultimate aim of this whole process? What are we all striving so hard to achieve?

The answer is: “A better standard of living and dignity for all our People.”

Good Governance is all about creating better economic conditions for our people. Adding dignity to peoples’ lives. At the end of the day, it is about how well can we sleep at nights, as national leaders, when any sector in society is going to bed hungry?

I have delivered a lecture on good governance at Georgetown University in Washington DC, and at my old Law School, Auckland University Faculty of Law.

I have tried to circulate those to as many of you as possible. Good governance, in a word, is all about integrity. Integrity is the glue that binds any effective good governance agenda. In those lectures. I do deal with all the various elements of the good governance agenda:

- Independent Judiciary
- A strong and independent Legislature (You all play an essential role here)
- Accountability Mechanisms
- A strong and independent Media
- A strong Opposition
- Accountability Principles

I then conclude:

“These are but different parts of the good governance agenda, but without honesty, all these wonderful and lofty ideals, will count for nothing.”

I then outline my seven premises of good governance. It was quite flattering, a couple of Georgetown students have written me, referring to the “Misa Telefoni” premises of good governance.

These premises espouse the foundation of any good governance agenda, which is not so unlike what we all agree, is the tenet of being a good speaker – **good governance must be culturally sensitive, to be effective.**

How do we measure our performance

- The literacy rate – is it over 95%?
- Average school attendance – are most school aged children enjoying access to schools?
- Maternal and Infant mortality rates
- Life Expectancy

Then there are the social indicators; domestic violence and the suicide rate.

John F Kennedy’s famous words are appropriate here. In his 1961 Inaugural Address he said:

“If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.”

It is the power of numbers really – the many who are the impoverished and hungry, will ultimately engulf the few who are wealthy.

Honourable Speakers, Honourable Members of Parliament,
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Enjoy your deliberations!

They must be exciting as well as challenging. Do not hesitate to add a little spice, and be deliberately provocative. This can only stimulate your discussions to a higher level.

You must discuss and debate but you must also fellowship!

Social interaction and cultural appreciation are as important a function of meetings such as this, as the presentation of papers and your discussions.

I have had an opportunity to peruse the many Papers, and I congratulate all your Presenters for the excellent standards achieved. The quality of these presentations is quite outstanding.

Enjoy Samoa!

We call our home, paradise.

So sit back and enjoy. Smell the flowers and listen to the birds.

See some of our beautiful island in your spare time, and meet and fellowship with our People.

Hon Speaker, Hon Toleafoa Faafisi, has a wonderful agenda and social program for you.

Our thanks and appreciation go out to the Australian government for making all this possible.

Thank you all for choosing Samoa to host you.

Thank you for coming.

God bless you all

Misa Telefoni