

Speech to Comvoices at Parliament on Wednesday 28 March 2018

by Sir Anand Satyanand

Te whare e tu nei tenakoe, Te Whare Paremata e takoto nei tenakoe, e te rohe Poneke e takoto nei tenakoe, nga maunga Orongorongo, te awa Heretaunga, te whanga whanganui a tara tenakoe. E nga mate, haere, haere, haere atu ra. E nga rangatira ma, nga mema ki whare paremata, nga koro ki Comvoices, tena koutou tena koutou tena koutou katoa. Ko Anand Satyanand ahau.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in my korero iti beginning, I have acknowledged where we meet, within the buildings of Parliament, the surrounding capital of Wellington, the Orongorongo mountain range that frames it on one side, and the presence of water in the form of the harbour and the Hutt River. I have paid respects to those who have passed on and then greeted all of you present.

I am Anand Satyanand, and in the next few minutes I have a goal of enthusing everyone about the potency of civil society. I have spent considerable time in official positions - often government. But that has been leavened throughout by association with civil society organisations to do with sport or community advancement, both here in New Zealand, and in overseas settings. For some four years ending 15 months ago I was Chair of the Commonwealth Foundation, the civil society arm of the 53-member Commonwealth. I am at present a member of the International Anti-Corruption Council, a civil society organisation continuing the fight in favour of transparency and openness in Government.

I acknowledge Comvoices whose efforts have been galvanised to make the voice of the voluntary and community sectors heard more widely and related to our law makers and other leaders. I acknowledge the Members who are here. The opportunity ahead at this breakfast is build a strong learning relationship between the representatives who speak in this House and Comvoices, in ways that will benefit people in communities around New Zealand.

In the main part of my address I have three things to say, the first relating to our country, Aotearoa New Zealand. In world terms we are small and remote and perhaps insignificant. On the other hand, New Zealand is regarded widely as a practical and reliable contributor to international discourse. There are many pieces of evidence to support that. We meet in Parliamentary buildings where democracy has been delivered in an unbroken fashion for more than 150 years. Our country has a reputation for egalitarianism without huge hierarchies that make participation by people difficult. The UN Secretary-General two ago, Kofi Annan, described New Zealand as “a country that works”. Not perfect, was how he described it, but one with people and structures and processes able to make it work.

The second thing I want to refer to is the special character of our people. Most countries have reached where they are, by conquest and aggressive usurpation of land. In New Zealand, our country began with the signing of a Treaty that would recognise the rights and customs of the indigenous people. And although there have been breaches of the Treaty over the years, in the modern era, the relationship between Maori and those who have

come is a special one built on respect and on belonging. In the past thirty years or more, people have come to be encouraged to migrate here and to produce the New Zealand of today which has, as the recent Census of 6 March will disclose, more people from more different backgrounds than ever before.

The third thing to which I want to refer is our current civil society, in other words, those who will benefit from the advocacy and assistance that you will be responsible for. The demography of New Zealanders is changing, as I have suggested, with more Maori and Pasifika and Asian New Zealanders than ever before but alongside this there are also burgeoning numbers of young people to whom this country will deliver much responsibility to organise and lead in the future.

These three things – Enzed reputation, special character of our country and large numbers of new adults all lead me to express a challenge to you about the importance of advancing civil society. My challenge relies on two things said by others. Very often, you may agree, it is others who have said things in a way that captures attention and galvanises our own opinion best.

Let me start with the late President Nelson Mandela, of South Africa. Quoting from a speech he made in 2001, he said as follows “As we advance the process of fundamentally transforming our society we need to tap into the energies of all sectors of our society. We shouldexplore the breadth and depth of transformational energies residing in that sector called civil society.....We need to forge strong partnerships across sectors and across social divides..... We need to see how various organs of civil society can co-operate to advance creation of conditions for a better life for all..... To do this we should call on a spirit of partnership.

Secondly, and only partly because he has been here in New Zealand last week, President Barack Obama in April 2015 said of civil society as follows.

“Strong, successful countries require strong and vibrant civil societies. human progress has been propelled not just by famous leaders, not just by states, but by ordinary men and women who believe that change is possible; by citizens who are willing to stand up against incredible odds and great danger not only to protect their own rights, but to extend rights to others. So civil society is the conscience of our countries. It’s the catalyst of change. It’s why strong nations don’t fear active citizens. Strong nations embrace and support and empower active citizens. And by the way, it’s not as if active citizens are always right -- they’re not.”

I leave you to reflect on the wisdom of those contemporary leaders and wish you well in your endeavours here in Wellington and surrounds with Comvoices. Tena koutou katoa.