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Office of the Minister for Disability Issues/Minister for Conservation
Chair, Cabinet

Report on Overseas Travel: Hon Poto Williams

I recommend that Cabinet note this report on my travel to Geneva, Dublin and Edinburgh during the period of 21 August to 29 August 2022 to represent New Zealand at the United Nations in Geneva, and to connect with State and Non-State Organisations across the Conservation and Disability Issues portfolios in Dublin and Edinburgh.

Report

- 1 This was my first official overseas travel since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I was accompanied by a delegation of officials from the Whaikaha – the Ministry of Disabled People, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Development and Te Puna Aonui in Geneva.
- 2 My travel to the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom included a number of Conservation and Disability Issues visits with government ministers and Non-Government Organisations.

Geneva

- 3 The purpose of my travel to Geneva was to lead the New Zealand delegation that appeared before the 27th Session of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (the Committee). The Committee has 18 members and is responsible for reviewing the performance of countries that signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (the Convention).
- 4 The Convention is a human rights instrument with an explicit, social development dimension. It reaffirms that all persons with all types of disabilities must enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Convention had the highest number of signatories in history to a UN Convention on its opening day and was the first comprehensive human rights treaty of the 21st century. The Convention entered into force on 3 May 2008.
- 5 On the afternoon of 22 August, the delegation was hosted by the New Zealand Permanent Mission for a preparation session at the Mission, ahead of the examination. This meeting provided an opportunity for the delegation to finalise material, consider the recent examination of other jurisdictions and agree on the approach in responding the Committee's questions.

- 6 From 23 to 24 August, the Committee examined the delegation over two, three-hour sessions. As Minister for Disability Issues, I opened the examination with a 20 minute statement, which set the scene for the work that has been done since New Zealand's first examination in 2014.
- 7 I acknowledged that expectations for how New Zealand is implementing the Convention are high. New Zealand is one of only a few developed countries to be examined by the Committee a second time.
- 8 Questions asked by Committee members covered a broad range of issues that disabled people face, including:
 - The formation of Whaikaha (the Ministry of Disabled People)
 - How New Zealand was ensuring that the voice of all disabled people, including Tangata Whaikaha Maori was influencing Government decision making
 - New Zealand's response to COVID-19 as it impacted disabled people
 - The Mental Health Act reform
 - Immigration settings
 - Enabling Good Lives roll out
 - Inclusive Education and residential special schools
 - Welfare Reform as it impacted disabled people.
- 9 Following the examination, I had the opportunity to reinforce New Zealand's international leadership around disability issues by hosting a reception for the United Nations "Group of Friends" on Disability Issues at the Permanent Mission. This is a group representing 30 nations who agree on a progressive approach to realising the Convention. I was also able to acknowledge the significant contribution of civil society organisations at this reception.
- 10 This was also an opportunity to acknowledge the work of Sir Robert Martin, a New Zealand member of the Committee who was the first person with a learning disability to be elected to the Committee.
- 11 The next step in the examination process requires the UN Committee to release "Concluding Observations" on the progress of New Zealand towards implementation. These observations outline where the Committee believes New Zealand has made positive progress and where it has principal areas of concern.
- 12 These observations were released at the end of the UN Committee's session on 9 September 2022. New Zealand has until 25 October 2030 to respond to the Committee, however it is my intention to bring a paper to Cabinet within the next six months to outline the next steps in responding to the Concluding Observations.

- 13 I will also be writing to relevant Ministers in mid-September to seek the assistance of their agencies in responding to the Committee. Whaikaha will facilitate the coordination of agency responses.

Dublin

- 14 On 25 August, I attended a breakfast meeting with Malcolm Noonan, the Minister for State for Heritage and Electoral Reform at the New Zealand Residence, hosted by Ambassador Brad Burgess. Our discussion focused on what New Zealand and Ireland are doing in relation to marine protection, biodiversity and nature-based solutions.
- 15 Following the meeting with Minister Noonan, I toured Trinity College with Ambassador Burgess and staff from the New Zealand Embassy. This included the Book of Kells exhibit, a historic document recognised by UNESCO as a Memory of the World.
- 16 My next engagement was a bilateral meeting with Mr Brendan Gleeson, Secretary General of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and other senior representatives from the Department, to discuss Ireland's biodiversity reward scheme for farmers.
- 17 The scheme, known as the Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme, is a €1.5 billion initiative designed to take a farmer-friendly approach to address biodiversity decline while also delivering income support for up to 50,000 farm families in Ireland.
- 18 Similar to New Zealand, Ireland has a significant heritage portfolio within its conservation estate. My final engagements in Dublin included meeting with officials to discuss the heritage value of the Hill of Tara and the Hill of Brú na Bóinne, and the UNESCO Tentative Listing Process for the Royal Sites of Ireland. The Hill of Brú na Bóinne is home to the 5,200 year old Newgrange passage tomb.

Edinburgh

- 19 My first engagement in Edinburgh was with Inclusion Scotland, the sole Disabled Peoples Organisation (DPO) in Scotland. Like New Zealand's DPOs, Inclusion Scotland bases its work on the progressive realisation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Social Model of Disability.
- 20 Issues canvassed during the meeting included New Zealand's examination before the Committee, the new Ministry of Disabled People and the Accessibility for New Zealanders Bill. Inclusion Scotland also shared information with us regarding the Access to Elected Office Fund, which supports disabled people seeking candidacy and election in Scottish local council elections.

- 21 Inclusion Scotland also spoke about the Adult Disability Payment, which provides financial support to those living with a disability or long-term health condition that affects their everyday life. The weekly payments range from £24.45 to £92.40, depending on the applicants circumstances. The payment is not means-tested, or taxed, and does not interfere with other benefits the applicant may already receive.
- 22 Following my meeting with Inclusion Scotland, I met with Barry Fisher and Dr Sophie Brett from Keep Scotland Beautiful at the Princes Street Gardens. Keep Scotland Beautiful advised me that they have strong connections with their New Zealand based counterparts in Keep New Zealand Beautiful. They also raised with me the importance of the Green Flag Award as a vehicle to promote well managed parks and green spaces, setting the benchmark standard for the management of recreational outdoor spaces across the United Kingdom and around the world.
- 23 I also met with Jenny Bruce, Co-ordinator for Old & New Towns of Edinburgh World Heritage Site, James Dalglish, Planning Convener at City of Edinburgh Council, and John Lawson, Archaeology Officer at the City of Edinburgh Council.
- 24 My final engagement was with Professor Pete Hollingsworth and his team at the Royal Botanic Garden. This included a tour of the New Zealand section of the Gardens. They spoke of the various international partnerships and programmes they are involved in to protect endangered flora species.

Proactive release

- 25 This paper will be proactively released as per Cabinet Office Circular CO (18) 4 on Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People’s website. The paper will be subject to redaction as appropriate on the grounds set out under the Official Information Act 1982.

Recommendation

I recommend that Cabinet note this report.

Authorised for lodgement
Hon Poto Williams
Minister for Disability Issues
Minister for Conservation