

Published in the Dominion Post, 1 March 2011

SPIRIT OF CHRISTCHURCH PARTNERSHIP FORUM LIVES ON

By Stephen Jacobi¹

Random acts of violence and destruction tend to shake our belief in the future. Two earthquakes, one more devastating and murderous than the other, a mine explosion, the senseless shooting of a Congresswoman, a hurricane, an oil spill, a tsunami - these catastrophic events cost us our loved ones and rattle the foundations of our belief and value system.

In Christchurch last week the fourth US NZ Partnership Forum was in its final hours. Around a hundred delegates had left the AMI Stadium where the Forum was held and had spread out around the city for a series of "boardroom lunches" hosted in company board-rooms or local restaurants. The emphasis was to be on discussion in small groups of around twelve of the key themes under consideration at the Forum: the future of the relationship newly informed by the "Pacific Partners" report released the day before; how the Trans Pacific Partnership negotiations could be turned into a trade agreement for the 21st century; how best to address climate change and build a low carbon economy; how to build growth and economic recovery in the Asia Pacific region; how to build a platform for security and political engagement in the region; how to feed the world safely and sustainably.

These are all global issues on which New Zealand and the United States need to work closely together if solutions are to be found. Today they seem esoteric when compared to need to bury the dead, comfort the living and rebuild the city of Christchurch. Tomorrow however they will be no less important.

In the months to come I am confident that we will find again the spirit of the Christchurch Forum which was so evident before the earthquake brought it to a premature end. That spirit had been warmed by the welcome of the people of Christchurch with whom we attended Evensong in Cathedral on Sunday, a powhiri and reception at the Art Gallery later the same evening and a gala dinner attended by the Governor-General on Monday evening. The spirit had been nurtured by high level delegations of extraordinary ability and experience on both sides who had come together to discuss big ideas and do some good for the future of Americans and New Zealanders.

Among the participants were 21 future partners, the next generation's leaders, who were to present their ideas on the future of the relationship to the plenary

¹ Stephen Jacobi is Executive Director of the NZ US Council (www.nzuscouncil.com)

session after lunch. Already by their presence and interaction with the delegates they had added to the future focus of the event. As we waited for transport out of Christchurch, I was asked when they could make their presentation ! We will find an occasion in coming months to hear their views.

No-one would want an event like an earthquake to contribute to reinforcing ties between the two countries but there are signs that those who lived through this event now share a new bond. Forum delegate Ernie Bower, Senior Adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, and one of the authors of the "Pacific Partners" report, has written as follows:

"As the ground turned liquid, and then shook us all like a menacing dog, as the walls around us crashed down, and the steeple that literally defined the city crashed to earth, a miracle occurred in Christchurch ... The U.S. - New Zealand brotherhood was forged anew in a way none of us could have foreseen".

There were many acts of friendship and courage witnessed by Forum delegates in the aftermath of the earthquake – the bus driver who returned to gather delegates from the lunch venues, the hosts who similarly transported delegates to a place we could regroup, those who offered comfort and assistance, those, especially from our event team, the emergency services and government officials, who acted calmly and professionally, those ordinary Cantabrians who did not panic and were resolute in the face of mounting disaster. Some of the delegates had some very close shaves: all are safe and, apart from cuts and bruises, unharmed. My wife and I are thankful to have survived, although very conscious of the continuing suffering in Christchurch.

In times of disaster and adversity there is pain and grief. But there is also courage, hope and determination to find the spirit to carry on, rebuild and work for a better tomorrow with those who share similar values, principles and outlooks such as those which link New Zealand and the United States.