

# “I have not changed my thinking” Hon. Aupito William Sio’s migration proposal seven years on

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At the Second Pacific Climate Change conference in Wellington in February 2018, New Zealand's then-Minister for Pacific Peoples, 'Aupito Tofae Su'a William Sio, said New Zealand must have policies in place to deal with the possibility of climate-induced migration from the Pacific Islands (Sio, 2018). Sio said that he was working to get fellow ministers to agree to the idea. Sio said many Pacific islands, especially the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau, may look to this country if their populations had to relocate because climate change made their countries uninhabitable. He said New Zealand's policies must be sufficiently flexible to deal with the situation.

Sio said long term planning needed to take into account requirements for infrastructure and the question of whether New Zealand was mentally and psychologically prepared for what could happen. Talking about the possibility of climate change-induced migration now could help pre-empt problems later on: "How do we act in an emergency we don't want to happen? Every factory has an evacuation plan it doesn't ever want to use." (Cass, 2018; 2018a)

Unfortunately, he failed to get his plan over the line.

*Right. Hon. Sio. Ministry for Pacific Peoples (2022)*



“I presented my findings to the Labour Party and said that we've got to be aware that at some stage we've got to be a part of either leading or part of the discussion around migration with dignity as a consequence of rising sea waters and have that discussion before the emergency actually occurs.

[That way] we can openly discuss where do they go, what sort of support will we provide them and who will pay for this. You don't want to be in a situation where suddenly you have 10,000 Tuvaluans at your doorstep.

And you think, OK, what kind of jobs do we give them? How do we support the education of their children? Is our healthcare system ready for their health needs? So all of that discussion has to be part of an overarching plan.”  
(Sio, interview, 2025)

*Right: Flooding in Fiji. (Mortreux, 2023)*



Hon. Sio said it was difficult it was difficult for some of his colleagues to grasp the seriousness of the situation because they did not understand the context if they had not seen the islands. To improve their understanding he asked the then-Speaker Adrian Rudaffe, to arrange for MPs to visit the Pacific to see the situation for themselves. He said some MPs came back with a back with a better appreciation of the challenges that the Pacific were talking about.





*During her time as Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern pledged that her government would spend NZ\$300 million in climate-related assistance over four years from 2018-2020. She is pictured with United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at the UN in New York.*

*(RNZ, 2018)*

He told me that Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was sympathetic, some thing he attributed to her upbringing.

“Her father was the New Zealand police liaison officer based in Samoa, so she had spent time living with him or visiting him. Her father was also the High Commissioner to Neway, so she understood,” Sio said.

“I think the problem with a leader where everything was happening to your government that was unplanned for - COVID, the Christchurch killings, the volcanic White Island eruption - is that the weight of responsibility becomes so heavy that you have so many voices in your ear about what's right, what's not right. But every time I would have discussions with her, she always understood.”

Sio retired from politics in 2022, retaining the title Honourable along with his traditional Samoan title of Matai. He now believes the way forward is for the vanguard of climate change action to pass to traditional leaders. In short, he has adapted to his own changing circumstances as the climate has changed, seeking more effective ways forward and learning from the past.

He is now working in a world that is radically different from that of 2018, when all we had to worry about was climate change and there had not been Covid, or the White Island eruption, or Russia's invasion of the Ukraine, or October 7 and America was not led by a man who describes climate change as a con job, hates the United Nations and despises international conventions. (Church, 2025) Sio, however, has not changed his mind about the importance of climate change.



“I have not changed my thinking about it,” Sio said.

Neither has Hon. Sio given up on trying to persuade New Zealand to take action before it is too late. He has maintained a consistent line that action needs to be taken before it is too late and that the large, industrial nations must take the blame and the lions’ share of the responsibility for what has happened.

On his LinkedIn page he has written:

“NZ must stand in solidarity with the Pacific and be prepared to develop a "Migration with Dignity Plan" using our Pacific Quota and Family Reunification as a base; a "Mobility of Labour" plan with our RSE scheme as a starting point; and an "Emergency Plan" if, and when these islands are no longer viable.” (Sio, LinkedIn page, n.d)



He told the Ocean conference in Palau that leaders from 'wealthy nations' had a moral obligation to save the planet and reiterated the charge that it the large states which contributed the most to global warming. He said the small island states were not the cause of global warming, but the victims. Despite this, the Island nations had never demanded compensation for the “ colonial wreckage of the past.”

"What we're asking is that they stand with us to ensure they protect our rights to self-determination, our right to live in our own islands. They can make a huge difference in achieving the 1.5 degree goal if they act quickly," he said. (RNZ, 2022)

According to Allaudin (2025) the Island nations emit only 0.03 percent of global carbon emissions, but are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change. UN Secretary-General António Guterres told the Pacific Islands Forum in Tonga last year that a worldwide catastrophe was putting the Pacific in peril. (World Meteorological Organisation, 2024).

According to Gosh and Orchiston (n.d) up to 50,000 Pasifika people could lose their homes each year due to the severe effects of climate change. Residents of Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu were highly susceptible to climate-induced displacement, which was mostly internal.





Sio's comments in Palau were in line with the Blue Pacific Strategy, which numbers among its leadership commitments a promise to urgently advocate for the reduction and prevention of the causes of climate change and sea level rise. The strategy also promises to secure a future for the Peoples of the Pacific and to protect the Island nations' sovereignty, jurisdiction and management over their maritime zones and resources. (2050 Blue Pacific Strategy)

### **Resources**

One of the key issues for the Island nations is how they would maintain their sovereignty if a shift in population put their governments in New Zealand or Australia. There are already major problems in the Pacific with degradations by pirate fishing fleets across the Pacific. Seabed mining is a major issue, even though no mining permits have yet been issued. President Trump has made it clear that he would like American companies to start mining. (ABC, 2025; MFAT, n.d; PIFFA, 2025). *Left: Photo PIFFA.*

## **Working with communities**

Sio has continued to work with communities and has encountered those who do not believe in climate change. One of the problems, he acknowledges, is that unless people can see it, they find it hard to accept it. However, he has hope for younger people.

“I think the younger generation is probably more in tune and in their heart. I've seen more and more younger people educating themselves about this,” he said.

He said he had not totally given up on his political colleagues. “I take some of them from time to time and share a view, but I just know from experience they're so fixated on the three year election cycle that it's hard to think long term.”

## Traditional leadership

However, Sio now thinks the future lies with working with other holders of traditional titles and elders who share a common concern. He is aware that the level of concern will change with the country.

“I've been travelling backward and forward to Samoa and I've immersed myself in a group of senior public servants, business people and some retirees. We have this walking group every morning, seven days a week, 5:30 in the morning. It's more a talk group. We end up in coffee and one of the issues that we always discuss is climate change and how it's impacting our land holdings. These are traditional land holdings closer to the ocean and we're seeing erosion happening. It used to be quite slow, but we're now seeing it a lot more despite our sea walls and despite our growing coconuts to try and hold the land together. “

In Auckland, however, the intense focus on climate change was not there and when his local group of returnees and business people go walking their café discussions focus on the cost of living, surviving and how challenging the government has become.

*Right: Hon. Sio signs off from Parliament in full Samoan ceremonial, dress. (Mase, 2023)*





Sio has become part of a support group for the Pacific's traditional leaders. He has been working closely with the Kaumaiti Nui, the paramount chief constitutionally recognized in the Cook Islands, who will be hosting a traditional leaders forum next year, following a forum in Hawai'i. He said climate change was a major issue for ariki.

“The Maori Queen's officers asked me when I speak, can I please raise issues that I believe the Arikis across the region are united on?

“I said climate change remains the single biggest security threat in the region. It hasn't changed. Health is still a big issue and climate change is in exacerbating that. And then language and culture.”

## The future

Since he left Parliament, Sio has been reflecting on what he has done and what his next steps should be. He believes traditional leadership offers a long term alternative to the often very short term focus of the political world. Politicians came and went, said. Some politicians accepted that challenges like climate change could not be resolved overnight. Other politicians just seemed to be there for their own survival.

He said he had decided to be strongly supportive of the traditional leadership because such roles were for life, with responsibilities to families, communities and the next generation. Such roles were forever rather than the political roles which came and went and did not last.

Traditional leaders with a responsibility for present and future generation must start thinking about the transition of power and authority, but also the transition of experience, knowledge and goals.

“And so that's where I'm putting my energy,” he said.

He said he was also helping the next crop of emerging leaders to recognise the key issues they should advocate for.

“How do you manouvre in the complex political community, whatever world that we live in today? What the next generation probably requires from somebody like myself is be firm in their values, but also help them. How do how did I cope with the challenges that they will face?

Whether it's on a board, local government, central government, international forum or simply in your home and workplace, because those are all the spheres that I've operated in. I was trying to utilise all the knowledge I might have, whether it be from the palangi world or from the Samoan world, to help navigate and push these issues along.”

*Right: Pasifika students taking part in a climate change protest in Auckland. (Samoa Global News, 2018.)*





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