

**Kick starting Fiji's Stalled Economy: Our commitment for a better and secure future**

**Speech by Leader of the New National Federation Party at the Working Committee meeting held on Sunday, 25 May, 2014 at the Tamavua Primary School, Suva**

Party President, Madam Tupou Draunidalo, General Secretary, Kamal Iyer, Party stalwarts, branch delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen. A warm and heartfelt greeting to you all this morning.

I want to start with sincere thanks to all. Since our election, Madam Draunidalo and I have received tremendous support from every section of our society from across the country.

We are excited to lead a determined NFP capable of being a big part of the new government and we offer to the country a real hope for its future.

**The President has stated that we are not partaking in a free and fair election.**

Until the state privileges decree and the media decree remain in place, 2014 general elections cannot be free and fair - period. The media decree with its heavy fines and penalties make it impossible for the country's journalists to cover issues openly and without fear. It makes it impossible for us to project our messages to our people.

I commend our journalists who in spite of these harsh restrictions are doing their best to keep our citizens informed. To these journalists, let me say a big vinaka vakalevu. The stakes have rarely been higher and weight on your shoulders so heavy. The national owes you its profound gratitude as you take real risks to help project our messages to Fiji citizens.

I call upon media organizations and editors to provide the right environment for their reporters so that they can do their jobs responsibly. I make special mention of the media because of its important role in the transition to democracy. To paraphrase a message from a Regional Media and Elections training program “Freedom is when people can speak. Democracy is when Government listens and the media is the messenger”.

NFP does not fear the media. If the Bainimarama government has nothing to hide and if it has the moral courage to do the right thing, it should lift the media restrictions with immediate effect.

***NFP in government will review the media decree. It will remove all of its unreasonable provisions including the fines and penalties.***

But we will go much further. Our citizens, our media, our businesses, our NGO’s should have a fundamental right to access information regarding government decisions and actions that affect their lives. We no longer live in the dark ages where Governments habitually kept secret, public information such as salaries paid to our leaders, and allowances they are paid on foreign junkets.

***NFP will enact a Freedom of Information (Right to Information) Bill, that will ensure that citizens can demand and be entitled to receive information from the Government. An open government is good for our citizens, for our businesses and for our democracy.***

**Fear in our society**

Our people are still afraid. Our youths are afraid. Our civil servants are afraid, our farmers are afraid, our women are afraid. Our businessmen are afraid. They are all afraid of participating actively in the campaign. I call upon the government to stop the threats, stop the victimization, stop the intimidation of anyone, including media from participating and articulating their views on any issue regarding the election. I call upon the people of this country and come out and be part of the election and campaign process.

Ladies and Gentlemen I want to talk about five issues affecting our people.

First is the rising cost of living. Second is the continued deterioration of our health services. Third, is the serious failings of short term education policies. Fourth, is the rising unemployment and worsening welfare of our retirees. Fifth, is the need to fix the fundamental flaws of the 2013 Constitution.

**1. This Government has just run out of ideas to reverse the rising cost of living**

The burden of the rising cost of living has become too much. The responsibility for this lies squarely on the Government. Milk is disappearing from our kid's breakfast menu. Most families can no longer afford a balanced diet. Families daily juggle between whether to pay their electricity bills, or rent, or buy adequate food, or pay for school costs. We see this across our villages, in the urban areas and across the squatter settlements day in and day out. This crime against our people cannot continue.

Ladies and gentleman, it is the duty of any government to look after the poor. In eight years, this government has failed to address the rising cost of living. In fact it has fueled it through its deliberate policies such as the increase in VAT from 12.5% to 15%; and increasing duties for milk, flour, rice and kerosene.

This Government's efforts to reduce the cost of living are half-hearted at best. The bus fare subsidy and increased school grants might have helped. But Fijians see right through the short term tricks this Government is playing on the poor.

Ladies and Gentlemen, more than a third of our families live in deep poverty. Poverty cannot be addressed through temporary band aid type of measures.

Poverty and growing inequality are a result of our poor economic performance. In Fiji there is inequality of opportunities, inequality of status, of rights, of participation and running through all this is inequality of income. **How can any country progress with such profound inequalities?**

The gap between the rich and the poor has never been greater than now. Making this worse is the Government's regressive income policy. Why reduce an already lower tax for people earning more than 100,000 yet increase VAT from 12.5 to 15%? It just doesn't make sense. Not for the poor anyway. This is why I say government has run out of ideas.

Small business operators, taxi owners and drivers, our fishermen are being squeezed by high fuel costs, by a barrage of fees, punitive fines and discretionary transactions costs imposed by various state agencies. This is what I mean by government is giving with one hand and taking away from another.

NFP attracts some of the most talented people in our country. We have the skills and the political will to arrest the regression of Fiji's growth and stop our decline as a country.

Our immediate measures to reduce the cost of living will involve

**(i) Reducing the Value Added Tax (VAT) from 15% to 10% immediately giving an average relief of \$50 per month.**

(ii) Review the income tax policies to ensure that the rich also pay a reasonable share of their income in tax.

(iii) Reduce import duties for some of the basic food items.

**2. The neglect and mismanagement of the Bainimarama Government has led to a frightening deterioration of our health services.**

Our extremely poor health service is blight on our nation. There is no other way to put it. Go to any hospital in the country and you will see the pathetic conditions.

I visited Lautoka Hospital few weeks ago. Women were waiting for more than 5 hours to see a doctor. The physical condition of the hospital was shameful. Pigeon droppings on the walls and windows, potholes and dust right in front of the entry space. Our hospitals should never run out of essential medicines for diabetics and high blood pressure patients, or of basic equipment such as syringes for blood tests. I call upon the Prime Minister Bainimarama to take a break from his campaigning to see for himself the conditions of the hospitals around the country. Let him start in his backyard with CWM hospital!

Even the expectation of clean and hygienic conditions at our hospitals is just too high an expectation from this Government.

NFP will introduce a comprehensive health care modernization program. **The health care modernization program will place our citizens at the heart of rebuilding health care.**

NFP will **ensure medical care that is focused on compassion, respect and dignity life** for all our citizens. Regardless of age and place of residence, citizens must have access to decent health care.

To achieve this, a Personalized Health Care framework is needed. NFP will ensure clinical (Hospital Based Care) is delegated to Empowered Health Specialists Group (Teams) for standard practice, equal care levels throughout Fiji. All citizens regardless of their residence from Fulaga, to Yasawa to Somosomo, to Suva will have access to the same quality of care under our approach.

NFP will commit funding to ensure that Fiji has well-placed and well-funded team of medical workers. Our citizens should know that in hospitals, they will be seen by doctors within a specified time and not wait endlessly.

Public provision of health care in Fiji is a foundation on which this country is built. Going forward, we will need private investments to enhance and sustain delivery of care especially in specialized areas such as cancer treatment and cardiology.

We need our medical professionals to be able to work with the most modern equipment and technical support. Fiji needs joined-up private-public sector solutions to modernize medical facilities and equipment, to use new technologies, including telemedicine, to extend services to island communities, and reduce costs of private and public sector drugs through bulk purchasing.

NFP will ensure **that facilities are restored and maintained to International Health Quality Standards**. We will not put up with the idea that because we are poor and small country, our standards can be lower.

NFP will realign/review policy for equitable health services outcomes in environmental, ecological health in sustaining life and welfare; disaster and humanitarian crisis health response.

NFP will review the salaries of doctors, nurses and health workers and implement a new salary structure within six months of being in government. We are happy that the nurse's salaries have been reviewed and increased by government but they deserve more recognition that is sustainable and caters beyond the election year.

Health is a big priority for NFP. Health is an unalienable human right. Investing in health is investing in our future. At the moment there is no foresight when it comes to health and medicine. We will fix this.

**3. We can bring education on par with Australia and New Zealand within 10 years – that is our ambition and our commitment**

The last Education Commission report was produced a long 14 years ago in 1999. We have yet to seriously look at our education system and whether it is fit for purpose. Education policies are changed in a haphazard manner. Changes to curriculum, school examinations have all be done without much consultation and discussion. This is amateurish.

**In government, the NFP will appoint a competent Education Commission to assess the ad hoc reforms of the recent past.** It will include an assessment of the status of teachers and school heads and recommend changes to modernize our education system. This will be implemented by the government within six months after the release of the report.

NFP believes that all **children should have equal access to a world class education**. NFP will work day and night to achieve this. Our children deserve nothing less. Our future and our place in the world depends on. No one will do this for us. We will get this right.

NFP will

- (i) Develop new and better forms of professional development opportunities for teachers, principals and school management.
- (ii) Introduce international benchmarks to monitor the quality of teaching and learning.
- (iii) Benchmark quality standards to ensure that standards of primary, secondary and tertiary education are on par with countries such as Australia and New Zealand.
- (iv) Provide incentives for high caliber students to join the teaching profession.
- (v) Ensure schools are equipped with modern technology to allow our teachers and students to benefit from latest innovation in education.
- (vi) Revise the current External Examinations and Assessment Policy, particularly the abolition of Fiji Intermediate Examination, Fiji Eighth Year Examination and Fiji Junior Certificate Examination.

NFP believes the best thing we can invest in a child's life is high quality early education. NFP will increase funding to encourage all 5 year old children to attend kindergarten. We will **create kindergarten education within the primary schooling system** to ensure that parents understand the value of starting early.

NFP recognizes the importance of tertiary education as a major contributor of economic competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge driven economy. In this regard, NFP values the importance of the newly



established Tertiary Education Loan Scheme (TELS). NFP will, however, **introduce a means based scholarship within TELS to provide full scholarship to bright students from low income families who do not qualify for Toppers Scheme.**

NFP will do everything in its power to ensure that these students are not burdened with a loan after completing tertiary studies. This will include many I-taukei students who were forced to take loan(s) this year.

NFP will ensure that our girl child has an equal opportunity to quality higher education and will address anomalies related to enrolment in non-traditional areas such as the sciences, business and commerce, engineering and accounting. Our daughters must be given the same support and incentives as our sons to aspire to professional careers in these and any other fields of employment.

Our tertiary education strategy has the overall goal of raising employment skills, sustaining a globally competitive research base and improving knowledge dissemination to benefit industry and our people.

#### **4. The Government has neither the ideas nor a political will to create decent employment for our young or protect the livelihoods of our retirees**

The best way to address poverty and inequality amongst our families is to ensure that they have decent employment. Youth unemployment is the biggest scourge in our society. We understand the pain of youths and their parents when they cannot find employment.

We support the creation of the National Employment Centre and some of the work that the Centre has done. However, given the large number of unemployed, we will extend the role of the NEC to not only

help them find employment but also provide a modest means tested unemployment benefit for six months. This would help unemployed youth to look for employment and manage their affairs while they look for jobs.

**But quality jobs have to be created by industry.** The NFP will work with businesses housing to establish new internship programs for young people to acquire skills and work experience.

**We will work with targeted industries including the tourism sector to increase technical, professional and skilled jobs across the country.** The NFP will work with foreign investors in targeted growth sectors to boost employment for our young especially in the North, in maritime regions and in depressed areas especially.

**We make a clear commitment to our young – we will create decent work for you. Our investments in education and our future will not be allowed to be criminally wasted any longer.**

One of the biggest pains that this government inflicted on many loyal civil servants is to retire them unjustly and prematurely. Many of these people had planned their working lives until a retirement age of 60. Many had financial and family commitments. They were left high and dry after the sudden reduction in their retirement age. **We will review the status of the retirees in the last five years with a view to providing them with appropriate compensation.** NFP has already announced that it will immediately extend the retirement age to 60.

As I stated before, NFP in government will urgently review the operations of the FNPF. We will restructure the FNPF board with more workers and employers representative and review the contractual agreements that had been violated by this government.

The FNPF must evolve into a pension fund and not remain a retirement savings fund. To this end we will call a tripartite meeting within the first six months in government to agree to review all the benefits with a

view to restoring some of the past benefits which have been removed. **NFP will make sure that at the end of their working lives, the people of Fiji retire with dignity with secure savings.**

**We will develop a ‘partnership model’ where employers, unions and government will meet regularly to decide on policies for training, investment, wage setting and welfare policy.** We will use this partnership model to provide a new ‘living wage’ (wages with which families can afford the basic necessities for a decent living) for our workers and not the shamefully low national minimum wage of \$2 per hour.

Our poor people, especially those in the squatter settlements, are living in inhumane conditions unacceptable in a modern Fiji. Poor housing leads to poor health especially amongst the children and the elderly. I invite the Prime Minister and his cabinet to join me on a visit to squatter homes to see the crowded, unhealthy and inhumane conditions under which some 25 percent of our people live.

Ladies and gentlemen, it pains me to say this, but successive governments have failed the poor squatter families. Many squatter families have been waiting for years for government action to provide land titles to them so that they could build decent houses.

**The NFP will review the national housing policy and focus specifically on squatter settlements in the country.** We will work towards providing a dedicated department within the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development to deal with all the problems of housing and infrastructure in the squatter settlements.

**Development partners, churches and community organizations need to be involved in the task of increasing the supply of low cost, high quality houses so that those moving towards the urban areas are able to own and rent decent homes.**

**We will bring new private sector players into low cost housing sector.** We will invest in boosting housing sector construction capabilities to raise our game. **The NFP will boost I-Taukei corporate presence in the social housing sector.**

- 5. We will certainly review the Constitution: those in power will simply have to get used to this fact.**

**Ladies and Gentlemen, let us not forget that we are fighting an election on a new and imposed Constitution and under a new electoral system.** The NFP is confident of being in government. We will seek an urgent review of the Constitution within the parliamentary framework. There are provisions such as excessive powers vested in the Prime Minister and Attorney General's offices and several derogations to the bill of rights amongst others that need to be reviewed. We make no apologies for our commitment to review this imposed constitution.

- 6. We offer a clear path and way forward**

I do not mince my words. The 2014 budget was a cynical election year stunt by this government. It is a cosmetic budget designed to mislead the public and get its votes. It is designed to gloss over all the serious problems that have been created for our people in the last 7 years.

We want an inclusive nation, based on equality, secure in its future and capable of dealing with its painful past. **A nation where everyone can talk, give opinions freely and differing voices are welcomed not crushed. Where citizens do not live in fear of their own government.** A Fiji where everyone will have equal opportunities. Where jobs are created in a sustainable manner. Where wages and salaries growth is higher than inflation. Above all ladies and gentlemen, we want to build a democratic Fiji where the

aspirations of different communities are respected and nurtured. NFP is asking you, the people of this country, to give us an opportunity to do all of this for you.

Our team offers you a trustworthy and highly capable team. We ask for your support in building a vibrant modern economy and country which will make all our citizens proud.

Vinaka vakalevu and God bless Fiji.

*Prof Biman Prasad*

*Suva, 25 May, 2015*