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**INAUGURAL SPEECH AT THE 2014 PARLIAMENT**

**Parliament House Mon. 13th Oct., 2014**

**Suva 0930 Hours**

Madam Speaker,

It is a great honour for me to make my maiden speech as Prime Minister in this Parliament, having led the FijiFirst movement to victory in last month’s General Election.

Talking about victory I wish to formally congratulate our rugby 7’s team for their magnificent victory over Samoa last night to the win the Gold Coast 7’s in the IRB World Cup Series. Well done men and Ben Ryan. You have done Fiji proud. Your victory was the icing on the cake after the successful launch of Parliament last week and the Fiji Day celebrations.

Madam Speaker, allow me to congratulate you on your election as Speaker. The fact that you are the first woman Speaker of any Parliament in Fiji or any Parliament in the Pacific Islands is a huge personal achievement. But it is also highly symbolic – a milestone in the history of our nation and the advancement of Fijian women for equal rights and opportunities.

Your speech of acceptance last week was a wonderful moment. Because as you rightly pointed out: The fact that you have assumed this high office will undoubtedly encourage other Fijian women to consider careers in politics.

I’m sure that all the Honourable Members of this House join me in wishing you every success in the role of Speaker. You can be sure of Government’s full co-operation in this Chamber and in the conduct of the Parliament’s affairs.

Madam Speaker, I am also sure that every Member of this House will agree with me when I say that our two days in the Chamber last week were unforgettable. We have launched our new democracy with dignity and with style.

As His Excellency the President reminded us, our ultimate duty as MPs is to the people who sent us here. And I know from the feedback I’ve been receiving that what they saw here filled them with pride and optimism for our future.

As the President also reminded us, this is a Chamber that has seen some of the greatest moments in our history and also some of the worst. There are mercifully few Parliaments in the world where shots have been fired into the ceiling yet that’s what happened here on 14 May, 1987, during the first coup.

I think we all share the President’s view that there is something deeply symbolic about having brought history full circle by returning to this Chamber. Let us all resolve to draw a line under the past and work together to achieve the future we all know awaits us if we put our nation first.

I want to pay a special tribute to those who have worked so hard over the past few months to carry out the refurbishment of this Chamber and the rest of the Parliamentary complex - the architects, designers, contractors and the many men and women who worked day and night to complete the project on time and to such a high standard. It is a wonderful achievement and to all of you, I extend the nation’s thanks.

Madam Speaker, much of my Government’s legislative program for the coming session was outlined by His Excellency the President in his speech opening the 2014 Parliament. There are many more details to come in the 2015 Budget next month. But as the President signaled, one of our main priorities will be to provide more assistance to Fijians who are disadvantaged.

I personally feel very strongly that we must not rest as a Government or a nation while any Fijian is marginalised. This is why – along with our program to improve our infrastructure – we have put so much emphasis on assisting ordinary Fijians and families who are disadvantaged.

I have said before that my proudest achievement in Government has been to free struggling families from the worry of having to pay for their children’s education. Because in my own life, I have witnessed the heartbreak of many ordinary Fijians in not being able to meet the cost of school fees. Heartbreaking because we have always known that education is the key to breaking the cycle of poverty. And not getting a proper education has condemned successive generations to lives of menial work, meager incomes, drudgery and not being able to improve their socio-economic status.

When I was growing up, we all knew children who were less fortunate and got left behind through no fault of their own simply because their parents couldn’t afford to provide for them in the way we were being provided for. If it is the only thing I do in Government, then I will be happy knowing that we were able – through our free schooling program – to place Fijian children in a much better position than previous generations.

I ask all of you in this Chamber to work with me to put our children and young people first, to support those measures that we plan to improve the lives of our young people, broaden their horizons, and open up the world of opportunity that awaits them if we join hands to give them the leg-up they deserve.

Madam Speaker, if everyone in this Parliament asks themselves the question: “Will this be good for our young people?” and the answer is “yes”, then let us not allow our political differences to get in the way of working together to make that initiative happen. As I’ve said before, I intend to run an inclusive Government. I intend to leave no Fijian behind. So I am extending a sincere invitation to my political opponents and especially the Honourable Leader of the Opposition to work with me to improve the prospects of every citizen and especially our young people.

By all means you can and you must critique our policies, that is your role in our Parliamentary democracy, just as it is in other countries. But don’t do it simply for the sake of it. We must all and, I ask you to work with and support all policies that are for the good of the nation. We must all and, I ask you to put the interests of our young people above politics. Because assisting them is the key to developing a stronger and more educated nation. Assisting them is an investment in a better Fiji. Assisting them means a stable and prosperous Fiji.

Madam Speaker, it is traditional in maiden speeches to thank those who have made an impact on our lives and especially those who have imbued us with the notion of service in public life. First and foremost, I want to pay tribute to my wife, Mary, who has always been a pillar of strength to me and a wise and trusted counsel.

She never dreamt that she would wind up as a politician’s wife but she was a wonderful asset in the recent campaign in reaching out to ordinary people, who got to see her as I have always seen her. I want to thank her for her unwavering love and support and for always being by my side.

I also want to thank my six children and my fourteen grandchildren, who provide me with so much joy. There is more joy on the way with Number 15. As we all know, there is no substitute for a happy family life and I have been blessed beyond measure.

I also think today of my parents, who imbued me with the values I hold dear of love of family, love of community and love of country. I grew up – thanks largely to them and my teachers at the Marist Brothers High School – committed to the notion of Fiji as one big multiracial family in which everyone belongs and everyone deserves equal treatment.

I have always tried to see my fellow citizens through the prism of their own personality and character rather than their ethnic background or religious belief.

It doesn’t matter to me who you are or what you believe in. What’s important to me is whether you are honest, courageous, compassionate, stand up for what is right, protect the vulnerable and treat people the way you’d like to be treated yourself - with consideration and respect.

I passionately believe in one Fiji is which everyone belongs and no-one gets left behind. And I passionately believe in being patriotic, putting our nation’s interests before ourselves, and defending our unity as a nation against those who wish to divide us. Which is why I also want to pay tribute today to my colleagues in the military.

History will eventually make its own pronouncement on the events of 2006. But those of us in the military who believed passionately in national unity came to the conclusion that the fabric of our nation was unraveling. And that only a radical intervention would enable us to pick up the threads.

We had all gone through the trauma of 2000 and the mutiny in our ranks that had caused us so much pain. None of us wanted to remove the civilians we had appointed to take our nation forward. But when it appeared that they had precisely the same racist and corrupt agenda as the instigators of 2000, we had no choice. We took the tough decision necessary to keep Fiji united, to prevent large numbers of our people from being relegated to second or third class citizens, to halt the spiraling out of control corruption and elitism and begin the task of reforming our society from the ground up.

Only a radical intervention in 2006 was capable of getting Fiji back on track – of establishing once and for all the universal democratic principle that all men and women are equal. Before 2006, that was simply not the case in Fiji. But now it is and we have a Constitution that not only guarantees genuine equality – genuine democracy - but provides Fijians with a range of unprecedented socio-economic rights. It puts in place institutions that will not only address the issue of systemic corruption but provide unprecedented levels of accountability and transparency in public life and institutions.

I want to thank the RFMF for supporting the reform process, of carrying out its duty to be the ultimate guarantor of our national security, of holding Fiji together. And for the personal support I received as Commander from those around me, those patriots who shared my vision of a united Fiji.

It was a great wrench for me to leave the military earlier this year. Everyone who knows me knows I never wanted to be a politician. But I came to realise that I had a duty to lead us forward, to introduce a genuine democracy instead of the pale imitation we had, to lead the fight against corruption, tackle the self-serving elites and offer up a vision of an inclusive nation, with fairness and justice for all.

I want to thank all of those who shared that vision, the countless thousands who understood what needed to be done, including those sitting beside me on this side of the House. We share a common love of Fiji and a vision of where we want to take it with the support of the Fijian people.

I especially want to thank those individuals who head our institutions of state for the sacrifices they were prepared to make in the face of criticism, abuse and sanctions.

Some of those who we counted as our friends set out to degrade our standards of governance by targeting and punishing those individuals who accepted positions in the Judiciary, as ministers, and on the boards of our state-owned enterprises. To those of you who withstood the vilification and in some cases, even death threats, I also extend my warmest thanks. I will never forget your loyalty to our nation and our cause of building a better Fiji.

I particularly thank the members of our Judiciary, the judges and magistrates – headed by our Honorable Chief Justice, Anthony Gates – for being willing to stand up to international condemnation so that the Fijian people could continue to get access to justice. I especially thank those who came from Sri Lanka to join the other judges and magistrates who stood by our nation when we needed them. Because of these heroes, the genuine rule of law in Fiji prevailed even during the most challenging times and we owe you all an immense debt of gratitude. We owe an immense debt to the Government and president of Sri Lanka for facilitating their service to Fiji.

I also thank our friends in the international community, those nations and individuals who took the trouble to understand that what we were doing wasn’t for ourselves but for the common good and stood by us. Those nations who tried to bring us to heel – to impose their will on us - failed. We were made of sterner stuff than they appreciated. And instead of complying with their demand that we restore the status quo and resolve nothing, we went out into the world and found new friends. Instead of harming us, they actually made us stronger. So instead of being resentful of these nations, we thank them.

Because of them, Fiji actually stands taller in the world than ever before. They tried to get us dispensed with as UN peacekeepers. But not only did their lobbying fail, we are in more demand than ever before. The recent detention of 45 of our soldiers in Syria showed the world what we have always known ourselves. That when the going gets tough, Fijian troops stay professional, disciplined and courageous.

They can be relied on when others can’t. And their equally courageous families can be relied on to support them, endure the separation from their loved ones and accept that this is Fiji’s contribution to the world, to being a good global citizen. To all those families, I also want to say thank you today and convey how much we all value the sacrifice you are making.

Most of all, I want to thank the Fijian people for putting their trust in me at the ballot box last month to move us all forward. The scale of the FijiFirst victory in the election surprised a lot of people, certainly those sitting opposite and a large number of diplomats, NGOs and elements of the media. But it didn’t surprise me.

I have always made a point of listening to the Fijian people, trying to understand their needs and concerns, respecting their views and doing what I can to assist them. Without being arrogant about it, I have had my finger on the pulse of the nation for the past eight years. I knew what ordinary people really wanted. And that was an end to the constant bickering and self interest in public life, the continual jockeying for power and a Government that genuinely serves the people.

Every Fijian of goodwill wants a level playing field in Fiji. They want fairness and justice for all. They want Government to provide them with the tangible things they need to improve their lives. They want a job or another source of income. They want food on the table. They want their children to get a better education, to have opportunities they never had. They want to get on with their neighbours. They want the freedom to decide their religious beliefs. They want a tolerant society in which their own choices are respected. They want to feel good about their country. They want to be one nation, not a collection of competing tribes, communal groups and interests. They want Fiji to assume its rightful place as the pre-eminent Pacific island nation and a beacon of good governance and hope for our smaller neighbours. And they want to be citizens of the world, for our education revolution to transform the lives of our young people and for Fiji to become known as a clever country.

Madam Speaker, that is the vision that members on this side of the House offered the Fijian people at this election and that is what we intend to deliver. And we will work as hard as we can to keep the trust they have placed in us.

Indeed I have told my ministers and members that we cannot relent, we cannot take it easy.

The people have spoken and our new democracy has been launched and it must translate into very real and tangible benefits for all citizens of our nation. I can assure every Fijian that this is only the beginning. Now that we are united, now that you have a Government that cares and has genuine love and affection for all Fijians, even greater days lie ahead.

May God Bless us all. May God bless Fiji.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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