

Rear Admiral Hon. J.V. Bainimarama, CF (Mil), OSt.J, MSD, jssc, psc

**Prime Minister of Fiji and Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Sugar Industry**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF THE 79TH USP COUNCIL MEETING**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Novotel House Thurs. 30th Oct.,2014**

**LAMI 0915 Hours**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Hon Ministers for Education of the Member States of the University of the South Pacific;**

**Pro Chancellor and Chair of the USP Council;**

**The Vice Chancellor and President of the University;**

**USP Council Members;**

**Heads of Education Systems from the Pacific and Members of Delegation;**

**Honoured Guests;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula Vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

It’s a great pleasure to be here today to address the 79th Council Meeting of the University of the South Pacific. To the Honourable Ministers of Education and to all those who have travelled from afar to be here for the meeting, I extend a special welcome.

You’ve come to Fiji at a very important and exciting juncture in our history. As you are no doubt aware, last month Fiji conducted a general election based for the first time on the truly democratic principle of equal votes of equal value. Removing the legal enforcement of ethnic voting was essential to creating a modern nation-state in Fiji.

The election itself was deemed free and fair and has been met with a chorus of support from our neighbours and friends around the globe.

The whole process came to a climax when, earlier this month, the members of Parliament were sworn in, officially launching our new democracy. It was a momentous occasion. Finally, 44 years after Independence, we ushered in a genuine democracy based on a Constituion that says every person is equal and we are all Fijians. From here there is no looking back. We have our eyes fixed firmly on the future and on fulfilling our vision of Fiji as a united and prosperous country and a leader in the Pacific.

As Government, having won 32 seats in the 50 seat Parliament, we’ve been given a decisive mandate by the people to continue with our ambitious program of reform and development, which has been underway for the past seven years. We intend to continue to run an inclusive Government that takes into account the needs and concerns of all Fijians when formulating new policies or carrying out new developments.

Our top priority will continue to be providing all Fijians with the things they need to empower themselves and improve their lives like electricity, water, better health facilities, better roads and telecommunications, and of course, free education.

Education is one of the most serious commitments we can make to improve the lives or our people and I’m personally more proud of our free schooling program than anything else we’ve ever done.

We want to secure a better future for our children and our children’s children and we believe that improving access to education all the way up to the university level is one of the best ways to achieve this.

No longer does any child have to drop out of school because of financial strains in their family. In fact, we’re already beginning to see the benefits of providing free tuition to all primary and secondary school students in terms of increased enrollment and better attendance.

We now have plans underway to extend the current free education program to pre-school students from the beginning of the second term in 2015. Free education will be available one year before admission to primary school at recognised and accredited pre-schools.

To cater for the higher enrollment, we’re also focusing on increasing the ratio of teachers to students to ensure that the quality of education isn’t diminished, it’s improved.

Because, as you know, it’s not just about access, it’s about quality too. We want to make sure that students actually learn skills that allow them to succeed in life – to find jobs that excite them and can support a family.

That’s why we’re working with all stakeholders – including representatives from tertiary institutions – to create a learning environment in our schools that allow those of our students who want to continue on to higher education to do so successfully.

Unfortunately, it’s still the case that far too many students are struggling during their first year of university because they were not trained with the basics they need to succeed at that level. The last thing we want is for students to become discouraged and decide to quit, giving up the amazing opportunity provided to them through our Government loan scheme , called TELS, and our TOPPERS scheme.

For those of you who are not familiar with these programs, TELS provides a low-interest Government loan to any Fijian student who is accepted at a registered tertiary institution in Fiji.

The scheme covers the full cost of tuition and does not have to be repaid until after the student has graduated and received employment. It also provides accommodation and living expenses where needed.

Government’s goal now is to extend TELS to those who already have a diploma or who are in the workforce and want to gain formal qualifications.

And in addition to these loans, the Toppers Scheme provides full scholarships to the 600 top achievers in designated areas of study. This is a vital component of our attempt to create a knowledge-based society, reward merit and build a smarter Fiji.

Of course, Fiji’s universities – including USP – are valuable partners in ensuring this program is successful by helping us continue to refine it so that it best meets the needs of our young people.

To this end, Government is fully committed to doing what we can to support our tertiary institutions so that they can expand their operations, improve the quality of their offerings, and become more involved in our national development.

Ladies and Gentlemen, USP always has to be on the lookout for ways that it can contribute to national and regional development.

As the largest single contributor to the university, the Fijian Government – providing $36-million a year –has very high expectations of the university to develop governance structures that benefit the education of children throughout the Pacific and that plug in to development efforts.

For example, the partnership between the Department of Energy and USP on biofuel has led to the establishment of a biofuel testing laboratory based at the Institute of Applied Sciences.

This is allowing biofuel producers in Fiji – and in the region –easy access to accredited fuel testing facilities, which has major implications for our long-term plans to reduce fuel imports.

The partnership between the Ministry of Tourism and University’s School of Tourism and Hospitality Management is another successful example of collaboration. Here, the Ministry provides internships to graduating students, giving them invaluable experience that will help launch their careers.

We want to see more of this sort of activity, as well as a greater willingness to work with other universities in Fiji, especially Fiji National University. Through co-operation and partnership, we will be able to raise the bar on the quality of education we can offer our young people.

Ladies and Gentlemen, if I could leave you with one thought this morning, it would be this: close co-operation is needed between all stakeholders to ensure that we develop educational systems – from pre-school all the way up to graduate school – that are relevant to the needs of our respective countries and the skill sets required by our workforces.

As I’ve said, this is one of Fiji’s top priorities moving forward – led by our Education Minister Dr Mahendra Reddy – and I encourage the representatives from other Pacific nations to adopt this approach as well.

I believe that the Council is well-placed to assist these endeavours and to help shape the future of the region through the provision of sound governance structures and relevant policies for quality education for our young people.

In closing, I would like to thank the Pro-Chancellor and the Chair of the USP Council, the Vice Chancellor and President of the University, and the University Council for inviting me to address you this morning.

I wish you all a very productive meeting over the next two days. It’s now my pleasure to declare the 79th USP Council Meeting open.

Vinaka vakalevu . Thank you.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_