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

**ADDRESS TO THE FIJIAN COMMUNITY IN LONDON**

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My fellow Fijians

Friends of Fiji

Ladies and Gentlemen

Bula Vinaka and a very good evening to you all.

It’s a pleasure to be with you today. I would like to thank you for this opportunity to meet with you and to present an update about the reforms we’ve carried out in Fiji over the past eight years.

As I’m sure you’re all aware, on September 17th, Fiji held its first genuinely democratic election under a new Constitution on the basis of one person, one vote, one value.

A total of 84.6 per cent of Fiji's 591,101 registered voters participated in this General Election. Only 0.75 per cent of the votes cast were invalid which was a record low for any election in Fiji or indeed, most other countries.

For the first time, Fijians weren’t legally forced to vote along ethnic lines but to vote on issues. They voted on and for development. FijiFirst, my political party won the support of nearly 60% of all the voters. This is why we have 32 seats in the 50 seat Parliament.

The Constitution replaced three previous constitutions since Independence in 1970 in which governments were chosen under a weighted and discriminatory formula that separated our various communities and favored some citizens over others.

The system was undemocratic, unjust and unfair. Indeed, for decades Fiji was a case study of a nation that was supposedly democratic and casting itself as such, but was failing to meet some basic democratic standards: A common and equal citizenry, a common identity and a level playing field on which every Fijian can excel.

Our electoral system before it was reformed did not give true democracy. It did not facilitate justice, transparency or good governance. It was about reinforcing the power of elites and keeping the population divided into different communal groups. This weighted system perpetuated injustice for a great many of our people, created different classes of citizens and encouraged corruption. It was a system that no advanced democracy would accept for itself.

Fiji needed a cleanup campaign to put it on the path to true democracy, unity and prosperity – to make a modern nation-state. And so, after assuming office, my Government embarked on a series of reforms that have transformed our beloved nation and brought it into the 21st century.

More laws were passed between 2007 and 2014 to improve our standard of governance than in the entire 36-year period before that since Independence. Central to this was the development of our supreme law – the Fijian Constitution – from which all other laws flow. The blueprint for the new Fiji.

Now every person born in Fiji enjoys equal opportunity and a common identity – Fijian; just as British applies to all citizens of Britain or Australian to citizens from Australia. This is not a threat to the iTaukei people as some of our political opponents have claimed. Calling everyone Fijian does not mean that iTaukei land is going to be taken away or the iTaukei are going to lose their identity. This word unites all of our people by giving us a word, an identity we can all use to describe ourselves. A common identity. Proud citizens of Fiji. Fijians. It is what we are and where our future lies. One nation. One people.

A range of social and economic rights have also been enshrined in our supreme law for the first time: the right to economic participation, a just minimum wage, the right to education, housing, health and adequate food and water, and the right to live in an environment free from pollution.

The Constitution also recognises the unique position of the iTaukei and the Rotumans, and their customary practices; protects the rights of landowners and also of their tenants; demands accountability and transparency from Government officials; and establishes strong and independent institutions.

So today, Fiji is a fairer, more just society, and a more compassionate society as we step up our efforts to alleviate poverty on the back of a strengthening economy.

Indeed, boosting the economy is one of my Government’s top priorities and we understand that to do this, we need to encourage investment and support private enterprise at all levels. But we do not believe in Band-Aid solutions or quick fixes. We know from our own experience and the experience of other countries that managing the economy requires us to be smart, flexible and adaptable, and to have a long-term vision. We know from experience that in Fiji, economic growth flows from stability and consistency, from consistent policies that encourage the private sector – domestic and international – to invest with confidence and create the jobs that many of our people need.

Our vision is to cement Fiji’s place as a pre-eminent Pacific Island nation, a true regional hub and a beacon of equality, prosperity and progress. Yes, this is ambitious, but it is not beyond our reach as a nation. With the strong support of the Fijian people and the right team in place, we have never been better positioned to make it happen: to turn promises into deeds. This past Friday, the Honourable Minister for Finance presented the first FijiFirst Budget to Parliament, which builds on the reforms of the past eight years and moves Fiji further along the path to inclusion, growth and social justice.

Next year, we will continue to develop and expand our massive infrastructure program and build our national capacity through our education revolution, which includes our free tuition initiative, “toppers” scholarships and Tertiary Education Loan Scheme.

We are also expanding our reform program into new areas. Two of the most important of these are, first, a major investment to hire the technical staff which Government needs to deliver better services to the Fijian people across a broad front: more teachers, more doctors, more nurses, more allied health workers, more policemen, more correctional officers.

And, second, a major overhaul of the Civil Service to make it more efficient and responsive, with the assistance and cooperation of our development partners.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to take a few moments to explain these key provisions in more detail, because it will give you a good sense of the direction Fiji is headed in the coming year and after that.

Government for the first time has provided $10 million for development of iTaukei land with provision of electricity, water and roads to allow for subdivision and other development works.

This will allow landowners to reap commercial benefits directly from this valuable asset, become true landlords and empower them directly to contribute to national development.

As I mentioned, Government is committed to providing the Fiji Roads Authority with the resources it needs to continue its ambitious program to arrest deterioration and restore Fiji’s roads, bridges and jetties to an acceptable standard. Government’s allocation in 2015 will allow the FRA to honour its current commitments and launch new projects around the country.

Apart from Government’s expenditure in infrastructure which includes roads, bridges, jetties, new hospitals, and water and rural electrification, there is an enormous amount of construction work in the private sector such as the building of new homes, factories, and commercial buildings.

 On top of this, we have two other major projects on the way which includes a major $100 million refurbishment of Nadi International Airport plus the $200 million Momi Integrated Tourism Development Project.

On the education front, in 2015, we will extend our free tuition program to accredited pre-schools, we will devote more resources to curriculum development, and we will begin to establish a number of dedicated technical schools to supplement our existing technical colleges and universities.

We will also recruit 142 new primary school teachers and 206 new secondary school teachers to improve the student to teacher ratio in the schools.

This year, we will also concentrate some needed resources on health, water and electricity.

For health in 2015, 150 new doctors, 200 new nurses and 91 other health workers such as lab technicians and pharmacists will be recruited. We will build new hospitals and renovate existing ones, invest in new equipment and laboratories, develop the means to treat the most serious health problems here in Fiji, and take health services to rural areas by opening clinics and nursing stations.

For water, we have increased capital grants to the Water Authority of Fiji to eliminate most of the impediments to ensuring that all Fijians have access to clean water and adequate sanitation.

And for electricity, we have allocated a significant amount of funding to deliver power to homes in sparsely populated, remote areas of the country.

All in all, this Budget builds on our previous reforms and continues our tradition of service delivery. Indeed, no Government in Fiji’s history has done more to give the Fijian people access to basic services. Service delivery has been one of the defining features of our Government and will continue to be as we move forward in this new era of Parliamentary democracy.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, as I keep saying, there has never been a better time to be a Fijian – never before have our people enjoyed such a level playing field or have our children had more opportunities. There is a place for everyone in the new Fiji and no one will be left behind. Ladies and Gentlemen, the future of our beloved nation is very bright indeed.

Vinaka Vakalevu. Thank you.