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**Prime Minister of Fiji and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, the Public Service, People’s Charter for Change and Progress, Information, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

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**SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF THE SILA CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL TELECENTRE**

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**The Attorney General and Minister for Communications,**

**The Principal, Staff and Students of the Sila Central**

**High School,**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**My fellow Fijians,**

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I’m delighted to be here at the Sila Central High School on this important occasion – the opening of yet another of the Government’s Telecentres.

This is number 22. And I’ll be launching the 23rd at the Kalabu Secondary School tomorrow.

It’s important because with the opening of these two centres, the people of the Nasinu Corridor – the most densely populated area of Fiji - are being connected to the world.

You may be close physically to our nation’s capital. Many of you may have mobile phones. But I know that very few of you have had access to personal computers and internet connection. Until now. And it’s a big reason to celebrate.

Through the computers at this Telecentre, my Government is giving you free access to one of the marvels of the modern age – the Internet. Your lives are about to be transformed. And you are going to be empowered in a way that anyone who has not used the Internet before could never have imagined.

This Telecentre will provide instant access to the World Wide Web, instant access to every piece of knowledge known to mankind, instant communication anywhere in the world.

You’ll have heard me talking about Fiji becoming a clever country. It isn’t just an empty slogan. We need to become smarter to be able to compete better in an ever-changing world. We need smarter Fijian workers to attract the investment we need to improve our living standards. Smarter farmers, smarter mariners, smarter tradespeople, teachers, health workers, all those things a nation needs to function at a more efficient level.

That’s why we are making such a big investment in the education of our children. Free primary and secondary schooling, a tertiary loans scheme to enable children from ordinary Fijian families to afford to go to technical colleges or university.

This education revolution goes hand in hand with the telecommunications revolution. My Government is thinking big. We have a vision of the way we want to see Fiji in five years’ time, in ten years, in fifty years. We don’t look backwards like our political opponents.

Our eyes are firmly fixed on the future. Building a prosperous and united Fiji. Working together as one nation. Empowering ordinary people by giving them the things they need to improve their lives and those of their families. Putting Fiji First. Making Fiji Great.

Today, you students are being empowered in a way that your parents would never have imagined. In their day, they saw their own parents struggling to come up with their school fees. And so many Fijians missed out on an education because they simply couldn’t afford one. I have seen countless heartbreaking stories over the years of ordinary, decent, hardworking Fijians unable to get their children into school.

So ever since we launched our revolution seven years ago, I had a dream that one day, we would be able to remove that burden on ordinary families. This year, we have finally done it. And I have to say that of all my Government’s achievements, free education is the one of which I am most proud. All of you students are now getting truly free education in high school. And under my Government you will all have your tertiary fees paid up front.

We have empowered ordinary Fijians and in doing so have empowered our nation. Smarter individuals, a smarter Fiji. Well educated people making quality products and providing quality services. Fiji as a byword for quality and dependability. Fijian workers prized the world over. Because that’s also part of the vision. More Fijians not only improving their own lives at home but fanning out across the world. An integral part of the global community.

I’m urging you all today to think big, to look beyond the horizon. Because today you have already become part of that wider world – the world of information that the Internet offers. Grab it. Run with it. Knowledge is power – as the old saying goes – and your ability to access information of every kind has just taken a giant leap forward.

By tomorrow, when I open the next centre at the Kalabu Secondary School, we will have 23 facilities like this already open across Viti Levu, Vanua Levu, Ovalau and Kadavu. The numbers of Fijians using them has now reached almost 55-thousand. And that number is set to rise dramatically with the opening of these two centres.

Because of the dense population of the Nasinu corridor, we’re estimating that around six thousand people will have ready access to this Telecentre and ten thousand people are in the catchment area of the Kalabu Secondary School.

To give you an idea of how much of a difference this will make, there are currently only three personal computers for the 611 students here at Sila Central. And there is not a single one for the 122 pupils at Kalabu. So the transformation in access is sudden, dramatic and a cause for immense celebration. Of course, it’s not just for the students during school hours. As with every Telecentre in Fiji, the wider community, the adults, can come here out of hours and on weekends and I want to encourage you all to do so.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as you all know, I am now a civilian Prime Minister and will soon begin the process of gaining the five thousand signatures I need to register the political movement I am forming to contest the general election. At that election, you will have a clear choice - between my vision of a better future in the new Fiji we are building together or a return to the Fiji of old. The future versus the past.

It has become very clear in recent days that some people want to drag us all back to the past.

To reinstate the privileged elites in Fiji and take back the power I was determined to give to ordinary people. It is too late. Ordinary Fijians can see both the logic and the justice of everyone getting an equal and fair share.

Ordinary Fijians are smarter than that. They saw clearly what happened in the past, even if they didn’t feel free to speak out. They saw some elites abusing the process and enriching themselves. Giving back that power to the elites isn’t going to happen. People want their leaders to command respect because they have earned it. Because of the mana that comes with their high standards of personal conduct, their morality, and their care and love for their people.

I believe ordinary Fijians are a lot smarter than they are being given credit for by some politicians - smart enough to see through the hypocrisy, the power plays, smart enough to spot someone trying to take back something that doesn’t belong to them, that isn’t rightfully theirs. And smart enough to see the gulf between how some people conduct themselves in public and how they conduct themselves in their personal lives.

Fijians also know when they are being empowered, when they are finally getting the services they deserve, not just the empty promises of the past, the false promises, but real benefits – free education, better housing, better roads, better access to electricity and water. And as in today, the opportunity to be connected to the wider world.

When I eventually seek your trust to lead you in the new democracy we are building to create our new Fiji, I will be doing so believing firmly in the underlying good sense of the Fijian people. It has always been there, despite the attempts of some to manipulate them, to mislead them, to sow discord, suspicion and resentment. And I will be calling on that good sense as I ask you all to turn your backs on the past and join me in taking our nation forward - to put Fiji first.

Vinaka vakalevu, thank you.

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