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**Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, Public Service, Peoples Charter for Change and Progress, Information, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

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**SPEECH AT TILAK HIGH SCHOOL “TILAK DAY” CELEBRATIONS**

**Lautoka High School Wed. 23rd July, 2014**

**LAUTOKA 1000 Hours**

**The Board of Management of the Tilak High School,**

**The Headmaster/Headmistress and Members of the staff,**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**My Fellow Fijians,**

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I’m delighted to be here at one of the most important schools in the West to help you celebrate “Tilak Day”, the day in which everyone associated with the Tilak High School commemorates its past and re-dedicate themselves to its future.

This great institution first opened its doors in 1955 after a number of prominent residents of Lautoka decided that local parents deserved an alternative to the Government-operated Natabua High School.

Today, we remember with pride the values of harmony, unity and friendship that have always been upheld at the Tilak High School and give thanks for the role it has played in our national life for almost 60 years.

From modest beginnings, it has grown from 60 students, when it opened to an enrollment today of 1120 students from all sections of the community.

While it’s the past we celebrate at Tilak High School today, I want to talk to you all about the future and your place in the new Fiji we are building together.

Far too much of the current political debate in Fiji is about the past. Now is the time to look to the future.

I want to explain to you here today and to every Fijian young person what it all means to you, where we go from here and how it affects you. All of you.

Unlike some of my opponents in this election, I see it as my role to govern for ALL Fijians, irrespective of who they are, where they come from or what beliefs they hold. I am Prime Minister – the Leader – of all Fijians. Holding this Office ensures that every Fijian will have an equal and honored place in our national life.

I will ALWAYS be by your side. And as we work hard to build our nation, to play hard for Team Fiji, I am with you. Every day. All the way.

You boys and girls sit here in 2014 in a better position than any young person in Fijian history.

Your parents come from a generation that never experienced true equality in Fiji. In those days, some Fijians were treated as if they were more important than others, some had more rights than others, depending on who they were or where they came from. Those Fijians were given more privileges while the rest were treated like second class citizens in their own country, and never had a sense of truly belonging.

You have to understand what that meant for individual families like your own. Ask your parents. Ask your grandparents. They will tell you that in so many instances, good honest, hardworking ordinary people who had contributed so much to our nation simply lost faith and left Fiji in search of lands where they could be recognized as equals for their contribution to national life.

After the coups of 1987 and 2000, there was a mass exodus from Fiji of tens of thousands of our best and brightest people.

This exodus was a national tragedy that robbed Fiji of the opportunity to develop itself years ago into the nation that it is only now starting to become – unified, proud, with a keen sense of purpose and punching above its weight in our region and the world.

Our new Constitution means that for the first time, every single one of you students has a level playing field on which to run hard and achieve your dreams. And with it the dreams of your parents and grandparents. Because now, finally, you can achieve what they could never achieve before because in so many instances, the game was stacked again them.

Now, we are all Fijians – sharing a common name which binds together the citizens of every successful nation. For the first time when you reach voting age, your vote is worth the same as anyone else. For the first time, you have a range of basic rights that have never been guaranteed by any previous constitution.

For the first time, you all truly belong. We are creating a Fiji in which no-one is left behind and everyone has the same opportunity.

Talk to your parents and grandparents about the struggle so many families had in the past to get even a basic education. They will confirm the countless stories of heartbreak, of families unable to pay their school fees, the pain of children having to be withdrawn from school, the shattered hopes of hundreds of thousands of decent, hardworking families.

Today, as we look to the future, we can all be thankful that those days of prejudice and discrimination are in the past.

Today, for the first time, your fees are being paid by the Government. And your parents have been freed from the pain that often struck THEIR parents - the worry of not being able to make ends meet that kept generations of Fijian families awake at night.

I urge you all to seize the opportunity that has been given to you – to work as hard as you can – and to seriously consider moving on to higher education if you haven’t already thought of doing so. Because we are also making that easier with our “toppers” scheme of free university and technical courses for the best 600 students, or government loans for anyone who makes the grade.

My Government is firmly committed to growing our economy so that you can get the best possible job when you enter the workforce. When you do so, you will also be paying less in taxes than previous generations of workers, and you will be taking more of your pay packet home. My Government believes in giving everyone an incentive to work, and the harder you work, the more money you deserve.

Unlike our elitist Politicians who are emerging amongst us, we don’t believe in slicing off large parts of the national cake for special interest groups in our society or the elite. We are determined to grow that cake – the Fijian economy – so that everyone gets a bigger slice.

And my policies are working. Our national cake is growing by 3.8 per cent this year, a rate higher than that of Australia and New Zealand. More investment is taking place. More jobs are being created. More money is becoming available to expand my Government’s policy of service delivery. That means better roads, better access to basic services like electricity, water, education, health, telecommunications, legal aid, everything.

We deliver. We serve. And we will continue to do so – to build on the reforms that have made all this possible – if everyone over the age of 18 puts their trust in us at the General Election in eight weeks’ time.

As I keep saying, there has never been a better time to be a Fijian and especially a young Fijian.

All along, we have worked towards our date with destiny on 17 September, the introduction of the first genuine democracy in Fijian history. Every single reform we have ever made is with that objective in mind. It hasn’t always been easy. In fact some of our neighbours made it very difficult. They just didn’t understand that our grand plan wasn’t for ourselves, it was for every Fijian. But we pressed on regardless with those who stuck by us and the new friends we’ve made along the way.

On 17 September, every Fijian voter has a very stark choice. They can choose to vote for the past – for the backward- looking policies of our opponents, who want to restore power to the elite. Or they can choose to vote for the future - for the vision of the thriving modern nation that my Government is constantly working towards and needs the support of everyone to continue.

You’ll have heard me say; Don’t judge me by my promises. Judge me by the achievements I’ve already delivered. And the record shows that if my Government has been able to deliver what it has with all the challenges we’ve faced, it is by far the best placed to deliver an even better future for every Fijian when we put the election behind us.

I want you all to dream big dreams, to work hard for the opportunities your parents and grandparents only didn’t have, --which Fiji wasn’t able to deliver because in the past it was a divided nation – a nation of squabbling politicians, small minds and small imaginations driven by shortsighted and selfish political ambitions.

Some of those people are still around trying to pretend they have changed – that they can work together now when they couldn’t work together before. As WE strive for a clever country, they still treat us as fools. We need to consign them to history once and for all – bury them, ignore their false promises – and set our eyes on the future we can build together, One Nation, putting Fiji first to make Fiji Great.

I say to you all. I want you to dream of your place in the new and better Fiji we are creating – focused, united, a model for our Pacific neighbours and respected throughout the world. A nation fit for you – the young people of Fiji – to fulfill your own ambitions and to build a nation worthy of every Fijian to come.

On this Tilak Day, I wish you and your families all the very best. To be proud of your school. To be a proud Fijian.

Vinaka vakalevu, thank you.

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