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

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**SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF THE VUNISEA TELECENTRE, KADAVU**

**Vunisea Wed.12th February, 2014**

**KADAVU 1000 Hours**

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

**Representatives of the Vanua;**

**Distinguished Guests;**

**Men, Women and Young People of Kadavu,**

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I’m delighted to be here in Vunisea among the people of Kadavu on this very important occasion – the opening of the Government Telecentre at the Vunisea Secondary School.

It’s important because this traditionally isolated part of Fiji is now connected to the world via one of the marvels of the modern age – the Internet.

You are no longer isolated. With a click of a mouse you can access information from the four corners of the earth. Using a chat facility like Skype, you can speak directly with relatives or friends anywhere in the world.

In fact, it’s impossible to overstate the importance that this revolution will have on your lives. For your parent’s generation, merely having access to a telephone landline was a luxury. Now we think nothing of using our mobiles to call each other all over Fiji and overseas.

But this Telecentre takes the communications revolution that has transformed our lives much further – instant access to the World Wide Web, instant access to every piece of knowledge known to mankind, instant communication anywhere in the world.

Vunisea is no longer some sleepy backwater largely cut off from the rest of the world. This Telecentre places you at the centre of the world of information that the Internet offers and is certain to transform your lives for the better. Because knowledge is power – as the old saying goes – and your ability to access information of every kind has just taken a giant leap forward. With the Internet, textbooks are redundant. Encyclopedias are redundant. Whatever you want to know now is right there at the click of a mouse.

We’ve got 20 centres like this already open across Viti Levu, Vanua Levu and Ovalau and about 50-thousand Fijians so far have been using them. This is the first on one of our more remote islands but certainly not the last. We’ll be opening more as the technology to do so becomes more widely available and will not rest until every Fijian, wherever they live, has access to the same opportunity.

Here in Vunisea, you have 260 students at the Secondary School, many of whom have never used a computer. I’m told that the percentage of young people with access to a PC at home is virtually zero. And here at the school until now, there’s only been one mini laptop available for everyone to use. Suddenly, all that is changing, and 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.

We’ve brought this Telecentre to you because my Government wants to empower you - to give you the means to acquire knowledge, to communicate better and more cheaply with the outside world, to be a part of the global community. Why should be the people of Kadavu continue to be neglected? You have the right to the same services as anyone on Viti Levu, anyone in Suva. And my Government is determined to deliver.

We have a vision of a clever country, of Fijians being smart enough to compete with anyone else in the region and the world in a whole host of areas. To be smarter farmers, smarter mariners, smarter tradespeople, teachers, health workers, all those things a nation needs to function at a proper and efficient level.

We are aiming higher. We don’t want to be second best. We want Fijian workers to be sought after for their knowledge and skills here and overseas. We want Fijian products and services to be a byword for quality and dependability. And to do that, we need a national effort to lift our game, to be the best, to compete against the workers of other countries. A bit like a rugby competition except that it’s a competition between our economies.

All this is behind my Government’s determination to deliver the best possible start in life for every Fijian young person. It’s why we’ve introduced free education in our primary and secondary schools and a tertiary loans scheme to enable students to go on to higher studies. We don’t want any young person to be left behind because their parents can’t afford to give them a proper education. We are giving every young person not a handout but a leg up. This is your chance to acquire the knowledge and skills you need to take yourselves and our beloved country forward. Our hopes for Fiji’s future rest with you. As your Prime Minister, I urge you to seize the opportunities we are giving you. Work hard, do your best, dream big dreams and do the utmost to fulfill them.

As you know, we are all going to the polls before the end of September for the first truly democratic general election in Fiji’s history. That election will be fought under our new Constitution, which declares every Fijian equal, provides them with the same opportunities and guarantees them a range of social and economic rights such as the right to education, health, adequate food and clean water.

And while we do that, the Constitution also gives unprecedented protection for the ownership of i’Taukei land. Under this Constitution, that my Government has brought you, never again will any i’Taukei land be allowed to be converted to freehold land. Never again will any i’Taukei land be alienated. For your information, the SVT and SDL Governments allowed I ‘Taukei land to be converted to freehold land. That land is now forever gone from the indigenous owners, despite all the so-called protections that were in place. We’ve made sure that this will never happened again.

I will be standing in this election at the head of a new political movement that I will announce at the beginning of next month. And I want to say a few things here about how important the election is for younger Fijians. Every Fijian over the age of 18 is entitled to vote and if you haven’t already done so, I urge you to register, to have your voice heard and have your vote count. I also happen to believe that the votes of young Fijians will largely determine the election outcome.

You need to be at least 28 to be able to remember voting at all in the last election in 2006, when it was restricted to those aged 21 and above. You need to be in your late teens or early 20s to have any memory of the traumatic events of 2000, when our parliament was seized by rebels. And only those in their mid to late thirties will have any recollection of the equally traumatic coups of 1987.

The point is that some of the greatest upheavals in recent Fijian history aren’t part of the lived experience of a great many young Fijians. So they are not interested in these old battles being fought again by some of the same politicians now putting themselves forward for political office in the 2014 election. These old politicians are part of Fiji’s past. They have no fresh ideas to take the country forward. They are locked in the same mindset that created our national traumas in the first place. They are bogged down in the same old politics of sowing suspicion and discord. They want to re-empower the same elites who brought Fiji to its knees in the first place. They are yesterday’s men and woman. They have nothing to offer Fiji’s young people. They have nothing in the way of a bold vision to take our nation forward. They put themselves and their interests first, not Fiji first. And their old ideas, their constant carping and jockeying for power deserve to be rejected.

I appeal to Fiji’s young people to turn their backs on the politics of the past and embrace my vision of a new and better Fiji. I want a level playing field, where hard work and the quality of your character determine your success in life, not who you know, which family you come from or which part of Fiji you come from. I want to make sure that your families, whatever their income level, have access to proper health care, electricity and clean water. I want to give your parents the best possible chance to earn a proper living to look after you. I want to give you the best chance to get a good education, to go on to high school, a technical college or university. I want to give you the best chance to get a good job, an interesting job, one that makes you look forward to going to work. And I want to make you a citizen of the world, a Fijian who is intensely proud of our nation but who doesn’t see the current horizon as a boundary.

As you look around this Telecentre today and the key that it provides to the wider world, I want you to think of yourself as part of that world. To dream of making a contribution yourself to make the world a better place. Already hundreds of Fijian troops are in the Middle East serving the United Nations and keeping the peace for ordinary people in a troubled part of the world. Already our civilian volunteers – teachers and health workers – are in several of our Pacific neighbours helping the citizens of those countries to have better lives. But this is just the start. My Government is thinking big. I want you to think big.

I want our young people to know that there has never been a better time in our history to be a Fijian. But it means all of us working together as hard as possible to achieve that vision. It means sticking to our current course and the policies that have produced this revolution, not looking backwards, as some old politicians would have it. I appeal to you to think carefully in the coming weeks and months about how you will vote. Will you vote to drag Fiji back into the past? Or will you vote to give yourself a place in its brighter future? Think carefully about the choice you make. It is for both yourself and your nation. And I ask you all to put Fiji first so that together, we can build a better future for everyone.

That future is embodied in what we see here today – empowering our young people by giving you access to the wider world. Today is truly a great day to dream, as we open the door to that world in Vunisea. To all you young people here, I say: make good use of the opportunity to learn. And also enjoy the social media and the odd computer game. To your parents and the rest of the community I say: it’s never too late to acquire knowledge. And I hope you too make good use of this new facility. With those words, I have great pleasure in declaring the Vunisea Secondary School Government Telecentre open.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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