

**SPEECH AT THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER OF THE NATIONAL
FEDERATION PARTY HELD AT THE SAN BRUNO HOTEL, NADI on
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By Professor Biman Prasad

Guest Speaker

The President of the National Federation Party, Mr. Raman Pratap Singh, Formers members of parliament, senators, mayors, town councillors, party stalwarts Mr. Attar Singh and Mr. Parmod Rae, party faithfuls, elders, supporters, well wishers ladies and gentlemen. I thank you for the invitation to speak at the party's 50th Anniversary Dinner. I feel honoured and privileged to do so. I was born in this party as both my grandparents and parents were strong supporters of the National Federation Party and I feel humbled today to address you all on this occasion. I know we are not in normal political environment and if we were I am sure many more would have been present here today and many more would have been willing to speak today.

Fifty years ago Fiji witnessed the birth of now the oldest political party in the South Pacific region. The National Federation Party's birth ladies and gentlemen was not an accident nor was it formed out of political expediency. Most countries in their history go through critical junctures and Fiji is no exception and political parties play important roles at those critical junctures. Today we hear calls about new politics, new politicians and new parties, some of course have jumped on the bandwagon and are conveniently ignoring history by suggesting that parties and leaders in the past lacked vision for Fiji. Fiji had been fortunate in a lot of sense to have leaders in the past who preferred dialogue and discussion to resolve critical issues

including the peaceful independence of Fiji. The NFP was part of this dialogue and provided leadership at critical junctures. To move ahead as a country, we have to learn from history and understand our history. We owe it to our younger generation to do so. Those who deny these historical facts are naïve and living in denial.

Fifty years ago, the National Federation Party started its struggle to create a just, free and fair society in our country for all our people irrespective of race, class or creed. The Party's founding motto was "One Country, One Nation, One People". The founding forebears should be saluted for their vision and foresight and their determination to achieve their goal despite the great odds stacked against them. Many of that early generation are now gone, but they are not forgotten. So the first duty for all of you today is to express your collective gratitude to those pioneers who founded and guided the National Federation Party.

An occasion such as this is a time for reflection and stock taking, to see where the NFP has come from and where it is now heading. We are now at a critical juncture in our history again. The National Federation Party has survived the traumas and turbulence of the recent decades despite the great provocations and challenges it faced. This it did because of its inclusive vision for our country and all its peoples was the correct one and because we had leaders who chose the path of dialogue and consensus as the most appropriate, indeed the only, way to resolve our difficulties. That remains the Party's unwavering commitment today and that is commendable.

The National Federation Party began as and has remained the common persons' party. Many of you may have come to understand that the Party's origins gained momentum in struggles of the cane farmers culminating in the sugar cane farmers' strike of 1960, however the philosophical

foundations for the quest for a just and fair society were laid over a longer period of time. The cane farmers' struggles simply gave impetus to this. So it should be no surprise that the Federation of Cane Growers morphed into the Citizens Federation under which banner the NFP first contested the 1963 elections. In 1964, the party was formally registered as Federation Party.

Although the Party was formalised as a political vehicle in the 1960s, the vision which guided its work was formulated decades before. As many of you will know, the central founding platform of the National Federation Party was Common Roll. That is, one person, one vote, one value. That cause to unite our nation of diverse cultures and creeds began in earnest in 1929 and continued throughout the ensuing years. I leave it to you to imagine what the future of our country would have been had that inclusive vision became a reality.

The National Federation Party can look back with pride and satisfaction on the great achievements of the Party. It is therefore important for party members to reflect on the most significant achievements of our country over the last fifty years and when you do that you will find that the contribution of the National Federation Party etched indelibly in all of them.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to reflect on some of the key issues that the NFP advocated over the last several decades. Some were achieved and some are still being pursued.

The independence struggle in Fiji was launched by the National Federation Party when there were many other leaders and political parties for whom independence was a distant goal. The NFP believed then as it believes now in a fair, democratic and non-racial Fiji. Its vision did not come to fruition, but it was not due to lack of trying on its part.

Ladies and gentlemen the NFP has often been better known as an opposition party. That label does an injustice to the party for it has never shirked its responsibilities and has readily participated in governance whenever it was in the national interest to do so.

At Her Majesty the Queen's command the NFP willingly participated as an equal partner in the transition to responsible government and its Leader the late Mr A D Patel served as Member (Minister) for Social Services in the first ever multi party government in the 1960s.

It was during that period that the NFP through Mr Patel laid the foundations for social protection and institutions for economic and social progress that remain not only relevant today, but on whose back the nation is where it is today.

It was the late Mr A D Patel, as Member for Social Services, who shepherded the Bill to create the Fiji National Provident Fund through the Legislative Council, despite opposition from some of our own people. Mr Patel had been advocating the provision of social security for the poorest sections of our community in the 1940s. Today, FNPF is seen as a landmark achievement and a major source of national savings, a national retirement fund, and finance for economic growth.

Higher and secondary education was also close to the heart of the founding fathers of NFP. Mr Patel and his colleagues, including Swami Rudranandaji, were instrumental in starting Fiji's first ever non-Christian, non-government secondary school, the Sri Vivekananda High School. Mr Patel had called for the establishment of a University College of the South Pacific way back in 1956. As Member for Social Services, he shepherded the Bill to establish the University of the South Pacific in 1968, again despite opposition by some of our own people.

The welfare of the sugar cane growers of Fiji was at the heart of NFP's existence in the cane belt. There is no dispute therefore that the Denning Award was a signal achievement by the NFP for our farmers, saving many from certain ruin under the Eve Contract of 1961. Lord Denning is on record as saying that his award was deeply influenced by the powerful advocacy of the late Mr. AD Patel.

Another issue of particular concern to our people has been the land leasing arrangements. The historical record is clear. The NFP played a crucial role in the passage of the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act which brought a semblance of stability to the agricultural sector of our country. There was dissent then and there are detractors of the ALTA now, but no better solution is in sight.

Let me go further and give you some more examples of what the NFP advocated in terms of policies and institutions that were designed to create a virtuous circle for developing more inclusive and economic and political institutions.

If you examine carefully what the current regime is doing you cannot help but be amused to see that much of its so-called "non-negotiables", etc, are in fact what the National Federation Party advocated for decades.

Some in the present government claim credit for originating the concept of a common name for Fiji. If you read the historical record, the late A D Patel was advocating a common name for all Fiji citizens in the 1950s. In the debate on the Interpretation Bill in August 1967, he had said in the Legislative Council that all Fiji citizens should be called 'Fijian' and the indigenous Fijians, 'Taukei.' That was at a time when some of the present day leaders and many of us were toddlers. His proposal was opposed by the

Colonial rulers as well as the Fijian elite including the Military. It was defeated by the forebears of some who are presently in power.

In its quest for inclusivity, the National Federation Party has always shown respect for Fijian cultural protocols and traditions. At its convention in Ba in June 1968, the NFP moved that Fiji be declared a Republic, with an elected Fijian Head of State. If that proposal had been accepted, we might not be in the mess we are in today. The NFP wanted a free and democratic Fiji which respected the traditions of our indigenous people, not trample upon them. Mr Jai Ram Reddy while addressing the Great Council of Chiefs during the formulation of the 1997 Constitution echoed similar sentiments and called for a united dream and vision for Fiji. Mr. Reddy was right when he advocated dialogue and discussion to arrive at a framework for democratic governance. The finest display of political leadership, vision and dialogue was demonstrated by Mr. Reddy and Mr. Rabuka in formulating the 1997 Constitution. Additionally, while strongly condemning the 1990 Constitution he reiterated the fact that any structure devised without the consent of the people will fail. That is the clear lesson of history and no political party or regime can ignore that.

It is being sung from the rooftops in Fiji today that the idea of Proportional Representation originated with those currently in power. That is plain wrong. It was the NFP which first mooted the idea in 1972 when its lead counsel, the distinguished British legal expert; Tom Kellock QC presented the NFP's proposal for a PR system of voting to the Street Commission. The Commission recommended the concept, but sadly its report was not even tabled in Parliament. It was rejected by Ratu Mara's Alliance Party who viewed it as a threat to their political hegemony. The truth is that a racial system of voting was not the idea of the NFP. It never was. It was forced

upon the people by those in power for short term political gain. And we are all paying the price of their myopic vision.

Colonial propaganda, partisan political posturing by a native elite, and the machinations of an entrenched minority white community always portrayed the NFP as being against the interests of ordinary iTaukei. Yet, it was the NFP which provided free legal advice to the Viti Chamber of Commerce, which it helped set up. The late A D Patel argued in 1961 that the CSR, or its wholly owned local subsidiary the South Pacific Sugar Mills Limited be localized, with the industry jointly owned by the Taukei as landowners and Indian farmers as cane growers. What if that idea had come to fruition? The NFP argued in the Legislative Council that the gold mining industry in Fiji should be nationalised and run in the interests of the people of Fiji and not in the interests of a foreign multinational company.

Much has been made of the proposal to reduce the voting age of Fiji citizens to 18 years. But this is not a new idea. National Federation Party had proposed this in the negotiations for independence. The Party had again tabled a motion for this in Parliament in 1977. In its submission to the Reeves Commission in 1995 NFP made this very same proposal again, which the Commission accepted and recommended. The recommendation was shot down by the crucial Joint Parliamentary Select Committee. It was said that at 18, Fijians (taukei) were still children, not fit for adult responsibilities. But now they have changed their tune. The records of those deliberations are a matter of public record. By the same token the NFP has always advocated for women's interests in participation in our economic and political systems. NFP's submission to the Reeves Commission demanded equal rights for women, including equal citizenship rights, and the Commission so recommended. The idea was not invented yesterday.

One of the cornerstones of NFP's policies since its inception was a "secular state". The Party always advocated complete separation of Church and State. It opposed the Sunday bans with all the power it could muster and it rejected the religious extremism and bigotry of sections of our own society.

At the same time the NFP continued to be a multiracial party. It has had amongst its leadership many prominent Fijian Chiefs, military officers and individuals such as Ratu Mosese Tuisawau, Ratu Julian Tonganivalu, Captain Atunaisa Maitoga, Apisai Tora, Isikeli Nadalo, Koresi Matatolu (Deputy Leader) Temo Sukanaivalu, Tui Macuata Ratu Soso Katonivere, to name a few. Many general electors who had the courage to break ranks from narrow bigoted ethnic politics also joined NFP. Prominent amongst them were Colin Weaver, Edmund March, Arthur Jennings, James (Jim) Smith and Boyan Crompton.

The NFP always stood beside our farmers and workers in their struggle for better wages and working conditions. NFP has rightly opposed the draconian decrees which have sought to emasculate our rights of assembly and association enshrined in international conventions to which Fiji is a signatory. I believe the Party will and must continue that struggle for fair and just working conditions for our people.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have given you only a brief history of some major principles and policies NFP has stood for throughout its existence. The NFP in my view has played a constructive role in the chequered history of Fiji. Fiji is today at another critical juncture. It is at a point where we need political parties and leaders who understand history and who can learn from history.

If we read that history carefully, we will note that most of what the NFP's leaders advocated was visionary. They always believed in the principles of

inclusive and participatory democracy, the rule of law, and an independent and unfettered judiciary. It always believed in the supremacy of the ballot box as the most legitimate way to bring about change in our public life. It believed in the rule of law and in the supremacy of Parliament is the only legitimate expression of peoples' will. In a democracy ultimately, it is the will of the people which should reign supreme. All political parties must therefore reject violence and dictatorship as an instrument of public policy. The NFP did it in the past and continued to do so after all the coups in Fiji and I have no doubt that it will do so in the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen, 1987 changed the course of our history forever. Our country was plunged into darkness. There was chaos and distress all around. Many of our best and the brightest left for other shores. Many continue to leave today. Fear stalked our people and continues till today. The National Federation Party did not shirk its responsibility to the nation. Through patient dialogue and discussion, often in the most difficult of circumstances, the Party engaged with the leaders of other communities to forge a peaceful path forward. All this history is known to you. The upshot of our effort was the passage of the 1997 Constitution. The rest is history. This history is important and the party must keep this in mind when it prepares for the General Election in 2014. NFP in the past has created space for dialogue and I know it has the capacity to create space for dialogue and discussion in the future. That would be the right approach.

The NFP I believe will and should participate in any process which returns our country to full parliamentary democracy in accordance with internationally recognized principles and conventions of social, political and human rights. Let me say that, no individual leader, party or institution has a monopoly on the wisdom and vision for this country. We need the

collective wisdom of a wide cross section of society in this country to create a sustainable vision for the future.

History shows that in many countries politicians, riding high on unearned power, seem to think that the world began with them. Many of them have misused that power to serve their own interest.

As I said before we are now at critical juncture in our history again. What is required now is patience and statesmanship, a steady hand at the helm, to lead our beloved nation back to the fundamentals of true democracy – through democratic means, with the support of our people, and not against their will. Any solution imposed on the people without their consent will not succeed. That is the lesson of all history. That is why we need to go back to our people to ascertain their will and views to chart our future

Whatever way in which we interpret the events of the last 7 years, Fiji is a changed country. It is this change that we have to understand, interpret and analyse to move this country forward. Adversity and crisis, ladies and gentlemen, provides opportunities as well and I urge NFP to seek opportunity in the current situation.

The General Election to be held under the new Constitution provides us an opportunity to start the process of building this country once again. I reiterate the call that has already been made by various NGOs and political parties including NFP that the government should ensure that it moves quickly on putting in place all the provisions for a conduct of a free and fair election. It cannot afford to waste any time on this anymore. The Constitution mandates that the election be held before September 30th and this means that effectively the government has only seven months until July 2014 to have everything ready. So far it has not made the necessary appointments nor has it come out clearly on the electoral regulations. It

must do this as matter of urgency so that there is enough time for political parties to understand the provisions and for the people to be educated on the new electoral systems and how it will be conducted.

Ladies and Gentlemen, all of you present here should feel proud to have been associated with a political party which has always stayed on its course of fundamental principles. It is the only party in Fiji which was not born out of political expediency and crisis of the coups. It is the only party which has never supported any coups in Fiji. This is no mean achievement. I urge all of you to take this Party forward and make it a force to reckon with in the next General Election.

Ladies and Gentlemen, there is no denying that NFP has not been without problems, but it is a Party I believe that has the force of history behind it and that history suggests that it can look ahead with optimism and present itself as a credible political force in the next General Election. For this the Party will need good leadership at all levels and I know that the party is capable of producing those leaders. The next leader of NFP will have a tough task ahead to steer the party and its success. He or she will also have the burden of ensuring that the party continues in the tradition of some its great leaders such the late Mr. A D Patel, the late Mr. Siddiq Koya, Mr Jai Ram Reddy, Mr. Harish Sharma and the late Balwant Singh Rakha. They did not seek to promote personal agendas, and indeed how could they for the Party is founded on principles and a vision for Fiji. That is what distinguishes the NFP from other parties come and gone that evolved around a single issue or around a single leader. The end of the issue or the demise of the leader spelt the doom of the party.

The National Federation Party remains as relevant today as it did when it was founded and will continue as such.

Let me congratulate the Party, its leaders, past and present for persevering in the face of extreme adversity and restriction especially in the recent past. As you celebrate the 50th anniversary think about the glory days of the party and the struggle it mounted for the development of this country and our people.

Ladies and gentlemen 50 years is a great achievement. It is time to look forward to the next fifty.

Thank you