

NFP – Our People’s Future

The following re excerpts of a speech delivered by the Leader of the National Federation Party Professor Biman Prasad at the NFP Convention at Nadi on Saturday 29th March 2014.

I do not underestimate what lies ahead of us. With much humility, a clear understanding about the scale of responsibility and excitement, I have accepted the National Federation Party’s Leadership.

The weight of history, I am aware is heavy. Expectations are large. I have accepted a post previously held by some of the finest political leaders in our country, Mr Jai Ram Reddy, Mr. Harish Sharma, the formidable late Mr A D Patel and Late Mr. S.M Koya, people from whom I and so many others draw so much inspiration.

Restoring our freedoms

On behalf of thousands of supporters of the NFP and Fiji citizens yearning for restoration of our democracy, I thank all those individuals in our recent leadership team who have steered our ship through stormy waters; Raman Singh, Attar Singh, Pramod Rae, Prem Singh, Bala Dass, James Raman, Parmod Chand, Kamal Iyer and all branch officials. They never wavered from our commitment to democracy and respect for fundamental human rights of all of Fiji’s citizens.

Many of our prominent leaders are not on the stage today because of an unjust and undemocratic decree that prohibits trade union leaders from holding political positions.

The NFP has, since its birth 50 years ago championed the universal freedoms and equality. We have championed this in our good days when we were well represented in parliament. We have championed these values when we were not represented in parliament. This is not fad for our party. It is not a fashion statement to get for media sound-bytes. This belief in fundamental rights and freedoms defines who we are.

Our country will make irreversible social and economic progress when our citizens are free. Their organizations including trade unions they belong to are not free, the

media they depend on are not free. We have fought for these rights in 1950's, 1960's, after the coups of 1987, after the upheavals of 2000 and after the coup of 2006. We will continue fighting to restore our freedoms. Fighting for these freedoms is in our DNA. We call upon government to rescind the political parties decree, media industry decree, state proceedings decree and ensure a level playing field which is essential for a free and fair election.

Our citizens need these answers. They need to know what differentiates and defines the parties. It is a choice between continued prohibitions on their rights and freedoms or openness and restoration of individual freedoms.

Let me say clearly and unequivocally, that come September of this year, these absurd and so fundamentally unjust decrees will go. We will make it a priority of the NFP to restore fully all political, labor and human rights of all Fijians.

Creating sound policies

As an academic, I am aware that it is easy to criticize government policies from outside. The business of governing is complicated. Difficult balances are needed when making policies.

My work as an academic has always been firmly rooted on the lives of our citizens. I know that good policies are those that begin from people, that respond to their needs and that are capable of being implemented by government.

Bad policies are those that begin from the need of governments to remain in power, or are incapable of being implemented or derived from the arrogance of the powerful that only they know what is best for our people.

Growing up, I have watched the arrogance of governments in my rice farming Dreketi community in Vanua Levu. Successive government policies failed my family and its efforts to lift itself out of poverty through rice farming; not because governments were ill meaning, but they could not get something very simple right. Our people know what is best for them. They need the support of the Government – they do not need their government to be against their efforts to lift themselves out of their poverty.

Growing up as a young adult in uncertain post-coup times, when my national identity was questioned, my religious convictions challenged, I could in despair have also packed up and left. I did not.

My upbringing has taught me virtues of truth, righteousness. It also taught me that the way to these is often tortured. Politics to me is extension of these values – through slow and deliberate collective action seeking the path of truth and righteousness and on this journey solving problems in national life.

As an academic, I have closely observed that those in government can lose track of what the people need. They are driven by motivations of self-preservation rather than lasting good to lives of our people. There is a dictum that captures this: ‘I know all, and what I don’t know does not exist’. I think many of you have also seen examples of this attitude in our country over the last several years.

We are at a defining point in our history. Without doubt, we need a break from the past. Fiji needs leaders who can energize and bring people together, who will bring new passion and fresh perspectives to begin to use politics for the long term good, rather than the short term goal of self-preservation.

We have had a turbulent history since 1987. Consistent political instability has harmed the social, political and economic fabric of our country. This political instability has been caused by the military’s intervention in the political development of Fiji through its support for the coups.

The 2006 coup continued with the tradition of military intervention in our political life. As a nation, we need a calm conversation about how we are going to address this issue. The military will need to introspect and be part of this national conversation. We welcome the new Commander of the RFMF, Brigadier General Mosese Tikoitoga’s firm assurance that the military will be apolitical, stay neutral during the coming election and respect the results of the General Election later this year.

In the last 8 years, many things have changed. Many of these changes have been haphazard; many policies are inconsistent and in fact contradict each other. But most of all these changes do not reflect inputs from us people who live in this country.

We are preparing for a General Election under a Constitution that has been imposed on our people. It is very important to understand our history if we are to confront the challenges that lie ahead with determination

In the preparation for the elections, the last thing our people want is to be fed with propaganda, pie in the sky promises, vote buying and more short term populist policies. Policies and promises which will be hard to sustain and fulfill under current difficult economic conditions need to be weighed and pruned.

Continued next Saturday