

“Change is coming”
Address by NFP Leader at NFP Convention
Saturday 3rd June
Girmit Centre, Lautoka
By Hon Professor Biman Prasad

The Party President, Vice Presidents, General Secretary, Party Executives, Party Elders and Stalwarts, Convention Chair Mr Selwa Nadan, Master of Ceremonies Mr Jagannath Sami, our small but extremely powerful parliamentary caucus of Hon Parmod Chand and Hon Prem Singh, Members, Supporters Ladies and Gentlemen

I am mightily delighted and privileged to be among you today and to be hosted by our gracious Lautoka Branch. I gratefully acknowledge the hardworking efforts of Mr Nadan and his team ably assisted by our Branch President Mr Frederick Work, Mr Michael Brown, Mr Jagannath Sami and other Branch officials and stalwarts.

I also acknowledge all other Branches in ensuring that our members and supporters who wanted to be participate in this significant Convention are here.

I am sure that many of us who travelled far and wide to congregate today are enthused and invigorated to be met by such a well-organised and festive atmosphere for today's AGM and Convention. It is indeed a telling omen of how #TheFeds approach to leadership and governance... that, many hands and heads make light work if we are all pull together in the same direction. This is testimony to the fact that we are more than ready to overcome challenges facing our nation for its lasting social, political and economic advancement.

Friends and colleagues, before the Convention we had the official proceedings which is the AGM. I would also like to commend our party branches who also spoke with one accord and made resolutions on the continuing evolution of our party workings.

I am sure we are all honoured by the election of our new office bearers, who will be ably led by our new President Lieutenant-Colonel Pio Tikoduadua. He succeeds one of our Vice Presidents Mr Semi Titoko, who set the ball rolling with his team last September by hosting our AGM and Convention in Rakiraki. Despite the district being ravaged by Severe Tropical Cyclone Winston, the Convention was attended by 700 people.

This is a step forward from last September and we can only grow in leaps and bounds from here. And of course, he takes over from our former President Roko Tupou Draunidalo who resigned in January this year after being ousted from Parliament through a lengthy but unreasonable and unfair suspension.

Lieutenant- Colonel Tikoduadua has outlined his reasons why he firmly believes in NFP. One of the reasons that he clearly stated when he made the announcement in April was that the NFP never shirked its principles in its 54 years of existence. He also emphasized that the NFP has always been ably led by leaders who were statesmen and always put national interest above everything else.

And those leaders were our founding father Mr Ambalal Dahyabhai Patel, Mr Siddiq Moidin Koya, Mr Harish Sharma and Honourable Justice Jai Ram Reddy. They were giants of their time in ability, understanding and perception of the problems facing the people of Fiji. Their achievements are monumental and despite efforts of the current Fiji First and the military governments to distort or change history, these milestones can never be erased.

Before quitting his job as Permanent Secretary in the PM's Office in 2014 to contest the September 2014 elections, Lieutenant-Colonel Tikoduadua, when he called me to inform of his decision said if he would have preferred to contest the elections under the NFP banner.

Less than three years after that call, his wish of joining NFP became a reality after having displayed ethics and political morality to resign as a senior Cabinet Minister of the current Government, after only less than 9 months into the job for reasons outlined by him.

That is hallmark of the man. He could have stayed on, shirked his principles and meekly succumbed to the trappings of power and a lucrative \$200,000 annual salary. But he did not. Friends and colleagues, Lieutenant-Colonel Tikoduadua leads a highly capable and truly multiracial team of dedicated and committed team of office bearers in a year that we want to be a defining moment in Fiji's history. And you all know what I am talking about.

Friends and colleagues, the last time we gathered in Rakiraki for the AGM we were directly immersed into some very dire realities of life after

TC Winston. The sight of Penang Sangam School with its roof still crudely covered with blue tarpaulin which was, even then, a telling indicator of the slow and almost lax attitude of the Government on prioritising the basic needs of its voters. Yet, the Government is quite content to take an international coterie of advisors and Public Relations consultants to the climate change meetings.

But we do not need Qorvis or any other PR consultant. We do not need spin doctors to camouflage the painful realities facing our people. At times I wonder whether Qorvis is working for Government or Fiji First. Probably for the first time in our history we have an overseas PR firm being paid millions of dollars of taxpayers funds ever since they were hired.

But spin doctors do not provide sound and sensible solutions.

Friends and colleagues, many of you would have seen and heard the parliament debate last week. I want to pay particular note to the debate on the "civil service reforms" that I posed a question on, on Thursday, 25 May. The response to that question was both juvenile and obfuscated, but you civil servants listening in, will know that already. The NFP therefore extended an official invitation to FICTU General Secretary, Mr Attar Singh and veteran Trade Union Mr Pramod Rae to present to share their expertise on the issue. Because we regard the rights of our workers as extremely important.

I am aware that many are keen to understand some of our policy positions leading up to the election campaign. I do not intend to disappoint you and the people of Fiji. As much it is ideal to reveal policy details in an election manifesto, it is the wish of the people, expressed during our listening campaign throughout the country to reveal some broad policies of what an NFP Government will do after the elections.

We had already announced both in and outside Parliament what we will do to either reverse or repeal anti-people Government policies and new initiatives.

Some of these have been namely: -

1. Building a new sugar mill in Penang, Rakiraki
2. Implementing a minimum guaranteed price of \$100 per tonne of cane for the next four years to revive our sugar industry and

improve the livelihood of 200,000 people directly and indirectly dependent on the industry

3. Reversing the Village By Laws if it is implemented because it is designed to control the lives of our village i-taukei community. Similarly, we will repeal the Rotuma Land Bill if it is enacted.
4. Reduce the salaries of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers by 25% and through Parliament appoint an independent emoluments committee to review salaries to bring relativity in salaries
5. Remove contract based employment in the civil service and ensure employment is permanent in nature
6. Hold elections for the Sugar Cane Growers Council so that growers as largest stakeholders in the industry have a legitimate voice
7. Repeal Bills 19 and 20 - The Reform of the Sugarcane Industry and Sugar Cane Growers Fund (Amendment) Bill which have been thrice rejected by growers, should they be forced down the throats of growers
8. Hold local government elections and elections for advisory councils

Like I stated earlier, details will be outlined in our manifesto.

However, today I will make three major policy announcements. They are on wages, cost of living and health.

Our firm position is that Fiji needs a living a "Living Wage", which in our view cannot be taken as a stand-alone approach, but rather as a suite of measures that are all necessary and synergetically necessary to alleviate poverty and hardship, among our people who need the "leg up" more. We cannot rise as a nation, if those where the need is the greatest, are not cultivated first as part of the equation. The "rise" must begin from the ground up.

The poverty trends that we have, are distressing. The triggers cut across the board our races. It has particularly doubled for our i-taukei community.

For better or for worse, those cultural obligations are not for anyone to pass judgment on, but rather are for our iTaukei brothers and sisters to negotiate, and to attempt to socially engineer what is appropriate, for example what is happening with the Village By-Laws will be an exercise in futility. The best made regulations and laws, require ratification -- hearts and minds -- of those who are directly involved. A legal or regulatory imposition in any form, like the Constitution, will always waver in terms of mandate.

Our "Living Wage" suite of measures, is for a minimum of \$200/week OR \$5/hour NET for those on a minimum wage.

These are not ideas just made up on a whim. We have analysed the trends, and the figures and it is very, very possible. Grant the NFP the social contract to make it happen, and we will. The current minimum wage rate of \$2.32 an hour is simply insufficient for a livelihood of a family of four. This rate means our workers on minimum wage earn 104.40 for a 45 hour working week. Even if the wage rate is increased to \$2.68 it will be \$120.60.

Recently the Minister for Economy justified the minimum wage during his budget consultation by saying the rate was for unskilled workers like house girls and grass cutters. He is demeaning our unskilled workers and non-unionised workers. The unionized unskilled workers are paid far more. For example the Suva City Council pays \$4.29 an hour to unskilled workers who are engaged in performing labour work. This is because the workers are unionized and their wage rates are negotiated.

But do not worry. We will outline detailed policies on this in our manifesto.

The second brief policy announcement that I want to make is that an NFP Government will increase the number of basic food items to 15 from the current 7 items plus medicine. Our low income families deserve more than 7 items. And all 15 items in the food basket offered by an NFP Government will be zero-rated, meaning there will be no VAT payable on them.

The current government betrayed its election promise by imposing VAT of 9% on 7 basic items plus even prescription medicine when their manifesto clearly stated they would remain zero-rated. This means that the reduction of VAT to 9% was a gimmick and betrayal of the trust placed on this Government. By imposing VAT on these 7 items and prescription medication, Government is raking in \$108.6 million in revenue.

The food basket of all 15 zero rated items will be listed in our manifesto. And you will not be disappointed.

Friends and colleagues, the third policy announcement is that an NFP Government will establish a National Health Service to look after our public health system. We have seen that political bureaucracy has failed. The state of our health and medical services have become a blight on the nation.

It has deteriorated to such an extent that our people have lost confidence in our health system. We have seen: -

- Deaths of newborn babies in our major hospitals this year due to an outbreak of virus inside the hospitals
- Lack of facilities like even beddings, beds and cutlery
- Poor quality of food
- Lack of doctors and specialists
- Lack of diagnostic equipment and deteriorating state of equipment that is available
- Malfunctioning equipment
- Lack of medication and medicines
- Lack of chemicals like x-ray processing agents
- Deteriorating infrastructure including even hospital toilets

The list can go on and on but there has been no solution in sight. At least under this government. It even cannot allocate more funding towards kidney dialysis. It only allocates \$300,00 annually while we have been asking for a minimum of two million dollars. But our motions in parliament get defeated. We hope this Budget at least allocates more funding towards dialysis.

But do not despair friends and colleagues. We have the solution.

In a major reform to our health and medical system, we will: -

Create a **National Health Service (NHS)**, which will be an independent entity tasked with managing the Hospitals in the country. The NHS will be given the necessary resources, and very specific KPIs for achievement. All hospital infrastructure will be transferred to the NHS, all doctors, nurses, etc will become employees of the NHA which will realign their salaries and working conditions, and ensure that the best of the services possible are delivered to the people of the country, Fiji wide, even in the smallest village in the country; even in the remotest island where our people stay.

1. The major KPI (key performance indicator) of the NHS would be quality **national health coverage**. There must never be any citizen who goes without the best health consultancy and treatment ever. The days of people being unable to see a doctor, traveling great distances to the hospital and then after hours of wait being told that there is no chemicals for x-rays, must become a thing of the past. It will become a thing of the past under NFP Government.
2. NFP will build a **Top Quality Tertiary Hospital** facility in the Country, which will carry out most of the procedures relating to core ailments people have here. The current government is incapable of doing so. NFP will work with top hospitals of the World, like Apollo, and ensure that we build a top tertiary hospital in Fiji of international standards.
3. The NHS will be responsible for all hospital and medical services like recruitment of doctors and nurses, purchase of essential drugs and medication, improve procurement policies to eradicate drug shortage in hospitals and identify and purchase latest diagnostic equipment.

This will be a four year project with substantial funding from Government. Political bureaucracy will be non-existent.

Ladies and gentlemen, friends and colleagues the rules governing the elections right now leaves much to be desired. As a member of very concerned Opposition political parties we are petitioning the Electoral Commission that the “laws as they are” need urgent revisions and we anticipate that as a collective, we will commence a nation-wide campaign on the changes required.

We all know that electoral integrity is vital to a truly credible free and fair elections. That is why the Multinational Observer Group (MOG) made several pertinent recommendations that necessitates a change in our laws. The MOG was an international group. It was made up of reputable personnel.

MOG recommended changes to the Media Decree, Political Parties Decree and the Electoral Decree. Most importantly it recommended that the design of the ballot paper be changed as a priority. But this government has ignored the recommendations until now.

We also want the balloting and counting process to change. We want police presence outside of every polling room and not 50 metres away as was the case in 2014. We want the ballot papers to have serial numbers and to be stamped and signed by the presiding officers – not a voter signing that he or she has received a ballot paper. We want the counting procedures to change. What is the use of counting votes at every polling station if it is not the final result? Why are final results tabulated at the national count centre after being fed into a computer system that we do not know about?

Friends and colleagues, today is the start of our national campaign to make all of you aware of what difficulties we face with an unfair and lopsided electoral system. We will also tell the international community of our concerns and how their recommendations through MOG have been ignored.

I said lopsided and how this system is not transparent and doesn't create a level playing field.

This is why. This is related to electioneering.

We understand that on Tuesday this week, there was a meeting arranged by the Fiji Roads Authority in Namaka Road, Nadi where they invited 4 roadwork contractors namely: Fairdeal, Pratap Chand, MR Dayal and Flametree to submit URGENT quotations by Friday (yesterday), for about 4km of roadworks to be carried out in Ba. The quotations sought were for 4 specific areas of roadworks for Ba:

- (1) Rarawai Feeder Road, Cemetary Road: 980m x 6m width
- (2) Veisaru Road: 360m x 7m width
- (3) Valele Road: 800m x 6m width
- (4) Navatukoula Road: 1,400m x 6m width

Now, the most pressing question to be answered by the Minister is this: Why is Ba being prioritised in such an untransparent manner like this? Why are other roadwork contractors being excluded from tendering by such an exclusive group? FRA Board must come out and explain why this is happening right under their noses. They are ultimately accountable to the taxpayers of Fiji and have been since 2012 enjoying the largest slice of the national budget.

I turn now to an issue, that is at the heart of deep concern in our Party so much so that we spend much time deliberating and talking through solutions with our iTaukei colleagues, for our Landowners around our yaqona bowl. It is not political point-scoring for the NFP to speak about this. Our esteemed party elders, had laid that standard down many years ago.

I'd like to quote from Justice Jai Ram Reddy's historic speech that he made on Friday, 06 June 1997 to the Great Council of Chiefs, in presenting the 1997 Constitution. He said to the Great Council of Chiefs:

"Let me reaffirm that we honour your place, and the place of your people, as the first inhabitants of Fiji. We recognize, and have always recognized, the unique and special role of this council. We seek not domination, indeed we cannot dominate – we are not the majority ethnic group in this multicultural nation. You are. What we seek is partnership. We seek a country whose children of all races grow up with a deep understanding and respect for each other's cultures languages and traditions. We seek a country which encourages the best and the brightest – indeed, encourages all its people, of all races – to work together. We seek not to threaten your security, but to protect it. For in your security lies the basis for our own."

In a speech that I made titled "Fiji Vision 2030" at a Rotary Club meeting on 12 June 2014, I shared some thoughts on my vision for Fiji by 2030. I had detailed then that my vision for an *i-Taukei at Ease with Modernity and Tradition*, is one where our *i-Taukei* community in 2030 is supremely confident and secure of its place at the heart of Fiji and its unique place in the world. Collaborating with other parties, I had committed to, in my Vision 2030 for Fiji, to work through the NFP to ensure that needed laws are in place, and controversy with respect to protective elements of such laws long made redundant.

My commitment to our the *i-Taukei* peoples has not wavered in the least. In fact, it has only strengthened my resolve., for it is under our mango

tree, where we will all find liberation and self-determination, just as our party founders did in 1963.

To that end, our policy position on our *i-Taukei* landowning communities that will be released much later, is that we will also develop a suite of measures that position our *i-Taukei* landowners on a platform whereby their native land can be developed with their free, prior and informed consent, insulated by Government incentives just like what we have already proposed for the sugar sector, where they receive what is long overdue in terms of fairness and is sustainable. --- This will be far above the pittance that they receive from land leases. The suite of measures, akin to our package of measures announced today, will be structured with our *i-Taukei* communities, with them in the driver's seat. That is our promise. Recognising land as itaukei identity and place, we will also ensure among others that their traditional and cultural concerns are addressed – which any responsible, empathic Government would do.

On this issue also, we are advised that the debilitating burdens placed on our iTaukei communities for whom the Soli Ni Yasana, levied to all iTaukei males over 21 annually, now foots the bill for 100% of the operational costs for the provincial offices. The provincial offices are now run by Provincial Administrators who are government appointees. If this situation is happening – it is sad day for our iTaukei males who are taxed three times: Tax, VAT and the soli ni yasana levy. We need clarification of this from the Ministry of i-Taukei Affairs.

We do not question the wisdom of the levy. That is a conversation for the iTaukei governance structures to discuss through their traditional processes, but what we do question is the almost non-existent returns to our iTaukei communities who meet this annual soli ni yasana levy, if it is not generating returns in initiatives that escalate their own self-determination aspirations. The soli ni yasana cannot be treated as an additional ATM for the Government's running of its affairs.

So, working from the ground up -- akin to I have laid out earlier in our "Living Wage" suite of measures is the way forward. We have consulted widely. We know that this too, is very, very possible.

Friends and Colleagues...

Our 54 years strong party history of making things happen politically, even from the sideline seats of Opposition, is testament to our capabilities. And now – be assured that the NFP will provide to you the most competent, effective, fearless, and ethical set of candidates. Every single one of our candidates will be able to stand on their own feet and be able to greatly contribute in either Parliament or Cabinet where we will be governed by a set of democratic rules that respects each other's voice,

Because, it is as I had stated earlier in my speech, the ethos of the NFP that was born under the magnificent mango tree that many hands and heads make light work -- all pulling together in the same direction. There is no space in the NFP ship for self-centred egos. We all keep each other in check. Even I, as Party Leader, am accountable to our Management Board.

Friends and colleagues, please join me in this journey for change. Join me in spreading our message to every corner of the country. Change is coming.... Change is Inevitable.

Let us march in unison to realise and fulfill our vision for Change.

May God Bless NFP

May God bless Fiji