



**REMARKS IN PARLIAMENT BY THE NFP LEADER
ON THE MOTION TO THANK HIS EXCELLENCY THE
PRESIDENT
FOR HIS MOST GRACIOUS SPEECH
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2017
BY HON PROFESSOR BIMAN PRASAD**

Madam Speaker, I rise to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious speech. I continue to hope that those on the Government side would also aspire to some level of graciousness. This would befit a government that claims to lead our country for the benefit of everyone. This opening session of Parliament should be an opportunity for the Government to outline its policies and plans. Instead it engages in petty politics and attacks on its opponents.

We are flattered by the attention the Government is giving us in its attacks over the past two days, particularly the mover of the Motion, the Honourable Prime Minister. We assure him, we fear no one; we will not be intimidated; and if we are attacked we will return fire with intensity and interest.

Madam Speaker, the National Federation Party has been around for 54 years. The tree of the NFP has unshakeable foundations and deep roots in the community. It has never sacrificed its democratic principles to grab power from others.

And it has watched other political parties ride high after military coups, only to dissolve into nothing when they fall from grace.

This too will be the way of the Fiji First Party. It has no ideology, no principles and no history.

It was born holding political power. It has never had to work hard to earn the people's respect and support. It has two leaders who will not share power even with their own team. Its members are interested only in what they can get from the government. And when it loses power, the Fiji First Party, too, will fade away.

Madam Speaker, I expected the Honourable Prime Minister as Mover of the Motion to set the right tone to the debate in the spirit of His Excellency's address, particularly his emphasis on unity, togetherness and marching forward in unison shoulder to shoulder without rancour as we present ourselves before the electorate in the lead-up to the 2018 general elections.

But all we have heard from the Government side is that the Fiji First Party is the only saviour for our beloved nation and no other party has the ability to move Fiji forward.

Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister based his supposedly sure-shot confidence of securing the next elections in his favour on two things – one, the so-called patriotism of his team and two, fighting the elections with his right-hand man beside him – the honourable Attorney General.

The Fiji First Party seems to be a two-man team with 30 more cheerleaders in Parliament and the Fiji Sun as its main cheerleader outside. The Fiji Sun yesterday called them the “Dynamic Duo”.

The first pair ever to be called the “Dynamic Duo” were the famous movie action hero Batman and his sidekick Robin. We would all do well to remember that the Batman movies were works of fiction – a bit like most of what you read in the Fiji Sun.

However, I agree with both the Prime Minister and His Excellency’s call for elections to be free of any campaigning based on ethnicity, race and religion. These have no place in a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious nation. They are inflammatory. Election campaigns should be about a battle of ideas, policies and objectives for the advancement of one and all in our nation. We in the NFP will do exactly this, just as we did in 2014.

But Madam Speaker, I remind the Prime Minister that the election campaign should also not be based on fear-mongering.

It should not about current Fiji First Members of Parliament and Cabinet Ministers telling Indo-Fijians that their security is guaranteed only under the current Government. Yes, the NFP knows exactly what you are saying, because the people tell us. You cannot say on the one hand that campaigning should be free of appeals to race when this is what you are saying in the community. This is shameful and despicable. It is similar to their Leader and Prime Minister telling Parliament that they are the only ones qualified to lead Fiji into the future.

Madam Speaker, this shows the fear Government has about losing the next elections. Elections for them are only about how they can buy their way back to power, privileges, Ministerial salaries and big travel allowances. But elections are not about winning and losing. Elections are about ensuring that the people have a voice in Parliament – yes, even those who do not vote for the Fiji First Party. And then it is up to whoever is in Government to work with everyone in Parliament to achieve the best results. A party like Fiji First, born from a military dictatorship, cannot understand that, and that is Fiji's loss.

Madam Speaker, His Excellency spoke about government's track record. So did the honourable Prime Minister, saying it was 10 years of progress for Fiji. Therefore, for all intents and purposes, the PM takes pride in governing the nation since the coup of December 2006.

Now what is that track record?

1. For the last three days, the focus by Government Members has been on eight years of so-called economic growth. Madam Speaker, I repeat what I said in Parliament on 11th July 2017 during debate on the 2017/18 Budget. I quote, "Government has effectively presided over an economy built on tourism, government spending and overseas remittances. This is an economic vision that requires zero imagination".

2. The sugar industry is struggling for survival. On 30th September the European Union sugar production quota will also end. No solution is in sight. All we hear is that the Fiji Sugar Corporation will pre-sell sugar! The Prime Minister rejected our repeated calls for bipartisanship to collectively overcome the challenges faced by the industry. Yet Government is wandering aimlessly to find solutions.

3. Government kicked out our petition to rebuild the Penang sugar mill. Another petition seeking the implementation of a minimum guaranteed price of \$100 per tonne was disallowed from being tabled in Parliament.

4. Government has repeatedly rejected the Opposition's motions to increase allocation for kidney dialysis from the meagre \$300,000 it used to allocate.

5. Government betrayed its 2014 election promise not to impose VAT on 7 basic food items by re-imposing 9% VAT from 1st January 2016 as well as imposing VAT on prescription medication

6. Our public hospitals have become a blight on the nation. Even the free medicine subsidy is shambolic

7. The minimum wage has been increased from \$2.32 to 2.68 while hefty salaries for Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers were prescribed through a Decree 3 days before the start of the 2014 Parliament.

8. The allowances of Office holders and all parliamentarians were unethically and massively increased last year when Fiji was reeling from the effects of Severe TC Winston

9. The parliamentary standing orders were changed to remove the provision of an Opposition Member chairing the all-important Public Accounts Committee. The Government has now reached the point where it is prepared to bully the Auditor-General into admitting so-called "errors" in his reporting. These were not errors. They were just facts that the Government did not like.

10. The Open Merit Recruitment System is a farce as seen in the review of salaries of teachers, downgrading of substantive positions to Acting appointments and bonding them into a contract.

11. This Government wants to impose Village By-laws and enact the Rotuma Land Bill.

Madam Speaker, what I have just outlined is just a sample of the scorecard of the Fiji First Government. To put it simply, this is a control freak government. If there was substantial evidence of this before, the scripted speeches of Government Members, all pre-approved by the honourable Attorney-General and his minions, prove this beyond any doubt whatsoever.

So what will we do Madam Speaker? Team NFP has practical, sound and sensible solutions. In Government, we will implement them to improve the livelihood of all our people. His Excellency implored upon us to campaign on issues and this is what we will do.

Therefore, we will: -

1. As soon as possible call a National Economic Summit to ensure that our people work together to find solutions for to ensure economic growth benefits every citizen of our nation

2. Immediately reduce the salaries and allowances of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers by 25%, repeal the Parliamentary Remunerations Decree and through Parliament appoint an independent Emoluments Committee to ensure there is relativity in the salaries.

The Government is paying its Ministers obscene amounts of money while some of its people continue to live in tents after TC Winston.

3. Implement a minimum guaranteed price of \$100 per tonne of cane to give confidence in our cane growers and provide them incentives to increase production with the objective of achieving the desired target of 4 million tonnes of cane and 400,000 tonnes of sugar

4. Build a new sugar mill in Rakiraki to ensure the survival of the local economy of Ra

5. Repeal the Village By-laws and the Rotuma Land Bill and instead begin a proper process of consultation with the indigenous and Rotuman people on their leadership and institutions at local and national level

6. Establish and fully resource a National Hospital Service that will be fully responsible for all aspects of public health care including implementation of a better free medicine scheme

7. Zero rate or make VAT free 15 food items including review on duties on them to cushion the impact of rising cost of living. And I can guarantee that one of the food items whose duty will be reduced and made VAT free will be lamb products like lamb chops, lamb shank and lamb necks

8. We will ensure our civil servants and teachers are given permanent employment and increase their retirement age to 60 years.

9. We will allocate \$5 million for kidney dialysis

10. We will implement a phased in living wage of \$5 an hour for our unskilled workers and all those wage earners earning less than this rate.

Madam Speaker, Government has publicly stated that a living wage is unaffordable and will result in job losses. This is nonsense.

We have to get the incomes of the poorest people in Fiji up to acceptable levels. This is not just about basic fairness and decency. This is about ensuring that people can participate in the economy, send their children to school and pay their rent and their water bills. If people cannot participate in the economy, then they are alienated and angry. And we have seen, in the last 30 years, what happens when people are alienated and angry.

Even the Government understands this. But their solution is to run around the country handing out millions of dollars for so-called "small enterprise grants" without knowing or caring how this money is spent.

The Government has made a big deal about the increase in the minimum wage. Here, I refer to a recent statement by the Honourable Minister for Employment who claims the new minimum wage rate of \$2.68 per hour will benefit 150,000 workers in the informal sector.

But after the Government cut income taxes again in the last Budget, what is the new minimum wage rate of a Cabinet Minister?

A worker on the minimum wage will earn, after FNPF is paid, about \$111 per week.

On the other hand, a Cabinet Minister on a gross salary of \$185,000, thanks to the tax cuts in the Budgets, will now take home almost \$140,000, an increase of \$6,400 per year. In other words, the net pay of worker on the new minimum wage – the net pay for the whole year – is less than the net pay rise of a Cabinet Minister after the last Budget.

Is this how the Government serves the people?

How does this Government expect people earning \$110 per week to support their families or save for the future?

Furthermore, even the implementation of the minimum wage rate has been a failure. We know that many workers in the garment industry have been receiving less than \$2.32 an hour that has been the rate since July 2015.

In our view, the Ministry has failed to enforce the minimum rate on many businesses and employers and this failure will continue in the implementation of the new rate of \$2.68.

And this Saturday at 2pm at Rishikul Sanatan College, we will be making another major policy announcement as a truly multiracial Team NFP continues its Talanoa and Listening Campaign.

Madam Speaker, after 3 years as a minority but effective parliamentary Opposition Party, Team NFP is now offering itself for judgment by all our people. Above all, we are offering ourselves as a truly credible alternative to the current Government.

Change is coming

Change is inevitable

May God bless Fiji