

CIVIL SERVICE REFORMS

Reply by NFP Leader Hon Professor Biman Prasad to a Ministerial Statement by the Attorney General and Minister for Civil Service in Parliament on Thursday March 15, 2018

Madam Speaker

I rise to respond to the Honourable Minister's Statement. What the Minister outlined in Parliament is nothing new. It is the favourite line of this Government – that all is rosy, nothing is wrong, the reforms are working, civil servants are happy and Open Merit Recruitment System is working well.

Madam Speaker nothing is further from the truth. The reality is distinctly different within our civil service and teaching fraternity. The same even goes for our personnel in the Fiji Police Force who feel let down but due to professional ethics do not speak out.

The Honourable Acting Prime Minister asked me to show evidence that Open Merit Recruitment System is being abused in police recruitment. I urge him to review the last two years of recruitment list and the minimum requirements of recruits into the Force that will be readily available in the Fiji Police Academy – whether or not OMRS was applied.

Madam Speaker in September last year Hon Prem Singh informed Parliament how a Principal at a prominent School in Lautoka was removed from her position and replaced by an officer from the Curriculum Development Unit - following direct involvement and interference by a senior Cabinet Minister. At that time the Honourable Attorney General stated in reply this was an isolated the affected principal could appeal against the decision. The senior Cabinet Minister even directed the school management to accept the change.

The substantive principal then had no choice but to report to the Divisional Education Office during her working hours.

The affected principal knocked the doors of the Ministry including the former and current permanent secretary of education to no avail. She was offered a downgraded position that she rightly refused.

We are now told that the principal posted to the school following the directive of the senior Minister was forced out of the school following an alleged sexual incident at the school this year. The former principal was then re-posted to the school on a temporary contract.

So much for the Open Merit Recruitment System.

Madam Speaker the most affected by the arbitrary reforms have been teachers.

The teaching fraternity has been exploited and held to ransom by the current Government, which has forced them to enter into discriminatory contracts under the pretext of offering them salary increases.

Principals, Vice Principals, Heads of Department (HOD), Head Teachers, Assistant Head Teachers and other post holders have been demoted to a lower rank and then offered acting appointments to the substantive positions they previously held.

Teachers who held substantive positions have been first appointed to a rank lower than the position they were holding, and then given a second contract offering them an acting contract to the position they held substantially and an acting salary of 95% of the substantive salary.

We have cited contracts of several teachers to confirm the exploitation and discriminatory nature of the contract.

In one case a principal was first offered the contract of a vice principal. The person has been holding the position of Principal prior to this ill-conceived reform. On the same day, the person was given another contract of Acting Principal of 95% of the increased salary.

In another case a teacher holding the position of HOD (Head of Department) was first offered the contract of Assistant Teacher. On the same day, the person was offered an Acting HOD Contract at a salary of 95% of the new salary.

Madam Speaker, In November those offered positions of Acting principals and head teachers were told to re-apply for their positions, that would come into effect from the beginning of 2nd term.

What we have been told is that a lot of substantive post holders, who were given acting appointments, have not been even shortlisted for interviews. This is despite earning their posts through years of experience and climbing the ladder meritoriously. Where is the Open Merit Recruitment System?

Furthermore, teachers who have been in the service for over 25 years have been given a meagre pay rise of 6.4 percent and the same as teachers with far less experience because they do not hold a Diploma. The teachers are furious because their experience counts for nothing.

Worse of all, all contracts render meaningless the teachers' employment security and make them totally subservient to Government.

Some of its regressive provisions are: -

- (a) Renewal of the contract is at the absolute discretion of Government
- (b) The Civil Servant irrevocably agrees that non-renewal of the Contract will not give rise to any course of action whatsoever against the Government
- (c) The duration of the Contract expires immediately upon a civil servant reaching the retirement age of 55
- (d) Renewal of the Contract is subject to Government requiring the services of the civil servant and that too if he or she agrees to enter into another contract on mutually agreed terms
- (e) The decision of Government to transfer a civil servant on the existing terms of the Contract to anywhere in Fiji is final
- (f) Government has the right to change or vary the Contract anytime

This discriminatory and exploitative contractual employment that is being forced upon our teachers will not result in a harmonious, unified and productive civil service.

Such draconian contracts are subjugating our teachers and have no place in a genuine democracy.

Madam Speaker, We will correct this discriminatory practice. We will offer permanent tenure of employment to all civil servants, teachers and members of our two security forces.

And we will increase the retirement age in the civil service to 60 years.