



Minister of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations
Honourable Iojiki Konrote

**MAIDEN SPEECH TO THE PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF
FIJI**

Parliament
GOVERNMENT BUILDING

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1020 Hours

Madam Speaker:

It is a great honour to make my maiden speech in this Parliament after the FijiFirst election victory and my appointment as Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations.

Firstly I want to join previous speakers in congratulating you on your election as speaker. The fact that 14 per cent of the members of this Parliament are women demonstrates the great strides that are finally being made in Fiji and the Pacific to give women a voice in the political process. We have a long way to go to achieve true equality for women but this is a great start.

Madam Speaker:

I am greatly honoured to have been given the Employment portfolio, one of the most important in Government as we continue our labour reforms of the past eight years. The creation of jobs is one of the Government's primary objectives. Increasing our productivity and efficiency as a nation is equally important. And we want to maintain a cooperative industrial relations climate that serves the interests of Government, employers and workers. Because we all need to work together in the national interest to take our nation forward.

Madam Speaker:

In many ways, the various strands of my professional life to this point have equipped me with skills that I believe would enhance my ability to do this job well. As most of you know, I have been a soldier, joining the RFMF in 1966 and climbing the ranks over the years to the position of Major General. The military teaches you many things but above all it teaches team work. And I firmly believe that Government, employers and workers in Fiji can benefit from better teamwork.

We don't need an industrial relations climate characterized by a "them and us" attitude and the kind of aggressive behavior that we have sometimes seen in the past.

Without wanting to score points, I believe that the failure of certain trade union leaders to gain traction in the recent election demonstrates that Fijians have rejected confrontation and the atmosphere of class warfare that some union figures have promoted. Similarly, more employees and employer have gained an appreciation that they can achieve far more in the way of productivity gains if they build an atmosphere of team-work in the workplace.

We are starting to see some spectacular results from the workplace reforms that the Bainimarama Government has instituted over the past eight years. A great example of this is Fiji Airways, which was on the verge of crashing altogether when the Government stepped in at the eleventh hour to pull it out of its dive. Working with the Fiji Airways workforce and not against it, we achieved a spectacular turnaround and our national airline is now making record profits.

The reforms involved changes to certain work practices that were effectively contributing to ruining the airline. But by agreeing to those changes, Fiji Airways workers have not only kept their jobs but are now benefitting from a share in the airline's profits. They are happy, the airline is happy, Fiji Airways shareholders – including the Government – are happy and the whole nation is benefitting as Fiji Airways flies higher than ever before, with new aircraft, increased frequency of flights and contributes a much larger amount to our economy. It has turned from an industrial relations battleground into a model of management-worker engagement. And it is a great role model for other companies and industries in Fiji.

As Minister responsible for maintaining harmonious industrial work relations, let me assure those who may believe that they are marginalized, that I will endeavour to address their grievances and have them resolved as soon as possible.

Madam Speaker:

The other role I have held that is certain to assist me in this job is my experience as a diplomat. From 2001 – 2006, I had the privilege of being Fijian High Commissioner to Australia. Diplomacy teaches you judgment and restraint.

You learn that in international affairs, you rarely get everything you want. You have to negotiate the best possible deal but you also have to be prepared to negotiate, to yield to the other side if it means being able to conclude an agreement in which both parties walk away happy.

I intend to approach the Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations portfolio with judgment and restraint. I will be a tough negotiator, especially if my objective is in the national interest. But I will also be diplomatic and civil because the best negotiations are those conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Madam Speaker:

I intend to work with the trade union movement to achieve the reforms that the Bainimarama Government has already put in train in this area. But I will not be railroaded into policy positions that are against the national interest, against the interests of a majority of Fijians. The reform process must go on. The union excess and inefficient work practices of the past cannot get in the way of the absolute need for Fiji to sustain jobs, create new ones, improve productivity and general economic

performance. We cannot allow a minority to dictate terms and conditions to the nation as a whole.

Madam Speaker:

We plan to continue with the productivity drive in a range of areas of the economy. It is imperative to make our economy more efficient and to lift Fiji's export performance. Our Balance of Trade is wildly out of kilter. We are importing far more than we export. So we need urgent action to tackle the bottlenecks in our system that is impeding our export trade.

Madam Speaker:

The task of conducting union elections will now be the responsibility of the Fijian Elections Office that conducted our highly successful national election last month. The move is designed to ensure that union ballots are held to the same high standard – credible, free and fair. I note that some elements of the union movement are opposed to this. What do they have to fear? It is not about reducing union power. It is about making sure that union elections truly represent the will of the membership in the same way that our national election represents the will of the Fijian people. As it is we get complaints about how some union

elections are not above board as they are conducted in-house and by the very people who are contesting themselves. Indeed in countries like Australia trade union elections are conducted by the Australian Electoral Commission.

This initiative will take genuine democratization beyond the national parliament.

Madam Speaker:

As everyone knows, I am a proud Fijian from Rotuma, just as all Rotumans are. I want to thank Rotumans everywhere for supporting me throughout my life, in my military career, my diplomatic career and now as a politician. I especially want to thank my family, my wife Sarote and our sons Emmanuel and Andrew and their wives, my niece Fiu and her daughter Josephine who have always been a tower of support for me. I also remember my parents Atalifo Marorue and Mua Sukamanu Konrote who taught me the values that I hold dear today – patriotism, loyalty to country and love of my fellow citizens.

Talking about Rotuma I also wish to thank the Bainimarama Government of the past 8 odd years for carrying out such unprecedented growth in Rotuma. The enormous improvements in infrastructure and government services has made Rotumans feel that they are truly a part of Fiji and made them realize that this is what Governments should really be doing. Madam Speaker and all of this has happened without a single Rotuman being in the Bainimarama Government Cabinet. Thank you immeasurably Mr. Prime Minister for all your work in Rotuma.

I also want to thank all those who have had an influence on my life, whether at the Natabua High School in Lautoka, my comrades in the RFMF, the Australian College of Defence and Strategic Studies, the Australian Defence Force Academy and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

In the words of the famous song from Gilbert and Sullivan, I became “the very model of a Major General” only because of their encouragement and support. I have had many testing times in my life, not least commanding Fijian Peacekeepers in the Middle East. I became Deputy Force Commander of the UNIFIL operations and then United

Nations Assistant Secretary-General and Force Commander
in Lebanon.

I can say that it has always been a great privilege to lead.
But it has always been a much greater privilege to serve.

And that is what I pledge to do in this role over the next
four years.

Madam Speaker:

I was very touched by the Prime Minister's comments
yesterday about the noble cause the RFMF took up eight
years ago to hold our nation together against the forces of
division who threatened national unity. We have put an
end to the era of division and set off on a new course.
And it is a wonderful privilege to be part of that journey.

God Bless us all. God Bless Fiji.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you