

## **Facing Fiji's future Together Address to NFP Convention, 1993**

**Brij V. Lal**

Mr Chairman, members and friends of the National Federation Party, ladies and gentlemen. I am honoured by your invitation to speak on this occasion, and humbled by your confidence in me to say something that may prove useful in your deliberations. I am by training (and temperament) a historian, at home in dealing with the past than in divining the future. For most of you, of course, at this critical juncture in our history, it is the future of your party, of the country, of the coming generations that is of utmost concern. History may not offer solutions for the problems that face you, but I have no doubt in my own mind that any solution which ignores the lessons of history is not likely to be enduring or satisfactory.

I am not a member of your political party nor, I should say for the record, am I a member of any political party in this country or anywhere else. Parties and I don't travel well together. Nonetheless, as a historian of Fiji, I cannot ignore the critical role your party has played in the history of Fiji in the last thirty years. The NFP is, after all, the oldest political party not only in Fiji but in the entire Pacific Island region. It was the vanguard of the independence struggle in this country, and the historical record is clear: it was the NFP'S persistence and tenacity throughout the 1960s that hastened the pace of political change in this country against the determined opposition of various vested interests. But, as fate would have it, the NFP was not destined to 'enjoy the fruits of its anticolonial endeavours'.

There is something else about the NFP's past that is worth recalling on this occasion. I believe that the founding vision of the party, its founding principles, were essentially correct ones for Fiji. The NFP was an Indian-based party, which grew out of the strike in the

sugar industry in 1960, but it was never an 'Indian party' as such but an organisation of and for the 'small person': the farmers, the workers, the small businessmen. From its inception, it was intended to be a multiracial party. 'One People, One Country, One Nation' was its motto, for a nonracial, independent Fiji founded on universally recognised principles of justice and equality. What if this vision had succeeded? Our history might have been different, but then the history of Fiji is tragically littered with ruins of opportunities, of turning points we should have taken but did not.

An annual general meeting such as this is an occasion for reflection, stock-taking, charting future directions. I have no doubt that you are fully alive to the burden that rests on your shoulders, for the decisions you now make will help shape the future of the coming generations. Make no mistake: we are standing at the crossroads of our history, on the threshold of the next millennium. A turn in the wrong direction at this juncture will plunge his country into yet another round of debilitating crisis. As you deliberate, it may be worthwhile remembering one of the favourite quotations of your founding leader, the late Mr AD Patel: 'Politicians think of the next election, statesmen think of the next generation'.

Face reality: that seems to be the new mantra of Fiji politics, often uttered more as threat than as advice. Fair though, but reality is not immutable, etched in stone; political reality is man-made, and what man makes, he can unmake as well. Where there is will, there is a way. If Nelson Mandela had accepted the reality of white rule in South Africa, apartheid would not be in the process of being dismantled. If Martin Luther King had accepted the reality of segregation in the American South, the civil rights movements would not have been won. If much of the present day Third World had accepted the reality of European colonialism, they would not be free, independent nations today. So, reality is really not as simple as it is often made out to be.

With that in mind, let me raise some general issues for discussion. Why are we in this mess today? How did get into this mess? How can we get out of it in a way that does not wreck the fragile peace and harmony of the nation? What kind of leadership do we need at this critical juncture, and what of the future of the Indo-Fijian community? I can only raise these questions; thankfully for me, it is the responsibility of your leaders to solve them.

The answer to the first question is simple enough. We are in this

mess today because of the coups of 1987. There is no getting around that fact. Those who carried out the coups and those who supported them, thought that the coups would provide quick and easy solutions to our problems. It is only belatedly that the people of this country are beginning to realise the truth that coups don't solve problems, they only compound them.

It would serve no purpose here to rake over old wounds and look at the role of certain individuals, institutions and social groups in precipitating the crisis of 1987. But there is one point, related to the present crisis, that your leader has been making in parliament and in the local press that I think can stand further emphasis. He has been talking about the politics of communalism, the politics of expediency and the politics of fair weather multiracialism as being the main cause of the problems we are facing today. The two main communities in Fiji, the Fijians and the Indo-Fijians, were different from each other in terms of culture, religion, language, and historical experience, though there were of course many conditions and interests which bound them together. The problems caused by these differences were exacerbated by a colonial policy that kept the people separate *and* compartmentalised, and actively manipulated the divisions to its own advantage. The Fijian and Indo-Fijian people were kept apart from each other at every stage in their lives, in their education, systems of rural administration, and in their social life. They lived like strangers under the same roof.

Little changed in the period since independence. The nation proclaimed its commitment to multiracialism and nation building: unity in diversity, share and care, the way the world should be. Happy slogans but, sadly enough, just that: slogans. Consciousness of race permeated every facet of our national life. Our political system and our public life thrived on racial separation. Race, it was said, is a fact of life, and the people *were* reminded of it when they left or entered the country, when they filled forms at government departments, went to hospitals or took out their driving licences. Every government policy, every public issue, was assessed not really in terms of the needs of the people but on the basis of their race. How could a nonracial 'national consciousness' develop in such circumstances? And so, despite the public pronouncements to the contrary, and generally for overseas consumption, Fiji remained a keenly race-conscious society, the most race conscious society I have ever lived in.

Why this emphasis on, this obsession with, race? Perhaps I am the wrong kind of person to be asking this question, for having lived much of

my adult life in cultures other than my own, with people of other 'races', and thoroughly enjoying and enriched by that experience, I don't think that race is a terribly important fact of life. May be there is something mysterious, primordial about race that I am simply unable to comprehend. But may be, just may be, it's not all that complex. It may be that in Fiji, race and race consciousness became expedient tools in the hands of political parties and leaders to promote particular agendas, hide cracks in their own communities, and so on.

Whatever the cause, this race consciousness has distorted and derailed public discourse in Fiji. And I agree with Mr Jai Ram Reddy wholeheartedly when he says that the most important task facing the nation is to tear down the walls of racial separation and forge an all-embracing national consciousness, create a nonracial Fiji. That is an ideal worthy of pursuit. Breaking away from the deeply ingrained habits of the past won't be easy, and it will take time. But as we all know, the longest journey in life begins with the first step.

Easier said than done, you might say. Fair enough, so let me make some practical suggestions for your consideration. Let us begin with the education of our children, a subject on which Mr Reddy has spoken recently. I agree with him that multicultural and multilingual education is not a luxury in our society but a necessity. The teaching of the three principal languages of Fiji - Fijian, Hindustani and English - should be actively encouraged in all schools. Not only language, although that is important, but each others' cultures, customs and traditions. It is an investment that will pay heavy dividends later. If the government can spend taxpayers' money to purchase freehold land and support an expensive military force in a tiny country such as this, then surely it should, as a matter of priority, support this project.

But the Indo-Fijian community should not wait for the government to take the lead in this field. There is too much at stake for it not to take the initiative itself. I believe that Sangam has committed itself to teaching Fijian in its schools. This is a worthy initiative worth emulation by other bodies in the Indo-Fijian community. Cross-cultural education that prepares our citizens to live in harmony and peace, with tolerance and goodwill, should become a core part of Fiji's primary school curriculum and not a soft option. As I said a moment ago, such an education is not a luxury any more, it is a necessity.

Another area where barriers should be bridged is in rural administration. You have in Fiji the Fijian Provincial Councils and the

Indian Rural Advisory Committees. I am not sure that Fiji needs these two separate bodies because the needs of rural Fijian and Indo-Fijian people overlap; but let's assume the existence of these two bodies in the present circumstances. It will serve the national interest if your party proposed legislation that mandated regular meetings between the two bodies so that our local leaders could meet to discuss matters of local and regional concerns in a nonracial perspective, on the basis of need rather than race. If the government of the day does not act upon this idea, and given its racially-oriented approach it might not, let our party take the lead. Why not?

The same goes for meetings with the Great Council of Chiefs. This institution, which sees itself as a representative council of the taukei, now deliberates on matters that touch on the life of the nation as a whole and just not a section of it. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, there is no provision in law or administrative practice for the leaders of other communities to meet with the Council to raise with its members matters of direct concern to their community. Instead of relying on intermediaries or official channels, the leaders of this Party might consider establishing direct communication with the Great Council of Chiefs. There is nothing to be lost here, but everything to be gained. It is in cultural, institutional and political integration, in building bridges across communal barriers, not in separation or communal compartmentalisation that the future prosperity of all our peoples and our country lies. At the end of the day, *we* will swim or sink together.

Change will not come overnight. Time is important, of course, but it is not the most important thing when we are dealing with the destiny of the nation, changing habits of thought fostered through the generations. Nationbuilding is a long-term process, and we may not see the fruits of our endeavours in our own lifetime. The essential thing is not to give up in despair, not to lose sight of the fundamental goals, not to cut corners or compromise your integrity.

As many of you would know, the cane growers' battles against the CSR began in 1921 in western Viti Levu, and it took two major strikes in 1943 and 1960, and much hardship and sacrifice by our people. In the most difficult of circumstances, before the company was brought to account in 1969 before the Denning arbitration. The struggle for a common roll system of voting - one person, one vote, one value - began in 1929, and more than 60 years later, we still have a racially divided electoral system that has landed us in this mess. No one, of even the most

vocal opponents of the concept, ever said that common roll was not the ideal that should be aspired for. Everyone conceded its merits, but said the timing was wrong. May be the time is now opportune for the concept to be resurrected and debated afresh. The real challenge for the leaders of this and other parties will lie in convincing the other side that it is in their own interest to keep an open mind on the idea.

Which brings me to the topic of the constitution. This understandably is a matter of some urgency for your party as mechanisms are being put in place to review the 1990 constitution. In a moment I shall talk about what I consider to be some fundamental flaws in this document; but I want to underscore the point that there has to be some sense of shared objectives and shared perceptions of what this country should be all about. There has to be some willingness on all sides to compromise in the national interest, to sacrifice for the greater good, otherwise even the most perfect constitution will not succeed; it will remain a piece of paper, nothing more, nothing less, unless there is a common will in the citizenry to make it work. This is a reality that should be apparent to all our leaders. In Rousseau's words, the most important laws are those which are 'engraved on tablets of marble or brass, but on the hearts of its citizens'.

Now to the 1990 constitution. I am not a constitutional theorist, but it seems to me that any constitution is an instrument, a means to an end, and not an end in itself. In my view, a constitution performs two major functions. In the first instance, it is a statement of the kind of society we are, the kinds of values and ideals we cherish, the hopes and aspirations of the people of the country, and, equally importantly, the kind of society we aspire to be. In that sense, it is a profoundly symbolic document of the nation. And in the second instance, it is a kind of prescriptive instrument, a problem-solving device that defines and limits the parameters and framework of government.

From both these fronts, the present constitution is deeply flawed and is bound to fail. I am not saying anything particularly new or controversial. As you well know, even some of the founding fathers of the present document, realising the kind of flawed and divisive document that it inherently is, have attempted to distance themselves from it. I get the sense talking to people on all sides of the political divide that the question is not if, but when and how, the constitution should be changed. The present constitution does no one any favour; on the contrary, it does grave injustice to the basic sense of decency and fairness of the people of this

country.

Grave injustice and violence? It says in the Preamble that the coups 'were occasioned by a widespread belief that the 1970 Constitution was inadequate to give protection to the interests of the indigenous Fijians, their values, traditions, customs, way of life and economic well-being'. Widespread belief: really? We are told that the 'people of Fiji have expressed the desire to have a new constitution', that they desire the replacement of the 1970 constitution 'so that the will of the people may be truly set forth and their hopes, aspirations and goals be achieved and thereby enshrined'. Will of the people: which people? And when did 'the people of Fiji' express the desire to have a new constitution? And we are told, in the Preamble, that 'Fiji is a democratic society'. That is fine, but we are told in the same sentence that its people, or some of its people, can play 'some part', not full part, in the institutions of national life. I could go on, but I think the point is clear.

There is no need, and it certainly does not help the process of national reconciliation, to obfuscate the truth. The truth is that the constitution was not embraced by the people through an act of free choice; it was quite simply imposed upon them through an executive decree.

I do not believe there are many people who are happy with the political system the constitution has produced. There is no reason to celebrate a system founded on the principle of racial segregation. Keeping the people of Fiji apart on the basis of race is no way to build a nation of diverse communities. There cannot be much pride in a constitution that says to a section of the community: you will be seen but not heard, at least not heard directly where it really matters, in the councils of state. There is no sense in a system that preaches the virtues of self-determination for one section of the population, but denies it to others. And in a constitution that proclaims its commitment to a democratic society, it is ironic that executive power is vested in an unelected office. I believe that the present constitution does not solve the political problems of the country, it compounds them.

Obviously, the constitution is not working for the Indo-Fijian people. How can it when there is not a single Indo-Fijian member in the cabinet. I am not saying that the government should have an Indo-Fijian minister for the sake of having an Indo-Fijian in the cabinet. That would be tokenism, but some symbolic and practical recognition of Indo-Fijian interests is important *and* in the national interest. The Prime Minister, on

his own evidence, is more keen to maintain provincial balance in his cabinet, than in building political bridges with the Indo-Fijian community. He talks of the need for reconciliation and government of national unity, but when the opportunity presents itself, he balks. Too much 'aagepeeche', as they say in this country.

The constitution is not working for the Fijian people either. It has not fostered the unity that its architects had intended or hoped for. Instead, it has brought about division and instability in the Fijian community that will only increase as time goes on. Sections and regions of the Fijian society are under-represented in the parliament, and their frustration will not disappear any time soon. The constitution was/is intended to protect the Fijian way of life under the time-tested leadership of chiefs. Now, the idea of preserving Fijian culture and traditions in the face of the dreary, universalising forces of the modern world is one that should receive the sympathy of all of us.

Yet, the very same leaders who have been entrusted to this task have promulgated policies whose ultimate effect will be to undermine foundations of Fijian culture. Promoting western education and competitive examinations which reward individual talent rather than social status, encouraging a free-market economy, promoting the privatization of local concerns. All these measures will do little to preserve the integrity of traditional Fijian culture under chiefly leadership. I mean, you can turn the hands of the clock back? It doesn't do the clock any good. There is another truth worth bearing in mind: Fiji now is an island in the physical sense alone; even if it wanted to, it cannot extricate itself out of the nexus of the global economy. Our laws and code of conduct have to conform with those of the rest of the civilised world.

So where do we go from here, how do you reform the system? I don't have the answers, but I do know that change cannot be imposed; it must evolve with the consent of the governed; that consensus not coercion is the answer; that racism is a cancer that will slowly but surely destroy the country; that it is better to share and contribute to a common culture, a common life, than it is to live a separate existence. What kind of political system is appropriate for our needs? All human (political) institutions are imperfect, so the question then is: which system has the least imperfections, which also promotes the noblest values of the human heritage. I believe that humankind has not been able to devise a better system of government than democracy. History is witness to the fact that totalitarian and racist regimes do not succeed, that no amount of physical

might can quell the yearnings of the human spirit.

Representative constitutional democracy is the way forward for Fiji. By that I mean a government limited and governed by law (not will or decree), in which no institution or individual, however powerful, should be above it. I mean, too, a government where the will of the people reigns supreme, where people's elected representatives should be the supreme decision makers in the country, not people nominated by and beholden to particular vested interests. A government accountable to the people in a free and fair election conducted on the basis of fair universal franchise.

That is the ideal, but what is the reality in Fiji? Are the people's elected representatives in parliament the supreme decision makers in Fiji? No one would deny that the restoration of the Parliament following the 1992 elections has been an important development in our politics, providing an important development in our politics, providing an important avenue of debate about issues of importance to the people of Fiji. At least, our leaders are talking to each other rather than at each other through the media. A positive development, to be sure. I doubt, however, if the Fiji Parliament is more than a 'paper tiger'. The most important bodies in the countries are the Great Council of Chiefs and the Army. So long as these two institutions continue to exercise the power they are exercising at the moment, the restoration of true representative democracy in this country will remain illusive.

Now, the GCC was created at the time of Cession as a supreme advisory body to the colonial government on matters pertaining to Fijian society. It filled that role with dignity and restraint for much of this century, and in the process carved a distinctive niche for itself in our social and political system. The GCC was given the power of veto in the 1970 Constitution over any matter that touched, even remotely, on the customs, usages, traditions and institutions of Fijian people. That was as it should be. But now the situation has changed, and it requires serious debate and discussion. The GCC now effectively has the power of veto over the legislative and political process in the country, a radical change from its advisory and protective role in the 1970 constitution as far as certain important Fijian interests were concerned, to an actively interventionist role in the national political arena. They appoint the President and nominate the two Vice Presidents (but who appoints the GCC?). They are the judge and the jury, with the ultimate power to hire and fire the president. In the present upper house, they have 24 seats out of the 34. So the GCC has, and exercises, such vast powers with no

constitutional or moral obligation or responsibility to be accountable to anyone in the country except itself.

There is something else to consider. There was a time when the GCC was seen by most Fijians as an overarching, representative body of all the taukei. I am not sure that is the case today, not after the Council entered the political fray in 1991 by directly sponsoring a political party, the SVT. By doing so, I would argue, it effectively moved away from its traditional role in Fijian society. What happens to those Fijians, nearly a third in the 1992 elections, who didn't support the SVT? What happens to the interests of the non-Fijians? It is my view that the entrenchment of the Great Council of Chiefs in the political process is a prescription for political paralysis and division. We are already beginning to see signs of that. So we need to ask: is it in the broad national interest, or even in the Fijian interest, to vest so much power in a small, unelected, and in truth unrepresentative body?

And the army. We all know that this is a sensitive subject, but the fears of sections of our society will not go away if we sweep sensitive-subjects under the carpet, as we have been wont to do in the past. They need to be aired. So why do we need a large military force? I doubt if we are in danger of being invaded by Tonga or Samoa, except possibly in rugby union, in which case the army won't be able to do much anyway. There was a time when it was argued that while the constitution protected their rights, it was the army, totally Fijian dominated, that was the ultimate guarantor of Fijian interest. A balanced multiracial Parliament couldn't be trusted. Let's accept that argument for the moment. But why do we need such a large army now that the Parliament is Fijian dominated, the President is and will always be a Fijian, when the taukei are or will soon become an outright majority in the population. Who will the army will be used against now that the fear of Indian domination has all but evaporated?

It used to be argued that the army provides employment and training for our young people. Two things need to be borne in mind here. The first is that it provides such opportunities to a small portion of only a certain section of the community, the taukei. It is, for all practical purposes, a racially exclusive club. That's the truth. And I am not sure that the kind of training the military provides is terribly helpful in addressing the present developmental needs of a nation living with the constraints of limited resources. There is, for instance, a crying need to address the terrible law and order situation in this country. Crimes increased by 11

percent in this country between 1991 and 1992, robberies by 21.8 percent, break-in offences by 28 percent, and illegal use of vehicles by 28 percent. And yet, in the same period, the facilities available to the police force have declined both in quantity and quality. The victims of these crimes are the ordinary people from all walks of life, and from all social and ethnic groups. Should not some of the scarce resources used for the training of soldiers be used to upgrade the law and order agencies in this country, for the benefit of everyone, and not just a small section of the community?

While I am on the subject of representative democracy, let me make one further point that relates to the need, for this country, to have an impartial and efficient public service based on merit. All the deliberations in parliament and other forums will mean little if the country doesn't have a well funded and neutral bureaucracy that will be in a position to implement the will of the elected representatives of the people. A demoralised, politically involved public service will not serve the larger national interest. This is an obvious point, of course, but one which in the present circumstances needs to be reiterated.

This brings me to my final point about the constitution, the composition of the parliament and the method of election to it. Let me begin with the Presidency. Under the present arrangement, the President is appointed by, and responsible to, the GCC. It is important to understand that the President, in the present arrangement, is more than a mere ceremonial figurehead, with the power at his disposal, among other things, to appoint public officers, suspend the civil liberties of individuals, to deal with any act deemed 'prejudicial to the security of Fiji', and appoint a Council to advise him on matters of national importance. All these powers vested in an unelected office is, in my view, a recipe for a disaster waiting to happen. At present Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau is in the President's office, but what happens when someone less experienced sits in the President's chair? Things have worked out reasonably well so far, but let's not confuse personalities with principles. It is important to put in place a structure that will ultimately be responsible to the will of the people.

I myself have little difficulty accepting the idea of an ethnic Fijian as the head of state of this country if that will help allay some of the fears of the Fijian people. I think the acceptance of this idea would be a gesture of great symbolic value and cultural sensitivity. But the head of state, whoever he or she is, should be popularly elected through universal franchise (or indirectly through one or both houses of parliament). The President's office should symbolise the unity of the nation, and represent

the hopes and aspirations of all the people of the country, not just a section of it. He or she should be a kind of a benevolent, impartial figure accepted by all sections of the country.

As far as the Senate and the House of Representatives are concerned, I believe that their present makeup is deeply flawed. Give the GCC complete power of veto over any legislation that even remotely touches on Fijian interest, as was the situation under the 1970 constitution, but why give them 24 out of 34 seats? What about the interests of the other communities in Fiji, who have only 9 of the 34 seats in the Senate? If the GCC can choose their nominees, why can't the other communities choose theirs? Why shouldn't political parties be allowed to nominate their own representatives in the Senate? In this regard, the provisions governing the composition and powers of the Senate under the 1970 constitution deserves serious consideration. Of course, I am assuming that you would like to keep the Senate. You may decide that a small country like Fiji does not need a bicameral legislature, especially when the Constitution provides for a strong, executive head of state.

The present arrangement in the House of Representatives is even more flawed. The first difficulty here is the racially segregated nature of the electoral rolls. The system of racial segregation of the electorate, with Indo-Fijians voting for Indo-Fijians, Fijians for Fijians and Others for Others, is not conducive to the task of nation-building. In fact, it is positively harmful. The present system provides no incentive to our politicians to appeal to nonracial issues of broad national concern. There is no political mileage for any political party in the present circumstances in embracing a multiracial platform. On the contrary, the present arrangement provides all the inducement to ethnic chauvinism. And in parliament, political discourse is equally distorted, even tainted, by race: it is not the opposition criticising the government, it is an 'Indian' opposition criticising a 'Fijian and General Elector' government. And so it goes.

Equally problematic is the unequal representation of the different groups in the parliament. Human beings the world over want to live in freedom, with dignity and self respect, It is dehumanising and degrading to live a life of subservience. Every group wants a political system that bears some resemblance to their contribution to society. So it comes as no surprise that segments of the Fijian community and, of course, the Indo-Fijian community, want their voices not just represented, but fairly represented, in the parliament. As your leader said in March this year: 'A

government has to be responsive to the needs of all the communities. Any future constitution which does not aim for that objective will fail. The notion that one community or the other alone should be able to be in government without the need for support from the other communities is quite abhorrent and will create serious divisions in society'. That statement needs 'no further elaboration.

I understand that sentiment and respect the struggle to create a just and fair representative democracy. Nonetheless, I have come to embrace the view that numbers by themselves are not that important. That is, it does not really matter how many Indo-Fijians there are in parliament (27, 30, or a figure reflecting their numbers in the total population). The more important question, I think, is how they are elected to parliament. Does it really matter who represents you in parliament as long as your vital interests are fairly represented and protected there? Numbers will mean little unless people speak cross-culturally, stretch their hands across the racial divide..

That is where I believe it will be worth thinking about the principle of common roll. You may have 40 Fijian seats in the House of Representatives out of 70 seats, but those 40 should be elected on the basis of common franchise, so that in the ultimate analysis, those thus elected are accountable to their (multiracial) constituencies, and not just to their own racial groups. Here, I agree wholeheartedly with your leader when he says that a racially based political system is 'a prescription for disaster', a 'cancer that will destroy this country'. As an interim measure and as a temporary compromise, it may be worth revisiting the Street Commission report (in 1975), which recommended the retention of the communal seats with the same weight as under the 1970 constitution to counter racial fears and to provide reassurance and a sense of security to racial minorities, but also suggested the removal of racial reservation for the 25 remaining national seats, turning them into five constituencies with 'no restriction of race or religion for either voters or candidates'.

Finally, Mr Chairman, a word to and about the primary constituency of your party, the Indo-Fijian community. There is no doubt in my mind that the Indo-Fijian people are going through the most turbulent period in their history since the end of indenture in 1920. When girmitee ended, the Indo-Fijians were essentially left to their own devices, discarded and despised, expected to contribute menial labour to the development of the country, but not to demand political power commensurate with their numbers and contribution to the colonial economy. A people, like children,

to be seen but not heard. Your leaders Pundit Vishnu Deo, Mr AD Patel, among many others dedicated their lives to the cause of a free and democratic Fiji. They suffered many setbacks, as you well know, and lost many battles, but they never compromised their integrity or sacrifice the principles they believed in. Stick to the truth (as they saw it) and the rest would take care of itself seems to have been their creed. At this critical point in your history, the Indo-Fijian community needs similar leaders who will lead by precept and example, who maintain the highest standards of integrity, who discard bigotry, vindictiveness and pettiness and embrace a nonracial vision for the country and all its peoples. Leaders who realise the truth of the statement that for our people, there is no alternative to coexistence, that dialogue and discussion are the only way forward for all our people.

The struggle for political equality, however, was only a part of a larger process of recovery and rejuvenation of the Indo-Fijian community. The Indo-Fijian people picked up the pieces from the debris of girmitee and gradually over time, bit by small bit, built up families, farms and social, cultural, educational and religious institutions. They engaged in nothing less than a massive project of cultural reconstruction. Self-help and sacrifice, with honour and a sense of fairness, *izzat* and *insaaf*, formed the cornerstone of this struggle. Most Indo-Fijian started by Sangam, Sanatan, Arya Samaj, the Muslim organisations, etc., which educated generations of our children, are the products of such efforts. I believe that a careful look at the ethos and spirit of the pioneering efforts of our parents and grand parents is needed at this point.

They started with virtually nothing and yet gave us so much. Surely the present generation, placed in far better circumstances, can and should be expected to do more, to teach our children values, morals and principles that will enable them to live with dignity, self-respect and tolerance in our multicultural country. We inherited so much from our forefathers (and foremothers as well). What, we must ask ourselves, is it that we are going to bequeath to our children and their children? The political struggle for a fair and just Fiji for all its peoples is, of course, vital and should be continued. But the larger and quite urgent agenda of cultural reconstruction should be borne in mind as well.

As you proceed with your deliberations, it is worth remembering the words of Martin Luther King who once said:

The 20th century is strewn with the victims of human cruelty, and it is also replete with examples of human triumph. The

worldwide struggles against war, racism, poverty, colonialism, and totalitarian repression all testify to the truth that while men may be oppressed by slavery, the urge for freedom will persist undiminished, and while death may break men's bodies it shall have no dominion over their souls.

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