The people of Fiji are embarked on an eventful journey as we seek to establish a more meaningful and more inclusive democracy. We await the setting up of a constituent assembly to debate a draft Constitution that is already being amended by the government, ahead of elections under a new fairer electoral system ending communal voting scheduled to be held in September, 2014. While the future remains unclear, because the military retains a tacit veto over the process in place, I remain hopeful that a more inclusive, representative, accountable and responsive system of governance will nevertheless emerge in the near future. My seeming optimism is based on the aspirations, hopes and expectations of those who participated in the deliberations of the Constitution Review Commission.

Against this background, the authors of “Voices of the People Perceptions and Preconditions for Democratic Development in Fiji” conducted their research between August 2011 and April 2012 for their Report. It combined both focus groups and in-depth interviews covering democracy, the rule of law, leadership, decision-making and citizenship. The findings and conclusions of the Report constitute an invaluable contribution to the national conversation and dialogue we must have about the system of governance we ought to strive toward. The institutions to be established under our new constitution comprise only part of the challenge. What is equally important are the informal systems that complement, influence and shape our perceptions in daily life such as culture, tradition, religion and civil society and the values that imbue them.

The authors make it clear that their concept of democracy is wider than the notions of liberal democracy that have developed in the west. The focus is on a citizenry that is fully aware of their rights and responsibilities and are able to participate fully in decision-making at all levels of our society. So beyond the institutions of State that are supposed to serve the wider public interest, what is envisaged is the capacity of the ordinary citizen to enter into and take part in issues of direct concern to them as well as wider issues of national concern. Our respective communities emphasise the role of leaders and more senior persons in dialogue and debate, and this can be a significant barrier to more open processes of discussion. However attitudes are changing as levels of education and exposure increase, and those who were previously voiceless develop avenues whereby they can be heard. This may emerge through civil society
advocacy or by way of a broader and deeper understanding of the culture of human rights.

Democracy is not merely about the right to vote and elect representatives to Parliament. It is much, much more than that. It is about enabling everyone to have the opportunity to be included in decision-making at all levels of society, especially those who tend to be excluded or marginalised such as the poor, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, women, the elderly and rural populations. If we are to build a more meaningful democracy, then there must be a conscious realisation by those who continue to dominate power structures to both share and devolve their authority and influence. As reflected in the Report, there is recognition that some of these systems are changing. But it is offset by a concern that leadership in all spheres of our society must be strengthened and better training and mentoring provided.

In the sphere of decision-making, the Report recognises the largely patriarchal nature of this process. However, this process is not immune to change. It is happening before our eyes as the process of modernisation proceeds apace, education advances the notion of equality and merit while the media projects images of individual achievement. The ‘clash’ between cultures, whether it is between customary rules and State laws, human rights and cultural values or between different ethnic communities is acknowledged. But it ought not to be seen as a necessarily negative development but a symptom of difference. If our evolving democracy is to have any meaning, then it must create mechanisms for mediating these apparent tensions in a more nuanced way. The solution is to find some means of balancing apparent contradictions between individual rights and community interests. It is not always possible of course, but the challenge and the promise lie in the exploration of possibilities.

Both the focus groups and those interviewed in the Report have a largely unflattering view of politicians. It is easy to ascribe blame to politicians for the failures of our system of governance and to indict them for our race-based electoral system. I have some sympathy for this perspective but also feel it is a little unfair. While we looked to our politicians as leaders, we must also accept some responsibility for perpetuating communal politics. There is a symbiotic relationship between politicians and their electorate, and the latter saw little reason to change or advocate reform for most of the period post-independence. If we are to develop a sustainable democracy for the long term, then we must all take responsibility for the failures of the past. Only then can we be more honest and realistic in our expectations of each other.

‘A common and equal citizenry’ is one of the principles enshrined in the draft Constitution and in the Decrees setting up the Constitution Review Commission and the Constituent Assembly. This is an issue of both of divergence and
convergence for those who participated in the research for the research for the Report. Identity was both a vexed subject for the two main ethnic groups, but there was also recognition that the process of globalisation and exposure, as well as the imposition of a common signifier, was creating its own dynamic. In the discourse around ‘a common and equal citizenry’ it is important to recognise that the phrase while asserting equality and acknowledging common values, makes tacit space for difference. Those characteristics make allowances for our ethnicities, our unique cultures and traditions, languages and the issue of indigeneity and ownership of land. This is merely highlighted for further discussion and debate.,

The Report makes practical recommendations about strengthening democracy in Fiji. These include a one person one vote electoral system, the promotion of initiatives on inter-faith, inter-cultural and peace dialogues to promote tolerance and mutual respect, creating education curricula to develop leadership skills in all spheres, strengthening programs on civic education in schools and communities rooted in the cultural and religious context of our communities and Fijian society at large and formulating civic education programs for communities throughout Fiji to be undertaken by government and civil society. In addition, establishing citizen fora in rural and urban areas to monitor the accountability of leaders and engage citizens on important public issues as well as develop codes of conduct and ethics for all leadership sectors. What is apparent from the nature of these initiatives is the promotion of accountability and transparency in decision-making, as well as the inculcation of values such as mutual respect, tolerance and cultural sensitivity. They also emphasise citizen participation and inclusivity at all levels of our society. This remains work in progress because community levels of understanding of human rights, civic values, citizenship and a more informed society are uneven. But the trend towards the questioning of authority structures and the demand for more accountability in leadership and decision-making is a welcome and healthy development.

The authors emphasise in their findings the critical importance of context and local circumstances. The democracy we are building must be suited to our situation. It has to take account of our multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious heritage, acknowledge the place of Taukei as the indigenous people of Fiji, while not privileging any community in particular. And it must build on what we share in common such as a shared identity, citizenship, cultural sensitivity, mutual respect, tolerance and a deeper understanding of what it means to be an integral part of this country.

The Report has not shied away from sensitive issues such as the role of the military and the role of the Bose Levu Vakaturaga and the rule of law. There appears to be widespread support for the view that the military should be answerable to civilian authority. The military for its part sees itself as the ultimate
guarantor of peace, security and order in the country. This then raises the question of to whom is it answerable? The reality that we have to consider is that the process of restoring civilian authority over the military will require negotiation and engagement with the military itself. It will demand patience, trust and goodwill among all parties. As for the role of the Bose Levu Vakaturaga, there is some support for its re-emergence as a cultural guardian of the Taukei. The government remains implacably opposed to any reinstatement of the institution. The alternative may be to focus on the Taukei Land Trust Board, the Taukei Lands Commission and the Vola ni Kawa Bula as the means of enhancing Taukei culture and language. The connection between the rule of law and building democracy could perhaps be better understood. Put simply, the rule of law mediates the relationship between the State and the individual as well as between and among members of our community. It minimises the tendency towards caprice and whim by ensuring that the law is applied equally to everyone irrespective of whom or what they are. The rule of law holds individuals and groups accountable for their actions. There is recognition that an independent judiciary is crucial for creating a sustainable democracy.

It is important to acknowledge that building a democracy which promotes full and inclusive citizen participation is an evolving process. The authors of the Report have offered practical initiatives as to how this may be accomplished. Whether one agrees or not, is not relevant. What matters is that the views discussed in the Report provide a significant starting point for the ongoing debates we must have about the nature of the democracy we are seeking to establish. Encouraging people to express themselves, recognising that everyone has a perspective to share, is an essential building block in this development. What is sustainable in the long term is what emerges from the people themselves. In that regard, this Report represents a valuable resource in the opinions it captures and the analysis it offers of perceptions and preconditions for democratic development in Fiji.

With those few remarks, I am pleased to launch the Report “Voices of The People—Perceptions and Preconditions for Democratic Development in Fiji”. Thank you and good evening.