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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Fijian Election

SPEECH

Monday, 20 October 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Andrews, Karen, MP

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Mrs ANDREWS (McPherson) (12:47): I am very pleased to speak in support of this motion by the member for Herbert. Australia played an important role in the Fiji election as co-lead of the Multinational Observer Group, known as the MOG, together with Indonesia and India. The MOG comprised 92 observers from 15 countries and organisations: Australia, Canada, the European Union, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Melanesian Spearhead Group, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia, South Africa, Turkey, the UK and the USA. Having served in the Australian delegation to the MOG, led by former minister Peter Reith, it was indeed a very rare and personal privilege to bear witness to a nation returning to democracy after a period of military government.

Australia has such a long and proud history of stable democracy. We sometimes take for granted our electoral rights and responsibilities. To see the Fijian people embrace this opportunity was extremely heartening and a reminder of the duty we all bear as elected representatives. The MOG did not run the election, nor were we there to be political commentators, but our observations were extensive, involving a lot of consultation with all sectors of the community in the lead-up to the election and particularly on election day. On election day, 17 September, members of the MOG visited 455 polling stations, which was around 31 per cent of the total number of polling stations. We took our responsibility seriously and we even had our own discrete tally room to ensure that the results posted matched what had been observed.

While a full report is due next month, the provisional statement made on 18 September found that the Fijian elections had been credible and that the conditions were in place for Fijians to exercise their right to vote freely and the outcome was on track to broadly represent the will of Fijian voters. It is worth noting that Australia, as well as co-leading the MOG, was also an important practical supporter of Fiji's election preparations, including providing six Australian election experts to work in the Fijian elections office.

Since coming to office, our government has taken a leadership role in normalising relations with Fiji within the region. As far back as late last year, the incoming government announced a new policy of enhanced engagement with Fiji, centred on increased cooperation in political and economic relations. Australia's conciliatory role earlier this year included working constructively towards democracy through the Pacific Islands Forum Ministerial Contact Group. I congratulate the foreign minister on her leadership and her understanding of the way to achieve democracy in Fiji through respectful negotiation and discussion.

I also want to take this opportunity to congratulate Prime Minister Bainimarama on both his election win and his decision to entrust the people of Fiji with the right to determine their destiny. Without raking over the history of the military coup, it is sufficient to say that few people in such positions of power relinquish control willingly. It is a measure of his regard within Fiji that his Fiji First Party received a resounding majority of the vote—around 59 per cent.

Of course, there are still many challenges to be faced when it comes to building a new parliamentary culture. Early judicial decisions taken on constitutional issues will help determine the success of the new system, and the degree of confidence the Fijian community has in it. As Peter Reith, our delegation leader, put it recently: 'Needless to say, democracy is not a one-day wonder. Fiji will need to continue and improve the practice of democracy.'

It is early days, but Australia certainly stands ready to work with the Fijian government to meet any challenges and to build on the very strong relationship between our two nations. It is worth noting that 300,000 Australians visit Fiji every year. In fact, Australia is the largest source country for Fiji's successful tourism industry. Further, Australian trade with Fiji is worth \$2 billion every year and Australia is the largest foreign investor in Fiji. There are also around 50,000 Fijian nationals living in Australia. So the ties between our two nations are undeniably strong. We both play a vital role in the region and a harmonious and constructive relationship is in both our interests.

I want to take a moment to thank Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade staff, led by observer coordinator Andrew Goledzinowski, who supported not only the Australian participants in the MOG, but all 92 observers. I also acknowledge the staff at the Australian high commission, led by Acting High Commissioner Glenn Miles. Finally, it is the Fijian people themselves who deserve our congratulations, respect and admiration for the way they conducted themselves and for the enthusiasm they displayed.