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**PARLIAMENT OF FIJI
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
DAILY HANSARD**

THURSDAY, 30 SEPTEMBER, 2004

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND
EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES**

HON. L. QARASE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to move:

That this House agrees to establish a 9-Member Standing Committee on Human Rights and Equal Opportunities consisting of all political parties including independent members of the House, not aligned to a political party, to examine the United Nations CERD Report relating to human rights and race relations and Human Rights Commission and any other report which deals with issues of human rights, equal opportunities and race relations tabled in the House, and to regularly report to the House with appropriate recommendations as and where necessary.

HON. K. DATT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. L. QARASE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this motion is another successful outcome of the informal *Talanoa* Dialogue

between Government and the Fiji Labour Party.

The motion is to establish a nine-member Standing Committee on Human Rights and Equal Opportunities. The Committee will consider the details of its terms of reference. Basically, through this Committee, this august House will be able to consider in detail, important reports that deal with human rights issues and what is being done to promote equal opportunities. This will include equal opportunities for women, the disabled and other disadvantaged groups in our society.

The Committee will examine reports such as the Annual Report of the Fiji Human Rights Commission and the Report of the UN Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD). On allegations of racial discrimination in employment, the Committee's purview will cover both the public and private sectors.

I would also like the Committee to keep track of the progress at the United Nations on the adoption of a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and a Declaration of Convention on the Rights and Protection of Minorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one aspect of human rights, which I want Government and the Committee to be in regular contact with, with the Human Rights Commission and the United Nations is the rights of groups and communities in Fiji.

The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights is weighted heavily towards the rights of individuals. The Bill of Rights provision of our Constitution is drawn largely from this Universal Declaration. We need to be sure that equal emphasis on rights and protection is being given in our Constitution, both to individuals, groups and community rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few words, I commend this motion to the House.

HON. K. DATT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make a small intervention on the motion before the House.

When this motion is passed, it will be a milestone decision for Fiji's Parliament. From my little knowledge, Sir, it would probably be unparalleled for the Pacific and for developing countries.

Sir, the proposal is to establish a Standing Committee. In other words, at a subsequent stage, it is envisaged that the Standing Orders will be amended to make this particular Standing Committee for all times, and that is the reason why this is a milestone decision.

It is one more step for Fiji towards greater transparency and accountability in its affairs. In this particular instance, the focus is on human rights issues. It is particularly to examine the UN CERD Reports, which initially deals with violations that are perceived to exist in the country. They do similar reports for other countries as well. However, as a measure of Fiji's strength, it has decided to set up this Committee to examine that Report in greater detail as part of its own Parliamentary process. This is a noble idea.

The *Talanoa* Committee had delegated the work of examining the UN CERD Report to a sub-committee that consists of three Members of the Government side and three Members from the Fiji Labour Party. They have prepared an extensive review of the UN CERD Report and I am hopeful that in the first report to this House, the report by the Committee will be appended, so that the other Members will get to share some of the visions and ideas expressed for nation building in this country, particularly on how we can move towards a united Fiji with better and more harmonious race relations.

The honourable Prime Minister made a reference to the

Committee having a closer look at individual and group rights.

Sir, I see no problem with that. Both individual and group rights are enshrined in our Constitution and as such, I see no problem as to why any other Committee cannot also function to monitor that part of the Constitution and that the requirements in the Constitution is fulfilled regularly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Committee will have some fairly wide-ranging reports to examine. It was originally envisaged that it will develop into a Committee like the Public Accounts Committee, which sits regularly to examine those reports, not just the UN CERD Report, but any other report that is tabled in the House, which makes reference to or deals with issues of human rights and equal opportunities. The honourable Prime Minister has kindly defined that in the widest possible way to cover gender issues, rights of women, the disabled people and so on.

It looks like it will become a full-time Committee working at all those reports. In that wide definition, it looks as if the reports tabled from the Department of Social Welfare may also come under the scrutiny of this Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very happy to be supporting this resolution and everyone on this side of the House is equally happy to be part of such a machinery that would show to the world that we are moving towards greater accountability and transparency.

HON. K. TAVOLA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very happy that this Committee is going to be set up to address all matters relating to human rights, equal opportunities and the UN CERD Report. That is the point that I wish to make.

I think out of the *Talanoa* Dialogue Session, we did agree on some procedural matters as regards to my Ministry and how it addresses the report to the CERD Committee and it also has obligations to submit via Cabinet to Parliament. I am sure that we will work out the procedures necessary between the Standing

Committee that we are now establishing, as well as the work that is now being done by my Ministry in relation to the submission of our two yearly reports to the CERD Committee. I am sure there will be a way that we can sort this out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before the House.

HON. L. QARASE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief. I would like to express my thanks to the honourable Member for Macuata East Open (K. Datt) for his useful comments as usual and also the comments by the honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade.

I think all of us are glad that again on this particular item, we seem to be on a similar wave-length and that we are ready to discuss in the Committee the issues that will arise from time to time, and of course, on the basis of the reports that will be submitted to the Committee on matters relating to human rights and equal opportunities.

Apart from that, I would like to extend my big *vinaka vakalevu* to the *Talanoa* Group and also to the Sub-committees for their work in relation to three very important issues that have been the subject matter of the three motions before the House. I know that Members have worked very hard. They have to read a lot of background information and I thank them for their contributions. I express the hope that the spirit of *talanoa* will flow into those Select Committees and the outcome will be in the best interest of our beloved country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few words, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put.

Motion agreed.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I would just like to say that it might have looked flitting that we have covered these three motions within an hour, but these are three most important motions. Each Parliament is always remembered for its record. This is one of the historic hours of this Parliament. It might appear flitting but its depth is such that it will be remembered. You can read about it in the *Daily Hansard* but you have to be in the House to witness it. Honourable Members, I am greatly honoured to be in the Chair on this occasion.