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WHO WILL PICK UP THE PIECES?

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Over the past weeks as the devastating consequences of the events of 19 May have begun to have their real impact on the nation, I have been trying to rationalise my own reactions. I suppose my overpowering emotion is one of anger. Anger, that a small group of armed men should have the arrogance to proclaim that they know what is best for our people and our country. Anger, that they apparently have no care or consideration for the disastrous consequences of their actions.

But the other dominant emotion is one of sadness. Sadness, that the aspirations and hopes of so many people, and of a nation collectively, should be shattered so abruptly. Sadness, about the fear and suffering that the people of this nation must now endure and the terrible economic hardships that lie ahead.

Sadness, that law and order have given way to anarchy.

Whenever I see our Pacific blue flag fluttering at the masthead, I remember with great poignancy that day in Albert Park 30 years ago when it was unfurled for the first time and the hearts of every Fiji citizen swelled with pride and hope. I recall Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara pointedly reminding us that we were not celebrating the end of British rule but the beginning of self-rule.

That flag still flies and remains a symbol of our freedom. It represents the lovely islands of Lau and the Yasawas; the rich delta flats of Nadi and Ba; the lush jungles of Taveuni; the clean air that we breathe. It represents freedom from persecution and the right to vote and speak our

views. It represents the brotherhood of Fijians and Indians, Europeans and Chinese, Rotumans and Melanesians, Muslims and Hindus, Catholics and Protestants. It represents hard work and thrift. It represents freedom of assembly, tolerance and understanding. It represents honesty, trust and sharing.

Some will say that the hope which filled our hearts on 10 October 1970 has not been fulfilled; that unacceptable disparities have arisen between the races; that in trying to keep pace with globalisation we have lost our way; that in attempting to impose western democracy we have sacrificed traditional values; that Fijians have been in danger of losing control in the land of their ancestors. These claims contain elements of truth. Yet, despite the imperfections, our systems were dealing more effectively than most other countries with similar problems.

Perhaps our very success has been the cause of our downfall. Perhaps we have been so concerned with economic growth that we became insensitive to the rumblings of discontent that were simmering malignantly in our bowels.

We allowed the flag to become faded and tattered. No one cared so long as there was money in the bank and time for leisure. Patriotism was regarded as something we need not waste time upon. We treated 10 October as a holiday rather than an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to Fiji, or as a time to honestly re-examine our progress and determine whether the objectives of self-rule were being achieved. People only thought of Fiji collectively when we won the Hong Kong sevens.

Now, the malignant growth that we could have treated has erupted into a suppurating sore that is slowly poisoning the whole Fiji body. There remains no pride in being a Fiji citizen. Only sadness as the fabric of life crumbles. The world mocks us and writes us off as just another basket case.

We must not allow this!

Our island nation has always had the ingredients to build, not a nation of power, nor one of strategic importance, but one where its people can have a satisfactory degree of prosperity and be happy. We have our share

of natural resources and a unique mix of cultures. We have in our midst men and women of the utmost integrity and intellectual ability. We have demonstrated that we can be an example to the rest of the world.

Let us not squander these marvellous gifts.

It is time for our collective human resource to be harnessed and for true leaders who have the interests of the whole country and of all people, as their utmost priority, to come forth and vigorously and steadfastly uphold justice and the dignity of all men and women of this nation. It is incumbent on all the diverse people who profess to be citizens of this country to be upstanding, support those leaders, and proclaim their loyalty to the country of their ancestors or adoption. That huge silent group must become the vocal majority.

I am reminded of Ratu Seru Cakobau's statement to Sir Hercules Robinson at the signing of the Deed of Cession at Levuka 126 years ago. 'What of the future?' he asked rhetorically. 'If things remain as they are, Fiji will become like a piece of driftwood on the sea and be picked up by the first passer-by.'

My third emotion is accordingly one of fear. Fear, about the way we are drifting aimlessly into a sea of intrigue and turmoil. Fear, about who will pick up the pieces of driftwood.