

**We face grave and urgent decisions
of inestimable importance to our country**

OPENING STATEMENT

Of

**Speaker JOSE DE VENECIA, JR.
SECOND REGULAR SESSION
House of Representatives, 13th Congress
25 July 2005**

WE FACE GRAVE AND URGENT DECISIONS

This second session of our Thirteenth Congress opens right in the middle of a political crisis.

And this House faces grave and urgent decisions that are of inestimable importance to our country.

Fortunately, crises often serve to bring *clarity* to basic questions.

Hence I am hopeful that this House—by *reasoning together*—will reach a *sober consensus* on what we as a nation must do.

TO IMPEACH OR NOT TO IMPEACH

On the question of whether or *not* to impeach the President:

I know *none of us* looks forward to this process—because it is liable to *destabilize* the economy: and at a time investors need political stability most of all.

But I also feel *that* we need to put this issue *behind* us—and *that* the President's best recourse is to confront the accusations against her in the manner the Constitution prescribes.

For this reason, I will—*immediately this morning*—direct the Secretary General of the House to include in our House Order of Business the two impeachment complaints and the attachments that have been filed earlier with the House.

I will exercise my constitutional duty to place them in the Order of Business now, even if the same Constitution allows me the luxury of ten session days within which to exercise such transmittal.

If there are any amended complaints duly endorsed by a member or members of the House, I shall also so see to it the same is included in the transmittal, not within ten sessions, but also today, as soon as I receive it.

A SYSTEMIC CHANGE IN OUR POLITICS

An even more far-reaching decision we must make is that of *initiating* a *systemic* change in our politics.

Enlightened national opinion now agrees the *divided government* produced *unavoidably* by the checks and balances of the presidential system we had *borrowed* from the Americans simply *cannot* work in the context of our present-day politics.

This session will have to decide on constitutional change.

My feeling—which more and more people now share—is that this is best done through this Congress' constituting itself as a *Constituent Assembly*.

WHY A CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY?

As opposed to a Constitutional Convention, a Constituent Assembly is the most expeditious, least costly and most orderly way of amending the Charter.

A Constitutional Convention will cost *eight billion* pesos in *new* money we don't have. While an Assembly can make do using the funds normally allocated to Congress.

Even more important, the Joint (Congress) Resolution calling for an Assembly can *specify*—and *limit*—the areas of revision the Assembly may be allowed to make.

This will safeguard the 1987 Charter from any partisan or self-interested tinkering.

No such restraint may be imposed on a Constitutional Convention.

By the way, our 1935, 1972, and 1986 Charters all list the Constituent Assembly as the *first*—and *implicitly* the *preferred*—*method* of constitutional revision.

The U. S. Constitution has been revised more than 30 times, not by Constitutional Convention, but by Constituent Assembly of the U. S., Senate and House of Representatives.

A UNICAMERAL PARLIAMENT, A FEDERAL STATE

The emerging consensus also favors a shift to a *unicameral* Parliament—and from the *unitary* to a *federal* state over a ten-year *transition* long sought by Mindanao and the Visayas, the outer islands, the Bicol Region, the Cordilleras and Cagayan Valley long complaining against the excesses of 'imperial' Manila.

Federalism will give local people *more* control—*not only* of their own resources—but *also* of their livelihoods, their police, and their children's schools.

Not only will federalism *soothe* the *grievances* of our cultural minorities that have become *alienated* from the national community.

Federalism will also ensure that the central government *becomes* the *partner*—and *not* the *master*—of local governments.

STRENGTHENING THE MACHINERY OF GOVERNMENT

Such a basic shift in the political system will require corresponding changes in other aspects.

—Most urgently, we must raise the Commission on Elections beyond the reach of partisan politics.

—We must also begin to set up a truly professional civil service—because, in the end, democratic practice comes down to the machinery of government.

—And we will also need to modernize our political parties—to make them more efficient *channels* of popular expression, and more effective agencies of *representative* and *responsive* government.

REPAIRING CONSTITUTIONAL INFIRMITIES IN THE E-VAT LAW

Even while we think on these key decisions, we must deal with unfinished business from the last session.

Most urgently, we will need to repair whatever *constitutional infirmities* the Supreme Court might find in our expanded Value-Added-Tax Law.

We need badly to raise State revenues so we can make more investments in public health, basic education, farm-to-market roads, and other basic infrastructure.

Socially, the Filipino nation faces both *nutritional* and *educational* disasters. Six out of 10 children are malnourished to some degree. Only half of all Grade 1 pupils ever get to finish high school.

While we have made some progress in alleviating mass poverty, our vigorous neighbors are doing much faster.

We too must hasten to ensure that development leaves no one behind.

DEBT-FOR-DEVELOPMENT SWAP

Lastly—I have some good news on our initiative to enable the 100 middle-income countries most burdened with debt to meet their Millennium Development Goal of *halving* national poverty by 2015.

As you know, the United Nations has invited us to elaborate on our large-scale debt-for-equity in development program before the United Nations.

More recently, the International Monetary Fund also asked me to speak before its Directors in Washington to present our initiative formally to them.

During this recess, I was able to explain the program to the Paris Club, the French Parliament, the British Parliament and the British Department of Treasury, the Austrian Minister of Finance, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Dutch Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, and the President and political leaders of Ukraine.

I was accompanied by five members of the majority coalition—Representatives Juan Miguel Zubiri, Monico Puentevella, Augusto Baculio, Ferjenel Biron and Janette Garin—and by Deputy Minority Leader Rolex Suplico.

The Paris Club—with its core group of the G-8 richest countries and led by its President, Jean-Pierre Jouyet—has formed a technical committee to study the Philippine proposal.

The Italian Government, led by no less than its Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, one of the powerful G-8 heads of government, has endorsed the initiative with an official letter of support, per outgoing Italian Ambassador Umberto Colesanti, less than ten days from receiving my letter.

Ambassador Colesanti wrote, and I quote:

"With reference to Your letter dated 16th May 2005 addressed to Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, I am particularly glad to inform Your Excellency that Prime Minister Berlusconi, in full agreement and coordination with the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, appreciates the aim of the Philippines to use even the debt conversions in order to fund the fight against poverty and the pursuit of the "Millennium Development Goals."

"The Italian Government shall therefore give favourable consideration to the Philippine proposal to augment the percentage of the debt previously restructured within the Paris Club that can be subject of conversion, once the proposal itself is submitted to the Paris Club."

The significance of this program to our country and people would be enormous if our campaign for approval of the proposal succeeds.

Our country has a staggering annual debt service of US\$4.5 billion. Under the proposed program, half of this amount—US\$2.25 billion or 112.5 billion pesos, which is huge in our era of budget deficits—could be made available for specific development projects to benefit our provinces, cities and municipalities.

Among these development projects are:

1. Debt for reforestation (backed by carbon credits) to reforest the bald mountains of Asia, Africa and Latin America;
2. Debt for mass housing;
3. Debt for infrastructure projects;
4. Debt for hospitals and health care;
5. Debt for irrigation, post-harvest facilities and food production;
6. Debt for schools, classrooms and information technology;
7. Debt for clean water;
8. Debt for eco-tourism; and

9. Debt for wealth-creating projects such as reclamation and mining.

These development projects would give a dramatic push to President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's 10-point legacy program and our 12-point wealth-creation program—and keep the Philippines on course toward attaining the MDGs and winning our battle against poverty, ignorance and disease.

Meanwhile DFA Secretary Alberto Romulo has also endorsed our proposal before the Summit of the Group of 77 in Qatar last month—and our diplomats at the UN are working to ensure it becomes a priority-agenda of the General Assembly.

OUR COUNTRY'S ON THE VERGE OF EPOCHAL CHANGE

Now to sum up and conclude.

Our country's on the verge of epochal changes in our political system.

Generally speaking, these changes will *shift the center of gravity* in national politics from the Executive Branch to the Legislature.

Our generation of lawmakers is *privileged* to take part in making the decisions that will set these changes in motion.

In making these decisions, let us *not* forget that we owe our constituencies *not* our obedience *but* our best judgment.

As the eighteenth-century British statesman, *Edmund Burke*, would remind us:

“Only to a limited degree [is] it a representative's duty to protect the interests of his constituents: [his] more important role is to play a part in a deliberative assembly of one nation with one interest, that of the whole.”

In this spirit, I declare *open* this Second Session of the House of Representatives of the Thirteenth Congress.