

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 27TH JULY, 2020

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 27TH JULY, 2020

The Parliament met at 9.41 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

HONOURABLE SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Honourable Members were present.

MINUTES

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Honourable Speaker, I beg to move:

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 17th July, 2020, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Honourable Speaker, I beg to second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I welcome you all to today's sitting of Parliament.

I also welcome all those watching the live broadcast and the live streaming of today's proceedings from the comfort of their home, office and mobile phone. Thank you for taking an interest in the working of your Parliament.

Handing-Over Ceremony of ICT Equipment

Honourable Members, later during the morning refreshments break, we will have the handing-over ceremony of the ICT equipment by the UNDP Fiji Parliament Support Project. The Fijian Parliament is grateful for the continued support rendered by the UNDP Fiji Parliament Support Project in the area of ICT, especially during this pandemic. This is another milestone achieved as it has enabled the Parliament Committees to continue with its work, meetings and consultations on Bills, reports and treaties virtually.

Honourable Members, please, take note that the hand-over ceremony will take place at the Big Committee Room and I invite all Honourable Members to attend. Thank you, Honourable Members.

Suspension of Standing Orders

Honourable Members, before we proceed to the next Item on the Order Paper, I will allow the Honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a suspension motion. As it is the convention, I am allowing this without notice, as I consider it necessary for the proper conduct of

the business of Parliament, particularly during this significant week involving the National Budget process.

I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, I beg to move under Standing Order 6:

That so much of Standing Orders 23, 34 and 46 be suspended to allow the following during the sitting period beginning Monday, 27th July, 2020 and ending Friday, 31st July, 2020 –

- (a) exempting the Shadow Minister for Economy from the ordinary speaking time limitations during his response to the National Budget Address;
- (b) exempting the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications from the ordinary speaking time limitations during his right of reply;
- (c) Parliament to sit beyond ordinary sitting times;
- (d) limiting the refreshments, lunch and dinner breaks to be determined by you, Mr. Speaker, so as not to unduly interrupt the business of the House; and
- (e) in the event that the business for any given day is concluded earlier than anticipated, for business to be brought forward from the following sitting day.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak on his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this motion is purely a procedural matter and as all Honourable Members are aware, the National Budget Debate week is a significant event in our Parliament Calendar, as it allows robust discussions and debate on the forecast for the next financial year. Mr. Speaker, Sir, now more than ever, this process is essentially integral to the Fijian people as our nation continues to grapple and deal with the socio and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, as you had earlier alluded to, the approval of the finance and appropriations is a fundamental role of any legislature and in that regard, the week-long process in the course of this week is essential and vital for Parliament to fulfil its constitutional obligation.

With reference to the Standing Orders (SO), Sir, clause 23 is about “Sitting days” and time, SO 34 again is on the “Order of Parliament business” and SO 46 specifically refers to “Notices of motion required”.

Mr. Speaker, as is convention, the Shadow Minister for Economy, in giving his response to the National Budget Address, can take up the same time as the delivery of the National Budget Address, therefore the House must approve exemption from the ordinary speaking time limitations.

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, for the right of reply from the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, there may be numerous issues from the Honourable Members which the Honourable Attorney-General will respond to and provide clarification on so as to allay all misperceptions and doubts, and we will have urgencies in some of the issues that will be raised before the House; and, of course, we expect Parliament to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. and, of course, the order of business may be different from the other sittings and there may be urgent motions in the course of the week as well and, of course, we leave it to your good self, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the allocation of time for refreshments, lunch and, of course, dinner as well.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Business Committee, at its meeting on Friday, 10th July, 2020 unanimously agreed in principle for all these notions to take place to enable the House to complete its business for the entire week.

In that regard, Mr. Speaker, I commend this motion to the House and I seek support from all Honourable Members. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me this opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Leader of the House. Does any Honourable Member wish to contribute to this motion?

I now call on the Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak in reply, if any.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to acknowledge and thank all the Honourable Members for their support and I have nothing further to add to the motion, *vinaka*.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Leader of the House. Honourable Members, the Parliament will now vote on the motion.

Question put.

HON. SPEAKER.- The question is: under Standing Order 6, that so much of Standing Orders 23, 34 and 46 be suspended, to allow the following during the sitting period beginning Monday, 27th July, 2020 and ending Friday, 31st July, 2020:

- (a) exempting the Shadow Minister for Economy from the ordinary speaking time limitations during his response to the National Budget Address;
- (b) exempting the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy from the ordinary speaking time limitations during his right of reply;
- (c) Parliament to sit beyond ordinary sitting times;
- (d) limiting the refreshments, lunch and dinner breaks to be determined by the Speaker so as not to unduly interrupt the business of the House; and
- (e) in the event that the business for any day is concluded earlier than anticipated, for business to be brought forward from the following sitting day.

Does any Member oppose the motion? As no Member opposes, the motion is agreed to unanimously.

Motion agreed to.

CONSIDERATION OF BILLS

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I have been advised that there are no Bills for consideration today.

We will now move on to the next Item on the Order Paper.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications to move the second reading of the 2020–2021 Appropriation Bill 2020.

DEBATE ON THE 2020-2021 APPROPRIATION BILL 2020

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, I move that:

A Bill for an Act to appropriate a sum of Three Billion, Two Hundred and Eleven Million, Nineteen Thousand, One Hundred and Twenty One dollars for the ordinary services of Government for the year ending 31st July 2021, be read a second time.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications for his second reading speech, if any. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. As per convention, I do not have a second reading speech. Thank you very much.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General.

Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate. We will first hear the response from the Shadow Minister for Economy, after which we will continue with the order of the speakers as listed on the Batting Order. Pursuant to the resolution earlier today, the Shadow Minister for Economy will have the same time allocation as the Honourable Attorney-General during the delivery of the National Budget Address.

I now call upon the Shadow Minister for Economy and Leader of the Opposition to deliver his response to the National Budget. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Ministers, Honourable Members of Parliament, I wish you all a very happy sitting and it is good to see that most of us are in good health and for that, we congratulate our healthcare people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I, first of all, congratulate Nadroga for their win on Saturday. We have too many Suva supporters here and they may not like that comment but we congratulate Nadroga for their double-header match victory on Saturday.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have very good memories of playing in Nadroga. The last time I captained Suva, we took our boots off in Korovou/Korolevu when the match was aborted after a small scuffle on the field.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday at the communion service in Wesley City Mission Church, the Reverend Akuila Yabaki mentioned that this is reconciliation week. A part of his message was the reconciliation that took place when the brothers Jacob and Esau, as recorded in Genesis, Chapter 32, met after many years of separation triggered by the younger twin, Jacob and their mother tricking their father Isaac into giving the younger brother the blessings he had intended to give the older brother.

Today, I shall try to contribute to this debate on the National Budget of 2020-2021 as presented by the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy on the evening of Friday, 17th July, 2020, in a language and tone that will promote and encourage thoughts and feelings of reconciliation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am no Shadow Minister for Economy but I am here as a Shadow Prime Minister, so my presentation will be at the level expected of the Prime Minister and the Shadow Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this National Budget is an extraordinary Budget, we accept that; that was anticipated with the heightened degree of hope by the people of Fiji, as thousands now look to the Government for help. These people and all of us here are victims of the economic down-turn due to COVID-19 pandemic.

There was and continue to be anxiety amongst the people as to how the 2020-2021 Budget would actually provide them relief and comfort from their current situation. In addition to the effects of COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of people have also been victims of the devastation caused by *Tropical Cyclone Harold* that the nation suffered in April of this year. What, in the Budget, is designed to bring relief to the afflicted at this time?

Before responding to the National Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me put on record and reiterate my sincere gratitude and congratulation to our front line workers for their resolve, dedication, and unwavering commitment to contain the in-country spread of COVID-19 pandemic. The nurses, paramedics, doctors, hospital administrators, security personnel, Police Force, the Military Personnel and all those people associated with the pandemic-control, trying their very best to contain and control the spread of the pandemic, deserve mention for their enormous contribution.

We, the people of Fiji, salute them for giving their best to contain and control the spread of the pandemic and deserve mention for their enormous contribution, their dedication and their commitment. I ask the Honourable Minister for Health to please convey our gratitude to everyone concerned in the Ministry, and also the Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing to convey our sentiments to those involved.

I know we are not out of the woods yet, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The claim that we are COVID-contained perhaps is not true unless you mean the COVID-19 has contained us within the confines of our borders. We do not exactly know where the world is heading right now and the uncertainty continues as the cases of infection increases around the world. Thousands of people are dying on a daily basis and the world has now seen more than 16 million cases reported and confirmed.

The people of Fiji must unite and stand together in these trying times. Indeed, the whole world needs to stand together to fight the pandemic and come out of the predicament that we are in

today. In view of this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the FijiFirst Government to consider and foster genuine discussion on this issue among political parties and communities to build trust and confidence to fight the current economic downturn.

On many occasions in the past, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had called on the government for a bipartisan approach in addressing issues of national interest, but it always fell on deaf ears. Our suggestions have been brushed aside for perhaps political reasons. This side of the House has been demeaned, belittled several times and we have grown punch-drunk from being belittled but we will continue. Sadly the confrontational thinking continues with reconciliation remaining but a dream.

We also have many concerned citizens with appropriate understanding. I mention a few and I hope they will forgive Mr. Beddoes, Mr. Narube and Professor Wadan Narsey, who have, from time to time, written their opinions in the papers and who have also been dismissed without being heard. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was listening to the Honourable Minister for Economy with great concern, in fact I do not want to be in his seat at that time. He sounded serious with his words about how different this COVID-19 situation was in the history of mankind. Indeed, it is a tragic phase in human history where millions of people are going through very difficult times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the great tragedy glaring in our eyes every day and every moment, the Honourable Minister for Economy, I believe continues to believe everything is okay and sits high on his pedestal. He made me laugh when he bragged about himself and his achievements and let me quote just a few lines, I quote:

“So, what have we accomplished? Through a world leading testing and contact-tracing campaign, we are a COVID-contained country. Excluding a handful of cases confirmed among returning citizens, who have been confined securely in Government funded quarantine facilities, Fiji is 90 days removed from our last case of the virus. Families in Fiji are safe and our record on testing ranks ahead of the rest of the world, right alongside New Zealand and Australia.”

I was wondering where the Honourable Minister lives and where he was speaking from. Was he on the same planet I am on? You do not stop bragging about your achievements or he does not stop bragging about what he says are his achievements or his Government's achievements. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe he was not very complementary in that condemning other countries that are so badly afflicted with the pandemic and where people are losing their lives and loved ones, and only praising our neighbours Australia and New Zealand, perhaps in the hope that they will include us in their travel bubble for our tourism industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Minister for Economy must know that our healthcare is in complete shambles and even in that state, they have managed to do very well at this time. The people of this country know this; the people who do not have the luxury of being treated at the 'Private Hospital', commonly known as that and quite correctly perceived to be that. They see that it is only for the elite who can afford it and the people know that well. Mr. Speaker, Sir, had our country not been so isolated and insulated by the wide expanse of the Pacific Ocean, our predicament would have been worse.

Our healthcare system is not in a position to handle such a pandemic situation, but as I have said before, they have done very well. We are grateful for the human sacrifice and the human factor of healthcare in Fiji. The fact of the matter, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that the FijiFirst Government, the Honourable Prime Minister has hardly done enough for the healthcare system in the past 10 years. The people of this country know. Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me recall some more of the Honourable

Minister's bragging, as some may have forgotten. These were uttered only over a year ago, and I quote:

“This age of historic economic achievements, this unbroken decade has been rightly dubbed by some as the “Bainimarama Boom” for our economy, not a bump, not a bubble but an economic boom, that has carried our economy through 10 years of expansion and will go down in history as the decade with solidified Fiji's economic future.”

That was in the Budget Address 2019-2020.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was no such economic boom as was claimed by the Honourable Minister. Had it been any semblance of boom, we would not be in a doom situation as we are in today. Mr. Speaker, Sir,...

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- ... this pandemic is far more serious than we currently face here in Fiji. People are dying all over the world where infections have been intense vis-a-vis USA, India, Brazil, Russia and Europe. My greatest fear is for the people.

God forbid any further infection in our country. Our healthcare system, and I say it again, is not in a sound state. Thanks to FijiFirst Government's misrule for the last 14 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I suggest to the Government to urgently consider convening a National Summit; that sounds like in an old record, does it?

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order.

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- We have been calling for that, where representatives of key stakeholders from different communities, civil society organisations can participate. We need to consult and involve the private sector in our discussion to restore their confidence and trust. We need to establish a spirit of genuine dialogue and mutual respect for one another rather than consultation with a selected few like-minded people. Any selective approach, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will not work. At the moment we are a bipartisan country, bipolar country, we are pointing at you. If you include us then we are part of your plan, we are all part of the national plan to move Fiji forward. Any selective approach will not work. We need to shift away from petty politics and obscurity which has been the hallmark of your Government Honourable Prime Minister. People must know the truth.

This country needs more open democracy, government accountability and transparency. The government needs to stand up to what it preaches.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I say this in the spirit of the 1997 Constitution which is no longer in force that guarantee the full rights and freedom of all citizens of Fiji. I have not deviated from this principle and continue to believe and urge our people to unite for the common good of all.

I sincerely believe that we could get through this unprecedented event if we all share our collective responsibility and dedicate our efforts to bequeath to our future generations a socially harmonious and prosperous nation.

Against this backdrop, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I share my take on the National Budget 2020-2021 with all the representatives of Fiji and the nation as a whole.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on many occasions, when this side of the House, suggested alternative or provided policy options to the Government, we were accused and ridiculed of being ignorant or of trying to politicise issues. A classic example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is when I discuss the subject of “government finance” and “pertinent issues” related to the economy, we always suggest alternatives based on sound advice from our local and international expert and our own research.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Minister of Economy always pretends to be an expert of the economy and finance and often ridicules others but fails to see the problems that exist. When we point out that our economy is “facing headwinds” or that our economy is in recession, the response from the Government has always been nasty and demeaning. The Honourable Minister of Economy blames us (and me personally) for the problems that exist now referring to things that happened more than three decades ago.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is now time that the FijiFirst Government take full responsibility of the things they did wrong and stop blaming others. Mr. Speaker, Sir, for how long will this Government keep blaming others for its own fault. It is time now that the FijiFirst Government realises its own wrong policies that has left us high and dry; policies that have put the people of this country in a dire situation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only made things obvious. The Fiji economy has been facing problems from about five years ago. It did not start with the COVID-19 pandemic. It started in 2014 and possibly even a few years earlier than that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know that the Honourable Minister of Economy will continue blaming others for his short-sightedness, for he is not humble enough to admit his fault. But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of this country are not fools. They know what this Government is doing and what it is not doing.

The damage that the FijiFirst Government has inflicted on this country through obscurity, lack of accountability and fraudulent practices runs into billions of dollars. Yes, Mr, Speaker, Sir, it is not millions, it is billions of dollars. Our future generations will remain heavily indebted for a long, long time to come and will judge this Government in very bad taste.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, coming back to the budget, I term it as an irresponsible, rudderless and deceiving budget. While the budget is terribly expansionary, it provides the policymakers least direction in terms of how those expenditures are to be implemented to achieve the desired objectives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a huge amount of funds are held as RIE category, which does not provide any indication of commitment of those funds. I will be deliberating on that a little later.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is mindboggling to observe the amount of funds held under Head 50. This indicates that the Government remains unsure of where it intends to commit those funds. These are some of the reasons to term this Budget a “rudderless budget”.

Debt-Ridden Economy: Mr. Speaker, Sir, the national public debt has now reached epic proportions. It will bring the nation to its knees. Yes, we agree that the COVID-19 situation is different from all others as the Honourable Minister has reiterated in his address.

But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to say that the country would have been far better off if the Government was more diligent and accountable in the recent past.

Today, our public debt level has surpassed 80 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP); this is most unprecedented. Under this budget the expenditure to revenue ratio is ridiculously high at more than 200 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all aspects of our economic stagnation, increasing poverty, deteriorating law and order situation, dilapidated infrastructure, weak institutions and the high debt to GDP ratio are associated with the Fiji Government's bad policies, poor governance and above all poor attitude.

The Honourable Minister for Economy is in the attitude of throwing money at problems. The Government has been spending lavishly and not paying attention to important issues. Excessive spending and spending beyond its means has been the hallmark of the FijiFirst Government. The national debt level reflects this in the 2020/2021 National Budget.

This Government's failures are historic misfortune for the people, the future generation is doomed with the proportion debt in the budget and indeed this is unprecedented in the history of this nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I shall get into the details of the budget figures now.

Expenditures and Revenues: Mr. Speaker, Sir, when economists, politicians or accounting firms analyse budgets they first look at the expenditure and the revenue or simply put, at the deficit status of the budget compared to the last financial years (COVID-19 response budget).

May I draw your attention to the following comparison, Mr. Speaker, Sir:

- Total Estimated Revenue, \$1.7 billion, a decrease of \$0.8 billion from \$2.5 billion previously announced;
- Total Estimated Expenditures, \$3.7 billion, an increase of \$0.2 billion from \$3.5 billion in the previous announcement;
- Gross Deficit, \$2.8 billion increase by \$1.5 billion from \$1.2 billion before;
- Total Loan Programme, \$2.7 billion, an increase of \$1.2 billion from \$1.5 billion before;
- Overseas Loan, \$1.4 billion, an increase of \$0.8 billion from \$0.6 billion announced before; and
- Domestic Loan, \$1.3 billion, an increase of \$0.4 billion from the \$0.9 billion announced in the previous budget; and
- Requisition to Incur Expenditure (RIE), those that are still under requisition will be \$1.6 billion increased from \$0.2 billion increased from the \$1.4 billion announced before. The total estimated revenue is \$1.7 billion, the total estimated expenditure is \$3.7 billion, estimated net damage at \$2 billion, gross deficit at \$2.8 billion.

I reiterate what you said to one of our colleagues; a junior officer at the time, living like kings on peasant wages.

Total estimated revenue, \$1.7, decrease from \$0.8 billion on the \$2.5 billion before. Total estimated expenditure is \$3.7 billion, increase of \$0.2 billion, gross deficit \$2.8 billion increased

\$1.5 billion, total loan programme \$2.7 billion, increased by \$1.2 billion from the \$1.5 billion before. Overseas loan is \$1.4 billion, increase by \$0.8 billion from the \$0.6 billion before. Domestic loan and all those things show that things are not well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is nothing less than a “Doomsday Budget”. Just look at the figures. To appreciate the implication of the figures and to determine the right mix of revenue and expenditure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one has to review the trend over the last seven years perhaps, so that a realistic Budget based on reality can be developed.

The average actual expenditure for the last seven years is around \$2.9 billion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and our revenue around \$2.6 billion compared to the 2020-2021 budget revenue which will drastically be reduced to \$1.7 billion, which is understandable and expected. However, expenditure has increased from the average of \$2.9 billion to \$3.7 billion, an increase of \$800 million. We all knew too well that based on the current expenditure trend we do not have the capacity to spend the total amount allocated in the Budget. The question is why is the variation so substantial?

Basically, revenue streams have not been realized and second, there is always substantial under expenditure. The expenditure in the Budget is 220 percent the size of the projected revenue. The deficit of the Budget is 120 percent of the revenue and the deficit as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is 20.2 percent. That, is absolutely reckless and irresponsible. There is no such example of a Budget like this in the history of, not Fiji, but the history of humanity. If this had happened in a genuine democracy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Minister would have been asked to resign immediately.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. MAJOR GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, these figures need the attention of everyone because this is historic, it is unprecedented. Yes, I agree that the time we are passing through, is difficult and unique, and we may be doing things that have never been done before. But the fact remains that we cannot do things that put our future generations into perpetual debt.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to further draw your attention to the level of deficit in this Budget. We, as the representatives of the people need to know and explain. We need to analyse this. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot just let it pass.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the gross deficit in the Budget is 27.8 percent of the GDP, which points to \$750 million in annual loan repayment. That level of public debt now stands at 83 percent of GDP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the seriousness and the gravity of this matter can only be measured in relative terms. We know that the situation is not normal, but the fact is, we cannot go overboard and do things that will hurt our people in the long run. We cannot harm our ability to develop in the future. The level of this debt will do exactly that. It will constrain our ability to borrow in the future for our development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to read to you what the Honourable Minister for Economy said in his address comparing Fiji with Singapore, I quote:

“The world economy is in the midst of a paradigm shift. Governments around the world are quickly recognising that only those nations that are willing to step up and finance

a recovery will avert a catastrophe and emerge whole from this crisis. Terms like “prudent management” and “debt sustainability” are taking on new meaning.”

He added, and I quote:

“For example, Mr. Speaker, Singapore - a nation long renowned for its prudence - launched its fourth stimulus package in May, which pushed its budget deficit to nearly 16 percent of GDP. Faced with a crushing 41.2 percent economic contraction in the second quarter, Singapore knows what Fiji knows: The only thing standing between a COVID-19 recession and a COVID-19 depression are herculean efforts to stimulate economies.”

I hear some echoes of “That is true.” I will let you see whether this is true in what we are doing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a very strange comparison. Singapore is a very different economy from ours. It is different structurally and hugely different in size and status.

First, Singapore’s GDP per capita is more than 10 times the per capita GDP of Fiji (as at 2019 Singapore stands at US\$65,233 to Fiji’s US\$6,220). Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Singaporean economy is 67 times as big as the Fijian economy (Singapore is US\$372 billion compared to Fiji’s \$5.5 billion).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Minister needs to be realistic when he draws comparison between the economies. This is only a little short of being amusing!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Singapore is a trading hub of the Pacific. It economically conjoins the Americas with Asia. Do we have any comparison here? Even if we do choose to compare, this budget still puts us in a far worse situation than Singapore.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Singapore with its 41 percent economic decline due to COVID-19 has a budget deficit of 16 percent whereas our deficit is 20.2 percent when our economic decline is only 21.3 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we were to compare Singapore with Fiji, with some degree of rationality and logic, than our deficit should have been closer to 8 percent and not 20.2 percent.

Economic Decline: Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is now projecting the single largest economic contraction in the history of Fiji. The Honourable Minister for Economy now states that the economy would contract by 21.7 percent in the fiscal year 2020-21. Already, 115,000 Fijians, which is a third of our total workforce have either lost their jobs completely or are now on reduced hours and wages. This is expected when the economy contracts at this rate, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

As I had mentioned earlier, the budget deficit is so massive and unsustainable. This is because the Government is not able to appropriate funds through its tax policies. It is fundamentally the case because our economy lacks the productive capacity to generate the expected output. This actually is not a COVID-19 phenomenon.

The contraction of the economy is also reflected by the declining revenue projections in the 2019-20 Budget. The issue of declining economy was raised at the time also in comparison to the 2018-19 National Budget.

The people of Fiji have been deceived by the FijiFirst Government in the last few years, by the manipulation of Budget figures. It is unfortunate that the truth about the economy is only now coming out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Minister is bold enough without shame to continue to say that the Fiji economy has grown in a steady rate of above 3 percent on average over the past 10 years. Sadly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the truth is, if you compare the real growth rate by decade since 1970, this is how it stands:

- 1971 to 1980 - 4.85 percent;
- 1981 to 1990 - 2.46 percent;
- 1991 to 2000 - 2.44 percent;
- 2001 to 2010 - 1.36 percent; and
- 2011 to 2020 - 0.75 percent.

It is so sad that the Honourable Minister continues to misinform the people. He is selectively using periods perhaps, to choose his own data and agenda. Where is the unprecedented growth when the real growth for 2011 to 2020 period is only around 0.75 percent, and much lower than the previous decades?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know that the economy was already in recession a long time back, even and especially in the last four years. The fact is that despite the economy in recession, the Government continued to be bullish (and we have used that word before) on expenditure and refused to consolidate Government finances. Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we see the dire consequences of the Government's budgetary follies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this side of the House (and I have the confidence of the Honourable Professor Prasad to say this), we have been raising the issue in the last four years, that the economy is in recession. This advice has been totally ignored and has fallen on deaf ears. The truth and the reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir, becomes obvious now. It became obvious when the COVID-19 Response Budget was presented to Parliament in April this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is already known in public through the social media that the Honourable Minister for Economy has been manipulating and inflating the revenue figures to exaggerate economic growth. In a nutshell, the manipulation of the Budget figures in the last couple of years, particularly inflating the revenue figures to intentionally reduce Government deficit is a cardinal sin and unacceptable. If you did that and if you were trying to borrow money from the bank, you would be charged and taken to court. We are lying to the people.

Prior to the COVID-19 Response Budget the revenue shortfall was already hovering at about \$1.5 billion. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is debauchery of the highest order. This should not be tolerated. Any credible Prime Minister of a credible democratic government will not tolerate such behaviour from its Minister for Economy. The Honourable Prime Minister should seriously consider reallocating that Ministry to someone more capable, or you take it on, Honourable Prime Minister. That is your responsibility, looking after the economy of the nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji should know the truth. We should not solely blame the COVID-19 pandemic as an "act of God", as claimed by the Honourable Minister for Economy. The FijiFirst Government always puts blame on others, even on God for things they have done wrong. The FijiFirst leaders have been in power for the last 13 years and have committed many unethical practices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is time to stop blaming others. It is time for you to take responsibility and must know that the people of Fiji are watching. If you do not act with honour and grace now, history will judge you harshly.

Growth Forecast: Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is interesting to note the growth forecast of 14 percent by the Reserve Bank of Fiji for the next financial year, is overstated and unrealistic. It is very clear that the independence of the Reserve Bank of Fiji has been compromised through interference from the Minister of Economy. His fingers are all over the place, particularly in independent institutions.

Based on the June release on performance of key sectors of the economy, all the sectors show a negative figure hovering around -30.4 percent: electricity, -7.4 percent; cement, -28.7 percent; gold, -7.6 percent; pine wood, -23.9 percent; sawn timber, -50.8 percent; wood chip, -11.5 percent; visitor arrivals, -56.2 percent; lending for consumption, -20.2 percent; Net VAT collection, -30.1 percent; new registration for VAT, -45.3 percent; sales of vehicles (second hand), -65.5 percent; domestic cement sales, -18.8 percent; new lending for building & construction, -28.7 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we really need a miracle to achieve the growth forecast figure given to us by our Reserve Bank of Fiji. It takes time for these sectors to rebound. While some may take a shorter length period, some will take longer. This is another clear indication of the cooking and manipulation of information which is clearly evident in the budget figures presented by the Honourable Minister for Economy.

Import Duties and Domestic Industries: Mr. Speaker, Sir, the statement made by the Minister for Economy to justify the changes in tariff is absurd and short-sighted and he is still trying to put the blame on somebody else. We should stop the blame-game and take full responsibility and I say this when he said, and I quote:

“Fiji’s overly complicated Customs system has put too much discretionary power in the hands of Customs officers which leads inevitably to inconsistency, uncertainty and corruption. I’m sure many importers have found themselves at the mercy of a Customs officer imbued with subjective - and corruptible - power to decide which vaguely-defined duty their goods will attract. It’s not a system suited to an efficient economy, and we’re scrapping it.”

How many times Customs officers have been prosecuted, how many have been convicted. He sounds like a very inefficient leader or commander, blaming your troops or worker blaming his tools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no doubt that we are facing unprecedented challenges in the backdrop of the government’s claim of “unprecedented growth”, “Bainimarama Boom” and so on in the past.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is absolutely tragic that our country is not just in a recession, but in deep crisis; a crisis that is reminiscent of the great depression and it is a global one.

However, the solutions to our problems cannot be borrowed from elsewhere. Our problems are unique and no other country can offer us unconditional assistance, not even a conditional one, as all countries are affected and are in similar crisis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, apart from providing livelihood to our citizens, we must also ensure that our industries remain viable. The current crisis requires us to be diligent in how we tread our

economic path from here forward. We are not even sure how the World Trade Organization will re-establish its functions to promote global trade just as US-China conflict escalates.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, common sense dictates that we take care of our domestic economy in the midst of COVID-19 crisis. The removal or reduction of tariffs for more than 1,600 items in the 2020-2021 National Budget is worrying and uncalled for to say the least. Such reductions or removal of tariffs are often done with great care and consideration of its effect on local industries.

The Honourable Prime Minister as a former Customs Officer should know better about the implications of such actions to the nation in terms of its impact on our trading relationship, investment and the survival of our small manufacturing sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot and should not slash tariffs at will and unilaterally. We must consider implications to our local environment in terms of employment, investment and capacity for our local market, amongst others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, tariffs are not all about raising revenue or just giving immediate relief to people. It is about creating a balance to ensure that we take advantage of our comparative and competitive advantages. I would like to reiterate my concern about this tariff removal in the Budget. I request the Minister of Economy to relook at that aspect of the Budget so that it does not have any debilitating effect on the economy in any way. My understanding is that tariff can be divided into three broad categories which include consumables, capital equipment for investment and raw materials. By reducing tariff on consumables, we are opening our doors to be flooded with cheap products from abroad which may sometimes be called “dumping” particularly from areas and countries that do not have enforceable or good labour relation laws.

We also know that 90 percent of our raw materials are imported. This will kill or destroy our limited manufacturing sector and further increase unemployment. Rather than playing around with our tariffs, we should pay more attention on facilitating trade and providing the enabling environment for investment. The expenditures in the Budget, even those directed at SMEs to provide employment, are not clear. We can easily do this by removing costly bureaucratic processes in clearing goods, improving the infrastructure and by right pricing the utilities to reduce costs. Most of these are under our control. While other countries are moving towards “Single Window Processes” to facilitate trade, we have stayed behind. Fiji is moving backwards with all unnecessary requirements put into place by the FijiFirst Government.

This is clearly reflected in our global ranking for “Ease of Doing Business”, which has worsened terribly from 43rd in 2008 to 130th in 2019. We must recognise that the nations are moving into trading blocks to reap economic advantage rather than just opening up. We need to recognise that we are part of the Pacific and in the midst of small island developing countries. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must be mindful of how Fiji fits into different trading blocks. The tariff structure is an important consideration and prerequisite in order to be part of various trading blocks. It is time to seriously consider joining the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER-Plus) arrangements rather than being selective. Trying to punch above your weight is not our way to go because trading arrangements are made on reciprocal basis. Therefore, we should rethink our trade policies and resume talks with our traditional partners in the Pacific.

Going a little back into history, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I was the Prime Minister, I was always reminded by the then Minister of Finance and the Central Planning Office, that we must always be cautious and not be bullish on government finances due to our vulnerability to international trading environment and natural disasters.

The question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is “Where is the independence and integrity of those institutions in providing government with sound policy advice?” Mr. Speaker, Sir, the independence and integrity of key institutions (Finance, Planning Office, RBF, FRCS) have been compromised or marginalized so that the Minister for Economy has a free hand by removing the checks and balances that have been in place to ensure transparency and accountability.

We need an inquiry into this if we are worthy to be called a democracy; not to prosecute anyone but to smoothen up and make our system more efficient. We need independent Commissions to find out whether our institutions are alive and whether they are allowed to perform the functions for which they were designed to perform.

One wonders whether Fiji has had any degree of preparedness to cushion the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and *Tropical Cyclone Harold*. I ask this because after reviewing the Asian Development Bank (ADB) Report on the comparative analysis growth forecast in the Pacific in June 2020, it is interesting to note that countries with much “higher vulnerability index” or indices are able to cushion the crisis better than Fiji, which is considered a much more vibrant nation in the Pacific.

Based on that, ADB’s preliminary assessment as of end of June 2020, Fiji’s economy will contract by more than 15 percent but it is well-known that our economy now will contract by at least 21.7 percent. I say at least 21.7 percent Mr. Speaker, Sir, because the real fall-out of the crisis is still to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while Papua New Guinea’s output is expected to contract by 1.5 percent, Tonga 3 percent, Samos 5 percent and Vanuatu by 9.9 percent, Fiji is doomed to contract by much more, now estimated at 21.7 percent Mr. Speaker, Sir, that needs an explanation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those countries must have done something right and we must have done something not so right. One explanation could be that the government cooked economic figures to hide the true status of the economy thus, our fiscal space deteriorated leaving the government in a terribly weaker position to consider strong corrective action. And now, the unsustainable deficit and humongous debt on the backs of the future generations is diminishing the country’s ability to consider fiscal policy options to address contingencies in the near future.

Foreign Affairs: Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very much concerned with the decision taken by the Government to unilaterally close down five of our Embassies particularly those in the Unites States, Papua New Guinea and Malaysia.

Papua New Guinea was the first government to recognise the post 1987 administration in Fiji and last week they had their *Remembrance Day* (a public holiday) to honour the thousands of Papua New Guinea natives who fought alongside allied forces in the war against the Japanese in World War II. They helped in slowing-down the Japanese advance into the Pacific and prevented them from further conquest and occupation of the Melanesian West.

Papua New Guinea sponsored Fijians trained to the Melanesian Spearhead Group during my term as Prime Minister, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and Papua New Guinea has been a loyal and faithful partner in the block-negotiation during the WTO/GATT and ACPEU Trade talks particularly in the early 1990s when I was Prime Minister.

Firstly, while I am sure this Government recognises that it is their sovereign choice or our sovereign choice of a country to do that, however they should have the courtesy, perhaps a phone

call from our Prime Minister to the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea or perhaps briefing with our High Commissioner, Mr. Tikoitoga would have eased the situation.

This act alone as it happen will be regarded as a diplomatic faux pas and you understand that, Mr. Speaker, Sir better than most of us, or diplomatic affront. Secondly, permanent closure would imply a serious diplomatic incident or that a breach may have occurred like a situation of war which would lead to such an announcement through a Budget Statement.

In PNG's experience with Singapore, following their unilateral decision to close their High Commission in the late 1990s because of cost which is our reason now, they found it extremely difficult to reopen their High Commission in the year 2000. Fiji may encounter similar difficulties in the future if a new Fiji Government decides to reopen the five missions that will be closed. Finally, this closure as a consequence may have implications for Fiji's membership of the MSG. Papua New Guinea may consider that in spite of having a very close relationship through MSG, Jakarta and Abu Dhabi are considered by Fiji to be more important than Port Moresby.

The United States of America has always been a part of Fiji's history in peace and in war. In the current climate of Sino-USA relations, what picture are we painting with the closing of Fiji Embassy in USA and leaving open the Fiji Embassy in Beijing. Fiji as part of the British Commonwealth Forces, was instrumental in defeating Chinese communist terrorists in Malaya before they formed a Federation and became Malaysia in 1963. Fiji participated in that war from 1952 to 1956 and lost 12 soldiers who were killed in action. Mr. Speaker, Sir, your late Ratu, the Deputy Prime Minister Colonel Ratu Sir Edward Tuivanuvou Cakobau was one of the commanding officers

In view of these historical association, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe, the Government should reconsider this decision, taking into account the historical background regarding our relationship with those countries. Our relationship with these countries were based on strong economic and geopolitical rationale. It is also very important that we continue to foster and build stronger relationships with those countries, particularly at this time in history when we are facing crisis and global geopolitics in taking an unusual turns, shapes and dimensions. I did not mention that we also participated in Borneo after independence, also in the actions against terrorists at that time.

Sectoral Expenditures: Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are many expenditure allocations that are troubling and need the attention of Parliament. I have already mentioned the dilapidated condition of our healthcare system and the likely inability to handle any serious pandemic situation or the worsening of the current one. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation for the education sector has been reduced by \$20 million this fiscal year. When in fact this one sector, where lots of intense involvement of teachers is needed due to remote and flexible teaching, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is nearly \$40 million decline since the 2018-2019 Budget. This reduction begs this question; whether it is an indication of the declining importance of education in our country? Or is it that earlier allocations were wasteful as has largely been the case of previous years? Mr. Speaker, Sir, this has been the hallmark of the FijiFirst Government since it came into power. The education sector should have increased drastically in this situation to reflect more support for activities to cater for new learning and teaching programmes, like distance and flexible learning.

Tourism: Mr. Speaker, Sir, this sector has brought down our economy substantially. I know very little can be done about that, it relies so much on a healthy world environment, but I would have expected the Government to take significant measures to generate domestic tourism. Looking to Trans-Tasman or Pacific Bubble to be extended to Fiji, may be too optimistic. Even the projection of 60 percent to 66 percent recovery for 2021 and 2022 respectfully, may be over optimistic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government's wishful thinking that early recovery of the economy is least likely to grow by 41.1 percent in 2021 as projected in the Supplement to the budget. The IMF and ADB projections are much lower than projected by the Government, so what I see here, is the Honourable Minister is again not observing any restraint or consulting the right people and institutions about economic issues affecting us. These Government projections, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are the shots in the dark to hoodwink the people, it is again the case of "bad habits die hard" for the Honourable Minister for Economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these primary sectors (Agriculture, Fisheries and Forest) offer a great hope for the economy and for the country. These sectors need special attention of the Government for that our SMEs can engage in those sectors to create new industries that would employ our people. We need special development strategies to realise SME success in those sectors. Lots of targeted programmes can be put in place that can become successful if right ideas are implemented with Government assistance. Such industries could become self-sustaining since they are sources of raw materials and sourced from raw materials.

Manufacturing: Mr. Speaker, Sir, lots targeted policies are needed in manufacturing to support that sector. This sector generates a lot of jobs. If merchandise exports can be maintained, this sector can prove to be of great advantage in terms of creating and sustaining better paid jobs.

Areas of Possible Reduction or Diverted to other Priority Sector of the Economy: Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of these specific allocations that I feel are unnecessary and need to be removed to reduce Gross Deficit or re-directed to key sectors of the economy include:

- (1) Construction of New PMs Office - \$7 million
- (2) Leasing of Government vehicles - \$29 million
- (3) Increase in Government rent - \$27.3 million
- (4) Construction of new Police Station - \$40 million
- (5) Charge on Public Debt - \$1.2 billion

Mr. Speaker, Sir, do we really need to construct a new office for the Prime Minister when there are people in the country going hungry? Is the timing right? I believe the timing is not right. Is there any urgency for the new office for the Prime Minister?

The allocation for Government vehicles continues to increase - now at \$29 million. This time we streamline this expenditure. There are better ways to improve efficiency through pooling arrangements particularly at this time.

It is surprising that the rent for "office space" under Head 50 has increased by \$7.2 million (from \$27.3 million to \$34.5m). Government has frozen increases in rent but it continues to pay the rich landlords through this increase.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, do we really need the construction of the new Police Stations valued at \$40 million? It is time to consolidate and work with the community and focus on improving existing infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is worth noting that \$1.2 billion has been allocated under Head 52 for payment of public debts (principal and interest). The Government should focus its efforts in discussing with our lenders and financiers for possible debt review and moratorium rather than wasting time on Trans-Tasman & Bula Bubble knowing too well that the borders will remain closed for some time yet.

We could at least divert \$700 million to \$800 million to priority areas to help those that have lost their jobs through “work for cash programmes” which has been used extensively when unemployment increases in other countries.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what a whopping \$1.6 billion under Requisition to Incur Expenditure (RIE). This is a clear indication that one man is controlling all the funds and not the responsible agencies.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- It is a sign of poor planning that documentation for expenditures are not ready. In a worst case scenario it is a sign that funds may only be released if money is available. It is a sign of desperation to make the budget look good. But the reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that most of these funds will not be realised or used at all.

In programme budgeting there is no such thing as savings because everything should be well-programmed for implementation. The removal of the PSIP programme gives a freehand for control only to one minister.

We could easily reduce our budget by at least \$700 million, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to reduce our deficit and the consequent borrowing or better still, reallocate this amount to priority sectors that will provide employment opportunities and minimize risks of hardship to those who have lost their means of livelihood.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after reviewing and analysing the budget in detail, the most important issues that keep creeping into my mind is how this budget will help ordinary people that are suffering from the crisis and how it could be balanced.

This budget reminds me of a quote from a famous writer and political observer, Arther Laffer when he said while talking about prosperity for all and, I quote:

“Government spending is taxation, when you look at this, I have never heard of a poor person spending himself to prosperity, let alone, I have never heard of a poor person taxing himself to prosperity.”

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the biggest challenge facing our nation today is not global warming or COVID-19 pandemic. It is out of control, unbridled government spending.

To me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is quite clear that the government has wasted a lot of funds through inefficiency, misuse of fund and sloth.

We should be realistic and compare ourselves with similar countries and not Singapore, Australia and New Zealand. Trying to punch above our weight is not the way forward. At this point in time we should focus on our own internal comparative and competitive advantages before venturing out. However, we must try and maintain our bilateral and multilateral arrangements rather than trying to work it alone.

Our expenditure must be well targeted to priority areas that will surely help our people particularly the most vulnerable rather than supporting big entities who have been exempted and are paid high rent despite the freeze.

Food security and the protection and wellbeing of our people should be paramount rather than big businesses who are already rich and have the reserve to cushion them from the impact of the crisis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us prioritize the human side of everything, keeping in mind the future of our citizens. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, God Bless Fiji.

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Leader of the Opposition for his contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, on that note, we will now break for morning tea and as I reminded you earlier, there is a ceremony at the Big Committee Room to which you are all invited. After morning tea will take the Honourable Prime Minister as the first speaker followed by the Honourable Bulanauca.

We adjourn for morning tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 11.04 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 12.02 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate and I now call upon the Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Foreign Affairs to take the floor. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my response to the 2020-2021 National Budget, but before I do so, I want to speak a little about the bipartisanship that, that group has been harping about for the last four years or so.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Leader of the Opposition has been harping about this bipartisanship. This is coming from a man who brought us to our knees and brought racial intolerance in 1987.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- They do not seem to understand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that bipartisanship requires agreement. We are poles apart from agreement. They preach a divisive society, we do not, how can there ever be a bipartisanship? They do not even have an agreement in their own ranks. They have been fighting amongst themselves for the last four months.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Knifing each other in the back, and look at them, as if butter would not melt in their mouths.

(Laughter)

The Leader of the Opposition was talking about manipulation. Let us not forget the manipulation that caused the demise of the National Bank of Fiji, so the use of these words align themselves to his own doing, not the Frank Bainimarama-led FijiFirst Government. Mr. Speaker, as we gathered, they do not seem to understand the measures we put together and the strategies we come up with to put this budget together; little understanding. He needs to wake up from his slumber and smell the coffee. Read all the reports from the UN, World Bank and IFC on our progress...

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... despite the pandemic we have been given a positive thumbs up by the UN representative on our bold budget. People of Fiji have come up with a very positive outlook.

Mr. Speaker, the end of the coronavirus pandemic is no closer in sight and the fate of the world economy is no clearer. In the 10 days we announced this budget, another two and a half million COVID cases have been confirmed. In truth, Mr. Speaker, that number is likely far higher

but global testing is still yet to match the pace of new infections. But as shocking as the sheer number of new cases is, this pandemic's most staggering statistics by far has been astronomical sums governments and nations have marshalled to stimulate their economies.

As we gather to debate this budget, every nation on earth is cranking out recession-halting levels of spending. We are talking about trillions upon trillions of dollars, Mr. Speaker, figures we have never seen before. Why? Because the world's foremost financial leaders all seem to get what some members opposite cannot fathom that this could be the world's worst ever economic crisis. And this COVID-fuelled economic fallout will only end if nations and governments step in to stop it.

If you have spent this pandemic locked in Novotel and Holiday Inn, I do not expect you to comprehend that greater global picture.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- You cannot take a view on this new era of economics when you cannot see further than your own party's future, or your own rank and privileges. But with regards to some supposed economists, I am not sure what excuse they have for the pathetic quality of their commentary on this budget. Mr. Speaker, let me be clear – we have no problem debating policy; that is the point of democracy. But what bothers me, Mr. Speaker, is that these people are not interested in well-intended debate. They are not even interested in reality, much less real analysis. These are people who disturbingly have made full-time careers out of rooting for Fiji to fail. That is how they make their money and this crisis has exposed there are no lengths to which they will not go, there are no lies they will not tell to keep themselves in business.

Mr. Speaker, we all remember when COVID arrived on our shores, these same critics claimed we had no plan, no ideas and no solutions for beating coronavirus. With over a hundred days since our last case of COVID-19 among the public, one would think we would be owed an apology, but no. These people do not make a living by making amends. Instead, Mr. Speaker, they simply hope we forget their false prophecies and then they move onto the next round of doomsday predictions. Now, they say we have no clue on how to solve this economic crisis and they are attacking the stimulus we have announced to fight it. It is okay when other nations like Australia who just announced its largest ever budget deficit since the Second World War do the same. But they blame Fiji for doing exactly what every other government knows must be done.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, do not take my word for it. Fiji's strategy of smart borrowing has been widely endorsed, including by the United Nations.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Our multilateral partners see the prudence behind all of our budgets. These are institutions run by actual economists, with whole teams dedicated to reviewing our economy and they trust Fiji, that is why they stood with us through this crisis.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, the Opposition can shut their eyes to these global realities all they want, I really do not care. I put my stock in the international economic

experts over failed former professors. But no Fijian should be blind to the hardship our people are facing.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- No one's ego should block their view of what is at stake here. We have an economy to save, by any means necessary. We have people to serve. We have jobs to sustain and new ones to create, and anyone with eyes can see that every dollar of the well-structured carefully targeted \$2 billion stimulus package in this Budget has been allocated to do exactly that.

First and foremost, Mr. Speaker, this Budget gives help to where it is needed most, granting \$100 million in direct Government unemployment assistance, not only to those whose jobs have been lost, but to those who are working on reduced hours. You would think, Mr. Speaker, that the 100 million figure would be worthy of a front-page headline. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, the *Fiji Times* prefers to parrot cherry-pick levels of debt servicing payments on debt that they failed to mention was mostly accrued prior to 2007.

The Honourable Leader of the Opposition has been harping on that debt, he should look back prior to 2007. But that is no surprise, Mr. Speaker. I could literally announce that we have found the cure to coronavirus and the *Fiji Times* would run a front-page story on what Honourable Professor Prasad had for breakfast.

(Laughter)

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, aside from direct Government assistance, the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) has extended their policy of ensuring impacted families will not have their water cut off just because they cannot pay their bills. That policy will remain through March of next year.

In a 50/50 split with Energy Fiji Limited (EFL), Government is directly paying for half of the first 100 units of energy used by low-income Fijian families every month.

We are providing concessional loans to MSME enterprises and micro entrepreneur loans to those out-of-work Fijians looking to repurpose unique skills.

The social security we have built over the years remains - free education is funded, social welfare payments are being paid, subsidised transportation to school continues and free textbooks are paid for.

But this Budget does not settle for keeping families afloat for the next few months. Mr. Speaker, that is not what any leader with vision will ever settle for, and that is not what the Fijian people expect of us.

The tens of thousands of Fijians who have already lost their jobs and working hours to this pandemic are Fijians who want to work, Mr. Speaker; Fijians who need to work. When your job is lost, you lose more than a pay cheque, you lose a sense of purpose, you lose a piece of who you are as a person, as a wife, as a husband, or as a provider for the family. The countless Fijians I have met

who need help now, they will get it. But these Fijians want more than just a handout, they want the dignity of working again. They want their businesses open again. They want to see their country come back from the brink.

Mr. Speaker, we cannot make these hardworking people whole, if we stick our heads in the sand, hoard cash, do nothing and wait out the years it may take for this crisis to blow over. We need to work our way out of this crisis now by bringing jobs back wherever and however we can.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- We need to build our way out of this crisis now, by pushing forward with construction and empowering Fijians to build their own homes. We need to innovate our way out of this crisis now, by getting businesses open again and helping businesses to begin anew.

Government is leading by example in keeping people fully employed. Honourable Cabinet Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament have taken a 20 percent pay-cut, and Permanent Secretaries, CEOs and Heads of Commissions and Independent Bodies have taken a 10 percent salary reduction. But that is where the cuts end. We will not be slashing the salaries of the civil servants, we need to help put this economy back on its feet and to support the people who have suffered the most, much to the disappointment, of course, of Honourable Professor Prasad.

Mr. Speaker, across the country, we have construction projects that are ready to begin. These are projects for which approvals have been sought and every box has been ticked, save for the ground-breaking. Take for example, the new Nakasi Police Station. This is where they do not understand, Mr. Speaker. Should we not press forward with its construction and create 200 jobs that lasts two years, allowing those Fijians to earn a living; they do not understand that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- And when it is all said and done, we have built a new police station so our children will not have to, we have created a source of employment for the new police officers we have committed to hire, all while paying the salaries of construction workers the entire way.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Of course, we should build it and that is why we are also pressing ahead with the CWM Hospital projects, the Lautoka Police Station, the Nadi Police Station, the Ba Court House, the Prime Minister's Office Complex and other projects, the construction of which will employ over 1,600 Fijians.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, these are not rich people. These are ordinary hardworking Fijians, whose skills ought to be earning them a living.

We have also strengthened support to families looking to build or buy their first homes, spurring more jobs into construction and realising more of our people's right to housing. These are not rich people either. Many are young people, Fijians who ought to be building and owning homes of their own.

Road by road, building by building and house by house, every cent spent on this stimulus will help employ people, build confidence and ripple through the entire economy, ultimately landing in our people's pockets. But Government cannot go at it alone. We need the private sector with us. That is why our stimulus package comes alongside the largest tax cut in Fijian history and a range of new measures to cut through the red tape of doing business in Fiji.

What some supposed economists fail to understand, Mr. Speaker, is that Fijian businesses are made up of Fijians. When they do well, our people do well and when we cut taxes on these businesses and make it easier and cheaper to do business, those savings help keep people employed, recoup investments made in our economy and incentivise even more investments to be made.

Mr. Speaker, when we lower the duty reductions on over 1,600 items, businesses can do more than create and sustain employment, consumers can see the discounts in the goods and services they offer. Those 1,600 items, Mr. Speaker, includes food like potatoes and sardines. They include basic hygiene products like toothbrushes, clothing, hardware and knitting tools and they include items, essential to many businesses, so everyday Fijians not only stand a better chance of being employed, their salaries will go further at the supermarkets.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to foreign affairs, which I do not think the Leader of the Opposition understands, we have cut the operating costs of our foreign service through the closure of five missions that frankly have not been recouping the Government's investment. That is the whole reason for this, Mr. Speaker. None of these missions ...

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... are disappearing altogether; their country accreditations will simply shift to nearby missions ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... which will maintain Fiji's friendships around the world, our development partners understand that. It is a more streamlined strategy of diplomacy, one that many other countries follow and one we know will earn Fijian taxpayers more reliable returns on our investments.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, we promised cane growers a guaranteed price per tonne of \$85 for three full seasons. That promise will be delivered.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- The first three payments of the third season will be paid at \$70 per tonne but in the fourth and final wash-up payment, we will make up the full amount of \$85 per tonne, as we always do.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, our growers know that they can count on this Government. In total, we have provided nearly \$300 million in direct support to cane farmers over the past seven years. Cane growing is the only agricultural sector to which we guarantee a price per tonne and that relief comes on top of the cane planting grant, the building of new cane access roads,

the subsidisation of fertiliser and weedicide, the buying of new trucks, the assistance we grant new farmers, and our commitment to accelerating mechanisation, will all which are fully funded this year.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am not sure why some media keep parroting lies from failed politicians without even seeking a comment from the Government. Luckily, our cane growers are well familiar with how our payment system functions, even if some newspapers are not.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is clear that certain media do not want the truth on cane growing, they do not want the truth on how we are responsibly managing our deficit, and they do not want the truth on customs duties reduction or any of the other measures in this budget. We know that because they do not ever bother asking Government for a comment and on the rare days they do, they do not press “print” until they get the final spin-job from the Opposition.

But the truth is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, no matter who you are or where you are in Fiji, this budget brings relief you need and builds confidence in our economy, preparing us for a recovery like we have never seen.

Fijians know what it takes to mount a comeback. We know what it means to be down and out. We know what it feels like to have the odds stacked against us, and still manage to seize victory from the jaws of defeat. Of course, there are the times we watch our Flying Fijians overcome a double-digit deficit to pull-off a miracle first-place finish. But we have not only watched miraculous comebacks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been part of them. I am talking about how we as a nation, rose to our feet in the aftermath of our hemisphere’s strongest-ever storm. I am talking about how we, as one people, shut the door on decades of ethnic division to build a strong and united Fiji. These are the great comeback stories of Fijian history, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and when we pass this budget it will begin another.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the opening of this session of Parliament, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, if that is still his title, arrogantly labelled all of Fiji as a nation of “low morale”. He attacked ordinary voters, he attacked our disciplined forces, he even attacked our rugby players and he attacked His Excellency the President, demeaning the patriotism and undermining the positivity in the hearts of so many of our people.

As Honourable Rabuka ranted that day, the novel Coronavirus was just beginning to ravage Wuhan in China. In the coming months, it would spread around the entire world. In March, it arrived on the shores of Fiji presenting the greatest-ever test of our resilience and national morale.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji that the Honourable Rabuka manufactured in his mind, was not the real Fiji, the real Fiji rallied together in the face of COVID-19. It was not a nation of “low morale” that stood united to confront that deadly challenge. No, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the real Fiji is a nation of patriots, proud patriots. Women and men who were prepared to endure the sleepless nights it took to keep our people safe. People and Fijians who sacrificed all they could to keep the virus at bay and we accomplished that goal. We saved our people from catastrophe, and we did it together, without the help of anyone who doubted our determination to succeed.

Then, we reopened our economy. Now, we are taking that recovery forward with maybe, the boldest national budget in Fiji’s history. All while the Opposition have kept busy hacking away at each other for power, brewing false predictions and rooting for Fiji to fail and, of course, if you have missed all the video clips, Mr. Speaker, Sir, dancing the night away.

Mr. Speaker, let this serve as a lesson to everyone. You do not build morale by breaking people down. You do not build morale by wishing for the worst. You do it by building confidence. You do it by staying positive. You do it both by listening and by being decisive when the urgency is greatest. That is what my Government did, that is what we will continue to do.

If you believe in this country, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you believe in our people, I urge all of you to stand with us, be part of Fiji's greatest ever comeback, get behind this Budget, get behind our game plan and let us get Fiji back to work. This is the peoples' Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a budget for people who share our optimism and who believe we can come back from this, once in a century crisis. We are grateful to every Fijian who shared their stories and solutions with us, to help put this Budget forward. Thank you to the teachers, doctors, nurses, boat captains and the police officers. Thank you to the business owners, tourism workers, hotel operators, Fijians in rural pockets of this country and in our maritime regions. Thank you to the home builders and construction workers, garment factory employees, fishermen and women, handicraft makers, cane growers, farmers, cooks in our kitchens, musicians, artists and artisans. Thank you to every parent and grandparent who has put their faith in our long term vision - a vision they can trust, serve their children and grandchildren most of all.

I thank the Honourable Attorney-General and the Minister for Economy and his team for putting forward the budget Fiji needs in this moment of challenge. I thank our people, not only for helping get us this far, but for the belief in our ability to take us forward. Together, let us lead the next great comeback of Fijian history. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I thank the Honourable Prime Minister for his contribution to the debate on the Budget. Honourable Members, I now have the pleasure of giving the floor to the Honourable Mitieli Bulanauca. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Mt. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for this opportunity and I rise to contribute to the 2020-2021 National Budget, as announced by the Honourable Minister for Economy. From the outset, I would say the Budget is non- stimulus, it is dark, faceless, does not serve or arose the attentions and spirits of the people for a real fitting appropriate response to the socio-economic crisis of COVID-19. There is a need for paradigm shift in the short and medium term and major structural adjustments in the long term. This Budget does not spearhead the truth or reality, the usual "take it or leave it" situation and no full consideration at all for the weak, poor and now deprived of employed.

The FijiFirst Budget is continuously for the rich getting richer. Fiji's growth prospect and development to a large extent is driven by the performance of the global environment and major trading partners, "No man is an Island." The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is now leading major health and economic crisis worldwide causing major destructions in the global economy. The situation is likely to get worse as waves of killer virus is felt. We should expect major reshuffling of the global production network as the result of the pandemic already triggered by the USA and China trade.

Following that, a world evil group using China, a communist dictated regime, to invent, manufacture COVID-19 as a biological weapon against the West or capitalist democratic society, in particular against USA. We also suffer in between. What is COVID- 19 anyway? It is a pandemic or a pestilence as in the *Bible*. Some take COVID-19 as a Chinese-originated virus in December, 2019, maybe a coincidence and there may be some truth in it. It is not an act of God, it is man-made, by those in the group in the developed world who tried to reduce the world population

to relieve hunger and poverty. Who are they anyway? They are not God. Do not worry about the population, we just feed them, share our wealth with the poor, a simple solution but difficult to grasp by the greed and pride.

If something is wrong, we will refer it to God, do not blame Him and say that “it is an act of God” no. Let God do His part, we just do our part according to His word, biblical values and principles, enjoy your life before leaving and be with Him eternally as He promises.

We are all going to die anyway, as long as we do not turn but continue to threat and scare people with some unpractical, irrelevant meaningless rules and laws. Why stop churches and prayers with at least two people with curfew at 8 p.m? We wanted to solve the pandemic problems by our own ways and methods. I thank those who fasted and prayed to God for help, the FijiFirst Government thought otherwise forgot about the Lord God Jehovah.

I believe, however, that COVID-19 is translated to mean Certificate of Vaccination/Virus Identification and the 19 stands for Artificial Insemination. They are still looking for a vaccine and when one is approved by the World Health Organisation (WHO) whose integrity is now questionable for siding with China or communism you will be artificially inseminated with, the certificate to it under your body or skin by which you can or cannot be allowed to trade or buy things by. Please, note your *Bible*, and I quote from Revelations 13:15-18:

“He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is a man’s number. His number is 666.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, corona is equivalent to 666, this COVID-19 is a step towards that already written in and by the word of God, it is just now being revealed.

By the way, in communism, there is no God, the only god is the Communist Party or the Government, whatever it says is correct, there is no sin and no questions too. With this in mind, I am truly baffled with motives of leadership of our military. Beginning from the *coup* of 2000 which the Honourable Prime Minister who was the Commander then (he was arguing here that he was not aware of also did not support) but I prove to you that he was aware of and supported it. Then what was the motive for the 2006 *coup*? To me, it was both for personal reasons to save Honourable Bainimarama from imprisonment and to allow communism into Fiji.

Our grandfathers with the Fiji Military Forces leadership whom we are thankful for, went to the Solomon’s, fought, and many died there but not to allow communism into Fiji. Our fathers with Fiji Military Forces leadership then went, fought and died in Malaya (Malayan Campaign against Communism not to come to Fiji).

However, the Honourable Bainimarama leading the Military Forces then led the *coup* in 2006, which allowed communism into Fiji. We now have it in FijiFirst Government. I appeal to the leadership, it is the leadership of the Military Forces not to allow or condone communism or communist dictatorial leadership in Fiji. With that in mind, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I propose that the following Diplomatic Missions should be closed and closed forever:

- Geneva Mission in Switzerland - can be easily serviced from Brussels, Abu Dhabi Mission closed it, Beijing (closed forever do not open it again), Jakarta in Indonesia and the Pacific Islands Development Forum in Suva, no need for that, there is already a Pacific Islands Forum in place. If you do not, we will close them in 2022 or earlier.
- We need to open Washington in USA, Brussels, Seoul in South Korea, Kuala Lumpur, Port Moresby in PNG. SODELPA will open them in 2022 sooner rather than later.

One that we, here in Fiji, need the most is Israel, we need to have a Diplomatic Mission in Israel. If anything you mention, Israel is the No. One supplier, whether you are talking about agriculture, architecture, engineering, medical, noble awards, military, security intelligence, you name it, Israel is top. We can learn and benefit a lot from it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 65 percent of Fiji's population are Christians and that Fiji was developed through the Word, biblical Christian values and principles and that we need to have close relationship with Israel, Jews, the chosen land and the chosen people of God the Creator of the Bible we believe in. SODELPA will open a mission in Jerusalem as the capital as a matter of urgency.

GDP Growth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is expected to decline in the coming 6 to 12 months and so on. Graphs shows decline to zero in 2020 of about 23 percent. All these would result in finance disruptions, substantial increase in unemployment in all areas therefore Fiji must do whatever it takes to minimise the socio-economic fallout due to coronavirus.

If the FijiFirst Government is not careful with the way it is behaving and living, in an alarming increasing debt, it can quickly slide into solvency and default like Argentina, Turkey or South Africa. Why? Because FijiFirst Government's stubbornness attitude against a bipartisan approach for proper financial budgeting policy strategy, management and governance involving other stakeholders most particularly those in the private sector.

The effect of the pandemic is dramatic as the hardest hit sectors (energy basic materials, airlines, automotive industry) listed companies earning forecast for fiscal year 2020 have been revised downwards by an average of 30 percent.

For the long-term response, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to maximise development of the domestic products through our natural resources. Can I steal a word from the Honourable Minister for Agriculture - we need to be "revolutionise" infrastructure to improve production in agriculture, forestry, fisheries, minerals, oil, manufacturing, engineering, et cetera. Fiji needs to maximise its comparative advantage in certain domestic commodities over other island nations and countries.

Why are we not focusing on natural resources? Is this another sunset clause strategy to leave the *iTaukei* behind? This is the question that we need to answer.

Now let me jump to the import and export, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We continue to increase our deficit since 2010 from 1,860 to 3,792. So, we are not having better exports out there in the market. Also our Government debt, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is increasing from \$3 billion to \$6.9 billion with an additional \$200 million borrowing to 2020, totalling to \$7.1 billion of debt. Ever increasing debt from \$3 billion which is about 45 percent GDP to \$7.1 billion which is about 83 percent of GDP. When are we going to stop? It is ridiculously high. We are mounting debts to the living dead. A rise from \$6,000 to \$9,000 debt per head (new born). As soon as a child is born into Fiji, you will need to tell him or her, "your debt is \$9,000."

May I just now focus on one particularly on mahogany. I now wish to focus on the mahogany industry as one of the natural resources areas to increase production for export and foreign exchange revenue for Fiji. This is one of the sleeping giants of Fiji or it is the sleeping giant. I cannot help but to ask here, why we continue to fail in this industry? Since 2000 with the coming into effect of the Mahogany Act 2003, we are supposed to reform it into production to export but production and export keeps dipping.

We do have here in Fiji the largest, mature and best quality mahogany plantation in the world, yet we continue to fail. We fail to get the maximum benefit from such a ready available resource of which previous governments established or grew just for the FijiFirst Government to freely harvest; *kana loto*. May I just quote in Fijian: "Qai mai cereka ga na lovo, sega ni bunotaka ia sega ni kila na kena cereki na ka rawarawa taudua, yet still fail to unravel it and properly share out the contents of the *lovo* of the mahogany industry.

Through the National Planning Office, Mr. Speaker, Sir, certain economically-depressed locations were identified for reforestation purposes either for pine initially and then for mahogany later to uplift economic wellbeing of those communities for foreign exchange and Fiji as a nation. A fitting and dignified purpose indeed but unfortunately the FijiFirst Government is failing to resource *iTaukei* owners and the nation of both the purposes.

The yield, they started off from \$150,000 per cubic metre to harvest every year, out of \$6 million available here with us. They dropped it to \$120,000 and then they dropped it again to \$112,000 and then in the second issuing of licenses, they dropped it again to \$80,000 per cubic metre. Why keep dropping the sustainable production? Is there expertise in our forestry department and mahogany to deal with that? They keep on blaming unfavourable weather, harvesting capability, economic factors, et cetera. Surely this can be managed and/or assisted to improve production as plantations, trees or logs are there, matured and ready for harvesting. What has Mahogany Industry Council (MIC) of which the Prime Minister is the head or Fiji Hardwood Corporation Limited (FHCL) doing or failing to do to improve revenue and foreign exchange? This is just an example.

Let me give you some details. Log production in 2010, 96,000 cubic metres down to 15,000 in 2018 and 2019.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Very bad! The MIC and FHCL for over eight years still cannot turn Fiji Hardwood Corporation and the mahogany industry to a profitable entity as it is supposed to be. Why? By not achieving these sustainable figures; everyone suffers. To ensure that the mahogany industry is sustainable, an underlying objective of MIC under Mahogany Industry Development Decree section 5 (1) (a). This is funded via a reforestation fee collected by FHCL from licensed and non-licensed buyers of mahogany logs for replanting of logged areas. But only 500 hectares out of so many thousands of hectares that have already been planted since 2000 till now.

Forest certification, nothing done till now. For the next five years, the Forestry Department is focusing on improving the timber export markets by introducing Forest Certification Standards on our local forest plantations, to act as marketing tool that will boost the export earnings to an estimated value of 50 percent (that is good) in the next five years. This had been highlighted under Section 5.2.5 of the Forest Policy Statement 2007. What has FijiFirst Government done till now? Nothing! Contribution going down, export has been going down. What has the Ministry been doing for the last decade? What has been done as this is quite a long time ago?

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Sir, if this was carried out, it would be better for Fiji and our resource owners. Why has this been low priority on export performance, Honourable Speaker, Sir, 25,000 in 2011 per cubic metre down to 5,000 per cubic metre in 2018 and 2019? It is very low, going down!

On mahogany export, revenue similarly shows a steep drop from 2011 from \$36 million down to \$6 million last year in 2019. So it is a sudden drop from \$30 million to \$5 million. Why? What happened, what can be done to improve export and foreign exchange? This is the area highlighted that we need to focus into. There is capacity and opportunity in the industry yet the FijiFirst plays a very uninterested attention to it. Again a low priority because of the likely benefits of the *iTaukei* resource owners - another sunset clause strategy?

There are quite a range of opportunities available in the industry and export products, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and there is a market there. It is important that they are opportunities in the mahogany industry to increase employment, forest log to supply production or harvest and export of various qualities or finished products for increased revenue for the nation. Why sleeping on it? Why is there no immediate attention to improvements to wood supply production and export? Is it because it would benefit the *iTaukei* resource owners? Why not? Based on the above and what has transpired, the FijiFirst are the biggest racists and have discrimination against the *iTaukei* indigenous people of Fiji or first nation of this country. So, it is important Honourable Speaker, Sir, that we improve our production wherever possible.

May I just now comment on the revenue and expenditure statistics. All the time, you have never achieved your budgeted revenue and is increasing margin of non-achievement of the budget. Why is that? Non-achievement of the budget both on revenue and expenditure. You know why, it is about your dictatorial attitude and working atmosphere. You do not give the freedom to your workers, employees to work freely, come up with new ideas, do them and produce what you cannot imagine in your life. With the right working environment, freedom to decide and act within the limits of standards and quality required, the civil servants and the private sector employees will produce to even surpass budgets to your surprise.

Yet, I am telling you, you better listen. Give the civil servants and private employees the room to perform, just resource them, motivate them, tame them and educate them. Release over 50 percent of most items under Head 50 to the responsible Ministers and workers and you will see the fun and enjoy the positive performance, output and growth you had never imagined. Just do not bring here communist dictatorial principles, it does not work. It is shown in your pathetic economic performance over the years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on expenditure, differences or short fall of actual spending to budget was between \$583 million in 2016 rising to \$1,052 million in 2019, which is about 15 percent of the budget rising to about 25 percent; the difference is around 10 percent over and above would be reasonable. It is getting worse, 2020 would be worse off.

Again release 50 percent of items under "R" and set performance targets with reasonable licences and motivational conditions. The workers will respond positively. When you are negative, your workers will be negative. They will not tell you, they will just do it without you knowing. When you are positive, the workers will respond openly, sincere and give their best, earnestly or honestly. They can get out of their way to perform best as long as justice prevails - now there is no justice. You treat as if everyone is a criminal, prosecuting people before they are even convicted. Shame!

Shift funding resources from uneconomic heads like military and police to focus on economic sectors, Honourable Speaker, Sir. Why try to build a \$7 million Prime Minister's Office building at this difficult time? What is the rationale behind it? Is there not enough room in the existing office? It is time to stop building construction, yet the FijiFirst Government plans to build houses this again. Why? Why build police stations and offices when people are suffering from hunger and poverty out there on the streets? To budget it at this time to me is a sign of forgetting the poor and making the rich richer and protecting them through one sided law and police.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not support the budget. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Mitieli Bulanauca for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the next speaker, the Honourable Selai Adimaitoga. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Attorney-General, Honourable Cabinet colleagues, Honourable Members and to the thousands of Fijians watching on the Fijian Government *Facebook* page. Today, I rise to support the 2020-2021 Fiji National Budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to express my gratitude to our Minister for Economy for this great Fijian Budget. The United Nations has commended the Fijian Government for a bold and courageous budget. It has silenced all the critics and provide us with hope for the future. While some are trying to take this hope away, this side of the House knows how important hope is for our beloved nation, especially during these trying times.

I would like to remind everyone that this budget is the product of extensive national consultations. The FijiFirst Government met with Fijians all over the country and we got their input. We spoke to them; women, youth, business owners, civil servants and more. We visited them on the ground and asked for their thoughts through the Fijian Government *Facebook* page. This is important because it allows us to understand where the needs of the people lie so we can provide them in those areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the past few months since COVID-19 first reached our shores was like a rugby match. COVID-19 is our enemy team. All the players and fans want team Fiji to win the game. On the field we are giving it everything backed by prayers of our fans. Our captain, Honourable Prime Minister is the leading charge against COVID-19. Finally, with the 2020-2021 Fiji National Budget, we have scored an important try and are closer to victory.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, then we have parties like SODELPA and NFP, who are cheering from the other side. While we all want Fiji to beat COVID-19 and recover, they are doing the opposite. They are cheering when we are forced to make a reduction because they think it will get them more votes. Let that sink in. The Opposition is cheering for COVID-19 to win against Fiji. I have never seen anything like it in my life. They should be ashamed. Luckily for Fijians, this side of the House is working hard to ensure that Fiji recovers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will ensure that no Fijian is left behind because of COVID-19.

Free education for our children; we all know that if Fiji is to be successful, we need to educate our young ones. The Budget ensures that that will continue.

Primary and secondary students will have their fees paid, textbooks provided and bus fares paid for those who need it.

Tertiary Education Loans Scheme (TELS) will continue with the mark requirement of 250 plus. I hope this encourages students to work even harder during the time when hard work is so important.

TELS repayments have been suspended for one year which will help former students to have more money to spend during these tough times. Just because you finished school does not mean you get left behind.

Toppers will continue to educate Fijians in areas when we need experts. Despite the hard times, our innovative Budget provides for our future generations and should be commended.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no matter what type of disaster occurs, we need to ensure that our children continue to get educated. But more than just learning about science and accounting, I would like to remind parents that they have the responsibility to teach their children the importance of being good people.

Learning starts at home by ensuring our children grow up as good human beings, which has never been important before. Parents, please, talk to your children, watch over them, give them guidance and help them to become better citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, not a single civil servant will get a pay cut in the 2020-2021 Fiji National Budget. Many were expecting pay-cuts.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- You listen!

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- The other side of the House had actually suggested that we cut the salaries of thousands of civil servants. A story in the *Fiji Times* had quoted Honourable Professor Prasad asking for a 35 percent pay cut. He denied saying that but the same article was published on the NFP website. Strangely, I am not misleading, I am telling the truth.

(Honourable Professor Prasad interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, whenever an Honourable Member of the Opposition gets caught telling lies, they simply act like it never happened.

The leader of another party that did not get a seat, Mr. Savenaca Narube, also suggested that civil servants' pay should be cut. Fortunately, for civil servants, we do not listen to those suggestions and we found a much smarter way.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, civil servants are people to ask; we know they have families too. The FijiFirst Government looks after our civil servants, who are now paid and treated very well.

Many fears caused by the Opposition, were put to rest with the Budget announcement. Imagine being a teacher and a nurse when the Opposition Parties are calling for pay-cuts and hearing

the rumours on social media that that was going to happen. It demoralised many of our essential workers who are civil servants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was sent a *Facebook* post from a young Fijian, who said and I quote:

“The media should stop asking Opposition what they think and start asking them what would they do differently.”

I found this to be very wise. The only thing that we can hear from the other side, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is negative opinions.

Once again, the Opposition failed to provide an alternative budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is because they do not have any ideas, ...

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Listen, and you learn!

... that required thinking. They do not want to think and actually work. They want to criticise. It is easy for them to only do that. What makes it easier is that the *Fiji Times* and some other media will publish anything they say without fact-checking, irresponsible all around.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while our hardworking Honourable Prime Minister and our response teams were protecting Fijians from COVID-19 and *TC Harold*, many on the other side were making things worse. Some Honourable Members of the Opposition are very active on *Facebook*, spreading fear.

An Honourable Member of the SODELPA who knows herself very well, contributed to panic-buying by making irresponsible post on a *Facebook* page.

Authorities had already warned Fijians that panic-buying meant overcrowded stores and put more people at risk of COVID-19. I say this because it needs to be said. Mr. Speaker, SODELPA and NFP need to understand that their habit of lying is directly putting Fijians in danger. I urge all Fijians to think twice before listening to those people, who have been caught telling lies over and over again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while many were spreading fake news on social media, the Fijian Government was the biggest source of news for Fijians during COVID-19.

The Fijian Government *Facebook* page ensured that Fijians got the facts in a timely manner and kept many of us safe through this. I would like to commend the Honourable Minister for ensuring that Government's information was delivered in such an effective manner.

Even in rural and maritime areas, our people relied on our social media pages for their news. Information is a very important tool during disasters and could be the difference between life and death. I urge Fijians to follow the page and get the latest news.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the reduction in duty to 5 percent and eliminating import tax on a range of food items and other goods. This means that we, Fijians, will pay less when buying items.

During tough times, these goods become harder to purchase, yet makes the lives of Fijians more comfortable. We do not want to deprive them of this.

No one has the right to deprive them of this. Some Honourable Members on the other side have suggested that Fijians do not need to purchase certain goods as they are luxury items. How dare they try to decide what we, Fijians, can and cannot buy!

How can you tell the fisherman who wants to buy himself a fridge so he can store his fish to preserve it so that he can earn a living that he does not need a fridge? To the fisherman, this is an essential good which will make life easier. Sometimes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the suggestions from the other side are just selfish.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very great to hear that Fijians will continue to access free medicine and healthcare. It is great news, considering we are in the middle of the global virus pandemic. Allowing Fijians to access health and medicine for free takes away another burden from us.

The health and wellbeing of Fijians is a priority for the FijiFirst Government. We want all Fijians to be healthy and live a long life. I encourage all Fijians to take advantage of the free medicine and healthcare that you are provided with, but we must also remember to eat healthy and exercise daily to prevent Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs). We must drink a lot of water and continue to play sports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first home-owner grant continues and will allow many Fijians to own their first home. For households who earn less than \$50,000 a year, they will be granted \$30,000 to build their first home and \$15,000 to buy their first home.

For families earning above \$50,000 annually, they can be granted \$20,000 to build their first home and \$5,000 to buy their first home. This will bring happiness and relief to many Fijians, who dream of owning their first home. In our time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, such opportunities were never provided and it makes me happy to know that we are providing our children with these opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition has a lot to say about the Fijian National Budget on his *Facebook* page. In his latest rant, he talks about Fiji being run aground because of FijiFirst.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those are statements of a hypocrite. Perhaps, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition is suffering from memory loss because he was the one that ran Fiji aground in 1987 and the following years where his mismanagement caused the downfall of the National Bank of Fiji (NBF).

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Those who were children of Fiji then, are still paying off the debt from it today. They are still recovering from his actions which were inspired by nothing, more than greed. Decades later, nothing has changed.

Under his leadership, SODELPA has been mismanaged to the point of collapse. At their Annual General Meeting, SODELPA locked their own supporters outside, claiming that it was due to social distancing.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- That was very un-Fijian, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Fijians will never forget what their lives were under threat.

The Honourable Leader of the Opposition and his SODELPA decided to have a fight for power within their Party. To take their own members to court, we now know what SODELPA is all about. They are not about looking after you, the Fijian voters, they are about power and they will use any trick in the book to get your votes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge Fijians to beware of such dirty politics. We cannot fall for it.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- You bother about who wrote it. I am speaking.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- COVID-19 has shown us that we need to work together, or we will all fall. No more than ever before we, as Fijians, need to be strong and responsible. Do not take it easy just because we are COVID-contained.

Make sure you wash your hands and follow all the rules provided by our Health Team. Please, do not break the curfew and do keep a physical distance of 2 metres.

Save water and electricity. Just because your Government provides it at a cheap rate, it does not mean you should waste it. Our Government is doing everything to ensure that you are safe from COVID-19, but you need to play your part.

Please, do not listen to fake news on social media and follow the Fijian Government *Facebook* page for the most trusted news.

Please, care for one another and continue to pray for our beloved nation. We show the true Fijian spirit, that there is nothing that we cannot achieve.

Take comfort in knowing that the team of the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Attorney-General and FijiFirst, is always going to put you, the Fijian people, first and we will not stop working until we recover from the virus. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I thank the Honourable Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs for her contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, on that note, we will now adjourn for lunch. We will resume in an hour's time.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.00 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.08 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now continue with the debate on the National Budget. I give the floor to the Honourable Mosese Bulitavu. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, I rise to give my contribution to the 2020-2021 National Budget that was announced by the Honourable Minister for Economy last week.

From the outset, I would like to say that the motion should be defeated, given this Budget, as I stated last year in the *iTaukei* idiom - *bulubulu boro vulavula*, which means in English, it is like a grey painted white with the contents rotting anyway.

This Budget, as you have heard this morning from the key response by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, the figures do not lie. They speak the truth of the real situation our nation and economy is in.

I would like to use another *iTaukei* idiom to describe what the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy did. It is called, *ucu mai duru*, which means a joke, for example, a person could be sitting at a grog session and want people to continue sponsoring the grog as he will do a *ucu mai duru* to keep them entertained.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- *Ucu mai duru qori!!!*

(Laughter)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Honourable Leader of the Opposition had said, this Budget is a rudderless and deceitful budget, and before I move into that, let me remark on a few points that were stated by the Honourable Prime Minister

The Sugar Industry: it was very clear from the Honourable Minister for Economy's speech when he delivered the Budget that the price per ton of cane has decreased from \$85 to \$70. Now the argument put forward this morning is that at the fourth cane payment, it will go up; that is another promise. We know the reputation of the FijiFirst Government - full of failed promises, false promises, false starts and the people know.

(Interjections by Honourable Government Members)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Cane farmers: I live in a cane belt area in Labasa and I am friends with cane farmers who have shared their experiences with me. The Honourable Minister for Defence is also a cane farmer. When they receive their balance sheet at the end of the year, there are plenty different deductions that Government said are part of the subsidies and they do not get enough.

Currently, about 10,000 people depend on cane cutting and with 14,000 farmers in Fiji, the rate for any cane cutter would amount to about \$25 with two meals. Some get \$24 in areas of Labasa and also closer to Seaqaqa.

Most of the people in these areas where the FijiFirst Government Members of Parliament (MPs) normally campaign in, will be very angry about this reduction. The \$85 was first mooted by the National Federation Party in 2014 in their campaign but the FijiFirst Government reacted to this

and they increased the rate. But again, the Honourable Leader for the National Federation Party has mooted again in 2018 for the price to go up to \$100 but again they raised it up to \$85. Why? They have to reduce this to \$70. Is it that there is not enough money? Is it that they do not have enough money and you are waiting for that money to come in so that you can give the extra in the fourth cane payment?

Those are some of the issues, probably people in the cane belt areas will be deciding - they will know that the FijiFirst MPs had lied to them, gave them false promises and they will never believe you when you come again even if you do increase this.

Let me move on, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The Budget: I can say, from all the budgets that there is a very big hole in this Budget.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Where?

(Laughter)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Let me explain that hole, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- That is where the coup happened.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- I want to explain that hole. The Government's estimated revenue is only \$1.7 billion and they want to spend \$3.7 billion. That is what is in their pockets so they are now cutting their coat to fit the size of their pocket. So, there is a \$2 million deficit in this Budget. That is the fact and as the Honourable Leader of the Opposition had said, you have been inflating this Budget and cooking up figures to say that all is well, but all is not well.

My response today will be focusing on the informal sector and how people at the grassroots level and the rural community view the 2020-2021 Budget. There were less provisions in the 2020-2021 Budget that focused on the informal sector. It was no doubt a business and pro-tourism budget and again the argument put forward by the Honourable Attorney-General is that this budget will provide opportunity in times of crisis. We understand COVID-19 is a global pandemic and all economies and nations in the world are slowly recovering but pot-holes, hospitals, government schools are already in bad stages or what we call worse conditions before COVID-19 came, that is the argument they want to put forward.

The other thing that I want to respond quickly on, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the fear that the FijiFirst Government has after hearing the two speakers who have spoken today, about the 2022 polls. They are quickly attacking the SODELPA Leader and the SODELPA Party knowing very well that we are stronger now, we are going to come to the other side in 2022 and with that political reaction, *Fiji Sun* quickly ran a poll a few days ago, probably to pre-empt the Budget Address this week; what are you people afraid of? You should have a Plan B if you are going to lose in 2022, prepare to come to the Opposition and that will come to pass.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me go into some of the inconsistencies of the policies in this budget. Focusing on 1,600 white goods that are imports; these are not consumed and used by the informal sector for people in the rural areas. From that 1,600 about 80 to 84 of them are food items. And from those only a few are affordable for those in the informal sector in the villages, in the *koros*, in the cane settlements - sardines, herrings and other things that are affordable to them. The rest of the things that people were expecting from this Budget was the removal of the 9 percent VAT on rice,

flour and basic food items which people in the rural areas depend and use every day. These are some of the things that people are worried about.

What is the use of removing duty on nuclear reactors; are we building nuclear weapons here? What is the use of reducing duty on deep sea drills; are we not part of the Oceans Conference? This is the inconsistency of the FijiFirst Government and what they want to advocate as champions at the international level. If you see the list of items and go line by line and number by number, you will see the stupidity in the choice of items that they put up.

Some of the things that people use daily are rice, flour, tea, garlic, onions and medicine; why have you not removed the duty? People will pay the duty on that plus the 9 percent VAT. The poor in this country will suffer. The rich will be able to afford those items. The lifting of duty for lettuce, carrot, cucumber and eggplant will be removing the competitive advantage of our local producers in the rural areas. These are some of the things that probably the policy intent of this budget should have looked upon before it was passed.

The other thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Honourable Prime Minister harped on today is that \$100 million will be given to Fijians. I will talk about the FNPF and the \$220 per month that will be available to FNPF. Whose funds are these? In FNPF, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the funds that go in goes into two account, it goes into a reserve account so if \$100 goes to FNPF, \$70 goes to the Reserve Account, \$30 goes to your General Account. The General Account includes your housing assistance, education assistance plus death of loved ones. The policy right now on this \$220 is that to qualify or be eligible for this particular grant or programme, those that who have lost jobs or have hours cut will need to exhaust or dry up all their General Account then this will come in. That is the fact and if a particular Fijian has dried up, his 30 percent in the general account, and if there is a death in the family, they will not be eligible to withdraw. If they want to build a home in the village after they retire from work, see, they will not able ...

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- That is incorrect!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- ... to build a home. They will not be eligible. Those are some of the things that probably the Honourable Minister should look into; the future of our people and how our people will suffer. Some will not afford education too because they will not have any funds for education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me move on again to the first home grant, much-fancied by the previous speaker and also will be touched by the Minister of Housing for the \$50,000 and above and below. There is about \$3 million for those below and those above will be \$2 million. If the Honourable Minister does a quick calculation on that, on average Honourable Minister, work on a \$30,000 salary threshold, divide that by \$3 million, I think that could be only 100 applicants, that will be available. I do not know whether they have done any survey on the number of people below the \$50,000 salary, who need a house. The calculation of that figure and reaching that figure, I think only about 100 or 150. The last time it was announced, it was a great failure. People waited in frustration, given the approvals and the requirements and also now people say it is just whom you know that gets the chance first.

For NDP grant, it is about \$500,000, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the Northern Division. We divide that by the amount of projects or proposals that people will put in from the North, I think that will be insufficient, given the amount of applicants over the years and the requirements also are too high.

The Young Entrepreneurship Scheme (YES) Programme, Honourable Minister for Trade, it is only \$120,000 and divide that by the number of youths who will apply, I do not know, they will get about \$4,000

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- It is all that, peanuts; they will get peanuts. Those are the things. It came when you were not here, Honourable Minister. Farm Access Road – it is only about \$800,000 and I am sorry that the Minister for Agriculture is not here. We, *yaqona* and dalo farmers in the rural areas need rural farm access roads to get our products to the market. Last year, in the whole of Vanua Levu, there were about 48 applicants for rural farm roads and still no decision reached.

For social welfare, thanks to the Australian Government Grant for that - about 40,000 recipients will be eligible but if you break down that \$100 a month, Honourable Minister for Women, by four weeks, it is about \$25 in four weeks, in seven days you get \$3.57. That is what a person gets from the rate we are at, so with that \$3.57, that is the amount paid for 2kg *dhal*. A loaf of bread is about 70 cents plus one packet of noodles is about 80 cents - will that particular person get a good healthy diet or not? That is what you get when you break down those figures, so we should put our money where our mouth is and also look into areas where people in the rural areas are suffering.

Bus Fare for the Elderly: let me emphasise that it started with \$40, Honourable Speaker, Sir. It went to \$20 but now it is only \$10 for the elderly. The bus fare from Savusavu to Labasa is about \$8 one way, so the elderly person will not return. Those are some of the inconsistent policies that need to be reviewed. I ask the Honourable Minister concerned to review those policies so things are done in a very reasonable manner so that no Fijian is left behind and that we meet our targets, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and also the National Development Plan (NDP) that you always boast about.

On excise tax on alcohol, about 60 related products are there; I think this is a decision that needs to be done on social responsibility of the Government. I still recall back in 2016, when Honourable Jone Usamate was Minister for Health, when we had debated on a consequential bill on excise tax. The reason that he gave was that the increase was for NCDs but now it has gone down. The social choices where people should be encouraged not to have access to these kinds of things so that they can prioritise food on the table and also NCDs and I do not see any consistency in the line of argument that is being put forward by this Government knowing that most of the night clubs are closed and the last thing they will buy is alcohol right now. They want to survive and eat.

For water bills, I think this needs awareness. The Water Authority of Fiji needs to go around to the rural areas so that they also be briefed on what the arrangement is too wide, on what kind of hardship that should alert WAF when they will be eligible for no water cuts or disconnections for a year.

For EFL bills, I think the 100 units paid by Government also needs to be discussed properly, given that there are some disconnections right now in villages, especially in informal areas where they do not have any earned income or source of income or any FNPF.

Currently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the difficulty that we have, as a nation and how our people are struggling to survive and the strategy that this Government has put forward in trying to reduce duty to create employment, is an assumption because it will depend on the business people.

They will try to save their profit margins, whether this government will monitor them to see how many jobs they will create, we do not know. They are also recovering, so the last thing on their mind is to create more employment because most of their income will be reduced and also they will be paying some FNPF.

The argument put forward by the Honourable Prime Minister this morning on the construction of the police stations, saying that the construction cost is \$40 million because of security. We all know it goes in phases; phase one they will go for all documentation then phase two that will come. It will not come immediately, the construction might start in the next 12 months or so. When we talk realistically on how things will happen that will now create employment immediately but we see the idea, but again, people should not be given false hopes. These are some of the things.

On Free Medicine Scheme boasted by the previous speaker from the other side of the House, it was a failure, Honourable Minister. Also people still pay medicine which are not available in hospitals and health centres.

Coupled with the VAT on bus fare and everything that they will pay, these are extra burden to our rural community. These are some of the areas that I have highlighted and open up for discussion to see whether this Budget is really fair for the people. I can say it is not fair. They are the end-users and they will suffer.

At the Labasa Market, a heap of *tavioka* costs about \$5 on government pay day. On non-government pay week, no cassava is sold. Those are some of the things that our rural area people are suffering from and this is an indication to the people that this government cannot be trusted.

This government has lost the plot and does not care about the people. This government only promises and promises after promises, brings in the Prime Minister to come and cut ribbons every time, everywhere and people come around for their *talanoa* sessions, filling up the notebook for the PSO. But again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is my contribution to the Budget. I reiterate, I do not support the motion that is before the House because a person who supports this Budget, supports the rich and does not support the poor and the disadvantaged that will be affected in this particular Budget. *Vinaka vakalevu*, Sir, for your indulgence.

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Bulitavu for his contribution to the debate and I now give the floor to the Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Cabinet colleagues, Honourable Members of Parliament and the thousands of Fijians watching this on the Fijian Government Facebook Live and other social media services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the 2020-2021 Fijian National Budget. The Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy and his team are commended for the level of innovation shown when drafting the National Budget. The Budget announcement brought back calmness and hope to our people and removing the fear created by some.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2020-2021 Fijian National Budget, we can now safely say that it looks after the needs and welfare of every single Fijian. Whether you are in the city, town, rural or maritime area, the Budget ensures that you are able to sustain your livelihood, have access to basic

amenities like water, electricity and of course, education for your children. Whether you are a company or business, the tax and other incentives enable you to stay afloat and many Fijian companies will weather the COVID-19 storm because of this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whether you are a civil servant who has worried about a pay cut but now can breathe a sigh of relief because your Government has found innovative ways to avoid this, while many others around the world are being hit with pay cuts and redundancy. Mr. Speaker, Sir, whether you are a young Fijian who has always dreamed about starting your own business now can easily do so with the few clicks online the National Budget caters for everyone. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the list continues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason the National Budget Address in many areas has shocked, so many critics is because of a simple strategy that was followed. The FijiFirst Government held nation-wide consultations. Whether on the ground with the Minister for Economy for the thousands that were involved in the online consultations on the Fijian Government *Facebook* pages, the FijiFirst Government once again has proven to be the Government that listens, the Government that visits, the Government that hears, the Government that talks to his people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason we held nation-wide consultations was that, we wanted to put in place strategies that work and what better way than to hear from the people themselves. Mr. Speaker, Sir, time and again it has been said that we are living through difficult and uncertain times. The world is facing an unprecedented global crisis and everyone is trying their best to adapt to the new normal. Like countless people around the world, Fijians are also feeling the economic threat and effect of COVID-19 pandemic. Seeing the need to empower and uplift our people during this difficult time, the FijiFirst Government has put out a bold innovative and forward-looking Fiji National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, businesses around the world are shutting down it is critical for us to protect Fijian businesses for the sake of our economy and for the sake of job security. The Budget has been received very well by most and has a lot of incentives for businesses. The Fijian Government introduce bold taxation and customs tariff reductions to rebuild competitiveness of the tourism industry and support economic recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we want to provide businesses tax relief, we want to provide businesses taxable paying in arrangements and targeted tax incentives to assist business cash flows to stop and soften the impact of COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these measures among many others are designed to ease the financial burdens being faced by businesses in Fiji. As I have mentioned earlier on, Mr. Speaker, Sir, these decisions were not made solely in Government offices, we went out, we heard the concerns of the Fijians and then put in place this Budget. For the first time, the Fijian Government is ending Fiji's business license policy from 1st August, 2020, all that the fresh Fijian entrepreneur seeking to start his or her business will need to do is going to be completely an easy task - an online business corporation, incorporation and tax registration. By ensuring businesses have what they need to flourish, we are also ensuring that Fijian jobs are sustained. Not only that, more jobs will also be created and overall Fijian livelihoods will be preserved. Yes, preservation of Fijian livelihoods is our focus.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with 70 percent of our population under the age of 40, we have an opportunity to encourage young Fijians to become employers and job creators. Many are known and have already been encouraged to plan and are already starting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us not forget that the Fijian Government already has programmes like the YES Scheme which assists budding Fijian businesses and women.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Government announced a \$2 billion Government stimulus package, a bold move to keep people spending and assist us in our economic recovery. This will provide direct relief to Fijians all over the country, as well as much-needed protection from the economic fallout of COVID-19.

Mr; Speaker, Sir, the 2020-2021 National Budget also introduced bold taxations and Customs tariff reductions to rebuild competitiveness of the tourism industry and support the economic recovery. Custom duties on over 1,600 items have been cut, Mr. Speaker, Sir, duties on over 1,000 items have been reduced to five percent or zero percent and duties of more than 500 items have been reduced from 32 percent to 15 percent. But this means, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that Fijians will now spend less on 1,600 items directly reducing the burden on them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 has completely changed the way we look at our world now. Every Fijian on the ground is concerned about the health, economy, job security and education of our children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2014, the FijiFirst Government democratically won the National Elections and one of our promises was and still is to give priority to the education of our Fijian children. Since then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have never wavered from this promise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, in his statement earlier this morning, equated a reduction in the budget for the Ministry of Education to the reduction in the importance of education. Nothing can be further from the truth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these will still continue; free tuition for our children, free textbooks, bus fares subsidies will continue.

There has been no reduction in teachers' salaries, like many of those from the other side have asked for. Let me remind the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the FijiFirst Government has educated more children than his government or any other government ever done, and we will continue to put in place policies that will give incentives for our children. This has not changed and we will not change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will ensure food and financial management by finding ways to effectively utilise the budget we have been given and of course, to manage our budget while ensuring that every child in Fiji gets education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can say that we can only do this through hard work, unity, working together, thinking smart and believing in a better future for all Fijians and of course, building confidence in our people. Just like *TC Winston*, we will definitely see another remarkable recovery for our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts has been allocated \$450.6 million while Higher Education Institutes have been allocated \$1.4 million in the 2020-2021 Fijian National Budget with the further \$161.1 million for the TELS and the National Toppers Scheme. This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will allow us to ensure that our children continue to be educated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the fact that COVID-19 has had such a severe impact on all economies around the world, the Fijian Government is still able to ensure that every child in Fiji

gets an education for free. This is not only a testament to our smart policies but a testament to our dedication towards Fijian children. We are dedicated to safeguard the welfare of our children, our grandchildren and their grandchildren by planning long term. Fijian children will continue to have their tuition fees paid. Fijian children will continue to be provided with textbooks. Fijian children will continue to be subsidised for bus fares so they can reach their schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, however, parental responsibilities in ensuring that the children reach school will still remain with parents. Our social media, many rumours quickly started flying that we will cut on free education. Mr. Speaker, Sir, nothing like that is going to happen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you can see, despite the reduction in the budget allocation due to COVID-19 no child will be paying for any education within our school system. Our children come first.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Toppers Scheme and the Tertiary Education Loan Scheme Programme will continue. To date, we have 2,525 active students on our National Toppers Scheme with a further 600 scholarships available in the next financial year.

This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently with 2,525 students, it is costing Government \$35.5 million and with the further addition of 600 scholarships next year, we will be spending \$7.9 million to add that 600 to the existing 2,525 students.

For TELS, we have 16,611 active students and of course, this initiative will continue in the next financial year as we have been given a budget of \$161.1 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, like I said, our children come first. In order to qualify for TELS Loan Scheme now, however students will need to score 250 marks plus. This is a strategic change and it has been done to encourage students to work harder and to further increase the quality of our graduates who enter our workforce. The National Toppers Scheme has always addressed areas of need for Fiji and of course, this will continue. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will of course, be subjected to revision depending on the COVID-19 situation and how it develops both globally and locally.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as leaders, we must give priority to our future generation and you can see that the FijiFirst Government is more than committed to every single Fijian child and student. If we do not educate them now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, then they will not be able to deal with something like COVID or other disasters that may strike our country in the future. By fostering our future generation, we are being responsible and ensuring that a better future is in store for our future generation Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is why free education will continue and must continue. Even before the budget, while our Honourable Prime Minister was ensuring that we are safe from the impacts of COVID-19 and *TC Harold*, the Ministry of Education was taking proactive measures to protect the welfare of the children. As soon as Fiji recorded its first case, we closed down our schools. We did not want to expose our young ones to any potential outbreaks. Fortunately, our Government has invested heavily in technology and we were able to leverage this during the lockdown.

First and foremost, we realised that information is the key to defending yourself against disasters such as COVID-19. We realised that as the Ministry for Education and as the Fijian Government, we needed to build our information dissemination assets ensuring that we are able to disseminate information directly from the source, which is us. And this has never been more important if we are to keep up with the rest of the world as a government and as a country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Government *Facebook* page, for example, was a flagship of information dissemination during COVID-19 ensuring that the messages of the Honourable Prime Minister and the health professionals reach majority of our people. The Ministry like ours also played a key role in ensuring that hundreds of thousands of Fijian children and families received very important information relating to our ministries. We provided supplementary lessons for our children who wanted to continue learning on both social media and other platforms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Government under the leadership of our Prime Minister has educated many Fijian children in rural and maritime areas, than any before us. This is due to our policy of not leaving any child behind. We plan to continue this treat and develop education facilities in rural and maritime areas. In doing so, we hope to empower children living in these areas as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as mentioned earlier, COVID-19 has taught us the importance of remaining technologically up to-date with the rest of the world. Tertiary institutions in Fiji are having online classes to help students finish their courses. Many of the world leading educational institutions have done the same. Harvard University, for example, has announced that all course instruction for undergraduate and graduates for the 2020-2021 academic year will be delivered online. The world is already adapting to the new normal and we, as a Government and as a ministry are doing the same. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can say that because we are responsible for the education of young Fijians. We must always be at the cutting-edge of technology.

During COVID-19 lockdown, we were able to provide our people with the same access to learning online like many other big nations and this is not by sheer luck. This was through smart planning that we did years and years ago. The FijiFirst Government saw where the world was heading and we planned accordingly. We did not want any Fijian to be left behind, and thus, we see the high internet penetration rates and infrastructure that has enabled so many Fijians to go online and continue working, continue schooling and, of course, continue to entertain themselves during this period of time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I highlight this because the budget is a forward thinking one just like all our past and current policies. We have spent strategically during a time when many are having cuts across the board. Part of the strategy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to ensure that our children continue to get educated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not only the children but also the welfare of our teachers and all our civil servants that we are thinking about. Before the 2020-2021 Fijian National Budget, many oppositions and many political parties openly called for a cut in our civil servant salaries. Every civil servant including teachers breathed a sigh of relief after the announcement and was grateful that our Minister for Economy had not announced that. The FijiFirst Government understands that civil servants need security as well during these challenging times; a pay cut was not the answer.

Like I said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we put our people first. Teachers are the custodians of knowledge and play an important role in the upbringing of the children. The Fijian Government knows we must feed them and any other civil servant and empower them so that they can empower our children. We also urge teachers not to take this responsibility lightly because you are responsible for nurturing the future leaders of Fiji. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also encourage the teachers to continue learning and upgrading their qualifications.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will continue to do our part in providing the best environment and opportunities for the Fijian people, but I would like to remind everyone that you have a part to play here too. No longer can we afford to sit down and complain about things on social media. We must

stand up and take responsibility for ourselves and our loved ones. We must be united, for a divided house will no doubt, fall. We must not lock our fellow citizens outside the gates and instead be decent human beings who bring each other up. Parents must take responsibility for their children and teach them the importance of hard work and being decent human beings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with COVID-19 already causing so much damage, we cannot let it do further damage by tearing apart the *bula* spirit that we Fijians are well known for. At an online conference, I lamented it on how it took a global pandemic to make us realise how insignificant our differences are. Education, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is so important, not just for academics and just for getting a good job, but also for the basic tenets of being a good person. As leaders of today, we have that unparalleled power to make a change by teaching against intolerance, corruption and other behaviour that damages our society as a whole.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can stop this and we should stop this by cutting out the roots of these evil values, beliefs and behaviour by teaching our children the right thing. We are compassionate people, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we must be prepared to help others when they are in need, and there never has been a better time to do so. The spirit of compassion equally applies to every single Fijian that we encounter including this side and the other side as well. With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I once again give my full support to the 2020-2021 Fijian National Budget. Thank you

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for Education for her contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Viliame Gavoka. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker. I rise to contribute to the debate on the 2020-2021 Budget. Let me just start by deflecting some of the comments made about our Party by people whom I know are very worried with the way things are developing within SODELPA. We had our Special General Meeting on Saturday and the reports by both the major dailies was very balanced. If I were a FijiFirst Member, I would be considering a career change in 2022.

(Laughter)

Honourable Speaker, one ask the question as to what is happening in the world today. We are being driven in this debate by COVID-19. We look at the budget, but COVID-19 is the issue that is driving this debate, this economy and indeed the whole world.

We see that no one is safe from this. We had Prince Charles who got infected, Prime Minister Johnson, President of Brazil, President Putin was under seclusion for a while there, likewise, Angela Merkel, the Vice Chancellor of Germany and even some superstars in Bollywood and Hollywood and of course, the millions around the world. Let me put that into perspective, Mr. Speaker, because it is something that we need to give an answer to. It is like this, Mr. Speaker, about two thousand years ago at the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, an event took place which saw Jesus Christ taken up to heaven witnessed by his disciples. As the disciples were gazing upward, suddenly two men in white appeared and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” All Christians, which is about a third of mankind are expecting Jesus to come back as promised. This is fundamental to our faith. The day of His return, no one knows including Jesus himself, only the Father knows. But he warned us of what would happen when His return is imminent. He gave us signs we should watch for.

In short, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would be a dreadful period, a time of great distress and extreme anxiety some of which we are experiencing today. And then, the Lord will return in the clouds and those who serve Him will be caught up with Him in the air. The trumpet will sound from heaven and multitudes on earth will disappear in the twinkling of an eye to be with Him. Generally known as the “Day of the Lord”. It will be the most tumultuous event unequalled since the beginning of time.

As a Christian, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would urge everyone to make the effort to know about all these. There are many in Fiji today who can guide you, please look for them. My biggest fear is for someone to say, “Honourable Gavoka, you knew about this and you did not tell us.” No one should be left behind.

COVID-19, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and what we are going through is part of the signs preceding the Day of the Lord. But, it should not be a period of despair, rather of comfort and hope, if as leaders we fear God and follow His ways. He says through the Prophet Amos chapter 5, verses 21 to 25 that He hates pretence and hypocrisy, he wants to see justice roll on like a river.

The Budget presented to the House Mr. Speaker, Sir, does not meet the standards expected by free and God-fearing people. It was badly prepared, ignoring the voice of the people to have dialogue and contribute to the solutions to challenges and threats unprecedented in human history. These are extraordinary times and require unity of purpose which unfortunately the FijiFirst Government could not harness and continue to refuse to do so. The Opposition wanted a bipartisan approach which Government refused to take up, NGOs were denied submissions, leading economists went to great length offering help but were spurned. The voice of the people inherent with the parliamentary system of governance, we subscribe to such as the Committees could have been used but were never considered. We end up with an irresponsible, deceitful and rudderless budget.

I have said in the floor of this Parliament in March, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that COVID-19 is way too big for the FijiFirst Government to handle and that it needs to reach out, but sadly it has not done so, believing their old merry ways of doing things will suffice. We are still busy opening police posts, sea walls, footpaths and the like while the country marches blindly towards the abyss.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, civil unrest is a real threat world-wide, brought by hunger and loss of hope and Fiji is not immune to that. While on the subject of hunger, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bible says that one day’s wage will only get a loaf of bread in the coming days and we know that the UN has been expressing concern about food security in the world today.

We at SODELPA, Mr. Speaker, Sir, hold that the budget should be for the people to meet their needs immediately today and now. We should help our people in ways unimaginable in the past, most of the countries are doing so. What FijiFirst is doing is grossly inadequate.

The Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, contained in this Budget Estimates with 325 pages has too much fat and can be trimmed in many ways making significant savings. The Budget continues to follow the established tradition of programme budgeting whereas with times like this, zero-based budgeting as espoused by leading economists may be the way to go. We do this in business, Mr. Speaker. During crisis, we go to zero-based budgeting.

Hundreds of millions of dollars can be trimmed from the Budget and given to the people in a programmed manner to see them through the pandemic. They should not be withdrawing money from the Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF). That is criminal.

It is obvious, Mr. Speaker, that Government banks on tourism to be pivotal in economic recovery, given its relatively huge inventory in terms of the airline seats, hotel rooms, transportation capacities on the ground and sea, and only needing tourists. I spoke about pent-up demands when debating the COVID-19 Budget in March. It will happen, but we need to look after our people in tourism now.

Many have been laid off in hotels, cruises, land transport, sea transport, airline and support services, such as the airports and the like. They are the ones who we need to look after our visitors and we cannot go and rehire and retrain. The workers need to continue being employed. There is much to do to maintain the tourism products at the standards Fiji is renowned for. With prudent planning and savings, Government can find the money to keep the workers employed.

Much of the incentives, Mr. Speaker, is geared towards making the tourism product affordable, and Fiji should be a very affordable destination once tourism returns. It begs the question as to whether the \$60 million to entice tourists is needed. It sounds like overkill and somewhat reckless.

All the operators in Fiji will be offering their own special deals, bringing down the land costs significantly. Perhaps, subsidy can be given on airfare, but not to the tune of \$60 million. After the 1987 events, the airfare from Sydney came down to \$299 and that quickly recovered tourism from Australia. Something similar could be considered, subsidised by Government which is also easy to manage.

Allocating the \$400 to each visitor and dividing it to the various suppliers can be complex and compromise the initiative. It is better to just go through the airline and stimulate travel with an attractive airfare to Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, operators need help with their banks. We know that the financial system is functioning well and there is available credit but with no income, repayments on the principal loan and interest charges must be frozen until tourists return.

A resort operator in the Yasawas had called me that his bank will no longer be able to help him after September. If this is true, the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) must come up with a scheme to back the banks and for them to provide relief to the hoteliers and other operators. A resort, Mr. Speaker, will need to continue operating with its generators, the desalination plants and the like even without business, and must be given assistance as there is no money coming into the business, only costs being incurred.

The people in the tourism areas must be encouraged to pursue other economic activities. We must lift the ban on the beche-de-mer or the *dri*, which has been in place for three years. According to our people, the stock lying under the sea is substantial and Government should not continue to drag its feet in lifting the ban at a time like this.

The subsistence economy, Mr. Speaker, long the economic model for the rural areas, must be strengthened. In fact, this model is keeping Fiji above water when compared to other countries. There is no lack of food in Fiji, unlike in other countries. It is through the subsistence economy that we have as part of our makeup. There is the sea for seafood, the mangroves and the land all available as sources of sustenance. We must focus on these areas. Countries are internalising their economies. For Fiji, this subsistence economy can be a huge part of the equation.

It is encouraging, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that villagers are now growing and selling vegetables at attractive prices by the roadsides, long the domain of other communities. This trend must be

encouraged as it will also lead to the reduction in leakages for tourism with food supplies being purchased locally.

Let me also stress that our tourism, this \$3 billion industry, needs a world standard health system. If the testing capacity for COVID-19 needs to be equal to Australia and New Zealand, there should be no compromise, we should have it. A survey carried out by the University of Queensland has indicated that health and hygiene issues will be paramount to tourists on their choice of destinations.

We commend our health people with the manner with which they are keeping us safe from COVID-19, but we know our systems need huge improvements. We also know that hygiene is a challenge Fiji-wide and we must mobilise the required resources to keep our country clean. Mountains of rubbish on the roadside, Mr. Speaker, will turn tourists away and, unfortunately, this is the phenomena that we see in Fiji.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, potholes create the wrong impressions. It makes Fiji look like a failed State. I do not drive now from Suva to Nadroga at night because of the potholes. I would urge Government to find a solution to this, temporarily and permanently. No pothole must be left unattended before the workers go home. No one should be driving at night, fearful that a road has a pothole in it. There must be a way - temporary and permanent.

On other parts of the economy, there is mahogany with some \$6 million cubic metre of stock valued at some \$4 billion. As one of my colleagues has said, this is a sleeping giant whose value must be fully realised to boost the economy.

Mr. Speaker, there is an inventory of projects that the private sector need to undertake to boost construction, but finance is the issue. And, again, I will ask the RBF to help banks support the developers.

In the United Kingdom, Mr. Speaker, it was reported that Prime Minister Johnson has set aside \$6 billion pounds to boost construction and his mantra is, 'build, build, build'. Together with this is his drive to simplify the process. Prime Minister Johnson knows that it is easy to say, 'build, build, build', but the processes in the UK are quite complicated and Fiji is not too far off.

In Fiji today, Mr. Speaker, it is better to buy a completed project than building a new one, as it is very hard to build with the many agencies wanting to have their say on projects. I hope the Honourable Minister is listening. It is easy to buy a completed project, as opposed to starting a new one. It is so difficult.

We are a developer of a project in Suva, Mr. Speaker, the Nadroga/Navosa Corporation. We are now told that there is now peer review by an engineer on our project. What it means, Mr. Speaker, is that an independent engineer has to give the okay on what our engineer is doing. This is just adding to the cost, to the difficulty of having a project done and completed.

And for our project, Mr. Speaker, which has taken too long to secure the go-ahead and we are still waiting, everyone we meet in the various agencies, are 'acting' in their positions. When can those people be confirmed and thereby take full ownership of their roles? There are too many people acting in Fiji. Government cannot be saying that the ease of doing business has improved, if positions are not confirmed for those who are running the show.

Mr. Speaker, on the productive sectors, Government needs to provide a sector by sector review of all we own and their potential. We need to know what we have and what can be done

with copra, pine, mahogany, sandalwood, sugar, fisheries products, agricultural products in their many varieties, mining and the like.

Mr. Speaker, I was shocked to learn that the approach by Fiji Water to manage Yaqara has not been accepted by Government. The people at Fiji Water are renowned beef people in the United States. And speaking as a tourism operator, as a former hotelier, we import most of our beef. By having a quality operator managing Yaqara and producing prime beef, we will no longer be importing and thus, help the leakage factor that has always been the bane of tourism. I would urge the Government to relook at that. If Fiji Water can do it, give it to them, Mr. Speaker.

As I have said, Mr. Speaker, countries are internalising their economies, and Fiji must do likewise with what it has. I am confident that we have more than enough to keep us afloat as a country.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of relationships, the regional power hubs - Australia and New Zealand, should be the people we strengthen our relationship with. I have always advocated for PACER-Plus, but always been rebuffed by the Government because they were thinking of protecting the local economies. Now, that you have taken away the duties of imported products of most local producers, there is no need now to protect them. We must get into PACER-Plus and open up export from Fiji into those big economies.

Mr. Speaker, I have been blamed in this House for being too pro-Australian, that I always lobby for Australia, it is not true, Mr. Speaker. It is just that a huge economy of some US\$1.5 trillion, right at our doorstep, should be the economy we align ourselves to.

In closing, let me take us back to the times we live under. In Israel, at the height of COVID-19, there was an earthquake and a woman was heard to ask, "What else? We have COVID-19, we have earthquake." Likewise in Fiji, trying to cope with COVID-19, we also got *TC Harold*. Yes, we also asked, "What else?"

Mr. Speaker, we are the 'what else' generation. Conditions in the world will continue to slide in ways we cannot control, but with faith in our Maker and placing Him as foremost in our lives, we will come through all these. He wants us to have dialogue in good faith, to love our country and to love each other. Our system of Government allows us that and we must make the system work for our country and overcome COVID-19 and all other threats that will come. Sadly, Mr. Speaker, this Budget has not observed the process in good faith and has fallen way short of expectations, and I do not support it. Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his presentation. I now give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports. You have the floor.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers, Honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to speak in support of the 2020-2021 National Budget delivered by the Honourable Minister for Economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me congratulate the Honourable Minister and his team for a considerate Budget, considerate Budget for its overall impact through a range of incentive measures designed to cushion the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and to ensure that all Fijians and their families are given relief in equal measures during these testing times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a budget that is smart in its rationale and is clear and simple in its setting of fiscal goals and achievable outputs and outcomes. Every dollar, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that has been allocated is shared with a clear intention that benefits all Fijians. It is a timely Budget that will confront the issues of today for the economic and social well-being for all Fijians for tomorrow and beyond. It is a budget that is going to help the poorest of the poor. Whether someone is running a small and medium enterprise business or just a worker in those businesses or any ordinary Fijian living in the urban centres or at the most remote part of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget is going to help everyone as our Honourable Prime Minister is always committed to the motto, 'Leave no one behind'. The FijiFirst Government will always work for the betterment of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to make a few general comments before I turn to specific remarks relating to the areas that fall under my Ministerial portfolio. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Honourable Minister for Economy has pointed out, a lot has happened since March 26th when this Government delivered its COVID-19 Response Budget. This most important consideration above all others, is to ensure the health of all Fijians and to keep Fiji working.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is often said that, simplicity is the key to brilliance. I believe that the quote first came from the famous Bruce Lee and it applies well to this budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, unfortunately this simple message is not getting through to some. Maybe we should get Bruce Lee to teach some simplicity to some of these people. By some, I mean, some sideline politicians apart from the usual qualities of nonsense from some inside this House, including the U-turn we have seen this morning from the Honourable Leader of the Opposition. After earlier making positive noises on this budget, you want to really know about the U-turn, first go and sort out your leader, who is the party leader, fix all the bolts and nuts and bolts then come and ask here.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijians need to be careful even be afraid of this kind of flip-flop politics from a flip-flop political leader. All Fijians will do well to remember the looting of public funds from the NBF and other entities when the Leader of the Opposition-led Government...

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

(Honourable Members Interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- He knows that under his leadership there was no economic progress and safety net for Fijians apart from the select few who benefited from the NBF saga. Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me also remind the people of Fiji that we are still paying for it. It is important to remind Fijians of the dark and dirty days of government under the Honourable Leader of the Opposition.

Even without the global pandemic crisis, it is also important that all Fijians remember that even economic growth and progress had come to a standstill and the Honourable Leader of the Opposition could not even get his own Government to pass the budget in 1993 and I think some of you were part of that.

The records speak for itself and the records of the FijiFirst Party stands out. This budget is a good reminder to all Fijians of the visionary leadership of the Honourable Prime Minister and his team. On a related note Mr. Speaker, Sir, the leader of the Fiji Labour Party, like the Opposition

members, continues to criticise the National Budget. It is time they get it straight that playing the same tune from the sideline does not do anything for the Fijians and, even it does not create jobs, it does not create a social welfare net in this time of global pandemic crisis.

Despite what they might think it is time for them to accept the reality of COVID-19 impact and stop misleading the ordinary Fijians. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we find the same of lack of bipartisan support from the Honourable Professor Biman Prasad. The same negative comment with no substance; he should find out what a good government does during a time of crisis.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Yes, it borrows and spends ...

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- ... and yes, it must let go of consideration of budget deficit and the like, because it has to work on a plan of survival towards revival. That is the simple economics of dealing with the global crisis, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and it is the simple plan that is working through this budget. In a crisis like this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Governments have no previous comparable examples to work with. These are not normal times, we are in a new normal and this budget deals with that new normal, not the old world economics that Honourable Prasad lives by; it no longer applies in the new normal. What applies is the good and clear sense of direction that this budget provides as it maps out the way forward for all Fijians; at least have the good grace to acknowledge what hundreds and thousands of Fijians have done. Not just admit but applaud the fact that this Government has come up with a definite master plan in this budget. It will not only ride the storm of the pandemic, but come out stronger.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also disappointed to see some civil society organisations jumping on the bandwagon now. This budget, like those past FijiFirst budgets, goes through a thorough consultation process where Fijians have a platform to contribute. Even during this pandemic, the consultations were taken to the people and I congratulate the Honourable Minister and his team for taking the consultation to the people, that is the grassroots. Yet, the civil society organisation leaders seems to think that they need to be given a special status when it comes to the consultation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, they could have participated in one of the consultations if they were really interested or cared about these ordinary Fijians whom they are talking about now.

This pandemic is not the time for beating your own drums, it is time for collective action, like this budget provides for in order to sustain all the Fijians, Mr. Speaker, Sir. And in the middle of the global pandemic, it is a proud moment for Fiji to have acted proactively and bravely as a small island nation to achieve this. Globally, as noted in the Budget Address, the world has changed for worse since our last budget in 2019. We cannot sit and hope, we cannot dream and wish away the pandemic, all we can do is to take advantage of our COVID-contained status, and prepare to deal with the situation as it unfolds. All the time we can keep an eye out for better times ahead, when the pandemic comes under control globally.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry will continue to maintain an efficient and effective service delivery under this new budget allocation. In sustaining our service delivery, my Ministry will continue to strengthen collaboration with our stakeholders to ensure unemployed Fijians find new employment opportunities or become job creators through other Government initiatives with relevant line ministries. As noted, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Budget Address, over 300 million jobs

have been lost worldwide. Here in Fiji, we note that around 115,000 Fijians, one third of our workforce, have had their hours reduced or lost their jobs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we welcome the hundred million available to make sure every unemployed Fijian is able to access their full relief payment. We are also pleased to note the range of incentives for businesses and I reiterate the words of the Honourable Minister that it is time to be generous rather than being greedy. The move to stimulate the economy through a never before seen or heard range of tax and excise duty cuts, is also greatly welcomed, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The trick here will be ensuring that our business leaders guarantee that this trickle-down effect is immediate and a steady stream to ensure that more workers are employed.

As mentioned in the budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the number one priority is that we need to bring back jobs, and number two, so long as this pandemic remains, so must our safety-net for those who are unemployed and those whose hours and salaries have been cut. The time to work harder and smarter is upon us as never before, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This is a time for a no retreat and no surrender approach when it comes to providing greater opportunities and incentives to all Fijians.

On this, let me add, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in today's world of work, the traditional enforcement method on reactive employment-based approach no longer works and is not cost effective. I am pleased to report to this august House, that my Ministry is pioneering an online model of Labour Inspection Management System with the assistance of the International Labour Organisation.

Mr. Speaker Sir, this system will ensure that the labour inspection conducted have up-to-date data and the information is stored in a web-based application system which will ensure that greater accountability and reliable labour services are provided to all employers and workers.

Mr. Speaker Sir, my Ministry will work in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and the operators in the tourism industry to ensure that COVID-19 workplace health and safety guidelines in the new normal, are maintained.

The budget allocation for the new micro, medium and small entrepreneur initiative is also greatly welcomed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and apart from providing immediate relief from the pandemic effects, I believe that we will have new job creators emerging from these schemes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will add greatly to the existing schemes in this direction. The Ministry of Youth and Sports through its Youths Feed the Nation Programme is providing grants to Youth Clubs and individuals to seed fund their micro and small businesses as well as in the agriculture sector. We have seen Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this programme how many youths, some from industries like tourism, have successfully re-purposed their skillsets to set up businesses of their own. Or to engage in community-based food security and climate sustainability programmes. We have found that this enables them to support and feed their families and wider communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we welcome \$5 million to up skilling or reskilling workers whose old jobs have been lost, but for whom new opportunities await.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note that there are broad-based changes including the removal of stamp duties on any Government document, which should free up our business community to invest in healthier and happier workplaces. I would like to repeat the words of the Honourable Minister for Economy that "your nation needs your generosity not your greed. Your profits should be felt by your employees, both those still working and those you know can bring back after letting go."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note and extend my support to the notion in the budget that these measures benefit all that is employers, employees and the consumers. The triangle of employment, industrial relations and productivity requires a lot of goodwill and common sense, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from my Ministry of Employment point of view, this will mean jobs will be sustained and even more will be created. And I welcome the flow on effect of the budget measures that will have on cost of living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome and support the budget initiative or prioritising opportunities for employment, and to have more sustainable public spending packages and removing those that are not working and providing the best returns for Government investment. Let me also acknowledge and support the Government for demonstrating true leadership with the leaders taking pay cuts, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and by not cutting civil service salaries. Civil service salaries are important not just for the individuals, but for the many families and wider communities that they support from villages to settlements to farmers, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I must commend the various arms of Government for their untiring effort to keep our country running. This is a good example for all to follow. As many Honourable Members of the Government have pointed out, this is not the time to hold back, and hope for the best. We must continue to be the best we can be in order to achieve the best. The workers, employers and the workplace, this means a re-thinking of how business can be best done, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Everyone must step up and be counted.

Before I make my concluding remarks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank all the staff and stakeholders in my two-line ministries which is the Ministry of Employment, Industrial Relations and Productivity and Ministry of Youth and Sports for their continued work and support for all activities and programmes. For much of this pandemic period, the two ministries have combined resources for example in the national COVID-19 employment survey, and in other areas Mr. Speaker, Sir.

During this pandemic, we more than ever need to empower Fijian youths now to take charge of their future and this Budget sets an example of how to get things done. How to take head on challenges and meet it with a well prepared and workable action plans.

This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will provide that empowerment for our youths so if decades down the line if another disaster hits, these young Fijians will be able to lead, following the example set by the FijiFirst Government during this crisis.

As the containment of COVID-19 has progressed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note the easing of restrictions and the effect it has on our sporting nation. I welcome the patience of our sporting organisations and its sports people who have now adopted safe COVID-19 practices as sports has made a comeback.

At this juncture, we welcome the announcement that any sponsor who donates to the Fiji National Sports Commission registered entity will receive 150 percent tax deduction, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Furthermore, the \$10,000 minimum threshold has been removed.

As we have seen, even in countries where COVID-19 is active, professional sports has continued. We see a whole host of Fijian superstars back in action as the National Rugby League and the Australian and New Zealand Super League have restarted.

They are an important and high impact contributors to our economy through remittances and my Ministry will continue to support youths, as they move towards this professional pathway into sports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government has a solid and proven record recovery from events that are not of their making. Whether it is COVID-19, the global financial lock down, Category 5 *TC Winston* or *TC Harold*, including other extreme weather events or the legacies of failed governments and governance system we have delivered and we will continue to deliver for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank this august House for the opportunity to speak on a historic and a landmark budget document for 2020-2021.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to once again declare my full support for the 2020-2021 National Budget. Thank you and *vinaka*.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I thank the Honourable Minister Parveen Bala for his contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, on that note, we will now suspend proceedings for refreshments in the Big Committee Room. Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.28 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.01 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate on the Budget and I now give the floor to the Honourable Anare Jale. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A. JALE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Government Budget Estimate for the period 2020-2021. There is no doubt about it. We are living in the unprecedented times, the two hour delay for the Budget Address was unprecedented; no apology, no explanation as Fiji and the world waited. Clearly, there was something wrong, the economy was at its unprecedented worst. The Honourable Minister for Economy admits in his Budget Address, that Fiji's economic activity has dropped to its lowest level ever. The inclusion of the COVID-19 deceives as an act of God is unprecedented, when previously it was only confined to natural disasters. These unprecedented situations have led to desperate measures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget estimate in my view, can be regarded as an anti-poor insensitive and a debt trap. A culmination of errors and bad decisions that the Government had made in regards to its fiscal and monetary policies, the years of wastage through handouts and failing to save and plan for rainy days are evidently clear in the financial situation that the ruling Government had created and had placed the people of Fiji in. There is no denying that Fiji's declining financial situation as confirmed by the available data has started well before the time COVID-19 was first detected in Wuhan in China.

Let us face the reality. The economy is in a mess and let us face it. We are now in this mess together. We have to cooperate to meet the challenges facing us. We have to see that the little we have is better targeted to maximise the benefit to the people of the nation. That will require the Honourable Members on the other side of the House, more so the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Minister for Economy to open their mind, reason and give due and fair consideration to suggestions and valuable ideas that will come from the Opposition and other stakeholder groups.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will touch on some key areas including the impact on the poor, foreign affairs, civil service, shipping and air services. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also unprecedented that the majority of the Fiji population is facing hardships. As the Honourable Minister for Economy admitted, already 115,000 Fijians, one-third of our workforce have had their hours reduced or lost their jobs entirely. If we apply the number of five dependents per person, a couple at an average of three children, this is a total of 575,000 people, this is more than half of the total population of Fiji, who can be classified as poor.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the removal of customs duties from 1,600 items as announced by the Honourable Minister for Economy, will only bring minimal relief and benefit to the majority of the people of Fiji, the poor and especially those that live in rural and maritime areas. In fact, the removal of customs duties from those items obviously, was and is intended to benefit the tourism industry and the rich. What would have brought about smiles to the faces of majority Fijians is the removal of VAT from basic food items.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. JALE.- To the poor, it is a matter of survival. I urge the Government to be considerate of the poor by removing VAT on basic food items.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a major employer, the Government is normally looked upon as a trendsetter in the employment market. Noting that salary cuts will be limited to Permanent

Secretaries, CEOs and Heads of Commissions and independent bodies, the Government's decision that there will be no reduction for the majority of civil servants is commendable. Considering the financial situation in Fiji now, that is likely to deteriorate further in the future. I fear the worst for civil servants. The recent action by the Government to change and widen the definition of Act of God, to include pandemics such as COVID-19, from my understanding, places in the hands of employers, including the Government, the power to terminate employment without following normal process required under the labour laws, including individual and collective agreements. Vacancies are not being filled and overtime not paid. This will impact on the productivity of the civil service and will impose extra burden on those that have to take on the responsibilities for vacant and unfilled positions. My plea to Government is that, redundancy should be the last resort and jobs must be saved at all costs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on foreign affairs, I have noted the decision to permanently close some of the missions abroad including Washington DC and Brussels and the reason given is that, and I quote, "they do not reliably make returns on government's investment in their operations". This is a rather short-sighted and an insult. There are major economic and security returns that have been overlooked. There seems to be a lack of proper consideration and consultation in the matter. Whilst I note the move to close some of our missions abroad, I call on the Government to reconsider the plan to close Washington DC and Brussels missions. The United States of America is one of our traditional partners and we have stood side by side in times of peace and war and the United States of America is viewed as the world's military and economic super-power. We have benefited from the United States of America in the past in terms of aid, training and security cooperation.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has benefited much from the remittances that our people living and working in the United States of America have been sending to Fiji. The emerging security situation developing in the South China Sea between the United States of America and China will have rippling effect on the countries in the Asia and Pacific region.

The rise of China influence in the geopolitics of the Pacific should be a major concern to Fiji and the Pacific countries especially in relation to debt-trap diplomacy. It would be prudent for the Government of Fiji to keep its mission open in Washington DC. If Washington DC is closed, would this cause the United States of America government to also consider closing its embassy in Fiji? Brussels is the centre of the European Union. The European Union is a major development partner to the Pacific and especially Fiji. European development agents to Fiji is mainly funded via the European development funds.

The current national funding cycle for 2014 to 2020 amounts to 28 million euros which is approximately FJ\$64 million. Fiji has benefited under the Regional Indicative Programme for the Pacific for 2014 to 2020. In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Brussels mission is Fiji's direct link to the organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States which is based in Brussels.

The Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) was created by the Georgetown Agreement in 1975 formerly known as ACP. The organisation's main objective are sustainable development and poverty reduction within its member States as well as their greater integration into the world's economy. All of the member States except Cuba are signatories to the Cotonou Agreement with the European Union. The Cotonou Agreement signed in Cotonou in June 2000 is a successor to the previous Lomé Convention which had expired in February 2020.

Fiji is playing a lead role with the other Pacific negotiators in the post-Cotonou discussions and will negatively impact our role in the negotiation when it closes its embassy. Again I am asking, what if the European Union decides to close or relocate its delegation of European Union for the Pacific currently based in Fiji?

A further question to be asked is whether the same yardstick was used to decide the permanent closure of the five missions was also applied to the missions being maintained, especially in Geneva, Beijing, Jakarta and Abu Dhabi. If the Government does not reconsider its decision to close the Washington DC and Brazil missions, the SODELPA Government will move to reopen the missions immediately when it comes to power.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. A. JALE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has been over a year when a petition on the shipping service to the province of Lau was accepted in this august House and referred to the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to inquire into and file a report to Parliament. The people of Lau and I am sure the other maritime provinces in Fiji, were looking in anticipation to the report of the Committee but nothing is in sight. It brings to question the parliamentary process. In the Standing Order, in terms of the timely completion and the filing of Standing Committee reports on petitions and something should be done to see that inquiries and investigation reports by Standing Committees are brought back to Parliament without delay and referred to the responsible authority for necessary action.

On the shipping subsidy, I thank the Government for the increase of around \$290,000 from the 2019- 2020 allocation under Head 40. Whilst on the subject, I wish to raise with the Honourable Minister responsible the concerns raised with me on my constituency visit to Vanuabalavu, villages of Daliconi, Malaka and Muamua. These three villages are about half an hour by ship from Nabavatu Estate. The shipping franchise provide for a franchise ship visiting Vanuabalavu to anchor, unload and load cargoes at Nabavatu Estate. The three villages that I have mentioned are only a stone throw away from Nabavatu but help to hire trucks costing \$100 per trip to collect their cargoes from Lomaloma or bring for loading their cargoes to Suva.

The franchise scheme should allow the ship to stop at Daliconi Village to enable the three villages to unload and load their cargoes. This is an example of how the grassroot people can fully benefit from government programmes, rather than being financially burdened unnecessarily. This may be the same in other islands in the maritime provinces.

The other concerns raised was that the shipping owners were using civil servants to sign and confirm that their ship had fulfilled the franchise requirements when calling on an island and free to depart the island. On several instances, ships on franchise depart the island without unloading all cargoes and before it loads cargoes for Suva. It is suggested that only the *turaga ni koro, mata ni tikina* or a village nurse should sign the confirmation that a ship has fulfilled the franchise requirements in order to stop shipping companies from manipulating the system to their advantage and depriving the villagers their rights.

I have noted the increase by \$75 million of the capital budget in Head 43 for the Fiji Roads Authority from the 2019-2020 Budget Estimate. However, the Authority's capital budget does not provide for repairs and construction for wharves and jetties. Jetties are critical for the efficient transportation to maritime provinces and should not be neglected by the government. Maritime and rural areas should be given their fair share of development budget in comparison to that allocated to urban areas.

The jetties in Naroi in Moala, Tarukua in Cicia and Lomaloma in Vanuabalavu have been in depleted states for a long period of time despite numerous representation to the Government and the Fiji Roads Authority for necessary action and I call on the Government to effect adjustment and make specific allocation for the repairs of the mentioned jetties in the 2020-2021 Budget Estimates.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have noted with concern the reduction on the domestic air service subsidy by \$330,000 from the 2019-2020 Budget Estimate under Head 3. Domestic air service provide a vital role in the provision of transportation to remote islands in Fiji where there are no jetties. Do you know, Mr. Speaker, in islands without jetties, disabled and elderly people are brought on to ships during bad weather in nettings used to load and unload cargoes? I previously raised the concern for the people of Ono-i-Lau that the island of Ono-i-Lau has not been serviced by domestic services for a number of years. Obviously its franchise air service was stopped.

So, after I spoke at the COVID-19 Response Budget debate about this matter, another Honourable Member of Parliament asked me the meaning of what the Honourable Prime Minister was doing when I raised the concern of the people of Ono-i-Lau. The Honourable Member related to me that the Honourable Prime Minister bent his head forward and was moving his hand like this (action shown). I asked the Honourable Member, “are you sure he was doing that?” The Honourable Member said “yes”. I then said to the Honourable Member “oh, the Honourable Prime Minister was telling the House that if the plane does not fly to Ono-i-Lau then the people of Ono-i-Lau should swim to Suva.” I am extending the invitation to the Honourable Prime Minister to visit Ono-i-Lau again soon so that he can show the people of Ono-i-Lau how to swim to Suva.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been hearing from the Minister for Economy about unprecedented growth. The question is, was there a real growth? COVID-19 has been conveniently blamed for Government’s past failures, mismanagement of the economy has led to the majority of Fijians falling into deeper hardship, becoming poor and government has the audacity to hand down an anti-poor budget. An ill-conceived decision to close missions especially in Washington DC and Brussels will diminish Fiji’s global influence and increase our security vulnerability. I cannot support the motion. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Jale and I now give the floor to the Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. You have the floor, Ma’am.

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of this august House, my fellow Fijians, *ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise with pleasure to address this august House on the 2020-2021 National Budget allocated to the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. Our Ministry has had several increases in the budget allocations for the past few years and it is the same for the next fiscal year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 11th March, 2020 the World Health Organisation classified COVID-19 as a global pandemic. Since then most countries are facing unprecedented challenges from COVID-19 and the challenge to governments is even more extreme as an impact on people all over the world continues to grow. The pandemic is impacting people daily from all angles; health, economics, social, logistics, politics, education, relationships and much more. The spread of COVID-19 is nothing short of a wild fire in a drought but the remarkable thing about Fiji is how well we managed to flatten the curve within an unimaginable period of time. It was also remarkable how quickly the FijiFirst Government responded through a Supplementary Budget, to prepare us economically to sustain the country from the crippling effects of the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Government, at a time of a crisis that no country had prepared for, made quick and tough decisions to control the spread of the virus, while addressing the

economic demands of the situation. This very evidently illustrates the clarity, the countless and the principles this Government channels when it deals with the lives of Fijians.

If the term ‘quick respond’ had a face, it would be the FijiFirst Government’s and for this, I wish to thank the Honourable Prime Minister for steering this Government in a direction that puts its people first and foremost. I thank the Honourable Prime Minister for being a leader for things not only for today, but tomorrow as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they say, by failing to prepare you are preparing to fail. This Government and the upcoming fiscal year’s Budget is a budget for preparedness because the Fijian Government does not wish to fail our people, our coming generations at any cost.

The progressive ideas, the proactive measures and forward thinking applied in the 2020-2021 Budget preparation is, indeed, extraordinary and I thank and applaud the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy and his team for giving us a Budget that not only addresses the challenges of the people, but also provides a platform to revive the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is so welcoming to note that even the United Nations has commended the Fijian Government for a bold and courageous Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this new Budget continues to prioritise what matters to our people - free education, free medicine, housing benefits, social protection for the vulnerable members of the society, subsidies on utilities, tax reductions to cushion the losses felt by the tourism sector, ease on student loan repayments, ease in establishing and running SMEs, and much more.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Supplementary Budget Debate that happened in this august House a month ago was a perfect indication of how the political agenda remains the only agenda of our colleagues on the other side of the House, from demanding pay cuts for the civil servants in an attempt to save their own benefits being reduced, to outright saying that the Government brought COVID-19 into Fiji, to even saying that the Ministry of Health had done nothing. Those appalling remarks made me wonder if the Fijian people and our progress as a nation is ever a priority to the Opposition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in light of the measures announced by the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, there is not much to debate. We have, yet again, come up with a straightforward strategic approach with the interest of our Fijian families at heart to deal with this crisis, and ensure that there is sustainability as stimulation of activity in our economy.

Our leaders have managed to meet and collaborate with businesses and financial institutions to devise the practical solution to cater for our current economic needs. We are not having pay cuts of ordinary Fijians in the Civil Service, nor are we abandoning Government’s ongoing incentives to the most vulnerable segments of the Fijian population. Instead, we are financially securing the most vulnerable through the continued allotment of budget for all of our social protections programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my capacity as Assistant Minister, I have been entrusted with the responsibility of progress in programmes related to persons living with disabilities in Fiji. And the 2020-2021 Budget is yet another reminder that the Fijian Government has the best interest of the most vulnerable population at heart, no matter what the crisis is.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 10 percent of the Fijian population is estimated to be made up of persons living with disabilities, but more accurately, persons with special disabilities. These persons are

equally entitled to constitutional equality and human rights, and we are here as leaders of this country, to ensure that they are not left behind while we drive Fiji forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, persons with disabilities often encounter discrimination and exclusion on a daily basis. This means, in particular, pervasive exclusion from development programmes and funds, education, employment, healthcare services, communication, information, infrastructure, economic empowerment programmes and transport services. In addition, the effects of climate change, such as natural disasters, food and security, conflict situations and global pandemics, one of which we are currently facing, make persons with disabilities disproportionately affected.

But the good news is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is changing for Fiji and this change is a result of the collaborative and concerted efforts of Government, civil society organisations, development partners and communities, for example, in older times, deaf persons would not have been able to watch the Parliamentary sitting and what we talk about and decide about them as we have seen here.

The Fijian Government did not limit this change to Parliamentary sessions, but also ensured that each time a press conference was held by the Government in relation to COVID-19, an interpreter always stood beside the speaker. And I also take this opportunity to call out the cyber-bullying that one of the interpreters was subjected to, and that has been an excellent indicator of how discriminatory, derogatory, and despicable the mentalities that are still around persons living with disability. This mentality needs to go, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The FijiFirst Government continues to support the welfare needs of persons living with disabilities through social protection programmes and the political will is evident in the Budget allocation for all these in the fiscal year 2020-2021.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2020-2021 Budget has seen a great increase in the grant towards the Fiji National Council for Disabled Persons (FNCDP), which is tasked to reach out to people in rural areas and ensure that there is disability development in Fiji. Government has allocated \$500,000 to the FNCDP, a \$150,000 more from the Supplementary Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Disability Allowance by the Fijian Government continues in the new fiscal year, an allocation of \$9.355 million, which is an increase of \$3 million from the COVID Supplementary Budget and over \$4 million from the original 2019-2020 Budget. This programme currently assists over 7,000 beneficiaries.

The continuation of this programme will ease the financial burden on low income earning families, who look after their loved ones with disabilities, but are challenged with the additional cost in catering for their special needs. The \$90 per head allowance per month is also the only source of financial support to some, and they are not in a position to support themselves due to their disability. The Ministry is extremely thankful for the political will of the FijiFirst Government as shown through this allocation to improve the status of the disabled persons in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is known that Governments cannot work in silence. We have always benefitted well from partners with the civil society and the disability NGOs have been instrumental in lobbying for the rights and issues of people living with disabilities.

The allocation of \$400,000 grant to these organisations, an increase \$200,000 from the COVID Supplementary Budget is to strengthen them in their operations and programmes to provide greater service to Fijians living with disabilities, and also adequately represented in decision-making. I cannot stress enough that the alliance between Government and Non-Governmental

Sectors, including faith-based organisations and the private sector is crucial, if we are to make good progress in creating a right-based, fully inclusive and barrier-free society in Fiji.

I wish to convey my heartfelt appreciation to the disability organisations in Fiji, particularly for raising COVID-19-related awareness with Fijians living with disabilities. In tough times like this, they have been very important helpers of the Government. Thank you so much.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this point, I wish to mention and comment our REACH Project Team because they play a very important role in taking services to those who cannot come to us. This phenomenal outreach programme is especially useful for persons living with disabilities in rural communities and moreso now with the need to maintain social distancing. The Project is also supported by the Government with an allocation of \$150,000 for the upcoming fiscal year.

Aligned to the Government's commitment to ensure access to equal rights and justice, the Fijian Government has allocated \$20,000 for the economic empowerment of persons living with disabilities and \$50,000 for the implementation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018 in the 2020-2021 Fiscal Year.

Overall, we are very satisfied with the budget allocated to support the needs and development of Fijians living with disabilities, and I must add that we should only consume as much as we can digest. Every time you see someone standing up, you say, "Oh, this Ministry should have got more" or "the other Ministry should have got more", but right now we have enough to chew. These allocations are adequate to execute the plans that the Ministry has in place for persons living with disabilities in the next 12 months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my capacity as Assistant Minister for Women, I would be failing in my duty if I do not acknowledge the vital role women play in this fight against COVID-19. Our mothers play a critical role in ensuring that our families practice good hygiene and ensure that our children are safe in our homes. I urge our mothers to be on the frontline and to keep our families safe in these difficult times. Take care of the mental health of your loved ones, as stress and depression in these times will only harm our ability to recover.

I encourage the women listening today to make use of the opportunity that the Government has provided with this Budget, especially in terms of entrepreneurial incentives. You are gifted and you have the ability to translate your gifts to incomes, so go for it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, may I add that we must immensely be proud that a woman is leading our battle against COVID-19 from the frontline. And I take this time to thank Dr. Aalisha Sahukhan, the Head of Health Protection at the Ministry of Health and her team, together with the hundreds of our nurses, doctors, disciplined forces staff for their commitment and diligence in carrying their call of duty, *vinaka vakalevu*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is rather unfortunate that Honourable Members of the Opposition failed to understand the depth of character illustrated in the 2020-2021 National Budget. Perhaps, they were too pre-occupied with other agendas. Any person with a sense of economic understanding will fortify the fact that impacts of tax reforms, entrepreneurial incentives and other benefits will trickle down to the pockets of an ordinary Fijian.

Not only does this Budget have the Fijian people at heart, it naturally addresses day-to-day issues that encircle our people and provides a platform of opportunities that objectifies our journey to pre-COVID-19 economic wellness. However, one must have an eye for visionary concepts to

understand this, and our colleagues on the other side of the House are, unfortunately, entangled in their own imagination and agendas, or should I say intellectual limitations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can fight this crises but not alone. We can overcome this, but not alone, so let us unite and show this Coronavirus that we are stronger than it is and that we will not succumb to it but we will overcome it, fight it.

I would like to close with a promise that the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation is equipped to look after the welfare of those living with disabilities, even in a crises and with a new Budget, we are ready to take on the challenge to continue to assist them. We will continue to reach out to Fijians living with disabilities at the community levels to the best of our capacity, to ensure they are heard and they are helped.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I say, “thank you”, before another Honourable Opposition Member stands up and talks about the closing down of the Embassies, I must remind them that closing down of Embassies does not mean closing down of services. The services will continue so, please, be reminded. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me the time.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR.- I fully support this Budget. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation.

I now give the floor to the Honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker. Honourable Speaker, given that the total debt level stated by the Minister of Economy is at approximately \$7 billion, and that the RBF’s latest projection that Fiji’s economy will contract by an unprecedented 21.7 percent in 2020, Fiji is in dire straits economically. This means that government’s debt payments, according to Honourable Professor Prasad, an economic expert in his own right, is almost \$100 million per month. Whereas repayment of debts back in 2006, for every man, woman and child was \$3,000 per capita, repayments of debts today is 3 times that at \$9000 per capita. It is no wonder with such depressing figures that so many of our people are struggling.

What does this mean for the Ministry of Education? The implication is that the 2020-2021 Budget has decreased from last year, fortunately wages and salaries are intact but more job creation as outlined by the Minister is going to be difficult with the decreased budget. What is important, Honourable Minister, is that this decreased budget provides the quality of service delivery for teachers and students. In this budget and based on recent experience, items designated under R (Under Requisition) have many times not been implemented. This is reflected in the Auditor-General’s Reports for multiple years, where allocations were unutilized or underspent. This means that maintenance and upgrading of physical facilities, for instance, have been grossly neglected.

Funds were instead vired or transferred elsewhere to cover over-expenditures in other areas or to serve Government’s debt repayments and this is reflected on the ground in the state of government facilities and infrastructure. For rural, remote and maritime schools, Mr. Speaker, Sir, who are relying on boats and outboard motors, as recently highlighted in the media, to transport students across rivers and seas, the \$200,000 under Requisition caters for that allocation. How are

these schools prioritised so that schools that really need it, get it. Of interest to yourself, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the allocation of \$689,085 which is for the completion of the new Bau College for this budget year 2020-2021, with \$2.5 million, Mr. Speaker, Sir, already in the COVID-19 Response Budget in March of this year but this does not make sense. How much of that amount has already been used from March to today? Is this \$689,085, part of that \$2.5 million or what is it? We have little way of knowing. With it under Requisition, it does not seem likely that this allocation will be used either, in the expected time remaining.

With schools being told by the Minister to defer Capital Projects, to put it on hold, because of the reduction in the Ministry budget makes it more likely that hardly any item under R will be seriously considered for implementation. This is very sad. Why get people's hopes up, only to let them down?

Just out of curiosity Mr. Speaker, Sir, what of the landmark policies of Free Milk, Free Laptops and Free Education; much touted initiatives prior to the 2014 elections? Much talk was generated on Free Milk and Weet-Bix for the pupils in excess of 20,000 class 1 pupils per year. No proper feasibility study was done on these initiatives; no consultation with stakeholders, teachers, guardians, parents, teacher unions, no one. So, free milk was distributed to Class 1 students Fiji-wide together with all the bragging and boasting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when things did not go right, the Ministry predictably started amending the poorly designed, and poorly executed policy. Free Milk and Weet-Bix was to be given only to rural schools, or was it only to urban schools. In the 2020-2021 Budget, free milk and Weet-Bix is to be given to neither rural nor urban as it has disappeared from the budget and it is given to no one although there was a \$250,000 allocation in the COVID-19 Response Budget. My question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is: What type of auditing or evaluation has been done on this allocation, now that it has disappeared? How did the children benefit from it? Did they become healthier? What about their bones and teeth, did it improve with the calcium that was provided for them? Or was this a political gimmick for children to believe that this was for their wellbeing? Never mind the gullible voters who helped to get FijiFirst into government with 32 seats and not forgetting the businesses that profited from this million dollar exercise - shortlived as it was.

To continue, does anyone from the other side of the House remember the promise of the Programme "One Laptop Per Child" that was touted so loudly and so incessantly prior to, during and shortly after the 2014 Elections? What happened to that great idea, Mr. Speaker, Sir? You may have forgotten but we have not. Was it just another lie to the children? That was well before this COVID-19 new normal. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these laptops would have been very useful right now for the students, had they been delivered on this FijiFirst promises. They could have been funded if Government was not so wasteful in unproductive areas elsewhere, such as the millions upon millions, Mr. Speaker, Sir, poured into vehicle leasing every month for several years running. This year alone vehicle leasing is approximately \$29 million. Such a waste of money, so shallow and all for show, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Thank you, FijiFirst.

On the Free Education Grant (FEG), again, no consultations were done prior to the implementation. Is it any wonder then that the FEG is a regular feature of every Auditor-General's Report since its inception? Schools are very concerned at the decreasing allocations from 2014 where it was \$250 per child and in 2016 it was reduced to \$200 per child. In 2018, there was a change of direction, again no consultations, where the Ministry of Education classified schools, where small and medium schools were provided \$150 per child and large schools, \$156 per child. This makes a big difference on the ground. The learning environment for many children is sub-standard and uneven.

For the 2020-2021 Budget, the Ministry has been advised of a further 20 percent decrease, which teachers now believe that the Ministry of Education is seriously jeopardizing and compromising the quality of education, with ...

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order.

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- ... see, it is hurting you because it is true.

HON. SPEAKER.- Order.

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- This is seriously jeopardizing and compromising the quality of education with the FEG being the engine room for all schools and where these further reductions in funding is hampered by the 'No Fund-Raising Policy.' So it is a real CATCH22 situation where much-needed libraries, computers, new technologies which should be funded by FEG, will just remain a dream.

Now I go briefly on TELS, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is the FijiFirst Government who lowered the marks required and now after compromising the standards, they are now wanting to reinstate what was there in the first instance. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, many students who are scoring less than 250 marks, what happens to them? There is no Fiji Institute of technology (FIT), there is no safety-net for them, so what is there for these hundreds of students, where do they go to? How do they ensure that they are given a second chance at something? So that is the way we want to look at things, because not everyone is going to go to TELS or to the Toppers.

So, we have to look after these students, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order.

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- The issues still remain on the high debt levels incurred in the TELS programme which students will have to pay off over a period of time. This is such short-sighted policy-making. Please, for the sake of the people and the students, humble yourselves and genuinely consult. Please, make sure Honourable former Minister, you have targeted policies rather than just aiming widely hoping you will hit something. Be like the wise tailor, measure twice cut once; and not measure once and cut many times. For the sake of our children, do what is right and what will last them for their life.

For Heritage and Arts, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the long overdue upgrade of the Fiji Museum \$200,000 is allocated, and for the Rehabilitation of the Levuka World Heritage Structure, an allocation of \$245,000 which will upgrade to the standard required for UNESCO Heritage Listing to be protected for future generations to appreciate and enjoy. Likewise, as has been explained previously, the likelihood of these items under Requisition being implemented, is quite low.

On another point and probably more importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the teachers who have been eagerly awaiting their MyAPA payments for 2017 to 2018 may have to wait a lot longer as there does not seem to be any allocation for this Performance Appraisal in this Budget. This will be most disappointing for the more than 98 percent of the 13,000 teachers who have been denied the entitlement they deserve. The less than 2 percent of teachers who have received their MyAPA payments are the lucky ones, Mr. Speaker, Sir, others have retired, some have relocated overseas,

some have died waiting for their MyAPA without having received their well-earned entitlement. The FijiFirst Government should hang their head in shame!!! They should just tell the truth that there is no money. You should tell the truth and shame the devil. Do not give the teachers the run around. They deserve better. They deserve the truth as the truth will set you free. FijiFirst people, you show little remorse or pity for the people. Very, very sad indeed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on poverty levels, there is evidence that many of the very poor are already in despair. They feel abandoned and for them, each day is a struggle to simply find something to eat. Sashi Kiran who is the Chief Executive of the Foundation for Rural, Integrated Enterprises and Development (FRIEND) said recently that informal sector workers who relied on tourism had no income and no safety net. The Budget offered them nothing.

Ms. Kiran met with a young single mother who had not eaten for four days. She had however managed to scrape together enough food for her little daughter. Her situation had worsened when she lost her job as a salesgirl in a small shop. The job had paid her only between \$70 to \$80 a week. Her scant savings were soon exhausted, and she was not a member of the FNPF, Mr. Speaker, Sir. When Ms. Kiran met with her she saw the desperation of someone living in abject poverty. The Minister's schemes for national salvation had failed to reach her. Thankfully, FRIEND managed to find her a job as a cleaner for this victim of our crisis. She is now receiving, Mr. Speaker, Sir, some rations from a FRIEND food bank.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are thousands of others like her barely surviving, just holding on and hoping against hope they will be saved. We see glimpses of this human tragedy in the pages of the *Fiji Times*. The Honourable Minister (I will not mention which one), Mr. Speaker, Sir, thinks this newspaper is a joke. I do not agree with him; their reports about human suffering and sacrifice in this time of crisis are anything but a joke. The Honourable Minister needs to take them seriously and not depend on the one-sided and bias reportage of the other daily paper.

I suspect, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that poverty is worse than we think. My own observations and sense of situation are in line with those of Non-Government Organisations like FRIEND who are doing their best to help the poorest and the most at risk. I am glad they are speaking out, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The challenge for the Honourable Minister is to use resources at their disposal to reach these deprived citizens and all the rest who are suffering.

I can tell him that the need for those at the outer edges of society is for cash in hand right now, not tomorrow, not next week or month but now. It is excellent to announce schemes for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, tax and duty concessions and exemptions. But that means little to someone with hunger, filled with fear and panic about their immediate future, living in a little shack with no amenities with sickly children to feed and hardly any or no money. May be a kind neighbour will help out today with the few sticks of cassava and a bit of *bele* but what about tomorrow and the next day and the next.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Minister announced what he described as a \$2 billion direct Government Stimulus Package to fund Fiji's come back from the impact of COVID-19. The aim was to pump as much money as possible into the economy. Resources will be redirected to where they would do the most and to ensure funds got to those left willing from COVID-19 worst impacts. Part of this, I assume is the \$30 million set aside for loans to small and medium businesses.

Australia to top up over \$7.1 million directly into the accounts of nearly 40,000 social welfare recipients. According to the Minister unemployment relief will be funded by the Government with another \$20 million. In total, he said, Government had made a \$100 million available to make sure every unemployed Fijian is able to access their food relief payments.

There is a question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as to why I am mentioning all these because for the ordinary person, what does that actually mean? The wording is a bit obscure. They have been send from pillar to post. They do not know how to access any of these assistance that has been highlighted in the media. So, that is where I am coming from in telling this, Mr. Speaker, because the figures are large, they have hopes. The vision is expensive in general but what about the details? Would the Honourable Minister explain please when a young woman who had not eaten for four days, how can she be helped by this programmes of assistance and where will she be helped? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa for her contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Dr. Salik Govind, you have the floor, Sir.

HON. DR. S.R. GOVIND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, Honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen listening from your homes.

I rise to contribute to the debate on the 2020-2021 National Budget delivered to this august House on 17th July, 2020 by the Honourable Attorney-General, Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communication.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Honourable Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communication for presenting a well thought-out, evidence based and widely consulted with stakeholders - the 2020-2021 National Budget.

This Budget has targeted all categories of people and families with special attention to those mostly affected by the unsuspecting pandemic COVID-19 that caught the global community unaware and unprepared for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Minister has made sure that our most vulnerable people such as children, youth, elderly and disadvantaged have not been left behind in the National Budget process. At the same time, the Honourable Minister has put great emphasis to revive the economy so that more people can get back to work within the shortest time and afford the necessities of livelihood to sustain themselves and their families in this trying times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught every one of us a great lesson which can never, ever be forgotten. Primarily, it has taught us that the basic essential of public health towards enjoying good health and these include maintaining good personal hygiene, good nutrition and physical activity. These are relevant to health today, as they have ever been before. I must emphasise, do not apply only to the current pandemic of COVID-19, but to every public health issue that mankind faces, including other infectious and non-infectious disease as well. The COVID-19 pandemic also taught us that maintaining one's health and well-being is not only the responsibility of the Ministry of Health, but more so, the responsibility of every individual, family, community and the nation as a whole.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a multi-sectoral approach that includes all sectors of Government and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), including private sector, is equally important for public health. Health is, and will always remain everyone's business. Let us not forget, that the world will be a very decent place to live when we emerge from COVID-19 pandemic and we have to arm ourselves with the practices of health and well-being we have learnt, as a nation and which the Honourable Prime Minister has repeated over time to the nation. Let us start preparing for the journey now together as a family.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Budget 2020-2021, we all are debating today, has been presented exactly with that in mind. The limited resources that are available to us now need to be prudently utilised and targeted to the critical areas of the economy and the society, so that the future of the country is sustained.

I am happy to hear that despite the drastic reduction in our revenues, duties and taxes, the budget for essential services such as health, education social welfare and infrastructure are still allocated a major share of the Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to elaborate on some specific activities that are highlighted in this year's Budget that will have significant impact on our people:

Health: the move to employ more nurses and midwives and to fast track our medical interns into the mainstream health service delivery is appropriate and timely. It will not only enhance and expedite service delivery, but also prepare the nation if we are to experience a second wave of the epidemic which to date, we have handled well. Thanks to our determined and efficient health workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I take this opportunity to extend my deepest gratitude to all our health officials, especially the frontline health workers who have sacrificed their time, their lives and the lives of their families in responding to the call of duty for the nation.

Education is one of the most significant factors of national development. Through it, a nation builds its skill set to drive their economy and maintain a healthy and well informed population and respond to future challenges. Indeed, the FijiFirst Government has remained innovative in its education policy and has remained steadfast with its contribution to ensure the appropriate skills for our next generation of leaders and professionals are maintained.

In these trying times, the Government has not abandoned its responsibility in relieving families of their burdens in educating their children. Yes, the budget has brought changes in the Tertiary Scholarship & Loans Scheme (TELS) funding system and reduced the mark of 250 as condition for receiving TELS. This, I think, throws a challenge to our youth to show their talents and rise up to the occasion by achieving the required grade and thus supporting the government and making their families proud. With the abundance of energy in our youth, I know they will pass. As per sports, all I can say is to repeat the old saying that, 'a healthy body is a healthy mind'. The Government continues to provide relevant support to all our sports for men and women and it has also made it possible for others to support our sporting nation by reducing taxes on their contributions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for social welfare, the welfare of the elderly and families in need has remained an abiding concern of the FijiFirst Government since it assumed the reigns of power in this country.

To date, it has continued to ensure that their needs are primary. For this reason, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has introduced no cuts and actually added to the allocation of the Ministry for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. The Government is acutely aware of the challenges faced by the Ministry for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation as it encounters individuals, families, older people and children in need and continues to extend a helping hand. They will not be abandoned in these trying times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must all thank our Honourable Prime Minister for his leadership prior to and in these times of wonder and despair, as the epidemic maintains its aggressive path. A leadership that has not faltered. A leadership that stood firm in the face of the challenging and

devastating crisis of our time, COVID-19. A leadership that took responsibility and allowed the Government to own the crisis and respond to it effectively and with efficient procedures. A leadership that engaged and informed the public regularly on the status of the epidemic. These together are what has contributed in standing the tide of the epidemic and making Fiji continue to be a healthy and safe environment. Indeed, through his leadership, the FijiFirst Party has shown once again that it is the Party and Government for the people.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. DR. S.R. GOVIND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I once again thank the Honourable Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications for presenting such a relevant people-centred Budget during these difficult times. I hope that everyone that is sensible will support this Budget. I fully support the 2020-2021 National Budget. Thank you. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Dr. Salik Govind for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Inosi Kuridrani. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the members of Cabinet and to the people of Fiji following the debate today on radios, televisions and live streams. Before I proceed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I need to voice here the concern of the redundant hotel workers, especially those along the Coral Coast, Nadi and the Western Division of their disappointment regarding the \$1,000 COVID-19 assistance. I request the Honourable Prime Minister and his Cabinet Ministers to take time and visit these people and they will be surprised to note that most of them did not receive that Government assistance that was supposed to top-up with the FNPF funds.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Where did you get it from?

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- I also ask the Honourable Prime Minister and his Cabinet Ministers to do their follow-ups on the victims of *TC Winston* back in 2016.

Secondly, I want to respond to Honourable Selai's remarks of praising the Honourable Prime Minister in the fight against COVID-19. I do not know if the Honourable Member has been watching news on the PM's tour to the rural and the maritime islands. He and his Cabinet teams failed to adhere to the social distancing rules of two metres.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly endorse the response delivered by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition this morning, that the 2020-2021 National Budget is irresponsible, rudderless and deceptive. I am sad to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I consider the Budget as a game not well thought-out because the Honourable Minister for Economy has failed again to allocate adequate resources to the critical sectors of the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we should understand that when a nation is in crisis, not only the economy is affected but the whole spectrum of governance and socio-economic development deteriorated including law and order, good governance and democracy. We remember only too well how Government tried to limit freedom of expression at the start of the COVID-19 epidemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the face of a disaster, we faced at a point in time in Fiji, Fiji urgently needs structural adjustment policies with a human face. Basically, this means that we need to relook

at the old structure of the economy, it requires a paradigm shift in the way we do things, and we need to work better and smarter.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is critical to appreciate the facts and true matters most during this crisis. When the government gives facts and figures, trust for the government goes up conversely last to try to paint a picture that is different from reality, the harsh reality they face reduce trust and confidence.

However, the last 14 years have been characterised by misinformation, manipulation and distortion not born out of the harsh reality on the ground. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last 2019-2020 Budget presentation, the Minister for Economy told the nation that we have had an unprecedented economic boom over the last ten years. It is worrying, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the people of Fiji are being led down the garden path from the podium in this august House as the saying goes Sir and I quote, "the fish rots from the head". So, the question of criminal charges being laid on public servants for falsifying information, to me just reflects the leaderships they see everyday. An investigation should be carried out into the deceptions that have been ongoing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last week it was in the news that a former LTA officer was charged by FICAC for general dishonesty to obtain a gain. My question is, can that also be applied to the Minister for Economy for misleading this Parliament and the people of Fiji in the economic situation of the country?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to time constraints, I will just show four scenarios of our economic situation. The numbers do not lie. They are contrary to the flowery political rhetoric we have been fed over the last 14 years.

First, the government debt, this excludes the contingency liability which is on a downward spiral from 2016 to 2021. In 2016 it was 43.9 percent of the GDP but projected this year it will be 83.4 percent of the GDP. For economies like ours even 6 percent of the GDP is too high. Yesterday the Minister for Economy in his closing remarks to the Fiji Chamber of Commerce said that we need to remove the economic cycle and not to depend on aid.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I question this House now, can we be free from the economic cycle of debt? I doubt it. Our revenue collection was also on a downward trend while our expenditure was also on the increase as confirmed by a negative shift as a percentage of GDP. In 2017, it was negative 0.2 percent, in 2019 it was negative 3.6 percent and this year it has been projected to negative 20.2 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if that scenario which I need to show to confirm that there was no economic boom is our average revenue and expenditure in the last seven years, our average revenue has decreased by \$1.7 billion, our expenditure has increased by \$3.7 billion and our deficit has increased by \$2.8 billion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been told that Fiji's economy is growing at a steady rate of about 30 percent in average over the past 10 years. This is a lie. The truth is that the average growth rate is only 0.75 percent in the last 10 years as compared to the SVT and Alliance Governments growth trends which was 4.8 percent in 1980, 2.44 percent in 2000 and it was only 0.75 percent in 2011 to 2020.

Based on the above scenario, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sad to note that the so-called Bainimarama boom was just another propaganda vehicle. When the clean-up campaign car ran out

of fuel we switched to bringing equality and then we were told to celebrate the boom. Their propaganda is now a car of unprecedented boom, now has no fuel; *esa kaput*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us quickly look at our economic position and growth prospects where we stand in the pre-COVID-19 relatively in the Pacific. In December, 2019, the ADB projected a GDP growth in 14 regional countries, including Fiji and we were placed 11th. Fiji's standing does not look very good against other Pacific Island countries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even the IMF, world economic outlook for April 2016 show that we were way lower than the African economies that used to be depressed and in turmoil. According to the Fiji Bureau of Statistics and Micro Economic Committee for June 2020 projections, the real GDP growth will contract by minus 21.7 percent in 2021. It is forecast to grow by 14.1 percent. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the contraction picture does not look realistic from the IMF projection. The IMF projected for 2020, the economy will contract by minus 3 percent and the growth forecast for 2021 is only 5.9 percent. How can we achieve the 14.1 percent in growth when our average growth was only 0.75 percent for the last decade? This is a lie.

Based on the above scenario, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have my doubts on the independence of these Government institutions and the reliability and accuracy of information and data provided. Our economic situation shows the fake claims of the so called "economic boom" and unprecedented prosperity that the people of Fiji have been told, we had been hearing by the Honourable Minister for Economy.

Agriculture: Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Shadow Minister for Agriculture, I support the status SODELPA goal that during this time of crisis, the budget should address the health and wellbeing of all citizens, particularly the most vulnerable. However, since tourism will not be in operation for the next two to three years or longer, this Government should put more focus on resources with the agriculture. May I repeat, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government must allocate more focus on resources to agriculture because tourism on which we have relied traditionally to navigate the nation out of political economic crisis, as after 2000 and 2006, will not be fully operational until two to three years down the road.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the right policies and appropriate adjustments and incentives, agriculture development can sustain our economy in the short and the long term and provide food security. Today food security has been a major concern globally and exacerbated by the vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters. We need to sustain domestic food production levels in line with food demand and market potential and continue the transition from subsistence to semi-subsistence and commercial agriculture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture has been allocated \$65.3 million in this budget, which I believe is insufficient and should be increased to \$70 million, considering the importance of agriculture during this crisis. The additional \$4.7 million is to meet:

- (1) Provide a stimulus package for the farmers cultivating the *mataqali* land for their development cost;
- (2) Special assistance for the rural farmers;
- (3) An additional \$2.4 million to be directed for the development of low volume and high volume crops, such as vanilla, cocoa, *yaqona* and ginger;
- (4) Relocate the Ministry of Agriculture. This incentive will create work for cash programmes so it will provide temporary wage employment for the unemployed;
- (5) Navuso Agriculture Technical Institution allocation to be increased to \$1 million. This will solve the problem of ageing farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to question why the goat meat industry has a bigger budget of \$850,000, when a little percentage of the population eat goat meat. It exceeds the budget for beef extensions of only \$200,000, *dalo* for only \$300,000, *yaqona* is only for \$200,000 but the goat meat industry has been allocated \$850,000.

We only have \$3,800 to establish bio gas plants. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has been trying to promote the protection of our environment, while they just allocate only \$3,800 for bio gas plants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is unfortunate to note that \$29.2 million, which is 45 percent of the agriculture funds is under Requisition, controlled by the Honourable Minister for Economy. This leaves only 55 percent of the budget to be controlled by the Minister for Agriculture. Mr. Speaker, Sir, could this be the reason why the Ministry of Agriculture has not been performing and it has not produced an Annual Report since 2014 or reflection of the Honourable Minister's incapability and incompetency? Therefore I strongly suggest that all funds under "R" be relocated to the Ministry of Agriculture. This will ensure better fund utilisation, control and accountability. Otherwise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Minister's salary needs to be deducted. May I suggest, Mr. Speaker, if the Minister's salary be reduced to 45 percent since he only controls 55 percent of his budget.

Let us look at sugar. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government has continued to throw money into the sugar industry willy-nilly. The Honourable Minister for Sugar has mentioned of the importance of real analysis and I wonder, Mr. Speaker, Sir, whether he has made some real analysis and identified the problem in the sugar industry. I believe the problem in the sugar industry is not the funding but it is the lack of capacity in monitoring and evaluation combined with weather calamities and bad governance resulting in poor productivity. To make matters worse, the Minister responsible is the Honourable Prime Minister who lacks the analytical qualities, knowledge and commitment to revive the industry.

We are currently producing 45 tonnes per hectare, that is only 50 percent of the farm potential, well below the production break-even point of 90 tonnes per hectare. That is why sugar farming is not viable. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we want to save the sugar industry may I suggest that the Honourable Prime Minister takes over the rural development portfolio and give up the sugar ministry because I believe he spends more time in the official opening of rural projects rather than the sugar portfolio.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe the budget allocation for the sugar industry is sufficient but need to make some adjustment within the funds distribution. The funds under "R" represents about \$50.87 million of the total budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, like in agriculture we have to reduce the salary of the Minister for Sugar by that much since he only controls a certain percentage of the budget. To improve productivity we need to relocate all funds under "R" to the Ministry, adjust stabilisation funds of \$30 million to:

- (1) Establish three transloading sites; one for Seaqaqa, one for Sigatoka and one for Rakiraki. This will drastically reduce transport cost and improve revenue for distance farmers.
- (2) Recruit more field officers for each sector to provide the monitoring and evaluation programmes. At present, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a ratio of one field officer to 700 farmers. Some sectors is 1:800 and some sectors is 1:900 farmers. This is not practicable, we need to have at least 1:70 farmers

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is disappointing to note, yet again another irresponsible, frivolous and deceptive budget. Truth and facts are as yet of an effective response to the disaster we faced as a nation. Truth and facts inspire confidence, trust and boost the morale of our people. The fact is 14 years of lies, economic mismanagement and oppression have made the poor poorer and the rich richer. It has brought us to our knees at the very least as we face disaster, the Government should be honest, we should invest in a strategic economic sector rather than continuing to mis-inform us, pull the wool over our eyes. Do not tell the people that all is well as long as we continue to spend, spend, spend and go further into debt that will burden our future generation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I regret that I cannot support the 2020-2021 National Budget. Thank you very much.

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Inosi Kuridrani for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Sanjay Kirpal. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament; I rise this afternoon to contribute my wholehearted support to the 2020-2021 Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I need to start by pronouncing how proud I am to be part of a Government that is successfully and certainly going through one of the largest crises and catastrophes that has faced this country and, indeed, the entire world.

What a proud reputation we have set up for Fiji. The small Fiji with a population of less than a million on this nook of the world is now capable of claiming that we have eliminated COVID-19 in our groups, in our streets, our towns and cities, and our families are secure for now, but the change stays. And the manner we keep to control this unique task is to continue to be cautious and that is what we are doing and this is what our Honourable Prime Minister has been calling for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I look at our Honourable Prime Minister, I look at the Honourable Cabinet Ministers and, indeed, all the Honourable Members on this side of the House. You can look at the challenges that this Government has faced during *TC Winston*, *TC Sarai*, *TC Harold*, the flooding and then this year, the COVID-19 pandemic that we have to face along with the rest of the world, it required resolute action and we got it.

We got the right decisions at the right time, we went hard and we went early. We are reaping the benefits of that. Look around the world and see what is happening to other countries. It is not a pretty picture, but the untiring efforts of our Honourable Prime Minister and all of the other experts who were informing us with their decisions, we took the crucial decision and the Fijians now are much, much safer and better.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, going back to the 2020-2021 Budget, allow me to commend the Honourable Minister for Economy and his team for a Budget that embraces all Fijians of our nations during this COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, the Government's vision for a progressive development and ensuring a safe and secure Fiji which this Government has been providing over the years to our people and what matters to them the most is expressively addressed in this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the Budget that says that we are prepared to commit and take the action of \$3.674 billion to get the recovery going.

As the Honourable Minister for Economy said on the first reading of the Budget last week, the commentary is already changing. There is already confidence returning to the economy. We still need this public investment in infrastructure, in income support and that is what we are doing.

We have put \$60 million into the tourism industry because it is going to take a long time for that industry to recover. We have to be realistic and I know the reality, that the Honourable Members of the Opposition are equally concerned as us about that industry.

But this is not going to return to pre-COVID-19 conditions any time soon and we have to support that industry because eventually, the borders will open and the travellers will return. We have to have something for them to return to, an economy that is robust and is growing.

The 2020-2021 Budget is welcomed by the vast majority of stakeholders, including our people, except for the Honourable Members of the Opposition and Honourable Professor Prasad, who cannot see the progress of every Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 21st July, 2020, Honourable Professor Prasad tried to fool the Fijians via an article published by the *Fiji Times* headlined, "Biman on Budget". The Honourable Member forgot that under the FijiFirst Government, every citizen of our beloved nation has the right to enjoy the luxurious food and not only the rich, as it used to be before during the SVT, the SDL and the NFP era.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Qereqeretabua gave a statement in the *Fiji Times* on 22nd of July, 2020, and just picked and issue and making a mountain out of a molehill. But she forgot that she does not practice what she preaches.

Honourable Qereqeretabua's been drinking water in the jar in Parliament to show the public through social media that she is so concerned of the climate of our nation and criticising plastic bottles. But on 23rd February, 2020, the same media outlet caught her enjoying water in a plastic bottle.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Members of the Opposition forgot about the initiatives given in the 2020-2021 Budget by our Government, that no citizens are to be left behind. Giving tax concessions on more than 1,600 items, abolishment of stamp duties to make things easier and faster and at the same time, making things cheaper, free education, first home buyers programme, free medicine, unemployment benefit and many more are in this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question is whether the Opposition has read and gone through the Budget thoroughly or just picking a few petty issues to save their political career because this 2020-2021 Budget is largely supported by all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, sugarcane farmers have been the ball game in the Fijian political history. It is our leader, the Honourable Prime Minister, who has come out clean as a whistle for the plight of the poor farmers, who have been suffering before 2006.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the FijiFirst Government, every child is given equal opportunity to be educated. Free education until Year 13 reduces the burden from poor parents. The late Mahatma Gandhi said, "If we want to reach real peace in this world, we should start educating children." The

FijiFirst Government has been instrumental in the education of every child so that we have a literate society, and a literate society means a healthier and a wealthier Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2020-2021 Budget is a well-executed Budget for all Ministries and with this Budget, Fiji will prosper.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I must say that this is a country that is on its way on the journey to recovery. We are not there yet and it will take time, but this is a country that can look back on the last few weeks and the last few months and say, “We had a hell of challenge, but we met that challenge and we support each other through the health crisis and now it is time to support each other through financial crisis.

We will do it, however, there is phase to understand this. This is a country that has proven that and when it is held up against it, we pull collectively, we work together, we cooperate, we collaborate and we make a difference. This is the time to celebrate what we have done, but not to rest on our glory but to be thankful for the leadership that we have had, to be thankful for the investment that has been put in through this Budget, as we recover and get back on our future again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I humbly urge the Opposition to support this great Budget and take our beloved nation to a greater height. With those sentiments, once again, I thank our Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Minister for Economy and his team for their effort in putting a wonderful Budget which can be called the people’s Budget, and I support the 2020-2021 Budget. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Kirpal for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Dr. Ratu Atonio Lalabalavu. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- The Honourable Speaker, the Honourable Prime Minister and Honourable Members of Cabinet, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and fellow Members of Parliament, and to the people of Fiji who are following the debate today on the radio, television and livestream. *Ni sa bula vina ’a.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to give my contribution to the 2020-2021 Budget. Firstly, Sir, I give my full support to the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and other Honourable Members of the Opposition, in suggesting alternates to the Budget. This Budget is a desperate Budget to save face at all costs, and as stated by businesses, it does not sound good to be true.

Sir, I agree with the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, who has said that this Budget is irresponsible and rudderless. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji will now fall into a debt trap with excessive debt, comprising up to 83 percent of GDP. Theoretically, the Budget sounds good, but in reality it is the opposite. It is a bullish Budget with an over-estimated revenue and a overestimated expenditure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our estimated current expenditure is \$3.7 billion and our capacity to implement is \$2.9 billion, therefore, it is a Budget full of contradictions. We all know that challenges cannot be addressed overnight, but progressively we are, therefore, back to square one.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the COVID-19 pandemic has gone beyond being a public health crisis, and now affected the global economy and consequently here in Fiji, we are not immune, with extensive job losses, closure of businesses and more and more of our people are facing daily hardships more than ever.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to take this time to give thanks to our Lord and Saviour for His blessings and protection throughout the crisis. So far, we have no deaths from COVID-19 and to date with the total of 24 confirmed cases, of which 18 have recovered with the recent imported active case safely quarantined.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note, I wish to acknowledge and thank our hardworking frontline workers in the battle against COVID-19 - the healthcare workers, Fiji Police Force, the Republic of Fiji Military Forces and NGOs. I convey special appreciation to our development partners without whose assistance and generosity, we would not have been able to effectively fight and contain COVID-19 in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we seem to have control over COVID-19 in Fiji and with zero death rate, the burden of other diseases and infections continue to affect us. Non-Communicable Diseases, infectious diseases, cancer, circulatory and respiratory illness and other illnesses, et cetera, contribute to morbidity and mortality in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, prior to COVID-19, the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services had mentioned some of the achievements in this august House, such as the:

- opening of new nursing stations, health centres and subdivisional hospitals;
- public-private partnership with Aspen Medical to operate Lautoka and Ba Hospitals;
- patient-doctor ratio has improved;
- new medical vessel - *MV Veivueti*, that has allowed extending services in terms of outreach, dental and surgical directly to the maritime areas;
- our status of health indicators are above par to World Health Organisation (WHO) international standards; and
- extensive upgrade of our testing laboratories at Mataika House, including the testing for COVID-19.

But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also prior to COVID-19, our medical system in its dilapidated services as infrastructure was already a topic of extensive discussion. One of Fiji's and the Pacific's most senior surgeon, who recently retired stated that the operation at the country's largest medical facility is struggling because of lack of equipment, shortage of drugs and manpower, and poor management. My other colleague surgeon also mentioned the shortage of specialist surgeons per population and also long delays in procuring specialist consumables and equipment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the nine theatres in the CWM Hospital have never been in full use since the opening and lately have been down to four theatres whereby elective surgery is not carried out, but rather semi-emergency cases are prioritised.

Aspen Lautoka Hospital's delay in the repairing of theatres for the last two years has resulted in patients waiting for a long time for their surgery and needs to lodge for acute admission.

The Radiology Department in Lautoka has not been fully repaired in the last two years since the fire.

The PACS are not yet operational and if they were, it would have been substituted for the lack of films for x-rays that we are now facing.

The story is the same regarding shortfalls in service delivery in other departments, contributing to the overall poor quality of service delivery and resulted in admissions and readmissions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the infrastructure of some of our hospitals is in a shoddy condition without regular and proper maintenance. Pictures circulated on social media and anecdotal accounts from patients and their relatives are cause for shame.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the health workforce, some have mentioned that they have highlighted most of the issues with regards to the work environment and equipment, but nothing had been done about it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to touch on the issue of shortages of medicine and consumables. A study which showed a qualitative exploration of stakeholders' views titled, 'The Shortage of Medicine in Fiji', addressed some of the causes and recommendations. Although qualitative in nature, it did address certain issues for the likely causes of medication shortages by relevant stakeholders and its impacts.

One of its impacts is the negative impact on patients' health. Medicine shortages are causing ill-health. Interviewees reported that the shortages has resulted in longer hospital stays, shorter times to patient readmission, and even mortality.

Another impact is professional dissatisfaction. Medicine shortage has resulted in higher levels of frustration. Patients were angry with pharmacists, prescribers and nurses, who reported violence and threats. Shortages mean that professionals had to dedicate extra time and effort to solving issues, taking time away from patients' care and other roles, such as inventory management.

Many interviewees felt they were unable to meet public expectations of a healthcare provider. This generated negative workplace environment, extending even to a sense of hopelessness. This was reported in both, public and private sectors.

Another impact is monetary loss. Medicine shortages are causing financial losses. Stakeholders reported negative opinions. The Government's help of medicine supply because of the constant cost of medicine with limited returns in terms of increased healthcare cost and consumer satisfaction.

Another impact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the loss of faith or a misunderstanding of the system. Interviewees reported that consistent shortages reduced trust in the public healthcare system. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what will you expect from the allocation of \$394.4 million allocated to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services? Firstly, the increase in \$46.8 million is acknowledged, it is hoped that the increase will address some of the issues mentioned Pre-COVID-19 at present.

Furthermore, approximately 50 percent of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services allocations is directed towards Established staff pay amounting to \$197.8 million, 12 percent of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services allocation is shelved under 'RIE' in Head 50 which is usually for items under capital construction and COVID-19 Contingency Fund with the amount being \$23.5 million and \$25 million respectively.

Whilst I acknowledge the increase in remuneration of professional staff, it is worth noting that increase in remuneration is not the key determination for performance and output for medical professions. Consideration should be given to addressing associated issues to improve the working environment consequently improving the delivery of quality health services, this include working with equipment scarcity; maintenance of equipment for full-use capacity; unequal distribution of medical personnel across Fiji, lack of specialist doctors; lack of funding and resource for public health awareness; poor health infrastructure; modern facilities for research and development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a fair share of the Ministry's capital budget is held under R. In the last three years funds under R were never fully utilised. The reason why funds were not utilised maybe due to government not being able to generate the estimated revenue to finance the capital budget or for any other reasons, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Whatever the case maybe Mr. Speaker, Sir, it will only add to the burden, miseries of the sick and the disease as well as the health medical personnel.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allocations for medicine and consumables remain the same while purchase of medical equipment by our medical people for urban and sub-divisional hospitals has increased by \$2 million and now not under RIE. Whilst shortage of medicines and consumables continue from pre-COVID-19 to the present, what will an unchanged allocation deliver. Our tertiary healthcare settings at times are still not delivering full quality service that is mentioned due to no, or poorly maintained equipment. The question is whether the increased allocation which is not under RIE will result in an upgrade in the quality service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, other infectious disease allocations such as that for Dengue and Leptospirosis have remained the same. Pre COVID-19 there was a continuous shortage of dengue and leptospirosis kits; these allocations should have increased given the continuing shortage even prior to COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another issue highlighted in the Budget Address was the removal of overtime for our civil servants. While it is planned due to current financial situation we are facing, it will only work if the vacant staff positions in various health departments are recruited and filled. Currently there is a shortage of staff in some departments and they would need more staff in order to effectively implement shift work. So, why not employ graduates in the various fields who are still without jobs to add more manpower.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have highlighted some of the achievements and shortfalls of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. I emphasise that this is not for political point scoring because I am also a doctor Sir. Therefore though I work in the private sector, it pains me to hear comments such as *vale ni mate, vale ni bula ni Panadol*: though not very good comments to hear, that has been said out of frustration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 is something extraordinary and acute, even though it is contributing to some current shortfalls. For the long term and the health and welfare of our people it is for chronic issues mentioned above that must be addressed as well. Our health system and the service delivery is desperately struggling and it is under more stress than COVID-19. Most of our health workers are already improvising by working with means available to them to deliver a service that nears normality but it just makes work harder for them Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, turning to my constituency issues;

- (1) The Natuvu Jetty or the planned new jetty has been in the pipeline for quite some time. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we use it on a daily basis to commit between Taveuni and Vanualevu. The recent closure of the jetty has affected travellers and business and also the safety of travellers.
- (2) The Kanakana seawall in the *Tikina* of Tunuloa has also been highlighted to some Honourable Ministers during *Tikina* Meetings and we would be grateful for a feedback and update on its progress.

We are grateful Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the progress of the Waibuna Crossing upgrade in the Tikina of Wainikeli. Just a reminder, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that when the Waibuna is flooded, everything in its way ends up in the ocean. Road repairs and maintenance is always an issue. While we are grateful for an ongoing service, regular time service is very much needed and not only when Government delegations visit then improvements are done.

COVID-19 has increased activity in the utilisation of land for farming, thus increased allocation is required for assistance and incentives in the agriculture sector. Post *Winston* school rehabilitation continues, we are grateful that progress is ongoing with the primary schools in Kocoma and Wairiki, while the primary schools in Dreketi, Qamea are still waiting for the rebuilding of their schools after devastation caused by the landslide three years ago, but nevertheless, school continues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this pandemic has given us time to reflect on how vulnerable our small nation and economy is to external factors. Personally, it has allowed for more family time, and as a family we have tried to reprioritise our commitments, utilise the land for subsistence farming, children being taught and experience how to fish, planting of trees, etcetera. What this pandemic has taught my family is always to live within our means and be grateful, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have heard in the budget address that we need to borrow now to build for tomorrow so that future generations can borrow less. I have serious reservations about the logic of that statement simply for the fact that we do not know what will happen in the future and we should always live within our means. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity to respond to the budget, and I do not support the motion before the House.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Dr. Ratu Atonio Lalabalavu for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Fisheries; you have the floor, Sir.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to by the earlier speakers, the world is going through unprecedented times. Country borders have closed, international trade has dwindled and economies around the world have contracted. Unemployment has dramatically increased and in most cases reaching record levels, even for strong world economies. We are fortunate in Fiji that we are COVID-contained and the only cases we have are from our quarantine facilities, mainly consisting of repatriated citizens returning from medical treatment overseas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will concentrate on the Ministry of Fisheries and will not discuss the *ucu mai duru* from the other side of the House, led by my *tauvus* Honourable Kuridrani and Honourable Gavoka. I am pretty sure that Honourable Saukuru, Honourable Matanitobua and Honourable Leawere will follow suit. Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, I would like to applaud the Government for its foresight and support for the resource based sectors, and the allocation of the Ministry of Fisheries' budget for the 2020-2021 fiscal year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has been allocated \$15.5 million with the provision of \$10.7 million for operations and \$4.09 million for capital expenditure. This is an increase in budget compared to the Ministry's COVID-Response Budget allocation of \$14.9 million. In our consideration of COVID-19, the Ministry of Fisheries recognises the important role it plays to cushion the impacts of this pandemic through re-adjustments. We are determined to put in considerable effort to ensure that the Fijian people continue to benefit from the fisheries sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will be undertaken through innovative, smart and holistic approaches which support Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2020-2021 Fiscal Envelope allows the Ministry to clearly focus on three key objectives. These objectives will allow us to deliver effective and tangible services to the Fijian people.

The first of this objective is optimising services delivered through our 32 fisheries service centres nation-wide. Under this objective the Ministry of Fisheries is determined to maximise utilisation and outcome, realised from the allocated budgetary provision to efficiently address short, medium and long-term sustainable fisheries goals.

The second objective, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is fostering food security. This objective underpins the broader context of focusing our efforts in advance research on aquaculture. Increasing the value of fisheries products through value adding and diversifying fish products targeted at niche markets.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the third objective is mitigating challenges through an innovative approach. This is an important goal for the Ministry of Fisheries given the growing issues in our national, regional and global context. Being innovative will allow the Ministry of Fisheries to identify problems, formulate solution and adapt promptly through cost effective methods. Ultimately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2020-2021 Fiscal Envelope support the Ministry's work for increasing the Fisheries sector contribution to stability and growth of Fiji's economy.

The Ministry's programmes will focus on an increase in aquaculture coastal and offshore fisheries productivity. With the allocated budget the Ministry of Fisheries is determined to achieve the national and international goals geared as sustainable growth development. These goals include addressing poverty and hunger, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, industry innovation, responsible consumption and production, climate actions, life on land and life below water.

At this juncture I would like to give a brief summary of the Ministry's Sectorial Budget. For aquaculture there is an allocation of \$3.3 million, Research and Development is \$2.08 million, Coastal Fisheries is \$3.92 million and also Fisheries with \$2.64 million. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I applaud the Government for the increase in budget for food security amounting to \$500,000 and the allocation of \$600,000 to support the Electronic Monitoring Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to achieve rapid growth and increase productivity in the Aquaculture sector the Ministry's work hinges on mobilising the private sector with clear focus on food security for rural communities. Hatchery production, advanced partnerships, farmer training, research and development as well as targeted financial assistance will support the Ministry's activities in the 2020-2021 Fiscal year. The allocation of \$3.3 million for aquaculture will enable the Ministry to supply shrimp and prawn post larvae along with tilapia fries needed for Fiji's Aquaculture farmers. This allocation will allow the Ministry to strengthen its research capacity to introduce new cultured species to the sector. It is very essential to move in this direction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our bid to increase and stabilise food security in Fiji the allocated budget has seen the increase in food security programmes. The \$0.5 million budget to the food security programme will increase farm productivity through extension services focusing on the needs of farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, capacity building is critical to ensure that our farmers are sustainable. Dedicated training programmes on best practices, farm methodologies and financial literacy will be delivered in the next financial year, and this is really through a Government structure of cluster-based farming association where farmers will benefit from economies of scale and a path to market initiatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, food security in ports institutions, climate change adaptation and economic development are all key benefits of aquaculture, therefore the Ministry supports the budget allocation for this programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2020-2021 fiscal envelopes for fisheries also provide for institution programmes to sustain and diversify our support to rural isolated maritime communities. This is fitting, given the impact of COVID- 19 which has caused urban to rural drift.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry provides fishing communities with ice through 24 ice plants from as far east as Lakeba to the far north of Rotuma. Ice supplied provides self-life for marine commodities and allows for proper fish handling. This assist rural communities to maximise the commercial value on fish and other seafood products.

Mr. Speaker, Sir there is an additional financial allocation for the continuous of work on the construction of new ice plants in Koro and Wainigadru. These additional ice plants broadening the scope of economic development and support the goal of achieving self-sufficiency.

The Ministry also welcomes the allocation of \$100,000 to explore the opportunities on the installation of solar power ice plants in two pilot sites. This initiative supports the current solar power programmes carried out by the Ministry with the support of our bilateral partners which has increased economic efficiency for rural isolated maritime communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry also welcomes the budget allocation of over \$100,000 for upgrade of Lautoka Fisheries Port. This will directly benefit our fishers in the Western Division who utilise services provided by the port facility. The allocation of over \$772,000 for coastal development will foster the Ministry's work in sustaining and diversifying opportunities for our coastal communities. Through the footprint of our nationwide fisheries service centres, we will continue to provide services for fishing communities. This includes the establishment of fishing associations, technical training, threat deployment and activities of monitoring, control and surveillance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, compliance and enforcement is another key pillar of work which allows the Ministry to manage Fiji's fisheries. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Inshore Fisheries Division which was established through the assistance of the New Zealand government will continue to coordinate work to eliminate unsustainable fishing practices.

We acknowledge the support rendered by our bilateral partners and we look forward to its continuation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, job loss due to COVID-19 and the financial support rendered to the Seaweed Programme for 2020-2021 is timely. Seaweed provides quick economic opportunities for rural communities as it can be harvested within six weeks.

Seaweed is an alternative option to wide harvest and provide a sustainable opportunity for income generation. The seaweed budget allocation of \$259,000 will provide funds start up materials, training value adding and the path to market initiatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, research, science and conservation are critical elements to sustainable fisheries. Climate change had depleting fish stocks further underscores the importance of research for our ocean governance. Over the past years, there have been substantial works done to ensure the sustainability of our fisheries resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation of \$300,000 for Fisheries Resources Conservation will support Fisheries-based scientific work. This will allow forecast research to support informed decisions for ocean governance.

As we embark on the UN Decade of Ocean Science, the Ministry welcomes the \$300,000 allocated for Makogai Research Centre. At Makogai, we will focus on selected species of reef fish farming. The allocated funds will also support the receiving programme of giant clams and rehabilitation of turtles.

Additionally, the Ministry will continue its work with the Pearl, Oyster Development Programme. The \$295,000 budget allocated to the Pearl, Oyster Programme will be used to procure spat collection materials. It will also focus on identification of potential spat collection sites, trading on harvesting methods and business models for community base farming.

Mr. Speaker, with the current struggles of declining in economic activity, the Ministry of Fisheries is determined to make every dollar count in the execution of this project.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2020-2021 Budget allows the Ministry to create valid and effectively manage our critical offshore resources. While the Budget supports the current operations of offshore, please allow me to highlight two key areas that shows Government foresight and determination to cushion the implications posed by COVID-19.

Firstly, transshipment levy; first is the removal of the \$450 per tonne of transshipment levy. Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Fisheries and the Fisheries sector welcomes the approach taken by Government. The smart and effective tactic helps the additional development of Fisheries sector and provides business for support services. Foreign fishing fleets will be attracted to Fiji under this initiative and supply of fish to our local process and facilities will increase. There will be an increase in service of vessels, repairs, bunkering, ship services, provisions and crew support, all of which will contribute to Fiji's economy.

Mr. Speaker, I acknowledge Government's foresight in budgetary support of \$600,000 for the electronic monitoring project or EMS. The electronic monitoring system was initially established through the assistance from the United Nations Food Agriculture Organisation (FAO) since 2015.

Mr. Speaker, the incorporation of this new budget item shows Fiji's commitment to support this valuable project. Mr. Speaker, the EMS project provide the added dependency of accessing the best premium market such Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and the EU via traceability efforts. EMS is innovative and provides a platform for improved product handling from the first point of contact at sea. Other benefits of the EMS project include the ability of vessel owners to view their crew landing practises. This helps the industry to conduct adjustment on fish handling suited to market demands.

For the Ministry of Fisheries, the EMS project compliments the work that our fisheries observers conduct out at sea. Mr. Speaker, while the EMS project ticks all the boxes for sustainable tuna management, the project is a suitable feat to limitations caused by COVID-19. Electronic monitoring provide a safe, alternative for observers to view and analyse scientific data in the comfort of their work stations.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to highlight that we all need to be forward looking as the impacts of COVID-19 is yet to pass. In this regard, the Ministry of Fisheries is determined to stretch its

budget to its full potential. Our goal is to achieve more with less. We are determined to address the needs of all Fijians, irrespective of age, gender or geographical positions.

Mr. Speaker, now is the time to collaborate with development partners. Partnerships allow the achievement of shared goals. I wish to thank our bilateral partners for their continued support to the development of Fiji Fisheries sector.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the allocated budget, the Ministry will strengthen its commitment in our mission to sustain, manage and protect Fiji's fisheries resources. To achieve our reason of having the best managed fishery in the Pacific, we are determined to excel across our whole operation. Mr. Speaker, in these difficult times, if I have learnt anything, it is the power of love, compassion and hope.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- If one person can change the world, it is by being compassionate and sharing love and hope. If an individual wants to change Fiji today, start each day with hope. Hope that transcends all barriers of political divide, ethnicity, religion, social background or financial status. Show respect to everyone, know that life is not fair and that we sometimes fail but if we take risks, step up when times are hard, ignore sarcasm and lift up the downtrodden, we will overcome by never giving up. If we do these things, the next generation and the generation that will follow, will live in a far better nation than the one we have today.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Fisheries will escalate, widen and maximise operational and fiscal efficiency. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend and support the 2020-2021 Budget, as presented to this august House and I thank you for your indulgence.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for Fisheries for his contribution to the debate and I now give the floor to the Honourable Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Cabinet Ministers and my fellow Honourable Parliamentarians, I rise to also contribute to the Budget debate for the financial year 2020-2021 that was presented by the Honourable Minister for Economy in this august House on 17th July, 2020.

From the outset, Sir, there is no doubt that the whole world is in a crisis, a major crisis, Sir. We are at the mercy of the COVID-19 pandemic. It would be remiss of us, Honourable Members on this side of the House not to offer our thanks and praise to the hardworking team from the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Minister for Health, your frontline workers and also members of the disciplined forces in ensuring that there is a mechanism in place to take care of ourselves in trying to address this pandemic that we have. At the same time, Sir, we must rise as a nation to continue with the sacrifice and the necessary structural adjustment internally, first to cope with such unprecedented event, particularly the most vulnerable in our society. This is in spite of the unprecedented growth claimed by the FijiFirst Government. When I say structural adjustment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have to make the necessary changes or shift in paradigm rather than business as usual in micromanaging the economy, as experienced in the last 13 years. This is the very reason why investment in the country continue to decline, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last eight years because there is a lack of confidence from the private sector due to inconsistency of policy and micromanagement of all facets of social-economic development of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is unrealistic to compare us with Singapore, Australia, New Zealand and other developed countries. We should compare ourselves with countries of similar size, capacity and more importantly the vulnerability index. Based on the Asian Development Bank assessment in June this year, it is interesting to note that all our neighbouring countries in the region are coping better than Fiji, despite the fact our economy should have been in a better position to cushion the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Surely, their policies and responses in addressing the crisis was probably much better than ours. This is clear indication, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that something is terribly wrong. The only conclusion that comes to mind is the poor management of the economy and the manipulation of our economic data.

The Honourable Minister for Economy, in his Budget Address, reiterated that more than 115,000 people, Sir, either have lost their jobs completely or are now on reduced hours and I would like to echo the same sentiments alluded to by my colleague, the Honourable Anare Jale in his response that if you times the 115,000 by the average size family of three or five, that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, should provide or give a figure of around 50 percent of the population. As such, I will try and look at the budget in this context to see how it will help more than 50 percent of our population for their daily sustenance.

My initial reaction to the budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to re-echo what was stated by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition this morning that not only is it irresponsible, it is rudderless and a deceiving budget. I say “irresponsible” because of the high debt level that will be a burden to our future generation. It is rudderless because the inconsistency of messages by the Honourable Minister for Economy when delivering the budget compared to the details in the Budget Estimates and the supplementary documents; lack of targeting and supporting the rich rather than those that need it the most Sir. It is deceiving because it sounds real but the truth of the matter is that the reality is the opposite and there is a lot of inconsistency.

It is interesting to note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that there are a number of expenditure proposals in the budget that will not help the most vulnerable and allow ordinary people of Fiji to put food on the table. I believe the Honourable Leader of the Opposition had deliberated on those unnecessary expenditures that can be considered not as a priority particularly at this very vulnerable time. He has suggested that at least \$700 million to \$800 million could be diverted to other priority areas, Sir.

We should focus on short term measures that will put food on the table and at the same time look at how we can develop our own natural resources. We have just heard from the Honourable Minister for Fisheries and our collective goal should focus on the health and the wellbeing of our people, Sir.

If this is so, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we should be directing our collective effort in ensuring food security for our people, health facilities in better position to address possibility of a likely second wave. Provide short-term employment opportunities to generate income to those who have lost their jobs and the maintenance of existing basic infrastructure particularly in our rural areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now focus my attention on food security and the mobilisation of our resource-based sector particularly the agriculture and fisheries to support food security. I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that these are the two sectors that will provide short-term employment opportunities to our people and also in the longer term to support our export and primary commodities and manufacture goods to our neighbouring countries in the Pacific including New Zealand and Australia respectively, Sir.

The Government should consider work for cash programme in these two natural resources sectors, Sir. The cash for work intervention will provide employment opportunities to unskilled and

semi-skilled workers on labour intensive projects such as increasing production in agriculture, public sector programmes such as housing and the maintenance of existing infrastructure. The cash for work programme can address the basic needs, preventing negative coping mechanisms while building or rehabilitating the existing assets, enhancing livelihood to cushion the impact of the crisis, most of all to increase demand that will lead to stimulate our narrow based manufacturing sector, Sir.

It is unfortunate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that a lot of funds have been allocated to help the rich and the big businesses. The focus is that we should pay more attention to small and micro businesses, particularly, in our rural areas, in supporting supply and value chain. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a lot of hot air and lack of clarity on how the budget will support the small and micro enterprises. I say this, Sir, because this is an area that we could develop particularly at this time when we are facing the COVID-19 crisis in terms of trade with our major trading partners.

The shut down due to COVID-19 has caused a simultaneous and massive shock to supply and demand. Therefore, we should now pay attention to micro, small and medium sized enterprises within the country rather than looking outward in this short term. This is to support domestic demand and also prepare these companies for the future. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is very little mention of concessional financing to these entities. A bit was highlighted by my colleague, Honourable Gavoka in his contribution. I believe, Sir that the low interest and zero interest loans are the first line of defence for us to safeguard our liquidity and create internal trading environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, very little has been said about the Government guarantee and Government order debt repayment moratorium to the small businesses which are relatively easy to implement instead. The Government continues to use our FNPf as a cash help. There is very little on tax reduction, Sir and grants offered to those small businesses that are hit hard to help them reduce cost and boost their bottom lines. This could be easily funded from the unnecessary expenditure, such as the construction of the Honourable Prime Minister's Office of \$7 million, leasing of Government vehicle of about \$29 million, increasing of Government rent of \$27.3 million as amongst others, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is very little employment incentive measures at maintaining workers on the payroll on the different entities. The Government of Cook Islands has implemented employment initiative to support workers so that at least they stay with their current employers, even though their economy is much smaller and much narrower than Fiji's. Subsidising businesses to cover operation costs in the short term will help small businesses reduce cost for maintaining employment, Sir. This programme could be directed to those in the tourism industry and those who were adversely affected during the shutdown.

It would be better to commit funds to support paying wages for employees in the agriculture and fisheries sectors in terms of food security, rather than directing these funds to the big businesses and the rich. Most of the major construction provided for in the budget will be undertaken by large companies with bigger profit margins and not small and medium-sized enterprises.

Last but not least, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government should provide some technical assistance and regularly measures to support small businesses by removing all the different types and layers of charges that has been put into place by the FijiFirst Government, for example, this river boat license and other types of licenses out in the village. There are so many kind of licenses, if we could get rid of those. Mr. Speaker, Sir, because all the layers of bureaucratic processes and fees are killing the small businesses, that is the very reason why our Ease of Doing Business ranking has eroded from 34 in 2008 to 104 in 2019.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the message from this side of this House is that the budget should properly weigh the pros and cons of the different measures. It is also important that policies are well coordinated among relevant government agencies and sectors to provide effective, timely and operational support to small businesses. Equally important is the easy access of information, processes and procedures to programmes that support small and micro businesses. I say this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because most of the initiatives announced by Government is pie in the sky, it sounds very real and very convincing but the sad part of it is that people will not have easy access to all the processes made by the Government. A lot of small businesses are still waiting and complaining that they have not accessed promises made during the COVID-19 Response Budget.

In concluding, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all agree that we are living in extraordinary times. We must also put in place extraordinary measures, target the right priorities rather than just creating an illusion, false hope and anticipation by our people.

The National Budget, Sir, will not address the plight of those who have lost their jobs and support. More than the 50 percent of our population have been seriously affected by the crisis. It is time for the Government to humble itself, get off its high horse and foster bipartisan, encourage working in partnership with all stakeholders so that we can ride the hard times together for a better tomorrow.

Last but not the least, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very much concerned with the high level of debt today. Every soul or citizen of this country including a child born today will inherit something around \$9,000, compared to \$3,000 in 2006. This is when you compare the debt level to the GDP per capita. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is unsustainable and unacceptable for a small country like Fiji. We are putting our responsibility to our future generation to pay for all our debts due to mismanagement. Our future generation will find it difficult to borrow any more for any future development because they will be burdened with paying debts made by an irresponsible government. With this view, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am not supporting the 2020-2021 National Budget. Thank you, Sir.

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I thank the Honourable Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu for his contribution to the debate. Honourable Members, we will now suspend proceedings for dinner. Parliament will resume in an hour's time. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.23 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 7.26 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate on the Budget. I now call upon the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me to take the floor to deliver my statement in support of the 2020-2021 National Budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, right at the outset let me just quickly say, Sir, there is one word that describes all the material that has come from the Opposition today and that word is “anachronism”. Simply put, they blurred the past with the present and we are not the only ones living in the past like they say, Sir, they are, they are the ones living in the past.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the years we have provided Fijians what matters to them most; affordable and accessible education, healthcare, better roads and ports, improved connectivity and the ability to make a good living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, without the guidance and the vision of the Honourable Prime Minister, Fiji would not have achieved the growth ...

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- ... we experienced over the past decade and Mr. Speaker, Sir, achieved COVID-contained status. With the greatest of sincerity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Prime Minister, Sir, we thank you for your leadership and I would also like to thank the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy for an innovative and inclusive budget for the betterment of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the world and our country are facing once in a lifetime challenge with this COVID-19 pandemic. The 2020-2021 Budget gives us hope, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by providing a well-designed plan to bring us out of this crisis and set us on the road to recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this turbulent time the only certainty is the uncertainty that we face. Hence in order to overcome that challenge before us, we need to be steadfast, we need to be unified, we need to be loyal to the well-being of every Fijian in our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what the Opposition has stated so far is so polar opposite; instead of unity, Opposition has preached disunity, instead of togetherness, Opposition has preferred divisiveness, instead of truth, Opposition advocates untruth, instead of honest analysis, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Opposition chooses to pedal unfounded conspiracy theories.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this morning, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition has claimed that the Fijian economy has grown by 0.75 percent in the last decade. That is, 2010 to 2019. I hear them saying, “That is right”, and our economist is especially saying, “That is right.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, however, these facts are completely and utterly incorrect. The average economic growth for the period of 2010 to 2019 was 3.2 percent. These figures, Mr. Speaker, Sir,
....

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Listen and learn.

These figures were verified by the World Bank Group and not just the Reserve Bank of Fiji.

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- This morning's utterance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition is an outright fabrication and manipulation of the true facts. And once again, misinformation is being spread around this House and to the general public of Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition went back on their PACER Plus bandwagon, yet again, with no research done, none whatsoever. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition should stop speaking about PACER Plus because they clearly do not understand. My Ministry will be happy to run a seminar for the Opposition on PACER Plus so that these rather uneducated and embarrassing remarks stop.

Let me tell you the real facts. By joining PACER Plus, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question is, what benefits are we giving to our Fijian manufacturers? Question one, in fact, PACER Plus will require zeroing of 80 percent of Fiji's trade. PACER Plus will result in liberalisation of sectors where Australia and New Zealand, industries are more competitive and have economies of scale and are more powerful than Fijian industry. This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will be detrimental to many of our Fijian industries.

Please, understand, PACER Plus will not provide any additional access to Australia and New Zealand markets than what we already have, Mr. Speaker, Sir. In addition, PACER Plus will systematically erode our policy space and sovereignty, and tie our hands with regards to the future trade agreements with any third country. So, do some research!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition also stated that the reduction of tariffs was worrying and uncalled for, and would damage Fijian industries. Yet again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, no research done. Here are the facts.

Whilst the new tariffs structure focuses on reinvigorating our trade and removing bureaucratic processes in obtaining duty concessions and protection is still accorded to domestic manufacturers on similar commodities. Fiscal duties and import excise tax have been reduced on items, such as machinery, mechanical appliances and parts to white goods, vehicles, hygiene products and canned food products.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the main reason for the reduction in tariff is to stimulate economic activity in the manufacturing sector, the import of raw materials has been made cheaper. For example, fiscal duty on footwear and components to manufacture footwear has reduced from 32 percent to 15 percent, and import excise reduced from 10 percent to zero percent. This leads to reduced cost of production, ability to compete better and in turn will lead to employment, Mr. Speaker.

Local businesses are at the heart of every community and we continue to believe in our ability to produce world-class products, Mr. Speaker, and enhance the Fijian made brand and what it stands for. This is the time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to show our national pride and demonstrate our

support for the brand, including the Opposition. As the Honourable Prime Minister has stated, this is the one time the Opposition could have risen beyond their usual dogma and display some patriotism and some unity for the sake of our nation and for the sake of our health workers.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Have you finished? You don't like it when you get scolded.

Our RFMF personnel, our frontliners and every Fijian that has sacrificed and helped our nation to combat the pandemic, but to no avail.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in summary, the National Budget for the 2020-2021 financial year, focuses on getting tourism back on its feet by making the sector competitive, streamlining business processes, empowering MSMEs and strengthening and diversifying our economic base. You can see Mr. Speaker, Sir, they get all riled up because this is the truth. This is the truth and they do not like it when it is told to them.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is what I say when I say that they live in different world, the nearly instantaneous global economic decline triggered by the pandemic has widespread ramifications on every single sector. Given this economic slowdown, the pro-growth and the pro-business support policies innovatively encapsulated in the 2020-2021 Budget comes at the right time.

These measures will ensure that the Fijian economy, not only recovers but it actually grows.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- The bottom line remains, Mr. Speaker, by helping our business to grow, we are helping Fijian families earn a livelihood and securing their future and that of their children.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, with respect to tourism as one of our most labour-intensive sectors, millions of jobs across the world have been lost with repercussions felt across all the sectors of our economy in Fiji. Visitor arrivals are expected to decline by about 75 percent this year, whilst earnings as per the July 2020 forecast is expected to reduce by 70 percent.

To fully comprehend the crisis, how the crisis is impacting the business, we partnered with the International Finance Corporation (IFC) to conduct a COVID business survey. The study revealed that if international travel does not resume in the next few months, 60.5 percent of tourism businesses anticipate closure, or moving away from tourism. Occupancy rates were down by 69 percent at a time when our industry was once at its peak.

I love the way they come up with this, 'what will you do, where will you get the money from', it is a budget, listen!

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Listen and learn!

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we know the impact, so let us focus on the fact that not all is lost.

The tourism industry has shown resilience to adapt and to recuperate from adversity. Along with the rest of the world, we now pivot to focus on preparedness and opportunities for economic stability. How we respond in moments like, is a testament of our character and more importantly, our solidarity as Fijians as a nation.

Whilst the borders remain closed, we have focused on marketing domestic tourism through our “Love our Locals” campaign, as a starting point. And according to a recent survey, close to about 40 hotels around Fiji, the average hotel occupancy rate was approximately 55 percent. These were all by our own people, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. SPEAKER.- You have the floor.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are a lot of gibberish coming from that side, Mr. Speaker.

As the Minister responsible for tourism, trade and transport, read our work plan. It has a new direction with four stages of market re-entry. Each stage works progressively towards rebuilding markets and calls for a different consumer message and approach.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Honourable Opposition Whip, you should know better than that. You have the floor.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I do not think she understands which portfolios I have.

Through Tourism Fiji, we have significantly realigned our marketing strategies for the coming financial year. Budget allocation for markets have been re-prioritised and re-diverted, for example, a portion of the budget for markets, such as North America, China and India are being re-directed to Australia and New Zealand. It goes without saying that Australia and New Zealand will play a key role in our tourism recovery, and given that Fiji makes only a small percentage of their outbound markets, there is immense opportunity for growth. This can be made possible with close collaboration with the industry to position Fiji as a trusted and value-for-money holidaying destination and gradually opening our borders through a comprehensive (and I want to say this loud and proud, Mr. Speaker, Sir) COVID-19 safe economic recovery framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are working on our own bubble, the Bula Bubble, between Fiji, New Zealand and Australia.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- This will allow Aussies and Kiwis to holiday in our VIP lanes, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We have established Pacific Pathways with Tuvalu, Kiribati and Tonga, who rely on Fiji's national carrier for connectivity.

Safe blue lanes have also been initiated for yachts and pleasure crafts. Just two weeks ago, we welcomed our first yachts from New Zealand and one yacht alone brought about \$40,000 into the local community over just two days. Not only that, the FOREX outlet also has reopened, giving a little bit of life back into the bustling Denarau. To date, 26 yachts have been approved to enter Fiji and we are looking at approximately \$1 million being injected into the country by the end of the year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our greatest asset is our people. They are what makes the industry what it is today and our economic resilience actually emanates from them. Fijians in the tourism industry and tourism-dependant sectors suffered the most. Thousands of jobs were lost and families have suffered, so we acted decisively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to the removal of Service Turnover Tax (STT) and cuts in Environment and Climate Adaptation Levy (ECAL), duties and departure taxes, the 150 percent tax deduction for hotels and restaurants engaging in local artisans will also benefit Fijians who depend on tourism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have received overwhelming responses from the industry, commending the Fijian Government on this forward-looking Budget. In the words of one of our major operators and very senior member of the industry, Mr. Tony Whitton, and I quote, "The leadership shown by the Government has not gone unnoticed. I am confident that together, we can navigate our way through this crises and emerge a stronger nation."

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also understand the industry will play its part. We have taken the necessary steps to revive the industry. We absolutely must ensure that the benefits that come with this Budget are actually realised, the tax and duty concessions need to be passed down to our tourists, whilst raising the bar in terms of service we offer. The face of tourism has permanently changed, signifying that Fiji will require a gargantuan effort by all to survive and thrive in the new normal of tourism.

With respect to MSMEs, Mr. Speaker, Sir, MSMEs commonly face challenges, such as difficulties in accessing markets and market information, availability of finance and the burden of regulatory requirements to do business. Through the MSME Fiji, the \$1.44 million allocated for funding programmes will continue to support a wide range of activities, such as creative business ideas and innovative youth and grassroots businesses to become exporters.

I would love to highlight to Honourable Bulitavu, unfortunately, he is not here, Mr. Speaker, that the Northern Development Programme (NDP) funding that he mentioned this morning, under the MSME Fiji has actually received an increased allocation of \$500,000, as we understand the essential support this Programme provides to the businesses in the North. Again, misinformation being passed on, Mr. Speaker.

In addition, Honourable Ratu Lalabalavu, just a short while ago, please, Sir, you said some things about the MSMEs. I think you forgot that the \$30 million MSME concessional loans package which is in addition to the \$30 million already allocated in the pre-Budget announcement will contribute towards the much-needed relief to the MSMEs.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- MSME Fiji will work with the Fiji Institute of Accountants, Women in Business, Fiji Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation and the Fiji Revenue and Customs Services to ensure that deserving businesses are assisted. This is the Budget. If the Budget passes, it all happens and it will.

These programmes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have created a climate where bright business ideas can become a reality. We will continue to handhold MSMEs through advisory, incubation, training and mentorship programmes.

We will also continue to revive and diversify, then register new cooperatives, with the ultimate goal of elevating them from producers to manufacturers to exporters, in line with making Fiji an investment-friendly destination.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with respect to doing business, we have also taken steps to alleviate the administrative burdens and reduce bureaucratic obstacles to fast-track approval processes and letting our businesses, especially our MSMEs, to breathe in the present environment. Through the Doing Business Taskforce, a collaborative group of Permanent Secretaries and CEOs of approval agencies, we will undertake transformational reforms to achieve the desired results for the betterment of the nation and this includes our bold target of being ranked in the top 50 countries in doing business by 2025. This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is non-negotiable and everyone will play ball.

Over the past few months, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Government has implemented decisive reforms in the era of starting a business beginning with the digitalisation of the business registration process, bringing tax registration online and now with the removal of business licencing, we have made it easier for Fijians to start a business and reduce the cost of doing business.

In addition, the building permits process will be digitalised in one year which means that the building permit applications and approvals will be done online. Moving to another critical component of the economy, the transport sector which enables development bills markets, facilitates trades, links people and connects local communities to the world. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2021 financial year we will further enhance linkages between the maritime regions and the main land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$2.6 million is allocated for the provision of shipping services to the nine routes namely the Upper-Southern Lau, Northern Lau, Yasayasa Moala, Lower Southern Lau, Lomaiviti, Rotuma, Kadavu, Yasawa and North-East Vanualevu. We will also introduce a new route of Beqa, Yanuca and Vatulele.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with respect to the matter that was raised by the Honourable Anare Jale this morning, whilst the member was referring to onshore confirmation that is signed at every port

during the provision of these services, this is still being signed off by the *turaga ni koro* or the *turaga ni vanua* and the ministry has also now included civil servants in the absence of the *turaga ni koro*.

The Ministry is also working with the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Fisheries and the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development to enhance trade and boost economic activities for Fijians living in remote and rural maritime communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, might I conclude by just saying all throughout this morning we have heard about rudderless, and everyone suddenly grabbed on to this word rudderless. Whilst, the Opposition talks about a rudderless budget, I would like to give them a lesson in ships. Firstly, you need a strong ship which is the FijiFirst Government. We need a steadfast captain and who better than our Honourable Prime Minister.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- We need a really strong engine room and this side of the House is the engine room. Our navigational charts through these turbulent waters is our National Budget, our navigational aids are our Budget strategies and as a comparison of the other side of the House, there is a ship full of holes, a captain that does not exist and an engine room that is misfiring every day, and some members of the crew about to jump ship onto a new political ship.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with adversity come new opportunities and through building our resilience as Fijians and steadying our ship, we can come out together from the stormy waters that this crisis actually presents, by setting our vision and course beyond the pandemic. We will set the very foundation of navigating our nation to a better and a more prosperous future. I wholeheartedly Mr. Speaker, Sir, support the 2020-2021 Budget and look forward to the new financial year with re-invigorated, re-engineered output. Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. *Vinaka vakalevu*.

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Mikaele Leawere. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been a member of this august House since 2015 and I have participated in four Budget Debates since then. This budget is the worst.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- In fact a sum total of poor leadership, unsound economic management and bad governance. It is not the result of COVID-19 pandemic or economic melt-down but the sum total of the false Bainimarama Boom and the beginning of economic ruin for Fiji.

I have one point to make, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that is that I have always assumed that everything was fair and lovely with the allocations made but what about \$2.7 billion budget deficit. My question in this context, Mr. Speaker, Sir, how have we come to this? How will we raise the national revenue for this budget? What would be its implications now and in the future? Who will pay for extravaganza and at what cost? The answers to these questions, Mr. Speaker, Sir, skins the cat to the bone and exposes every iota of truth on the matter. This honey-coated 2020-2021 Budget

is not only irresponsible, but also self-deceiving. It is a big trial of mandate, a budget without a human face and unrealistic vision. It is a doomsday budget and we just put our entire serenity into sale by turning promises into debts. It is a shameless and delusional budget, hiding behind the excuse of COVID-19 and Government not admitting it has finally put the Fiji economy on the path of ruin.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Koroilavesau mentioned in his response the *ucu mai duru* from Honourable Gavoka, Honourable Kuridrani, Honourable Matanitobua and myself. What we in the Opposition are trying to do, is to drum some sense into Government. Since they are not listening, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I ask Honourable Koroilavesau to note the Book of Daniel, Chapter 5, Verse 25, which reads: "*Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin.*"

This budget has numbered the days of this Government. Places like Serua, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is one of the most under-developed places in Fiji. Our people make their living from fishing, forestry, cash cropping, livestock and working as labourers and professionals. Those who are engaged in the tourism industry in Pacific Harbour, are now without jobs. Our problems, Mr. Speaker, Sir, range from poverty of access to neglect in terms of rural development. Even the villages along the main Queens Highway, only got their drainage problems partially solved after we knocked on the doors of the Honourable Minister for Environment and Waterways, for weeks and I thank him.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture, fisheries and forests are the mainstay of the livelihood of the people, especially so in Serua. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I glance through this Budget, generally the resource-based sectors have once again been ignored and not given special attention. It appears that the fact or truth of the matter has not dawned upon this Government. That it is not tourism but the resource-based sectors which can sustain our economy whether we talk about the pandemic or man-made disaster, like the effects of a military coup. I plead with Government to rethink and relook at its strategies and the priorities, especially in our suggestions in the coming Committee of Supply stage.

While I must thank the Honourable Inosi Kuridrani, the Shadow Minister for Agriculture, for his elaborate contribution on agriculture, let us look at the forestry sector. Not long ago we had the mahogany industry reforms, where the saw mills dealing with mahogany disappeared. What has been the plight of those mill workers? It points out to the fact that families do not matter. It is the ego which matters and which has set Fiji on the pathway to destruction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I continuously raise the plight of the workers and the impact of this sustainable mahogany industry - Waivunu Sawmill in Serua and Navutu Sawmill in Lautoka. There are some other sawmills like that all over Fiji, who have ceased their operations voluntarily or were made to do so because of draconian laws that were put in place. We are landowners only on paper, but someone else is making the decisions for us today. I say this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because let us examine the terms and conditions that have been set for logging which completely puts the resource owners out of the logging business. It is now an industry only for the elite and here we witness our own resources being plundered before our eyes.

This is the nature of a systematic loot, encouraged, financed and supported by this budget. Not long ago, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were advised of the green revolution and its benefits, but what has become of that revolution now? Like every other initiative that was taken by this Government and every other thing that it touched or tampered with, the green revolution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was a gross failure. Had it been a success, our people would not feel a pinch in the economic meltdown, a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For countries overseas, Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 is a crisis, but for us in Fiji it has been turned into an advantage, in fact, into a scapegoat for this Government to evade its failures and continue to oppress our people and it has made our cash-cow barren and dry.

It clearly spells out that with FijiFirst Government at the helm we are on the brink of an eminent economic ruin. On that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to by Honourable Kuridrani we hope that the hotel workers would receive a top-up from Government especially those who have less than \$1,000 in their Fiji National Provident Fund after this Budget debate. As if that is not enough, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the plight of the working class of this country continues to deteriorate from bad to worse.

Let me now address you in some detail as the shadow Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations. Sir, I must thank the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations for the employment survey that he has initiated following the COVID-19 crisis but we would like to request him to update this House and at least table a progressive report on the survey. I say this because that would dispel the argument that we have every time in this House and elsewhere over the employment rate or figures. The sword of labour reforms, Mr. Speaker, Sir, continues to hang over the head of this Government despite its *kerekere* and white-wash in Geneva last year to pacify the International Labour Organisation.

They may continue with the consultation until they leave but the bottom line is that one day these draconian regressive labour legislations that have been forcibly imposed upon the workers of Fiji shall perish and they must be prepared for life after that. That is the reason I say “please let us go back to the democratic culture of consultation and goodwill”.

Sir, the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic meltdown has just provided the Fiji Government some breathing space to recover, to consult, to build consensus and to renew its labour laws rather than being complacent thinking that this the end of the road for them, giving them looming defeat in 2022 they must make sure over this period to complete the labour reforms at home. Let me caution them that this is the lull in the storm and be prepared to face the worse because we cannot make slaves out of people who were born free and are supposed to be living and working free.

The Unions will fight for their workers and they will never give up on their people. Mr. Speaker, Sir, while opposing any moves to cut the salaries, wages and allowances of civil servants, there is a dire need now than ever for Fiji to ponder seriously whether we need so many expatriates and some local persons holding multiple positions in statutory bodies. Their appointments, perks and privileges, and their terms and conditions must be renewed. There was a time soon after the *coup* in 2006 when we were told that one person should hold one position, but just look around us. Is it not the submission to justify the levels of intellectual literacy that exists on the other side of the House.

Sir, while the immediate challenge for this Government right now is to look for money for its lipstick and honey-coated budget, the larger and collective challenge for the nation is to provide for those affected either directly or indirectly by the COVID-19 pandemic and this economic meltdown.

A stocktake of our labor market reveals that more than 115,000 people have been laid off or are placed on part-time work. There are no jobs for youth on the streets and there are those who will be joining them when the year ends. Our secondary and tertiary industries have just slumped and there was no back up strategy to contain this. It so happened because our primary industries and resource-based sectors like agriculture, sugar, fisheries and forestry were undermined and

neglected over the years. The meagre allocations for this sector except for sugar, in the last one decade speaks out the truth for itself.

Now, our people will realise that the safest investment to make apart from education and health or in a mutual trust is to invest in a primary industry. It puts land and labour to good use, it keeps you healthy by supplying fresh foods and it does not have to rely on foreign governments and states to rescue you or depend on your Government to bail you out when you are facing financial problems.

The farmers of Fiji have proved this: they are the only people in Fiji who can proudly say that they have the means and ways to earn and make a living except cane growers. That brings me to speak with privilege, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals. First and foremost we heard the Honourable Mosese Bulitavu speak in this House about his trip to Mongolia, at which Pacific Island states including Fiji, were singled out for being behind schedule in the implementation of SDGs - stakeholders, civil society organisations, the Opposition Parties are to be consulted widely on the SDGs. Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, needs to be realistic and responsible or all will come to nought.

Secondly, the Bill of Rights in the 2013 Constitution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and the number of legislations as well as treaty ratification for this Government do not in any way certify the limitation process because, in fact, the benefit of all these things have not trickled down to the ordinary people, to handle the changes intended by the SDGs.

With COVID-19 pandemic and its economic repercussions are intended, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to raise a question on how does the Government intends to implement the SDGs now, given its almost financially and I mean theologically on the brim of doom.

This is coupled with those raised by the Honourable Members points out clearly that the FijiFirst Government is only been providing lip service or rather the lip speak solution with regards to the implementation of the SDGs.

The lives for the people in international commitments does not matter, what matters is its ego and selfish agenda.

The next issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the education sector with the Government in ability to establish the National Investigative Commission and having inculcated child rights in the wrong context. The Fiji Government has torn our education sector apart. Its policies and programmes have been the root cause of division and moral collapse of the education sector. It will now take ages to remedy the tragic situation this Government has created. In fact, I feel sorry for the present Minister for Education who bears the brunt for not following the rules, except to play defensive instead of admitting past mistakes of her predecessors since 2007.

We had a Minister who introduced reforms and then resigned, and now a Minister pays the prize for the same. The rot in the education sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, does not stop at the Ministry of Education but extend to the institutions of Higher Education like the recent saga at the University of the South Pacific is a glaring example of that. The manner in which the Audit report was swept under the carpet and the Vice Chancellor was made the sacrificial lamb to bring the conduct of this Government into account.

I say this because we do not only host the seat of this regional university but every millions of dollars given to it as grant and then pump in further funds and the fact that there is a huge arrears with respect to the non-payment of TELS, and the truth of the matter is beyond our imagination.

Before I conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with your indulgence, I wish to contribute to two prominent people who passed away recently. The first is the *Turaga na Vunivalu* Korolevu, who is the paramount chief. Our *Vunivalu* relieves himself from politics, instead he devoted all his time to godliness, welfare and the development of his people. He was humble with a kind heart, brave soldier and is a fatherly figure and visionary leadership will be sorely missed and fondly remembered.

While taking my Party and the Honourable Prime Minister and the Government for their *reguregu* in Serua Island, I take this opportunity on behalf of Serua, to express our condolences to the family, family members of the *Vunivalu*. May he rest high in peace.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to pay my tribute to our former Prime Minister, Mr. Laisenia Qarase who has left the rich legacy in enterprise and public affairs for us and for the future generations based on good thoughts, words and deeds. As a faithful servant of God and its people, Mr. Laisenia Qarase has left an indelible mark in the history of Fiji and God willing his unfinished agenda will be completed by our Party and our Fijian generations, if not us. His ideals and principles, mission and vision remain the guiding philosophy of SODELPA to which I pledge here again today and the rest of us from our Party.

While sympathising with Mrs Leba Qarase and her family, as well as the people of Lau Province, I join each and every patriotic citizen of Fiji to pray that Mr. Qarase rests high in peace and now he has gone and leaving us a brilliant record and for this nation as well.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this highly quoted and self-deceiving Budget 2020-2021 reminds me of the story of King Midas. This Budget is exactly the opposite. Everything this Government touch it fails. Now given the announcement of this Budget it is apparent that they have lost the touch of this nation. Even one time, this was admitted openly in the social media.

Let me make my final remarks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we cannot hide three things; the sun, moon and the truth. The super boom of last year has been reduced to a doom. Now that is the final say of the FijiFirst Party. The question is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, should I congratulate or console them, I will do mine and leave the judgement to the people of Fiji in 2022.

This Budget is pro-business, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and ignores the importance of the informal sector. Our people are trapped in poverty with the opportunities and alternatives. I remember the book of *Proverbs 22:7*; it says and I quote; "The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender".

With these few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I oppose the Budget, as presented by the Honourable Minister for Economy and lend my support to the response by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition. *Vinaka saka vakalevu*.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Mikaele Leawere for his contribution to the debate, and I now give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Local Government, Housing and Community Development. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Cabinet colleagues and fellow Members of Parliament.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to deliver my statement in support of the 2020-2021 National Budget.

Let me commend the Honourable Minister for Economy for a very thoughtful, progressive and bold Budget, designed to navigate these uncertain and challenging times.

Thoughtful, because it takes into account everyone's needs by not raising VAT, personal or corporate taxes, as some were predicting. By maintaining the social wages, by not cutting civil servant salaries and by supporting those who are unemployed or under employed.

Progressive, because the Budget focuses on near and long-term job creation by financing public investments, providing stimuli to private sector and construction industry and supporting ordinary Fijians through government initiatives.

It is a bold Budget because the Service Turnover Tax (STT) is removed, Environment & Climate Adaptation Levy (ECAL) slashed, the business licence removed, the Tariff restructured and the closure of five overseas missions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a well-planned Budget for the broadest range of Fijian citizens and institutions and the broadest range of needs in our nation. This Budget is made for economic recovery because it restores business confidence, investor confidence and consumer confidence. Both international and local institutions are predicting economic contraction, but none of them are able to forecast with certainty when our international travel and trade will be normalised or what will be the depth and duration of this economic contraction.

Against this backdrop, the Honourable Minister for Economy has delivered a Budget that addresses not only our immediate needs, over the next 12 months, but also carefully lays the foundation for years ahead by introducing various stimuli and incentives that are absolutely needed for the economic recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the media and again, listening to the debate from the Opposition members, I can only say that nothing will change the mentality, criticism at any opportunity. Considering that the crisis affects not only Fiji, but also the whole world, the Government has realistically and comprehensively addressed issues across the board. However, the Opposition is again, playing with emotions of the people by giving them a false hope that they would have done better than us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Budget was announced, many critics were in a shock at the level of innovation and outside the box thinking that gave us a Budget that safeguards the welfare of every Fijian in this deeply trying times. Workers, children, men, women, businesses, civil servants, vendors, farmers and those who lost their jobs due to COVID-19 will reap some form of benefit and assistance, as together we weather the COVID-19 storm.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we could call it the 'people's Budget' that has restored hope after Opposition and other critics have nothing better to say, where our critics see only the dark clouds of the last few months, the Government offers a way for all Fijians to work in the light, where our critics paddled doom and gloom, stuck in the present, the Government puts us on a road to a brighter future.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- We have seen, Mr. Speaker, Sir, economies many times larger than Fiji have been torn apart because of this virus. Fiji is not immune. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocations for my two Ministries have been reduced but that does not mean the services are not being provided. Our municipal councils' budget for example, were not designed for a pandemic of this magnitude

and we are doing everything we can to adapt and make sure that councils' services continue to function as best as possible. As a result, our municipal councils are short of the revenue they need to the tune of \$18.4 million. Some of the revenue streams affected at this time are rates, garbage collection fees, stall fees, hiring of sports and events venues, property rentals and parking meter fees. We should also note that a number of ratepayers have not been able to pay their rates on time for several years and this is even before COVID-19 pandemic was declared.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the impact on Councils' revenue streams, our Government has removed the need for business licence to start a business. We know that businesses drive the economy and today more than ever, we need to make it easy to start a business. The financial impacts of COVID-19 on cities and towns across the country and on our lives and livelihood is going to be serious and long-term.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to better understand each ratepayer's ability to pay rates and for the councils to respond to those who are in legitimate distress, all councils will be completing rate profiling in the respective municipalities. The results will assist the councils to come up with strategies to assist ratepayers where necessary.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year, we saw the completion of three new markets in Namaka, Laqere and Rakiraki. All these markets provide hundreds of Fijians an opportunity to earn a living. Municipal councils have also decentralised their markets and opened flea markets to assist people who have lost their jobs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation of \$2.545 million this year to support solid waste management continues. The Government's commitment to improving this essential municipal councils' service will be achieved through regional partnership and shared services between councils.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Local Government is already working on comprehensive reforms to bring the planning system into the 21st century. These reforms will create a simpler planning system and improve the capacity, capability and performance of town and country planning to accelerate development. The review of the Town and Country Planning Act will be finalised, we will have a modern framework that guides scheme plans, buildings, subdivision, rezoning and forward planning, giving greater certainty to current and future investment. To implement faster turnaround times in decision-making, the Ministry will focus on digitisation by working with the Ministry of Communications. The National Budget is a time to realign expenditure to cater for new priorities and to discontinue expenditure in areas where assistance is no longer needed and for the programmes that have concluded. Sometimes, we take it by looking at the Budget book as if the programmes have been cut down just because there is no money. Sometimes, the programmes have concluded, that is why the reductions are shown in the Budget books.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite hard times, the Ministry of Housing and Community Development has been allocated \$13.4 million to provide housing support to low and middle income earners. The Ministry has introduced a number of innovative measures such as engaging with Non-Government Organisations, multilateral financial institutions, development partners and the private sector to deliver a breathe of projects using different financial modalities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our first home owner grant will continue, despite these challenging times. This Budget takes a bold step responding to the current market conditions, with an increase in assistance of up to \$30,000 per household. In response to the Honourable Bulitavu's comment on the first home grant where he said only 100 to 150 applicants will benefit and the last time it was announced, it was a great failure. I do not know how he assessed the failure. People waited in frustration given the approvals and requirements and also now people say, "it is just whom you know that gets the chance first." Unfortunately, he does not know that this programme started in 2014. The Ministry of Housing and Community Development is working in partnership with all financial institutions. If anyone who wants to apply for a First Home Grant under this programme, they have to put in their application to the financial institution. The intent of this programme is to provide this grant as a deposit to their first home either to build or to buy. So, that is the intent.

So I find this statement completely misleading; the programme was introduced as I said and we have spent a total of \$23.6 million in assistance to these households to-date. And why are we working with financial institutions, Mr. Speaker, Sir? When we work with the financial institutions and ministry, they reduce the cost of enforcement. All that is taken on board by the financial institution and for your information in 2019-2020, 15 applicants did not use their grants and that money was reimbursed by the banks back to the Ministry of Housing. So, this is how we check and ensure that the grants are utilised properly.

Again, I want to correct Honourable Bulitavu, Mr. Speaker, Sir, unfortunately he just says things, again he moves out of the room and he is not here to listen to what we all have to say about some of the statements he had made. In fact when he made that statement, he made it with confidence and he mislead the House that one has to withdraw funds from the General Account of FNPF to buy or build a home. This is not correct, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The General Account can be accessed for education, medical, funeral and unemployment whereas Preserved Account is for house and land.

How many people will benefit? That is the question he asked. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are various programmes for different needs and this programme is not the only programme to assist first home owners, our calculation show a total of 432 households will be assisted in the 2020-2021 Budget with a total of \$6 million allocated for first home, first land grant in different categories.

In 2019-2020, a total of 543 applicants benefited from these grant programmes. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to note that the Social Housing Programme is not affected in the 2020-2021 Budget. The assistance for people with special need will also continue under the direct supervision of the Ministry. This programme was initially implemented by Habitat for Humanity Fiji, given the need for this assistance to be accessible to the larger community, this programme has been restructured under a new cost model.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the 2019-2020 financial year, the budget allocation for the informal settlement upgrade programme was used to complete the works of three informal settlements which are Waidamudamu, Cuvu and Ledrusasa. A total of 183 households in Cuvu and Ledrusasa will receive 99-year leases this year and 270 families in Waidamudamu will receive their lease titles early next year. The total investment in the upgrading of these three settlements is in excess of \$12 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, preparatory work for five more settlements, Wakanisila, Sakoca, Tavela, Tore and Field 4 are nearly complete and will be ready for the commencement of civil works in this financial year.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- This will benefit 588 households.

With the recent launch of the Ministry's new website and social media platforms, Fijians can access services digitally, information on all assistance programmes, application forms, related legislations and publications are now available to all Fijians.

This also includes access to the free download of a two-bedroom Category 4 cyclone certified timber house together with the list of materials required to build it. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will also be developing a three-bedroom house plan that needs all planning requirements so that people do not have to spend money to pay professionals or wait for approvals of plans. These services will add immense value for our low to middle income earners and encourage them to start construction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will complete the review of the National Housing Policy in the new financial year. This will outline strategies, direction and new mechanisms to meet the increasing demand for affordable housing and strengthen the legal framework across the housing spectrum.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now let me turn to certain budget critics who have been harping about tariff restructure, that in their view will not assist the vulnerable group. Comments such as:

- (1) Why chocolates, jams, cabbage, eggplant, tomatoes or salmon?
- (2) Who will buy diamonds or luxury vehicles?
- (3) Who will buy white goods or white goods are not commonly used in our villages, in the *koro* and informal settlements?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, low income earners are assisted directly and indirectly. Direct assistance is through social welfare and other social programmes in different ministries, such as social housing and other forms of social wages.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, when budget is crafted, it considers all areas of the economy, all types of businesses, all economic activities and all forms of consumption and production in the country. So yes, in addition to the attention this budget pays to the low and middle income Fijians, it also encourages people who can afford to buy luxury goods to do so and to pay the taxes on those goods and to help employ people in jewellery shops, appliance stores, car show rooms and to circulate that money through the economy. We want the Government to collect taxes needed for capital projects such as mini markets, roads and bridges, to support unemployed and under employed members of the community and to continue providing social wages to our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Bulitavu's comment cannot go unchallenged, particularly his comments that 1,600 white goods that are our imports and he further said that these are not consumed or used by people in the rural areas. I really do not know whose house he visited, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that he was not able to see the white goods in some of these informal settlements and *koro*. One has to pick up the 2011 hire purchase report that clearly states that white good industry for consumers is around \$60 million every year, and around 81,125 people bought white goods in 2011, where 70 percent of these household earned less than \$20,000, when the personal income tax at that time was \$16,000. Now more people can access white goods because the income threshold increased to \$30,000 in 2017 improving their purchasing power.

Regarding duty reduction, the intent of this exercise was to remove subjective decision making and bureaucratic red tape and to make these items affordable to consumers and businesses.

I do not know why we have got this idea that duty reduction is only for one group of people, it is also for businesses, as explained by Honourable Koya. So these are various ways of making our economy work in many different forms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every economy is in the survival mode, and building in recovery measures into the budget is the way to go. The Government has introduced measures that will assist in retaining the jobs we have, creating the jobs we need and revitalising the economy in all the sectors. The budget has received resounding support from people from across all the sectors.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the 2020-2021 Budget as presented by the Honourable Minister for Economy. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for Local Government, Housing and Community Development for her contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Ratu Suliano Matanitobua. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I bring to this House the greetings and best wishes of the people of Namosi Province. While watching the conduct of the affairs of their land with dismay, we continue to pray to the Almighty to protect us from the effects of COVID-19 and to continue to pray to the Almighty to protect us from the effects of COVID-19 and to continue to show us the light in the future. However, this Budget has poured cold water on their hopes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, I wish to pay tribute to the late Prime Minister of Fiji, Mr. Laisenia Qarase, *na Turaga Na Tui Kobuca*. It was my privilege to enter national politics under his leadership. The late Mr. Laisenia Qarase was a towering figure who was like a father to me and I learnt a lot from him. In celebrating his legacy, I wish to reflect on the honour he granted to me and the *vanua vakaturaga o Nabukebuke* in appointing me to serve in his government. It was my privilege to serve in the late Mr. Qarase's administration given that my great great grandfather was one of the 13 signatories of the Deed of Cession executed in Levuka on 10th October, 1874.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to recognise the historic legislation he proposed in line with his 50/50 by 2020, a Blueprint which was approved by Parliament in December 2001 as per the provision of Chapter 5 of the 1997 Constitution to achieve in full measures the intents and covenants of the Deed of Cession. This includes the Land Claims Tribunal Bill and the *Qoliqoli* Bill which are our unfinished agenda. With all sincerity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this nation and its people will continue to seek to achieve what the late Mr. Qarase was prematurely stopped from doing in his time.

Coming to the Appropriation Bill, I wish to place on record my support to the response by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition. As the Honourable Leader of the Opposition has stated, this budget is irresponsible, rudderless and a deceptive budget. It is a doomsday budget. Unfortunately this budget does not give policy-makers clear direction as to how expenditures are to be implemented to achieve the desired objectives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is the cause of the doom we face as a nation? Is the Coronavirus pandemic alone responsible for the sudden disappearance of the unprecedented doom that the

Honourable Minister for Economy has been boasting about? Mr. Speaker, Sir, the COVID-19 pandemic is a blessing in disguise for the FijiFirst Government.

Our economy was already in recession since 2017. Our GDP growth was already below zero last year where it was contracted by 1.3 percent. Yet, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Minister for Economy continued to boast about unprecedented growth. I believe that what he meant was unprecedented growth in our debt stock. Sir, in 2006 our total debt stock was \$2.5 billion. This has grown more than three times and our total debt now is \$8.3 billion. Now that is unprecedented, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The Honourable Minister for Economy in his speech said and I quote: “The current high borrowing is to build for tomorrow and it means future generations can borrow less.” Instead of building a brighter future for our generations to come, the FijiFirst Government continues to selfishly and lavishly enjoy a spending spree they will not be responsible to repay. Is this the future we envision for our youths, a future where we are setting them up to be caught in a debt trap?

Mr. Speaker, this Budget is a regressive Budget without a vision. It is really irresponsible, rudderless and deceptive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me speak very briefly on my shadow portfolio as Minister for Youth and Sports. The Ministry of Youth and Sports’ Budget has been reduced by 25 percent from \$16 million to \$12 million. This reduction sends the signal that this Government really does not care about the youth of this nation, especially during these trying times.

Regardless of the reduction, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note a few increases in the allocation within the Ministry. To my dismay, two of these increases could have been better directed to programmes that will empower our youth. First, is the new allocation of \$44,500 for Social Media Management. How will this help prepare our youth to go through this crisis?

One can only wonder as to who is receiving this allocation, as I believe that this can be easily directed to create additional staff posts within the Ministry for our capable young people, instead of outsourcing it to external service providers.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry’s social media pages are not impressive and I am told that \$45,000 was paid in the previous fiscal year. Can the Honourable Minister explain, what fantastic service is provided for \$44,500 allocated this year?

The second allocation I wish to query is the construction of the rural sports complex in Vunisea, Kadavu. I, for one, would strongly agree for such a development to take place, however, I believe that the timing might not be right. The \$1.3 million for this item could have been directed to other priority areas within the Ministry.

More worrying, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that, this allocation is under RIE, so will it really happen or is it just a gimmick? Will this project be implemented within this fiscal year, or are we going to see the same item again in the next few Appropriation Bills, like other similar projects that have become the hallmark of the FijiFirst Government?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also acknowledge the \$1 million allocation for Overseas Sports Tournament. How realistic is this allocation, taking into account that our borders are still closed? This, Sir, is another inappropriate allocation that could have been reduced so that resources can be adequately redirected within the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the \$600,000 for Youth Capacity Building and Training Programme. I hope that these training programmes are aligned with an accredited institution, so the certificates the youth gain are actually recognised and benchmarked for their future employment. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been the recommendation of the Standing Committee and I hope that the FijiFirst Government will not treat this recommendation as optional, making a mockery of the Parliamentary Standing Committees.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, majority of our population are youth and they also represent a significant number in our workforce. During Post-COVID-19, more than 115,000 lost their jobs and many more are working on reduced hours. Undoubtedly, majority of them are youth.

Instead of addressing this issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget marginalises and deceives them by making and disguising their debts as promises because it is the youth who will repay the \$8.3 billion in loans our people will owe.

I am sad to note that the Government has not planned initiatives to help youth thrive. Instead, Government has removed tariff and duties on imported goods and services, and this will challenge and destroy our local industry, leading to more job losses. Why does the Government not diversify resources to support our local industry that will create more employment for youth?

I am also disappointed to see the reduction of duty on alcohol. This does not empower the youth, it causes more social problems. Why can Government not support local production and entrepreneurship that will bring back the confidence in our young people to be innovative and self-supporting rather than dependant on handouts?

I call on Government to prioritise and redirect resources adequately so that our youth are not marginalised further. I make this suggestion to secure our youth and give them hope in these trying and testing times.

All in all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe that this irresponsible, rudderless and deceptive Budget does not care about our young people and their families. It is a doomsday Budget.

In summing up, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has failed miserably to do its duty. That being so, I call upon all the Honourable Members to put aside their political affiliations in the best interest of this nation, and use the opportunity to deliver a vote-of-no confidence to the Government.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to register my strong opposition to this irresponsible, rudderless and deceptive Budget. Thank you Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Ratu Suliano Matanitobua for his contribution to the debate.

I now call upon the Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports, the Honourable Maharaj. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament and all those watching from the comfort of your homes; a very good evening to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I start, this is the very reason as to why the Honourable Minister for Economy called on the Opposition to come for a budget brief. Had they attended the Budget Brief, this kind of question would not have been raised in this august House.

The Opposition tried to act smart but to Honourable Ratu Suliano Matanitobua, the reduction in the Budget is just because there will not be any international matches due to COVID-19 travel restrictions apply. No one will be travelling to Fiji, nor the Fiji teams will be travelling abroad to participate in overseas matches, so why do we need that budget?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- That is where the reduction is.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- That is where the reduction is, as simple as that.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, the Opposition needs to realise that they have been criticising the Budget for the past six years, but what they failed to realise that, they keep criticising and FijiFirst continues to deliver.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- They need eyes to see what is happening around them.

I really do not understand how long it will take these set of expired politicians to realise they are doing no good to the parliamentary process, nor to the nation. Every year, we come with the Budget. Sometimes they oppose, sometimes they walk out, clearly showing how confused they get whenever they hear or see our Budget.

I will give a typical example. An Opposition Member who claims to be a champion of the tourism industry ran out of words during his speech today, and did not even speak about the tourism industry. This clearly shows what happens to them when FijiFirst starts to deliver. Since the Honourable Opposition Members are so good at walking out, it is almost 9.00 p.m. so they can go home and rest.

(Laughter)

Honourable Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of a very understanding 2020-2021 National Budget, a Budget that understands the needs of its people, a Budget that ensures that families affected by the COVID-19 crises are able to have food on their table, a Budget that understands that while on the one side we need to give immediate help to people, on the other side we need to bring our economy back on track.

A very understanding Budget as delivered by the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy has put our people at the centre. This is the difference, Honourable Speaker. We, the FijiFirst Government, put Fijians at the centre of the Budget and Honourable Members of the Opposition try to place themselves at the centre, so that is why they are not able to digest such a considerable Budget.

Our measures on protecting livelihoods are based on helping people to stay employed and businesses to stay viable. With an eye on the future, this Budget sets out a strategy to build a bridge

to recovery. We can go to far lengths to pick points to oppose this Budget, but let us look at the Budget with a more holistic approach.

The investment in our future must continue and I must ask this question, who are the future of this country? We are. We, the 70 percent young Fijians, are the future of the country and not the vintage politicians from the other side. Investment in this 70 percent population must continue in order to build a more sustainable and resilient economy for Fiji.

I applaud the Government and the Honourable Minister for Economy for continued budgetary support towards the future of Fiji and the young Fijians. The investment in this sector will never fail. Investment in our young generation will never fail.

Much has been said about housing grants in a negative way but what wrong have we done as young Fijians, if we want to build our house for our family? And if my Government, the FijiFirst Government is supporting me, what is wrong with that?

We are educated and the thanks goes to free education. We have tertiary qualification, thanks to the Tertiary Education Loans Scheme (TELS) and the National Toppers Scheme (NTS). We, as young Fijians, have employment so thanks to the Open Merit Recruitment System (OMRS).

At this juncture, Honourable Speaker, it is through such policies that we see that recruitment is done on the basis of merit and not on nepotism. If you go to Government agencies today, you see so many young who are employed because these young Fijians and their hard work matters to this Government, unlike previously, when civil servants were employed on the basis of nepotism, skin colour, race and gender.

Today, in this ever-changing time, we have a very young and vibrant workforce in the public sector. Because of such policies, we are able to feed our families, we are able to drive our families around because we can afford a car, so what is wrong if the Government of the day is helping me out to build a house which I can call my home? What else, as a young Fijian, do I need to ask from the Government?

This is not just about me. This is about those 70 percent young Fijians' stories who are successful Fijians. Disasters come and go. Crises comes and goes, but that does not mean that all resources should be diverted to one sector of the country's economy.

One of the best investment a country can do in terms of building its human resources and in a country where 70 percent of the population falls under the age of 40, the FijiFirst Government is doing just that. We, the 70 percent of the population, need sustainability. We need our future to be protected. We need this assistance today to build a better tomorrow and do not worry. Once we have a stable future, we will pay the debt. We need to go away from the culture of spoon feeding. We need policies to enable us to self-sustain ourselves. I, on behalf of young Fijians below the age of 40 years, who are building their future by the policies passed by the FijiFirst Government, thank the Honourable Prime Minister for the vision he has for the Fijians. I would also like to thank the government on behalf of young and vibrant civil servants for not reducing our pay, while some politicians and political pundits called for pay reduction, FijiFirst government placed the need of civil servants first.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not in the business of printing money. One way we can push money into circulation is through civil servants pay. Mr. Speaker, Sir, government's bill for civil servant pay is close to \$4 million daily. Civil servants spend their salaries internally in our economy which thus boosts our business and people remain employed. The moment government reduces their

salary, civil servants would have gone from spending mode to saving mode; just imagine what drastic situation would have been created by reducing the salaries of civil servants.

All of a sudden the cash flow within the economy would have vanished, exactly what we are seeing in the tourism sector, thus leading to closure of businesses, and unemployment would have reached the sky. How would that have helped our current situation which has already been ruined by COVID-19? I would also like to place on record my appreciation to the most honourable Prime Minister for his continued confidence and support and to other members of the Cabinet and FijiFirst caucus (unfortunately I cannot say the Opposition members) who have all accepted the need for such a stimulating budget and have provided valuable advice and support along the way.

The fortune of workers and businesses are tangled by keeping the economy stable and strengthen the social resilience by investing and upgrading the skills of our people and transforming our business, the economy can recover more strongly. I also wish to acknowledge the support and guidance of all those who have made it possible to continue in the discharge of my responsibility in the Ministry of Employment, Productivity, Industry Relations, Youth and Sports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year the budget debate discussion can be safely described as ground breaking. For the first time we have carried out the function within the context of recently updated special governance framework. The enhanced framework, established through the amendment of the Tax Scheme and announcement of various initiatives ensuring that the struggling Fijians are back to work in the industry they love and rely on.

The historic nature of this pandemic and economic down-turn has made it necessary to come up with such an innovative budget. It is a budget of the time and for the times - a budget that addresses the issues for today; for economic and social wellbeing of all Fijians tomorrow and beyond.

I support the budget for the effective response to the impact of the current pandemic and responsible allocations. These are areas of particular interest to stakeholders in my portfolios including workers, employers, investors and our youth and young Fijians. I am pleased to note the priority given to bringing back jobs. During these difficult times of crisis our country is facing and bracing for the new normal - the budget has perfectly announced Fiji's biggest ever tax cut. This budget is going to safeguard those who are unemployed and those whose hours and salaries has been reduced.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now turn to specific remarks relating to areas of employment, productivity and industrial relations that falls under my portfolio. One must realise that the Ministry of Employment is all about service and it is not a capital project oriented ministry. I had various meetings with my ministry officials and they have assured me that since government has thought about them and their families by not reducing their pay, they will be giving an additional 100 percent towards their work to ensure that their day to day operations within the Ministry are not affected and the service that is offered is of high quality. My Ministry is working towards implementing various strategies and carrying out substantial internal realignment which is going to significantly reduce the operational cost and bring about efficiency in our services. My Ministry, in summary, is well served across its diverse range of impact areas by the budget.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I welcome the budget. We work with each other, we do not fight like the Opposition.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I welcome the budget for it cares for all Fijian families. The provision of various incentives and schemes will uplift existing businesses, create new business opportunities and ensure a decent employment for the people. We will definitely get the best value for whatever we spend and that spending will be relevant, sustainable and lead to short, medium and long term gains.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the timely and welcome budget allocation indicates for the commemoration of events, Fiji will be celebrating 50 years of independence this year. This is an opportune time to reflect on the past 50 years as well as on the contemporary situation. The current situation due to COVID-19, for the first time in 50 years means a complete re-ordering of priorities and postponement of some important projects which is unavoidable. In supporting this extraordinary budget that saves lives, protects livelihoods and actively builds a bridge to the prosperous future, I welcome the allocation plans and robust policies for our workers, investors and for our employers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Members, I thank you all and I reiterate my strong support for the 2020-2021 Budget. Thank you.

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I thank the Honourable Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports for his contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, we will now conclude proceedings for today and we will continue with the remaining speakers tomorrow. Thank you and Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 8.52 p.m.