

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 30TH NOVEMBER, 2021

[CORRECTED COPY]

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TUESDAY, 30TH NOVEMBER, 2021

The Parliament met at 9.53 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry, Foreign Affairs and Forestry; honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications and Housing and Community Development; honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport; honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation; honourable M.D. Bulitavu; honourable N. Nawaikula; honourable Adi L. Qionibaravi; honourable Lt. Col. P. Tikoduadua and honourable T. Waqanika.

MINUTES

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Monday, 29th November, 2021, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members 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 homes, offices and electronic devices. Thank you for taking an interest in your Parliament.

Fijian Elections Office Voter Registration Team

Honourable Members, please, take note that the Fijian Elections Office Voter Registration Team will be in Parliament from 10.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m. today, on Wednesday and Thursday, and on Friday from 10.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m., to provide the following services:

1. New Registration;
2. Update of Voter Details;
3. Replacement of Voter Card;
4. Confirmation of Deceased; and
5. Mobile Registration Request.

The Team will be based at Level 2 outside the Party Offices and I encourage all honourable Members to utilise the services that they will provide. At this juncture, I extend my gratitude to the

Supervisor of Elections for accommodating the request from Parliament. Thank you, honourable Members.

Also on that note, I apologise for the lateness of our resumption today, I misread the time so my apologies.

REINSTATEMENT OF BILLS – ORDER PAPER

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 97, I hereby move:

That the following Bills be restored to the Order Paper, the:

1. Code of Conduct Bill 2018 (Bill No. 33/2018);
2. Heritage Bill 2021 (Bill No. 3/2021); and
3. Fiji Institute of Chartered Accountants Bill 2021 (Bill No. 35/2021).

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Standing Order 97 primarily focusses on the procedure with respect to the reinstatement of Bills to the Order Paper. As honourable Members are aware, Parliament had prorogued on Monday, 25th October, 2021, and during the Prorogation period, all Bills had lapsed, which meant that all processes paused or came to a halt. Why is it necessary, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 97(1) further provides that those Bills which had lapsed may proceed in this new session of Parliament at the stage they had reached in the previous session by resolution of Parliament, restoring the Bills in the Order Paper. Therefore, Sir, this is purely a procedural motion which is necessary, so as to allow Parliament to undertake or continue with its mandate to legislate, to make and pass laws – a core parliamentary function which is entrenched in Section 46 of the Fijian Constitution.

On the lapsed Bills, again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted in my motion, the three Bills which had lapsed are the:

1. Code of Conduct Bill 2018 (Bill No. 33/2018);
2. Heritage Bill 2021 (Bill No. 3/2021); and
3. Fiji Institute of Chartered Accountants Bill 2021 (Bill No. 35/2021).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the reinstatement of the three lapsed Bills, Parliament and respective Standing Committees would be able to proceed immediately from where they left off at Prorogation. This would further mean that Parliament and its Standing Committees would be able to continue to undertake their legislative, representative and oversight functions.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reiterate that this is merely a procedural motion, which is necessary to allow the three lapsed Bills to be reinstated and restored to the Order Paper. I do commend this motion to Parliament and I hereby seek the full support from all honourable Members to approve the motion before this august Parliament, as it is imperative for Parliament and its Standing Committees to fulfil their legislative, representative and oversight functions. Sir, I thank you for this opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion for anyone wishing to take the floor.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the motion, but I just wanted to make a point with respect to the Code of Conduct Bill 2018.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, that Bill had gone to the Committee, the Committee had rightfully done its work and brought its Report to Parliament. I do not understand why the Government has been sitting on it and that Bill was not debated and approved in Parliament. However, I am happy that it has been brought back.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, you have the right of reply.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we take note of the concern raised by the honourable Leader of the National Federation Party. Of course, it is before the Standing Committee and Government will consider it once the work has been completed. Sir, I have nothing further to add.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

2022 CALENDAR OF PARLIAMENT MEETINGS

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament adopts the Sitting Calendar for the Year 2022.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, very briefly, as honourable Members are aware, Standing Order 22(1) stipulates, and I quote:

“That Business Committee must recommend to Parliament a programme of sitting periods for each session of Parliament or each 12-month sitting period of Parliament, whichever is the shorter.”

Standing Order 22(2) further provides, and I quote:

“The recommended programme must be presented to Parliament no later than the third sitting day of the session of 12-month period.”

In that respect, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Business Committee convened and undertook discussions on a proposed Sitting Calendar for 2022 which, I believe, all honourable Members have been provided with. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can confirm that the Business Committee agreed and approved the Sitting Calendar for the year 2022 which, as I have stated, has been circulated to all the honourable Members this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst the Business Committee had agreed and approved the Sitting Calendar, the Committee had also further agreed that should there be an eminent need to readjust some of the sittings, this would be subsequently tabled in Parliament. Primarily, this is to allow some flexibility which would assist with the continuing nationwide efforts in battling the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the flexibility would also accommodate the necessary readjustments required with the re-opening of our borders.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to put on record that there were no objections from the Members of the Committee, therefore, I plead that honourable Members approve the proposed Sitting Calendar. The dates are as shown on the Calendar as follows:

FEBRUARY – AUGUST 2022		
FEBRUARY	Monday, 7th - Friday, 11th	Parliament meeting
MARCH	Monday, 7th - Friday, 11th	Parliament meeting
APRIL	Monday, 4th - Friday, 8th	Parliament meeting
MAY	Monday, 9th - Friday, 13th	Parliament meeting
AUGUST	Monday, 29th - Friday 2nd	Parliament meeting

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as ongoing practice, the dates of the Budget Address and subsequent Budget Debate will be confirmed in due course and this must and will take place either in June or July 2022. This Sitting Calendar will allow all the Standing Committees to continue with their Committee work on the Bills that have been reinstated today, and the Annual Reports that are currently pending with the Committees. It is with this reason also that all honourable Members must support this proposed Sitting Calendar.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also pertinent to note that the Committees are essential mechanisms through which Parliament is able to reach out to members of the public. They are essential mechanisms in terms of accountability and scrutiny, therefore, vital to allow them time to undertake their work which this proposed Sitting Calendar allows.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have stated this before and I will say it again today, in essence when Parliament is not sitting, the Government has to execute and implement its plans, policies and programmes, and the Standing Committees have to continue to undertake and discharge their functions mandated in the Standing Orders. In this respect, Sir, the proposed Sitting Calendar before Parliament must be supported and it is one that will greatly ensure that the Fijian Parliament will continue to undertake its legislative, representative and oversight functions.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the salient points I have put on the floor of this august Parliament, I do commend this motion to Parliament and hereby seek support from all the honourable Members to approve the proposed Sitting Calendar for 2022.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the response to His Excellency's Address and I now call on the first speaker for today, the opening batsman from that side of the House, honourable Mikaele Leawere.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, *ni sa bula saka* and I wish a good morning to all the Honourable Members of Parliament. I rise to join honourable Members of this House to thank His

Excellency the President for his most gracious Address.

At the outset of my speech, I wish to associate myself with all of you to congratulate His Excellency the President on his appointment, and wishing him a fruitful tenure of office, blessed with a healthy and long life. I have the same prayers for our First Lady. Further to that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I also join all of you to thank our former President, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote for his impeccable service to the nation as a serviceman, politician and our last Head of State. I wish him continued good health and a happy retirement.

It is, indeed, a pleasure to see ourselves sitting here as a whole House after the traumatic experience with the raging pandemic we had this year. I thank God, we, and our families are safe but this has not been the fate of many Fijians who continue to suffer and moreso, those who lost their beloved ones. We pray that Fiji is spared from the new COVID-19 Omicron variant.

We are also happy, Sir, to welcome back to Fiji the Glasgow contingent, headed by the honourable Prime Minister, after earning a bit of a spotlight. While Fiji remains poorer, robbed by corporate interests at COP26, it draws home the point that one can do things unilaterally at home, with your own skewered rules, but things work otherwise at the universal level where ego, decree and brutal force of arms have no appeal and standing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I started my career as a school teacher rising to become an Education Officer and then joined the Fijian Teachers Association Trade Union movement in Fiji, prior to my election to this Parliament in 2015. As such, I have highlighted many issues pertaining to education, industrial relations and higher education in this Parliament. Since then, it seems to have fallen on deaf ears, it was a sheer waste of time, knowledge and expertise that issues like this and many others are not acknowledged and not recognised by this Government which could have helped to improve the lives of our people, especially the teachers and the education sector. Of concern, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our teachers with certificates being replaced by degree holders, especially at this time and also with their financial commitments, many of us will remember this is a missed opportunity.

Sir, I thank my voters for giving me this opportunity to be their voice and posterity and they will judge me and my party better than this Government, as we geared for the next election. By now, we are fully convinced that this egocentric, confrontational, childish and selfish Government would not listen or do anything for Fiji, other than systematically loot, oppress and misrule us. Therefore, as opposed to the past, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand here to:

- Not to plead for the review of the labour reforms which has not happened and will never happen as FijiFirst is in power. Contempt for worker rights, trade unions and right to strike and freedom of expression is not hidden and skins you to the bone. The kind of democracy being preached and the kind of democracy this Government follows.
- Will not call for an immediate review of the National Minimum Wage rate because we all know this Government is in the pocket of the rich and is dictated by corporate interests.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Can you listen so that you can learn something from me?

This Government wants our people to be caught struggling for their daily needs so they can govern without being questioned, leaving them helpless with minimum or nil bargaining power.

- Will not ask for a national education Commission or raise the problems of our teachers suffering in silence, now some without pay and dreading to be put out of jobs because we know FijiFirst does not really care what happens to our teachers and civil servants as these or they are the catalyst to shaping the lives of our youths and future leaders. Rather, I would use this opportunity to expose bad governance, the broken trail of promises by this Government and asking the people of Fiji to deliver a protest vote against them next year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to put it simply, FijiFirst no longer deserves to be in Government. Their prolonged stay in power and unilateral decisions are destroying Fiji faster than cancer. The cancerous cells in a body politics simply needs to be weeded out by the ballot and replaced by a healthy and caring government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the many promises made by this Government was to import fossil fuel, refine the same and sell it at a controlled price to local petroleum companies through a State-owned enterprise. Seven years down the lane, nothing has happened in that regard and fuel prices are skyrocketing everyday.

Then what happened to the free water and electricity or free medical scheme? The truth is, people are asked to buy generators for electricity, water tanks and given the regular power outage and water cuts, our rural communities suffer in silence. Hospitals, health centres and nursing stations have run out of basic medicine, forcing people to pay an exorbitant price to heal themselves, or suffer and die. Is this the legacy worth of any celebration? Definitely not, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but these features are high on the FijiFirst scoreboard. On that note, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services for providing a doctor for our community in Galoa. Thank you very much, Sir.

What else, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we spend half-a-billion dollars on our roads, yet potholes, dusty, pathetic road conditions and defective works are now a staple feature on our roads in Fiji, not forgetting the more than 200 bridges around Fiji which are in need of urgent repairs. Road accidents are getting to be frequent and a loss to the many who had suffered. Our communities needs road humps and rules need to be changed in erecting them, especially for villagers on the Coral Coast from Qarasarau, Wainiyabia and to my village. Another item in the FijiFirst scorecard which leads me to ask where those millions of dollars have gone to.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I come from Galoa in Serua which is sandwiched between the Queens Road national highway and the sea. My daily experiences gives an equal authority to join all of you to talk about climate change. Similarly, there are honourable Members in this House who have firsthand experiences about the impact of climate change. More so, our unique ridge to reef development needs keeping in mind our small, yet important agro-biodiversity.

How many such people and communities were consulted during the enactment of the climate change legislation, or included in the Fiji Delegation to COP26 remains a matter of debate. Perhaps, their exclusion was one of the reasons why the case of Fiji was not being able to put on the international fora with the eloquence it required, leading our 39 members squad to return home empty-handed as the *Hindi* saying from the *Bhagavad Gita* implies which I would like to translate in English, "We came empty-handed and we will return empty." That was what happened when they went to Glasgow and came back.

Sir, His Excellency the President mentioned about successfully prosecuting the offenders who destroyed the pristine environment and natural resources at Malolo Island. That may be so but my question is, what about mitigating the damages done and compensation to the resource owners, as the developer has filed a notice for winding up. Why is there a complete silence on that issue in the speech and from the Government benches, or is it again another politics of diversion tactics at work, to conceal environmental exploitation right under the nose of our so-called climate champions?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President must be commended for sharing his exemplary personal experience from his home village in Naduri, Macuata, about the impact of climate change and mitigation actions, and we join him to thank the Government for the initiatives taken to mitigate the threats there.

We must not forget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that not far from Naduri, Macuata, is Nawailevu in Bua where we still have a pending environmental mitigation to be done, given the damages caused by bauxite mining at the hands of a rogue foreign firm. Why is there no word in the speech about Nawailevu in Bua or the Sigatoka River mouth mining or planned exploration without the consent of the resource owners in Ono-i-Lau, Kadavu, Ra and Nadroga?

Past experiences have shown, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that selective reading, interpretation, memory, story-sharing and hearing are staple attributes of this Government and that has not gone missing, even in this speech from the throne, compromising the neutrality of the high office of our Head of State.

The other feature that I have taken note of is the grant of self-accolades by this Government to itself, in other words, transforming from self-proclaimed leaders from 2006 to 2014 era to self-praising politicians from 2014 till now and for that purpose, using the Presidency as a rubber stamp to create a 'feel and look good' image.

That being so, they have reduced what was supposed to be a solemn and uniting occasion last week to a master divider Address from the throne, heaping insult to the intelligence upon the people of Fiji. We have to put the narcissistic culture to an end - the sooner the better and Election 2022 is an opportune time for that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency made a very profound statement when he called to all of us to fight Elections based on issues of merit. I think no one can beg to disagree with that but let us look at the track of the FijiFirst Government in this regard.

Who was the first to raise the issue of violence? Was it not the Leader of the FijiFirst Party who said that, "Suva will not burn until he is the Prime Minister" - an act of an empty threat under the guise of a security prank? Who was the first to talk the language of intimidation and threat? Was it not the General-Secretary of the FijiFirst Party when he said, "If voters are not going to vote for his party leader, then they are putting a dagger to their neck"? What a blatant mockery of free and fair electioneering by indirect threat!

Whom did the rumour-mongers support who were posting on the social media during the blackout period, telling the voters that if NFP wins, transgender marriage would be legalised or if SODELPA wins Diwali and Prophet Mohammed's Birthday would be abolished? What better example can one give of this Government, than this sponsoring the politics of fear to systematically rig the elections?

Now, what is next, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is an onslaught of freebies about to come to entice our voters in 2022 and people are not being fooled easily this time around. I think those very fair observations by His Excellency from past experiences tantamount to this call for self-reflection and soul-searching by this beleaguered Government now caught red-handed and pants down, and muddying the waters of democracy.

That being so, as it was, or as it is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was perplexed that no mention was made in His Excellency's Speech about the scope and space for freedom of expression which is a fundamental pre-requisition to conduct free and fair Election to ensure a credible outcome. For these purposes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition parties have collectively suggested a total of 142 amendments and to our displeasure, none of them were included in the just concluded review of the Electoral Act.

Instead, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the amendments made to the electoral law further compromises the very ideal and principle of parliamentary democracy - free and fair electioneering. It was simply the handiwork of the amateur and power hungry politicians demonstrating and consolidating their lust for power by unilateral decision-making through the use of the tyranny of the majority, not realising gerrymandering the future elections in Fiji in their own unique style.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how can we have a free and fair election when forcible decrees referred to as new legal order or part of that order weakens political parties, policies candidates, threatens political party workers, muzzles the media, over-regulate the social media and has now launched an unprecedented purge on sharing of alternative policies with the need to provide costing for the same. Indeed, it is a sham on this Government and the system it has created on its now not-so-dynamic duo who have become to themselves and are known for hiding statistics that leads me to ask how a political party or an independent candidate can provide a credible costing for their proposed promises?

Their entire litany of conduct with regards to electioneering and now this statement coming in a speech from the throne to contest elections on merit, leaves almost everyone, except themselves, to wonder and inquire, has the adage of the pot calling the kettle black, we need answers and positive outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as opposed to the past, the proposed legislative agenda of the Government for the next year looks funny, reducing the last shreds of creditability left in its effort to regulate our lives to ashes. Just to begin with, what honourable Nawaikula just predicted only some time ago about the use of hemp is now going to become a reality with the introduction and perhaps, speedy enactment of the Industrial Hemp Bill. Why not? What else can we expect from a Government and its leadership under whom there has been a record drug haul, rampant substance abuse reaching to almost every corner of the country and more so, an indirect admission of running out of funds - *paisa nai hay, sa sega na i lavo*?

The other interesting item on its legislative agenda, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the proposed Statistics Bill. One wonders if this is in response to control the exposures such as what was revealed by the deposed Chief Executive Officer of the Bureau of Statistics in the recent past, or is it another attempt to hide statistics or systematically obtain the power to doctor them and dish it out as it suits those in power? It is certainly fishy and adds to the maxim - where there is smoke there must be fire.

Yet another proposed legislation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Development of Informal Settlements Bill, I have got a mouthful to say on this, beginning with a burning question to the honourable Prime Minister, whether Fiji was offered \$200 million over a period of seven years by the new Government to avert his *coup* in 2006. That money was to resettle the squatter dwellers of Fiji, but his *coup* in 2006 deprived Fiji of that much-needed money for a worthy cause than the carnage of democracy.

Not only that, Sir, let us look at the statistics on the demographic shift from provinces like Macuata, Ra, Ba, Nadroga and Navosa, to our urban slums reducing who were once proud farmers, the custodians of our green and blue economy

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Absolute rubbish!

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA.- Carry on.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- ... to squatter dwellers slipping into acute poverty and giving credence to the recently published Household Income and Poverty Report by the Bureau of Statistics.

As if that was not enough, the truth hurts, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The dramatic stunts by the FijiFirst Government to issue notice of approval of lease to hundreds of people and the media to create a good look image is now evaporating fast, as no one with a notice of approval of lease can secure credit facilities without a proper land lease to either build an affordable house or set up a farm or an enterprise.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.-.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are taking up our time.

Lastly, on this matter, this Bill is brought to this House with no intent to eradicate the housing problems of Fiji or to bring relief to the plight of our squatter dwellers. It is being purely introduced at a time around or right here on the eve of the Elections with the FijiFirst realising the importance and dreading the prospects of the loss of its vote bank from the squatter dwellers next year.

The Bill now acts as a smokescreen, providing a band-aid solution. This will be used by this Government which had all divorced itself from our urban slums to systematically link itself with the squatters and be seen to be addressing their housing needs when, in fact, it is all about securing the votes of the squatters and prolonging the political life of this Government.

Where was the FijiFirst Government when these same squatters ran out of electricity and water, women and children were begging for food, cases of depression and suicides on the rise and as much as threats posed by drug lords or mafias operating as landlords? Where were you until now when the squatter settlements have been suffering from high tide seawater running into their shelters and people starving during the pandemic without food and reeling with fear to go out and to ask for food, given the threats?

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government is tethering on the brink of strategic paralysis, description often used by that side of the House. No one is worried or should be worried about what happens to the FijiFirst, not even those who belong to it because they have milked the cash cow barren by now and made their money. But everyone apart from them are more worried as to what will happen to Fiji.

With each passing day, we are witnesses to overregulation and over taxation of our lives. We see institutions and structures falling to become victims of personal pride and political hate perpetuated under the guise of reform and we are getting robbed and raped and pushed to poverty and suffering. No one ever envisioned this would be our fate at the point of our independence but I think this pain and suffering is now captured in the Address by His Excellency so succinctly when saying, "old style politics has no place in Fiji".

What is that old style politics? Perhaps, he was correctly referring to the one-and-a-half decades of deluge, delusion and destruction by this Government and here, we have a new Head of State calling for it is time for a change - a change for the better and the best with a competent leader and caring Government.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is the strong inculcating, fast indoctrinating and superbly overarching view of the vast populous majority of this nation now that would answer to our problems and this is to vote this FijiFirst Government out through the ballot box next year.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to wish you and your family all the best for what Christmas can bring and also to honourable Members of this House.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians; I rise to speak on His Excellency the President of Fiji's eloquent, inspiring and forward looking Address to mark the opening of the Parliament Session for 2021-2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me join my colleagues in congratulating His Excellency on his appointment to the high office. We look forward to his able leadership in guiding and supporting Government's untiring efforts in the development of our country, especially in the post-pandemic period. I also wish to express my appreciation to the former President, who served his two terms with dignity, dedication and distinction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency has rightly summarised the past and what we must not repeat. He acknowledged what FijiFirst Government under the able leadership of our honourable Prime Minister has done for its people, how the COVID-19 outbreak was managed and how the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic is being handled. His Excellency has also reminded us to work towards a future that puts the nation's interest and the welfare of Fijians above petty politics.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the wise advice from His Excellency should be taken very seriously. We have seen how politics of fear and instability in the past have destroyed the progress of our country. Unfortunately, the Opposition will remain critical foremost for a single reason and that is how they can sway the minds of people through misinformation and lies just to win the next Elections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President very eloquently said that he will protect the flame of our young democracy from all who seek to extinguish it for personal and political purposes. This says it all about what some people are trying to do. Instead of uniting the nation, they are playing in the age-old game of divide and rule. It is the first FijiFirst Government that has given all Fijians equality, stability and dignity so that we can live peacefully. It is my hope that those who attempt to divide do not succeed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government's COVID-19 strategy, including the decisive plan for vaccine roll-out has worked. We are very pleased that infection rates have gone down substantially, businesses are open and jobs are being restored. Most importantly, we have aeroplanes to fly when the international border opens tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the Opposition had its way, we will be looking for aeroplanes to fly as they would have returned the planes, not knowing how the leasing arrangements in the aviation industry works. This would have meant thousands of tourists we expect over the next few months, choosing another airline resulting in revenue meant for Fiji going to other countries.

His Excellency the President's Address is visionary and forward-looking. He mentioned the important role our Prime Minister played to push our national and regional interest at COP26; getting oceans on the climate agenda and the introduction of Blue Bond initiative is no small victory. The issuance of the Blue Bond initiative has been highly commended by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), The United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) and by the United Kingdom (UK) Government. It will assist in Fiji's blue economy efforts towards a carbon neutral path by 2050.

I commend the honourable Attorney-General for this sterling initiative. His Excellency also mentioned that there is no place for politics of pettiness and personalisation and we must see further than short-term political wins towards a long-term vision for the nation's progress.

Mr. Speaker, calling our participation at COP26 as a junket trip is an example of politics of pettiness and ignorance. The Opposition cannot fathom that a small country like Fiji is punching above

its weight in matters of global significance, alongside the major countries that are known to dominate international diplomacy and action.

The recently concluded COP26 in Glasgow, is one such example where the significance of Fiji's participation was not understood by the Opposition and politically-biased NGOs and individuals. The honourable Prime Minister not only represented Fiji but also the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) members as the current Chair. It is a norm that important international meetings are attended by the Chair of the Forum. Let us not forget that our honourable Prime Minister was also the past Chair of COP23.

Mr. Speaker Sir, similarly, the honourable Attorney General, in his capacity as Fiji's Minister for Climate Change and appointed champion on Ocean-Climate Nexus and Climate Finance for the region, had to be at the negotiating table.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the critics said the trip was a waste of taxpayers' money. This backfired when they came to know that the Fiji delegation was funded by donors. Immediately, they changed their tune and asked the Government to be transparent and accountable and to present a report on the use of every dollar of donor funds. Similar sentiments were expressed by the honourable Leader of the Opposition asking for the report to be presented in the Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, do they not know that any funds received by the Government is audited by the Office of the Auditor-General and the report is presented in the Parliament? What was the point of asking the obvious? Mr. Speaker, Sir, once again, this is a good example of politics of pettiness, which I also call 'cheap politics'.

Yesterday, I heard Opposition Members speaking on climate change and I wonder whether they even understand the impact of climate change on the lives and livelihoods of our people and our education system. Ask the people of Narikoso Village who were recently relocated to higher grounds. Mr. Kelepi Saukitoga (Chairman of Narikoso Development Committee) said, and I quote: "It has been one year now, and we can boldly testify that we feel at peace knowing that we do not have to worry about the rising sea level coming right into our homes."

Mr. Speaker, there are 40 such villages that the Government has identified for relocation. Despite contributing least towards climate change, we continue to face the ferocity of rising sea levels, coastal erosion, intense storm surges, and flooding. There is no shame in asking high emitters to pay for the climate mitigation and adaptations in small island States, like Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji First Government has been relentlessly making continuous investments in building a resilient nation. Amongst many other things that the Government is doing, it has channelled significant funds towards improving schools for the benefit of our students. Since *TC Winston* in 2016, the Government has invested in excess of \$240 million in rebuilding and repairing schools damaged by cyclones. By building back better and with cyclone resilience in mind, we will have less disruption to schooling which in turn will reduce learning loss.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to inform that most schools have been completed of which one has already been commissioned by the honourable Prime Minister last Friday, and most schools will be commissioned before the new school year starts.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Who's funding?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I thank our development partners for coming on board and helping with the Government's initiative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the vision of transforming Fiji has education at its heart. With the commitment to improve quality of life by giving equal opportunities to all Fijians, the FijiFirst Government introduced reforms in the education sector to benefit parents, students, teachers, employers and the school committee. Free education grants have been provided, infrastructure of schools have been improved and schools are resourced with items such as computers, science models, library books, charts, and PEMAC items, to improve teaching and learning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my recent discussion with the school committees revealed their struggle in the past to pay 20 per cent salary for grant-in-aid teachers and to maintain school infrastructure. For example, Nawai Secondary School had to sell a portion of the land in those days, to pay the teacher's salary. We have come a long way with the bold vision set by the FijiFirst Government...

HON. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- ...to ease financial burden from the communities, to run community-owned schools. As part of the reform this Government increased salaries of teachers and post holders twice in the past seven years, and also started paying ECE teachers teaching five year olds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the free tuition fee, bus fare assistance, free textbooks, Toppers Scholarship and Tertiary Education Loans Scheme (TELS) have reduced financial pressure on our parents and guardians, effectively putting more money in their pockets. The Government's investment is substantial to provide equal opportunities to all Fijians regardless of gender, race, ethnicities, socio-economic status or geographic location.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now want to focus on another very important message by His Excellency. The importance of merit-based recruitment, he stressed and I quote:

“Without merit-based selection, our companies, our Civil Service and even our Government would serve the interests of a privileged few rather than serve the Fijian people....”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government will follow merit-based recruitment to ensure quality education is not comprised. Having said this, I do want to reiterate that the revised process of appointment is for new recruitment to fill currently vacant posts. Teachers who are in the system need not worry about this unless, of course, they apply for a higher position within the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to comment on misinformation and smear campaign by the Opposition and the Teacher Unions. They spread misinformation that I have not acknowledged our hard working teachers. On the contrary I have always praised the work of the teachers, Heads of Schools and school committees, for their dedication and commitment to education. This is another example of the politics of pettiness.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have said repeatedly and reiterate here, we are grateful and praise the majority of teachers who have made all efforts to keep their qualifications and registration up-to-date. We praise all teachers who have gone out of their way...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- ... to assist students especially during COVID-19. Also, I thank teachers for assisting Ministry of Health during COVID outbreak. Our concern is with the small percentage of teachers who have failed to keep their qualifications and registration up-to-date.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we want the best for our students. There are around 1,000 teachers teaching with limited authority to teach who need to upgrade their qualification; a practice seen in Australia and New Zealand as well. These teachers do not have teacher training qualifications, in fact, the Teachers Registration Board reported that some of these teachers have not upgraded their qualifications since 2009.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is equally disappointing to note that around 538 teachers did not bother to renew their Teacher Registration Certificates as reported by the Teachers Registration Board. Sir, our children deserve the best. It is all about our children, they are the future.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- *Vinaka.*

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Are the Opposition and Unions encouraging unqualified teachers in the classroom?

HON. MEMBERS.- No, no!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Do they want to compromise the future of our children for what they think will get them quick votes?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to inform teachers with teaching certificates from Nasinu Teachers College, Lautoka Teachers College and Fiji College of Advanced Education, that their certificates are recognised in the Remuneration Policy. However, it is important for those teachers to understand that we live in a competitive world, and the recruitment and promotion of teachers will be based on OMRS.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a majority of our teachers are fully qualified with education units and practical. One cannot be a teacher if one has not done education units and classroom assessment, or what we call 'practicum'. A degree alone without education and practicum does not make a person a qualified teacher. Just like a lawyer, LLB will not qualify a person to practice law, unless he or she does Professional Diploma in Legal Practice (PDLP). Even a person with an MBBS degree cannot practice medicine without internship or training in a hospital. So, teachers also need training in a classroom, assessed by teacher-trainers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one may argue that in the past, they were taught by teachers with certificates, but did they know that those teachers were regularly assessed by visiting teachers? In those days, very few could afford university education, unlike now. Thanks to the FijiFirst Government that made in-service scholarships (TELS and the Toppers Scheme) available so that our teachers can study fulltime or through distance education.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry values teachers who have been continuously improving their qualifications. Just like any other professional fraternity, knowledge is

evolving continuously. In teaching, IT skill has become important for teachers to be on par with students who are tech-savvy. So, like experience, qualification also matters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I met six teacher training organisations to emphasise communication skills, entrepreneurial skills and digital literacy, to be part of the teacher training programme because the content of education keeps changing and one must keep pace with the needs of modern society. Students are living on the internet and teachers need training to integrate technology with learning. Mr. Speaker, Sir, educating students in a traditional school environment is getting harder than ever.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, teachers have the power to shape the future of our nation. Given how big this responsibility is, it is important that we support our teachers, and ensure they are better equipped to handle the task. We must also understand that our core clients are the 242,569 students from Early Childhood Education (ECE) to Year 13. We must serve them and serve them well because they are our future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now let me turn to the comments made by the Opposition. Yesterday, Santa Claus came early in the form of honourable Gavoka. He pulled out a list that read, "SODELPA will cancel all students' loans. SODELPA will make tertiary scholarships free. SODELPA will restore apprenticeship", and the list goes on. Sir, SODELPA's proposed policies are a sign of political desperation. This, in itself, shows that SODELPA may be an old Party, but not a wise Party.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji, on average, spends almost 20 per cent of the total Government expenditure on education. This equates to over 6 per cent of the GDP. On average, we have been spending approximately \$700 million annually on education and this includes:

- payment of teachers' wages and salaries – approximately \$340 million;
- Free Education – approximately \$60 million;
- Transport Assistance – over \$20 million;
- Operating Grant for Tertiary Institutions – over \$70 million; and
- Funding through TELS and Toppers – approximately \$130 million.

Despite the fiscal challenges, we have ensured that the education sector spending is not affected. We have been paying teachers, despite many calling for a pay-cut for our teachers just because they were at home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, TELS debt currently stands at around \$600 million. The actual TELS spending on tuition and accommodation has been as follows:

- 2018-2019 - \$101 million;
- 2019-2020 - \$109 million;
- 2020-2021 - \$67 million;
- 2021-2022 - \$114 million.

Funding every school-leaver to go to university will cost approximately \$200 million annually. So, SODELPA is proposing to write-off \$600 million in TELS debt and pay \$200 million annually on funding tertiary students. This is unsustainable, Mr. Speaker, Sir. On the one hand they say that the Government debt is high and then again, propose unsustainable populist policies that will cost Government hundreds and millions of dollars.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, SODELPA lacks creativity. We only hear what changes they will make into the current policies without any cost analysis. Please tell us about your new initiative rather than the removal of current policies introduced by the FijiFirst Government.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- MyAPA, Minister!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Regarding MyAPA, that applies to all the civil servants across the board. Why are we treating teachers differently - they are also civil servants? It is on hold, we have all heard it, it will be reviewed and after the review, MyAPA will apply.

The problem with honourable Leawere is that, he claims that he has been looking after the welfare of the teachers. Unfortunately, they have not done that. With or without the unions, this government has looked after the interests of our teachers, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Is there anything else they want to ask - I will be happy to answer any of their questions? I once again, commend His Excellency, the President for his statement.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will adjourn for refreshments.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.51 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.27 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now continue with the debate.

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give my response to His Excellency the President, for his most gracious Address on the occasion of the opening of this new session of Parliament for the 2021 - 2022 calendar year. I join other Members of this august House in congratulating His Excellency on his new appointment to the High Office of the President. I wish him a fruitful tenure of office with good health and long life.

On the same token, I would also like to thank the former President, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote, for his dedicated service and wish him and his family the best in their future endeavours.

As a direct descendant of one of the signatories of the Deed of Cession in 1874, I am delighted and honoured that the prestige and pride of the highest office in the land has been restored in the appointment of His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere. He is also a direct descendant of one of the 10 Chiefs that ceded Fiji to Great Britain.

However, let me inform the nation that we may have forgiven but not forgotten the honourable Prime Minister's childish comments on the eve of the military *coup* in 2006, telling us the chiefs to go and drink homebrew under the mango tree. It is amazing how the truth is catching up for this man, now running to the chiefs and all of a sudden quoting verses from the *Holy Bible* and styling himself as a defender of the native rights for obvious reasons. Let me ask him, what is next? Is he also preparing to accompany us for a *talanoa* session under the mango tree to bring back unity in the spirit of genuine dialogue?

Sir, this is the thirteenth time I am involved in responding to the Address by the Head of State, nine of those under your stewardship as Speaker. The address is, in fact, not a statement by His Excellency the President based on his vision, but driven by the Government of the day's policy and legislative agenda. Based on our experience, the statement is just another window dressing. It is a common norm that Government does not practice what it preaches.

By Convention as required by Standing Orders, we are required to support this motion but that does not mean we are a party to it or support everything that has been stated. We, the Opposition, beg to differ as a matter of principle, expressing our right to disagree and to suggest better cost-effective alternatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the preservation and protection of existing institution to ensure that transparent and accountable governance are adhered to yet the track record of the FijiFirst Government is laughable and disappointing. They hold an unprecedented record of destroying and dismantling the very institutions and structures which were built as a major fabric of our society. These include:

1. forcible imposition of 24 super decrees, diluting indigenous rights;
2. stealing away the rights of the resource owners with regard to the use of their resources;
3. tampering with everything related to freedom of expression;
4. oppressing the workers of Fiji;
5. removal of the right to decide on the use of FNPF funds;
6. holding institutions, such as the University of the South Pacific to ransom; and
7. (on many occasions) compromising the independence of independent institutions, just to mention a few.

In other words, they have removed processes and procedures that guided our institutional structures so that there is no check and balance. This is common traits of a dictatorship model which has been the hallmark of the Bainimarama-led Government. They have the tenacity to shamelessly make a statement on this matter again. Perhaps, FijiFirst loves to get exposed and be skinned to the bone because they do not practice what they preach.

The second issue of concern that I would like to raise is on the call by His Excellency the President on matters relating to the Election. I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that His Excellency the President represents all the people of Fiji and he should be impartial from politics. He seems to be interfering with the political rights and human rights of individuals. The Government should not use His Excellency's Address for political purposes.

One just have to look at that track record of the FijiFirst Government's non-compliance to the rule of law and order and undermining human rights. Glaring examples, include the:

1. Use of \$463 million of State funds for electioneering under the guise of Fiji Care in 2018 and look where is Fiji Care today?
2. Empty threats and rumour-mongering tactics to create fear in the voters' mind during the Elections and in the blackout period.
3. Changing election rules and skewing each time as it suits them this time to deprive a section of Fijian voters from their right to vote only after a horrendous experience of rectification.
4. Raising the race card each time it is grilled on issues of probity and when the Opposition replies then it is quick to label us as racists instead.
5. Taking the lead in personal and political vilification with guttering level and venomous attacks using fake profiles on the media and alleged-to-be-paid agents in the public. Yet, we are debating on a statement written by a product of unethical election dealer, calling the people of Fiji to fight election on merit in 2022.

What a tribute to His Excellency the President in his first Address to this august Parliament.

The third issue which I wish to highlight is the lack of transparency and accountability by the Government to our people during the second wave of the pandemic that struck our shores in April 2021. They cannot hide their failure now and expect people to vote for them in the next Election. Their failures have brought pain and suffering to the lives of our people and their loved ones which will be very hard to forget.

What could have been a simple way to deal with the pandemic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was to have a 28 days total lockdown, followed by cluster lockdowns to get over this pandemic. Yet, the Opposition proposed a total lockdown but the Government refused to accept, just to save face. As a result of such political gamble, lives were lost and an exponential increase in infection, people lost their jobs and crippled the daily lives of more than 50 per cent of our population.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Navua which is heavily reliant on Suva for jobs, shopping, selling and buying of produce suffered heavily, as well as the residents of Vunidawa and Korovou. While the Government worked at a snail's pace to provide food rations to people in the Lami, Suva and Rewa corridor, there were no ration supply made to the people in Navua, Vunidawa and Korovou. It was in the latter stages before the lifting of restrictions that the people came to know that they had to contact their Government agents to have access to food. The question is, what were the Advisory Councillors doing all that time? Had it not been for the support from families abroad who sent funds, the local NGOs, business houses and good-hearted Samaritans in our midst, thousands of people without jobs and income in Navua, Vunidawa and Korovou would have suffered to the extent of starvation and famine for the first time right under the nose of the FijiFirst Government.

Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand here as the traditional chief and their representative, I would like to thank every proud and goodhearted Navuan who were helping each other to see us get through these trying times. We have proven to the FijiFirst Government that Navua can survive and thrive better without them, and the way forward is to have a new government with vision and commitment to all of us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government may have expected me to say something positive regarding youth and sports as I did during my Budget speech but the irony is that, nothing has been done in that regard and we do not expect much to be done on any of those issues raised with this beleaguered Government suffering from poor leadership, policy paralysis, financial doom, lacking public support and running short of ideas.

My message to the youth and sportsmen and sportswomen of Fiji is very simple. If we share a vision that we in the Opposition are for you, and if you believe we can make a better Fiji, given the issues I have been articulating to you all, a change of government in the 2022 Election is the only solution.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Where was your vision in 2013?

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA.- Listen honourable Minister, you've had your time!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am thankful to the honourable Minister for Housing, Local Government and Community Development for clarifying in writing the *modus operandi* that this Government is adopting to develop Navua into a town through consultation with the people of Navua. I think nothing can be better than that - to inculcate the sense of true ownership of the township by the people of Navua.

On the same token, let me also thank the Lami Town Council for the diligent services with regard to improved garbage collection, the beautification of Navua business area, upgrading of local infrastructure and improvement in processing business applications and building permits which have been the relief for the people of Navua whose pace of life was once slowed down by the near to bankrupt and dormant of the Navua Rural Local Authority of yesteryears.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe these positive developments are encouraging for the people of Navua which I welcome wholeheartedly and thank the Government for this. However, this may not be digested very well by a few selfish and power-hungry people in the Navua Community who wanted a town in place for their own benefit with no regard to the development and welfare of the people of Navua. Thanks to the people of Navua who gathered the courage to stand and speak out – “we want a developed town, not a ghost town”.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are two sticky areas which I wish to speak on, to draw attention of this Government. Firstly, the need to dredge Navua River to avert a major flooding situation, taking into account the climate change threats involved there. Secondly, the condition of two major roads in the Navua Central District.

On the Navua River, Sir, not long ago the FijiFirst Government announced the development of three hydro developments in the upper Navua River region up through the Namosi Province and nothing has come about as such, it is again a hallow promise, I wonder how the villages in the Namosi Highlands gain access to electricity.

In addition, there are people with devious personal agenda and may oppose the extraction of low value minerals from Navua River. Let us not forget that these extractions, not only ensuring regular metal supply for building works but also averting a major flood down the Navua Plains. But this is not for the permanent solution as the siltation downstream after the Navua Bridge continue to build up. Why can

the Government not have the will and commitment to dredge the said area to avert a major flood threat to the Navua Plains? At the same time, use the sand extracted for development work.

In addition to that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Environment and Waterways, who is a regular visitor to the district for reasons best known to him, assured the people of Waidova in Navua in 2014 that the erosion of the Navua River Bank along the adjacent settlements would be mitigated by way of dumping boulders, it never happened. On the eve of the General Elections in 2018, five loads of boulders were dumped to pacify voters. The threat continues to exist and if left unmitigated, would wash away surrounding settlement during a major flood which occur regularly at an interval of an average of 15 years.

On road works, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while Navua can boast to have one of the best gravel roads in Fiji, we also have made it to history as perhaps one of those few places where tarsealed roads have indeed become gravel roads, an example of this is the Calia–Nakavu Road, not once but twice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to take this opportunity to thank the Government for initiating the planned and proposed projects by Namosi Provincial Council and our *tikina* councils expressing the hope that they are expedited keeping in mind its importance to the development and welfare of the people of my Province.

His Excellency's Address confirms that from once self-proclaimed leaders of Fiji by the coup of 2006 have now transformed themselves to self-praising masters. Their intent is clear to create a 'feel and look good image' which is dissipating fast despite so much effort.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji have lost faith, credibility and respect in the FijiFirst Government. Fortunately, the Fiji government is barely afloat on its small majority three, using the military to threaten the people and the support from the few business-houses. That being so, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the answer to all the problems they have created including disunity, poor economic growth, high incidence of poverty, deteriorating of law and order, abuse of human rights, lack of transparency and accountability among others will only bring disaster to them in the 2022 Elections.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to wish you, Members of this august House, your families and the people of Fiji a very Merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members and fellow Fijians; first of all, I would like to take this opportunity to thank His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, for his most gracious Address during the Opening of Parliament and, once again, congratulate him on his appointment as the Head of State.

His Excellency spoke on a number of important issues affecting our beloved nation and one of those is climate change. Changing weather extremes threaten the livelihoods of the Fijian people, implicating the islands' ecosystems on land and at sea. Our leaders are doing the hard work of adapting to climate impacts, investing in resilient infrastructure, relocating vulnerable communities and harnessing nature to build powerful buffers between Fijians and the rising seas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is committed to achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050, although we are not a major emitter. Fiji contributes around 0.006 per cent of total greenhouse gas emissions but that does not make us too small to make a difference, and the recent passing of the ground-breaking Climate Change Bill will keep us accountable to our net zero emission. Salt water intrusion from coastal flooding destroys farmland, disrupting the supply of staples in the Fijian economy and forcing communities to migrate to safer grounds.

Climate change includes both, global warming driven by human-induced emission of greenhouse gases and the resulting large scale shifts in weather patterns. Although there have been previous periods of climate change since the mid-20th century, humans have had an unprecedented impact of earth's climate change and caused change on a global scale. The largest driver of warming is the emission of gases that create a greenhouse effect, of which more than 90 per cent are carbon dioxide and methane.

Fossil fuel burning for energy consumption is the main source of these emissions, with additional contributions from agriculture, deforestation and manufacturing. The human cause of climate change is not disputed by scientific body of national or international standing. Temperature rise is accelerated or tempered by climate feedbacks such as loss of sunlight reflecting snow and ice cover, increased water vapour and changes to land and ocean carbon sinks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Climate Change Act will ensure that, in responding to the climate emergency the core rights and freedoms recognised in the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji are respected. The mother earth is facing a climate emergency and the purpose of this Act is to create a legal framework for addressing the climate emergency in Fiji.

There is a provision to review the Act in every five years and it provides for the integration of climate change within all Government sectors through the appointment of focal points within each Ministry, who must report to the Director of Climate Change on the implementation of the Act within their Ministries.

The Act provides a comprehensive approach to Fiji's climate change response that is consistent with the existing policies and priorities. It introduces a framework for implementing regulations in relation to climate change adaptation and resilient development. It provides for the preparation of integrated risk scenarios and conducting an audit of existing public infrastructure and physical assets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Act establishes principles and procedures for the relocation of at-risk communities, resulting from the adverse impacts of climate change and allows the use of monies in the Climate Relocation of Communities Trust Fund. It also establishes a framework for implementing regulations, measures and actions that promote the conservation and restoration of Fiji's territorial seas and coastal environments, including by protecting stores of blue carbon and reducing anthropogenic stresses on marine and coastal ecosystems.

The Act aligns with the Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the face of Climate Change Related Sea Level Rise which was endorsed by the Pacific Island Forum Leaders under the leadership of our Prime Minister at the 51st Pacific Islands Forum Meeting. This Act sets Fiji's long term sustainability target, which is for Fiji's internal waters, archipelagic waters, territorial seas and exclusive economic zone to be 100 per cent sustainably managed. It also sets Fiji's 2030 marine protected area target, which is for 30 per cent of Fiji's internal waters, archipelagic waters, territorial seas and exclusive economic zone to be designated as a marine protected area by 2030.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the second issue I would like to speak on is protecting the vulnerable people in our communities, especially women and children. Recently, the FijiFirst Government passed the Registration of Sex Offenders Bill and this is one of the initiatives and necessary tools relied on by the Government to address and combat the increasing number of sexual offences cases. The fragile status of morals in Fiji's societies today is the evidence of sexual offences taking place here and this Act aims to realise the Government's efforts in achieving its goal of a safe Fiji, where the public can live life without fear of being victims of such heinous crimes and have confidence in the justice process.

The objective of this Act is to establish a register containing information on sex offenders to reduce the risk posed by sex offenders and the rate of sexual offences in Fiji, thus create a safe Fiji.

Despite intensive advocacy and lobbying by women's human rights organisations in Fiji, violence against women and children in Fiji and the Pacific continues to be a problem.

Throughout the Pacific, there is still great deal of stigma attached to the reporting of sexual assault, child abuse, domestic violence and other crimes of violence against women. A general problem that affects services and programmes to address violence against women is the social, cultural and religious acceptance of and justifications for violence against women.

There continues to be a great need to raise gender awareness at all levels of society in order to address the issue of violence against women in Fiji and throughout the Pacific Region. Currently, there are a number of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that have instituted measures to address violence against women and children, including counselling, community education, training, workshops, drama, advocacy and lobbying for law reform and policy changes. Despite these initiatives, there is a need to incorporate service-oriented programmes, analysis of the issue of violence against women and action at community, religious, social and policy level to address the issue of violence against women in the Region.

The Act seeks to establish the Register of Sex Offenders to enable specified agencies to monitor sex offenders in the community and to reduce the risk posed by sex offenders and the rate of sexual offences in Fiji. The Act requires sex offenders to report relevant personal information about themselves for inclusion in the register. Sex offenders are also required to make periodic reports to keep their personal information in the register up-to-date.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Fiji Islands has considerably mentioned the Government's payout to its people who were affected by COVID-19. This payout has substantially eased the burden of no income families during this pandemic. The citizens of Fiji are pleased and have praised the FijiFirst Government for looking after its citizens during difficult times as this. His Excellency supporting the democracy based on equal citizenry under the Constitution, has brought further confidence and assurance to the people of Fiji.

The FijiFirst Government has put Fiji first than everything else. The Government has assured that the principle of democracy is upheld and provides its people with energetic democratic political culture. The present Government listens, answers and delivers to that which is demanded by the people. The Government has made every effort to decentralise the economic power and economically empowered individuals and communities through Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). The Government has permitted every citizen equal ability to seek and receive justice. It supports Legal Aid Commission to provide free legal aid services to members of the public by giving advice, providing legal representation in court and other related services. The Government in the true spirit of democracy has been providing subsidised electricity, water, medicine and free education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this list is long and exhausting. With those words, I wholeheartedly appreciate and support His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, for his most gracious Address on the occasion of the Opening of the new Parliament session. I also would like to take this opportunity to wish you all a merry Christmas and prosperous new year. May God bless our beloved nation.

HON. RATU T. NAVURELEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my response to His Excellency the President's most gracious Address at the Opening of the new session of Parliament for 2021-2022, delivered on Monday, 22nd November, 2021. While Fiji is on celebration mode from the outcome of the Sevens Tournament in Dubai, we can only thank God for blessing us with such happier and joyful times, but we are saddened to see one of our regional counterparts in a state of chaos. Mr.

Speaker, Sir, I pray that the people of Solomon Islands will arrive at a peaceful and workable solution for all parties so that they can put an end to the current unrest and continue with their daily lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to convey my heartfelt congratulations on behalf of the *vanua o Namuka* and the *vanua o Caumatalevu* on the appointment our new head of State, *Na Turaga Bale na Tui Macuata, Taukei Bolatagane*. The people of Macuata are, indeed, proud and delighted of this achievement through his appointment.

Last week on Friday, 26th November, 2021, as alluded to by fellow colleagues, chiefs and villagers from the 12 Districts of Macuata gathered at Subrail Park, Labasa, and performed the traditional ceremony of *vakasenuqanuqa* to respectfully symbolise the acknowledgement of the appointment of the *Turaga Bale na Tui Macuata*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, although we have differences in the province of Macuata in terms of our faith, beliefs and political affiliations, the unity of the *vanua* remains stable. I thank the honourable Prime Minister for the appointment of His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, *Taukei Bolatagane*. Sir, this is, indeed, a great achievement and has united the *vanua o Caumatalevu* and strengthened the traditional relationship amongst its people.

On the same note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to thank the outgoing President, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote, for his dedication and commitment during his term of office, and I offer my sincere best wishes to him and his family in their future endeavours.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to acknowledge and thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious speech in highlighting the common need for all Fijians to live in unity with one another, despite the different party principles each represent and the different priorities each uphold. Above else, national interest should always be paramount.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) such as Fiji, are highly vulnerable to climate change and sea level rise, owing partly to their small land masses surrounded by ocean, and their location in regions prone to natural disasters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji amongst other island nations in the region have been represented in the international front in the fight against climate change. I thank the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Attorney-General, who led the Fiji delegation to COP26, to gauge progress, urge implementation in most needed areas and make new commitments to reduce greenhouse gases responsible for global warming and climate change. I believe, Sir, they also advocated for one of five priorities identified by the Pacific, which is climate finance amongst the others.

I wish to put on record my disappointment on the appointment of the honourable Attorney-General and Minister responsible for climate change as Champion of Ocean-Climate Nexus and Climate Finance. Given our knowledge of the USP saga, his nomination is an insult to the Region, undermining the concept of regionalism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I represent mostly our people in the rural areas and the maritime zone. It is sad to say that very little has been done to support the development of our rural and maritime communities. The figures in the last census speaks volume of the negligence and the lack of priority given to our rural and maritime communities - a major cause of urban drift.

In 1976, 62.8 per cent of our population were residing in our rural areas. In 1996, it has reduced to 53.6 per cent and in the latest census carried out in 2017, it has further reduced to 44 per cent. Today, 56 per cent of our population reside in our urban and peri-urban areas. Basically, this means that more

and more people will be moving to our main urban centres and its impact, if not addressed very quickly, will lead to much bigger challenges. The increase in urban migration will put a lot of pressure on our infrastructure and service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the later 2019 Household Income Expenditure Survey (HIES) Report which was carried out prior to the COVID-19 pandemic clearly reflected the true status of poverty in the country which is on an increasing trend. People living in rural communities make up 62 per cent of the total number of people living in poverty, while 38 per cent is made up of those residing in the urban centres.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 75 per cent of the poor population are the *iTaukei* community, indo-Fijians make up 23 per cent and others a mere 2 per cent of the total poor population. So, instead of addressing the issue constructively through targeted policies to address poverty, the Government took the easy way out and shooting the messenger by terminating the Government Statistician for revealing the reality of the matter.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have come a long way in our efforts to contain COVID-19. Fiji's 90 per cent vaccination rate for our eligible adult population will serve as a further layer of protection for locals and visitors who come to our shores. As much as we want to resume Fiji's hub of tourism, finance, communications, business and transportation for our Blue Pacific, we must be mindful of the possibility of a third wave of the COVID-19 and must continue, if need be, to strengthen measures in place for all incoming visitors to our shores.

Australia has already confirmed that two people who arrived from South Africa over the weekend on Sunday, 28th November, 2021 had tested positive for the Omicron Coronavirus variant. It will only be a matter of time before this virus is transmitted or becomes contagious. Recovering from the aftermath of the second wave of the pandemic has also brought about a new normal, a new way of doing things and we must embrace this new path to help put Fiji back on the map as an ideal tourist destination, a potential investment hub for the Region and the designated port to accommodate offshore fishing vessels that wish to utilise the available services for the processing of their catch.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I join my colleagues who have spoken before me in reiterating their sentiments on the termination of two qualified Government Officials - the Chief Executive Officer of the Bureau of Statistics and the Solicitor-General. Their removal from office was simply because they did what they thought was right as civil servants in upholding principles of good work ethics. The resignation of the Chair of the Fiji Electoral Commission, Sir, because he does not have a legal practicing certificate, although he has been practicing law on a conditional practising certificate over the past two years, questions the integrity and transparency of appointment in those constitutional Offices. Are they just recruiting their cronies and choosing people who suit their own agenda? How effective is the Open Merit Based Recruitment Selection (OMRS) Guidelines in the appointments in those Offices? Mr. Speaker, Sir, I ask the Government to be fair and just in the appointments made for those Constitutional Offices and for civil servants alike, so no one gets special treatment.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight in this august House a few issues of concern from the people in the Northern Division. The *Tikina* of Namuka has taken the initiative to form a rice scheme. We have invited an Officer from the Ministry of Agriculture, Labasa Office, to survey the land in seven villages. He advised farmers that machinery are needed to prepare the rice field.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are about 60 acres of land suitable for rice farming. This will produce about 480 tonnes of rice. With the current price per tonne, farmers in Namuka will earn \$384,000 in three months. I humbly request the honourable Minister for his assistance on this. The *Tikina* representatives have submitted a letter requesting cost of necessary machinery to prepare the rice field upon the Field Officer's advice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on licenced carrier, the licensed carrier was issued with a three-tonne vehicles to transport students to and from schools in various places in the rural areas. The vehicle owners have raised this issue since the school commenced for Year 12 and Year 13. The carrier used to carry more than 20 students everyday from their home to school and back home. Now, they are carrying only five to six students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the carrier owners have discussed this issue with the school Principal and they have submitted a request to the Ministry to subsidise cost of travel to a reasonable amount. I kindly request the honourable Minister to follow up this issue and assist the vehicle owners, please.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the lifting of the ban on sea cucumbers, last month, the *qoliqoli* owners have submitted their consent in writing for the harvest of sea cucumbers as requested by the Ministry of Fisheries. The *Tikina* of Namuka is ready now with their resource management team to harvest when the ban is lifted. Sir, I request the honourable Minister for Fisheries to give us a proposed date of the harvest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the road in the Northern Division - the Namuavoivoi to Wainunu Bua Road, especially the bridge at Nabilodra Creek/River, South of Namuavoivoi Village, has been damaged during *TC Yasa*. This is a shorter route by bus from Labasa to Namuavoivoi, which takes about more than two hours. Since the bridge is damaged, they have to travel a longer way which takes about seven hours from Labasa to Wainunu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another road from Nasasa to Nadogo, which I have discussed with the honourable Minister on the issue relating to a landowner not allowing the road to cross his land and because of that, a delegation from the Village of Valovoni and Nadogo in Saqani went to Naiyarabale and traditionally asked for the road from Naiyarabale to Nadogo. Now, logging is in progress in the Naiyarabale forest with the proposed road in construction that will allow access to Nadogo Village in Saqani. I request the honourable Minister to inspect the two sites - Nasasa and Naiyarabale, to determine which one is more feasible and is accessible at all times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would prefer the proposed road from Naiyarabale to Nadogo due to the fact that the road will cross only two small creeks and the road will be accessible at all times rather than the road at Nasasa, which will cross the river and will require a crossing or a bridge and is accessible only in good weather. Moreover, Sir, I humbly request the construction of a new road from Lagalaga to Sogobiau, the village of the *Turaga na Tui Nadogo*.

About connectivity, there is a need for mobile phone connectivity in the remote and interior places in the Northern Division, as is important as someone living in the urban area or living in the Western Division or Central Division. Mr. Speaker, Sir, places, such as Sevaci, Naiyarabale, Vaturova, Nadogo, Valovoni, Vagani, Saqani in Cakaudrove, Dogotuki, Udu Point and Cikobia Island in Macuata are really in need of this development.

I hope that the honourable Ministers mentioned can take note and address the issues raised from the unfortunate people in the Northern Division in reiterating Government's commitment to see that Vanua Levu undergoes rapid expansion within a very short period of time, as outlined in the Look North Policy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we look forward to the festivity of Christmas, I would like to wish you and all honourable Members in this august House a very Merry Christmas and a blessed New Year.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers and all those watching this session from the comfort of their homes; *bula, ram ram, salam* and good afternoon to you all.

I would like to join my fellow colleagues to congratulate His Excellency on his gracious Address in assuming his new role as the Head of State. I also thank the outgoing President for his service towards the nation. I also take this opportunity and time to pass my deepest condolence to my classmate and my fellow colleague, honourable Bulitavu, for the loss of his beloved father.

I thank the Almighty for giving me this opportunity to respond as the youngest Member of this Parliament, to the youngest President of Fiji. I second the fact that His Excellency also has the same vision for the nation that we, as young Fijians, have and one for Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji celebrated its 50 years of independence last year. It is time we see in retrospective what Fiji has achieved in this 50 years of independence. On 10th October, 1970 when our beloved nation was set free from Great Britain, I was not even born. Today if I sit and reflect what was done for the future generation from the leaders that were in Government back then, I would basically say nothing. What we were in pre-independence and what we are today, let me ask, what were the visions of the leaders in Government back then that we see today's generation are still struggling to live a life they desire.

The seed of success should have been planted 50 years ago for it to flourish today. Was it their vision to ensure that we have brain drain post-1987 *coup* to our neighbouring countries? Did they have the means to stop people from migrating overseas post-2000 *coup* or boldly telling the instigators of 2000 *coup* that the fearful non-democratic event will push Fiji far back instead. Some of them supported these *coup* for their own gain. A number of them are on the other side of the Chamber.

Leaders come and leaders left. Did leaders prior to 2006 say for the betterment of the nation or for the betterment of themselves? Look at some of those leaders today, they have even left Fiji for greener pastures. Can we call them real sons and daughters of our nation? Whilst some may have their own views, I personally think otherwise. When hardship fell upon us, they left the nation leaving behind the people who had faith in them to stand up for them in time of crisis.

Fiji has been a nation that has gone through a lot of devastation in the past 50 years. Be it Mother Nature, such as impact of climate change, sea level rise, severe tropical cyclones, flooding or human made events such as political upheaval, manipulating people leading to discrimination, nepotism and favouritism for personal gain.

While the effect of mother nature spares no one, human made devastation favoured a few lights but country suffered at large, yet Fiji has the blessing of God that we are still standing strong and way ahead of other South Pacific island nations.

Under the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister and prudent financial management by the honourable Minister for Economy through reforms of financial system, is allowing us to flourish as a nation. Unity between diverse Fijian communities has been the main pillar for development of Fiji. The harmony that existed between the major communities was thrashed to pieces when one community was instigated against the other during and post-1987 and 2000 *coup*. Some elite citizens of the country were driving discrimination between major communities for their personal gain and to maintain political powers.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- All rubbish!

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- NFP was part of them.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The love, bond and care the Fijian communities share is unmatched in this world. It was the pillar of love, trust and equality between all communities that ensured the growth

of our country was unprecedented before 1987 and that is exactly what honourable Prime Minister ...

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Tell them, tell them!

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- He is saying something else.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- ... is trying to bring back since 2006. This was not the vision of the leaders prior to him nor was it the vision of the people who carried out the 2000 and 1987 *coup*, nor the political leaders who supported this move. The very existence of love, unity, equality and trust within the society would be in limbo in future, as some political parties have indicated that they will move into election campaign led by agendas such as division, hatred, segregation, inequality, discrimination, et cetera, to win the elections. I still do not understand how we, as leaders, can betray our voters who have trusted us into this august Parliament.

Back in 1987 when a particular Prime Minister lost an election, someone was brought about to introduce the *coup* culture. So much division was caused between communities - suffering from rape and hatred for each other was embedded through brainwashing. Within a month back in 1987, the person who introduced the *coup* culture and devastated the very existence of humanity in Fiji became the self-proclaimed Prime Minister and people rejected him through an election in 1999. The *coup* leader continued to shatter the pillars on which Fiji was flourishing before 1987 for the next 10 years, during his term as the Prime Minister.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- More lies.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Tell them!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- He is not even here.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Now that same person is trying to make a comeback to destroy what the honourable Prime Minister has been doing for the past 15 years. He claims he is sorry and regretful for his doing so I urge him to do the honourable thing, just stay out, while finally we are on the path to modernise Fiji under the leadership of honourable Prime Minister.

The nation, under the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister, we are finally bringing about true democracy. We are bringing about true democracy, equal citizenry, trust, faith and love between Fijian societies - ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- ... a Fiji that FijiFirst is building for our future generation, a nation that FijiFirst is building to serve the senior citizens who have contributed their sweat and blood towards nation-building, providing genuine assistance to physically-challenged citizens of this country; a Fiji where we are ensuring we provide needs, such as water, electricity and infrastructure and internet connectivity to each and every Fijian, regardless of their geographical location; a nation where communities are living in harmony with each other and treated equally.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- It is not easy to build a nation where all other political parties are causing divisions within the society, just for political gain.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Shame, shame!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Someone is trying to divide us through on ethnicity, someone on religion, someone on culture, someone on land, they are using anything to everything, just to ensure FijiFirst does not win the election but in the process, they are forgetting what detrimental effect it will have on the future of this country.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I would just like to give an example. The City of Las Vegas was built 100 years ago.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You cannot get only road in Suva.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Go around in Suva you will see the road.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The city was nothing else but desert. Look at Fiji, where have our past Governments taken us in 35 years?

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- And the FijiFirst Government has done it in last 15 years?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Do we want to continue to see brain drain...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Can we get there in 15 years?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- ... in our country for the next 50 years? If SODELPA or the People's Alliance form a party, do we want to see Fiji transform into a developed country which is able to stand shoulder to shoulder with other successful countries under the FijiFirst Government?

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- What is it that we want to give to our children and grandchildren?

It is amazing how we hear honourable Members in this House stand up and preach about God, love for each other, living in harmony ...

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Never said that.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- ...but the very next moment that they are out of this Parliament, they are advocating division, discrimination and hatred.

HON. MEMBERS.- Very poor.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- We should ask ourselves, what are we trying to achieve? Why can we not have a Parliament whereby we debate on policies and development of the nation, which would address pressing issues? Why do some Opposition Members concentrate in trying to fool people just to form government? What legacy are we going to leave behind for our future generation? Why do we put our personal agenda well before our nation? A typical example was when honourable Bulanauca stood here and said “no” to vaccination when his own leader says “yes” to vaccination. Mr. Speaker, Sir, then the honourable Member goes and gets vaccinated himself.

(Laughter)

He was preaching about God, he will and see his own doing. It is not about you or me, honourable Bulanauca, but it is about our people who suffer in the end. They listen to us, they believe in us, they have faith in us, so let me ask, should we play with their trust? Should we betray them like this, honourable Bulanauca?

Fiji is a very small country and a very small family with a population below one million. Does such a small family need deception from its leaders, or do we need a leader like the honourable Prime Minister to lead us into a bright future?

HON. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- We need to sleep in peace with the hope of new beginning towards achieving our goals every morning and not fear of losing everything that we have built today. We need an aspiring nation where dreams turn into reality rather than our hard work shattered by certain politicians. Should we not, as elected Members of Parliament, be responsible towards our people and build their future rather than destroying it?

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Shame!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Honourable Nawaikula went out in 2000 telling landowning units not to renew leases for sugarcane.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Where is your proof?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- What good had been done to the nation by such irresponsible behaviour.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Shame!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Who benefitted from that? Thousands of acres of land between Labasa and Lagalaga are lying idle. Who benefitted from that? No, one.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Tell them, tell them!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Farmers lost their land, their source of income, their home, their livelihood, landowners lost their lease money, their daily income, the community lost valuable people because of relocation, country lost on its own export of sugar, people who were dependent on sugarcane

industry suffered as well, economy of Vanua Levu was brought to its knees because the action taken by an irresponsible Member sitting here in this Parliament ...

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Shame!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- ... calling himself as the saviour of indigenous community in Fiji. Also, let me mention, Sir, that he is the legal counsel of a bogus company who has not paid a single cent or rather what is rightfully owed to a landowning unit in Macuata for thousands of acres of reserved forest. On one side he speaks about the rights of the *iTaukei* people and on the other hand he is representing such company that continues to cheat our landowning unit. This is the reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir. For political gain, some Members are ruining the country and they will continue to do so. Look at the number of factions in SODELPA - they are not even in government and the fight for power is so evident that they are willing to destroy the Party.

(Inaudible interjection)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Their ego and self-pride will not let these people work together. They cannot manage a Party consisting of 21 Members of Parliament, so what will happen if they form the government? Just imagine in the fight for power and supremacy, what will they do to this country? The way they are destroying the Party, they will for sure destroy the country. A lot of talks and speeches, but what will be the end result - one ponders?

Is it not true that some SODELPA Members were part of the Qarase-led Government when they brought about the blueprint, a document which was in total breach of human rights, a document that suppressed the marginalised society of this nation? Was it not part of the blueprint that certain levels of public service positions would be occupied by the elite *iTaukei* community and these people would have been selected through nepotism and favouritism rather than OMRS - a system that was used by the SVT Government that was led by Sitiveni Rabuka?

It was a long battle for the honourable Prime Minister and the FijiFirst Government to clean this culture of nepotism and favouritism in the public sector. Was it not the policy of the SVT and SDL Government to offer scholarships to students based on ethnicity and race and to sons and daughters of chiefs, and not for the fact that a particular student deserves the scholarship? I ask Fiji, do we want to give powers back in the hands of such people who will take Fiji back in the 1990s, on the pillars of nepotism, discrimination, favouritism, biasness and partiality, or do you want a government that believes in fairness, equality, trust and progress?

All Opposition Parties are making and have made it evident that they do not want to win for the betterment of the country, or rule Fiji better than what our honourable Prime Minister is doing, but rather just to remove the honourable Prime Minister and the FijiFirst Government. What these Parties are doing are basically out of their pure hunger for power. What are these Parties fighting for? To lead Fiji into a brighter future? Let us face the fact that you cannot see what the honourable Prime Minister is doing. Most of you have said it openly and you do not have an issue with the honourable Prime Minister, but you have an issue with the honourable Attorney-General. Is this not arrogance that majority of you cannot see how the honourable Attorney-General is performing and leading the nation?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Just that you have not been able to do it, so let us not allow anyone else to do it?

FijiFirst has been transforming the nation by bringing in reforms; modernising the nation; ensuring that children's future is secured through free education; people are connected to infrastructure; electricity is available on finger tips by switching on the buttons; people have safe and clean drinking water; elderly people are supported; people living with disabilities are treated equally with their rights reserved; towns and cities are modernised; people living in squatter settlements have their own piece of land with a house that they can call a home; people can move around without fear of being robbed; people are selected on public service on merit system; service delivery of public service is up to par with the private sector; world class health facility and treatment is available in Fiji through public private partnership; people have footpath to walk on the roadside rather than walking in mud; households have tanks to store water; and farmers are assisted through respective ministries. Do you not expect this kind of government, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

Nowadays, certain people want FijiFirst to be removed because people find it very difficult to cheat the system and it is very difficult to obtain personal gain. What we want Fiji to be is to be decided by us. It takes minutes to destroy what we have built over the years. Remember, giving powers in the hands of leaders who do not have the vision for the nation, will only take us back. They will get full the four years to destroy what FijiFirst has built in the past 15 years. While external factors such as effects of climate change and pandemic are slowing our progress, Opposition coming into power will just ruin this particular progress. Giving powers in the hands of Opposition will have more detrimental effect than category-5 cyclone and COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me reiterate that FijiFirst Government mandate of 'all Fijians first', this is our *mantra*. Our continuous commitment for the betterment of all Fijians and leaving no one behind. The FijiFirst Government is built on the platform as it has been from day one in government. This bold action to protect every Fijian, was demonstrated in a well thought out course of action by the honourable Prime Minister to save the Fijian economy when the second wave of the pandemic hit us in April this year. If Fiji had not taken the bold action of 'No Jab No Job' decision, we would still have been struggling in trying to prevent the spread of pandemic, which would have been more devastating for our small economy and already vulnerable society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is on this note of not letting our guards down, that I would like to firstly convey our sincere appreciation to all employers and workers for their support during the past few months when we started the enforcement of the amendments to the Health and Safety at Work (*General Workplace Conditions*) (*Amendment*) Regulations 2021, to ensure effective implementation of 'No Jab No Job' policy. We all know that the new normal has changed the dynamics of the work environment, and it is evident that this is a time where workers and employers have tried their best to engage in dialogues and consultations to mitigate several effects of crisis and discuss the way forward to sustain employment relations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you and I look forward to the upcoming 2021-2022 Parliamentary session as we continue to put Fiji first in serving all Fijians. I wish everyone a merry Christmas and a happy New Year.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note, we will adjourn for lunch. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.36 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.31 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- We will continue with the debate and I now call upon the Honourable Simone Rasova. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- *Ni sa bula vinaka*, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would like to contribute to the motion by the honourable Prime Minister, that this Parliament thanks His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address.

The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of Opposition and honourable Members; His Excellency's most gracious Address has a signature tune for the session of Parliament, and I quote:

“As we open the session of Parliament each of you must answer the questions: are you a partisan or are you a statesman or a stateswoman? Are you here to better the lives of our people or are you here because you see politics as a means to a pay check or a way to gain power or status? Words cannot tell the answer to those challenges only by your actions can show.

Honourable Members, political life is a nascent democracy like ours which should not be seen as a career, it must be a calling; one suited only to those who aim to serve the nation with dignity, decorum, poise and a consistent national focus. The people look to you for that and they depend on your foresight to understand what we can achieve together. Do not fail them.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank His Excellency the President, *Turaga na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, *Turaga na i Taukei Bolatagane*, for his most gracious Address to open the last and final Parliament session for 2021-2022 last Monday, 22nd November, 2021. A true loyalty and happiness revealed by his people of Caumatalevu in Fiji and the world over in his inaugural ascent to the highest throne of the land and we wish him independence, inspiration, entertainment and success in his first term of three years.

Thereafter, like the rest of the Honourable Members of our collective acknowledgement of his immediate predecessor, the former President Major-General Jioji Konousi Konrote, just like you, Your Excellency the President, we are all honoured to have served faithfully in his loyal Opposition Chambers, even though we recognise not to agree in some key areas of his perceived high standard of leadership as our President because of Section 82 of the 2013 Constitution which takes away the independence Fiji and the world seeks from him.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to acknowledge the indigenous *iTaukei ni Vanua o Suvavou*, who have given their inheritance for public good - our capital and the business centre of our beloved Fiji. *Vinaka vakalevu* Suvavou, you should all be rewarded accordingly.

On the “*Miracles do happen*” live programme on Tuesday every week from 11.00 a.m. to 12.00 p.m., *vinaka vakalevu Talatala Qaselevu Atunaisa Vulaono, Talatala Qase Emosi* and all those *Talatala* who gave physical and spiritual hope to our humble citizens listening in Fiji and overseas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President has come a long way. He has unprecedentedly paved the future as the youngest President of Fiji. I take serious acknowledgement of his most gracious speech inclusive of great national economic intelligence in the “pursuit of peace among people, public participation with values and principles, vital national business of our democracy, seeing the difference between the genuine democracy we share today and past systems that fell short of delivering true equality for our people, the preservation and strengthening of our democratic society, to be his greatest responsibilities as our President.

Mr. Speaker Sir, His Excellency the President further challenges Fiji that he will protect the flame of our young democracy from any and all who seek to extinguish it for personal or political purposes and this side of your loyal Opposition know exactly who he is referring to. He supports a leadership to the highest possible functioning of the state and the work of executives to release the objectives of our Constitution in institutions and the ethos of equality and a strong nation state, must endure and must thrive.

Mr. Speaker Sir, His Excellency the President has watched proceedings closely for years offering some perspective from the outside looking in, knowing that we all represent different parties and may have different priorities but regardless, we must all strive to serve the national interest; the best interests of all Fijians — all women, men, and children, and those unborn.

Your Excellency, that is the bipartisanship your loyal Opposition has always reminded the Fiji First Government of - to involve us in since 2014 until to date, its evidence of stubbornness reflects the sluggish economy even before *TC Winston*, even before *TC Harold*, even before *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*, and definitely before *Ratu* COVID-19 pandemic of which the FijiFirst Government is attributing as the cause of our unfortunate, already suffering, economy. Yes, of course, Fiji is home to a people who want stability and prosperity and who are wiser and more educated than ever before with a modernising economy of recovery where old style of politicking for the past 14 years has no place in this new Fiji where SODELPA is destined to govern next year - 2022.

The honourable Maharaj, Chairman of the Standing Committee on Justice Law and Human Rights, I trust you are healthy - the person you are politically attacking for reasons of 1987 is no longer here and how much more will you do in future. FijiFirst voter base in the Western and Northern sugarcane belt is up for grabs and cannot be bought for 30 pieces of silver. Mr. Speaker Sir, Fiji should not suffer the politics of pettiness and personalisation or exist in some perpetual state of political antagonism but must strive to move beyond a perspective and in meeting this century's challenges and opportunities.

Mr. Speaker Sir, His Excellency the President addresses the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis reaching far beyond the arena of health. The pandemic has dramatically impacted our food systems and threatens our food security. Here in Fiji the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced a growth in subsistence farming and backyard gardening. In his role as Fiji's President and Head of State, he wears several hats, one is Champion and Lead Advocate in backyard gardening, an initiative of Fiji's Ministry of Agriculture. As an avid farmer, he will continue his predecessor's passion about the State House backyard farm.

Before the global effects of COVID-19, the former President travelled to communities and advocated for subsistence farming to address the issue of food security. With COVID-19, this issue affects food security in each country differently, therefore, solutions need to be specific and relevant instead of a blanket-approach solution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 is an economic shock that has shocked the bottom line of businesses, crippled entire industries and left hardworking people without reliable streams of income, forcing families to make trade-offs in both the quantity and quality of their food. For some families, this has led to insufficient calories as well as insufficient variety and quality from unhealthy dietary options, now putting food systems under strain as global food chain supplies are disrupted, the synergies between agriculture, food security, forestry, fisheries, biodiversity and human wellbeing, and prosperity are laid bare.

The current COVID-19 vaccination efforts in our beloved Fiji has been a success and that has revealed a 90 per cent and still increasing of vaccinated adults and very proud but not satisfied against a deadly disease and worst scenario is if this new Omicron variant accidentally reaches our shores uninvited when borders open.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President comes from a very religious background and with the blessings of his *Jehovah Lord Almighty*, this nation of Fiji is prayed upon from the first light sunrise from honourable Anare Jale's island of Ono-i-Lau to when the sun sets West beyond, my *tau*, honourable Jese Saukuru, the Yasawas, and all throughout nightfall prayers from south of the borders from honourable Tabuya, honourable Qereqeretabua and honourable Waqanika's islands of Kadavu - that His Excellency and his Government and his beloved citizens are protected from harm's way for Isaiah 41:10 says and I quote; "do not fear for I am with you, do not be dismayed for I am your God. *Emeni Jisu*."

Thanks to all the people of Fiji for being observant of the current health laws which has helped decreased the number of deaths since May of 2021 until today and has introduced a new normal of our traditional and burial cultures in all ethnicities, et cetera. To all those members of families in urban, rural and maritime villages, friends, co-workers and business associates that have passed away during the pandemic, our special heartfelt sympathies and condolences especially to my friend the famous weathermen and Captain Jonathan Smith of Lautoka, *a vasu* of Lagalevu, Kadavu; my Class of 1974 Lelean Memorial School - Ratu Orisi Dobui and Jona Veikoka; my Raiwaqa Jazz Basketball Player - Tu Fisher, Ratu Ilisoni Naulumatua Tuimabualau; my *Turaga Naita* Ratu Meleti Bainimarama and former CEO Tourism Fiji, Mr. Josefa Tuamoto; families and friends of mine in California, USA - Mr. Ilisoni Nicklaus Raikuna; my *Jikina* Tevita Ravuravu; cousin and former Navy from Nabouwalu, Ono, Kadavu - Mr. Peni Tuivuya; the famous Cumming Street *banao* king - Ratu Penjamini Sodrega; and in Australia - Mother Mrs. Elaine Thomson of Adelaide; Watisoni Nasalo, Sydney; Old Girl - Ms. Salanieta Tokalau Ravoka of Melbourne Australia; and without prejudice to those I may have forgotten to name, may all their good souls rest in forever loving and eternal peace.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the FijiFirst Government should learn from the unpreparedness of when the COVID-19 pandemic reached Fiji - when it struggled to compensate those whose employment was badly affected or unemployed; where payout of unemployment benefits reached hundreds of millions of dollars throughout this crisis, the most assistance ever paid, a big but Your Excellency with the help of the COVID-19 relief bank – FNPF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President sets to keep our sights focused on the greatest challenge that is before Fiji and that lies ahead of us, that of climate change. Climate Change is a global crisis, a shared trauma for children on both levels of the equator, that can only be addressed through global solutions.

For those of us that have seen a glimpse of the Fiji COP26 Team to Glasgow, Scotland, the global breakthroughs that have been discussed and achieved in world standards has to be carefully crafted for Fiji especially in agriculture where the rural and maritime farmers at least have a chunk of the financial assistance from COP28 in 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President has other hats as Champion/Lead Advocate in the Fight Against Non-Communicable Diseases something that has become a sad reality in the midst of an ocean teeming with fresh and nutritious food and on islands with rich soil and a favourable climate - Fiji and the Pacific Island States have some of the highest rates of diabetes in the world. Fiji needs immediate attention on NCD as the Ministry of Health had mixed the death figures with COVID-19 deaths.

The deep trouble is the reality of what an increase in unhealthy and decrease in nutritional diets can lead to - a deadly over-reliance on convenient and affordable processed foods. This increases the burden of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD) which already has a disproportionate and devastating effect on Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President has to be made aware that in addition to economic and social disruptions, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted teaching and learning for students through

periodic closures of schools around Fiji with two bouts of school closures - one in 2020 and the second currently ongoing since 20th April, 2021, maybe until 6th January, 2022. This means that students starting Year 3 in Fiji in 2022 will have had their education disrupted since Year 1 – 12 weeks in 2020 or almost 24 weeks until January 2022. The 36 weeks lost will equate to almost one whole year, when students should have been at school during the first two years of schooling.

Unless teaching and learning loss is recovered, the pandemic will exacerbate the existing learning inequities in education, especially the gap between high and low achieving students and other vulnerable groups, such as those without access to internet and computers. Without prejudice to you, Madam Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts, we thought that honourable Rosy Akbar was doing exceptionally well and above her pay grade, but that is FijiFirst Government without reasons, as proven by the dismissal of former Member of Parliament, Ashneel Sudhakar, Vijendra Prakash and Mereseini Vuniwaqa. Do not say anything or you might be next.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as NCD Champion, His Excellency the President should visit all hospitals Fiji wide and in advance Your Excellency, there is nothing to be ashamed about the hospital services, especially CWM Hospital, as proven by those that were treated and survived, and those that just returned home alive fortunately.

As for the maritime islands of Kadavu, Vatulele and Beqa, Matuku, Moala and Southern Lau, we were all devastated by *TC Harold* on 8th January, 2020. Evacuation rehabilitation response has not always been immediate, however it is the trend of unprofessional high standard services rendered by FijiFirst Government because of the two-man management.

A big *vosota vakalevu* to the said rural maritime islands for the last 18 months of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions since April 2020. It has slowed down the negotiations of infrastructure developments, education, health, agriculture and fisheries to you all. As a Member of Parliament of the Opposition Office in Parliament voted from Kadavu, I, along with thousands of people from Kadavu, Vanua Levu, Lomaiviti and Lau has been stranded in Suva since 21st April, 2021 until 11th of November, 2021. Most have happily returned to be with loved ones, that is seven months separation.

Similarly, those who have been stranded in the island have been quite mentally and financially traumatic for everyone, but thanks to all families that assisted anyway. *Vinaka vakalevu* for the \$360 payout that may have helped the stranded in many ways, but now how can we pay the \$200 million debt?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank His Excellency the President, *Turaga na Tui Macuata, Turaga na Taukei Bolatagane*, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, for his most gracious Address to reset Fiji Government, and I quote:

“As we open this session of Parliament, each of you must answer the questions: are you partisan or are you stateswoman or statesman? Are you here to better the lives of all people, or are you here because you see politics as a means to a pay check or a way to gain power or status? Words can't tell us the answer to those challenges — only your actions can show us.

Honourable Members, political life in a nascent democracy like ours should not be seen as a career, it must be a calling; one suited only to those who aim to serve the nation with dignity, decorum, poise and a consistent national focus. The people look to you for that, and they depend on your foresight to understand what we can achieve together. Do not fail them.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, I would like to highlight the increasing COVID-19 cases in Kadavu and other maritime islands - Kadavu in the East; Macuata, Vanua Levu in the North; Beqa, Malolo and Naviti to the West of the country. We have reported a total of 703 COVID-19 cases, 465 of

them from Kadavu alone. There have been 93 new recoveries to report since the last update, Dr. Fong said, which means that there are now 13,407 active cases, 2,238 in the Central Division, 10,871 in the West, five in the Northern Division, Macuata and 295 active cases in the East, all on Kadavu.

As of 18th September, 2021, 31 new cases of COVID-19 was recorded on the island of Kadavu. It makes the total number of cases on the Eastern islands as 521. More than 800 people in the remote islands were affected with COVID-19, 12 patients admitted at the Vunisea Hospital, of which seven recorded positive and are in a stable condition. The impact of climate changes are no longer just in the rung, a political issue but also a social problem with immense repercussions for wellbeing of women, girls and marginalised groups who already face injustices, due to the gender power dynamics and a lack of control over the use of resources.

The women in rural, remote communities of Fiji are among the most vulnerable groups of people battling climate changes in the world. Women in Namuimada Village in Rakiraki specialised in harvesting *nama* – an edible seaweed also known as sea grapes, which is farmed in the shallow waters near the reef. The harvesting of *nama* is done mainly by women who go out in fishing boats to the reef during low tide and spend about four hours harvesting seaweed. Women are expert fishers in the coastal zones and the dominant sellers of seaweed, crustaceans and molluscs with many fishing for household needs and selling surplus contributing to the income and livelihoods of their families. With rising ocean temperatures, the production of these onshore and coastal marine resources will continue to decline, eventually causing loss of income and increased insecurity for fisherwomen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are 10 households from River Road Settlement in Narere which soon will relocate to Millennium Lease in Nausori. Families who are breadwinners of about \$20 a day are being forced to find thousands of dollars to relocate after the Ministry for Housing issued eviction notices two months ago. A man who lives in River Road, Narere Squatter Settlement, claims families were struggling to find resources to relocate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, I would also like to thank the *Vanua Vakaturaga o Kadavu*, as this will be my last speech before Christmas from my first in 2018, and farewell in *iTaukei*:

1. *Vanua Vakaturaga o Nacolase, na Vunisalevu na Turaga na Tui Tavuki;*
2. *Koro-i-Soso vua na Turaga na Tui Naceva;*
3. *Nabala vua na Turaga na Tui Nakasa;*
4. *Vale Sasa vua na Turaga na Tui Nabukelevu;*
5. *Naivibati vua na Turaga na Tui Yale;*
6. *Vale Daidaiga vua na Turaga na Tui Yawe;*
7. *Manusa vua na Turaga na Tui Ravitaki;*
8. *Nawaimalua vua na Turaga na Tui Drue;*
9. *Ki na noqu vanua i Koro-i-Vabea, vua na Marama na Tui Vabea na Tui Ono;* and
10. also to my household in *Naturu vua na Turaga na Rokovaka.*

A merry Christmas to His Excellency the President, to you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister and his Government, honourable Leader of Opposition and his honourable Members, all staff of the Legislature and our families throughout Fiji and overseas - merry Christmas and a happy New Year. Mr. Speaker, I humbly support the motion before the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, just remember not to take advantage of the Christmas period and start speaking in the vernacular. You keep to the language that is used in this august Parliament.

Honourable Members, I give the floor to the Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports.

HON. A.T. NAGATA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, families and friends, *vina na cola* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to support the motion by the honourable Prime Minister in thanking His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, for his most gracious Address during the opening of the 2021-2022 Session of Parliament on Monday, 22nd November, 2021.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate His Excellency, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, on his appointment as the new President of the Republic of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, being the youngest President of Fiji and may not have the same number of years in public life as most of the honourable Members do, I wish to remind His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Fiji, and everyone tuning into today of that well-known *Bible* story found in 1 Samuel 16: 6-7, and I quote:

“When they arrived, Samuel saw Jesse’s son Eliab and said to himself, “This man standing here in the Lord’s presence is surely the one he has chosen. But the Lord said to him. “Pay no attention to how tall and handsome he is. I have rejected him, because I do not judge as people judge. They look at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I may go any further, allow me to also congratulate our Fijian’s Seven Rugby Team for finishing on fourth place in the first leg of the HSBC’s World Rugby Sevens Series in Dubai over the weekend, not forgetting our Fijiana for reaching the finals for the first time in history.

HON. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.T. NAGATA.- It might not be the result we have wanted, but we should continue to thank them for their sacrifices and efforts and wishing them the very best in their preparation to the second leg of the HSBC’s World Rugby Sevens Series in Dubai next week.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in His Excellency, the President’s Address, in the opening of the 2021-2022 Session of Parliament, His Excellency covered a wide range of areas in his speech. His Excellency, spoke on matters of great importance to our economy which includes the Fijian Constitution, democracy, politics, vaccinations, climate change and so forth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please allow me to introduce to you an author by the name of Ellen Gould Harmon who was born on 26th November, 1827 and died on 16th July, 1915. She was married to Mr. James White and was instrumental with a group of early Adventist who formed what became known as the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Mrs. Ellen G White was amongst the 100 most significant Americans of all time, her writings still influence people today. During her lifetime, she wrote more than 5,000 periodical articles and 40 books.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, her writings covered a broad range of subjects including religion, social relationships, prophecy, publishing, nutrition, creationism, agriculture, theology, evangelism, Christian lifestyle, education and health. She advocated vegetarianism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in one of her writings, she clearly defined the type of leadership and government that is acceptable to God. Surprisingly the values that she spoke about 126 years ago are embedded in

Chapter 1 of our 2013 Fijian Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, the true object of government is beautifully represented by the great tree and I quote:

“Whose leaves were fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it was meat for all; under which the beasts of the field dwelt, and upon whose branches the fowls of the heaven had their habitation.”

Now, if God had called a man or any set of men to rule in any sense that representation of the tree shows the only kind of ruling acceptable to him. A government that protects, restores, relieves, but never savours of oppression. The poor, especially are to be kindly treated. Aid is to be given to the oppressed and not one soul that bears the image of God is to be placed at the footstool of a human being. The greatest possible kindness and freedom are to be granted, to purchase of the blood of Christ.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the FijiFirst Government, these values are being upheld and it is doing exactly what is wanted of a good government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we commenced the beginning of the final leg of this parliamentary term, I wish to reflect on the journey that we have made thus far. I look back and I can only compare this journey to that which is found in the Book of Exodus where God told Moses to lead the Jews out of bondage and slavery from Egypt. To put it into the Fijian context, our people have been enslaved to the wrong type of leadership. Former leaders have overlooked many things that should have helped in nation building.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.T. NAGATA.- These leaders were more focused on racial division, provincialism, religious chauvinism or class division. With the FijiFirst Government leadership, things are changing for the betterment of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is sad to note that previous Governments did not care much for our fellow Fijians. We must remember that in any government, we should not only serve our own *matavuvale*, *mataqali*, *yavusa*, *koro*, *tikina* or *yasana*, as the Fijian Government is for all Fijians. Therefore, you must serve the interests of all Fijian people, irrespective of their gender, ethnicity, religious background, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through this past leadership, Fijians continue to face a lot of challenges and this include, no access to clean and safe water and proper sanitation; no proper access to electricity in rural areas; Fijian households not connected to proper sewerage treatment system; no access to an adequate supply of healthy and nutritious food locally; no proper road infrastructure; lack of preservation of environment; and inaccessible to quality education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the FijiFirst Government, the livelihood of every Fijian had been improved. A large number of Fiji's population can now have access to a treated and reticulated water supply or other standalone systems. In the urban centres, 98 per cent of the population have access and the coverage in the rural areas has been expanded.

The Government continues to carry out works and having 40 per cent of the population connected to the central sewerage system. More than 80 per cent of Fijians now have proper access to electricity and hopefully to achieve the 100 per cent electrification with the accelerating grid extensions programmes and standalone systems in Viti Levu, Vanua Levu, Ovalau and Taveuni. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government will continue to maintain a policy of fully funding rural electrification projects. It will also

continue to develop domestic agriculture and fisheries to support access to an adequate supply of healthy and nutritious food locally.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the nation's economy is not completely out of the woods yet, with regards to the COVID-19 pandemic. I would also like to pay tribute to those who have lost their loved ones to this deadly virus, and I encourage those who are still not vaccinated, to visit any vaccination centre near them and get their first or second dose. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank our doctors, nurses and health workers for their dedication and efforts in keeping us all safe during this crisis. Mr. Speaker, Sir, a new variant has been detected in South Africa recently, I urge every Fijian to continue to adhere to health advices, practice the new-start health concept and follow the safe health practices and habits all the time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Youth and Sports continue to address the Government's 'No Jab No Job' policy to our staff and youths. I am proud to say in this august Parliament that 100 per cent of our ministerial staff have been fully vaccinated and it is very encouraging to see our youths continue to support the "No Jab No Sport" policy by getting fully vaccinated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in support of the Government's policy on mandatory vaccination, all youth participants in any ministerial organised training and workshop, must be fully vaccinated. Anyone who wishes to be part of any sporting activity in the future, must be fully vaccinated. Any sporting bodies found breaching the return-to-play protocols, will not be funded. If anyone is not double vaccinated, he or she will not be able to play sports. The bottom line is that, all sporting officials, players and spectators over 18 years of age in Fiji, must be fully vaccinated if they want to participate in any future games or competitions, nationally, internationally or attend events in stadiums, national and indoor arenas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government continues to take the leading role in fighting against climate change and protecting our environment and rich biodiversity. I thank the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Attorney-General and Minister responsible for climate change and the Fijian delegation from the 26th COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland, for being the voice of Fiji and the Pacific. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this fight is not only the honourable Prime Minister's fight, it is everyone's fight, including all honourable Members of this august Parliament.

While the honourable Prime Minister continues to fight on our behalf at the world stage, our Ministry of Youth and Sports continues to support the Government's initiative in the setting up of mangrove nurseries for our registered youth clubs and planting of mangroves in our coastal areas. We have also introduced management of waste as a programme for our youths in their respective communities. Further, we have introduced the disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation programmes for youths.

Mr. Speaker, youth clubs continue to participate in the major project to plant 4 million trees that would reduce erosion and siltation at the same time offset some of our carbon output. The pandemic has never halted our work and I take this opportunity to thank the following clubs from the Western and Northern Division in their work to address the climate change. These youth clubs include:

1. Delaikamali Youth Club;
2. Muanaira Youth Club;
3. Vatulovona Youth Club;
4. Vesi Youth Club;
5. Ligaulevu Youth Club;
6. Wainiyabia Youth Club;
7. Tokatoka Nabaramai and Waitabua Youth Clubs;
8. Matainoco Youth Club; and

9. Burebasaga Youth Club.

These youth clubs engage in planting mangroves in their respective villages.

Mr. Speaker, just like the challenges faced by Moses and Aaron in the leadership when leading the Exodus of Israelites from Egypt, our FijiFirst government leaders have also faced the same situation in our journey. Despite being struck by 13 cyclones our leaders continue to remain calm in this journey and we were able to pull through together as a nation.

Mr. Speaker, when we are faced with a long drought our leaders continue to steer the ship forward in assisting farmers and those affected by the disaster. Whenever there is flooding our leaders will never turn a blind eye on any affected Fijian.

When we were hit by the pandemic and most families were put in isolation, the government supplied food rations to every family. When an employment was affected by the pandemic, the government provided cash assistance to unemployed Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, our Government has never forgotten us. He will continue to be with us till we reach our final destiny, a place where there will be no disasters, no more crisis and everything will be made new.

Our resilience, strength and trust in God will keep us together from breaking apart. This was and will only be possible through the joint effort of good leadership, loyal and dedicated Fijians. It is our ultimate duty as Members of this august House to continue spreading positivity and speak in the national interest and not for our individual or party interest and let us work together and help our fellow Fijians reach our final destiny.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, before I begin, I join other honourable Members of this august House in congratulating His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, on his election as Fiji's sixth and youngest President.

His Excellency's father, Ratu Soso Katonivere was elected a Member of Parliament for the National Federation Party (NFP) in the 1982 General Elections, and Ratu Soso served a full term as an NFP Member of Parliament until 1987. I wish His Excellency and his family a blissful and blessed future.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday, we heard the honourable Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs continue from her End of Week Statement of 24th September, 2021 in Parliament, to attack probably the two most independent media organisations, namely; the *Fiji Times* and Communications Fiji Limited and *Fiji Village* of giving too much coverage to the Opposition and, therefore, spreading lies.

She singled out the NFP's three MPs many times in her tirade. At one stage, Mr. Speaker, I thought she was behaving like a teacher making a roll call. This is on the very same day her leader, the honourable Prime Minister, encouraged Members of Parliament to avoid personal attacks and talk about issues.

We all know who is writing the honourable Assistant Minister's rantings against the media, so we have to ask the question, Mr. Speaker, does the left hand of the Government know what the right hand is doing?

I mean on one hand, the honourable Prime Minister says this and then you have these personal attacks. But we ask the honourable Assistant Minister, just try to respect what is really left of free speech and media freedom in Fiji.

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, your Media Decree is already bad enough.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have already responded to honourable Bulanauca's comments yesterday against Mr. Jai Ram Reddy, NFP's former Leader. His reputation speaks for itself as the longest serving Leader of the Opposition, a President of the Fiji Court of Appeal and a Judge, who gained international recognition by serving on the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.

But I will tell honourable Bulanauca here too, please, do not fan the flames of ill-will and hostility with your warped logic to justify your comments against Indo-Fijians 20 years ago. And do not attack a leader who stood head and shoulders above others of his generation; a leader who became the first Indo-Fijian in history to address the Bose Levu Vakaturaga (Great Council of Chiefs), a leader whose vision was gladly shared by the then Prime Minister, Sitiveni Rabuka, and that was why both are rightfully credited for achieving the 1997 Constitution that is not only entrenched but guaranteed the primacy of native land rights of our indigenous people. So, please, make no mistake about that indisputable fact.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every year, I begin my response to the President's Address in the same way. I note that we should respond to it as a "gracious speech". But I also point out the Government's lack of respect shown to our country's Head of State in the content of the same speech.

This year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a new Head of State, but we have the same tired, clueless approach to governance and tirade from the other side. His Excellency's Address appears always to have been written as somewhat a last-minute afterthought. Someone remarked to me that there was something on the social media that said, 'It looked like someone wrote it on the trip back from Glasgow.' This does great injustice to the graciousness of His Excellency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the President's Address is supposed to set out the Government's work programme for the year. It is supposed to tell the Honourable Members in this House, the elected representatives of the people of this country, what Government will do over the next 12 months. His Address should be a moment for us to monitor our progress as a nation. We should be able to review our successes and our failures. If the Government had a plan, if we had targets to meet, we would hear what targets we have met and where we are off-track.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you know it, we know it and the people of Fiji know that there is no plan, strategy or vision. So instead of us hearing in an organised way what the Government will be doing in the next 12 months, the speech we heard was full of praise of the very people who actually wrote the speech. So His Excellency praised the Government for introducing the so-called "genuine democracy" but one day later, we read the truth that the international community believes us to be a "weak democracy".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a test of our democracy coming in the next Election, and the biggest test for any democracy is a change of government. It is not just a matter of how we will vote. We have heard the honourable Prime Minister speak of decency and sticking to facts.

But there are more and more people out there, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this country asking this question of the Government; if you people lose the next Election, will you leave office? And if you do, will you do it with grace and in a democratic way? Will you do it decently?

Those are the questions people are asking. And the reason why they are asking those questions, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because time and time again, this Government behaves as if it owns Fiji, owns the

people. This Government does not believe it is here to serve the people, it believes that the people are here to serve the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Government, for example, loses the court case to the honourable Nawaikula, what does it do? Does it humbly accept that it was wrong? Does it look inwards and ask if perhaps, it was in error? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir, never! It moves under urgency to change the law so that it can say it was right. Never mind that tens of thousands of people are now at risk of not voting, never mind that they must all now go to the trouble of changing their names and records so that they have that basic democratic right, the right to vote.

It is because, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to this Government, those people are not important, it is what they want is more important. In fact, it is only the ego of the two-man government that are important and the silent 25 do not say anything.

Not just that, the Government blames the Solicitor General for being wrong, so he is suspended and then suddenly he said that even though the Constitution is very clear that a tribunal must hear the case. This Government or the previous Government before 2014 Elections wrote the Constitution and now, it will not even follow its own rules.

His Excellency praised the Government for the success of its vaccination effort, but nothing was said about the hundreds who died of COVID-19 because the Government failed to manage the spread of the Delta variant. And worst of all, the leaders were missing while it happened. The doctors were put in front to manage the Government's failures - the crisis. His Excellency talked about leadership, and this is the standard of our leaders today, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

After the most disastrous year since Independence for our health system, not a word in the speech about health. Even now, the Government cannot demonstrate leadership. There are still , including those in the rural areas, who refused to be vaccinated. Let us face facts, why? Because they do not trust this Government and they do not like this Government. They do not want the Government to keep telling them what to do.

If they were inclusive, they would have asked the Opposition Leader, they would have asked me and everyone else to work together, have a united front and then advocate for vaccination. But this Government will not lead, it cannot work with those whom it disagrees with. It cannot consult and listen to people's concerns and create new solutions. It can only work by ordering people around, this is what they do.

The Government calls teachers with decades of experience 'unqualified' and cannot even process their pay. I know the honourable Minister for Education desperately tried to control the damage they have done after insulting the teachers of this country, the parents and the students.

While the Government talks about Glasgow, climate change, resilience and the blue economy, not one word about housing and agriculture in the President's Address. You can talk all you want about resilience, climate change and all those fancy words that everyone else uses everywhere; you might talk about mitigation, carbon trading, carbon offset markets and whatever other words that might appear, but you have to turn this into reality for our people. We have not seen any plan with regards to that.

I have a message for our leaders.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- What is your plan?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You fix the Health!

They want you to come and do the work, not face the cameras and the microphones in Glasgow and travel around in first class cabin. They want you to go into the field and listen to the families.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- What's your problem?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Look at what the problems are, they want to look for new opportunities for their children, and to look for how we can add value to the produce of our farmers.

What did His Excellency tell us about what Government will do this year? He read out 17 different laws the Government says it will pass. Those are laws about child care, civil aviation, water and sewerage, informal settlements, international mediation, industrial hemp, et cetera. Some of these legal developments could be important and they could have a major impact on our lives. But what is our experience from the past? Will the people be consulted about these laws? No, most likely not. Instead, the honourable Attorney-General will work on those laws in secrecy and even hide from them. Even the Ministers and Members of Parliament from the other side. Then we will get the Bills with two days to read, debate and passed.

Why is this, Mr. Speaker, Sir? Is it because the Government is afraid of others criticising their laws, or is it because the Government is just so disorganised that it cannot plan for consultation with other people, or more likely, it simply does not believe in consultation?

That is how they do this. Like everything else, these are the last-minute gimmicks that they used in the 2018 Election and with an election year coming up, we are sure to see many more of those last-minute gimmicks.

Everything about this Government's record spells disaster. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 1,300 people have died as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, 696 of those are listed as COVID-19 deaths, the rest after contracting COVID-19 but were classified as non-COVID-19 deaths because of pre-existing conditions but they were alive until contracting COVID-19. Are all those deaths because of lack of treatment because COVID-19 consumed the capacity of our hospitals? They do not talk about it.

We are grandly talking about public-private partnerships in health with Aspen.

(Honourable Dr. I. Waqainabete interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He's shouting loudly from the other side, the honourable Minister for Health but it is a complete disaster, Mr. Speaker.

The CWM Hospital, our biggest hospital, our flagship hospital, is crumbling. We cannot even clear the weeds that are growing out of its building. We built a hospital in Ba three years ago, we cannot even put patients there. What is happening?

A few days ago, I talked about the on-off state of our kidney dialysis and angiogram facilities. After I gave the statement, Mr. Speaker, then two days later, they said, it is working and then the patient called me and said it is still not working, so I do not know who is telling the truth. They cannot even manage the basics. It cannot keep drugs in supply in the hospitals.

Mr. Speaker, jobs have been lost in tourism with nothing to replace them. Just as we begin to welcome tourists back in large numbers, the Omicron variant arrives. What is our plan now?

We have done nothing in the last 13 years before the Coronavirus, to diversify our economy. The Government has not shared with us any plans to reduce our dependence on tourism.

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is your job because you brag about 15 years of unprecedented growth. You are asking us our plans? Give us your plan.

What are we paying our unemployed? Mr. Speaker, \$720 for six months or \$30 per week or \$4.28 per day and no one talks about the \$3,000 allowance that the honourable Prime Minister gets and everyone else on that junket. They will say, "Oh, it was donated by donors." The donors, Mr. Speaker, gave money to the taxpayers of this country. There is no justification.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- So, what is wrong with that?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, the sugar industry is on life support. The Government and the Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) have short-changed cane growers by over \$10 million in the last two seasons by renegeing on their \$85 guaranteed price and making unlawful deductions from farmers' payments. The Sugar Cane Growers Council, which is supposed to represent the growers, is actually now a toothless bystander.

Mr. Speaker, education everywhere, including Fiji, is a way to prosperity. If the Government was to do one thing for our future, it would be to plan for and build a world-class education system. Instead, Mr. Speaker, we have a Government that has bullied teachers, parents, school owners and managers. It tries to centralise the smallest decisions ...

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Rubbish!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... issuing directives from headquarters and everyone forgets about that after one month. This is what has happened.

Every Minister out there wants to be the leader and wants to go and open every little thing. Mr. Speaker, it is no wonder why the morale in the education sector is at rock-bottom today.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Hogwash!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Finally, Mr. Speaker, let me talk about corruption and sleaze which His Excellency the President referred to. After all, we were told after the 2006 *coup* that this is a clean-up campaign. We are going to clean up corruption.

You do not have to ask the Opposition, Mr. Speaker. We do not have to provide the evidence. All the evidence is sitting in Government. Read the *Transparency International - Corruption Perception Index Report* earlier this month where it says, 68 per cent – two out of three people, Mr. Speaker, believe corruption is a big problem in Government. One in 20 people say they have bribed someone in Government to get a favour. One in 25 people say they have bribed a police officer. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is just petty corruption. This says nothing about the corruption that goes on at higher levels in higher places.

This Government talks about accountability and transparency. It even wrote a Constitution in 2013 that created an Accountability and Transparency Commission. Eight years on, no Accountability and Transparency Commission has ever been appointed. Why? Because the Code of Conduct Bill is yet to be enacted.

Mr. Speaker, in February, it will be three years since the honourable Prime Minister told Parliament in his briefest of answers of investigations into the former Chief Executive and Chairman

of the FSC and still nothing has happened. Millions of dollars of taxpayers' funds have been poured into FSC. Why can it not answer the people's questions? Why do all these lapses in governance, deliberately or otherwise, add up to? What do these corruption add up to? What does it all mean to the ordinary struggling public, Mr Speaker, Sir?

We believe and our estimate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is through wastage, pilferage and mismanagement of funds costs our Government, our people, almost up to \$500 million per year. If you take six years from 2015 to 2020, we have wasted almost \$3 billion through pilferage and wastage...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Where did you get that figure from?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... All the evidence is sitting in Government. If you are talking about evidence, have an independent inquiry.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... money that could have been used for the increasing number of poor people in our country, money for health, education, and the list could go on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the real picture of our country today. His Excellency may talk about democracy but his Government does not practise it. You know that, Mr. Speaker. Everyone in this country knows this.

His Excellency may talk about climate change resilience. That too is all this Government does talk about, as long as it is in another country.

His Excellency may talk about leadership, but we no longer have leaders. We only have two tired men talking to each other and leaving the rest behind.

HON. MEMBER.- How do you know?

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Tell them, tell them!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would say that time is really not on the side of this Government. As 2022 unfolds, we will wait for the big talk, big promises and freebies. We can already see the fear-mongering, the same old type technique of creating fear, talking racial fear, talking about all the benefits ...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... that Government gives to the people of this country will go away suddenly.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- People are watching, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but let me tell them, all the freebies, all the fear mongering, all the Qorvis written speeches

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In 2018, after spending almost half a billion dollars in freebies, they got 50.2 votes in 2018, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They should learn a lesson. Stop using the same old techniques. It may have worked one time, second time, but it is not going to work for the third time.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is why I am saying time is not on this Government's side.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- There are some good people on the other side, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to tell them, prepare to sit on the Opposition because your time is up. As indicated by honourable Bala, all the sideshows that they will do, freebies, last minute gimmicks, laws and fear is not going to work for them.

For the people of this country, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are sideshows now. The real issue for the people and their focus is, they want a new government after the 2022 election.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Same, same – broken record.

HON. J. USAMATE.- You have been saying that since 2014.

HON. O. NAIQAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; good afternoon to you all.

I humbly thank His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, for his stimulating and encouraging Address, invoking in each one of us the urgency to act with wisdom and acknowledging the tribulations ahead of us.

His Excellency the President, in his Address, has outlined the struggles and progress Fiji has made, emphasising that we cannot afford to be complacent. In this decade of action, we must all come together and embark on a journey, continuously striving to do what is best for Fiji and the people of Fiji.

His Excellency the President has aptly focused his Address in the areas of concern and provided strategic guidance on the path we must take, and I noticed the bulk of his Address focused on climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also echo the sentiments of His Excellency the President on our COVID-19 strategies and our efforts in minimising its impact, while preparing in advance for the worst. It has been a challenging year for Fiji and, indeed, the world, as we continue to battle the health, social and economic impacts of COVID-19.

We all must appreciate and accept the fact that since the beginning of 2020, we have been operating in an environment of the new normal. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this time to salute our healthcare professionals and thank them for their sacrifice for being at the forefront of this virus everyday for more than 19 months now. You are our real life heroes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the world is in the grips of a climate emergency and we are living in an era of climate change. Scientists say we have entered an era of human-caused mass extinction of our biodiversity.

As stated earlier, His Excellency the President's Address mainly focused on climate change. Forest must be worth more alive and thriving than when they are indiscriminately burnt or cut down for short-term economic gain. Healthy forests act as a carbon sink, capturing more than 20 per cent of the emission required to hit our temperature goals. Rehabilitating our forests can ensure that agricultural systems remain full of soil and nutrients required to provide food security.

In his Address last week, His Excellency the President described how his home in Naduri Village in Macuata sits 20 metres from the shore. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have seen similar scenarios and far worse during my term as Minister for Forestry when I travelled to more than 300 villages across Fiji, promoting the forestry agenda, and how best to mitigate climate change. I know for a fact that we cannot sit idly and do nothing as if we are powerless to act. We can act, and we must act now.

I must commend Fiji's tree-planting initiative, the 30 million trees in 15 years which is spearheaded by the Ministry of Forestry and its Minister, the honourable Prime Minister. This initiative which started out as 4 million trees in four years has now increased to 2 million trees per year for the next 15 years after the announcement by the honourable Prime Minister at the World Wildlife Fund Leaders for Nature and People Event in New York in September 2019. Fiji has the opportunity to plant around 30 million trees in the next 10 to 15 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the national tree planting initiative is an investment in our country, especially in our environment as a climate change adaptation and mitigation strategy. It is an investment in biodiversity and our economy. Importantly, it is an investment in our youth and children - the future of our beloved nation.

We all know that without a habitable planet for our children to inherit, all our work to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals will be futile. But by working together and finding common ground for the future of our nation and the world, we will win this greatest battle of our lives over climate change and leave a legacy we can all be proud of.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, trees that will be planted today will definitely reduce soil erosion and siltation and they will certainly offset some of our carbon output and help in our efforts to mitigate climate change. Almost 30 per cent of our total land mass is degraded landscape. These landscapes are without trees due to deforestation for various reasons over a period of time. Some of these landscapes are predominantly covered with grass and are more prone to fires. This is common in the drier part of the islands. Replanting of trees in these areas will provide significant benefits both, environmentally and economically.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a nation, we all have a collective responsibility to explore avenues to address climate change because climate change will affect us all. It has no boundaries. It has no borders. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is inspiring to see that Fijians are taking ownership of the national tree planting initiative. And I would like to appeal to and encourage all Fijians to contribute to our national tree planting initiative as this initiative is ours and together, we can grow our future and that of our children.

On this note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we approach the festive season, I ask that we give thanks to the Lord Almighty for all that we have, because if there is one thing that we have learnt during these difficult and challenging times, it is to be appreciative of life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish you and all honourable Members and their respective families a Merry Christmas and a prosperous 2022.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to add my voice in response to His Excellency's speech to open this new session of Parliament.

I must say, Mr. Speaker, in all honesty that it is hard to refer to His Excellency's speech as "most gracious", seeing as most of us on this side of Parliament know that it was perhaps, drafted in the same approach as the honourable Prime Minister's eye-watering IPAD remarks on that now viral interview in Glasgow with the Commonwealth Secretary-General, as we all saw on Sky News.

However, at this time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I pay tribute to the late brother of His Excellency the President, the late Turaga na Tui Macuata, Ratu Aisea Katonivere, for the vital part that he played in the study and conservation efforts at the Great Sea Reef or Cakaulevu, the third longest continuous barrier reef in the world, and the Turaga na Tui Macuata's traditional *i-qoliqoli*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the end of 2004, during a 12-day survey of the reef undertaken by World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and its partners, significant threats to the Great Sea Reef were identified, such as overfishing and poaching, poison fishing, sand dredging, and other development activities. It also found a species of damsel fish previously unknown to science, 12 threatened species, including 10 species of fish, green turtles and spinner dolphins.

A couple of years later, in my capacity as the Manager of the Vodafone ATH Fiji Foundation, which had helped to fund the survey, I had the great privilege of travelling to the chiefly village of Naduri, Macuata, with the late Ratu Aisea Katonivere and representatives of WWF Pacific to traditionally pronounce a *Tabu* to conserve this treasure and all that it meant and continues to mean for the people of Macuata, Vanua Levu, Fiji and, indeed, the planet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is now more than ever a need to ensure that resource owners are a key part of the sustainability journey. Just as much as they might need to learn the jargon when it comes to high level dialogue and compliance, Government, through inclusive consultation and action, needs to learn from resource owners because the emerging science keeps pointing back to traditional knowledge systems as a solid foundation for sustainability and disaster resilience.

On the issue of traditional knowledge, I note that the annual Attorney-Generals' conference next month has dedicated a session on "Mapping Traditional Knowledge" on 11th December. Unsurprisingly, there is only one *itaukei* expert speaking on it, and no perspectives from actual traditional knowledge holders. In fact, every ethnic community in our diverse melting pot of Fiji whether Indo-Fijian, Rotuman, Part European, Rabi Islander, Chinese, Tongan, Samoan, Solomon Islander or Ni-Vanuatu, possesses their own rich traditional knowledge and heritage. How is this then all cumulatively mapped and recorded nationally?

The Fiji delegation has returned from COP26. The climate crisis, we all agree, is as big a challenge facing the global south, as the COVID-19 and its emerging variants. But what we have not heard from Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is how under Article 6 Rules now agreed to in Glasgow, credits from Reductions of Emissions from Deforestation and Desertification (REDD+), are now not included, in order to prevent double counting and to prevent the richer countries paying developing countries to do the work, without making any serious efforts at cutting emissions in their own countries.

The World Bank and others have been piloting REDD+ projects here on the strength that landowners and resource owners could acquire revenue from the sale of carbon credits. It has also echoed

that in the rapidly adopted Climate Change Bill, but NFP had warned repeatedly that embedding references to Article 6 in the law, before the negotiations were finalised, was unwise.

So, now, how does Government intend to resolve this apparent conflict between its law that this side of Parliament opposed, and the recent United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) adopted resolution? How does the Government hope to stand by its promises to compensate resource owners and those high hopes of 7 million trees or as we heard from the former Minister for Forestry, 30 million trees in 15 years?

On the issue of loss and damage at COP26 which NFP had also warned about on the drafts of the Climate Change Bill, what happened during the actual negotiations, I wonder? Did Fiji pull yet another negotiation *faux pas* by suggesting the setup of a "Loss and Damage" financial facility through an ill-timed intervention that raised many eyebrows in almost all our developing country negotiating blocs, including the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), G77 and China? Did the Fiji delegation under the micro-management of the proxy Minister for Climate Change, not understand the basic tenets of negotiating processes where initiatives are first discussed and endorsed by negotiating partners beforehand?

More importantly Mr. Speaker, Sir, what does these all mean for our people and their families? What does these mean for families who can no longer afford the burden of the constantly rising kerosene and cooking gas prices, which we all know is going to rise again tomorrow, and then have to resort to firewood such as mangroves to cook their meals?

The Government can talk about China's loans to Fiji, or how much budget support the New Zealand is giving the Fijian Government, but what does this mean for people on the brink of homelessness because they are not able to pay their rent? What does this mean for tenants who get asked to vacate a flat, only to see the same flat going for higher rent later, without any improvements? How does all these talks translate into helping people living with disabilities have dignity when the Budget announcement earlier this year of a measly \$100,000 for the Housing Assistance programme for people with disabilities, means only 20 people will qualify for the \$5,000 grant - only 20 out of the thousands of people with disabilities in Fiji?

The Government will boast about how much money was put into some people's hands, and I will stress "some people's hands". But my question to them is; what about the sad state of affairs in the Ministry of Education? What about paying teachers what they are owed? What about the teachers with decades of teaching experience who are now being cast aside like unwanted rags, told in writing a month before Christmas that their contracts will no longer be renewed?

The cane farmers whose ancestors came to Fiji to grow what would eventually become this nation's biggest earner of foreign revenue, being forgotten in favour of , a glitzier alternative - tourism? The instrument of their livelihoods - the sugar cane mills - allowed to fall into a state of disrepair and what that means for their generations of blood, sweat and tears, literally? What of the job security of the staff of FRCS, EFL and WAF, just to name a few, and the very survival of their families?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency said, and I quote from page 3 of the *Daily Hansard* of Monday, 22nd November, 2021:

"We should not suffer the politics of pettiness and personalisation or exist in some perpetual state of political antagonism. Instead, we must see further than short-term political wins towards a long-term vision for the nation's progress..."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, control has brought this country to the state it is in, not COVID-19, not past Governments (the two things that this regime conveniently blames for all our problems), but control. And dictators' control; a dictator is a political leader who possesses absolute power. A dictatorship is a State ruled by one dictator or by a small clique. In my opinion, what Fiji needs is a wholesale change and for this to happen, the change must start with who is running this country and how.

Unfortunately, the reality is that, as long as the honourable Minister for Economy runs this country, the politics of pettiness and personalisation will continue to be a blight on our nation, and we will exist in a perpetual state of political antagonism, while the ordinary but hardworking people of our country continue to suffer.

We need only look at the shameful way that the former Chief Executive Officer of the Fiji Bureau of Statistics and the former Solicitor-General were treated, to confirm that the politics of pettiness and personalisation, as His Excellency puts it, is alive and well in the FijiFirst Party. Even at this moment, we still have no idea why the Chairman of the Electoral Commission suddenly resigned, and what has the Prime Minister, as the Chairman of the Constitutional Offices Commission, is going to do about it? Did the Attorney-General know about Mr. Chandra's alleged Trust Fund issues when he was appointed and then re-appointed? If so, why did he allow the appointments?

No amount of condescending bellowing, from my colleague to my immediate left as they did yesterday, can hide the fact that this sends a worrying signal to the world and to investors, that elections could be mere months away, but the Electoral Commission Chairman has stepped down under mysterious circumstances and only Mr. Saneem is worryingly running the shop. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) is quite right. Therefore, as Honourable Professor Prasad said before, to label Fiji as a 'weak democracy'.

The Government, by using this 'politics of pettiness and personalisation', coupled with vindictiveness and spitefulness, tries to gag any opposition voices from around the country, from the industry, civil society, civil servants, former Fiji Airways staff, even from their own MPs as well as Opposition MPs. The world still remembers MPs from this side being pressured to attend multiple CID police interviews during a sitting week, flouting all protocols of parliamentary privilege.

Need I remind Fiji during the sixth day of the United Nations 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence on how the ruling party, FijiFirst, used their print media mouthpiece to drag a woman and a proud daughter of Natewa, the former Minister for Women, through the mud because she dared to stand up for what she believed in, in relation to Bill No. 17?

This brazen 'politics of pettiness and personalisation', as His Excellency puts it, Mr. Speaker, should alert us all to the bottom-of-the-barrel lows that this regime, nay, the honourable Prime Minister and his boss, the honourable Minister for Economy, will stoop to for their own political survival.

Right after the Bainimarama *coup* of 2006, our now Prime Minister told the Chiefs of Fiji to go and drink homebrew under the mango tree. The Honourable Leader of the Opposition, himself a high chief, *Na Turaga na Tui Cakau* mentioned this in his speech yesterday. How ironic then that the honourable Prime Minister now needs some of these very chiefs for his Party's political survival?

Now, with that in mind, Mr. Speaker and in regards to the next elections, His Excellency said on page 9 of the *Daily Hansard* of Monday, 22nd November, 2021, and I quote:

“Those who seek office must approach the campaign with compassion, with dignity and understanding, and they must “stay high” by adhering to principles of ethical conduct rather than “go low” by seeking votes at any cost.”

I sincerely hope, Mr. Speaker, that by that, His Excellency means that he, as the holder of the highest office of the land, will not lower himself to the conduct of the FijiFirst Party and go on the campaign trail for FijiFirst like his predecessors before him. I hope His Excellency, as the former past president of the FijiFirst Party means that FijiFirst Party will not abuse State resources during the campaign period under his watch because, Mr. Speaker, for the information of the members of the public who are watching right now, I wish to explain a few things about the position of the President of the Republic of Fiji, whoever he or she may be.

Sections 81 to 83 of the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji outlines the Office of the President. Section 82 states, and I quote:

“...the President acts only on the advice of Cabinet or a Minister or of some other body or authority prescribed by this Constitution for a particular purpose as the body or authority on whose advice the President acts in that case.”

So I wonder then, Mr. Speaker, if the 7 principles of ethical conduct will be expected equally of all parties contesting next year's polls or only the parties running against FijiFirst? Only time will tell but I hope that His Excellency's legacy at the end of his tenure whenever that will be, will be one where he upheld justice and righteousness, fairness and service to all our people in equal measure.

On the environmental front, Mr. Speaker, we all know that what this regime preaches overseas and what they allowed to be practised at home are as different at day and night. Just a 30-minute drive from Parliament House, Mr. Speaker, are communities living beside the tributaries of the Wainadoi River. Families in the area, those who settled there decades ago and those newly arriving there and settling on either freehold or crown land, all depend on rainwater and the tributaries for water for bathing, washing and cooking during the dry months because despite being 30 minutes away from Parliament House and despite pre-election promises, they are still without piped water to this day. So in the words of one of the residents whom I visited only last Sunday, Mr. Speaker, I quote:

“So much for COP26 which I assumed was about saving what is left of our pristine environment. What was once the best water source for all residents along this natural ecosystem has now been destroyed. We engaged (they) the Environment Department, only to be advised that it comes under Mineral Resources, we called them only to be advised it comes under Ministry of Waterways, when we called them, we are then advised that it comes under Lands Department. The river banks are collapsing even without rain or flooding.”

Finally, Mr. Speaker, a stop work order was approved a week ago today, the extraction from the Waisulubonu Creek has stopped for now but the damage has already been done. Mr. Speaker, because at any one time there had been up to three diggers working in the Creek with seven different trucks taking loads. The banks of the Creek are damaged and weakened for about 350 metres downstream. Now, Wainadoi children often go to the Creek to brush their teeth, wash clothes and bathe and I would hate to think what could happen if a weakened bank were to suddenly collapse on a group of frolicking kids.

Families from Suva to Navua often go to Wainadoi to enjoy what used to be the cool clear creeks but I am told that when the extraction was happening, you only had to stand at the Wainadoi River Bridge to see the amount of silt travelling to the sea, silt which would then settle on the reef surrounding Naqara Island, endangering the ecosystem and the livelihoods of the families who live there and who rely on the reef for their food. So much for all the hot air from our oceans champion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I cannot believe that the honourable Minister for Environment and Waterways is saying, “Drama Queen”. This is his Department and he should shut up and take care of it.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- I was just talking about the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence and the man is calling me a “Drama Queen”? Thank you.

I am sure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that this sad tale is being repeated right around the country and would go unchallenged if it were not for environmentally minded, passionate citizens, who see the huge disconnect between what this Government says overseas and what they allow to happen right here at home, despite all the laws that we have enacted. Where are the Prime Minister's bold statements on these types of rogue elements wilfully desecrating the environment, when will they pay for their sins?

I wish to put the other side of the House on notice right now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the residents of Wainadoi, those whom you promised piped water to before the last two Elections are waiting patiently for you to go back to Wainadoi before the next Election.

Now, whilst the global community has kicked off the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based violence - the Pacific last week did a soft launch of the UN Human Rights - Women Human Rights Defenders Report - which shared that women are subject to threats and online bullying when we stand up to defend human rights. We question why women especially, get victimised for vocalising violations, including environmental violations, in their communities.

In another example, I am reliably told just yesterday that the mortuary freezers in Levuka Hospital are, again, not working properly and a few women (from the community) have been victimised by officials in Levuka for raising their concerns after they were told to bring the funerals of their loved ones forward because the mortuary could not preserve the bodies properly.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Private sector.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- On Saturday night, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I attended a Haus of Khameleon organised Transgender Day of Remembrance to remember those of the rainbow community who have been murdered in Fiji and around the Pacific. I would like to ask on behalf of all victims' and families and their loved ones, including those of the late Magnus and the late Lucky, if the authorities could please at least update their family members on the state of investigations to find their killers.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I mentioned control and I mentioned dictators. It is well known in the Civil Service and, indeed, around the country that the honourable Minister for the Economy likes to control everything. This is how dictators behave. Dictators cannot give autonomy, they cannot allow for other leaders to grow because they only think they are the fountain of all wisdom and knowledge and they fear this power being wrested from them.

From the abhorrent way the Fiji Airways staff were treated in May last year, to the recent revolving door of Permanent Secretaries, to the unconstitutional sacking of the Solicitor-General, these

all have the Minister for Economy's fingerprints all over them and all, of course, with the other 2021 sackings I have mentioned earlier.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, everything rises and falls on leadership. And in the words of William Arthur Wood, "Leadership is based on inspiration, not domination; on cooperation and not intimidation." With that said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank His Excellency for his Address.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That under Standing Order 6 that so much of Standing Order 23(1) is suspended so as to allow the Parliament to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed in today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we still have item six and we have a few speakers to contribute to the motion before the House and thus the request to sit beyond 4.30 p.m.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note, we will take a break and when we resume, we will resume to complete the Batting Order for today. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.00 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.32 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now continue with the debate.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members and the fellow Fijians; I rise to respond to the Presidential Address as delivered by His Excellency the President on Monday, 22nd November, 2021.

Allow me to begin by congratulating His Excellency the President for his appointment as the Head of State and wishing him the very best in his leadership role. On the same note, I wish to take this wonderful opportunity to thank the former President, His Excellency, Major-General Jioji Konrote, for his prolific and visionary leadership as the President of the Republic of Fiji. Sir, thank you for your leadership and sacrifice to this nation.

His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, alluded onto many critical and important agenda, which I am sure must have re-kindled everyone's thoughts towards our commitment to our nation. One very critical and timely areas which he expressed upon was climate change, because climate change is now not an environmental issue, but it has become one of the major developmental challenges of the world.

Climate change is influencing every sector of the world's economy. Human development of any country also cannot be exclusively dealt with or without the inclusion of climate change. Yet, it is very sad to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that our very own Professor, honourable Professor Biman Prasad, is calling COP26 climate trip a junket. It is a cheap, shallow and malicious attempt shot towards our honourable Prime Minister and Minister responsible for climate change, honourable Sayed-Khaiyum, and that has ended into thin air.

One may ask, honourable Prasad of his contribution towards combating climate change issues, apart from making unnecessary noise to no avail. I urge honourable Prasad to utilise his professorship abilities towards some worthwhile activities that can bring positive impact towards climate change rather than making noise just to cover his own inadequacies and trying to earn cheap political points.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, global climate change has already had observable effects on the environment. Glaciers have shrunk, ice on rivers and lakes is breaking up earlier, plant and animal ecosystems and biodiversity have been affected and some beyond repair. I think these and many other signals around us are more than enough to wake us all up and become more responsible and less selfish.

I am sure we all are aware of the World Bank Report which lists climate threats to Fijian society and economy in the following ways:

1. Higher rates of disease as average temperatures rise;
2. Increasingly destructive storms as oceans get warmer and weather patterns become more severe;
3. Disruption to agriculture as intrusion of saltwater damages existing farmlands; and
4. On Fiji's main island of Viti Levu, these factors are expected to contribute to economic damages of up to \$52 million per year or roughly 4 per cent of Fiji's GDP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having such knowledge, I believe that all great efforts initiated towards climate change through the Climate Change Division of the Ministry of Economy, a government agency

responsible for the coordination of the implementation of the National Climate Change Policy (NCCP) 2018 under the able leadership of the honourable Attorney-General, is a step in the right direction to address climate change issues with more responsibility and explicit commitment.

Under the leadership of our honourable Prime Minister and honourable Attorney-General, Fiji has become a global and regional leader in raising awareness on climate change, its effects and what all nation States should do together to reduce the emission, to keep us within 1.5 degree celsius of global warming and to avoid catastrophic climate change.

Financial resources and sound investments are required to address climate change to both, decreased emissions, advanced adjustments to the impacts that are now happening and to construct strength. The benefits that stream from these measures significantly exceed any upfront cost.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, investment by the FijiFirst Government towards climate change is unmatched because never ever before have we had such investment of such magnitude. The list is impressive and still growing. Therefore, I am very proud that we have a Head of State, His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, who is so committed towards climate change, that his leadership is going to fuel Fiji's effort towards climate change which is currently led by our stalwarts, the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Attorney-General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, apart from climate change issues, please, allow me to share the sentiments of people on the ground towards the Government \$360 assistance initiative that has been timely, adequate and greatly appreciated by ordinary Fijians. I must put on record my appreciation to the honourable Minister for Economy for his inventiveness and resourcefulness in creating schemes and initiatives of such nature, which time and again has benefitted ordinary Fijians at the right time.

While we cannot deny the fact that despite all efforts, all may not be happy but that does not deter the FijiFirst Government in continuing to assist all Fijians. Recently, I have been in the communities day and night, meeting and listening to the people where they have echoed huge appreciation to the FijiFirst Government for upholding commitments, such as:

1. Free education grant;
2. Transport assistance to students;
3. Free textbooks;
4. Social Welfare Assistance;
5. Tertiary Scholarship and Loans Scheme;
6. Assistance to Micro Small Businesses; and
7. Initiatives in agriculture area; and so many others.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I appeal to members of the public to unite and become more compassionate in order to continue our fight against COVID-19 because the deadly virus does not spare anyone on the basis of religion, race or even political parties. What will matter at the end of the day is how we can bring our nation back towards the new normalcy and expedite economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I wish to salute all Fijians who have made the right choice to get vaccinated for their safety and for the safety of their loved ones, and on the same note I humbly appeal to other eligible Fijians to get vaccinated for the betterment of our beloved nation.

While we maintain COVID-safe protocols, vaccination is the best way to fight COVID-19. My fellow Fijians, may I remind you that we cannot become complacent and let our guards down as we are not fully out of COVID-19. Let us remain alert and adhere to COVID-19 safety protocols so that we can

see our children return to school, businesses get normal trading hours and those who lost their jobs are back at work.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to conclude by saying a big *Vinaka Vakalevu* to His Excellency for his motivational, thought-provoking and inspiring Presidential Address which has undoubtedly set the platform for the New Year's Parliamentary Session. *Vinaka Vakalevu* and I wish everyone in advance a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I deliver my response to His Excellency's Address, I would like to pay tribute to the former President, Major General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote, for his commitment and dedicated service during his term of office and would like to wish him and his family all the best in their future undertakings. I would also like to offer, at this stage, my sincere congratulations on behalf of the *Matanitu o Burebasaga*, to the newly appointed Head of State, His Excellency, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere.

Through the FijiFirst Government and its 2013 Constitution, the Office of the President has become a political appointment and although some of us did not vote for him, we share in the momentous achievement with the *Vanua o Caumatalevu* in his appointment to the Presidential Office and pray that he is there for the good of all and that he will serve us well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you are well aware, serving as President of our beloved country is no easy task. Balancing the interests of the nation for the good of all, trying to be a Statesman and a unifier, I just wish His Excellency all the best.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we live in a great country created by God and personally selected by Him for us to live in for a certain purpose. From the gentle Rewa River to the mountainous peaks of our beautiful volcanic islands, to the white sandy beaches that tourists keep returning to, we are reminded time and again that we live in a great country. Sometimes we try to convince ourselves that the grass is much greener on the other side, however, when something momentous and earth shattering like the COVID-19 pandemic happens, with it comes the realisation that the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean sometimes perceived as a hurdle to development, is actually a natural barrier between us and other COVID-19 ravaged countries and when all is said and done, we sometimes think that maybe the Lord during creation actually knew what He was doing. Indeed, when you think about it, we live in a great country blessed by the Lord and for that we should be grateful.

Amidst the chaos of the pandemic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that has shaken our country in 2021 from the first wave, the second wave and maybe the third wave, there really is no other place I would rather be and the claim for this wonderful country of ours - does not belong to the politicians, although the FijiFirst Government have been trying their best to re-write the history of Fiji by accrediting themselves for most, if not all, the developments in Fiji since Independence, and in the process, perhaps do not appreciate or do not even care that they are confusing the younger generation who hardly know any current affairs, *qai yawa sara* the history of Fiji.

Can you imagine, with the propaganda the Government puts out on a daily basis, how the students and worse still for teachers, whose job it is when the children are back in school, to untangle the fact from fiction as the children have spent so much time away from the classroom listening to the *vesu mona* and the blah, blah, blah of the wonderful contribution FijiFirst have participated in, in shaping the country. With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend His Excellency's commitment to the preservation and strengthening of our democratic society as his greatest responsibility. He reminds us all that despite our political differences, we must serve the nation for the betterment of our people.

It is encouraging that His Excellency reminded us that we need stability and prosperity for a stable united country. When he said that, I noticed that he was not looking at our side of the House. His Excellency's vision and commitments are noble indeed but the problem is its implementation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the past seven years since the 2014 Elections, the FijiFirst Government has only given lip-service to democracy. Just one example are the Bills coming in for a so-called 'debate' under Standing Orders 51 to be considered without delay, maybe moved without notice and with no public consultation. The only people or maybe the only person who knows about the Bill is the honourable Attorney-General. If only one person knows about the Bill which comes in under Standing Orders 51 and 99.9 per cent of the population do not know about it, neither were they consulted about it, where is the democracy in that? The sad thing about this democracy is that, most Bills are coming in through the same window.

That status of socio-economic indicators in the nation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has gone from bad to worse. This is reflected in low growth, high unemployment, lower investment, increase in poverty, poor dilapidated state of the infrastructure, amongst many others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we should be working together with the people rather than Government trying to do everything on its own and messing things up big time, like trying to get people jabbed in the minimum time. Had they consulted with people, they would have got 90 per cent in less time than it took them. This resetting the course which is much needed with more dialogue is to ensure long-term unity, peace, tolerance and prosperity in our multiracial, multicultural and multi-religious country.

Rather than looking at each other, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with suspicion where we cannot say certain words because it is termed as "racist" in the wannabe new order, we must continue to value, embrace and respect each other's unique, rich and diversified culture, and at the same time embrace the rights and aspirations of the iTaukei which is clearly stipulated under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) and Article 169 of the ILO Convention on the Rights of the Indigenous People.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, although the dynamics of our society may change or evolved over time due to progress, we must continue to embrace and value our direct link to the *vanua*, as it is the basis of our collective existence. Without our *vanua* with its traditional *i qoliqoli*, its maritime areas which are part and parcel of the *vanua*, there is no chief, no *tokatoka*, no *mataqali* and no *yavusa*, as the chief of the *vanua* is termed, "*Na turaga ni vanua kei na kena i qoliqoli*". For example, the seas that surround Suva City is registered with the Native Lands Commission and is supposed to belong to the *Tui Suva* and the *Vanua o Nadonumai*. So whatever income received from this *qoliqoli* from the various licences that people pay for its use, whether inshore or offshore, a certain percentage is supposed to be paid to the *Tui Suva*, who is the registered owner of the *i qoliqoli*.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the various decrees, including the Surfing Decree now enacted, nothing is received by the *i taukei ni qoliqoli*, as the laws have usurped ownership of the *i qoliqoli* where, for example, the *Tui Suva* becomes just another of the majority of indigenous Fijians living in poverty. Very sad, Minister for Fisheries, where the *Tui Suva* looks out to sea and shakes his head in bewilderment and wonders, where on earth he went wrong, and people wonder why indigenous Fijians are termed "asset rich and cash poor".

Income received from the traditional *i qoliqoli* enable chiefs to implement development projects in the *vanua*. People who do not know the full story sometimes comment on why chiefs are in politics. Outside the political arena, many chiefs are clueless about what is really happening. That is how successful the Government propaganda machine is, on how the chiefs and people really do not know the full story.

However, over 20 Decrees, now Acts, from 2007 to 2013 have robbed indigenous people of their resources to fund Government development projects and programmes, whilst the resources are supposed to be indigenous-owned. The honourable Attorney-General kept on reminding us that 92 per cent of all native land is indigenous-owned, so these are some of the resources also that are owned by indigenous Fijians that have been taken over and managed by Government forestry - pine and mahogany, sand and gravel extraction. However, through legal processes, most of those resources are managed by Government to fund its development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Bill No.17 is just another of the legal processes whereby indigenous Fijians' assets and resources are slowly and systematically being pulled from under their feet in broad daylight through legal processes, especially Standing Order 51. So daylight robbery is happening before our very eyes.

In terms of education, Mr. Speaker, this is one of the most difficult times for all stakeholders, from students, teachers, guardians, school committees and everyone associated with education. It is a very difficult time indeed. Although difficult, this is part of the new normal which everyone has to get used to. As a result of the new normal, education has changed dramatically with a distinctive rise of e-learning whereby teaching is undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. This gives rise to more difficulty, particularly in terms of connectivity in rural, remote and maritime areas. However, this is part of the new reality which all stakeholders have to familiarise themselves with.

Also part of this unknown journey is how to make this new type of education more attractive for students who have no urge or desire to return to school. That will be an ongoing challenge for the Ministry of Education for students especially after spending months at home to return to school next year. At this time, I must thank the 95 per cent of teachers who are already vaccinated or encouraging and motivating eligible students to get vaccinated.

Having said that, the inconsistent education policies and reforms of the Ministry of Education has eroded the morale and values that teachers hold dear. Had Government consulted with teachers and teacher unions from the beginning of their tenure in 2007, education would not be in a mess that it is in today where teachers are, once again, coming off second best with lower pay and their qualifications not recognised. For teachers, every Christmas seems to be a worse one for them.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Not true!

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- Especially during your time as Minister for Education.

Since Fiji's independence 51 years ago, relationships have been fostered with development partners both, on a regional and international level. The USP saga was one that tested the region's patience and questions ...

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- Yes, especially with your free laptops to everyone.

... Fiji's commitment to regionalism. With 80 per cent of students at USP being Fijian, most of our Pacific neighbours are now reluctant to consider any future partnership with Fiji.

On the international front, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the closure of the Diplomatic Missions in Washington D.C, Brussels, Malaysia and South Korea is a disaster for bilateral trade and development assistance. Maintaining a relationship through these Missions is important to Fiji, not only for economic gain but also for diplomatic ties, instead the Government decides to close them down. It is unfortunate that Fiji

has lost credibility and standing in both, our own region and the international arena, which were built by our former leaders and founding fathers of modern Fiji.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the chiefs and people of Rewa for their continued support and cooperation over the years and especially during these difficult pandemic times. We were named by the honourable Prime Minister as one of the provinces that have not been fully jabbed, so I would urge them, those who have not been jabbed to get jabbed because there is another new variant called "Omicron" which some say is more deadly than COVID-19. I am requesting all those not yet jabbed, especially those from Rewa, "*sSa kua soti mada na vakadriwai, na vakadrecike kei va-kils tiko. Ni ratou kanaka ga na turaga naita, "cula mo bula"*.

Lastly, to our relatives who helped us conclude traditional protocols for our *vasu levu*, Ratu Finau Mara, at his *vakataraisulu, vinaka saka vakalevu*, especially to those from the chiefly households of Mateiwelagi, Naisogolaca, Nadrukuta, Nakauta, Naicobocobo, Muaidule and our *veimataki* from Vunivau and from Naivisere, Matanikutu.

May I wish you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Members of Parliament from both sides of the House and our Parliamentary staff a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Attorney-General, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of this august Parliament; I rise to respond to His Excellency's most gracious Address during the opening of the 2021-2022 Fijian Parliament.

Let me start by congratulating His Excellency, *Turaga Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, on his appointment as the President of Fiji and the youngest at that. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am from Macuata so it feels proud to have our President from Macuata.

I absolutely concur with the issues raised by His Excellency, Fiji is a young democracy and within a short span of time, the country has achieved a lot. In the last 15 years or so, the country has made significant progress. Imagine where the country would have been if the events of 1987 and 2000 had not happened? These actions of self-centred individuals had pushed the country years back.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the Bainimarama-led Government and later the FijiFirst Government, the country has made huge forward leaps. The economic and social development has been huge, not only regionally but Fiji has been recognised internationally for its ability to represent itself and the region in significant international forums.

Fiji has become the regional economic hub. Our infrastructure investment and investment in technology has put Fiji at an advantage and has benefitted the nation. It has become a habit of the honourable Opposition Members to pick up issues, twist it around and create a false hype.

All economies, inclusive of Fiji, has its highs and troughs. It is a natural economic cycle. One cannot have highs or troughs all the time. Ask any credible economist, except honourable Professor Prasad, and you will be advised that it is opportune time to invest in a trough so that when the curve lifts, one is in an optimum position to make the best of the upward movement in the economy. That is exactly what Fiji Airways has done. They invested in planes and when the tourism market improves, they are in the best position to get maximum number of visitors into the country rather than rely on non-Fijian airlines. We should not be caught putting our shoes on when the race has already started but be prepared to hit the ground running when the race starts, or maybe wait and watch the would-be Opposition strategy, if they were ever capable enough to come into power.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge FijiFirst Government's support to the agricultural sector. The Government is continuing to ensure that alternative livelihood opportunities are available to all Fijians. All statutory and supporting institutions must be praised for ensuring that all sectors in the agricultural field continue to perform.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would be failing in my duty if I did not acknowledge the hardworking farmers who, during the difficult times, continued to toil the soil to ensure the nation was well fed. Not all that we eat are imported. It is the result of the hard work of our farmers which keeps us all fed. The FijiFirst Government has ensured that those farmers are well supported either technically or materially, to enable them to produce for the nation.

It is sad to hear the Opposition harping about the high unemployment and increase in costs during the 2020-2021 year. Have they ever managed to get out of their cocoon and see what the other countries are going through? Fiji is not the only country that has gone through this. According to *World Travel and Tourism Councils Global Economic Impact Report* of June 2021, the global tourism industry has suffered a loss of US\$4.5 trillion, and has resulted in 62 million job losses because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fiji is just one of those tourist destinations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our well thought-of and strategic opening of Fiji's borders will see a systematic increase in the number of visitor arrivals and at the same time, ensuring that systems and infrastructure are in place to properly manage the arrivals and mitigate the risk of any COVID-19 variant arriving. Despite these difficult times, the FijiFirst Government has taken the bull by the horn and continued to assist people who lost their jobs, either through direct monetary assistance or indirect assistance, such as electricity subsidy and payment of fees. There are many other countries who have left their citizens to fend for themselves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister and the FijiFirst Government recognises the pivotal role played by our Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in contributing to the Fijian economy. These are versatile businesses that are able to survive through thick and thin, like it may not be plain sailing, but they press on regardless.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last 50 years since Fiji's independence, the FijiFirst Government is the only Government that has provided tens of millions of dollars' worth of assistance to these businesses to ensure they are able to survive during the COVID-19 pandemic, and continue to contribute towards Fiji's economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for a change, the Opposition should commend the FijiFirst Government for handling the situation well within the limited resources that were available. Fiji is far better off than many other countries and our vaccination rate is one of the best in the world. Despite these, people like honourable Bulanauca harp negativity about it.

Misinformation is rife amongst the honourable Opposition Members. One of the classy ones is the increase in the cost of goods because of FijiFirst's policies. Last week, I went to a car accessory shop and I heard the sales representative telling the customer that the price of accessories has gone up because Government has increased duty on those products after the lockdown. Totally untrue! Guess who is adding fuel to fire? My honourable colleagues on the other side.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact of the matter is, freight has almost doubled and has resulted in the increase of costs of goods arriving in the country. Ask any importer and they will not dispute this. If this is the case, then how is the FijiFirst Government responsible for cost increases? They have no control over freight cost. Rather than relying on facts, the honourable Members on the other side continue to stick with their lies, blame the Government for everything, including cost of goods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me talk about the duty of care. The duty of care for telling the truth seems to be amiss for the honourable Members of the Opposition. Despite this small setback due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bainimarama-led Government and the FijiFirst Government has done much more for Fiji and its people than any other Government since Independence. I know this statement would be hard to digest for some honourable Members on the other side, but the fact remains.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Tell them, tell them!

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, what really surprises me is that, the very person who was responsible for pushing Fiji years back in the late 1980s is now claiming to be the best person fit to give growth and prosperity to Fijians. I will not be surprised that some from the Opposition side would go to bed with him just to further their political interests.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S. NAND.- I have not mentioned names but if the shoe fits, wear it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's commitment towards countering the effects of climate change has to be commended. The honourable Prime Minister and the FijiFirst Government has continued to be a voice for Fiji and the Pacific in regards to climate change. Our honourable Prime Minister has gained international recognition for his effort. He has achieved what no other politician in the last 50 years has achieved. However, Sir, it is not only the duty of the Prime Minister; it is the responsibility of every honourable Member of this Parliament and as a matter of fact, the responsibility of every citizen of this country to play their part in countering the effects of climate change. Little steps make a lot of difference.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday this august Parliament heard a lot of 'SODELPA will' from honourable Gavoka. My simple advice to him, sit down, relax, clear your head and think hard. It is not 'SODELPA will', however it is 'FijiFirst is'. FijiFirst is providing safety and security to Fijians. FijiFirst is providing free education to primary and secondary students, while SODELPA is now contemplating on do so but without any financial discipline.

FijiFirst is empowering landowners, ensuring they get the full benefit from their ownership rather than the elite few. FijiFirst is providing economic growth to all Fijians. FijiFirst is putting Fiji in the global arena for its efforts in the greater good and not because of *coups* and corruption which it was previously recognised for. Mr. Speaker, Sir, my advice to honourable Gavoka is, instead of chanting 'SODELPA will', from now start chanting 'FijiFirst is'.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President has correctly put that elections is just around the corner. It is an opportune time to remind everyone, especially the honourable Members of the Opposition, that our country is much, much bigger than our political opinions, political aspirations and our political cheap shots.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our obligation to this beloved nation is paramount when it is for the greater good of the nation. We should not let our personal opinion or self-interest deter us from moving forward in the right direction. We should not disagree for the sake of disagreeing only. Look at reasons behind Government Bills and motions. I am sure if the honourable Opposition Members shed away their own political veil, they will clearly see the rationale and the greater good of the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji have chosen us to represent them in this august Parliament, so let us not desecrate their confidence in us. Let us not mislead them. Let us speak the facts and not let our personal political opinions cloud this. They need to be told the facts without being fabricated to suit your own personal agenda.

The FijiFirst Government has made a lot of effort to get away from the race of ethnic card. Let us not bring it back and take Fiji years behind. Racialised politics in every way has driven people apart and has never brought them together. Divide and rule was a white man's tool. In today's Fiji, there is no place for it and let us keep it that way. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to move ahead and not drag dead weight with us.

To conclude, I would like to thank His Excellency for guiding this Parliament through his gracious opening Address. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of this august Parliament and the people of Fiji, I would like to wish you all a very Merry Christmas and a very prosperous and productive new year. God Bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Member for his contribution to the debate. That being the last speaker for today, we will continue with the debate tomorrow. I have also been advised that there are no Bills for consideration today.

Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's sitting. The Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 5.10 p.m.