

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 12TH SEPTEMBER, 2017

[CORRECTED COPY]

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TUESDAY, 12TH SEPTEMBER, 2017

The Parliament resumed at 9.33 a.m., pursuant to adjournment.

HON. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Honourable Members were present, except the Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Foreign Affairs [Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts]; the Honourable Minister for Fisheries; the Honourable Minister for Industry, Trade, Tourism and Lands and Mineral Resources; the Honourable Assistant Minister for Agriculture; and the Honourable Ratu S.V. Nanovo.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Monday, 11th September, 2017, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

HON. A. SUDHAKAR.- Madam Speaker, I beg to second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome and Acknowledgment of Students

HON. SPEAKER.- I welcome all Honourable Members to today's sitting. We may have some students from the University of the South Pacific who are undertaking the Political Ideologists course. Welcome to Parliament and hope your visit will be a fruitful one.

I also welcome members of the public joining us in the gallery and those watching proceedings on television, internet and listening to the radio. Thank you for taking interest in your Parliament.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights - Report on the International Arbitration Bill 2017

HON. SPEAKER.- For the information of Honourable Members, pursuant to the resolutions of Parliament passed on Friday, 14th July, 2017, the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights is compelled to report back to Parliament on its reports on the International Arbitration Bill 2017 and the Personal Property Securities Bill 2017, and thereafter, the two Bills must be debated and voted upon in the same sitting period.

I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to present the report.

HON. A. SUDHAKAR.- Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I am pleased to present the Committee's Report on the Arbitration Bill to this honourable House.

Madam Speaker, investment in Fiji has been one of the steadiest contributors to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) over the years. However, it is believed that there is potential for more improvement. This has seen a need to improve on the contributing factors that impact investment and one such way is having systems in place that attract foreign trade into the country.

Therefore, the Fijian Government has taken cue from the international trade arena and saw where Fiji is lacking, and that is, having a commercial dispute resolution regime that is attractive to trade. Thus, the introduction of an International Arbitration Bill 2017.

This Bill would see a system that establishes independent arbitral mechanisms. It would respond to public concerns by offering strict guarantees of independence, transparency and legitimacy. It would bring much needed coherence to the global system of investment dispute settlement. This would also be a more efficient means of dispute resolution than the current multitude of bilateral investment dispute resolution mechanisms that are provided in the individual agreements. A tribunal would ensure a uniform approach to international arbitration by aligning the Fijian domestic and international law together.

The UN Convention on the Recognition and Enforcement of Foreign Arbitral Awards (the New York Convention) which Fiji had acceded to is widely considered as the foundation instrument for international arbitration. This Bill has been drafted according to the Model Law on International Commercial Arbitration adopted by the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL).

This honourable Parliament tasked the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to scrutinise the said Bill in its July sitting and to return a report in this sitting of the House. The Committee straightaway commenced its work and read the Bill in its entirety, called for public submissions, invited and consulted experts and relevant stakeholders to obtain the widest possible views on it.

The Committee, after deliberations and consultations as part of its scrutiny, consulted the drafters and their drafting experts and was satisfied that since the Bill was based on International Model Law, no amendment was required to achieve its objectives.

This Report will cover the Standing Committee's role in reviewing the International Arbitration Bill to ensure that all due processes regarding the Bill have been followed and to also ensure that the provisions contained in the Bill would contribute to the achievement of the Bill's objectives.

Some of the pertinent areas which the Bills addresses are as follows:

1. Having laws in Fiji which are accommodative to foreign investment;
2. The need for having better investment climate, thus increasing regional and international investor confidence;
3. Any international commercial dispute which has been determined by the arbitration will be subject to the application of the Bill unless such dispute is not capable of determination by arbitration under any law of the country or the arbitration agreement is contrary to the public policy of Fiji;

4. Jurisdiction of a court or other tribunal to determine a matter does not stop parties to an agreement from resorting to arbitration;
5. Arbitrators, their representative and their institution have immunity for acts or omissions arising in the discharge or purported discharge of an arbitrator's functions as an arbitrator, unless the act or omission is shown to have been done in bad faith;
6. The promotion of uniformity of Fiji's national laws pertaining to international arbitration proceedings;
7. Aligning Fiji's international arbitration law with international best practices;
8. Establishing Fiji as a venue of choice for international arbitrations and bring in an influx of foreign investing and spending to the country; and
9. Step forward for arbitration in Fiji and providing alternative, cost effective and time efficient means of dispute resolution.

At this juncture, I would like to thank the Honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights for their deliberations and input, the Alternate Members who made themselves available when the Substantive Members could not attend, the consultants, staff and officers of the Research Unit and Secretariat, the entities who accepted the invitation of the Committee and made themselves available to make submissions and members of the public for taking interest in the proceedings of the Committee and Parliament.

I, on behalf of the Committee, commend the International Arbitration Bill 2017 (Bill No. 37/2017) to Parliament and seek support of all the Honourable Members of this august House for the Bill, since it is designed to achieve commercial and economic developments which, in turn, will benefit all Fijians.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, please hand the report to the Secretary-General.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. A. SUDHAKAR.- Madam Speaker, at this juncture, pursuant to the Resolution of Parliament passed on Friday, 14th July, 2017, the International Arbitration Bill 2017 (Bill No. 37/2017) is now ready to be debated, voted upon and be passed.

HON. SPEAKER.- Pursuant to the resolution of Parliament passed on Friday, 14th July, 2017, the Standing Committee has now reported back and the International Arbitration 2017 (Bill No. 37/2017) is now ready to be debated, voted upon and be passed.

Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights –
Report on the Personal Property Security Bill 2017

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Chairperson Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to present the second report.

HON. A. SUDHAKAR.- Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I am happy to present the Committee's Report on the Personal Property Securities Bill 2017 (Bill No. 38/2017) to this Parliament.

Madam Speaker, the Personal Property Securities Bill is the Fijian Government's initiative to reform laws, to facilitate the financing of movable or personal property in order to provide access to credit for micro, small and medium enterprises and individuals.

A personal property securities law allows people and entities to place their personal property to secure finance and for lender to secure their interest in personal property. It also enables finance providers and other interested parties to determine without delay whether a proposed debtor has previously pledged particular property to secure a previous loan.

The aim of the Bill is to increase economic activity in the previously untapped market of financing where personal property such as livestock, crops, farm machinery, business equipment, personal effects (such as electronics, computers, furniture, jewellery, watches, et cetera), attachments to buildings, and so on can be mortgaged to willing credit providers to raise funds to expand business or for personal endeavours.

This honourable Parliament tasked the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to scrutinise the said Bill in its July Sitting and to return a report in this sitting of the House. The Committee straightaway commenced its work and read the Bill, called for public submissions, invited and consulted experts and relevant stakeholders and held a public hearing in Lautoka, to obtain widest possible views on it.

The Committee, after deliberations and consultations as part of its scrutiny, consulted the drafters and their drafting experts and came up with amendments which the Committee resolved was essential to properly achieve the objectives of the of the Bill. Necessary amendments were made to various clauses and subclauses of the Bill which are marked in red, in the copies of the Bill provided with this report.

This Report covers the Standing Committee's role in reviewing the Personal Property Securities Bill, to ensure that all due processes regarding the Bill has been followed and that the provisions contained in the Bill would contribute to the achievement of the Bill's objectives.

Some of the important areas which the Bill addresses are as follows:

1. Regulates the money lending regime in Fiji, which are secured by personal property;
2. Modernises Fiji's system of liens and security interests on property that is not land;
3. Provides for the filing of notices for priority lending and provides clear rules surrounding listing and enforcement;
4. Reflects and is consistent with current law in other jurisdictions, thus is in line with international best practices;
5. Establishes a central, searchable registration system (Personal Property Securities Registry), which allows quick searches of liens and security interests on property;
6. Provides a clear system for registration, perfection, disposal and prioritisation of liens and security interests;
7. Expands on what can be used as collateral from just fixed assets of land and building to what is termed as "movable assets";

8. Ensures greater confidence in lenders in extending credit; and
9. Enables the taking advantage of new financing procedures and products which in turn improve the lives of ordinary Fijians without administration restrictions to accessing credit.

At this juncture, I would like to thank the Honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights for their deliberations and input, the Alternate Members who made themselves available when the Substantive Members could not attend, the consultants, staff and officers of the Research Unit and Secretariat, the entities who accepted the invitation of the Committee and made themselves available to make submissions and members of the public for taking an interest in the proceedings of the Committee and the Parliament.

I, on behalf of the Committee, commend the Personal Property Securities Bill 2017 (Bill No. 38/2017) to Parliament and seek support from all Honourable Members of this House for the Bill, since it is designed for the greater good of all Fijians.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, please hand the report to the Secretary-General.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. A. SUDHAKAR.- Madam Speaker, at this juncture, pursuant to the Resolution of Parliament passed on Friday, 14 July, 2017, the Personal Property Securities Bill 2017 (Bill No. 38/2017) is now ready to be debated, voted upon and be passed.

HON. SPEAKER.- Pursuant to the Resolution of Parliament passed on Friday, 14 July, 2017, the Standing Committee has now reported back and the Personal Property Securities Bill 2017 (Bill No. 38/2017) is now ready to be debated, voted upon and be passed.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now resume debate on the motion by the Honourable Prime Minister that this Parliament thanks His Excellency the President for his most gracious Speech, and now I call upon the Honourable Osea Naiqamu to have the floor.

HON. O. NAIQAMU.- Madam Speaker; the Honourable Acting Prime Minister and Cabinet colleagues; the Honourable Leader of the Opposition; Honourable Members of the House; Distinguished Guests; Ladies and Gentlemen: Good morning to you all.

Madam Speaker, I rise to reiterate the Opening Address by His Excellency the President of Fiji, in which the Government will continue to introduce policies and legislations intended to modernise the economy, create increased economic opportunities and encourage economic and social development, one of which is the introduction of the new 2016 Forest Bill which is intended to address good governance, compliance and promote entrepreneurship in order to capitalise on emerging issues and opportunities that sets the balance between economic development and resource sustainability. The Planted Forests Policy will further increase forest production and economic returns, while reducing pressure on our natural resources.

Madam Speaker, I wish to congratulate the Honourable Prime Minister for the honour and responsibility in his capacity as the President of the upcoming COP23 in Bonn, Germany. This is a

first for a Small Island Developing State to lead the 197 nations to a consensus that will substantially reduce global warming. This is significant due to our role as custodians of our forests in ensuring the sustainable management and conservation of our forest resources, which in turn will further contribute to reducing the impacts of climate change on our vulnerable ecosystems and communities.

Madam Speaker, my Ministry continues to play its part in climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies. The readiness phase of our national REDD+ Programme has progressed significantly, which will eventually transit into results-based payments for carbon in 2020. These payments will directly benefit the forest resource-owners for the conservation and sustainable management of their resources for the purpose of carbon emission reduction.

Madam Speaker, my Ministry is formulating its Strategic Development Plan (SDP) that will guide the sector for the next 13 years. A holistic approach to strategic planning has been adopted, engaging all sectors associated with forestry in order to define goals and initiatives for collaboration in areas that balance the industry and commercial development with conservation.

Madam Speaker, this SDP takes into account stakeholder needs, new forest product development, industry development, forest conservation, managing national forest assets and associated forest-related emerging issues. The SDP also encompasses forest-related international obligations under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and also addresses our national priorities in a cohesive and effective manner that can be monitored over the life of the SDP 2017-2030.

Madam Speaker, under the current Budget, my Ministry received a total of \$16 million, of which \$11.8 million is for Operating Expenditure and \$3.6 million is for Capital Expenditure, targeting two new initiatives, with a total allocation of \$972,000.

A total of \$250,000 is allocated towards promoting, revitalizing and further expansion of the planting, management and awareness of our various indigenous tree species, to ensure the sustainable supply of various multiple forest benefits.

Madam Speaker, \$722,000 is allocated for the purchase of forest harvesting equipment for improved operational efficiency and productivity at the forest community level.

Madam Speaker, one of the priorities of my Ministry is to provide financial and technical support to our maritime pine communities, to ensure their meaningful participation in Fiji's social and economic development. A total budget of \$0.9 million is allocated for the setting up of timber processing facilities to maritime pine, to ensure maximum utilisation and promotion of value-added products. This is part of the capacity building and empowerment that my Ministry, in collaboration with the Fiji Pine Trust has, to support several communities in the production of timber, to meet their building requirements. Excess timber are sold to further contribute to the economic returns from their plantation resource.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry provides an annual subsidy programme whereby small and medium woodcarving enterprises are assisted with woodworking machinery and tools with its associated training. This has resulted in a mosaic of wood-based cottage industries throughout Fiji.

In the last fiscal year, the Ministry had assisted another seven new applicants for this subsidy. This assistance has enabled the improvement of small medium enterprises by increasing productivity, creating high standards and modernising the woodcarving industry which, in the past, was practised in a subsistence manner.

His Excellency the President rightfully mentioned changes in law whereby gender equality is promoted. An excellent example of these changes is apparent in my own Ministry. Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Forests was well known as a male-dominated Ministry over a long period of time. Since the consistent prioritisation of gender equality by this Government, the Ministry has seen a growth in the number of female employees from 7 percent to 43 percent of the Ministry's workforce. A motivational factor for all women in the Ministry is the appointment of the first ever female Conservator of Forests, and I hope this will set precedence for other women foresters in future.

Madam Speaker, suffice to say, both the men and women of the Ministry have been at the forefront in our rebuilding efforts following the *TC Winston* devastation, whether it is with the provision of training, equipment or expertise. They have continued, enabling communities in the salvaging of their forest resources. To date, our efforts have produced 600 cubic meters of sawn timber to sufficiently build 60 houses in Vanua Balavu, Yacata, Bua, Koro, Dawasamu and Nakorotubu in Ra. This, Madam Speaker, is the extent of the outreach that my Ministry has done towards the rebuilding efforts, and will continue to do so.

Madam Speaker, in the short to medium term, it is estimated that the forest sector will generate a total of \$161 million annually, consisting of \$150 million of exports; \$15 million from the sale of timber from private community timber harvestings and \$1 million paid to communities in terms of timber royalties. The revenue generated from fees collected from our harvesting services only amounts to \$0.8 million annually.

In the long term, the trees that we will be planting from this budget alone for the purpose of providing ecosystem services is a total of 750 hectares which will generate \$33 million in 50 years. Within those 50 years, Madam Speaker, the ecosystem services provided by these forests will be even greater. The Ministry has already planted 696 hectares which will contribute to both, economic and ecosystem benefits from degraded areas which would otherwise be idle land.

Madam Speaker, plantations and natural forests, both provide multiple economic, ecosystem and social benefits, which need to be managed and protected to ensure their continued availability for current and future generations. We will continue to train and empower Forest Wardens, who will be playing key roles in minimising illegal forest activities, thus ensuring greater economic returns for forest-dependent communities. The Ministry's enforcement of the Fiji Forest Harvesting Code of Practice has ensured the effective management of the ecosystem and social benefits from forests.

Madam Speaker, the budget allocation for forest production, management and assessment under the 2017-2018 Budget is \$0.9 million, which is for the management and control of forest harvesting operations. This budget will ensure the ongoing improvements on awareness and implementation of new forest management mechanisms, such as the control of harvesting diameters for various timber species.

Madam Speaker, recently, Fiji Pine Limited distributed lease security bonus payments amounting to a record of \$1.5 million to its pine landowners. Two weeks ago, I personally visited Nakadrudru in Bua, Vesidrua in Macuata and Kubulau, to distribute the cheques to the pine landowners and also hear firsthand their issues. It does not surprise me at all that the other side of the House has come up with questions relating to pine industry, which is once again based on untrue facts.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. O. NAIQAMU.- I was expecting this when distributing the cheques two weeks back since it was making news on the media showing emotions and joy of our landowners.

Madam Speaker, instead of appreciating the Bainimarama-led Government's initiative where the landowners are now getting a share of profits from the pine industry, they come up with all those issues which are not based on facts. It seems that they are running out of ammunition and when one is at this stage, he or she should not fire blindly.

Now, coming to the issues raised regarding overplanted areas, it is very irresponsible of them to say that most of the areas are overplanted. Yes, we do have cases of overplanted areas and there are procedures for addressing that. These include:

1. the claim being raised by the landowners to my Ministry;
2. my Ministry refers this matter to Fiji Pine Limited (FPL) for joint verification with iTaukei Land Trust Board on the ground; and
3. once the area is verified to be outside FPL's lease, FPL grants a release letter.

Madam Speaker, in most cases, we have come to know that the claims of overplanted areas arise from incorrect survey data. Upon verification, we find that these are within the FPL's leases.

It is important to note that this issue originated from the SVT Government when the initial leases were taken. We had many Governments, including the SDL, who have come and gone, and no action was taken to address this issue.

Now, when the Bainimarama and the FijiFirst Government set the procedures to address this, the other side has an issue with that. If they have any specific issue that any of the landowners have raised, please do forward that to my Ministry and we will address them. I hope that this is clarified once and for all.

Madam Speaker, Fiji's forest sector is at a crucial point in its development as it tries to capitalise on new opportunities and at the same time, address emerging challenges. As we address the challenges in the short term, we must not lose sight of our long term vision of building a sustainable forest sector, enhancing community livelihood and creating a competitive workforce.

Madam Speaker, my Ministry is committed to setting high standards for conservation and development by working with the people of Fiji and providing opportunities for the sustainable development of their forest resources. The strong partnership between our stakeholders and Government, gives us a unique advantage and we must continue to make conscious efforts to cultivate and strengthen this partnership. By working together as a team, we can leverage on our strengths to position our sector and workforce for any challenges be it local, national, regional or global, and emerge stronger and more united.

Madam Speaker, I would like to express my gratitude to the Government of the day, the staff of my Ministry, our stakeholders and the general public who have provided continued support in the development and prosperity of the forest sector, and to all development partners, non-governmental and community organisations, working towards the wellbeing and progress of our forest-dependent communities and the nation.

In conclusion, I would like to state my full support to His Excellency the President's gracious Speech, and let us be ambitious in shaping a brighter future for our beloved nation. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the Honourable Ratu Inoke Kubuabola.

HON. RATU I. KUBUABOLA.- Madam Speaker, the Honourable Acting Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament: I rise to respond to His Excellency the President's Address at the Opening of the 2017-2018 Session of Parliament. His Excellency's Address has highlighted the progress we have made as a nation.

Madam Speaker, I join His Excellency the President in commendation towards the nation's Constitution of 2013 and the high sound ideals consisted within. The approach towards Government reform in all aspects is evident from the vibrant focus that our Constitution steers the nation and informed governance.

His Excellency the President also expressed onwards to mention that next year's General Elections will be the second election under this Constitution. This is, indeed, significant as this second election is the first for a Government under this Constitution and will attempt to uphold a further tenure in office.

Madam Speaker, let me just remind my colleagues, the Honourable Members from the other side of the House, that the very fact that we are here in this House is because of the 2013 Constitution. Some were criticising the 2013 Constitution yesterday, they are here because of the 2013 Constitution. If they do not like the Constitution, they should go out of this House, and if they continue to dislike this Constitution, they do not stand for election next year.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- How many times do you want me to say, 'order'? Please, we need to hear the Honourable Ratu Inoke Kubuabola.

HON. RATU I. KUBUABOLA.- It hurts to hear the truth, Madam Speaker.

(Laughter)

Madam Speaker, rightly so, the past few years in office has provided the Government of the day, to gauge delivery and forecast the future. And I take this opportunity to inform this august House that the Ministry, through the assigned Disciplinary Forces, is prepared, leading up to the General Election of 2018 and in the events following, to ensure that not only is stability imperative but that the Elections is run safely and transparently.

I wish to applaud the Fijian Elections Office for an impeccable service in the 2014 General Election, earning them superb international recognition, and I look forward to seeing the Fiji Elections Office do even better next year. In the Ministry, we will do our part to preserve law and order; and keep the Fijian people secure in the lead-up to the Election.

Madam Speaker, in my response this time last year, I pledged to work with my fellow Honourable Members of Parliament to:

- Make our communities safer for women and children, so they can live lives of dignity without fear of gender-based violence, child neglect and child physical and sexual abuse;

- Make our communities safer for home and business owners;
- Build the capacity of our authorities through appropriate training and acquisition of proper and up-to-date equipment; and
- Strengthen our borders against human and drug traffickers, money launderers and terrorists.

Madam Speaker, we have made progress in meeting those pledges through various legislations that the Ministry has committed to review, namely; the Security Industry Act and the Fiji Police Act.

The review of the Security Industry Act 2010 is well underway and the Ministry has held numerous consultations with the legislative arm. The Ministry, through the Act, intends to work closely with stakeholders to improve on the processes and regularise the necessary areas to govern the security industry properly.

Madam Speaker, the review of the Fiji Police Act is progressing through continued consultations with relevant stakeholders, with the view to present a final draft to the Office of the Solicitor-General by the end of the year.

In line with the Fiji Police Force's modernisation project, it has embarked on institutional restructure that will strengthen its capability to curb multifaceted and trans-border crimes by making the Force more capable of meeting 21st Century challenges.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry through the Fiji Police, is building mechanisms to deal with substance abuse and areas of anti-doping. Through various international bilateral engagements, the Ministry seeks to step up the campaign against transnational crimes, such as narcotics.

Locally, there are ongoing initiatives for the review of the Illicit Drugs Act to enhance empowerment to the Fiji Police Forensic Chemistry. The Ministry will host the two-day workshop on narcotics towards the end of this month.

Madam Speaker, His Excellency the President in his statement, mentioned the unprecedented progress in our nation's development and economic growth. I would like to highlight the importance of the Ministry and the institutions assigned under the Ministry - the Republic of the Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) and the Fiji Police Force (FPF), have for the Fijian economy and the prosperity of every Fijian because without security, there can be no economic growth, no development and no bright future for the Fijian people.

The RFMF and the FPF are both major sources of employment for our people, and we are embarking on another recruitment drive this year. The recruitment policies of both Forces support the goal and gender-mainstreaming, as mandated by the UN requirements.

His Excellency the President, spoke on this Government's commitment to gender equality and on its campaign to end sexual and domestic violence. The Ministry fully supports that campaign. I still hold great confidence in Community Policing through the Duavata Community Policing Programme. This Programme is dependent upon public support of Police actions. The creation of partnerships between law enforcement agencies, like the Police, and community organisations has a marked effect on public engagement, and works to create a deeper and more effective partnership between the public and the Police. Inherent in this interactive partnership is the acknowledgment

that preventing crime is not only the responsibility of the Police, but is rather an obligation shared with every Fijian.

Madam Speaker, I have been fortunate to tour the nation, visiting the various Divisions to gauge the needs of our Police Officers. During those tours, I was able to correspond with the various Crime Committees and Municipal Commerce Council Boards, and determined the situations faced by our Officers on the ground. The Ministry was able to plan out more specific areas to contest crime in many facets, but the area of Community Policing has been a proven workable plan when intense commitment is rendered towards the Programme.

Madam Speaker, the introduction of a National Crime Board is envisaged to complement the Duavata Community Policing at the grassroots level. The Board will comprise of various sectors, including faith-based organisations, civil society, NGOs and others, and to support its critical role as an advisory body to Government through the Minister responsible, on recommended policies, initiatives and best practices as part of our effort to reduce crime nationwide.

Madam Speaker, again, I wish to acknowledge the support of the Government and Defence Forces from Australia, China, France, India, Indonesia, New Zealand, United States of America and all other countries, organisations and individuals, who tirelessly assisted our nation following the aftermath of *TC Winston* in February last year.

Again, I would like to acknowledge and celebrate the resilience of our people in the aftermath of *TC Winston*. The Fijian people have shown unity, and they have showed love towards one another, as fellow countrymen in the shadow of the devastation. Yes, the rebuilding process is long, but we always knew that, that would be the case. We are making gradual progress to rebuild our nation to a higher standard, more capable of withstanding the ravages of climate change because His Excellency the President stated, "it is better to maintain a steady pace to resilience and security". I strongly endorse his words, as it also applies directly to the work of my Ministry.

The National Security Strategy (NSS) headed by the Ministry has paced to its final stages through this fiscal year, 2017-2018. The NSS which was principally endorsed by the National Security Defence Council and Cabinet in April and May 2016, has planned, through its endorsed Concept of Operations, that the NSS Secretariat is to be operational and effectively functioning by June 2018. In preparing for June 2018, the NSS Work Plan focusses on internal strengthening and consolidation of resources within the Ministry.

I wish to revisit, Madam Speaker, Fiji's Presidency of the General Assembly through Ambassador Peter Thomson and the upward cadence to Fiji's leadership of COP23 by our Honourable Prime Minister. A major reason we have assumed such pivotal leadership roles on the global stage is because we have earned a stellar reputation abroad through our Fijian Peacekeepers and Disciplined Forces.

Madam Speaker, the national security landscape and indeed, the global security environment is dynamic and has become unpredictable at best, as criminal elements use ever-evolving technologies to advance their evil interest and purposes. As part of the reforms, we will work to ensure that our FPF and the RFMF are doing everything possible to keep the Fijian people safe and meet our international obligations. With our ultimate goal being that, both Forces are looked to by every Fijian as steadfast protectors of their communities and of the progress that we are all making for Fiji.

Madam Speaker, the FPF is being challenged with the task of tackling new and multifaceted crimes that transcend national borders and invade the privacy of our citizens through social media.

This calls for an adequately resourced Police Force, particularly in the area of information technology. The Ministry is planning a Cyber Security Workshop during the fiscal year to clamp down on any avenue that leaves our nation vulnerable to cybercrime.

Madam Speaker, our commitment to the RFMF Cadetship Programme is that, schools will continue, given the tremendous good we have achieved in instilling students with discipline, responsible citizenry and leadership ability.

The Ministry is also seeking to improve Fiji's visibility by engaging with bilateral partners to enhance our peacekeeping Contingent Owned Equipment. The purchasing of the 10 Bushmaster Personnel Mobility Vehicles or PMVs from Australia and the deployment of the seven to the UNDOF Mission has certainly reinforced our peacekeeping capacity and helped us meet the pledges announced by our Honourable Prime Minister in New York in November 2015.

The plans for the RFMF Blackrock Complex in Votualevu, Nadi, stages currently as a peacekeeping training purpose for pre-deployment, looks to primarily serve in the humanitarian context of a Humanitarian Assistance and Relief Centre HADR. The complex will aim to train and react to HADR issues when required and activated.

Madam Speaker, in the last fiscal year, the Ministry has engaged with religious and faith-based communities and organisations, community leaders, businesses and NGOs to work in various facets relevant to building a safer, secure and prosperous Fiji. That commitment to engagement at every level of our society will continue because at the end of the day, all the work we do is to bring security and stability into the lives of our people, and it is critical we bring their voices to the forefront of our campaign across Fiji.

Madam Speaker, in closing, I wish to continue to pay tribute and acknowledge the efforts of our Peacekeepers from the Discipline Forces - the RFMF, the FPF and the Fiji Corrections Service deployed overseas. Their impeccable service only increases our footprint on the global stage as a reputable, responsible member State of the United Nations. I would also like to thank their families for their great support and diligent sacrifice.

I wish to conclude, Madam Speaker, in reiterating His Excellency's statement to leave aside petty squabbles, rivalries, divisions and grandstanding for personal and political gain.

We all look forward to Fiji's leadership internationally, again with the headship of the COP23 that lies with our Honourable Prime Minister and deliver justly in this opportunity, given our responsibility not only to our people but also to our region.

I wish to thank His Excellency, Madam Speaker, for his endowed statement in his Opening Address last week and look forward to this new Session of Parliament. All eyes are indeed on Fiji. May God Bless you all. *Vinaka vakalevu, dhanyabaad* and thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the Honourable Jilila Kumar.

HON. J.N. KUMAR.- The Honourable Speaker, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Cabinet Ministers and Honourable Colleagues: first and foremost, I wish to acknowledge and thank His Excellency the President, Major-General (Retired), Jioji Konousi Konrote, for His most gracious Speech at the Opening of the 2017-2018 Session of Parliament. To sum up His Excellency's Speech, I would say that Fiji is going towards the right direction.

The unprecedented economic growth we have experienced is resulting in all Fijians sharing the cake of this progress. This is due to well-planned policies and programmes by this Government which is making the lives of ordinary Fijians easier and comfortable.

My speech today, Madam Speaker, is based on Fijian dreams and aspirations. I personally believe that in order for one nation to prosper economically, socially, spiritually and intellectually, first and foremost, our nation must embrace and promote our Constitution. This Constitution is rooted in the ideology of one nation, one people and one identity. Only then, we can achieve what I would call the Fijian Dream.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.N. KUMAR.- You may be curious about what is the Fijian Dream.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- We will only continue when there are no interjections.

Thank you. We will give you extra time.

HON. J.N. KUMAR.- You may be curious about what is the Fijian Dream. It is not complicated, it is simply the desire for:

- security;
- solidarity;
- shared opportunities;
- equality;
- love;
- peace;
- happiness; and
- good health.

Those can only be achieved unless and until we all accept and believe in our Constitution, which embraces the ideologies of one nation, one people and one identity.

The FijiFirst Government is leading the nation to the right direction to achieve the Fijian Dreams. The Government is translating the ideals of the Constitution into practical, efficient and effective legislation that drive the country's development.

The ideas of unity, one nation and one people are important. This is a challenge to all Fijians, particularly Honourable Members of this august House, that we must accept one another and look after one another, no matter who we are, where we come from, how we look like, rich or poor, able or disabled, young or old, we are one in God's Kingdom.

Madam Speaker, I have been travelling around Fiji and I am amazed to observe first-hand the development that is taking place, such as the building of basic infrastructure, like roads, bridges, jetties and extension of electricity supply to our often isolated communities. These are what all Fijians are always looking forward to, to have proper roads, lights and transportation to make life easier and safe, particularly people who live in rural and remote areas of Fiji.

It is unfair to say that roads and bridges are not done, but one must remember that we are not looking at one area only, we are looking at the whole of Fiji, and someone can imagine the number

of roads and bridges to be upgraded and constructed. One thing that needs to be noted is that, the Government must be acknowledged with the rate in which development is taking place and this is one of the greatest periods of progress ever experienced by our country since the birth of our nation.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.N. KUMAR.- Madam Speaker, for the first time, more of our children are able to go to schools and universities. Parents and their children's dreams have been achieved because of free bus fares, supplementary breakfast, free tuition, Toppers Scholarship and TELS.

A lot of argument has been said about TELS Scholarship. One must be reminded that this loan scheme is different from other student loan schemes because it does not require any guarantee or guarantor, no deposit, and it can only be paid back when a recipient actually begins his or her employment. One must understand that this is the time when students really need assistance the most, particularly when their parents cannot afford to send them to school or university. They are not only assisted with their fees, but also given other allowances and benefits.

Most parents whom I have met and talked to, are very happy when their hopes and aspirations are met. As a former teacher and administrator, we all want to see our students go to university, not only to achieve their dreams but to get decent employment, earn a living and contribute to national development.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.N. KUMAR.- Madam Speaker, it is also equally important to highlight that the people of Fiji are enjoying the benefits of sharing equal distribution of wealth, particularly lease money amongst members of a landowning unit. This also apply to distribution of royalties to the Fiji Pine Landowning Unit. This is a dream that they never dreamt about, and it only comes from a Government who cares about its people.

With the FijiFirst Government's policies and initiatives, Madam Speaker, people are given access and opportunities to affordable housing, small entrepreneurs are given assistance to expand their businesses and farmers in our important agriculture sector are given the help they need. The Government has facilitated the extension of leases for agricultural purposes, it has increased social welfare benefits, and the list goes on.

The Fijian Dream, Madam Speaker, gives people the freedom of worship and this Government respects people's beliefs and religion. This is biblical because God does not force anyone to worship Him.

No one can deny that businesses are flourishing and growing rapidly. Local and overseas investors are investing in Fiji because they have faith in this Government.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.N. KUMAR.- We can all share this opportunity with sheer determination and right planning because the Government is always ready to assist its people, and all Fijians should make use of this golden opportunity.

We are now living in the 21st Century and we must change our behaviour and attitude by always telling the truth to people who are under our care, if we really care for them. As responsible

Members of Parliament, it is our utmost responsibility not to mislead people because we will be answerable to God for what we say and do.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.N. KUMAR.- I will wait, Madam Speaker.

Before I conclude, Madam Speaker, I wish to take this opportunity to thank every one of you for your hard work and perseverance and a very special acknowledgement to our Honourable Prime Minister for his scrupulous leadership and passion in leading the Government and taking Fiji forward to where it is today. The people of Fiji are very happy because our Honourable Prime Minister always answers their call whenever they call him, and also attend to them when they come and see him during Parliament Sittings. He is the only Prime Minister who does this.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.N. KUMAR.- Thank you, Sir. I think he must be listening and I wish him all the best, as he prepares to preside over COP23 in November in Germany. Fiji, I would say, is a melting pot of the South Pacific and we can work hard and persevere together as Fijians to make Fiji a peculiar nation where all Fijians work together and be each other's keepers.

May God bless you all and bless Fiji. Thank you for your indulgence, Madam Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Are we ready to hear the next Honourable Member?

HON. MEMBERS.- Yes.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I now give the floor to the Honourable Parveen Kumar.

HON. P.B. KUMAR.- Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the Honourable Acting Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and Honourable Members; I rise to address the statement delivered by His Excellency the President.

Madam Speaker, at the outset, I wish to reiterate and reaffirm the sentiments that support the statements made by His Excellency the President.

The Address by His Excellency the President was both, inspiring and admirable, in the vein of some of the greatest speeches ever made in this august House and beyond. Madam Speaker, I was moved by his call for a people-based and focussed election that promotes national development and the ethos of a Fijian people that is united in its aims and aspirations for a better Fiji.

Madam Speaker, the former US President, John F. Kennedy, said in his famous speech on 26th June, 1963, and I quote:

“(It is) an offence not only against history but an offence against humanity, separating families, dividing husbands and wives, brothers and sisters and dividing a people who wish to be joined together.”

Madam Speaker, in 2020, we will reach a milestone of the 50th year of Fiji's Independence. For most of this period, Madam Speaker, we were trapped in walls divided us; walls of hatred and communalism.

Madam Speaker, in the elections, the fight was between Fijians and Indians rather than on policies and development.

HON. MEMBERS.- Justice!

HON. P.B. KUMAR.- Madam Speaker, one has to realise how powerful the 2013 Constitution is by getting everyone together.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- (Inaudible)

HON. P.B. KUMAR.- I am coming to you, you will get it from me today.

During the first term of the FijiFirst Government, we have committed to breaking down these walls to unite all Fijians. This was not just political speechmaking but a concerted and concentrated effort to make one Fiji for all Fijians.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.B. KUMAR.- History will judge Fiji for many things in its 50 years; some bad, some good. Madam Speaker, but history will have to judge this radical transformation of our country into one united force, as one of the greatest achievements among former Colonial State, celebrating their first 50 years of Independence.

Madam Speaker, listening to responses over the past day of Parliament from the Opposition, I strongly feel that these achievements and the heeding of universal values of peace, progress and unity carries little or no weight for most of them.

Madam Speaker, I must note the gutter level of politics in calls for communalism that Honourable Members of the Opposition are making, in calling for a return to a divided and regressive Fiji. This will be a mistake of massive proportions. The people of Fiji spoke clearly and loudly in the last Election and they will do the same come 2018, rejecting walls that divide us.

Madam Speaker, I do not wish to labour the point or turn to God to make a point, the facts speak for itself. Once again, we have an Opposition that relies on rhetoric and pulpit-styled sermons rather than making any concrete or material contribution to this country.

(Hon. Opposition Member interjects)

HON. P.B. KUMAR.- I am responding to you now.

Talk facts, talk figures, talk business and talk development on eight years of growth, of lowest level of employment, of social and economic indicators of a better Fiji. But, Madam Speaker, how can we expect them to talk about all those when they are ringing in praises of walls and pulling out the race card?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Shame, shame!

HON. P.B. KUMAR.- Madam Speaker, when this august House reconvened for the current Session of Parliament, I was hoping against hope for some shared constructive dialogue from the Opposition. As I said, Madam Speaker, I was hoping against hope and have to come to the conclusion that there is no hope for any constructive contribution from Honourable Members of the Opposition. In fact, Madam Speaker, I do not blame them because most of the time they have to solve and resolve their internal bickering - *kachkach*.

(Laughter)

Failing that, we have to rally against their calls for a divided Fiji. We cannot and will not have that.

Madam Speaker, the reference to the Bible and supremacy of one God over another is the work of mischief-makers and false prophets. False prophets have worked against the very people who profess to be prophets. It used to be they, who were also often rural dwellers of our society that these false prophets prey upon. They have to wake up at sometimes, I mean, the false prophets.

Madam Speaker, I am reliably told that false prophets do wake up from time to time and I live more in hope of that, than fear. And when they wake up, they will come to terms with the new reality that our rural people are a lot better off now than ever before, as the FijiFirst Government has rolled out a massive number of developments for them. Hopefully they will realise that we are better educated and more mobile than ever before all over Fiji. In either case, Madam Speaker, the work of false prophets and politicians is the work of the devil, and we know that the devil does not deliver on any promise, false or not.

Madam Speaker, instead, as believers in leadership through service and delivery of our services, we will work with the provisions of the 2013 Fijian Constitution, a constitution whose vision and success we celebrated in unity and harmony just last week and thanks to the Honourable Prem Singh for attending.

Madam Speaker, as His Excellency the President remarked in his Address, the success of a constitution provides the foundation for a progressive and harmonious society. I would like to add to the sentiments of the Address that the success of the Constitution also comes from the political will of the FijiFirst Government, who in their first term of governance, delivered on all accounts to the people of Fiji. When the FijiFirst Government took oath of office under the 2013 Constitution, it committed to the people of Fiji by pledging allegiance to the supreme law of our land; I really do not know with the case of the Opposition. And we have continued to uphold our pledge and allegiance in ensuring our commitment to delivering on our policies, even in the face of adversity.

As our Honourable Prime Minister had pointed out on numerous occasions, we lost more than a third of our GDP when *TC Winston* struck. If we need indisputable proof of a resilient people backed by a government committed to their recovery and well-being, Madam Speaker, you will not find a better example, than our rise post-*TC Winston*. We not only recovered, but we sustained continued economic growth through this adverse period.

Madam Speaker, a Constitution, which as His Excellency the President had pointed out in his Address, moves us forward towards development and progress for all, regardless of any walls or divides that is proposed for us, or as some Honourable Opposition Members profess to do, as a divine ordination for their mischief-making and work for darker powers.

Madam Speaker, to paraphrase the late former US President, John F. Kennedy, and I quote, (we want a government) "whose public acts are responsible to all and obligated to none". As a

Government, we are committed to a Fiji for all Fijians and what our minds dictate to be in the national interest of Fiji and for all for Fijians, and nothing will change that.

Madam Speaker, I have said this before in this august House and I will say it again, what the Constitution provides for in paper, we, the FijiFirst Government, will deliver on the ground.

Madam Speaker, once again, we have unfounded attacks on the Constitution by the Honourable Members of the Opposition. The real issue is not with this document, the issue is with how the FijiFirst Government is able to deliver on its promises. This is the real problem they have and I know that they are worried about what they are going to say during the Election. Let me repeat, Madam Speaker, that this delivery on what is promised is the real reason for the Opposition's continued attack on the founding document of our beloved nation.

The FijiFirst Government, in its first term of Office, has delivered good, accountable, transparent and progressive governance for all Fijians from all walks of life and from all corners of our beautiful islands. This was what His Excellency the President referred to when he urged the House to contest the next Election on the basis of, "... policies over the future, not ethnicity, religion or geography."

His Excellency said in the opening of the 2016-2017 Session of Parliament that he is a true servant of this nation, a soldier, civil servant, politician and a people's President.

Madam Speaker, let me add to that and say that in addressing issues of global concern on climate change, His Excellency has elevated Fiji and his high office as a global statesman with his comments on our role as a nation in meeting the realities of climate change. In his Address, His Excellency impressed upon us the need for clarity of purpose and the strength of steel in our convictions on climate change and to merge local concerns with the ever-growing wave of international and global action on climate change. Fiji's action on climate change is headlined by the Honourable Prime Minister's Presidency of COP23.

Madam Speaker, we, as a nation, look forward to our Small Island States, leading the 197 countries gathered at the COP23 in Bonn, Germany, towards consensus and concerted global action on climate change. Yet, Madam Speaker, as the country gears for global leadership of COP23, the usual elements, including the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, are bent on putting us into reverse gear when it comes to climate change.

Madam Speaker, I was disappointed in the media reports based on statements made by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition relating to our towns and cities. It is hard to work out from exactly where and how the Honourable Leader of the Opposition has got her information in the statements made by her and published in the media on 29th August, 2017. Maybe, it came from her coconut wireless service based on the *bilibili* model for action on climate change.

(Laughter)

Madam Speaker, in response, I would like to highlight some of the actions and awareness on climate change across my Ministry. The Honourable Leader of the Opposition, in particular, pointed fingers at our towns and cities and the environment management that needs to be corrected.

In line with our commitment to the Paris Agreement, the streetlights have been changed to 100 watts and 120 watts LEDs. There are a number of green initiatives with a pilot project in Nailaga on solar lighting that will become the model to spread this initiative to other villages and settlements.

Madam Speaker, these pilot projects will extend to the use of renewal energy and sustainable building design and construction across my Ministry in Housing, Transport and Local Government, all designed to reduce our carbon footprints.

Our towns and cities are at forefront of actions and advocacy on climate change. Madam Speaker, let me point out some of the highlights:

1. We have embarked on major coastal erosion mitigation projects through Municipal Councils in Savusavu, Nasinu and Lami, to combat the effects of climate change.
2. We have begun construction of Fiji's first climate change park in Tavua, using reused and recycled materials, with awareness and mitigation programmes that will include all segments of the local communities.
3. Nadi has joined the Global Compact of Mayors and this will lead to major initiatives in measuring carbon emission in Nadi as a pilot for our municipal centres. We will highlight this data on global monitoring platforms under GCoM, to establish benchmarks so that we can set targets for carbon emission reduction.
4. In Levuka, mitigation of coastal erosion with the related mitigation of creek ecosystem, with the binding systems made from reused aluminium fish scrap bins.
5. In Municipal Councils across Fiji, we have embarked on upgrading and bringing in best practices in waste management as well as advocacy on action programmes on climate change using platforms, such as municipal markets in programmes that are of benefit, in particular, our rural women vendors.
6. All Municipal Council carnivals focus on action advocacy and I am pleased to note that proactive role played by our contestants and the carnivals in taking climate change awareness to local communities across Fiji.

Madam Speaker, comments have been made on the lack of enforcement of regulations at the local government level, so let me give some facts on this.

- We have issued more than 6,000 littering notices from last year up to-date.
- We have taken five cases through the DPP's Office against those waste removal contractors found illegally dumping rubbish. This sends a strong message that enforcement of the Anti-Litter Decree will continue.
- We will increase efforts to ensure a Litter Free Environment not just in urban areas but also in peri-urban and rural areas by placing large waste skip bins.

Madam Speaker, in this last Parliament session, I would like to thank and acknowledge the work of the various Sections and Departments under my portfolio of Local Government, Housing, Environment, Infrastructure and Transport.

I would also like to thank and acknowledge all the stakeholders, corporate entities, inter-governmental agencies and local, regional and international partners for their contributions to our work. The Ministry covers significant areas and much of our work focusses on development aspects of our Government. I look forward to the continued input by my Ministry and all stakeholders,

particularly in our initiatives on climate change. We will continue to work on the principle of action and advocacy on this pressing global issue.

Madam Speaker, before I conclude, I just want respond to some of the statements made by the Honourable Bulitavu yesterday in regards to the National Candidate List of the 2014 General Election. Being a lawyer, he should know better that the matter is before the Supreme Court and he should not have touched that. It is better that he withdraws that.

Secondly, he talked about common identity. He forgot that the leader of his party had already accepted in this august House the common identity. The problem now is maybe, he does not know which leader, as there are two leaders.

(Laughter)

Thirdly, Madam Speaker, he also touched on the disabled access and the Honourable Minister has covered that well yesterday in her response.

Madam Speaker, let me congratulate the Honourable Prime Minister for his upcoming Presidency of COP23, and wish the team representing Fiji at the pre-COP23 and COP23 meetings the best. I know that my Ministry, like all Fijians, will look forward to initiatives on climate action arising from negotiations at COP23, so we can all meet climate change challenges as a united global community.

In his final Address during this term of Government, Madam Speaker, and keeping in mind the key points raised in the Address to Parliament by His Excellency the President, I have limited my contribution to programmes that relate to good governance and climate change.

In closing, Madam Speaker, once again, I would like to thank His Excellency for his thoughts on a way forward for all of us in this House as we seek to lead our nation. I know, it will motivate us in keeping to the foundation of leadership by serving all Fijians for this generation and generations to come. I invite everyone in this House to heed the words of His Excellency and closely examine our own words and deeds when we strive to lead the nation. Let us forget about all those slogans and words, let us work for the betterment of this country and its people. May God bless us and may God bless Fiji.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Members. We will now adjourn Parliament to have refreshment because we are not able to accommodate the next speaker within the time left. We will resume at 11.30 a.m.

Thank you, Honourable Members.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.50 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.30 a.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Members, you may be seated.

We will now resume from where we left off and I now give the floor to the Honourable Dr. Brij Lal.

HON. DR. B. LAL.- Madam Speaker; the Honourable Acting Prime Minister; the Honourable Leader of the Opposition; Honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers; Honourable Members of Parliament and the Fijian audience: *bula re*.

Madam Speaker, I take this opportunity to thank His Excellency the President for His most gracious Speech delivered at the Opening of Parliament on 4th September, 2017.

Madam Speaker, I will be speaking on the subject – Youth Becoming Responsible and Productive Citizens of Fiji. Youth is:

- that spark which needs no ignition; and
- that clay which can be moulded into other shapes one wants.

Our aim should always be to make youths dream big. They are the marbles of the universe. Let us create the youths as great thinkers so that they can become great creators.

Helen Clark, the Administrator of UNDP and Chair of the United Nations Group said, and I quote:

“Today’s generation of young people is the largest the world has ever known. One in every three people alive today is under the age of 30 and around 90 percent of the young people are living in developing countries, mainly in Asia and Africa.”

Madam Speaker, let me look at some statistics on youth:

1. The number of youths between the age of 15 and 24 is 1.8 billion and this accounts for nearly 40 percent of the world’s population.
2. Geographically speaking, the largest population of youth is concentrated in Asia and the Pacific. Approximately 60 percent of the youth live in Asia; 15 percent in Africa; 10 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean and the remaining 15 percent in other developed countries and regions.
3. Approximately 238 million youths live in extreme poverty, that is, they live on less than \$1 per day; 462 million youth survive on less than \$2 a day. We are so lucky that this does not happen in Fiji under the FijiFirst Government.
4. About 255 million young people live in the 19 countries with the largest poverty gaps; 15 of these 19 countries are in sub-Saharan Africa.
5. About 133 million youth in the world are illiterate while 110 million youth live in hunger. We are lucky as our literacy rate in Fiji is higher than 97 percent.
6. Youth comprise 41 percent of the world’s unemployed people.

Madam Speaker, the 2014 United Nations Population Fund Report states that India has the world's largest youth population as follows:

1. India - 356 million;
2. China - 269 million;
3. Indonesia - 67 million;
4. US - 65 million;
5. Pakistan - 59 million;
6. Nigeria - 57 million;
7. Brazil - 51 million; and
8. Bangladesh - 48 million.

Ban Ki-moon, the Secretary-General of the United Nations said, and I quote:

“The world has the largest generation of young people in history. I place great hope in their power to shape our future.”

This is what Daniel Webster said about the youth, and I quote:

“If we work upon marble, it will perish. If we work upon brass, time will efface it. If we rear temples, they will crumble to dust. But if we work upon men's immortal minds, if we imbue them with high principles, with the just fear of God and love of their fellow men, we engrave on those tables something which no time can efface, and which will brighten and brighten to all eternity.”

Our youths are the vibrant heart of the nation and our true treasure on whom we count for the advancement and progress of our nation. The FijiFirst Government has adopted many programmes that serve young people, and some of these programmes include:

- The Tuition Fee Free Grant;
- School Transport Assistance Scheme;
- Free Text Book Scheme;
- Tertiary Education Loan Scheme;
- National Toppers Scheme;
- Youth Entrepreneur Scheme;
- Youth Capacity Development;
- Youth Development Programmes like sports, agriculture, health and education;
- Agricultural Programmes like the ones offered at Tutu Training Centre in Taveuni;
- Various SME programmes;
- Health and Wellness Programmes; and
- Other programmes in the area of health, civic education, leadership, food security, life skills training and Duke of Edinburgh Awards Programme.

The National Youth Policy focusses on the following eight key areas:

1. Youth empowerment and livelihood opportunities;
2. Leadership, good governance and human rights;
3. Sports and recreation;
4. The health of the Youth;
5. Life-learning training;
6. Vulnerable youths;
7. Cultural and religious values and virtues; and

8. Environmental sustainability.

Madam Speaker, D. Mridha once said; "You cannot have a beautiful life if you always focus on the ugliness of others." The FijiFirst Government is looking at the holistic development of the youth. The voice of the youth is unique and strong and they want their voices to be heard. Everyone dreams of living in a prosperous Fiji, a happy Fiji, a peaceful Fiji and a safe Fiji which FijiFirst has created.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- *Vinaka.*

HON. DR. B. LAL.- Our Honourable Minister for Economy went around the country to hear the views of the youth so that their views and thoughts could be included in our Budget.

HON. A. SUDHAKAR.- Listen, listen!

HON. DR. B. LAL.- After the Budget, once again he went out around to high schools, tertiary institutions and youth organisations for further discussions. I quote the Honourable Minister for Economy saying:

"Today in Fiji, 69.9 percent of the total population is below the age of 40, so we need to know what their priorities are, what are their development agendas and where do they need the finance."

Madam Speaker, the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan said, and I quote:

"Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be the key agents for development and peace. If, however, they are left on society's margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have the opportunity to participate fully in the lives of our societies."

Our youth are equal to all under the FijiFirst Government.

The 13th century Persian Sufi poet, Jalaluddin Rumi, beautifully composed these lines on youth. The poem is titled, "Wings to Fly", and I quote:

"I am born with potential;
I was born with goodness and trust;
I am born with ideas and dreams;
I am born with greatness;
I am born with confidence;
I am born with courage;
So, I am not meant for crawling; and
I have wings, I will fly, I will fly and fly."

Madam Speaker, the FijiFirst Government is developing these wings for our youths.

Madam Speaker, our youths have all these qualities. It is the FijiFirst Government that is further developing qualities like:

- "1. Courage in our youth**
Courage to think differently;
Courage to invent;

Courage to travel into an unexplored path;
 Courage to discover the impossible;
 Courage to combat the problems and succeed;

2. Unique youths

When we think of electronic lights, we think of Thomas Edison;
 When we think of aeroplanes, we think of the Wright Brothers;
 When we think of telephone, we think of Alexander Graham Bell;

How do our youths become unique?

They just need a happy home. A happy home includes the following:

- Spiritual home, mother's happiness (that is why we have so many crime free villages in Fiji today), transparency of the home and providing clean and green environment."

There is a mission called the Mother Smile Mission. They have a mission which everyone should take note of, and let me read that:

"From today onwards I will make my mother happy;
 If my mother is happy my home will be happy;
 If my home is happy, my society will be happy;
 If societies are happy, the State will be happy; and
 If the State is happy, the nation will be happy."

Madam Speaker, Fiji is proud to have produced several unique people in the area of sports, education, medicine, business, music and entertainment and peacekeeping.

1. Creativity. It is often said "what worked yesterday, will not work today".

Even ideas that just a few years made millions are now stale and sour.

Madam Speaker, Denis Waitley, in his book, "*Empires of the Mind*", gives the following examples:

1. "Yesterday - natural resources defined power,
 Today - knowledge is power.
2. Yesterday - Hierarchy was the model,
 Today - synergy is the mandate.
3. Yesterday - leaders commanded and controlled,
 Today - leaders empower and coach.
4. Yesterday - shareholders came first,
 Today - customers come first.
5. Yesterday - employees took order,
 Today - teams make decisions.
6. Yesterday - seniority signified status,
 Today - creativity drives status.

7. Yesterday - production determined availability,
Today- competition is the key.
8. Yesterday - value was extra,
Today - value is everything.
9. Yesterday - everyone was a competitor,
Today - everyone is a customer.
10. Yesterday - profits were earned through expediency,
Today - work with integrity and succeed with integrity.”

Madam Speaker, this is why the FijiFirst Government brought in the Civil Service Reform.

Madam Speaker, I had said earlier that India has the world's largest youth population of 356 million. During the time of the President, Professor Abdul Kalam, he developed the Oath for the Youth since the planet earth is facing many conflicts, both natural and man-made. All the youths have a responsibility to work in universal harmony by ironing out all causes of conflicts. The Oath of the Youth reads like this:

- “1. I will have a goal and work hard to achieve the goal. I realise that small aim is a crime.
2. I will always be righteous in my heart, which leads to beauty in the character; beauty in the character brings harmony in the home, harmony in the home leads to order in the nation and order in the nation leads to peace in the world.
3. I will work with integrity and succeed with integrity.
4. I will be a good member of the family, a good member of the society, a good member of the nation and a good member of the world.
5. I will always try to save or better someone's life. Wherever I am, a thought will always come into my mind that is, “what can I give?”.
6. I will always protect and enhance the dignity of every human life.
7. I will always remember that; let not my winged days, be spent in vain.
8. I will work for Clean Green Energy and Clean Planet Earth.
9. As a youth of the nation, I will work with courage to achieve success in all my tasks and enjoy the success of others.”

Those youth have much pride in their country and do their very best.

Madam Speaker, we love and keep hearing the quote and saying “Rome was not built in a day”. We fail to remember that Rome was eventually built, and it must have been so magnificent that when people admired it, they were told that it did not just happen in a day. The question then is, if Rome was not built in a day, how long was it built?” Madam Speaker, the answer is, it was built everyday, it was built everyday.

Madam Speaker, it is exactly the same with our youths, the FijiFirst Government is building them everyday by providing them new initiatives, new incentives and jobs with lucrative salaries. The saying of Tariq Jahan, a student of Allahabad University, says: "People without education are like weapons without bullets."

Madam Speaker, if we look at the vision of youth organisations like: I have a Dream Foundation, One Hope, Per Scholar, Scouts, Guides, Adventures of Mind, United Front, Global Youth, Princes Youth, Youth on Board - they all emphasise on developing the youth. We are not behind, Fiji has progressed and our youth are advancing with great possible education, skills development, learning for tomorrow and exploring the uncharted areas of creating a better life and a better society.

Madam Speaker, my advice to the youths of Fiji is the words of affirmation presented by Yee Shun-Jian in his book "*101 Powerful Affirmations.*" These affirmations are about opportunity for youths:

1. Today, I will open my mind to the endless opportunities surrounding me.
2. Opportunities are everywhere, if I choose to see them.
3. I boldly act on greater opportunities when I see them.
4. My intuition leads me to the most lucrative opportunities.
5. An opportunity is simply a possibility until I act on it.
6. Some of the best opportunities are made, not found.
7. Today, I see each moment as a new opportunity to express my greatness.
8. I expand my awareness of a hidden potential in each experience.
9. Let each of my experience today be a gateway to something even better.
10. Each decision I make creates new opportunities."

Madam Speaker, it is time for me to share a short story on "Do your own work."

A young man arrived at a railway station. He was looking for someone to carry his luggage to a nearby college, where he was enrolled as a student. He looked all over the place and finally saw an elderly person walking towards him. The simple looking man approached this young man and asked him, "Why are you looking so worried? The young man said, "I am a new student at this college, I need someone to carry my luggage." This simple person picked up the luggage and walked to the college. When the young man offered him some money, the elderly man refused and said, "One should try to do one's own and not depend on others for such small jobs". The next day, the new student, the young man was shocked to see that the man who had carried his luggage was no other than the Principal of the College.

Madam Speaker, Franklin Roosevelt rightfully said this for the youth: "We cannot always build the future for the youths but we can built our youths for the future."

Madam Speaker, let me end by reminding everyone of the words of the great poet, writer and a winner of the World Noble Prize, Rabindranath Tagore, for his words had elevated me and many others in our thoughts and actions, and it reads:

"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not broken down into narrow domestic walls;
Where words comes out from the depth of Truth;
Where tireless strivings stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary sand of dead habits;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action;
Into that heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake”

This is where the FijiFirst Government is leading Fiji to.

Madam Speaker, FijiFirst is not deciding what should be done tomorrow, but what should be done today to have that good tomorrow. I wish the youth of Fiji good luck.

Madam Speaker, I thank you and the Honourable Members for their patience. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I now give the floor to the Honourable Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu.

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- The Honourable Acting Prime Minister; Honourable Ministers and Members of the Cabinet; Honourable Leader of the Opposition and my colleagues, Honourable Members of this august House: I rise to join the Honourable Members of this august House to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Speech.

As we embark on this last Parliamentary Session before the anticipated Elections in 2018, this is an opportune time to reflect on the state of affairs of the nation and take stock of what we have achieved and the opportunities we have missed. As such, Madam Speaker, our deliberation in this debate is not against His Excellency the President or the presidency, but the legislative agenda, policy direction and mismanagement of the state of affairs made by the FijiFirst Government.

To begin with, Madam Speaker, I commend His Excellency the President for his visionary and forward- looking Speech in trying to create a picture that will unite all Fijians which we believe is noble. However, the reality is that, the Government seems to be doing the opposite, with no consultation or cosmetic at its best, with legislations being hurriedly put through Parliament without the benefit of consulting with the Fijian people. I embrace the assurance given by His Excellency, confirming that the Election will be held some time between April and November in 2018.

In the spirit of democracy, I pray that the Election will be truly free and fair, as is guaranteed in the 2013 Constitution, being the right due to all the eligible Fijian voters. Elections are critical for the legitimacy of our Government and the development of our fledgling democracy, 11 years after the 2006 *coup d'etat*.

Madam Speaker, I agree with His Excellency the President that the national conversation during and after Election should be based purely on policies, principles and truth. However, we must recognise the reality on the ground that politics in Fiji will continue to be race-based, given that our nation comprises different ethnic communities.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Because of you.

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- You listen, so you may learn something.

I do not celebrate the unfortunate fact that our politics will continue to be race-based for some time. Yes, we on this side of the House agree that common sense should prevail and that as a nation, we must look at issues, for example, whether the Government has fulfilled its promises to the people on reducing the high cost of living or whether the *TC Winston* rehabilitation programme has been badly mismanaged.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Madam Speaker, for that, SODELPA is committed to a united and multiracial Fiji, but it would be unwise to not recognise the different and specific needs of each ethnic groups in Fiji, given the reality that Fiji comprises indigenous Fijians, Fijians of Indian descent (*luvedra na Ratu*), as well as our minority ethnic communities who have all made Fiji their own home.

We must also recognise that laws, policies and programmes can have a disproportionate or discriminatory effect on certain communities. As lawmakers, we must be alert to this and guard against it. We have a responsibility to correct, amend or repeal such laws as legislators.

Madam Speaker, to ignore or brush off the rights, needs and grievances of one ethnic community in Fiji is to deny their identity as a specific ethnic and cultural group, and denies their existence, which is a form of discrimination, a breach of their human rights. The empirical evidence suggests that indigenous Fijians vote freely, however other minority communities tend to block-vote.

As a country comprising various ethnic groups, we cannot run away from the realities of race-based politics and distinct group rights and interests of different communities. There is always insecurity and fear amongst our communities. For the *iTaukei*, it is about the security of their land and for non-*iTaukei*, it is about the security of tenure.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Therefore, it is important that we should all come together as leaders and find amicable solutions that allow communities to live and work together in harmony and trusting one another.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Madam Speaker, His Excellency the President has emphasised that the 2014 General Election was pronounced credible. However, there remain challenges that need to be addressed. While certifying the 2014 Election as credible, the Multinational Observer Group (MOG) did not pronounce them as free and fair and they made 38 recommendations for reform.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- The Fiji Electoral Commission in its 2014 Report also made various recommendations for reform to improve our electoral system.

The MOG recommended that our ballot papers must have the party name, symbol, as well as the names of candidates. It also recommended improvement to the pre-polling process. SODELPA and five other political parties had recommended that pre-poll be restricted to emergency workers and essential services and that the rest of the population vote on voting day to make it a truly one-day election, rather than the three weeks voting process that Fiji, in fact, had in 2014.

Madam Speaker, allow me to now turn to the Government's legislative programme, as outlined by His Excellency the President in his Address. It is encouraging to note that new laws will be introduced and existing laws will be reviewed.

It is an ambitious legislation agenda and we urge the Government to refer the Bills to the Standing Committees for consultations with stakeholders and the public at large, rather than overuse Standing Order 51 to fast-track the Bills through Parliament. We seek the Government to review

the Land Use Decree, Media Decree, Public Order Decree and the 24 Decrees that adversely affect indigenous Fijians' individual and group rights.

We note that there will be a number of legal reforms and we, on this side of the House, on a number of occasions have supported the Government's reforms but it is unfortunate that most of the reforms are undertaken on an *ad hoc* and piecemeal basis. To be successful, it is important that we all work together for the benefit of the nation. A classic example, Madam Speaker, is when the Honourable Leader of the National Federation Party, Honourable Professor Biman Prasad, requested for the re-establishment of a bipartisan committee on the sugar industry but sadly, it was totally rejected by the Government.

The sugar industry will continue to be the backbone of our economy. Therefore, it is important that we should put aside our political differences and work together to find an amicable solution for the sugar industry, to continue to thrive and be a major contributor to Fiji's foreign exchange earnings.

It is unfortunate that the Government is selective in its approach to individual sectors or subsectors. It is important that the Government should take a more holistic and consultative process in the formulation of policies so that we can all operate on a level playing field.

It is unfortunate, Madam Speaker, that this Government claims that the latest statistics show that Fiji is one of the five countries in the Asia-Pacific region where inequality has decreased but the reality is that, more people are moving from rural areas to urban centres, living in squatter settlements and are looking for job opportunities. There is also inequality, as almost 40 percent of our population are now living on the margins of poverty due to the high cost of living and a low minimum wage.

Madam Speaker, the projected population for 2018 is 873,210, and 40 percent of our population is living on the margin, that is, 280,000 people, the largest number ever and this is based on the Bureau of Statistics latest key statistics released.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Madam Speaker, I wish to briefly highlight the mismanagement of the *TC Winston* Rehabilitation Programme. There is, no doubt, that the resilience of our people has been on display since *TC Winston*, as we tried to work together as a nation to recover from the severe devastation wrought by this Category 5 cyclone.

Madam Speaker, it is unfortunate that almost 50 percent of those affected by *TC Winston* are still trying to get their lives together due to the poor organisation and management of the Government, to give the necessary support and the removal of the governmental institutions that support the rehabilitation efforts post-natural disasters.

The Government has been heavy-handed and inefficient in its rehabilitation programme. Almost two years now, Madam Speaker, and people are still in tents and children are still going to school in tents. The Government should review its policies in disbanding the institutions set up to respond to disaster and the Government should seriously relook at this, given our vulnerability to national disasters.

His Excellency the President mentioned that Fiji is projecting its presence on the international stage, Madam Speaker. While we all applaud our involvement in the international fora, such as the

Presidency of COP23, the Chairmanship of the Group of 77 and China, amongst other notable international engagement, ...

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- You listen!

...our involvement, Madam Speaker, did not come overnight or in the last 11 years alone. The foundation of our involvement was built by our former leaders, who thrived to ensure that Fiji became a major contributor to international issues, such as peace, climate change, unity and international co-operation.

Firstly, our efforts to participate in the international arena goes back 30 years ago when Fiji was Chairman of the European Union and the African Caribbean Pacific Group. Secondly, our involvement in peacekeeping duties in the Middle-East since 1978 and the opening of regional organisations headquarters in Fiji. Madam Speaker, this shows the commitment of our former leaders to put Fiji in the international fora, it is not new.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Our international reputation was built over 40 years and not overnight. The foundation of this country was built by our eminent former leaders, who did not blow their own trumpet. What we enjoy today is credit to the efforts and sacrifices of our former leaders. Each government builds on the achievements of previous governments.

For that, Madam Speaker, the former Prime Minister and current SODELPA Party Leader, Major General (Ret'd) Sitiveni Rabuka has a Master's Degree in Military Science from Otti, Madras in India, and distinguished himself in peacekeeping operations. He was awarded the French Foreign Legion of Honour in 1981, when he also received the OBE from Her Majesty the Queen. In 1998, he was promoted to *Grand Officier*, the French equivalent of a knighthood. He later was Commonwealth Peace Envoy to the Solomon Islands in 2001, when trouble broke out there. The peace agreement was the precursor to the Regional Assistance Mission (RAMSI), which just recently completed its work.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Madam Speaker, as Sir Isaac Newton said, and I quote: "If I have seen further, it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants." to localise that in our local context, Madam Speaker, I would say, Fiji has been punching above its weight internationally since colonial times. Our soldiers, led by the late *Turaga na Talai sa Bale*, *Turaga na Tui Nayau*, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, participated in the First World War, and in the Second World War in Malaya.

In the 1970s, we started our peacekeeping effort. At the same time, our first Prime Minister, the late *Turaga na Tui Nayau sa Bale*, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, began distinguishing himself on the regional and international stage, leading the negotiations with the European countries on the Lome Agreement. This international engagement was continued by each successive national leader. As the Athenian Statesman and General Themistocles said, and I quote, "We can only judge the future from what we suffered in the past."

Madam Speaker, SODELPA reassures all the minority religious and ethnic communities in Fiji that it is committed to assuring their security in Fiji.

Madam Speaker, various laws have been imposed on the people of Fiji without their consent over the last 11 years of the Bainimarama-led Government. This includes the imposition of the 2013 Constitution Decree, the various Decrees that limit human rights, like the Public Order Amendment Decree of 2012, the Media Decree 2009 and the Essential National Industries Decree.

Madam Speaker, further suspension of the Great Council of Chiefs in 2007, its termination in the Fijian Affairs Act in 2012 and the chiefs' representatives in the iTLTB, the Land Use Decree, are examples of changes and laws that affect all the people of Fiji, not only the indigenous community, which were imposed without their free, prior and informed consent.

SODELPA is unequivocal in supporting the human rights of all people in Fiji, as well as the rights of all communities in Fiji. Let there be no question about this fact. Recognition of the rights of indigenous people of Fiji is in harmony with the Party's welcoming and acknowledging the other ethnic communities, who have made Fiji their home.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Madam Speaker, allow me to briefly dwell on the well-being and good governance of the *iTaukei* people, a core responsibility of the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. This is an institution which has a role in ensuring good governance and wellbeing of indigenous Fijians and that institution has been in exile since 2007; 10 years, Madam Speaker.

As the apex of Fijian institutions, the good governance and well-being of the *iTaukei* people is firstly the responsibility of the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* (BLV). The unique role of the BLV is to make recommendations to the Government of the day for the wellbeing and good governance of the *iTaukei* people.

I now come to the Committee on the Better Utilisation of Land (CBUL), Madam Speaker. I wish to also comment on this Committee. The Committee, which has been an initiative of the Bainimarama-led Government was to assist the farmers in the renewal of agricultural areas, especially sugarcane farmers, whose land lease had expired.

I also understand that the Honourable Minister for Agriculture had also indicated in this House the quantum of money that has already been used by this Government for this particular project. The sad thing about it, Madam Speaker, is that this Committee has, unfortunately, impacted again in a negative way, not so much the quantum of money mentioned by Honourable Minister, but on the good governance and wellbeing of indigenous people. I say this, Madam Speaker, because with the injection of Government funds to facilitate the work of the Committee, it has directly resulted in Government having not only a say, but an active decision-making role in not only the iTaukei Land Trust Board, but also the iTaukei Affairs Board. These are matters that affect the good governance and wellbeing of indigenous Fijians.

Madam Speaker, unlike an earlier Report by Mr. T.L. Davey, a British land consultant which had recommended the subsidising of leases only for ALTA leases on Native land, the CBUL now deals with all types of leases over Native land. These policy issues and the provision of funds to facilitate the policy objectives affect the wellbeing of the indigenous people and should be addressed.

Madam Speaker, I wholeheartedly agree with His Excellency the President that we need to unite. However, the actions of the Government is opposite to this in governing without consultation, overusing Standing Order 51 to bulldoze laws through Parliament and ignoring the views of the indigenous people.

I have expressed my grave reservations on the policies that have impacted the good governance and wellbeing of the indigenous people. Changes must be made, Madam Speaker, Decrees must be abolished and saying, "Nothing about us, without us", must be seriously practiced by Government.

To conclude, for me personally, we must put aside our small differences and work to bring about national unity and progress. Madam Speaker, my one regret is that, I have only one life to live and serve my country, Fiji. Long live Fiji! There is only one remedy to this string of problems, choose a new leadership in 2018.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- There is a dire need for change in leadership, vision, policies and direction. No one, except the naïve, can dispute this statement of fact. I call on the people of Fiji to reclaim and rebuild our nation. Let us make Fiji free again, Honourable Praveen Kumar.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I now give the floor to the Honourable Mikaele Leawere.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- The Honourable Acting Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Cabinet Ministers, Honourable Assistant Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament: I wish to associate myself with all Honourable Members of this House, to express my sincere gratitude and heartfelt thanks to His Excellency the President for his most gracious Speech on the occasion of the Opening of this new Session of Parliament.

Since this year is the last for the life of this Parliament, I wish to thank all the Honourable Members for the services that they have rendered to the people of Fiji, and I wish all Honourable Members good health and all the best of luck in their endeavours for the one year we have left in office. On the same note, Madam Speaker, I also pray for good health and long life to His Excellency the President and to your goodself.

Madam Speaker, His Excellency the President's Address last week had made mention of some key themes which need to be debated in this House, as well as by the public of Fiji, to ascertain the accuracy of some of the statements the Government has made through His Excellency's Speech.

Madam Speaker, His Excellency the President spoke in regards to accommodating the contemporary changes in society pertaining to the 2013 Constitution. Accommodation means the process of inclusivity and participation whereby all stakeholders, including the Opposition, are part of the nation building process. Unfortunately, the 2013 Constitution was imposed on the people, and also it had not gone through this House.

The FijiFirst Government fails to live by its word by completely alienating the Opposition from all facets of governance and decision-making impacting our nation. I urge the Government to be adhering to the practice of effective participation which also means, having the political will to review aspects of the 2013 Constitution which essentially restricts free speech and human rights.

Madam Speaker, the next limb of my statement in response to His Excellency the President's Address, is about elections. The 2018 Election is not far from today, and we are concerned that our citizens are still not well informed of the electoral process and system. We call on the Government to seriously reconsider the participation of the Multinational Observers Group, together with NGOs and local stakeholders.

Government, Madam Speaker, needs to review section 115 of the Electoral Act which prohibits civil society organisations from carrying out voter education, as they have a very wide reach in the nation. Why deny them this right? Donor funded organisations have been at the forefront of voter education without legislative restrictions in all parliamentary Elections prior to 2014. Madam Speaker, Government must show that Fiji has a robust and a democratic process that is fully representative of the wishes of the Fijian people when the results are announced.

Madam Speaker, the Government needs to measure this with other international standards and treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). We duly acknowledge Government in ratifying core international treaties, such as the United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). There is a lot more to do.

Madam Speaker, we should aspire for a free, fair, transparent and credible 2018 Elections. Only that will free our nation from the current bondage we have been experiencing.

Madam Speaker, His Excellency the President spoke about business development and confidence in Fiji, and I believe the initiative taken under the auspices of the Micro Business Grants did not escape the attention of the masses. In that regard, Government is urged to monitor their Small and Micro Business grants to avoid wastage of taxpayers' funds.

It is overwhelming to see our citizens scrambling to get its \$1,000 handouts but so far, we have not received any statistical feedback on the impacts and success stories of these grants. Due diligence and accountability on these grants or so called 'handouts' is paramount. We want to know the return on investments, and not how much we had given away. Recent statistics have shown that Fiji has drastically fallen in terms of the Ease of Doing Business Report. Are our efforts not recognised, or are we not doing this right?

Madam Speaker, the next issue on which I intend to speak on is the Free Medicine Scheme. Free medicine is a good initiative but unfortunately, the programme has been poorly rolled out. Let us look at the general state of our health sector which is in shambles and deteriorating in each passing day. The Auditor-General's Report adequately highlighted the negligence by the Ministry of Health in procuring medicines which then lay idle for nearly a year.

In addition, Madam Speaker, deaths of infants due to an unknown suspected bacterial infection at the CWM Hospital is appalling, to say the least. So far, we have not received any word from the WHO Team, who carried out the investigation in our very own largest hospital. We are talking about the loss of lives here, Madam Speaker, our precious future generation, and I call on the Government to establish an independent commission of inquiry to investigate these infant deaths.

Madam Speaker, in relation to the importance and the need of freedom of information in Fiji, citizens have the right to obtain correct information from the State. The recent statement by the Auditor-General about the errors in the 2016 Auditor-General's Report led to more speculations on the secretive approach adopted by this Government.

We have the right to know how the Government is managing and spending taxpayers' money. There is no harm in telling the truth, and nothing else but the truth. The fact that the Office of the Auditor-General (OAG) and Ministry of Economy appearing together in a press conference in order to correct errors in the Auditor-General's Report sets a dangerous precedent. The OAG should not present a supplementary report but should go back to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and correct the errors there.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- (Inaudible). You don't understand that.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Then why are they appearing together?

I apologise, Madam Speaker.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- When they are ready, then you will continue.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Madam Speaker, a few words on climate change; the Honourable Prime Minister while globetrotting on climate change needs to mobilise leaders by bringing the Talanoa Session back home and hold consultations with other stakeholders on pressing issues of national significance. We must put into practice the Talanoa Spirit that the Honourable Prime Minister championed during the Petersburg Climate Dialogue in Berlin several months back and which other delegates reacted positively to his explanation on the Talanoa Spirit. Let us stop sugar-coating international speeches with our way of life which we fail to put into practice here at home.

(Laughter)

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- The nation is thankful to the Honourable Prime Minister for acknowledging the importance of committing things to the Lord when he advocated for a weekend of prayer regarding climate change. The announcement should be the catalyst to impact this issue in the 2013 Constitution.

Our Economy, Madam Speaker, is still largely consumption-driven. Unfortunately, the Government cherry picks statistics in order to make them look good. The recent statistics that unemployment and inequality have fallen has been disputed by a renowned Economist, Professor Wadan Narsey, in his piece on, "Khaiyum cherry pick statistics". We need to measure ourselves against global surveys and performance indexes.

Having said all those, Madam Speaker, I think any person worth some sense of fairness, righteousness and sanity will agree with me to say that the FijiFirst Government has lost the plot and is masquerading with the mandate of the people to serve its own interest, and not that of the Fijian people.

Madam Speaker, I will devote the rest of the time at my disposal, on education issues and labour rights.

Madam Speaker, the Fiji Education Sector is built on the sacrifice of many individuals and organisations spanning more than a century now. We owe our success to the Crown, the chiefs, faith-based organisations, teachers and teacher unions, missionaries and volunteers, school managements and academics, who have all put in their heart, mind, funds, skills and talents for building the basis of the education sector to shape the destiny of Fiji. This has resulted in more than 93 per cent of the schools in Fiji becoming faith-based, and whose rights are well protected as per Section 22 of the Constitution of Fiji, which has been breached more than once by the Ministry of Education for a variety of reasons best known to it.

Today, Madam Speaker, as a product of that system and having played my part proudly as a student, a teacher and a unionist, I stand in this Honourable House to pay tribute, on behalf of the Opposition, to all the founding fathers and stakeholders of the Fiji Education Sector. They have done us proud and under SODELPA Government, their voices will matter and they will find space and value that they rightfully deserve.

The Fee Free Grant Education since 2013 is now four years old and cannot be equated to the sacrifices of the founders and stakeholders of the Fiji Education Sector. What is being done is that, this Government is attempting in vain to rewrite the history and erase the contribution of our ancestors, who played a far more meaningful and proactive role in our national life than this Government and its supporters can ever imagine.

We have had schools which were fully built by their managements without any assistance from the State. Some managements fully paid their teachers and there are managements still around, who fund lunch and stationery of students everyday. We have had sponsors and philanthropists, as well as stakeholders within the Education Sector, who have paid school fees, bags, shoes, uniforms, as well as books. Many still continue to do so, Madam Speaker, because this so-called free education is only fee free grant education, plus bus voucher and nothing else. I think this explains the reason why His Excellency the President asked why it had taken so long to achieve free education, which we know is only partial free education.

Madam Speaker, on Fee Free Education, we in the Opposition, welcome fee free grant education and it was not the brainchild of the FijiFirst Government, it was established by the SVT Government and continued through past Governments. However, students who have reached Year 13 under the current system of this Government will have to subject themselves to TELS, a system worse than slavery to attain tertiary education. It is for this reason that the Opposition advocates free tertiary education and converting of loans into scholarships when we come into Government next year.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Education has embarked upon policy reforms and composition of new policies to manage the Fiji Education Sector. Some of those policies are the Canteen Policy, Extracurricular Policy, OHS Policy in schools, Substance Abuse Policy, Family Life Policy, Fiji Education Sector Information Policy, Financial Management Policy, and several others.

There are two questions we have regarding this composition, the review and implementation of those Policies:

1. What input have the various stakeholders made and how much of it was incorporated in those Policies; and
2. What is the result of the implementation or piloting of those Policies in various schools?

As far as the Opposition knows, Madam Speaker, consultation was limited and ignored. The implementation is a disaster, as the Honourable Leader of the National Federation Party puts it some time ago in this Honourable House, in tearing the education system in Fiji apart.

Madam Speaker, allow me to speak on employment relations. In this regard, there are two issues that I intend to address, as follows:

1. Salary increase and employment contracts of civil servants; and
2. the right to collective bargaining.

Madam Speaker, it is the birth and constitutional right of any worker to have meaningful employment, fair wages, conducive working conditions and right to collective bargaining. It is further subdivided into public and private sector employment. The matters affecting those rights and issues are addressed by the employment relation laws of the State, which must be in conformity to the universal standards set by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Having said that, Madam Speaker, the Opposition wishes to submit to this House, that the:

1. Employment Relations Decree was forcibly imposed upon the workers and trade unions in Fiji in 2009. It is anti-worker in nature and lacks universal standards. We call upon the Government to allow public discussions on the matter to bring improvements to the Decree, and to grant it the legitimacy and acceptance it needs from the workers and trade unions in Fiji.
2. Issue of a national minimum wage has been a subject of public debate for some time and we acknowledge and thank the Government of the day for implementing the National Minimum Wage of \$2.32, although it should have been \$2.70 as recommended by Father Kevin Barr at that time. Right now, it should be something like, \$4 or \$5 per hour.

However, Madam Speaker, in a consumption-driven and highly regulated economy, wages cannot be stagnant, as the price of goods and services are skyrocketing, leaving a large percentage of our working population deprived of their purchasing power. This has, in turn, resulted into more people being pushed below the poverty line or on the brink of it, and stagnancy as far as the improvement in the quality of life and standard of the people is concerned. No wonder, the increase in the GDP of the country is not truly reflected in the lives of the ordinary people.

It is for those reasons, Madam Speaker, that we in the Opposition, together with the trade unions and workers in Fiji, call for a public discussion on the issue of fixing the National Minimum Wage and the formula to upgrade the same, to avert future stand-off with regard to demands for increase in wages and salaries of workers in Fiji.

In the public sector, Madam Speaker, the quantum of setting and upgrading the wages and salaries are based on the recommendations of the Job Evaluation Report. Before, trade unions and permanent secretaries or his or her designate were the drivers of this exercise and there was no political interference from politicians. Madam Speaker, Government must not trample on the rights of trade unions but should encourage a consultative approach.

Madam Speaker, the civil servants of this nation have been hoodwinked. They were blind-led to believe in the increases announced in the Budget and were not told about the salient provisions of their employment contracts until they were made to sign those agreements and take what was on offer, or decide otherwise.

The Job Evaluation Exercise, Madam Speaker, is a nightmare for all civil servants, and teachers especially. The lowest pay rise for a teacher in Bands E and G, starts from 3.98 percent and about 4,000 of them are within the range of 7.62 percent to 11.53 percent. Those receiving higher percentages will either be redeployed or given acting allowance until the post is re-advertised and filled. Never before has the workers of this country experienced this, but only under the FijiFirst Government. Madam Speaker, because of this, teachers are left to agonize on their job security and livelihood.

In addition, Madam Speaker, the Public Sector Unions are asking Government to refer to Clause 8 of the contracts given to civil servants which states, and I quote:

“Without prejudice to the provisions of Clause 10, the Government may, in its discretion and without having to provide reasons, terminate this contract.”

This Clause, Madam Speaker, is in total breach of ERP 2007, which prohibits termination of any contract without providing reasons, and also under the Constitution.

In ministry after ministry, department after department, section after section and unit after unit, civil servants are demoted to lower ranks, made to act in positions they held at a lower rank, and given salaries less than what they earned overnight. Those string of actions, Madam Speaker, depict some important things which cannot and must not go unnoticed:

1. There is, in fact, no salary increase and placing civil servants at lower salary. This only reveals that the State is plagued by financial crisis, given the public debt report that, unfortunately, was not presented in the last Budget.
2. The contract itself is against the ideal and principle of the law of contract.
3. The issue of job security and future promotion or development of human resources are being at stake.

Madam Speaker, the third issue that I intend to speak on in relation to employment relations in Fiji is collective bargaining. Since day one of coming into office, this Government has been venturing on a confrontational path with trade unions in Fiji, and refusing to accept and embrace collective bargaining. On the contrary, it has moved in an adverse direction on what many call, "a purge against the trade unions" by interfering with union activities.

Those actions and string of events, Madam Speaker, are ample enough to make a case for the violation of the fundamental rights of the workers and right to collective bargaining. We cannot isolate the trade unions as they are workers' representatives. The FijiFirst Government has no one but itself to blame for this mess, because of its ego and no consultative approach to the problems of the workers in Fiji.

Madam Speaker, if this was not enough, there have been cases where workers and unions, giving notice to seek approval to take ballots for industrial actions, have been ignored, delayed and not approved. The case of the employees of the Air Terminal Services is just a glaring example of what I am saying here and now. Maybe, the Honourable Minister for Labour should take note of this.

The Government, Madam Speaker, should ensure that the Federated Airline Staff Association conduct their secret ballot according to law and not be victimised, given their rights as citizens of Fiji under the 2013 Constitution.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Instead, Madam Speaker, it has become habitual for the Government to refer matters to the Employment Tribunal, over which it has control. This is simply disconcerting and totally unacceptable to us in the Opposition, the workers and the trade unions of Fiji.

Madam Speaker, in concluding my response to His Excellency the President's Address, I will not mince my words to say that the FijiFirst Government has lost the will, the plot and the confidence to govern Fiji, and must face the people as soon as practicable. We are ready to take on the challenge thrown by His Excellency the President when he said, "Fijians will be tested next year."

In expounding and basing my statement on the loss of the will and confidence to govern Fiji, I submit to this House that this Government is inconsiderate and irresponsible. They are good at drama, lip service and creating a hype.

Madam Speaker, allow me to finish off by quoting John Maxwell, he said and I quote:

“Never be bullied into silence. Never allow yourself to be made a victim. Accept no one's definition of your life; define yourself.”

With those few words, Madam Speaker, I once again thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Speech.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we have four speaker left, would you like to finish it now?

HON. MEMBERS.- Yes.

HON. SPEAKER.- Which means going for lunch by 1.45 p.m.?

HON. MEMBERS.- Yes.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

I now give the floor to the Honourable Alvick Maharaj.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the Honourable Acting Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament, and those listening either from the public gallery or from the comfort of your homes; a very good afternoon, *ramram, salam* and *bula* to you all.

Madam Speaker, I would like to join my colleagues in thanking His Excellency the President for his gracious Speech in opening the fourth and final Session of Parliament. I will quote from His Excellency's Speech which is on page 3 of the *Daily Hansard* of 4th September, 2016, I quote:

“We, Fijians, will be tested in this Election. We will be and should be challenged to contest this Election on the basis of policies, principles and truth. Although it may be tempting in the heat of an election, we will be tested not to descend into demagoguery, race-baiting, ethnic profiling, diminished dignity and lies. This, I urge you most earnestly; this Election must be contested over policies, over the future, not ethnicity, religion or geography.”

Madam Speaker, the biggest weapon of destruction used by politicians are based on ethnicity and religious discrimination. Just to get a seat in Parliament, is it right to play with people's emotions, their religion or ethnicity? There is always two sides of a coin, why do politicians opt to hide one side and show the side of the coin to people which they want them to see? If a Muslim or *iTaukei* leader from the FijiFirst Party attends an Indian festival, why is it portrayed that it is done in order to gain political benefits or publicity? Why can it not be portrayed that, at least, someone sees beyond the line of religion and ethnicity and tries to reach out to people, uniting them as one and encouraging them that at the end of the day, we are all human beings?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Why do certain politicians have this mindset that if I am not the one who has been able to do this, then let us not allow others to do it as well? Why is it the attitude

of some politicians that if it was not their idea, then they manipulate it in such a way that it seems political rather than showing it as an act of peace, unity, modesty and humanity?

All religion and faith teaches us that humanity and unity takes precedence. Did we ever have a leader in the past who was attending functions and activities of other religions? So what wrong are the FijiFirst Party leaders committing if they are accepting and embracing people of other faith and also joining them to celebrate their festival? If leaders in the past were doing it, then why are we making it an issue now? If they were not and if someone is starting to do it now, then why are we having a problem with it now?

Madam Speaker, it should not be a concern from where people are chosen to be a Member of Parliament, but what is more important is that benefits from policies and service delivery reaches out to each and every Fijian, regardless of their geographical location. If we continue to have our mindset based on ethnicity, religion and geographical location, the policies made by such mindset will always be biased towards one ethnic group, one religion and concentrated to a particular geographical location.

One nation one people is the foundation to build a modern nation, likewise a Parliamentarian in this era should campaign on the basis of policies on nation building, infrastructure, economic growth, increase in GDP and improving foreign reserves - ways to ensure how Government machinery, through public enterprises can improve and bring about revenue rather than relying on its citizens to have huge a tax burden.

Madam Speaker, it is only after improved performance of public enterprises that has started to generate revenue for the Government and it has been able to reduce corporate tax and VAT, and also increase PAYE threshold to \$30,000 so that less Fijians have to pay PAYE and have more savings.

These are some things which we can only think about, if we get out of petty politics of ethnicity and religion, Madam Speaker. Rome was not built in a day, nor will Fiji. Inconsistent policies will only take our country backward rather than taking it forward.

If the Opposition continues to campaign on ethnicity and religious line, when will they start thinking about a modern nation? When will they make policies that will last for a decade? The Opposition would come up with a policy this year and before the benefit can be seen, they will change the policy. We have seen that in the past in this Parliament and today, I am going to give such examples as to how inconsistent the Opposition are in their approach.

We should not go back to the old tactics of divide and rule on the basis of ethnicity and religion. Why cannot Honourable Opposition Members move on and debate on the way forward for the country rather than constantly going back, blaming and criticising the Constitution and Government policies? Knowing very well what is embedded in Bill of Rights they still question it. For how long will the Opposition bark on what the Government has done? When will they start to elaborate on what they are going to do for the ordinary Fijians?

The Election is coming near and it is high time that Fiji should know of what you are going to do for them rather than just opposing the Government which most of the time does not make sense? The Opposition is still in a dilemma and as I had stated before, they are running out of ideas. They are commenting on what is happening within FijiFirst which are only assumptions, but what is happening in the Opposition is in front of everyone.

Nowhere in this world, Madam Speaker, where we have two party leaders and the third one in reserve - one sitting inside Parliament, one standing outside Parliament and the third one waiting for 2022.

(Laughter)

How can they point fingers at others, first look at yourselves! We wonder which of the leader are the Opposition Members following.

At least, the FijiFirst has a leader with principled stand, who has the courage to tell people openly what he will do and will not do regardless of the outcome of the election. Hats off to such FijiFirst leaders, who take principled stand and stick to it, and do not just change their stance just for some mere gain. I would urge the Opposition Members not to worry about the FijiFirst Party, but look at yourselves in the mirror. You will get a lot of questions which you may not even be able to answer yourselves. When will the Opposition use their head and come up with something new rather than amending FijiFirst policies? One such example is TELS and the Toppers Programme.

Prior to 2006, why were scholarships awarded on ethnicity? Why did we had two scholarship schemes for one ethnic group and one scholarship scheme and loan scheme for others?

Let me emphasize, Madam Speaker, on the word 'others'. Majority of the courses were not covered under the so called multi-ethnic scholarship or loan scheme, therefore, students have to resort to their parents' FNPF fund to study. Now, all of a sudden, Madam Speaker, the Opposition is amending FijiFirst initiatives of TELS and Toppers Programme to scholarship for everyone. There we go again, amending the FijiFirst policy rather than coming up with something new.

This outright screams election campaign. Now, all of a sudden and out of the blue, they have started talking about unity and scholarship for all. What were they doing about ethnic-based scholarship prior to 2006?

Let me take you back, Madam Speaker, when we did our Form 7 and applied for scholarship along with my other *iTaukei* friends and Fijians of Indian descent, one of whom was the Honourable Bulitavu, my Form 7 colleague and as friends, we did not know about racial and ethnic discrimination. Such Government policies back then ensured that two friends who used to share their food, happiness and sorrow are discriminated on the basis of their religion and ethnic background. When two youth discriminate each other on the basis of ethnicity, religion, skin colour, geographical location, et cetera, then why did we have such Government policies to pollute an individual's mind, Madam Speaker?

That is why I am sitting on this side of the Government and his sitting on the opposite side. Why do politicians, for their own gain, try to put filth in the minds of the youth? Madam Speaker, now all of a sudden, with the backing of those same leaders who brought in such discriminatory policies in the first place, Opposition comes up trying to be the saviour. God help Fiji, Madam Speaker.

I am glad to say that, at least, we now have leaders in the FijiFirst who look beyond all these differences. It is quite clear that the path the Opposition Members are going to use to promote themselves would be based on criticising and twisting current Government policies and making unrealistic promises resulting in the implementation of race and religious discrimination in ordinary Fijians. It is also being said in the past in this Parliament that God has stopped creating land.

Madam Speaker, I urge the Opposition to leave God aside of politics. Let me remind them, God has created enough land for us and many generations to come. If Singapore can accommodate a population of 5.6 million people in 277 square miles landscape, we in Fiji only have a population of 800,000 people in 7,056 square miles, Madam Speaker.

Using dirty politics to ensure survival in the political arena comes at a cost that is mostly borne by the population of the country. On one side, we talk about landowners being resource-rich and cash-poor but on the other side when Government help them develop their land and get market value of their land, Opposition comes up claiming that Government is taking their land. What hypocrisy, Madam Speaker? How can we empower *iTaukei* landowners without even developing and investing in their land? Again, Madam Speaker, a contradicting policy of the Opposition.

Back in 2015, they were criticising Land Bank and praising TLTB, but just yesterday they have changed their tune and are now criticising TLTB. Everyone is watching, Madam Speaker, and are taking note, at the same time as to how distorted Opposition Members are as they contradict, not their own policy but contradicting each other.

Madam Speaker, the question we need to ask is why they want to change the Constitution. I think, the Honourable Member who spoke before me was talking about the security of *iTaukei* land. Have we forgotten so fast of what happened in Momi Bay – how land was transferred from *iTaukei* land to State land and then to freehold land within a day? If you have forgotten, then I ask the Honourable Member who brought this issue up yesterday, go back and ask your own Honourable Member how such a transaction took place.

(Hon. Members interject)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Then what about Denarau?

(Laughter)

Just because the 2013 Constitution protects the land of *iTaukei*, it does not have any entrenched provision to change native land to freehold land. Is this one of the reasons why they want to change the Constitution? Maybe for the Opposition, this is the reason why they want to change the Constitution so that they can bring such provisions back and either make money underneath the table or by fooling ordinary Fijians by using their lands.

(Hon. Members interject)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes, I know. We go back to the past and tell what was being done by previous governments, Madam Speaker, and why should we not?

SODELPA has the following, a:

1. Sitting Member who was part of the above scam whereby land was taken away from landowners, converting an *iTaukei* land to freehold land;
2. Sitting Member who was a former TLTB staff who was going around asking landowners not to renew leases.
3. Member under which scholarship was offered on the basis of ethnic background;
4. Member under which almost 800,000 unaccounted ballot papers were printed during the 2006 General Elections;

5. Member under which FRU lottery scam took place;
6. Leader who started the *coup* culture in Fiji;
7. Member under whose leadership from 2001 to 2006, the biggest discrimination policies came into place at the University of Fiji and the Honourable Prime Minister had to step in and remove him before he could have destroyed the entire country. The only reason he cannot be a candidate is because the law does not allow him. It would be interesting to see who leads the Opposition in 2022.

Does it hurt seeing your real faces in the mirror? I believe that is why it pains whenever we take you back to reality of what was happening prior to 2006.

(Hon. Members interject)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- One can imagine what chaos these people will bring if they ever get into power, do we want such people to form a Government?

(Hon. Members interject)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- You cannot move forward while still holding onto your past. Changing the name of the party will not do any good. The Opposition Members need to change their attitude, thinking and behaviour.

Madam Speaker, if a road is being built, everyone understands that there would be congestion and traffic jam. We know very well and I am glad that every general public look at the future benefits of new improved roads rather than how the Honourable Member criticised yesterday about the road congestion.

Madam Speaker, on one side, they expect us to do the roads and on the other hand they are complaining about road congestion. Can they come up with some solutions rather than just coming up with two statements which go in opposite directions and contradicting each other?

When will the Opposition start to bring in real ideas about national development, Madam Speaker? As stated before, Opposition seems to be obsessed with the fact that they need to change the Constitution. The Opposition also says that not everyone has embraced the 2013 Constitution, so can anyone remind us where the huge landslide victory for FijiFirst Party in the 2014 General Election came from? Just wait, we will show you again in 2018 how many people have accepted the 2013 Constitution.

Thank you, Madam Speaker, and I thank everyone for listening.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I now give the floor to the Honourable Ratu Suliano Matanitobua.

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA.- Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Honourable Acting Prime Minister, Honourable Ministers, Honourable Leader of the Opposition and Honourable Members. I have profound pleasure to support the motion before the House and join this august House to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address and pray for his good health and long life.

Madam Speaker, there are a number of things hinted in His Excellency the President's Address of which the main ones are:

1. The importance of the Constitution;
2. Free and Fair Elections;
3. Conduct of the Affairs of the Nation;
4. Unity and Quest of Leaders to work for Fiji; and
5. The Legislative Agenda of the Government for the next one year.

At the beginning of my speech today, Madam Speaker, I wish to make it clear that some of the things I am going to say today are not against the Presidency or the incumbent holder of the Office of the President. It is directed at the Government of the day whom we strongly oppose.

Madam Speaker, I will fail in my duty if I do not acknowledge the leadership, meaningful contribution and the rich legacy of the past Presidents, Governor-General, Prime Ministers, Ministers, Members of Parliament, Senators and Political Leaders.

There is no doubt that they fought battles which were worth and had deep differences but they were all patriots, men with sportsmanship, having the ability to shed their personal ego and come together when the nation demanded. That is how they made Fiji what it was prior to 2007 and we are proud of them and their legacy.

Madam Speaker, I think His Excellency the President had this in mind when he spoke about the need for us as leaders to come together to work for the larger national interest and aspirations after elections which has not been the case since 2014 because of the hostile attitude displayed by the FijiFirst Government enjoying the comfort of its super majority.

Madam Speaker, history is the testimony to the fact that Fiji achieved its independence without a drop of blood. Our leaders resolved land issues in 1976 and were on the verge of doing the same in 1999. Our leaders averted national strikes, sailed the ship clear of rocks in the aftermath of 1987 and 2000, gave Fiji the 1997 Constitution which was acclaimed as one of the three best constitutions in the world and led Fiji to greater heights in the international fora with the Pacific way, something that the current Honourable Prime Minister has accepted and embraced with regards to his Chairmanship of COP23.

Now, Madam Speaker, those things did not happen overnight by miracle or by design. It happened because as His Excellency the President desires, those leaders were able to overcome their ego and personal differences putting the interest of the nation first, talk with each other rather than talking to each other creating meaningful dialogue and consensus building and reaching solution points acceptable by all people of Fiji. The irony is, some of them are now turning back and complaining about it to suit their political and personal agenda when they were the root cause of the problems then as now and I do not need to name those politicians.

What is important, Madam Speaker, when we talk about unity between the leaders of Fiji is the creation of a conducive environment for dialogue to develop trust and faith which has not happened because some politicians think they are too smart. There needs to be a bi-partisan approach to issues which is not happening, we have a Government that is priding its super majority. The truth about the whole process of attaining unity among the leaders of Fiji has today become a puzzle whether to put the cart before the horse as has been the case of 2014 or behind the horse as it was prior to 2017. And, when the leaders are divided, it is natural our people will be divided and that division is clearly reflected as you traverse in Fiji. I have never seen Fiji divided so much as it is today.

Madam Speaker, one of the main reasons for that division between the leaders and the people of Fiji is the 2013 Constitution that was forcibly imposed upon us without the consent of the people of Fiji. There are numbers of adjectives used about the Constitution by the people from all walks of life and they will continue to be used until it is reviewed. The people are waking up and coming face to face with this document and its designs. I will not use those adjectives but I will not hesitate to call upon the Government to review this draconian law.

I think the points drawn home by the other Honourable Member of the Opposition are worth endorsing, Madam Speaker, that a constitution cannot be cast in the stone. It is an evolving document and it must be changed to reflect the correct and true wishes of the people of the nation. The 2013 Constitution, Madam Speaker, fails to reflect that.

Constitutions throughout the world, Madam Speaker, are evolving documents. The Constitution of the United States of America which is hailed as the strongest democracy and India which is known as the largest democracy in the world has been through changes. Great Britain and New Zealand who have unwritten Constitutions are embracing changes and Australia whose Constitution is more than a century old has amended its Constitution many times.

Madam Speaker, I see no reason why Fiji cannot and should not do the same to unite our people and move forward with a unified vision and sense of political engineering. The sooner we accept this hard cold fact and agree to amend the Constitution, the better it would be to unite our people.

Madam Speaker, His Excellency the President spoke about the elections and in the same breath said "Fijians will be tested next year". I think that is a very important statement His Excellency made which needs to be expounded. Having said that, Madam Speaker, let me put the case of the Opposition as opposed to what is being articulated by the FijiFirst Government.

Madam Speaker, it is on the record that we oppose the current electoral arrangements as they are. We demand electoral reform to pave the way for free and fair elections. Fiji and Fijians deserve better than this nature of elections where their constituency and sectoral as well as group and individual interests are not protected, reflected or provided space to be heard.

Madam Speaker, almost all the political parties except the FijiFirst have made their case known to the Fiji Electoral Commission with regards to the need for free and fair elections and we in the Opposition endorse and support the same. Fiji cannot move forward unless we open up the processes that are involved to have elections.

Madam Speaker, the time of the Presidential Address is an occasion for the Parliament to debate the State of Nation and how the Government of the day has conducted the affairs of the State. There are some staple features emerging about the FijiFirst Government out of its three years of rule which if added with the years since the *coup* totals to eleven years in all. Let me highlight those staple features to this House and via it to the people of Fiji:

- Lip service - promising one thing and doing another thing.
- Failed leadership - having lost the will to govern given the plight of *TC Winston* and other disaster victims who are suffering in silence.
- Poor economic management resulting in huge public debt.

- Creating public hype by huge budgetary allocation while the ground realities suggests otherwise.
- Becoming an expert in playing politics of diversion to evade public probity on its conduct and their mouth piece to the media industry are their henchmen in this act of diversion.
- Political stuntmanship - to look good when they themselves know how good they have been to the people of Fiji.
- Regulating the lives of the Fijian people to attain absolute control because they acted more than once to show they are afraid of the people.
- Politics of fear - Fiji is probably one of the few nations still in the world where the people are afraid of their Government and suffer in silence. Many fear victimisation and many are being victimised which is why they vote down Opposition motions calling for a Judicial Inquiry into the cases of brutality in May, 2017.
- Meting out assistance to selected groups to build vote banks, sowing the seeds of vote bank politics in Fiji. This is wounding the spirit of national unity and in breach of the Constitution. Please refer to equal opportunities.
- Playing blame game - taking ownership of the success and refuse to own up failures.
- We have a Government that is afraid to disclose information, statistics and other data to create a healthy national debate on public issues. They are concealing information for the reasons best known to them.

There are many others, Madam Speaker, which I believe is now known to the people of Fiji better than there were in 2014. That is why it is little wonder to see Fiji waking up with the slogan of "Make Fiji Free in 2018".

(Hon. Members interject)

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA.- Madam Speaker, His Excellency the President elaborately laid down the legislative agenda of the Government for the next one year. In addition, Madam Speaker, the Honourable Prime Minister has made it clear that he and his Government are not going back from their path of legislating laws in the manner that they have been doing since 2007.

These statements within themselves depict that given the super majority and authoritarian control they have over the Government, nothing except the will of the people can turn back the tide in 2018. Our voices and that of the other stakeholders in nation building are meaningless and not valued by this Government, in so far as its legislative agenda is concerned.

When a government takes such confrontational, ego-centric, childish and melodramatic path, it does not only create fear and discontent but gradually the loss of the sense of belongingness and ownership of its citizenry and this is what has happened since 2007.

Madam Speaker, the legacy of the FijiFirst Government can be summarised as follows:

1. Rule of Terror and Decree Raj;
2. Enticing the people of mouth-watering and pie in the sky promises;
3. Tampering with traditional institutions and structures making;

4. Sowing the seed of discord and division among the people of Fiji; and
5. Economic mismanagement by poor mismanagement by poor and failed leadership.

Yet, by the legislative agenda they have pronounced, it appears the FijiFirst wants to have more of this and regulate the lives of the Fijian people. This will not happen come 2018 because Fiji and Fijians have had enough of enough. It is said, Madam Speaker, "Enough is enough but more than enough is not good enough."

Madam Speaker, I will devote the rest of the time I have to talk about the developments that are needed in the South-Central region of the highland of Viti Levu.

Madam Speaker, water is a basic human necessity and a constitutional right. Fiji will be 47 years of age as a nation this year, and it is totally unfair that we have communities living along the main national highway without water.

In this regard, Madam Speaker, I wish to mention the plight of the people of Nabukavesi, Wainadoi, and other communities in Namosi sitting right on the edge of a rich water catchment source but craving for water project funding from the Government. I am of a very strong view that this pressing matter be prioritised.

Madam Speaker, we often hear the Honourable Minister for Economy mention that we have a Prime Minister who continues to visit communities and people around Fiji. I have seen him visiting Namosi and I hope he has seen the potential in the interior of Namosi has for eco-tourism projects. It is my humble plea that this potential be realised to empower the people of Namosi, bringing them into the mainstream of the national economy.

Madam Speaker, climate change has come in on a fair share of mention in the House, more than once and His Excellency the President has also mentioned about it and together with it the importance of Fiji's chairmanship of COP23.

Madam Speaker, it is said that "Charity begins at home." By that implication, Madam Speaker, what I mean is we have islands that will be swamped and there will be people there who need to be relocated first before we talk about relocating the Pacific Islanders in Fiji. There are communities on the main island who live along the coast threatened by the rising sea level and need seawall development. These issues should be our priority rather than big talks and no action.

The village in Namosi in the district of Veivatuloa are prone to be affected by climate change and there has been a drastic erosion of the seawall. I have drawn the attention of the Government in this matter before and I am doing it again because as citizens and taxpayers of Fiji, we need services, protection and action. More than that, as a native of Fiji, it is our right to ask from the State to protect our land, traditional lifestyle and customary practices which are all threatened by climate change.

Madam Speaker, in my response to the Budget Address, I had spoken at length about the need of a tax free zone in the Serua/Namosi region and I resubmit the same in this speech. It is time we move to prepare Navua to give the expanding greater Suva City a westerly direction. The reasons for this are well explained in my last address in this House.

Madam Speaker, Navua is one of the places in Fiji where we have abundance of freehold land which are lying idle. One of those vast stretch is the Tamanoa land owned by Uniform which the Government should consider purchasing to subdivide and lease the same to cash cropping farmers in the Navua area. This will put the idle land to productive use generating economic activity, serving food security issue and engage more people in the agricultural industries.

Madam Speaker, the Opposition wish to place on record its sincere appreciation and heartfelt thanks to the Government and the people of the Republic of China for the grant in aid development of the new Navua Hospital at Naimelimeli, Navua. This was a long overdue project delayed. Initially, the Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) Government wanted to build the hospital in Calia, Navua but one of the attitude of the freehold land demanding too much caused the change of site.

Madam Speaker, we also wish to thank the Honourable Prime Minister for his intervention to upgrade the facilities in the new Navua Hospital, particularly the new kitchen.

In conclusion, Madam Speaker, I have two points to make. Firstly, a short story about a man who loved himself and was fond of his reflection or shadow. I see a lot of this with this Government. The amount of time they spend on parading themselves and attacking the Opposition and ridiculing people who are opposed to them can be better spent by working for the people.

Secondly, this Government is under the false impression of having the "Midas Touch" when the case is exactly the opposite. That is why they are told not to fight but to listen to the words of wisdom of the Opposition. After all, the intellectual capacity of the Opposition to have a better perception and vision for Fiji is far more above and ahead of the FijiFirst Government.

With those few words of wisdom, Madam Speaker, I support the motion before the House.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the Honourable Alivereti Nabulivou.

HON. A. NABULIVOU.- Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Honourable Acting Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and Honourable Members of Parliament. I rise to thank His Excellency the President for his most precious Speech last week.

Madam Speaker, a few days ago, just before Constitution Day, His Excellency the President addressed this Parliament. His Excellency spoke with justifiable pride in our new Constitution which has served us well in these last few years. Shortly it will be put to test again with another election.

His Excellency offered very wise words of advice to the effect of our nation should focus on policies for a better future rather than descend into divisive and selfish arguments founded on ethnicity, religion and geography. His Excellency concluded with a call for setting high standards for unity and democracy. Madam Speaker, I wholeheartedly agree with His Excellency.

Madam Speaker, what I would like to dwell on are the positive things we can take from and give to each other. We are one nation, we have one constitution under which we have all the same rights and privileges irrespective of our backgrounds. We have one nationality, and when we travel overseas, we are all Fijians and not a member of some sub-group. We have one flag, let us be proud of that. Let us be proud to be one unified group of Fijian brothers and sisters regardless of ethnicity, where we come from or who our parents are.

First of all and most importantly, we are all Fijians and we all have something to contribute to our nation and the Fijian society as a whole. I like to think of this in terms of being a modern Fijian. Our fundamental collective connection as Fijians allows us to move on to strengthen our nation and create a prosperous and a happy nation of modern Fijians. We have the capacity to do that, only if we have the will to do so.

I am an *iTaukei*. I admit to being proud of that, but first of all and best of all, I am a citizen of Fiji, like all my brothers and sisters in this Parliament. I wish to move forward as a modern Fijian.

I am not too proud to admit that other cultures have brought many things to Fiji, which have enriched our country, and improved the life of my family and myself. To take an obvious example, I find it much more convenient to drive a motor vehicle from my village to Suva or to visit rural communities than if I had to walk. Receiving modern medical attention certainly beats native herbs and portions most of the time.

On the other side of the coin, my friends from Indo-Fijians or other backgrounds love to come to visit the simple life of my village in Nadakuni, Naitasiri and its beautiful natural surroundings. To them, that is something special and unique that refreshes them and improves their zest for life. My friends from outside enjoy the laid back yet organised life of the village, as opposed to the skelter of cities. They admire the traditional handicrafts which are still practised and handed down to succeeding generations. If we lose this, I feel we will be losing something precious and irreplaceable.

Whenever I travel on Fiji Airways, our national carrier, I feel proud that the aircrafts are decorated in traditional *iTaukei* designs. Those aircrafts are distinctive in every country they visit. They reflect to the outside world who we are as modern Fijians, not just those of us who are born *iTaukei*.

I do not suggest for one minute that citizens of any particular ethnic or religious or geographic backgrounds should give up aspects of their culture which they hold dear to them. There is great value in recognising the individual cultures, gifts and insights of us all. There is no harm in variety as long as it does not undermine the essential unity which is the price of being a Fijian citizen. Diversity is beneficial when it bring insights and interests and colour to our collective lives.

There is a very good case of Government's encouragement and development of a diverse range of the cultural activities associated with different sections of our wider community. For one thing, we do not wish to lose the cultural insights and skills because they are not passed on to succeeding generations. In our modern society, there is often no incentive for young people to receive training or time devoted to those cultural elements, and we must make sure this problem is overcome.

In many instances, the Government has already been pro-active in these matters. I look forward to the day when all modern Fijian children are educated in a variety of cultural backgrounds and languages and not just those from their parents' culture.

Madam Speaker, my Australian friends tell me of the destruction of Australian aboriginal tribal groups and with its high source of cultural knowledge, knowledge of languages, knowledge of history, knowledge of the environment, knowledge about land management and knowledge of plants and animals. Their society is very much poorer from the loss of the accumulated wisdom of thousands of years. Let us not make the same mistake in Fiji.

No person in the world fails to be excited by our rugby seven players. On the one hand, the players are mostly conspicuously of *iTaukei* ethnicity, yet they excel at a game which has its origins in England and our immediate colonial past. When I look at the Fijian supporters in the crowd around the world, they are sure to include a group of very vocal indo Fijians. The point is that, when we embrace something good from other cultures, it can produce a very beneficial and unifying outcome.

When I travel abroad and ask people what they know of Fijian culture, they usually tell us about the athletic prowess of our footballers and Indian food. Is that not remarkable? And let me tell you, I do not mind a good curry also. The truth is, we have become far more multi-cultural than many people care to admit, and that is no bad thing.

The reality is, we are already forging a common and unified modern Fijian identity. The vast majority of our community embrace diversity of background and culture. These are no matters which should set us apart but earlier reflects a trend which can enrich our lives.

The truth is that we, as modern Fijians, have far more in common than we have apart. Let us not move backwards from that.

Madam Speaker, our Constitution treats us as one unified nation. Any attempt to divide us on ethnic, religious or geographic consideration is an attack on our Constitution and should be resisted with all our might. No Member of this House should even contemplate the politics of division. To think or do otherwise renders them unfit to be Members. We should all remember that in the upcoming Elections, it is a healthy thing to have a variety of viewpoints in a Parliament such as this, provided we all fully uphold the Constitution and all it implies.

I am glad to say that there are many occasions when Honourable Members from different parties work well together in the national interest. Sadly, there are also many occasions when debate in this House descends into petty carping on divisive issues and personal attacks.

Madam Speaker, this is not in the national interest and sets a poor example to the wider community. Let us start putting forward our views with courtesy and respect and set a good example.

In the lead up to the next Elections, let us put aside personal attacks and issues which divide us. Madam Speaker, rather, let us from our different perspectives put forward constructive policies which aim at unifying and strengthening the nation as a whole. Let us all act as modern Fijians, fully embracing the whole bundle of things in uniting us and make us unique as one nation.

Madam Speaker, I cannot end this speech without paying tribute to the excellent work of the Honourable Minister for Economy and his team. As His Excellency pointed out in his Address, the Fiji economy continues to grow. That is not just a matter of good luck. What it takes is sound economic management. The Government has taken a comprehensive view of what will lead to growth in the economy and eliminate wastages.

Madam Speaker, over the last couple of years, there has been a significant boost in Government's revenue. In no small measures, that can be attributed to a more efficient and fairer taxation system.

Madam Speaker, tax avoidance has been greatly reduced and the burden has been spread more fairly. No one particularly likes paying tax but it is part of the duty of citizens of Fiji and businesses operating here to pay the taxes as laid down by the law. Every Member of this House and every responsible citizen, should take a stand against and report tax evasion because tax evasion is a fraud on us all.

Madam Speaker, growth in the economy and growth in Government revenue has paved the way for significant increases in spending on nation-building projects, particularly in public infrastructure, education and health. We are becoming a more efficient economy and at the same time building a fairer and better society for all Fijians and not just for a privileged few.

Madam Speaker, we are putting record amounts into road construction and upgrading. Huge efforts have been made in repairing *TC Winston* damage.

Madam Speaker, the new Nadi International Airport Terminal is virtually complete and will provide a world-class gateway to Fiji for our own citizens and visitors. It would be a great boost for our tourist industry. Already, planning has started for other airport upgrades.

These are just a couple of examples of what a well-managed economy can provide for Fiji. Expenditure in key areas like these always has a flow-on effect. It boosts employment during construction phase, and the finished infrastructure continues to boost earnings and employment right across the nation. A growing and well-managed economy encourages private investment in new businesses and new business facilities

Madam Speaker, we owe it to our nation, we owe it to our children and their children, to continue to build our economy. We must never allow that building process ever again to be undermined by greed, self-interest, jealousy and division in our society, as so often has occurred in the past.

Madam Speaker, in conclusion, I would like to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Speech. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the Honourable Ruveni Nadalo.

HON. R.N. NADALO.- Madam Speaker; Honourable Acting Prime Minister; Honourable Cabinet Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament: I thank His Excellency the President for his most precious Speech, delivered to this House on 4th September 2017. He has given the direction for all the Honourable Members of this august House to abide to when we focus on the final lap of the fourth year as Members of Parliament.

His Excellency the President, in his Speech on 4th September, 2017 said, and I quote from page 7:

“...never before has the future looked so bright for Fiji. Yes, we have challenges, but we have all the tools in place to overcome them. So let us commit today and set a high standard for unity and for democracy. Our people are watching, our investors are watching, indeed, we are on the world stage and the world is watching. All eyes are on Fiji.”

The world, Madam Speaker, is faced with many challenges today. We are often bombarded with bad news. We hear stories of hate, discrimination, war, cruelty, crime and heartbreak, which can often bring us down. But despite the hurt in the world, there is a lot of good things that await us in the future. Amongst us, there are a number of people who are kind and compassionate, people do care, they do give and above all, they love and share their kindness with people they have never met.

Madam Speaker, that is the spirit we need to maintain in Fiji and not division, and I urge people from other political parties not to spread the wrong information.

Fiji is known to be in unity throughout our past journey. However, Madam Speaker, let me share the meaning of “unity”. Unity, Madam Speaker, means, “The quality in individual to do some work as a unit without jeopardising the individual interest in any way as far as the result of the work is concerned.”

Unity, Madam Speaker, refers to the state of being united or together. It is a feeling of oneness, togetherness, harmony, for a common goal. It is a kind of cooperation or harmony for a common cause.

Unity, Madam Speaker, refers to a situation where many people join together to do a much bigger work and collectively put their energy to achieve that.

This is what is happening in Fiji, Madam Speaker. We have so many community projects where people have partnered with Government, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and others. The best example is that 99 percent of the schools in Fiji have been built by the community and faith groups.

Fiji is a united nation living in its diversity. The term “unity in diversity” refers to the state of togetherness or oneness in spite of the presence of immense diversity.

Unity in diversity, Madam Speaker, is best based on the concept where the individual or social difference in physical attributes, skin colour, caste, creed, culture and religious practices, et cetera, are not looked upon as a conflict. Rather, these differences are looked upon as varieties that enrich the society and the nation as a whole.

Unity in diversity, Madam Speaker, is a very important principle because we all live in a diverse world and it is crucial to respect each other and to support each other, no matter what our culture, background, gender, orientation or other differences may be.

What does unity in diversity mean? Madam Speaker, unity in diversity means that we can live in communal harmony, whilst also embracing each other's differences. According to these principles, Madam Speaker, diverse cultures and diverse races can live together in total peace and happiness.

We all have diverse origins, Madam Speaker, but no matter how diverse your background is from someone else, you can live in harmony with them, united by a single thread of unity. Fiji is the best example of this. Unity in diversity means:

- Peace-making: The idea that we are united and that we should celebrate our differences rather than making them a cause for conflict is the cornerstone of peace.
- Social progress: When we live together in harmony, we can learn from each other's diverse experiences and our society will progress much better.
- Economic prosperity: Economic prosperity thrives in an atmosphere of communal harmony.
- Law and order: It is easier for us to live together in a way that respects the law and for the law to respect us too.
- Happiness: Nothing makes us happier than the atmosphere of love and sisterhood and brotherhood.

His Excellency the President said and I quote: “Everyone's eyes is on Fiji.” For sure everyone is looking at our brave soldiers carrying our peace duties in most vulnerable countries of the world. Here at home, different races talk, play and drink *yaqona* together.

Why is unity important? The importance of unity can never be overrated. Little drops of water makes the mighty ocean and little drops of sand make this vast world. The thin fibres of jute or flax, when twisted together into a rope, can control a mad elephant. These are instances of the benefit of unity. We love the saying ‘united we stand, divided we fall.’

Fiji: The island of Fiji sits in the South Pacific between Hawaii and New Zealand. Fiji is a tropical paradise, Madam Speaker. Fiji contains more than 330 islands. Approximately 900,000 people live in Fiji and enjoy the tropical marine climate, with little variations in temperature throughout the year. The country's distinct landforms include terrain, covered with abundant forest and coastlines with beautiful beaches. This environment Madam Speaker, is the source of our logging and timber, inland tourism, herbal medicine, fish and fish exports. So many of our people depend on these.

Fiji covers a total area of some 194,000 square kilometres, of which around 10 percent is land. We have 330 islands. The islands are separated by sea. This is a challenge but its people have lived here for some 500 years and managed to survive. The current Government through its Department of Maritime has:

- Brought in new ships to service the maritime zones;
- It has provided incentives to private commercial ship owners to service these routes;
- It will upgrade our small airports to enable small planes to service the people here;
- Subsidies have been provided to the aircraft companies to service all these non-profitable routes; and
- Continuous improvement on several island jetties.

Fiji, Madam Speaker, is a multiracial country, with different ethnicities, religion, languages and culture, yet we are all united as one. The world has an eye on us because despite so much differences, we have lived together peacefully for over 140 years. One just has to look at our festivals, cultural programmes, sports, farming and job sector and Members of Parliament to see our togetherness.

Madam Speaker, we celebrate our cultural diversity together for:

- Knowledge is the key to tolerance;
- To gain new perspective on the lives of others around you as well as around the world;
- Celebrating our differences, as well as our common interests, help us unit and educate us;
- To understand other's perspective, to broaden our own and to fully experience and educate ourselves;
- People all around need to understand and to appreciate other cultures and this is one way to accomplish it;
- Through each other's diversity, we become more aware of our own. Not only do we become more aware, we gain a sense of pride for the diversity of our own culture.
- Understanding people and their background is crucial to personal and community growth;
- Because diversity makes the world go round;
- It is energising and thought-provoking. We live in such an isolated area that we do not often reflect on the diverse people we have all around us.
- To see how many different forms of music can bring happiness to groups outside of their own traditional roots;
- In order to realise what varied cultures, beliefs and lifestyles people lead;
- To help us all spend some time together. We understand, appreciate each other's culture so much more.

Madam Speaker, we all live together and stand hand-in-hand with each other in times of:

- Crisis;
- Natural disasters;
- Family gatherings;

- Weddings;
- Sports;
- Cultural activities; and
- Others.

Thanks to the Government for providing reduced bus fares for the elderly and disabled, housing assistance for us after *TC Winston*, pensions, farming assistance and easy access to education.

Madam Speaker, we are leaders in the main fields for our neighbouring island States. These include:

1. Education;
2. Medical Services;
3. Economic developments;
4. Infrastructure developments;
5. Agriculture; and
6. COP23.

Investment: Fiji is blessed to be in a central location, Madam Speaker. And because of its central location and faith in this Government, many reputable companies, organisations and NGOs have interest investing here. Some of these can be seen in:

1. Hotel development;
2. Embassies;
3. Medical, like the MIOT Private Hospitals;
4. World bodies, like the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme and European Union, et cetera.

Presidency of COP23: It is a very proud moment for Fiji, Madam Speaker, for our Prime Minister to be the President of the Conference of Parties 23. Over 190 nations will participate in Bonn, Germany, in November for the meeting. Climate change has become a great issue for small island nations of the Pacific. Climate change awareness was taken around the country by the canoe *Uto ni Yalo*.

Religion: A multiracial, multicultural nation, the population of Fiji is made up of significant number of followers for all major religions. You will find Christian Churches, Mosques, Sikhs and Hindu Temples throughout the country. People are free to practise their religion. This right is enshrined in our Constitution.

Peace: I believe in peace, Madam Speaker, not only peace for some, but peace for every man, woman and child on earth. I believe in the core values of democracy, human rights, rule of law and individual freedom. Fiji has all this and let us salute the FijiFirst Government for creating such a peaceful environment here. If we begin to embrace the ideas of unity in diversity right now, Madam Speaker, the world will be a better place.

Conclusion: Fiji is a small country with a population of almost half a million. Madam Speaker, we have dry and wet seasons but the climate is the same all over. The spoken languages are quite different from one another. We speak, *iTaukei*, *Hindustani*, *Urdu*, Rotuman, Chinese, English, Banaban and other dialects, yet we are united by the English language.

Different ethnic groups wear different types of garments. They celebrate different festivals and perform varied religious rites. People belong to diverse cultures and different religious faiths. In spite of these diversities, Fijians feel a sense of unity and oneness among them. Despite all the differences, thanks to the FijiFirst for calling us all Fijians. Fiji First is leading this united, peaceful and progressive country.

Let me quote from E. Roosevelt, who said:

“It is not enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it is not enough to believe in it. One must work at it.”

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you Honourable Members, that brings to the end our sitting for today. Thank you for your patience and contributions to the debate and I wish you the best for the rest of today. Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.35 p.m.