

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 25TH MAY, 2021

[CORRECTED COPY]

CONTENTS

Pages

Business Committee Decision	1059-1060
Minutes	1060
Communications from the Chair	1060
Point of Order	1061-1062
Review Report – Audit Report of Municipal Councils for 2013	1062-1085
Review Report – Public Service Commission Annual Report 2014	1085-1099
Questions	1099-1110, 1111-1118

Oral Questions

- (1) Progress of 100 Percent Target – Access to Clean and Safe Water (Q/No. 90/2021)
- (2) Update on the National Development Programme (Q/No. 91/2021)
- (3) COVID-19 Response (Home Loan Assistance) Act 2020 (Q/No. 92/2021)
- (4) Reduction of Chemical Fertilizers & Promotion of Organic Agriculture (Q/No. 93/2021)
- (5) Goat Meat Industry Partnership (Q/No. 94/2021)
- (6) Bullying and Brawling in Schools (Q/No. 95/2021)
- (7) Status of Mineral Exploration in Fiji’s EEZ (Q/No. 96/2021)
- (8) Empowerment and Mobile Skills Training (Q/No. 97/2021)

Written Question

- (1) Citizenship by Naturalisation – 2018-2020 (Q/No. 98/2021)

Suspension of Standing Orders	1110-1111
-------------------------------	-----------

TUESDAY, 25TH MAY, 2021

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

HONOURABLE SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

Hon. Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Foreign Affairs
Hon. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications
Hon. Lt. Col. Inia Batikoto Seruiratu, Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management
Hon. Parveen Kumar Bala, Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports
Hon. Rosy Sofia Akbar, Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts
Hon. Mereseini Rakuita Vuniwaqa, Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation
Hon. Dr. Mahendra Reddy, Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment
Hon. Cdr. Semi Tuleca Koroilavesau, Minister for Fisheries
Hon. Faiyaz Siddiq Koya, Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport
Hon. Osea Naiqamu, Minister for Forestry
Hon. Jone Usamate, Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources
Hon. Dr. Ifereimi Waqainabete, Minister for Health and Medical Services
Hon. Premila Devi Kumar, Minister for Local Government, Housing and Community Development
Hon. Alexander David O'Connor, Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services
Hon. Veena Kumar Bhatnagar, Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation
Hon. Vijay Nath, Assistant Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Disaster Management and Meteorological Services
Hon. Alvick Avhikrit Maharaj, Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports
Hon. Alipate Tuicolo Nagata, Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports
Hon. Jale Sigarara, Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Maritime Development
Hon. Viam Pillay, Assistant Minister for Environment and Rural Development
Hon. Joseph Nitya Nand, Assistant Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts
Hon. George Vegnathan, Assistant Minister for Sugar Industry
Hon. Selai Adimaitoga, Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs
Hon. Dr. Salik Ram Govind
Hon. Rohit Ritesh Sharma
Hon. Sanjay Salend Kirpal
Hon. Virendra Lal
Hon. Ro Teimumu Vuikaba Kepa
Hon. Ratu Naiqama Tawake Lalabalavu
Hon. Niko Nawaikula
Hon. Viliame Rogoibulu Gavoka
Hon. Salote Vuibureta Radrodro
Hon. Adi Litia Qionibaravi
Hon. Mosese Drecala Bulitavu

Hon. A.M. Radrodro
Hon. M.R. LeawereHon. L.D. Tabuya
Hon. Anare Jale
Hon. Ratu Suliano Matanitobua
Hon. Ro Filipe Tuisawau
Hon. Dr. Ratu Atonio Lalabalavu
Hon. Inosi Kuridrani
Hon. Mitieli Bulanauca
Hon. Peceli Waqairatu Vosanibola
Hon. Simione Rokomalo Rasova
Hon. J. Saukuru
Hon. Tanya Waqanika
Hon. Professor Biman C. Prasad
Hon. Lenora Salusalu Qereqeretabua

Absent

Hon. Ratu Tevita Navurelevu
Hon. Lt. Col. Pio Tikoduadua

BUSINESS COMMITTEE DECISION

Virtual Sitting

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, as you are all well aware, today the Fijian Parliament embarks on its first virtual sitting. Given that this is the first of its kind and for the purposes of the Standing Orders, it is crucial that all Honourable Members are informed of the decision of the Business Committee with respect to how business would be conducted,, taking into account the legal, procedural and technical considerations.

Parliament will continue to meet in order to carry out its oversight, supply and law-making functions. For the foreseeable future, the Fijian Parliament will meet virtually and this is to ensure adherence to the health and safety protocols in place nationwide.

In addition, only members in the Suva containment zone and who do not reside in the areas of interest as announced by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, may either attend the Parliament Sitting in person or virtually. Members residing in the areas of interest within the Suva containment zone can only attend virtually. All remaining Members outside the Suva containment zone will attend virtually.

For the purposes of the Standing Orders, a Member is regarded as present, including for a quorum and voting, when participating virtually, remotely in the Parliamentary proceedings by using the virtual means made available by the Parliament.

Casting of Votes

Like in all Parliamentary proceedings, voting will be required and in taking account of the legal, procedural and technical consideration, the Parliament will continue with the vote by acclamation as has been the case since March 2020. Given the changeable nature of the pandemic, the Business Committee will continue to review these measures and decide accordingly.

Virtual Parliament Sitting Guide

Finally, a sitting guide for the virtual meetings has been shared with all Honourable Members. I encourage you to peruse those thoroughly to assist with the meetings that will be conducted.

Thank you Honourable Members, we will now proceed to the next item on the Order Paper.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the Sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 26th March, 2021, as previously circulated be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome

I welcome all Honourable Members to today's sitting of Parliament, to those who are present in person and those joining us virtually from across Fiji. I also welcome all those watching the live broadcast and the live streaming of today's proceedings from the comfort of their home, offices and electronic devices. Thank you for your continued interest in the working of your Parliament.

Virtual Sitting

Honourable Members as I had alluded to earlier, today's first virtual sitting marks another milestone achievement for the Fijian Parliament. It is especially vital in times of this pandemic that Parliament continues to meet in order to undertake its oversight and law making functions. This virtual sitting would not have been possible without the ongoing support rendered by the UNDP Fiji Parliament Support Project with the generous funding from the Governments of New Zealand, Australia and Japan. Thank you for your contributions which has continued to ensure public access to the Parliamentary proceedings.

Honourable Members, as this is the first for the Fijian Parliament, we expect that there may be glitches along the way. Therefore, I seek your indulgence as we continue to find solutions to the technical glitches that may surface. At this juncture, I would like to acknowledge our valued stakeholders who will be providing the necessary support during our trial stages – the Ministry of Communications, ITC and the Fijian Broadcasting Corporation Limited. Thank you for your support in ensuring that the Honourable Members in the maritime areas and those outside the main centres will have access to the virtual meetings.

Honourable Members, we will now proceed to the next item on the Order Paper.

POINT OF ORDER

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a Point of Order and clarification, as discussed in the Business Committee meeting yesterday, we had said that the backgrounds to all the Members who are tuning in virtually should be of neutral background. Honourable Professor Biman Prasad continues to do what he did yesterday. He is still sitting in front of his political party logo and we had decided in the Business Committee meeting that that would not happen because when we come to Parliament, no one displays their political party logos, but he has continued to do that today.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that is the point that was raised in the Business Committee and we should follow that. The background from where you are sitting should be neutral.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, may I respond to that?

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Stand up and get out.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- I can understand the paranoia that the Honourable Attorney-General is facing. What I said was, this is a feature of the office that I am in. If he wants I can cover the word “NFP”, but I cannot cover the flag.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Yes, yes.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- You should have done that.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Is he saying that I cannot use the Fiji flag. I mean, he wanted to make that change once. I just cannot understand these little gimmicks by the Honourable Attorney-General. We are sitting with our waters, we are sitting with our flags, what is wrong with that?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I have said is actually very simple English and what was discussed yesterday was very simple English. I, at no point, said that you cannot have the Fijian flag; the Fijian flag is there. He should cover up the word “NFP”. The Honourable Leader of SODELPA and the SODELPA Members who are actually tuning in virtually do not have the word “SODELPA” in the background.

All we are simply saying to him is, he should cover the word “NFP” because when we come to Parliament, we do not come here with our political party banners. If the flag is part of the banner, then you cover the rest of it, it is very simple. I cannot understand what he is going on about and we had agreed on this, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Attorney-General. Honourable Members, as I had said earlier and please take note of that, make a neutral background so we can carry on with our proceedings. We will move on.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- I will cover that, Mr. Speaker, but I find this completely ridiculous.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- He should cover it up, Mr. Speaker.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, it is not you.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- You are not listening to the Honourable Speaker because the Honourable Speaker said yesterday that you are supposed to have a neutral background. We all agreed and, again, you are not listening. You have been completely recalcitrant.

HON. SPEAKER.- We move on. Honourable Members, I have been advised that there are no Committee Reports for tabling today, there are no Ministerial Statements and there are no Bills for consideration for today.

On the next agenda item, I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

REVIEW REPORT - AUDIT REPORT OF MUNICIPAL COUNCILS FOR 2013

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review on the Audit Report of Municipal Councils for 2013 which was tabled on 15th May, 2019.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to speak on his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament, I, as Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts who moved the motion, take this opportunity to speak on the motion with regards to the Public Accounts Committee Review of the Audit Report for various Municipal Councils for the 2013 Financial Year.

At the outset, this Report focusses on the findings of the Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji - Audit Reports for various Municipal Councils for the 2013 financial year. The Councils that were audited included:

- (1) Nausori Town Council;
- (2) Rakiraki Town Council;
- (3) Lautoka City Council; and
- (4) Nadi Town Council.

The Report identified audit issues within the four Municipal Councils for the 2013 financial year. Due to the timeframe that has lapsed, some of the issues may have been resolved by now or are in the process of being rectified. It is pleasing to note that the Ministry of Local Government with all the four Town Councils that were audited, have responded to the Committee in relation to the audit issues that were highlighted by the Office of the Auditor-General in their audits.

The Committee has identified a general concern on the needs for the Councils to have some understanding on the specifics of the public sector accounting audit skills and encourages the line Ministry and the respective Councils to take this concern on board as these addresses the financial audit issues that may be reoccurring over the years.

The Committee strongly believes that Heads of Municipal Councils, especially Chief Executive Officers, should be appointed on merit, having a good background in financial

management and governance. Municipal Councils should be managed as a corporate organisation while maintaining its social obligation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to note that the Office of the Auditor-General had issued a modified audit opinion for all the four Municipal Councils with two Councils issued a disclaimer of opinion. This was due to the non-preparation of financial statement under the International Financial Reporting Standard for small and medium-sized entities as required by the Fiji Institute of Accountants. Also note was that reconciled variances between the Council's General Ledger balances and subsidiary records for balance sheet items, specifically the rates receivable.

In addition, the Office of the Auditor-General had also highlighted on other significant matters, the issues that affected the operations of the Municipal Councils. These include issues such as:

- (1) Absence of supporting documents for journal entries passed;
- (2) Increase of rates arrears;
- (3) Variance between general ledger and subsidiary records for rate receivables;
- (4) Absence of separation of duties;
- (5) Variance in valued-added tax between general ledger and subsidiary records and non-preparation of VAT reconciliation; and
- (6) Board of Survey not carried out.

The Committee had conducted a round of consultation with these Councils at their offices from 26th March to 27 March, 2019. The Committee started off with the Nausori Town Council, Rakiraki Town Council, Lautoka Town Council and followed by Nadi Town Council.

It is pleasing to note that during the consultation, Members had raised the question on deficiencies identified by the Office of the Auditor-General which had impacted the overall system of control of these Municipalities. However, during the consultation with Council Heads, the Committee had been advised on the mechanism in place to address the audit issues.

Overall, I commend the performance of Municipal Councils and the efforts in trying to improve its systems and processes, and also acknowledge the Ministry of Local Government on measures that are put in place to improve and standardise all Municipal Councils' systems and processes.

The Committee notes that our recommendations were taken on board. A lot of reforms came to Municipal Councils with Special Administrators coming on board and Chief Executive Officers appointed on open merit-base. With changes in senior management, these Municipal Councils have committed a lot of things to the Public Accounts Committee and the Committee will take into account all commitments when it scrutinises the current audit report that was submitted after the appointment of new management, to ensure all recommendations are taken seriously and necessary changes are taking place for the betterment of the ratepayers and residents. The Committee also notes social responsibilities taken by the Councils and commends their effort.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those words, as the Member moving the motion, I thank you for the opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Chairperson. Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on this motion. I call upon the Honourable Gavoka.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I note that the Committee has highlighted some concern about the controls of the finances of Municipal Councils and that the Chairperson has said that the CEOs have been tasked to look into these issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are talking about 2013, we are now in 2021. We ask the question as to why we do have a huge turnover in CEOs in the towns and cities. They do not seem to last long, they come and go. Something is badly amiss in the management of the municipalities.

This brings us back, Mr. Speaker, to what we have been saying for quite some time that the municipalities should have their own elections. They should control their own affairs and then the citizenry have a say in how they run their towns and cities. We were told that back in 2006, the overthrow of the SDL Government was to do away with inefficiencies and the like, and they are to bring in better governance. But here, we are today in 2021, improvement has been, short of what we expected. In fact, we have gone backwards in many ways.

Mr. Speaker, we continue to press for this. Let the Municipalities control their own affairs – the citizenries of the towns and cities have their own elections so that they can, in their own way with their own system as in the past, improve on issues that are important to them.

Mr. Speaker, I visited Ba a couple of weeks ago and the situation in Ba is not what it used to be. It used to be one of the best-run townships in the country – very clean, but that is not the case today, Mr. Speaker. I know it is not the responsibility of the Council but if the citizenry, the people in the Ba area, are empowered, they would do a lot more in improving the town.

Mr. Speaker, we went to see this new hospital that has been sitting there idle for a number of years. The people of Ba are going to the Ba Mission Hospital that looks very poor. It is almost like it was built in the stone ages. But you ask the question, is anyone in Ba highlighting this to the Government; that they should not be going to the old hospital when a new one is standing idle? So, this is what happens when you do not empower your people, when you think that Government can do it by placing their own administrators in positions of leadership in those municipalities.

Mr. Speaker, Parliament should one day go and see this hospital in Ba. The road to the hospital has potholes. The quality of the building is so poor, there is even a dormitory where people used to stay, Mr. Speaker, for the staff....

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, there is a point of order.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the motion on the floor is about Municipal councils, it is not about hospitals nor about roads. Honourable Gavoka has actually strayed away from that, and if he could speak on the debate on the Municipal Councils itself.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was highlighting that, Sir, to strengthen the case from this side of the House, from SODELPA and so our Honourable colleagues of NFP, that the people of the Municipalities should control their affairs.

When they do not do that, things like this happen. I ask, who is in charge of the Govind Park in Ba? The stadium, Mr. Speaker, is a modern stadium, but grass is up to your waist. It is not being maintained. I went to school at Xavier College which is just adjacent to the Park, Mr. Speaker, which is pathetic. It is pathetic! Where is the citizenry? Mr. Speaker, that is where we are coming from. We were promised by the Honourable Minister responsible for Town Councils back in the last Parliament that there would be elections. He said there will be a review and now we have a new Minister, nothing has happened.

We were going to have an election, Mr. Speaker, but when is it going to happen? When will Fiji First trust its own people to decide on how to run their own towns and cities? They obviously do not trust their own people to have municipal elections for them to run their own affairs. I state here today and let it be very clear, the SODELPA Government will make sure within the first six months to have municipal elections...

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Dream on, dream on!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- ... in every towns and cities in Fiji.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Gavoka and I give the floor to Honourable Salote Radrodro. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to make a contribution on this motion and my contribution will focus on Recommendation No. 3, where it is saying that there needs to be a lot of improvement done to the rate collection.

Mr. Speaker, we will recall that in the previous term of Parliament, this has been an ongoing issue and up until now, nothing has really been done by the Honourable Minister responsible, to be able to tackle this issue effectively. Also, the previous Minister had mentioned in this House that financial collection systems in Municipalities have been improved but until now within this 2013 Report, it still says that there are still a lot of improvements and that being 2013, I believe that is still a nagging issue in all Municipalities.

Also in their conclusion, they say that there is a weak structure for financial reporting in the municipalities, and the very fact that the 2013 Annual Audit Report is coming in now, clearly reflects the failure of the municipalities and also the Ministry responsible, to adhere to the financial requirements in having to table annual reports, which must include financial reporting, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We have also heard in this House that there are still pending reports from various municipalities in regards to the submission of the annual report. I believe reports are still pending from 2006, which is still in the Committees. We are now in 2021 and that shows the laxity and ineffective system and financial processes in the Ministry as reflected in the continuous problem, or the biggest continuous challenge in municipalities which is the high rate of arrears by the ratepayers, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Also in one of the annual reports of the municipalities, there was mention that a huge amount was being used to pay for transportation of green waste to Naboro Landfill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that reflects the ineffectiveness of systems and processes within municipalities, even though we hear from the Honourable Ministers from the other side that there have been reforms carried out, but the very fact that they are using the much needed finance available in the municipality to pay for trucks to cart those green waste to the Naboro Landfill reflects that they are really not engaging in new creative ways of getting rid of green waste.

There was about \$98,000 in one of the municipalities in a year being used to pay trucks to carry green waste to Naboro Landfill. Rather than doing that, if Municipalities are given the autonomy and they are being empowered to carry out their job, maybe they could have looked at purchasing machines to be able to shred these green waste which could be reused and recycled for those interested in mulching for backyard gardening, Mr. Speaker, Sir. There is, indeed, no improvement at all in regards to the collection of rates from the ratepayers, and also in regards to the prudent use of their resources that have been given in regards to maybe grants from the government, and also other income revenue streams which municipalities are engaged in, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Salote Radrodro for her contribution to the debate.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me the opportunity to debate on the motion before the House. Going through the Report on the recommendations, and as alluded to by the Honourable Radrodro, I would just like to refer to the third recommendation which states that “the Committee noted the continued release of governments grants to municipalities on a regular basis, while at the same time, the municipal councils failed to adhere to the requirement of the Local Government Act (51)(1), which is to report by the 31st of March every year and also to publish by 31st of August every year.”

The Auditor-General has provided the following recommendations:

- (1) Modified (qualified) opinions were issued on the financial statements audited which reflects very poorly on the councils. Close and immediate attention should be given to address matters which have been emphasised in audit reports including those included as other significant matters in management letters.
- (2) Timely preparation of quality draft annual financial statements is a major issue which needs to be addressed by those charged with governance in the Council. Delays in submission of financial statements for audit prevents the Auditor-General from giving an opinion on them on a timely basis and informing Parliament and other stakeholders of the outcome of such audits.

The fourth recommendation states:

- (4) Another key area that needs to be improved by the Councils that were audited is their financial reporting. Numerous audit adjustments were proposed for correction of incorrect accounting entries and accounting mis-statements. This was also one of the key reasons that completion of audits of most councils were delayed.
- (5) The involvement of the Ministry of Local Government in improving accountability and financial reporting is noted. However, there is room for improvement in individual capacity in financial management and reporting through active participation in seminars and workshops. It had been noted that it becomes challenging for councils to prepare annual accounts when these have not been done for some time resulting in a backlog. The Ministry can encourage councils to prepare and submit draft financial statements for audit annually.

Sir, I would like to continue on the common findings which have been reported under the financial matters, which include the following:

- delay in the submission of financial statements;
- Non-performance of monthly bank reconciliations;
- Salary reconciliations not carried out;
- Interest not being charged on rates due;
- Non-maintenance of appropriate and adequate accounting records; and
- Sexennial valuation not carried out by the councils.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to say that the Suva City Council has not provided an annual report since 2010, given that this audit was done in 2013; Lami Town Council, since 2013; Sigatoka Town Council since 2016; and Nadi Town Council since 2013. Lautoka City Council has not provided an annual report since this audit in 2013.

Ba Town Council has a delayed audit of 2 years; Tavua Town Council – delayed audit of 4 years; Rakiraki Town Council – delayed audit of 3 years; Levuka Town Council – delayed audit of 6 years; Nausori Town Council – delayed audit of 4 years; Nasinu Town Council – delayed audit of 8 years; Labasa Town Council – delayed audit of 2 years; and Savusavu Town Council – delayed audit of 7 years. So in total, 55 annual reports have not been reported but the Office of the Auditor-General has noted that about 31 annual reports have been updated until today. I thank the Council for updating that report, but audit opinions were modified (qualified) audits for Lautoka City Council and Nadi Town Council.

For the Lautoka Town Council, there was a discrepancy. The council made several adjustments to cash at bank accounts amounting to debit of \$3,554,180 and credit of \$3,290,711. There was a difference in the cash at bank account of about \$263,469. An unreconciled variance of \$750,987 was noted by the Auditor-General. Included in the creditors of \$1,205,166 is VAT payable, totalling \$248,161. An unreconciled variance of \$204,864 was noted between this amount and that derived following an independent reconciliation of the Statement of VAT account. Consequently the audit was unable to ascertain an accuracy of VAT payable as at 31st December, 2013.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an unreconciled variance of \$464,800 exists between the PAYE annual summary and the general ledger for salaries and wages. Consequently the auditor was unable to satisfy itself if salaries and wages of \$1,385,139 was correctly stated in the financial statements.

For the Nadi Town Council, Sir, there were a lot of discrepancies in trade and other receivables, including miscellaneous debtors and infringement fines of \$80,862 and another of \$43,217 respectively and an unreconciled variance of \$217,701 was noted. Therefore the audit was not able to confirm if the trade and other receivables of \$2,007,270 were fairly stated in the financial statements. An unreconciled variance of \$91,194 existed between the general ledger and bank reconciliations statement of the general fund.

In addition the Council did not provide bank reconciliation of the general fund account which had an ending balance of \$420,662. The audit was not able to obtain sufficient audit evidence through alternative audit procedures to confirm completeness, valuation and existence of these accounts. Accordingly, it was not able to confirm if the cash at bank balance of \$565,459 under the general funds was fairly stated.

Stated under the current liabilities were sundry deposits of \$706,930. The council was unable to provide sufficient and appropriate evidence to substantiate these deposits. They were not able to perform necessary audit procedures or any other alternative audit procedure to verify completeness, existence and valuation of this balance.

The value of parking meters for the Nadi Town Council have not been incorporated in the Statement of Financial Position as at 31 December 2013. The council records the parking meter fund account cash at bank general ledger balance through a book entry by adding ending balance of accumulated funds of the parking meter financial audit with the net deficit/profit derived from the operations of the account. Additionally, the council does not maintain a separate cash book to record all receipts and disbursements in relation to parking meter operations.

The Nausori Town Council did not prepare monthly bank reconciliations for garbage fund, vehical fund, labourers fund and loan fund accounts. In addition, the general fund account bank reconciliations included a number of reconciling items with significant amounts which could not be substantiated to place reliance on the bank reconciliation. Furthermore, unrepresented cheques amounting to \$122,667 were stated as stale at balance date was not reversed by the council and necessary supporting documents were not provided to substantiate them. As a result they were unable

to perform necessary audit procedures to verify existence, completeness and accuracy of cash at bank of \$99,437 as disclosed in the financial statements.

The council has disclosed a total of \$1,964,340 as trade and other receivables in the statement of financial position. However, the council was unable to provide reconciliation of rate debtors of \$1,836,120; fees, charges and rent of \$108,733 and other receivables of \$9,487. They were unable to perform any other alternative audit procedures to obtain sufficient audit evidence to verify existence, completeness and accuracy of the receivable balances disclosed in the financial statements.

The Council recorded a sum of \$2,770,231 in total expenses in the statement of comprehensive income of the year ending 31st December, 2013. The council did not provide any payment vouchers and appropriate supporting documents for amount totalling \$66,884 for audit variation.

In addition, numerous payments made in the financial year ending 2013 related to the 2012 financial year were recorded as expenditure. The Council did not record the accruals for these payments in the financial year, as a result we were unable to determine where the eight adjustments might be necessary in respect of the Council's expenses for the current year.

The Council recorded a total revenue of \$1,892,027 in the statement of comprehensive income. The Council was unable to provide a reconciliation of total ratepayers and associated general income to verify the completeness and accuracy of its general rate income amounting to \$456,785.

In addition, appropriate records of reconciliation were also not provided for business trading and other licence, fees, charges and rents of \$212,734 and \$892,405 respectively. Absence of reconciliations and records limited the audit scope to perform necessary audit procedures to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence over completeness and accuracy of the revenue balance disclosed in the financial statement.

A number of variance existed in the asset movements between the financial statement and the fixed asset statement included in this were variance of \$239,890 and \$553,092 in the written down value as of 31st December, 2013, for property, plant and equipment respectively.

As a result, we were unable to perform necessary audit procedures to verify existence, completeness and accuracy of PPE balance of \$8,435,808 as disclosed in the financial statement. However, the Council has not disclosed separately these properties as investment property in accordance with the International Accounts and Standards (IAS).

The Council was unable to provide supporting documents for the leased properties. As a result, we were unable to determine whether any adjustments might have been necessary in respect of the Council's investment properties balance in the current year or comparative year and the elements or making up a statement of profit or loss and other comprehensive incomes, movement in funds and cash flows.

The Councils have recorded \$167,189 as trade and other payables as part of the total trade and other payables as disclosed in Note 7 to the financial report. There is an unreconciled variance of \$83,953 between the amount and the subsidiary listing.

The Council has a provisional VAT of \$51,763 recorded in trade and other payables in the statement of financial position as at 31 December, 2013. The Council did not perform reconciliation for the VAT payable account.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as for the Rakiraki Town Council, the Council did not provide adequate and appropriate accounting records, supporting documents and reconciliations for cash at bank of \$64,070. Trade and other receivables of \$104,834, property, plant and equipment of \$279,546, VAT payable of \$106,075, prior year adjustments of \$54,610, salary and wages of \$104,559, garbage collection expense of \$17,000, depreciation expense, there was no document to support all these miscellaneous expenses.

In addition, we were unable to obtain sufficient and appropriate audit evidence concerning the total income of \$332,020 reflected in the financial statements. Therefore, we were unable to perform the necessary audit procedures to substantiate accuracy of balances of these accounts disclosed in the financial statement.

The Council did not maintain an up-to-date general ledger for the financial year 2013. As a result, we cannot perform necessary audit procedures to confirm balances from the financial statements to general ledger. Therefore, we were unable to confirm the accuracy on the determination of the balances in the financial statements.

Sir, that is all that I would like to point out on the Audit Report of the Auditor-General's Report.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Rasova for his contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, I still have four Speakers on this motion. The order is the Honourable Virendra Lal, Honourable Professor Biman Prasad, Honourable Adi Litia Qionibaravi and Honourable Lynda Tabuya. Before I take those speakers, we will break for morning tea and resume in half-an-hour. We adjourn for morning tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.30 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.02 a.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate and I give the floor to the Honourable Lal. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament; I, as a member of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts take this opportunity to speak in support of the motion in regards to the review of the Audit Report on Municipal Councils for 2013.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Auditor-General is responsible, on behalf of Parliament, to audit the accounts of all Municipal Councils. It is important to note that the deficiencies detailed in this Review Report, as well as the Auditor-General's Report that were identified during the audit, as well as during the public hearing may have been subsequently resolved by the Councils. However, attention must be drawn to internal controls such as timeliness, quality of financial reporting and adherence to International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) needs to be improved.

The Auditor-General examined the financial statements of four Municipal Councils namely; Lautoka City Council, Nadi Town Council, Rakiraki Town Council and Nausori Town Council, and were all issued with a modified and qualified audit opinion. Two Councils, however, were issued with a disclaimer of opinion. The reasons why the Councils were issued with a modified audit opinion was due to non-preparation of the financial statements under the IFRS for small and medium-size entities as required by the Fiji Institute of Accountants and unreconciled variances between the Councils' general ledger balances and subsidiary records for balance sheet items specifically the rates receivable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee endorses the Auditor-General's recommendations. Modified opinions issued on all the financial statements audited which reflects greatly on the Councils. Close and immediate attention should be given to address matters which have been emphasised in Audit Reports, including significant matters in management. Timely preparation of quality draft annual financial statements is a major issue that need to be addressed by those that are charged with governance.

Delays in the submission of financial statements for audit prevents the Auditor-General from giving an audit opinion in a timely basis which further delays the status of the audits financial statements to Parliament and other stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Local Government for the outcome of such audits. Efforts should be made to improve rate collections as most Councils that were audited were carrying significant amount of great debtors. This is important because rate is the main source of income for the Council and its timely collection can assist the Councils significantly to improve operational and capital expenditures.

The qualified accounts personnel are recruited to ensure that preparation of financial reporting is crucial. Numerous audit adjustments were proposed for correction of incorrect accounting entries and accounting misstatements before the Auditor-General's Report was finalised and tabled in Parliament.

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts acknowledges the involvement of the Ministry of Local Government in improving accountability and financial reporting. However, there is room for improving individual capacity in financial management and reporting through active participation in seminars and workshops.

The Committee notes that it becomes challenging for Councils to prepare annual accounts when this has not been done for some time, resulting in backlog. The Ministry can encourage Councils to prepare and submit draft financial statements for audit annually, as well as prepare and table its Annual Report to Parliament with reference to Section 45 of the Financial Management Act; ensure that all Municipal Councils pursuant to Section 57 (1) and (3) of the Local Government Act, that each year on or before 31st August, Municipal Councils, are required to publish their balance sheet and a summarised income and expenditure of the Councils in local newspapers. The annual reports containing a balance sheet, a summarised statement of income and expenditure of the Council on 31st December, together with any report of the Auditor-General and notification that any ratepayer or any person holding any security charge upon the Council, make all reasonable time to inspect the Council's office, the full annual statement as certificated by the Auditor and the Council's Annual Report are prepared pursuant to the provisions of Section 19 and make copies from any part of the statement of the report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to earlier with respect to internal controls that design and implementation of the internal controls from the respective Heads of the Municipal Councils must ensure that they are suitably designed to prevent, detect and correct material statements where the audit strategy and scope meets its operating effectiveness, accounting processes and procedures which would be more resilient and add value to the operations of the Municipal Councils.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few comments and as a Member of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, I fully support the motion that is before the House and I thank you for this opportunity. Thank you, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member. There is a slight change on the speakers. I will give the floor first to Honourable Tabuya, then Honourable Professor Prasad, Honourable Qionibaravi, Honourable Bulanauca and the Honourable Minister for Local Government, Housing and Community Development.

Honourable Tabuya, you have the floor.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me the opportunity to speak on this issue.

Firstly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I do contribute to the motion, I just want to state for the record and this is something that has been reflected now by our viewers and members of the public watching right now, why we are discussing issues that are not relevant right now to the crisis at hand. There has been a lot of anger expressed and I wish to apologise to the public about this because I want to state that the Opposition did raise this issue in the Business Committee about the need for us to address the issues that are current to us right now.

Our people are suffering during this crisis, however, it has been stated in the Business Committee and certainly that the business from April be brought forward and so here we are discussing issues about Municipal Councils when we should be really looking at the issues about the current crisis.

I just want to respond to what the Honourable Attorney-General in his Point of Order against Honourable Gavoka, who raised the issue about roads to the Ba Hospital and the issue that it is not an issue for Councils - I just want to remind the Honourable Attorney-General and also Members of the Government that really at a time when governments had the Municipal Councils look after the roads, so it is relevant. The Suva City Council, for example, had their own depots and their own equipment to maintain the roads and this was done pre-2006 and certainly, it was something that the

Municipal Councils tendered to, yes and so the poor reforms by this Government to pass the work of what the Municipal Councils and the Government through PWD were doing to the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) was a very poor decision and we still see more potholes on the roads than ever before. Unprecedented! So, it is relevant to what Honourable Gavoka had mentioned.

Now, Mr. Speaker, it was important at the time when we had Municipal Council elections that our city fathers and mothers were involved in decision-making because they would be on the back of employees in the councils to make sure that they were doing their jobs, so Municipal Council elections is needed in this country. We need Municipal Council elections brought back. Our people have the right to vote in who leads in their councils and who runs their municipalities, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, there has been a rise in the number of people and those in informal settlements all across the country especially the Suva-Nausori corridor. We have seen an increase in the number of people in the informal settlements. They are bursting at the seams so obviously the services that the informal settlements and our Suva-Nausori corridor, as well as our municipalities need to be improved but we are not seeing an improvement in this, Mr. Speaker. We are not seeing this.

Actually, we see the Honourable Minister for Agriculture going out, distributing seeds to these informal settlements. How useful is that for our urban areas when they hardly have any land to plant those seeds? It would be more useful for him to nurture it in the nurseries and then give those plants for people to plant it. They do not have the land to plant it, but this is a municipal council issue. They are bursting at the seams.

What are the municipal councils doing to handle the rubbish collection? The issue of rubbish collection. We are still seeing rubbish on the road, yes and then there is the issue of garbage collection or garbage being sorted. I mean, we have the champions for climate change throughout the Government but what are they doing to look at recycling garbage. What are they doing to do that? We have not seen much commitment from the Government in that regard.

We hear about these garbage sorting facilities in Caubati and Makoi. Where is that up to? Why are they even in the settlements themselves, Mr. Speaker? Yes, the locations. The locations are very ill-thought of, right in the middle of our settlements, in the middle. I mean, this is what we are facing right now with the COVID-19 crisis. It is because of the number of people that are living in the informal settlements.

Yes, Honourable Attorney-General, the numbers, the cases are increasing from these settlements and it concerns us in Opposition because you are not dealing with the housing issue. Where is the affordable housing you promised? We have been talking about this. The International Finance Corporation (IFC) was supposed to be involved. Where is the affordable housing? Where is it for our people? They are living on top of each other. It has created this problem now, we are facing it with the COVID-19 crisis in terms of infection, Mr. Speaker.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Talk on the motion!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Another issue that has been raised, Mr. Speaker, is the workers' welfare, our rubbish collectors. Yes, they are still working during the pandemic, during the lockdowns, our rubbish collectors, yet they are still exposed to hazardous waste. Even if you see them in the mornings, rain or shine, they are not even wearing any covered outfits, raincoats, anything to protect them and then there is hazardous waste that they are collecting and some of the rubbish collectors actually had burns, they actually have injuries from this. But this is the issue when you have poor reforms of Municipal Councils, passing over the rubbish collection to private contractors.

This used to be collected by the Councils. Why have you given it to three or four companies, competing for rubbish collection and this affects the workers also, the rubbish collectors.

Mr. Speaker, a lot of the reforms by this Government are poor reforms, so you have failed the people in these reforms. You need to revisit these in the Municipal Councils and how you serve the people of this country.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Tabuya. I give the floor to the Honourable Professor Prasad. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thought for a while that you were ignoring me but thank you very much for this opportunity.

Just listening to the debate so far, Mr. Speaker, proves the point that we have to discuss in the Business Committee the relevant and priority issues that Parliament

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- There are thousands of people who do not have jobs, who are finding it difficult to put food on the table, pay medicine for the sick, and here we have not had a single Minister coming up today with a Ministerial Statement. We are talking about the response, the whole of Government approach and the people's expectations.

Mr. Speaker, I received many calls last night about what was going to be discussed in Parliament. After all, Honourable Ministers are getting calls about people not getting food and I know many of you are helping as much as you can. But this is a Parliament, Mr. Speaker, that ought to look after the people. The people are living in fear, people have a lot of anxiety, so it is us who need to talk about this and if we do not, then it is the dereliction of duty on the part of us, as legislators, not to talk about the current crisis in a very determined manner.

Mr. Speaker, we have just come out after having morning tea but there are people who are calling me right from this morning, saying that they do not have food. I mean, you can dispute some of the information that we are getting but the reality of the matter on the ground, Mr. Speaker, is that people want to hear what we are planning to do. We need to look at what the system that can do.

The municipalities that are we are talking about in the Report, Mr. Speaker, is exactly where people are suffering. I have received calls about what the town councils are doing. So it is absolutely vital, Mr. Speaker, and I would suggest that we relook at the agenda of Parliament and maybe, we should have another Business Committee this afternoon and look at how Ministers can give Ministerial Statements tomorrow. Let us have some discussions, let us inform our people of where the Government is. In fact, we could have been talking about the Auditor-General's Report on the COVID-19 response from last year. I am very, very disappointed that we are not discussing the issues concerning our people today in this Parliament, Mr. Speaker.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- A point of order.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, there is a point of order .

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- I can hear the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are supposed to discuss this Report - Review on the Audit Report of Municipal Councils for 2013, but not a single word on this Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if Honourable Professor Prasad was that much concerned about the issue that he is raising, he should have raised an urgent motion this morning, but he did not. Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us follow the Order Paper. The Order Paper had been voted and we have accepted the Order Paper. He did not raise the issue at that particular point in time, so just follow the Order Paper.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment.

Honourable Professor Prasad, you have heard the point of order. Just stick to the Order Paper.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- I have heard the point of order, Mr. Speaker, but I think it is a bit irrelevant for the Minister because he himself should know the issues confronting the people today. People want to know the plan, whether you are going into further lockdown....

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- A point of order, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, there is another point of order.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, this is very disingenuous of this Honourable Member. He participated in the Business Committee meeting yesterday. We had thoroughly talked about this matter. Both he and Honourable Tabuya are now coming here and grandstanding (really, that is what it is) and saying that we do not want to talk about those issues. Even if on a minute point, if he looks at it under the Agenda Item, Sir, everyday, as you mentioned in the Business Committee Meeting, the Ministers have their right to make a statement if they wish to do so and that is their prerogative.

However, we also discussed in the Business Committee Meeting yesterday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that next week when we have our sitting, there will be an opportunity for the Opposition by the Business Committee Meeting that will be held this Thursday, for them to fill in the new questions, and they can ask new questions on COVID-19 or any matter related to COVID-19, and that is what we agreed to.

Honourable Professor Prasad cannot help himself but do this grandstanding and this is the point we precisely made yesterday. Please, do not politicise the issue. He is here doing exactly the same thing. He said, "We are not going to do that", but he is doing that even before we have reached the question session regarding COVID-19, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I would urge, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that those Opposition Members who are doing this grandstanding, please stick to the rules and be reasonable. We all know there is a COVID-19 situation going on, we know that. Various statements have been made by Government and various other statements will be made by Government. The Opposition with their specific questions, have the opportunity to ask those questions next week because this Agenda Item had already been set.

The reality of the matter is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, there is a COVID-19 situation, but there are other facets to running of Government, and these matters that we are addressing also pertain to other facets of running Government. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General. Honourable Professor Prasad, just stick to the subject matter. You have the floor.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is absolutely no grandstanding and he knows what I said in the Business Committee. He talked about Ministerial Statements and today, I was expecting that there would be some Ministerial Statements from the key Ministry. I had talked about these issues and we will not get back this opportunity, but let me just get back to the Report.

(Honourable Members interject)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am hearing noise. I think some microphones are switched on and I am hearing a lot of interference.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you look at the recommendations of the Report, it says that the audited report reflects very poorly on the Government. I think the point made by the Honourable Attorney-General in the Report, he is saying that ...

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Maybe it is the quality of the content, that is why...

(Laughter)

HON. SPEAKER.- I can hear you.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I think what needs to be said is that, the reference to Councils is actually a misnomer because there are no Councils in this country since 2007. So, it says it reflects fully on the council, it reflects fully on their administrators and the administrators were appointed by this interim government and continues to be appointed by this government.

The refusal by this government to have proper election, I mean, we talk about democracy, we have appointed Advisory Councils, we have a Growers Council and we have appointed administrators for the administration of towns and cities, but where is the accountability to the people? And this is what we have been saying for so many years that it is time, that this Government actually does what it should do to give the people what they want, which is power to the people, the administration of councils and that would bring about complete opportunities.

There are too many instances, Mr. Speaker, that people do not have any idea when they go to the Town Council, they go to the administrators, they do not get the kind of assistance they should be getting because these people do not have the responsibility to the people, they have a responsibility to the Minister, to the Government and all the decisions are top-down and the issues and the concerns by the people on the ground in these town and city council areas are not addressed and unless you have elected councils, previous terms used to have wards. If an issue is not raised like the rubbish collection problem, the drainage, mosquitoes in an area, people would take it to the council for them to address.

What comes out very clearly from the Auditor-General's Report is not only the lack of accountability and transparency in terms of the way that the reports are compiled but also that it shows that the system of the administration of councils through the appointed administrators by the Minister is not working. The promise that the previous Minister made in the 2014 Elections, and we have been hearing about the review of the Local Government, I do not know where this is but those are urgent matters that need to be addressed by the Ministry. We need to get that and start preparing for municipal elections. Those are the points that I want to make, Mr. Speaker.

Still on Recommendation 2, the Auditor-General finds that the submission on the Statement of Audit on the qualified opinion on timely basis, I think this is not just in relation to town and city councils. The Auditor-General can keep proper Reports, I think it is very important and I want to thank the Public Accounts Committee for actually pointing that out in the recommendations that they have made so, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very important and I think it is urgent now. We know where the problems are, we know the difficulties of managing city and town councils and their administrators.

The best thing that this Government can do before they finish off next year is to have town and city council elections through a proper review of the Local Government Act. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Professor Prasad. I give the floor to the Honourable Adi Litia Qionibaravi, you have the floor, Madam.

HON. ADI L. QIONIBARAVI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity to contribute to the motion before the House and I also thank the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee and the Members for the Report that has been tabled in the House this morning.

Honourable Speaker, the speakers from this side of the House have all spoken at length on the weaknesses and shortcomings of the Municipal Councils. These audited accounts were the subject of the Report before the House.

I will be very brief, Mr. Speaker, Sir. In reviewing the Audit Report, I noted that the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, in his Foreword to the Report, stated in the fifth paragraph as follows:

“The Committee strongly believes that heads of Municipal Councils - Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), should be appointed on merit, having a good background in financial management and the Government. Municipal councils should be managed as a corporate organisation while maintaining social obligations.”

This is the crux of the problem in Municipal Councils which has resulted in the status of the financial management of the Council and the instant report before the House, all four Municipal Councils have been given modified audited opinion.

The residents of each municipality, Mr. Speaker, Sir, expect the Councils to promote the health, welfare and convenience of the inhabitants of the municipality and to preserve the amenities. They also expect the Councils to administer and that finances are managed prudently and to comply with recognised local financial standards and international as well, Sir.

The reform which have been ongoing for over 10 years now have obviously failed to deliver the objectives of the reform. The problems outlined by the speakers from this side of the House will continue, until and unless the CEOs of Municipal Councils are appointed on merit and more importantly, the residents of these Councils elect their own Council members to manage their affairs.

All municipalities are governed by the Local Government Act and with the approval of the Minister, promote or establish and maintain public utilities services, including public transportation and construct or maintain any public works in the opinion of the council may be necessary or beneficial to the municipality. The roles of the Municipal Councils cannot be effectively carried out unless the governing bodies are elected by the residence of the municipalities.

For over 10 years now, CEOs have been appointed by the Ministry of Local Government and it is evident from the report that the Councils are not been properly governed in the services expected to be delivered under the Local Government Act are not been effectively carried out, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Therefore, our plea from this side of the House is that, Government moves quickly to enable the autonomy of the Municipal Councils and to appoint CEOs of the Councils on merit with the good background of financial management and governance. I thank you, Sir, for the opportunity to speak on the motion before the House.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Qionibaravi. I give the floor to the Honourable Bulanauca. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to contribute briefly to the debate on the Committee's Report this morning. I thank the Committee for doing their work and I thank the previous speakers for having said what they had said. But hearing and going through the Report and whatever has been said, we can see that there are a lot of problems in the leadership and management of the various councils that have been reported on.

As has been highlighted, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) need to be appointed on merit. All these problems Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted by this Government in previous years where the Municipal Councils before had been doing and now we have seen the same problem again. The incomplete development or not developed completely, leadership, late financial report, late financial report and submission and also the many details of the various details through the financial decisions that are not transparent.

Also there are no markets where the vendors can sell their vegetables properly and it was important during Honourable Bala's time and now with Honourable Premila's time that they need markets to sell their vegetables or farm produce along the roads in order to survive. So, it is important the various promises that they have been giving, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and to have Municipal elections as soon as possible.

The Government's responsibility is to ensure that elections for the Municipal Councils are done every three years. It is important Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Government itself be responsible and be able to control and manage Municipal Council elections. They are elected by the ratepayers because the ratepayers have the right to elect them. That is very important, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We need to have municipalities with very qualified CEOs who can manage all the problems. The Government and Ministry concerned is merely to control and manage those Municipal Councils through the CEOs or through the Administrators to do the work by themselves. By doing that they have to lead, develop the policy and also doing the operational work. The problem from the various ministry, government and ministerial level in trying to do the operation part as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all the Municipal Councils have the ratepayers pay their rate, so they have the right to elect their own council. If there is any problem in the council, the Government and the ministry concerned have the responsibility and the power to control, manage and motivate them in order to do better. I would have thought that they would have done that during the last ten or eight years but they have not done that and now even worse, the elected Municipal Councils.

It is important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to give back that right to the ratepayers to elect their own municipalities, let the Government and the Ministry control, lead, motivate and manage them because it is important to understand where that right comes from. That right does not come from the

Government, the right of the ratepayers to elect comes from the International Labour Organization (ILO) 169 and where did ILO 169 get that from? The right of human beings like an individual, organisation or Municipal Council in Fiji or in the world is only from God. That right is only from God, not from the Government nor from anyone else. Only the Government have to protect it in order that it sees the rights are properly managed in the Government, in the ministry and also in the Municipal Councils.

It is important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from that basic thing, the right. Where that right comes from; the right comes from God, not from anyone else. ILO 169 protects the right of the individual and the communities concerned in this case the Municipal Councils.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you very much indeed for giving me the opportunity. It is important to have that right, recognise that right from God and not from anyone else. The Government through the Ministry to protect that right and make it accountable, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you Honourable Member. I give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Local Government, Housing and Community Development. You have the floor.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to contribute to the motion that is before the House. The Ministry for Local Government acknowledges the findings of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts pertaining to the Office of the Auditor-General 2013 Audit Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must acknowledge the fact that we are discussing a seven year old Report. Since then the councils have gone through continuous improvements and a number of reforms were undertaken by each municipality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has been working tirelessly towards bringing efficiency in the operations of the Municipal Councils and this is through the institutional reforms badly needed in the Municipal Councils. These reforms are carried out through the review of the council bylaws, creation of policies and manuals and recruitment of competent personnel to effectively carryout the functions of the councils.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you will agree with me that for any institution to function, the institution must have the right Chief Executive Officer (CEO) with the right skill-set and along with the CEO, one has to have the finance officer and the HR personnel. These three positions are extremely important for any municipality or for that matter any organisation. We had noted that the CEOs recruited did not have financial acumen which was correctly pointed out by the Standing Committee. Since then, the recruitment of CEOs now are based on certain skills-set and these CEOs have financial degree, years of experience and they have worked in many other organisations before they joined the municipality. Unlike previously where the appointment of the CEOs were based on years of experience only, not really the skills-set that was required to deliver the services of the municipality.

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recruitment of finance officers. Previously what we noted in most municipalities were that, a properties officer can become a finance officer, a HR officer has become a finance officer. So what do you expect? What we expect is such type of reports because the skill-sets were not there. But now we are recruiting finance officers with accounting backgrounds and they go through a rigorous interview process before they are appointed and similarly the recruitment of HR personnel. So we are reviewing the Council policies and we are confident that we will be able to improve the financial operations and HR system in Municipal Councils.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has reviewed the existing HR and Finance Manuals. The charts of accounts were very outdated but all these reforms have been undertaken. The consultations were held with Municipal councils, Office of the Solicitor-General, Office of the Auditor-General and private accounting firms just to make sure that we have a good manual that makes sense and the Municipal Councils will be able to operate within the requirements. The two manuals are, in our view, very essential documents that will help in the smooth operations of the Municipal Councils.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is worth noting that some Councils have also developed Standard Operating Procedures to guide them through the operations of different divisions within the Councils. There are other Councils that are working towards developing similar standard operating procedures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to inform the House that the Councils have now switched to International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) which has been mentioned in various reports that came out of the Office of the Auditor-General. The reports and statements prepared by these Councils are now all aligned with these required standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry also conducts regular CEO Forums where the CEOs have the opportunity to deliberate on the best practices and lessons learnt from the Municipal councils. This is a forum where we also invite speakers and relevant organisations where Municipal Councils can collaborate and they can develop inter-agency partnership and through these dialogues, we have seen a lot of changes within the Councils. For example, recently in the CEOs Forum, we had invited the Office of the Auditor-General and the representative from the Office Auditor-General's office was able to speak to the CEOs and enlighten them with a number of new requirements that are required of each Municipal Council. Again the CEOs Forum gives an opportunity to invite personnel who can speak on the national laws or any policy changes that takes place at the national level and its implication at the local government level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Municipal Councils have been directed to look at the organisational structure. Most organisational structures are quite outdated. It is no longer relevant to improve service delivery and a number of councils have gone through this and I am happy to say that the organisation structure that each council had embarked on - some of them have completed this exercise and some are still in the process of completing it.

To-date most councils have submitted the annual reports considering the backlog of reports. I had mentioned earlier on before December 2020 that 66 annual reports were submitted and similarly for this year a large number of reports have gone through Cabinet and will be making their way to Parliament. Similarly, the financial statement reports have gone to the Office of the Auditor-General for audit purposes.

We have introduced this Performance Management System (PMS), the CEO's have KPIs and one of their KPI is the submission of annual reports in a timely manner - these are some of the changes that have taken place at institutional level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the issue of rates arrears which a number of previous speakers had talked about - rates arrears is there and a substantial amount is owed by the ratepayers as of 31st January, 2021 with the total rates arrears for the 30 Municipal Councils being approximately \$40 million. It has noted that some Councils managed to recover some of these rates. The Municipal Councils have now come up with the rate collection plan which they have been implementing from 2019 and there are a number of strategies in place.

For example, first of all, we give discounts during the beginning of the year, payments of rates by instalments, rate profiling was major exercise conducted by each and every Municipal

Council. This piece of information was very crucial for four Municipal Councils to truly understand whether a ratepayer has the ability to pay the rate or they are just avoiding paying the rates. Because we have come across situations where rate payers have got properties on rent but yet they are not paying the rates. Other cases where people have migrated, they have left their properties in Suva and other places which is fetching them rent, but they are not clearing their rates. So surely some stringent methods are required to deal with such matters.

We have also been using Small Claims Tribunal for the recovery of rates - we are issuing demand notices, placing caveats on properties, we have introduced the deduction at source, we have introduced online banking options, including M-PAISA, legal actions to recover rates so there are number of methods that have been introduced to recover rates. But as Members have mentioned, the Municipal Councils must operate as corporate organisations with social obligations, and that is what the Ministry of Local Government believes in. We have got to operate as a corporate organisation.

Now, it is all very nice to hear these statements in this House but when it comes to the actual implementation these are the very Members who will stand up and come in the way when Municipal Councils want to operate in a corporate manner. It is all about dollars and cents. I will give you one good example. There are market stalls around the country where the vendors are paying as little as 75 cents per stall per day - 75 cents gives them clean secure place with 75 cents a day, we pay electricity bill, water bill, cleaning services and security, and the vendors in many places use free car park and we also provide them with free toilet facility. But as soon as the vendors start saying that the rates be reduced, it is the Members sitting around here who will be the first ones to stand up and say that the rates are too high and yet we talk about corporate organisation. How can the two work together?

We do our work, we do all our analysis before we make a decision and again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when it comes to rates collection, as soon as the demand notices are sent, the Members are the ones who are complaining. Why are you sending demand notices? People cannot pay, people cannot do this, people cannot do that, and I understand that. But then again in this House, it is the Members who get up and ask why you are not collecting the rates, so you better make up your mind, what the Ministry of Local Government should be doing. You cannot be talking both ways just to look good. The reality is that we have to operate a Municipal Council as a corporate organisation.

I can give you a number of examples and let me just do that. I will give you an example of Nasinu and Suva as municipalities. Suva has 11,401 ratepayers and the population of Suva is 93,000 people. How many people are paying rates? Only 11,401. Now, how much rates are they paying, cents per dollar in Suva is 0.02. In other words, two cents per dollar. Nasinu, we have got a population of 92,000 people, 11,252 are ratepayers and how much do they pay, cents per dollar, it is half a cent per dollar, so if you equate the two and if you are wondering how much rates are invoiced by Suva City Council or Nasinu Town Council, Suva City Council invoices \$18.4 million whereas Nasinu can only invoice \$3.1 million. Now, with \$3.1 million, that is actually the cost of garbage collection, so how do you expect the Municipal Councils to operate as per your vision.

We need to consider the realities on the ground. We do understand that there are a large number of informal settlements in Nasinu area. In total there are 17 informal settlements in the Nasinu area, but that does not mean that the services are not provided to them. They are not ratepayers, they do not pay rates but the services are provided to them and that service which we provide to the informal settlement is paid by the Government. The Government has given close to \$1.3 million to Nasinu Town Council to assist them in collecting garbage from the 17 informal settlements. Now these are some of the challenges we have when we are running the Municipal Councils. But despite all that we are doing everything possible to provide the service which our ratepayers and other settlers within the municipal boundaries require.

I know the Honourable Lynda Tabuya had made some statements about the informal settlements, but Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a reality that people have migrated. They have moved into the Suva-Nausori corridor and for good reasons - for employment purposes, for education purposes and it is expected that people will move and they are moving. But in most cases, the arrangement that the informal settlers have made, they made these arrangements under the *vakavanua* arrangement and moved into the informal settlements.

Now Honourable Tabuya is questioning what Government is doing about this. Yes, wherever we managed to get the development lease, the Government is developing those informal settlements. We have completed a few, some are underway, like Waidamudamu is complete; in Omkar, the leases were given; for a few others, it is work in progress. So, this is the reality that we have on hand, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

On rubbish collection, again, Government funded 44 skip bins which were placed around the Nasinu area by the Nasinu Town Council. These are mainly in the informal settlements where the skip bins are then later collected by the Council workers.

One cannot say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that reforms have failed because what you have heard and read, particularly what you have read is a seven-year old report but you have to wait for other reports to come out to really see what changes have come about.

Honourable Professor Prasad was questioning about the review of other legislation as part of my first Ministerial Statement. I had said that it was very important that we review the Town and Country Planning Act and Subdivision Act before any review of Local Government Act can continue. And I am pleased to say that we have completed from our side, the review of the Town and Country Planning Act and Subdivision Act, so we will be delivering another Ministerial Statement on this aspect, as well as other information.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, reforms are underway and I just want to thank the Committee for their Report and the recommendations that they have made. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity. I note the Report at hand in terms of the issues raised and also the various responses that have been shared in the House. I know that the Business Committee had met and I also echo the sentiments that had been raised by Honourable Members regarding the order of our business in terms of the agenda item.

I would like to support the sentiment that we need to relook at the order of our meetings, given the sentiments of our people and the need to really address the issues at hand regarding COVID-19 and the various issues they face, particularly in the lockdown areas. There have been a lot of issues raised by those within that and not only that but those around the country regarding the measures, the spread of COVID-19 and also in particular the communications coming from Government. So we would have expected the Honourable Minister for Health to make a statement today. We hope that something could be done about that but, again, the agenda has been set.

On the Report at hand, a lot of issues have been raised by Honourable Members, particularly there have been cases and I note what the Honourable Minister is saying, the need to follow the law, the need to follow what we have but I think in these difficult times, there is a need to be flexible, in particular as mentioned by Honourable Bulanauca, the need to be flexible about vendors in terms of

selling in places other than the markets. So, I stress in particular the case regarding the Mead Road vendors and the Nakasi vendors.

I understand in those two cases, they were pulled down just prior to *TC Yasa* as a safety measure. That is understandable but I feel, given the sentiments expressed by the vendors and also the sufferings they are going through when that was pulled down, their families, I spoke to a few of them and it really affected them, particularly their families and some of them are sole income earners. That is something which I believe in the COVID-19 situation, there should be some flexibility, of course, noting the COVID-19 procedures and precautions in terms of allowing our vendors flexibility in where to sell and I hope that Government can take that into account.

It is very sad what happened at Nakasi because they were pulled down and they were not allowed to set up again and if you look at that Report, Nausori Town Council, part of that Report, they have been collecting vendor fees from those in Nakasi. When I spoke to some of them, they showed the receipts they had and the Town Council has been collecting from them. From my perspective, that legitimises their stay there. If the Council has been collecting from them and also they have been paying and they have been receiving services, like rubbish collection, et cetera, then they have a right to be there.

I also would like to remind the Honourable Minister that she mentioned in February last year (2020) and let me read that out, I quote:

“Local Government Minister, Premila Kumar, said that roadside vendors in Nakasi and along Mead Road will remain, until the Government builds a market for them. She mentioned, “If you can recall, I already made a statement previously that we have identified land at the back of RB South Point, so that is where we are going to develop the market for market vendors in Nakasi and I have clearly instructed the Nausori Town Council that the vendors will remain where they are until we build the Nakasi market so that the status quo remains.”

I believe she has gone back on that and just recently, they came back and are selling at Nakasi but they were removed again. I think that was two or three weeks ago. So I am asking Government to reconsider that on behalf of those vendors. It is an advantage to them, it is near where they stay, it is near their source of supply and it is also less expensive for them. It is not only for them but also for the customers who buy from them. They go to the supermarket and at the same time, they can access that market in Nakasi.

So those are just some of the issues I thought I would raise, apart from the audit issues which have been raised by Honourable Members. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Tuisawau. I now give the floor to the Honourable Assistant Minister for Environment and Rural Development. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I did not request for the opportunity, thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the Honourable Attorney-General. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I think the fact that the Honourable Opposition Members are making so many comments on the subject matter, it goes to

show that it is actually an important subject matter and that COVID-19 is not the only issue that we need to discuss. I will be very brief, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The point that I would like to make, very quickly just to clarify some of the falsehood that have been created by the other side, firstly, as has been highlighted and responded to that the roads in Government properties are not the responsibility of Municipal Councils. For example, if the RFMF, if the Correction Services, if the Fiji Police Force and if various hospitals and health centres, the roads within that or the driveways within that, fall within that particular property of that institution, then it is the responsibility of that institution or the responsibility of Government, it is not the responsibility of the Municipal Council. Honourable Tabuya has obviously misled Parliament in that respect and it is very, very important to understand.

Secondly, absolutely no facts or figures or research has been given to say that the roads overall in Fiji have deteriorated significantly. One can only drive around Suva, if I can speak for Suva, for the time being and also there are other municipalities where qualities of roads have improved significantly, resealing the expansion of the road, the additional lanes being created, et cetera.

I think the other point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that the Opposition's whole thesis is dependent on elections being held as the only panacea to fix up every single problem in the Municipal Councils. There is a whole lot of nonsense from that perspective. I think the Honourable Minister for Local Government quite adequately addressed the issue about capacity-building within the Municipal Councils. Just because you have the elections does not mean that the person who used to work as a clerk and is now being made the Financial Controller, therefore, everything would be hunky-dory, it does not work that way.

You need to have organisation structures. Many of the laws that she did highlight in respect of planning, et cetera, pertaining to Town and Country Planning where Municipal Councils have a major saying in that respect have not been changed for decades. That process is already underway. We hope to bring some new amendments to those and to bring to this Parliament.

The appointment of people; how they have been appointed over a number of years, what qualifications they have, has a huge impact on the type of output of that particular organisation. Recently, I know someone who joined the Suva Municipal Council on some position, not very high up in the hierarchy but joining the Suva City Council and he was working and then some of the workers came and told him, "Don't work beyond 4.00 p.m., just sit around because that's the deal we have. We actually stopped working after 4.00 p.m.", even though they are technically supposed to knock-off at 4.30 p.m. This is the type of culture that does prevail. Obviously, not all municipal workers are underpaid.

The second issue that I also like to highlight, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that previously, we have seen even when we had elected councils, a number of elected councils actually went to administration, and we know that. Most of the Honourable Members on the other side know that and in fact, if previous governments had stuck on very strict basis of good governance principles, almost all the Municipal Councils in Fiji would have gone under administration.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the issue about outsourcing which actually creates jobs. If outsourcing is done well, not every single thing can be outsourced nor should you rubbish any outsourcing at all. If outsourcing is done well, it actually creates jobs in the private sector. If you do not have outsourcing, people who get paid one particular wage, will not necessarily have the same level of efficiency if that matter was outsourced and you have various KPIs linked to that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the last point that I also wanted to make was the IFC work, it is being done. Obviously, like the number of projects where we have to have consultants coming in or where people are able to give their input but that has been actually affected by the COVID 19 situation because of the lack of travel but nonetheless a lot of work has been done in the background.

I think the other point also that the Honourable Minister highlighted which seems to be a general sort of philosophy running with the Opposition, it is about instant gratification, going out to people “Yes, don’t worry, these people are grieved, we will fix it up, don’t worry, when we get elected, we will let you come and seal half the road and sell your produce on half the road, don’t worry if it causes traffic jam but we will make sure that you will get to sell your produce”, what about the other half?

New markets have been built in Laqere, new markets upgraded in Nausori, those market vendors actually pay a rate to the Municipal Council, they will then come up to the Municipal Council and say, “You’re telling us to pay market fees but those guys selling on the road, just a few metres away from us, they are not paying any market fees, there are no restrictions on them, there is no OHS compliance. We do not know where they are going to when they want to go to the toilet, there is no sanitation provision being provided, no hygiene provisions provided and you want us to pay these rates, is it not unfair on us?” The Opposition is only going and talking to people, who they feel there may be a votebank, essentially which is what it is.

Instant gratification: The Honourable Minister highlighted the issue that we have a number of squatters, a lot of *vakavanua* arrangements. Of course a lot of people have come here because of leases not being renewed. We can go into that and that is another story. They are not paying any municipal rates but they all want the service as Honourable Tabuya has said garbage not collected. This has not been done.

The Honourable Minister has just highlighted the financial position of Nasinu Municipal Council vis-a-vis the collection of rates and the pressure on it. So, this is again the Opposition Members, political grandstanding, trying to give instant gratification saying if you vote for us we will do all of this but they are not looking at the big picture. They are not looking at health and hygiene and how your towns and cities will be portrayed. What will happen to things like good governance? What will happen to those people who actually pay fees, who are paying rates but they are being marginalised because we have no ability to want to govern those other people who are obfuscating the law? Who are bypassing the law? It is unfair to those that who actually follow the law, who follow the municipal regulations. Please, try and understand. So, those people who maybe you know that, have been stopped from selling, yes, this is great - these guys will be going to do this for us. There is another half of the people who are saying but what will happen to us. Let us apply the law of the jungle now – sell wherever we like, do whatever we like and that is the issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

So unfortunately we seem to be getting sidelined in respect of what we are doing, what we are supposed to be debating about - the motion on the floor - and no one from the Opposition has highlighted. This was initiated by the Honourable Prime Minister and I remember this. He highlighted this in one of the Municipal Councils a number of years ago before 2014, about the women who come and sell in the markets.

A lot of these women now in most municipalities have actual accommodation. They have got places or residence to sleep for a couple of nights when they come down from the hills in Ra, Ba, Lautoka and various other places. They actually have accommodation. They used to sleep on the streets before. They no longer sleep on the streets. This is the type of advancement that has taken place unfortunately there is no recognition of that, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to also again say of course there is a lot improvements that needs to be put in place and we agree with that. The Government is working with that. The fact that you have the Minister highlighted, the Office of the Auditor-General personnel went and met with the Municipal Council personnel highlighting to them how they can improve their system is something that is positive and we should be happy about that - some proactive steps have been taken.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General. I give the floor to the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to speak in reply. You have the floor, Sir.

HON A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I actually appreciate the comments from the Honourable Attorney-General and the Honourable Minister for Local Government for clarifying the issues that were raised. As I stated earlier, definitely there has been a lot of work done and they are continuously doing it. That is why we have a system in place as I was actually saying in my opening speech that the Public Accounts Committee will take note of what is actually happening. Once we get the new reports before the Committee, we will scrutinise and see what has been done and what needs to be done.

With those words, Sir, thank you very much for giving me this time.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Chairperson for his right of reply. Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Members, we will move on. I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

REVIEW REPORT - PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION ANNUAL REPORT 2014

HON A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review of the Public Service Commission Annual Report 2014 which was tabled on 16th May, 2019.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to speak on his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I take this opportunity, as the Member moving the motion, to make a small contribution on the Committee's Report on the Public Service Commission Annual Report 2014.

By way of a brief background, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Public Service Commission Annual Report 2014 was referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights in the last term of Parliament and then reinstated in this new Parliament and referred to the current Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Public Service Commission Annual Report 2014 covers information on type and quality of work carried out by the Public Service Commission, as it was constituted when the Report was initially tabled in Parliament. It also highlights the restructure of the Public Service Commission (or as it is commonly known and referred to as PSC) as part of the implementation of the provisions of the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker; there were a few issues identified from the Annual Report, which included:

- issues regarding the policies for the Training and Workforce Development Division;
- issues regarding the policies for the Office Accommodation and Government Housing Division;
- issues regarding the recovery of student loans under the Student Loans Recovery Unit;
- the effectiveness of the Fiji Volunteer Services;
- issues regarding the Public Service Group Investment Scheme; and
- certain discrepancies in the Financial Statement provided in the Annual Report.

The Committee also noted that during the review of the Annual Report, that reforms and restructuring of government had already commenced bringing about improvements, thus some of the issues identified had become somewhat redundant. There were numerous reforms carried out, including the review of policies within the PSC and transferring functions under the Units or Divisions of the PSC to other Ministries, such as the Ministry of Finance, as it was then constituted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, consideration was also given to the requirements of the Standing Orders of Parliament pertaining to the impact on gender when reviewing the Annual Report, however the Committee appreciated the apparent gap that existed, in placing emphasis on such requirements as gender related information, when the Annual Report was drafted and tabled in Parliament.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would urge the Honourable Members of this august House to take note of the contents of the Committee's Report and to show support for the motion before the House. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Chairperson. Honourable Members the floor is now open for debate on this motion. I give the floor to the first speaker, the Honourable Salote Radrodro. You have the floor madam.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. Before I contribute to the motion for debate, I would like to reiterate the call from this side in regards to the importance of having to consider the priorities of the people in this week's meeting. Having said that Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were told late yesterday evening that this is an urgent Parliament sitting and therefore I believe that it would address urgent matters raised by members of the public pertaining to issues that are a matter of urgency to the people right now with regards to government's plan in having to address the challenges brought about by COVID-19.

I support the call from the members of this side of the House that have already spoken and I would implore the government side that it is not too late to consider those issues. There does not have to be a special Business Committee meeting, there is room in the current Order Paper whereby Ministers responsible...

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Point of Order

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, there is a Point of Order.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the member moving the motion, I would like to seek your intervention to what happened in the previous debate and what is happening now. The Honourable Attorney-General has clearly stated in Parliament what actually transpired in the Business Committee. We are going to have another Business Committee meeting, Members can bring in their queries, questions and everything to Parliament next week. Why are the Members just deliberating on that point now and then? They need to stick to the report, they need to respond to the debate that is before Parliament.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Chairperson. Honourable Member, you have the floor, stick to the subject of the debate.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can hear you, Honourable Alvick but we must be reminded that this is the people's House. This is where the people's issues of priority should be discussed. The priority of our people right now is, what is the Government's plan in having to address the challenges brought about by COVID-19? That is the matter of urgency with our people right now, Mr. Speaker. There is room for the Government side to amend that. They can bring in Ministerial Statements.

The Honourable Prime Minister, the people are looking forward to hear from you, Sir, to speak to the nation on what is the Government's plan on having to address the challenges brought about by COVID-19.

Honourable Attorney-General, the people are waiting to hear from you, how are the people are going to put food on the table, particularly we have been hearing that there is going to be continuous lockdown. This is what the people want to hear, Mr. Speaker, and this is something that must be addressed by the Government side.

HON. SPEAKER.- Just stick to the subject of debate. You have the floor.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I believe the Government has heard that and if they can respond to that through Ministerial Statements.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Childish!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- It is not being childish, Honourable Attorney-General. It is not childish. This is what our people want to hear from the Government side. This is what is priority to them and it is not childish. You do not care about the people.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order! Just stick to what the agenda states.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, but before I move onto the Report, their famous phrase is "Leaving No One behind". You have left a lot of people behind through this food distribution. How are you going to reach them? One of their other famous word is "unprecedented". There is unprecedented chaos in this food distribution channel, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I will now move onto the motion for debate which is on the Public Service Commission Annual Report of 2014. Again, I highlight and reiterate the failure of this Government to satisfy the Financial Regulations in having to submit Annual Reports on time. That is the requirement, Mr. Speaker, and they have continuously failed to do that.

Mr. Speaker, on the Report, even though there is hardly any recommendation but I would like to pick up on the Committee Deliberation and Findings and the first bulletpoint is on the policy for the Training and Workforce Development Division, and that it be looked at in sync with the third bullet point on the monitoring of recovery of student loans under the Student Loans Recovery Unit.

Mr. Speaker, in the previous Public Service Commission, one of their key responsibilities was having to work on the Workforce Planning and the importance of having to identify the skills gaps in our country which are then synchronised with the scholarships that is being awarded by the Public Service Commission which now has been moved to the Student Loan Scheme Unit. Having to do that, we now can see that a lot of our graduates from tertiary institutions are without jobs and even previously, there were no more scholarships that were going to be awarded to the Fiji School of Medicine.

In the current situation that we are faced with right now and this is one of the precious that the Government is faced with. It is on human resource and it is on the medical professionals in the Ministry of Health. Right now, we need doctors, we need lab technicians and the failure of the Public Service Commission in having to award the scholarships to these needy areas have resulted in this. Whereby we have to bring in medical professions from Labasa to go and look after Lautoka. They are going to be faced with this big problem of having to cater for the lab technicians which is a very dire need right now in our country. That is the problem when they have taken away that key role when the Public Service Commission structure has been revised and changed.

The other issue that I would like to speak on is the last bullet point on the certain discrepancies in the financial statement of the report. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we know this is the report of 2014. What I would have expected to find in this report is something because now the Public Service Commission under the 2013 Constitution their main role is recruitment of Permanent Secretaries, monitoring and assessment of the Permanent Secretaries performances.

One of the key issues that was highlighted very widely by the media was the recruitment of an external accounting firm that was recruited to deal with the Ministers' salary. In previous Governments, the Ministers' salary were all included under the payroll in the Government. Also what happened during this time when the Ministers' salary had been given to this external accounting firm to look after, there was a drastic increase in the Ministers' salary, Mr. Speaker, Sir. But we do not see that in this report and that is one of the reasons that this report does not really hold much water, so to speak because it does not reflect those issues that I have just mentioned in regards to the recruitment of the external accounting firm to look after the Ministers' salary which was increased drastically.

Also, it does not contain any recommendation to deal with the Permanent Secretary for Finance and then the Permanent Secretary for PSC who had the responsibility. They must be accountable to the people to include in this report on why were the increases in the Ministers' salary and the details of it. So that it appears on the annual report because the money was given to the Ministry of Finance and to all Ministries to look after this allocation. So it is only proper, it is right the Government owe it to the people to reflect that in the annual report which unfortunately, does not say anything at all, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Salote Radrodro for her contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, on that note, we will adjourn for lunch and we will continue with the debate when we resume after lunch. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.29 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.32 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please be seated. Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate and the floor is open for debate for those who wish to take the floor. Anyone wishing to take the floor on this agenda item.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Attorney-General, you have the floor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to make some brief comments on this particular Report. This Report, as we know, dates back to 2014. I would like to acknowledge the work of the Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to very quickly just inform Parliament of the review of the Public Service Commission (PSC) Ministry as it was called then which was undertaken as part of the civil service reforms. Since then, of course, quite a lot has changed, since the publication of this Report.

There is now a Ministry of Civil Service and Public Service Commission, as it rightly should be, Mr. Speaker, Sir, sits on its own as an independent Commission. Its budgetary allocation is under the Head of all the independent agencies and all the independent Commissions, and of course, the number of the functions of the previous Public Service Commission Ministry, has been transferred to a number of the other agencies that has specialisation. They include the Volunteer Services that used to rest with the Public Service Commission, it has now gone to the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations, and of course things like the Government Quarters, Office Accommodation, the Government Service Centre and the Student Loan Recovery have gone to the Ministry of Economy, where they have different divisions that look after these various work of the former Public Service Commission.

The Ministry of Civil Service was established on 1st January, 2016 to set standards for the civil service in the form of Civil Service Guidelines as approved by the Public Service Commission. The Public Service Commission is appointed by His Excellency, the President upon the advice of the Constitutional Offices Commission and the key performance of course, is to recruit, hire, monitor and evaluate the Government's Permanent Secretaries. The Permanent Secretaries are the non-political appointees that head the different Ministries, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Permanent Secretaries, of course have enormous autonomy as granted in the Constitution, in respect of managing human resources. Previously, for example, when we had the days of the Public Service Commission Ministry, even a junior staff that has to be appointed or even transferred in a particular Ministry, had to get the approval of the Public Service Commission, which created a lot of inconsistencies, bureaucracies and of course, inefficiencies within the system. The Permanent Secretary, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of each of the Ministries has the ability to appoint, remove and institute disciplinary action against the staff of the Ministry.

The Public Service Commission, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also manages the performance of the Permanent Secretaries, as well as considers and determines appeals against decisions made by the Permanent Secretaries in accordance with the guidelines, directions and policies and now the rules and regulations institute by the Commission. In other words, we have the independence that is guaranteed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sure there are other people who may wish to speak, but the Honourable Radrodro, just to clarify, again misled Parliament and she said that, as a result of the Public Service Commission no longer looking after scholarships, that is why we do not have scholarships for doctors. It is nonsense. For the past number of five years or so, when we introduced the TELS and Toppers Scholarship Programme, the subject areas or the areas of studies that have been chosen for the toppers and of course, TELS is open equally to everyone, was determined in consultation with the Ministry of Employment and various other agencies to see where we have lack of human capital in those specific areas. For example, if we look at the Toppers Scholarship, a lot of this scholarship, about 80 percent at one point in time, was secured towards the science subjects.

It is interesting and she talked about the laboratory technicians. We actually have specific scholarship programme under the Toppers for science based and laboratory technicians. There were not any specific scholarships in that respect, with the kind of quantity that we have now. Of course, some of these have been reduced because of the COVID-19 implications on the budget, as we highlighted last year, but it is no reflection of simply the fact that the Public Service Commission no longer handles scholarships, therefore, there are no scholarships given in that area. That is actually completely untrue at all. So, now we have more scholarships for laboratory technicians, foresters, marine scientists, town planners, engineers, et cetera, which there was none before. A lot of these scholarships were in the areas of administration and various other specific public policy areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, she ranted on about the salaries of Ministers. The Public Service Commission has got nothing to do with the salaries of Ministers. The budgetary allocation for Ministers is not determined by the Public Service Commission. If you look at the budgetary allocation, it is determined under each Head of the respective Minister him or herself. Of course, as we know, the appointment of Ministers is not done by the Public Service Commission but it is actually done by the Prime Minister when the Prime Minister appoints and removes Ministers at his leisure based on performance, of course.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you know obviously, standards, I just want to clarify that because quite a lot of things that were said were untrue. The 2016 switchover came over when we had the Ministry of Civil Service that looks after all the training, the dues of the day to day, for example, evaluation of positions when Ministries want to actually have increment in salaries or increment in the numbers of people, Mr. Speaker, Sir, then they are able to go through the Ministry of Civil Service.

The Public Service Commission looks at the overall performance of the civil service vis-a-vis the Permanent Secretaries. They appoint the Permanent Secretaries. There are various guidelines that rolled are out disciplinary measures that the Permanent Secretaries actually use to invoke in running their own Ministries. And, of course, there is also a right of appeal because the Public Service Commission is independent. So, if someone, for example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, feels aggrieved by, for example, a particular promotion that they have applied for a particular demotion that may have taken place, they can actually write, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the Public Service Commission, in particular, in appointments.

When people apply for positions in Government, there are people from outside now, a lot more people that actually apply to the Ministry through this sort of Government Ministries now from outside (from the private sector) if any applicant feels aggrieved, there is a right of appeal to the Public Service Commission.

In terms of disciplinary matters, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the disciplinary matters are dealt with the specific tribunal that has been created and that again is independent and is headed by a member of the Judiciary where those specific disciplinary matters can be taken to, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General for his contribution to the debate. I give the floor to the Honourable Ratu Filipe Tuisawau. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- I rise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to contribute to the Report at hand on the Public Service Commission Annual Report 2014. Before I go on, I was muted from the controls there. I note the Committee Report and also there are various findings of the Standing Committee.

The main issues, the policy for Training for Work Act, Office Accommodation, Fiji Volunteer Services, et cetera, and moving down, there are some issues of concern regarding the legislation regarding responsibilities and functions which the Honourable Attorney-General has mentioned. I would like to comment on the Open Merit Recruitment Selection System and the current ideology of the FijiFirst Government which forms the basis of that and regarding the Open Merit Recruitment Selection where you are looking at that Open Merit Selection currently as in a blanket way. Also the way I see it is, it has not been applied as we had hoped for or as the government had hoped noting the various problems we had encountered regarding that.

This is because we think that there are biases within the Open Merit Recruitment Selection System. Those biases I believe originate from the ideology of the FijiFirst Government that we are the same and we should not recognise differences but the opposite of that is identifying or recognising diversity in a multi-cultural or multi-ethnic society by celebrating, recognising those differences and how we, as a nation, can manage that.

I think these are two opposing ideologies which we need to deal with and I point us in particular to, I am not speaking out of thin air, if we look at Australia, New Zealand, they do recognise diversity and the need for inclusion in their public service or in their public policy. In particular, in one of the New Zealand ministries, they have diversion and inclusion strategy. For one of them, it is diversion and inclusion strategy 2018 to 2028. They identify diversity as all the ways we differ, it includes everyone.

Diversity is about a unique blend of knowledge, skills, thoughts people bring to the workplace and include issues such as gender being Maori, ethnicity, cultural and socio-economic background, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, and not only that, it includes characteristics such as professional qualifications, jobs, family, location, life experiences, that is diversity. Inclusion they look at it as the workplace where everyone feels valued and respected and they are able to contribute.

It is about removing barriers to make sure everyone can fully participate in the workplace and have equal access to opportunities empowering staff and fit in organisational performance and the diverse staff are self-identified as being diverse and they are not pressured to say that we should not celebrate our differences. We should, for example in Fiji, be all Fijians. Being all Fijians has a positive side but we must also recognise differences in the workplace.

This is not something which has just been developed overnight by New Zealand and Australia, they have based this on studies and also has historical places in terms of, for example, in New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitagi. In the broader context, there have been significant number of studies in that particular document which I have looked at. It establishes a strong business case for diversity and inclusion within organisations and it has been reported statistically a significant relationship between more diverse team can have better financial performance.

In terms of how do they do it, the Ministry has collected and analysed employment staff data which guide and their recruitment efforts, they conduct analysis to ensure there is diversity in the workplace in terms of the various backgrounds including ethnicity.

Recruitment is targeted to diverse people to recruit and attract the best possible applicants and there are also recruitment panels which are diverse and representative. So, this is something I thought is very important when we are looking at this Public Service Commission Report and then the push for that minimum qualification requirement, et cetera, but then there is that element of diversity that we as a nation need to look into because Fiji is not a homogenous country, it is a country of multi-ethnic diversity and we have indigenous peoples also in Fiji and that is what I believe we should be looking into. There has been concerns raised very recently in the past few years about the lack of diversity, so let me emphasise here that when we say 'lack of diversity in terms of ethnicity' that does not mean that we are being racist because the concept of diversity is different from the basis of this recruitment policy which has been brought in by the ideology of the FijiFirst Government.

Diversity is really a legitimate strategy or ideology or basis on which we could base our public service strategies or frameworks, and that is an area which I believe is an issue today and which is an area of concern, and it is causing discomfort within our various communities, within our indigenous community and also generally within the wider population when we look at particular sectors. It is dominated by a particular ethnic group or even not only sectors but in particular workplaces in terms of the management or even the higher hierarchy of the ministries or statutory bodies and that is an issue which we should not push under the carpet, we should address it in a rationale way on how we should move forward as a nation and in those areas.

I believe the Public Service Commission has a role in that to do more research in that particular area to ensure that we have diversity in our workplaces in various sectors of the economy as we move forward as a nation, as a multi-ethnic society, as a society with an indigenous people in order for harmony and also for an inclusive society as we move forward. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Prime Minister, you have the floor.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would like to contribute to the motion by Honourable Maharaj and I noted that after reviewing the 2014 Annual Report of the Public Service Commission, the Committee noted that there are no contentious matters or issues to be raised in Parliament but further recommends that Parliament take note of the Report and I thank the Standing Committee for this review and, of course, the subsequent findings and recommendations.

At the outset, Mr. Speaker, we are in the most challenging times with the community case of COVID-19 in Fiji. As Prime Minister, I would like to take this time to convey my deepest appreciation to all frontline civil servants out there, braving the challenge that is before us, working continuously, sacrificing their lives and their time with their families in the battle against Coronavirus. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have done it before and we will do it again, we completely eradicated the virus during our first wave and I am confident in our resolve to do that together once again.

Mr. Speaker, the civil service has been tremendous in these past four weeks maintaining community lockdowns, undertaking community screenings, distributing food rations so just lending an ear and providing assistance to their fellow Fiji citizens during this difficult time. To all our civil servants doing your country proud, I thank you.

Mr. Speaker, the findings of the Report translate the vision of my Government to transform the civil service into a more efficient and modern civil service which is reflected in the recommendations from the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to this august House to note the Report. As there are no contentious matters or issues to be discussed.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee deliberated the review of the annual report of the then Public Service Commission. Mr. Speaker, our reforms have enabled a more modern civil service. We have fully transformed decades of neglect on human resourcing across the civil service. This transformation has led us to take action in recruiting people based on merit and equal opportunity. We have also ensured that our high performers are retained and rewarded accordingly with the introduction of our new salary bands for the civil service.

Mr. Speaker, my Government believes that in order to better serve the interest of the public, it must first serve the interest of its own staff by having a robust human resource system. That is why through our reforms we have instituted effective performance management through better pay, better training and improved work environment where effort and hard work are recognised and rewarded.

Mr. Speaker, the reforms that my Government has undertaken are not only about performances and salaries but it is also about critically considering the daily business of Government. We want a restructured process of doing business to be more competitive in the current and future era of development and globalisation. The buck does not stop with our civil service only but the whole of Government machinery and its services. We continue to bring progress to Government services fully realising the digital world and e-services available in the 21st century. COVID-19 has forced us to conduct businesses in the new normal. That is why, Mr. Speaker, my Government has been harnessing the potential of e-commerce through the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport.

Recently we launched the digital platform for businesses to obtain passes to operate as an essential and economically-essential business in Fiji. This not only ensures the safe operations of businesses but also keeps employees, clients and the Fijian population safe. Our services are becoming more efficient, making our progress more transparent with publically available matrix that show our success in action. It is a foundational step forward, modernising our economy to welcome more foreign investment and it will forge new linkages between our ministries, fostering collaboration and effective communication.

Mr. Speaker, these reforms were and continues to be a critical ingredient to improving Government's policies and practices and as a direct result to strengthening Government institutions but the greatest of these reforms has been the more efficient delivery of public goods and services to the Fijian people. On that foundation, Fiji recorded its unprecedented nine years of economic growth – the longest stretch achieved by any government.

Mr. Speaker, allow me now to speak on the Report that is before the House and highlight some of the deliberation and findings of the Committee, but first let me talk a little about the difference between the Ministry of Civil Service now and the then Public Service Commission in case the Members on the other side of the House are still yet to grasp.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Civil Service was created to set standards for Government ministries and departments, hiring, evaluation, discipline and emoluments. The individual ministries manage their own personnel while adhering to guidelines provided for by the Ministry of Civil Service. This is a global best practice which is much like the same systems practiced in the United States of America, in Europe, in Singapore, in Japan and Mauritius. On the other hand, Mr. Speaker, the Public Service Commission will have one very important role – to recruit, hire, monitor and evaluate the Permanent Secretaries.

Mr. Speaker, the Permanent Secretaries are the senior, non-political executives in government. They must have sector expertise, management and leadership ability acumen and

integrity. They will drive performance and we must have the best people available to fill those positions whether they are Fijians or professionals recruited from abroad.

The Open Merit Recruitment System ensures that the best qualified and the experienced individuals are recruited in government agencies. For all training and development matters, the then PSC implemented its training and bonding policy of 2014. However, with the new and improved Ministry of Civil Service, an improved learning and development guidelines is now implemented, and act as a guide to respective Ministries to support their constitutional roles in empowering their staff through learning, training and development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my vision of ensuring that we have a more modern and efficient civil service is by looking at the dynamics of civil servants serving in a particular Government Ministry. If I must say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the past for example, everyone could be sent to pursue advance studies in the same field in a particular Government Ministry, however in strengthening the roles and functions of the Ministry, its respective Permanent Secretary will identify training and development based on the needs of the Ministry, in conjunction with the Ministry of Civil Service. For example, one could pursue Advanced Studies in Oncology, Paediatrician, Neurology, et cetera, depending on the need of the Ministry rather than sending everyone on one particular field annually.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Constitution gives authority to the Permanent Secretaries on matters pertaining to employment, therefore, selection of nominees to undertake training and development is the responsibility of the relevant Permanent Secretary. The Ministry of Civil Service will then facilitate and implement those nominations. For the benefit of the Members on the other side of the House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the final selection of nominations for overseas trainings are made by development partners. Development partners have their conditions and terms to respective training courses, whether on a short term or long term basis. To-date, Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the circumstances wherein most trainings are still conducted virtually.

Government is not sitting idle but we are also working with our development partners to continue to provide development and growth to our civil servants through provisions of training remotely. Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Government will continue to empower our civil servants. We will ensure that our principal instruments of service delivery, the civil service meets international best practice, delivers what Government decides quickly and efficiently, is prudent with public finance and plays a more effective role in national development and the growth of our economy. Based on those remarks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I therefore, do support the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Prime Minister for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to speak in reply. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would like to thank the Honourable Prime Minister for his contribution to the debate.

HON. SPEAKER.- I beg your pardon. I have just received your request so I will give the floor to Honourable Professor Prasad and then to Honourable Nawaikula. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I will try and be brief. At the outset, I wish to say that we support two fundamental principles of the civil service and these are very important in a democracy.

The first one, of course, is merit and the second one is the independence of the civil service. I wish to say that within a system of Merit Based Recruitment, all the other factors such as diversity

and gender can be accommodated but the fundamental principle of a merit based Civil Service is indeed important.

The second principle of the independence of the civil service, Mr. Speaker, is also fundamentally important and perhaps we could say as a fundamental tenet of any good democracy.

Here, Mr. Speaker, while theoretically speaking we might say that the civil service is independent, but if you look at the structure and at the decision making process, first of all the PSC appoints the Permanent Secretaries. But if you look at the Constitution, I have raised this before and I think is important to keep flagging this so that we can come up with a system within the PSC where the PS and civil service can have that independence that is fundamental to any democracy.

If you look at the Constitution provision, Section 127(7) and I need to read this, Mr. Speaker, because a lot of people seems to miss this and I quote:

- “(7) The permanent secretary of each ministry shall have the authority to appoint, remove and institute disciplinary action against all staff of the ministry, with the agreement of the Minister responsible for the ministry.
- (8) The permanent secretary of each ministry, with the agreement (not in consultation) of the Minister responsible for the ministry, has the authority to determine all matters pertaining to the employment of all staff in the ministry, including:-
- (a) the terms and conditions of employment;
 - (b) the qualification requirements for appointment and the process to be followed for appointment, which must be an open, transparent and competitive selection process based on merit;
 - (c) the salaries, benefits and allowances payable, in accordance with its budget as approved by Parliament; and
 - (d) the total establishment or the total number of staff that are required to be appointed, in accordance with the budget as approved by Parliament.”

Fundamentally, Mr. Speaker, the Ministers are politicians whether we like it or not; all Ministers are politicians. They play political games. They have political ambitions so they are politicians. They are part of the Executive and they are accountable to Parliament but fundamentally gives the powers to the Ministers to finally determine the Permanent Secretaries. The process could all be merit based and I do not doubt that in many of the Ministries, many of the Ministers do not interfere.

This provision, Mr. Speaker, in the Constitution must be taken care of either by allowing the PSC to put its own guideline as to where the Ministers can and cannot interfere because if you leave it open-ended, the Ministers cannot only determine who should be appointed, at what qualification, at what salary and when and this could be remunerated.

I know there is a provision in terms of tribunal and in terms of appeal, but fundamentally it still gives the Minister the final power to sign-off whatever process the Permanent Secretary or the Ministry of Public Service may have instituted in the process. So, I just wanted to make sure that we understand this well so that there is always this important knowledge behind the principles of having everyone appointed on merit so that there is no political interference because as soon as, Mr. Speaker, if there is any perception or if there is any hint even on the grounds is not happening, but if there is a perception of bias or nepotism in appointments, promotions and political interference then the Civil Service itself is really not independent as one would expect in a democracy.

Sir, I just wanted to make sure that as we go forward, we need to be aware of this Constitutional provision which can be misused by Ministers who are politicians and this has happened in other countries. It must have happened here as well, there are instances, and if we do a proper investigation inquiry into different ministries, I am sure there would be issues of political interference that would come out but that is another matter. But it is important for us to understand when we talk about the fundamental tenets of what a civil service ought to be in a democracy.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Honourable Nawaikula. I give you the floor, Sir.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I hope there is no issue with the sound. Mr. Speaker, I wish to start by asking the Government side, I know there were two Point of Orders raised by Honourable Attorney-General and another when the Opposition spoke on COVID. I would like to say that the most contentious and important issue now is COVID so I would like to ask the Government side, do not raise a Point of Order.

It appears to me, Mr. Speaker, these people do not appreciate the situation we are in. Recently the Police in the news, the police has stated that the Police has up their work by asking the public, stopping traffic and asking people to stay home. I have had two instances where a very close shave with contracting the virus. Here in Waila, Nausori is on lockdown. There is another area in Naqali that is also on lockdown. Even now there is an announcement that says that four miles where the RFMF is also on lockdown.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Point of Order.

HON. J. USAMATE.- The Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, is that we are talking about the Annual Report of the Public Service Commission. Now we are talking about something related to COVID. As the Honourable Attorney-General has pointed out that there will be an opportunity to talk about that. At this point in time, we are talking about this annual report and we should confine our discussions to that.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Mr. Speaker, let me just remind that the Honourable Prime Minister has raised the issue so why is he telling me not to talk on the issue. That leads me to ask the reason why there is nothing in the Order Paper today on COVID. I was hoping to hear a Ministerial statement of it; nothing at all. And yet the Government is saying, “stay home, stay home, stay home” but we are doing totally the opposite. We should be leading by example and here we are in Parliament not doing anything, debating about Annual Reports of Municipal Councils in 2012 and debating about the PSC Report of 2014. We should be talking about COVID. I was hoping or anticipating that there will be a Bill or mini-budget to seek the allocation in relation to this. That is the point I want to say here first.

Let me go to the issue that is on the table. This is the Annual Report of 2014. There are two issues. The Honourable Prime Minister has told us that one of the recommendation is that it is not contentious, for the simple reason that this is 2014 and now this is six years later. But one of the outcomes of the Civil Service Review that I wish to talk about is the OMRS and the three-year contract.

Mr. Speaker, I think that sincerely and I wish to submit that OMRS has failed us. Let me illustrate that. Very recently the CEO for Water Authority of Fiji has left. Jonathan Moore, the CEO for Fiji Roads Authority has left - mid contract. Graham Clark the CEO for FSC has also left. All

these people are leaving mid-term – the Permanent Secretary for Education, Permanent Secretary for Health. This tells me that OMRS has failed.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Point of Order!

HON. SPEAKER.- Point of Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- The Honourable Nawaikula is citing names of people who are actually not Permanent Secretaries.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- CEOs. You are not listening.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- This Report is about the Public Service Commission and the Ministry of Civil Service. The CEO of FSC is not appointed by the Public Service Commission, the CEO of FSC is appointed by the Board of Fiji Sugar Corporation. All other appointments on statutory bodies are not made by the Public Service Commission, they are not made by the Ministry of Civil Service but they are made by the respective statutory organisations or other entities that have been given the legal authority to do so. Honourable Nawaikula is actually obfuscating the issues as usual.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Nawaikula keep to the civil servants and the Civil Service Report. You have the floor.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- It means now that we have a wider problem of the failure of OMRS. Remember, Mr. Speaker, the last time I raised this issue and the Honourable Usamate told me to take my statement outside. That is because of the failure of the OMRS. There is another issue. OMRS has come out in the last few years and one of the net result in the civil servant especially and I said this last year and one is the Ministry of Agriculture is its effect, all positions from Directors further up are non-iTaukei. That tells me that something is wrong with OMRS because it has the effect of removing of iTaukei from higher echelons of the management.

The other point that I wish to raise, Mr. Speaker, is in relation to three-year contracts. Also one of the outcome of this review is the three-year contract. I hope that the Government Ministers observe their employees. From where I am standing, civil servants are threatened. Civil servants are intimidated. Civil servants do not have a security of employment and the very reason for that is the three-year contract. The Honourable Attorney-General stands in the House and says that a three-year contract is a secure employment but it is a contract for three years and he should ...

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Point of Order!

HON. SPEAKER.- Point of Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we have highlighted in Parliament previously, some civil servants get three-year contracts but a number of civil servants also get five-year contracts, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So for him to say that they only get three-year contracts is misleading and as already being highlighted, if he bothered to read the Civil Service Guidelines, when a person is appointed, a newly appointed person to a particular position, generally they are given a three-year contract. Like majority of the people in this country who work in the private sector, they also are given three-year contracts and subsequently upon their completion of their three years, if they re-apply and they perform well and a lot of them are now getting based on their performance an automatic extension of another three years, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So, it is completely incorrect for him to say there are only three-year contracts in place.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you Honourable Attorney-General. Honourable Member, you have the floor.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Mr. Speaker, then he agrees with me that the problem is even worse. Three years, no security; five years, no security. I hope that the Honourable AG goes down to the ordinary people to speak with them on the effect of these contractual terms. How it has been used to terminate people unnecessarily, to remove people who do not favour their boss and that is the side-effect of that.

I wish to end, Mr. Speaker, by commenting on some of the points which had been made by the Honourable Prime Minister. The first point that he said was that this is uncontentious. True, uncontentious but the effect of the review has been bad. The effect of the review has left the whole Civil Service without any security, with them being intimidated and that is totally unfortunate.

The second point that the Honourable PM is that, he congratulated those who are at the forefront. I totally agree and we are one with him in relation to that. But then he moved onto say that we did this before and we will do it again. The point I wish to say here is that the Honourable PM should admit that the buck stops with him. He is totally responsible for all the mess that we are in now. We are in a disaster that is worse than the previous cyclone and his responsible for the neglect of the people at the quarantine office in Nadi. He should come forward, first apologise to the nation, take responsibility and then move forward. He cannot just come here and grandstand and say, “we have done it before and we will do it again” because he is the person that is totally responsible for the mess we are in now and it is worse than what it was even before.

Mr. Speaker, another point that the Honourable PM said is that the civil servants had been assisting in the lockdown. At this point I want to ask where is the NDMO, where is Honourable Rae in all of this. Why is Honourable Seruiratu and his Ministry which is responsible for natural disaster not distributing the \$90 or not distributing the food ration? What has happened to him? We paid them to do this job and why has he agreed for the Ministry of Economy to be doing a responsibility which the public paid him to do; totally unfair. I wish to end by saying, we totally feel for the civil servants, the morale is low, they feel intimidated, there is no security. We need a change of government. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Nawaikula for his contribution to the debate.

I now give the floor to the Honourable Maharaj, the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights. You have the floor for your reply.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank the Honourable Prime Minister for his contribution towards the Report and explaining the content of the Report. I would like to actually acknowledge all other Honourable Members who have contributed towards the debate and I have no further comments. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Chairperson. Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before we move on to the next question, I would just like to point out to those who are on virtual that if you want to take the floor, it would help that

you put up your hand, put it up in a nice way, so that I know. Some of you are making gestures, I do not know whether you are yawning or whatever, so that is why there is a miscommunication, so I apologise for not giving you the floor immediately. I can see you well now.

Honourable Members, we will move on to the next agenda item. The first Oral Question for today, I now call on the Honourable Jale to ask his question. You have the floor, Sir.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Progress of 100 Percent Target – Access to Clean and Safe Water (Question No. 90/2021)

HON. A. JALE asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources update Parliament on the progress of the targets for 100 percent access to clean and safe water in urban areas by 2021, as outlined in the 20-Year National Development Plan?

HON. J. USAMATE (Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank the Honourable Member for the question.

Achieving a hundred percent in urban areas is our target for the 20-Year National Development Plan. As it is right now, we have had quite a number of achievements in that regard in that particular target *per se*. Sir, 100 percent access by 2021 in the urban water areas the coverage is currently 98 percent, even though we continue to provide new water connections to the customers daily and there is still ongoing influx of people into urban areas, but that is the latest assessment by WAF - sitting at 98 percent.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, supplementary question to the Honourable Minister. What is the Ministry or the Government doing about the fact that our people who are unemployed and currently struggling, are still having their water disconnected for non-payment of bills? What is the Government doing about providing some relief for these families? Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister you have the floor.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is a completely new question as it is talking about access to urban areas, but I know that there has been some relief provided by WAF. Firstly, we had relief in terms of people using less water, for those in the lower income bracket there were some allowances given to them and also some work that has been done by WAF in terms of delaying the payment of bills. That has already been done. So the delay in the payment of bills was while not cutting the bills but giving time to people to pay for it later on - that was some of the work done by WAF in that regard.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Radrodro, you have the floor.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would like to thank the Honourable Minister for the answer that was given. When you say 98 percent, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it

sounds very good indeed, but in fact the reflection of the progress of the instalments would be, say, the resignation of the CEO of WAF recently for another personal reason. It is interesting to request our Honourable Minister to advise this House about the 2 percent that is yet to be connected for clean and safe water? When will they be connected and which areas are involved? There are some areas right in Suva who are yet to get connected to clean and safe water or to piped water because of the regulatory requirements of WAF. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, you have the floor.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. There seems to be an insinuation that we, the Government, caused this personal issue on behalf of the CEO of WAF which is why he left. Nothing could be further from the truth. It also relates to the comments made by the Honourable Nawaikula, asking why the CEO of FRA left mid-term. He did not leave mid-term but left at the end of one contract so the CEO of WAF also left because of personal issues in relation to his family, that he had to attend to.

I think we should stop making insinuations of that kind without any evidence. As Minister responsible I have been in touch with him and I have been very impressed with his performance and what he has done to WAF. He has restructured it and has put in a new culture. He has put in a new management team that is beginning to have an impact but there were other issues which he has had to deal with in relation to his family.

But nevertheless in terms of the 2 percent that is left, our target was to achieve this by the year 2021, but you know that there have been a lot of major challenges that we have had in trying to reach that target. There are places in the vicinity of those urban areas where we want to lay the water but the landowner does not allow it. Sometimes there are difficulties like that. I know of places around Suva where I have tried to personally get water into, but people are still drinking from wells and so forth. We have had those sorts of difficulties but we are trying to work closely with them.

Over and above that, we have had issues with the rising number of people trying to come into the urban areas. In Fiji now, urbanisation is well into 56 percent and going up to 60 percent. So, in terms of trying to get 100 percent urbanisation, it is not a static target but a moving target. The proportion of our population that is coming in, is continuing to rise, and now we have COVID-19 and we have had cyclones and floods, and all the money had to be diverted away from existing projects to address those issues; cyclones and floods. Money is being taken away so we need to continually try to re-tweak what we are doing with WAF. We still have that target for 2021 so to the best of our ability we will try to close that gap as much as possible, given the resources that we have and the economic situation, it might take a bit more time but my target is still on. I am trying as much as possible to try and identify those areas where we can address them by 2021 or hopefully by 2022. Vinaka Vakalevu, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, we will move on to the next question. The second Oral Question for today and I call on the Honourable O'Connor to ask his question. You have the floor, Sir.

Update on the Northern Development Programme
(Question No. 91/2021)

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR asked the Government upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport update Parliament on the Northern Development Programme?

HON. F.S. KOYA (Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport).-
Thank you, Mr .Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the Honourable O'Connor for his question. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Northern Development Programme was launched in and around 2007 and is actually specifically targeted for the development of economic activities in the entire Northern Division which includes Vanua Levu, Taveuni and Rabi. This is actually a Government funded program which provides equity assistance to MSMEs in the form of grants to enterprises, to assist them to start and grow their businesses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can say with some confidence that the NDP has actually led to the improvement of the livelihood of many Fijians in the North. Since 2008 the NDP has assisted about 2300 odd MSMEs, investing and injecting over \$10 million alone in agri-business including livestock, fisheries, forestry, manufacturing and also the retail sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to the \$10 million investment, the FijiFirst Government also supported MSMEs in the Northern Division through various other programmes, such as the Micro Small Business Grants which is more than about \$13 million and approved more than \$6 million in MSME concessional loans.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in NDP especially, during this time of uncertainty, we will continue to play a critical role in the business community up in the North and, in fact, it has been the genesis of many small and successful businesses today, providing much needed support that enabled the business to expand or allow existing businesses to diversify and even reach export levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by supporting these 2300 odd MSMEs, we have actually managed to create employment for about 7,000 Fijians in the North. This means that we have actually supported the livelihoods of approximately 35,000 odd people, and for every MSME supported in the North, we have created three additional jobs and supported five livelihoods.

This program has been amongst the most successful programs of the Fijian Government and in addition to providing equity finance to MSMEs through the NDP, we have also partnered with the private sectors such as the Fiji Development Bank and other financial institutions to share risk and commit finance to viable and sustainable projects. For instance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the banks have provided more than about \$12 million to this project and this actually shows confidence. Having the right people with the right skill-sets to offer top-notch advisory services to our MSMEs, we have also got rigorous monitoring by the NDP team and continuous business training programs offered through our NDP office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sure the Honourable Members from across this august House, including the *Tui Cakau* would appreciate all the necessary support that we have actually provided to the MSMEs in the North. Given the devastation of *TC Yasa* and even today, Sir, I request the actual resource owners and the MSMEs in the North to contact our NDP office in Labasa, because we want to assist as many Fijians in becoming asset rich with the ability to sustain themselves. We are here to help in trying to generate returns from those particular assets, and also that they can provide a sustainable income to support not only their livelihoods but that of the families and communities.

As we move forward, Sir, the Government programs such as the NDP, we need to take into account the new norm that exists. Nothing in Fiji is, as we all know at the moment, what it used to be. We are in the middle of our second wave of the pandemic and the past one year and the current situation has led to a Fijian Government rethink and re-strategisation of trying to invigorate MSME businesses. We will endeavour to make tailor-made programs to ensure that all business that have

been assisted are working in a new way that is COVID-safe with actual enhanced use of technology, adapting to ways of doing business or operate in the new reality, Sir.

The Northern Division remains COVID-contained, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but this does not spare them from the challenge that we all face today as a nation. Therefore the MSMEs need to take advantage of this particular program now more than ever and they need to step out of their comfort zones and take every opportunity they get to improve their lives. We are actually here to watch them grow and I want to take this opportunity to also tell all of those people in the North to be mindful of all the messages that are put out by the Ministry of Health with respect to living in a COVID-safe environment. I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Mosese Bilitavu, you have the floor for a supplementary question.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I also thank the Ministry of Health for the COVID-safety measures that are in place for businesses. As for Vanua Levu's containment status, what are some of the plans in place for MSMEs? It would really be helpful here in the North if, in the future, it becomes a producing area for Vanua Levu to Viti Levu.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, you have the floor.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Apology, the question is very muffled, we could not hear it.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Bilitavu, could you repeat your question but making sure that you are facing one way only and not looking around, so your voice can become clearer.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Thank you, Sir. The question to the Honourable Minister in terms of Covid-19 in the North. What is your future plans to provide for the North to Viti Levu in terms of COVID-19 effects and also the effects of non-essential business that are closing down probably as a containment measure and how this incubation process to help sustain them in the crisis? What are some of the measures in place?

HON. SPEAKER.- You have the floor, Sir.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. There are two questions there but with the first one that the Honourable Member is talking about I think he really needs to know the changes that are reflective of the current economic situation.

Primarily, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the NDP only accepted proposals previously in the agriculture and forestry, tourism and manufacturing sectors and what we have done effectively is we have expanded this to include other sectors such as hospitality services and textile in clothing and footwear. Sir, because we are in the very restricted mode at the moment, apart from the actual financial assistance, programme also undertakes training, advisory and mentoring and obviously bearing in mind all the limitations that are put upon us with all of that. We want to make sure that we are also in a state of readiness so that becomes the very important components for us to ensure that successful implementation of anyone's business.

So, we are also amending our policies to enable more women and young entrepreneurs to actually apply for the programme. The downtime so to speak, Sir, is being used very wisely to get everyone into the stage of readiness. There are things that has to be looked at as the whole of Government approach in terms of what assistance can be given to them but right now it is what I have just explained, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Honourable Professor Prasad. You have the floor, Sir.

(There was no response from the Honourable Member)

Since he is not available, I give the floor to the Honourable Nawaikula for his supplementary question. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can the Honourable Minister explain, what type of security does the Government take to secure the repayment of these small loans?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Government does not take any security. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may, he is asking what type of security does Government take in terms of loans that are given to these SMEs. All that is taken is a 10 percent deposit, there is no security as such as actually taken. It is not a case of similarity with what is done at the bank, so it is a 10 percent deposit that people will come up with in order to be facilitated. We try and make it as easy as possible.

The Honourable Prime Minister, many years ago, actually focussed on the Look North Policy and trying to expand it as much as we can and it is always at the forefront of our mind to make it easy for our MSMEs to grow in that particular area and they have grown exponentially. I hope that answers your question. We do not take any securities.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Kuridrani, you have the floor.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Based on the reply from the Minister, it seems that the programme has been quite successful and my question is, if it is successful then why the Government has not been able to establish programmes in other divisions, especially in the Western Divisions and the Central Divisions? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may, this particular programme is only reserved for the Northern Division. We do not have a programme for the Western Division. This was actually done for the North to promote the North. There are other programmes within which the West and Central can access. This particular one is actually reserved for the Northern-based MSMEs.

The NDP is unlike any other of our assistance programmes as the financial assistance provided is actually a hybrid product, a combination of a government grant and a loan component of a financial institution and the applicant contribution so it is a different partnership model. There are other programmes that we used in other parts of the country, especially with our MSMEs and grant, et cetera that we have done and they have been successful also.

We must also be mindful that at a time like this, these small businesses are facing difficulties but we are here on a timely basis to try and see what we can do to assist them. You cannot measure in the same way, there are other programmes that you have to look at with respect to how we measure the rest of the country has been done.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. We will move on to the third Oral Question for today and I call on the Honourable Tabuya.

COVID-19 Response (Home Loan Assistance) Act 2020
(Question No. 92/2021)

HON. L.D. TABUYA asked the Government upon notice:

Can the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications update Parliament on the COVID-19 Response (Home Loan Assistance) Act 2020?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM (Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Parliament approved this particular law in December of last year, on 11th December, it was assented to. By way of background, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was to address the issues emanating from the economic contraction and of course the shutting down of the borders because of COVID-19 last year. It had a deleterious impact on the tourism sector. Of course a lot of people have become unemployed, some people have got reduced hours.

We have put in place a number of measures in place specifically to do with financial institutions. We had meetings with for example hire purchase companies and also banks and a particular moratorium was given by the banks. There was also identification of loans that would actually go bad whether they were personal loans et cetera and the hire purchase companies also gave a particular amount of time for reprieve for those who actually had hire purchase agreements.

Consequently that had ended that arrangement and the arrangement in respect of homes was going to end in March of this year. We were specifically concerned about those people who had home mortgages in particular those who were owning their first homes and so therefore, this law was put in place.

The law specifically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, allows or states as I have got the law here, that the mortgagor or the mortgagee must try and reach some agreement to ensure that the owner of the home actually does not lose the home. In particular those people whom we know they were a couple and both of them were working and in some cases if both were flight attendants, you no longer have your job or you worked in a hotel and you may not have a job and if you have a home mortgage, then you would have difficulties in making your mortgage repayments. The law essentially allows and persuades the banks to ensure that they give these people enough time to help make ends meet.

In the event that there is an eventuality that repayment has to be made, then the banks can with the approval of FNPF, we have to make an amendment to the FNPF Act, where these individuals can then access not only the General Account but also their Preserved Accounts. As we know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we cannot access the Preserved Account unless you are actually purchasing your first home. In many instances, these individuals actually had already accessed their FNPF account to purchase their first home to get their mortgage, but this gave them the second bite of the cherry, so that they could get up to 50 percent of the total amount of their FNPF funds that they have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have an update which I understand what the Honourable Member must be looking for. As of yesterday, 24th May, the Fund has received 275 applications for home loan assistance under this particular programme. They paid out 155 applications totalling \$1.64 million and 70 percent of these were from members' Preserved Accounts. The 155 applications that came through, 13 were from Housing Authority, these were the ones that were approved, 52 from BSP, 21 from HFC Bank, 1 from Bred Bank, 39 from Westpac Bank and 29 from ANZ Bank. The banks and lenders have provided FNPF a list of 1,575 members, Mr. Speaker, Sir, who have moratorium with them. About 900 of these members have collected their COVID-19 eligibility statements, equal to 100 percent General Account plus 50 percent of Preserved Account balance from their FNPF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the recent lockdown in the urban centres in Viti Levu and the inability to travel and make necessary arrangements, the FNPF Board is considering extending the deadlines

for applications which is due to close at the end of this month. So we hope to extend that to more people because some people have not been obviously, for example, in Nadi, Lautoka, even if you are living on the other side of the creek near Rups. FNPF has dedicated a team working to assist members in the COVID-19 response in Housing Loan Assistance Act and all efforts are being taken to assist members to save their homes as well. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General. Honourable Lynda Tabuya, you have the floor.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the Honourable Minister for the update on the COVID-19 response Home Loan Assistance and thank you also for the indication that the Board is considering to extend the period for applications.

My supplementary question is regarding the repayment of loans and the involvement of the banks, Mr. Speaker, Sir. If they have done any discussion and the Government can get involved to negotiate with the banks to reduce the interest rates on payments of these mortgages. Because it is still ridiculously high and there is a flow on effect, especially for landlords who have rentals and the rentals help repay the mortgage, but because of the current situation, there are many people who are not able to pay their rent on time and also are asking for the reduction of rents which the FCCC is encouraging. There is a flow on effect from landlords, especially to repay the mortgage, so can the Government at least make the attempt with the banks to negotiate to reduce the interest rates on the repayment of the loans. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Attorney-General, you have the floor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a very dangerous thought in a way, I have to say. Honourable Gavoka would know, he has been a banker before, that to artificially interfere with the market, can have enormous consequences. We, of course, had discussions with the banks last year, a lot of the banks realised themselves, that many people, many customers were in strife so they had to make various adjustments.

But for Government to actually interfere with the financial system itself will create financial instability which will also mean that we will not be able to adhere to international standards regarding financial independence of licensed financial institutions - you cannot do that. In the same way, I heard some former politicians saying that Government should interfere, for example, not allow for the increase of fuel. These are world market-driven forces. It is adjudicated by an independent body - Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC).

Drive down interest rates, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the level of liquidity in the system, is the amount of foreign reserves that you have within the system and, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, supply and demand. So, if your liquidity levels are high, which is actually quite high at the moment given the situation, our reserves have exceeded \$3 billion then that gives confidence to the financial institutions to be able to then have a reflection on the interest rates.

The other point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I have said this so many times in Parliament before is that, unfortunately for Fiji, we used to have a National Bank that had a significant portion of the share of the market in Fiji.

The only 100-percent Fijian-owned bank is Home Finance Company (HFC) and it is probably the smallest, if not the second smallest, and it only started a few years ago. So, when you have out of the six banks five of them having their financial decisions being made by the capitals in their respective cities, it will have an impact on how they assess risk. And it will also have an impact on

the appetite of the financial system in Fiji to be able to, for example, a change in interest rates, to be able to come up with policies that are more Fijian-focussed - that is the reality of it.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it is very dangerous to try and interfere with that because you will cause a huge havoc in the financial system itself. So, Government has tried to, for example, as the Honourable Minister for Commerce and Trade was talking about the Northern Development Programme. Last year, we disbursed about \$30 million in loans to Micro Small Medium Enterprises (MSME) Fijian companies so Government has had to intervene.

We currently have an arrangement with the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) where 70 percent of the loans for women businesses are actually guaranteed in the event that they do not pay their loans; 70 percent of their outstanding balance is guaranteed between the Fijian Government and the Reserve Bank of Fiji.

That is how we actually participated in the market to ensure that loans are given on a much better terms or accessibility of loans are actually increased. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General. We will move on to the fourth Oral Question for today and I give the floor to Honourable Dr. Govind to ask his question.

Reduction of Chemical Fertilisers & Promotion of Organic Agriculture
(Question No. 93/2021)

HON. DR. S.R. GOVIND asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment update Parliament on what the Ministry has undertaken to reduce the use of chemical fertilisers and to promote organic agriculture?

HON. DR. M. REDDY (Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment).- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the Honourable Dr. Govind for asking this question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, both the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Environment is very much concerned about the volume of inorganic fertilisers that are being utilised throughout Fiji in the agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the primary concerns is about the negative effect of inorganic fertilisers on the environment, on our soil structure, on groundwater lands as well as surface water, flora and fauna.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the three major components of macronutrients in our fertilisers - nitrogen, phosphorous, potassium which are the major components of any fertiliser that are being used in the agriculture sector and some of the micro-nutrients that are in these organic fertilisers that are used in the agriculture sector have major impact on the flora and fauna, the environment, groundwater as well as surface water.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you know that our agriculture sector, as we are commercialising, expanding, it is now moving towards upper catchment, higher altitude, higher areas from where most of our drinking water is connected to the streams and comes to our reservoirs and as farmers are increasing the utilisation of these fertilisers, particularly nitrate and potassium-based fertilisers, this can have a major health impact on us downstream who are consuming this water. Excessive amount of nitrate can cause health problems.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also in the rural areas, farm households are utilising groundwater consumption and this groundwater that they obtain, they are obtaining it within their farm area where fertilisers are utilised, either through well or borehole.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, excessive utilisation of these fertilisers go down to the groundwater lands which is then pulled up for utilisation, consumption for drinking and also for cooking purposes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, environmentalists are also concerned about the fertilisers' impact on the flora and fauna that the environment has its own way of balancing and us interfering by applying heavy doses of these fertilisers can affect that particular balance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also having a major impact as agriculture is expanding commercialising. We are importing increasing amounts of fertiliser. At the moment, our import bill of fertiliser stands at around \$20 million.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, both the Ministries are working together to see how we can reduce the utilisation of inorganic fertiliser and substitute it with organic fertiliser without compromising on our quest to increase agricultural output.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are doing, I would say, substantially well in terms of increasing agriculture production. Our agricultural exports, fresh produce exports have gone substantially high over the last five years by 26 percent in value terms and 16 percent in volume terms which, Sir, is a remarkable achievement from 2016 to 2020 - the data that we have got recently from Bureau of Statistics.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, so, abruptly stopping or cutting down on importation of the inorganic fertilisers is not the way to go.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also want to cash into the small but significant and growing organic market, not only overseas but also in Fiji too, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and if we can access that particular market, we will be able to get premium price.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is in this regard that we are working very closely with farmers, with organisations to get organic fertiliser readily available. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the organic fertiliser for it to substitute inorganic fertiliser, that 2G, 3G dimension; one the same amount of fertiliser in the organic fertiliser that you apply in substituting the inorganic fertilizer, you must have greater positive impact in terms of productivity and production. Number two, the unit cost should be low.

The primary objective of the farmer is to maximise output, maximise production whilst minimising costs. So, if you tell the farmer or the agricultural entrepreneur that you substitute this, the farmer will say - 'what will be the impact on my bottom line?'

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have got model farmers who are solely commercial farmers, large-scale farmers, who are solely relying on organic fertiliser to undertake during agriculture activities. I give you a few examples, Mr. Speaker, Sir: a model farmer in Kadavu, Mr. Taniela Dama, who utilises poultry manure for his *yaqona* farm, vegetable farms and he is supplying vegetables to the hotels there (one hotel was in operation in Kadavu). For the last six years, he has not utilised on his commercial farm a single dollar worth of inorganic fertiliser.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have got a farmer in Kulukulu, Mr. Praneel Singh, who is making a net return of around \$100,000 per year in a 15-acre farm without utilising a single inorganic fertiliser as

well as any chemicals for pest control. He is basically using other biological methods of controlling pests and diseases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have got the *iTaukei* Agriculture, Apiculture and Trade Cooperation Association. They have carried out extensive research and CEO - Mr. Kalivati Vodoravu is a champion of utilising organic fertiliser in his cooperative, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They have found that utilisation of organic fertiliser vis-a-vis inorganic fertiliser has resulted in one better yield in the *dalo* farm. They are in fact providing and giving out organic manure to their farmers and their Cooperative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are other commercial ventures who are utilising organic fertiliser that we are supporting. We have also developed a bacterium medium liquid organic which we are giving out to farmers so that they can utilise this, to enhance faster degradation of the compost that they have got on their own farm.

Secondly, this particular bacterium medium when they apply on the field, it helps in better uptake of micronutrients by the plant. Often what happens is that excessive and continuous utilisation of inorganic fertilizer for longer period of time raises the soil pH, makes the soil acidic and therefore fertilizer is wasted so uptake is not there.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also developing organic fertiliser, organic manure which we want to give it out to remote farmers in the islands so that they can have access to that at no cost to them. Mr. Speaker, Sir, that work is in progress and we are utilising poultry manure and most of it we have extracted a large amount of bat manure from caves around the Central Division which is the only source of phosphorus, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, normal animal waste has got good content of nitrogen and potassium but most of this waste lack phosphorus which is very expensive. We have found the source which is not in large amounts but we are utilising that in our organic fertiliser which we want to give it out to farmers in the remote interior area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also want to gradually move to identifying islands which we want to declare them as organic and there will be no fertiliser utilised in those islands. Those islands will then be certified as organic islands and the products that come out of the islands would be organic products.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our turmeric that goes from Fiji, which is widely grown 100-percent organic, is fetching premium price in the US market. We are not able to fulfil the full demand for turmeric in the US market. Turmeric is now moved to one of the top six export crops, alongside *dalo*, *yaqona* and ginger. So, you can see how we can leverage ourselves to assert our product in the export market but differentiating with other countries' product in the same market by certifying our product as organic but then again, we need to get into that.

Certification is not a one-year process, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a couple of years' process where you really need to have a dedicated area and you need to comply with the requirements before the certifying organisation certifies that particular area as organic and the product coming out as organic product.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the longer run, for smaller countries like Fiji, we can have a competitive edge in the export market if we are able to differentiate our product and one way of differentiating our agricultural produce is by getting it to be organic and the products coming out of organic produce, again, will fetch premium price in the export market. So, in a nutshell, we are working with farmers

to provide them with support materials so that they can develop their own organic fertiliser. We are supplying bacterium medium which helps to improve their compost and decomposition in a short period of time.

We are developing our own organic product which will only give it to interior and remote farmers and island farmers because they do not have access to this material to make compost there, while we are working with the farmers in the Central, Western and Northern Divisions to develop their own compost and we are giving out this medium to them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have got a long list of areas and the hectares that have gone organic in Fiji and probably, I will provide that data later on or if someone asks a question, and I will read those out. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. Honourable Kuridrani, you have the floor for a supplementary question.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- A supplementary question to the Honourable Minister, what has happened to the supply of manure that has boosted the 2019 supply in 2020? What has happened? If not supplied, why?

HON. SPEAKER.- You have the floor.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- I do not know why, probably he is not able to hear the delivery that I made just a while ago. I said that we are providing the organic finished product to remote, interior farmers. For example, in Nadarivatu last year, we delivered a couple of truckloads of poultry manure so that they can develop their own compost from that.

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, throughout Fiji, if you go to any extension office today, you will find probably a thousand-litre tank there where we have got this lactic acid bacterium medium which any farmer can come with their gallon, fill their gallon with the bacterium medium, we will give a sticker which they put on their gallon so that it says that this is a bacterium medium, they can take it and put it on their farm or they can put in their compost, decompose the compost in a shorter period of time and also if they put it on their farm, it will quickly improve the soil structure as well as improve the uptake of micro nutrients. So, that is happening, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Viliame Gavoka, you have the floor.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Honourable Minister spoke about turmeric and it is huge in our area in Nadroga/Navosa in the highlands. Can I just ask the Honourable Minister, what kind of harvest are they carrying out? Is it in a sustainable manner or can he brief the House on how it is being done to make sure it is sustainable.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, you have the floor.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, probably the Honourable Member knows the plant system. It has got ribosomes and when you pull out a turmeric plant and you pull out the turmeric, certain parts of that turmeric will remain there and the roots will be there and will grow again. Secondly, we have got villages, our officers are working with the villagers to expand that but we are very careful and particular that we do not want that particular expansion to get into an area where inorganic fertilisers are applied and therefore, then it gets mixed with the organic turmeric. So there are villagers who are actively bringing new land under turmeric but we have made it very clear, given

that at the moment our turmeric is classified as organic turmeric, we do not want to risk it that it is mixed up with the commercial turmeric that is grown with inorganic fertiliser.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Radrodro, you have the floor.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wanted to ask the Honourable Minister a supplementary question on his previous decision regarding the banning of paraquat. I think it is a weedicide and this is part of the production for any farmer whilst talking about manure. Can the Honourable Minister advise whether he will be able to review the decision to ban the paraquat and re-introduce them? These are some of the plights of the *dalo* farmers, especially in the Naitasiri, Namosi, Tailevu and Vanua Levu areas who have faced difficulties in trying to maintain their *dalo*, *yaqona* and *tavioka* farms because of the banning of the paraquat by the Ministry of Agriculture and replacing it with the samurai weedicide. Can the Honourable Minister review the decision to ban the paraquat and reintroduce them to assist the non-sugar cane farmers?

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister you have the floor.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, no, that is not going to happen. No way. We have made a decision last year. I think it was the year before last, now we have got about more than 24 months of experience and there are no issues. There are some farmers who are psychologically stuck with paraquat gramoxone and they think that there is no other alternative, but we have provided them with alternatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are very concerned about the effect of paraquat, its residue on human health and also directly and indirectly through the residues on the produce which people are consuming. If you just *Google* the impact of paraquat consumption on human health, you will find a number of referee journal articles who have proven that there is a direct negative impact of gramoxone consumption through its residue on human health, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is why you will find now there is a large number of cases of cancer. So that is not going to happen.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. Honourable Members we will suspend the Question time whilst we deal with the Suspension Motion. For the purposes of complying with the Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I will allow a Suspension Motion to be moved and I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move his motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

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

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

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak on his motion.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, it is 19 minutes past four and we still have four remaining Questions under Schedule 2 of today's Order Paper and thus the request, if we can sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today in order to complete the agenda items, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. Is there anyone wishing to take the floor? As there is no one wishing to take the floor, I give the floor to the Honourable Leader of the House if he wants to add anything further. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- No, thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- We will continue and I give the floor to the Honourable Kuridrani for the fifth Oral Question for today.

QUESTIONS

Goat Meat Industry Partnership (Question No. 94/2021)

HON. I. KURIDRANI asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister update Parliament on the progress of the Partnership to Establish Goat Meat Industry that was provided for in the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 budgets?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- (Minister for Agriculture, Rural and Maritime Development, Waterways and Environment).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I want to thank the Honourable Member for asking this question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we note that there is a substantial demand for meat consumption in the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we note that we are importing about close to \$48 million of lamb meat on a good year. Last year it went down to \$40 million. We note that while lamb meat is very widely consumed by nearly every household, goat meat is also high in demand. But one way of reducing the import bill of lamb meat is one, we increase our production. At the moment we importing 98 percent of the lamb meat that we consume.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the last decade, we have substantially increased lamb production, sheep farming in Fiji and therefore locally provision of lamb meat. But we note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, similarly goat production is three times higher than sheep rearing in Fiji. We note that while we are doing everything to expand sheep production and the number of farms in Fiji, we can also substitute lamb meat if we are able to supply goat meat. But the problem at the moment is that we do not have a formal market for goat meat. Now, what happens is that, goat farmers raise their goats. They sell it in the informal market. Now because they slaughter it at home, they cannot sell the meat for commercial purpose. Anyone slaughtering on their own backyard or on their farm any animal unless it is inspected by a meat inspector, unless it is slaughtered in a slaughter house or abattoir, it cannot be sold commercially. They can consume it for family purpose because the moment you sell it commercially, if there is any health issue, then to whom will one have the liability with.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we are rapidly expanding goat production, we want to get it through the formal sector. If we want to get it through the formal sector then we will need to have a large farm who will have a part of the supply chain to the supermarkets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the 2019/2020 budget, the Ministry of Economy allocated \$1 million for us to establish one, the fattening farm and also feeder farms.

At the moment we have got eight commercial and 12 semi-commercial farms with a stock of close to 3,000 who will be supplying goat at \$6 per kilogramme live meat to the fattening farm who will take these goats and raise them further, use different feed to get them to the required weight with the required level of fat and then they will formally slaughter in a proper slaughterhouse or abattoir and get it to the supermarkets so that it is readily accessible to anyone who would want to buy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the moment lamb meat prices go on to about \$20 to \$23 per kilogramme. If you are able to increase production of goat meat, we can peg it slightly lower than that or substantially lower than that, this depends on supply. If you are able to get a large supply in the market then obviously the price equilibrium will come down.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Western Division is working fine. We are able to get it to the supermarkets but it got affected by the cyclone and COVID-19. But we are now also embarking on establishing these feeder farms in the Northern Division. At the moment we do not have a slaughterhouse and abattoir in the Northern Division but we are looking at establishing a slaughterhouse once we get to the stage of establishing the fattening farms.

The Western Division is ready and operating but in the Northern Division, we have got the feeder farms who will be supplying to the fattening farms, who have not established the fattening farms at the moment and we are looking towards, as soon as we get into that, we can then also establish a slaughterhouse there.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. Honourable Members, we will now suspend proceedings for refreshments and this is being served at the Big Committee Room.

Parliament will resume in half an hour. We adjourn for refreshments.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.27 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 5.01 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please be seated. We will continue with the agenda item and I call on the sixth Oral Question for today. Instead of the Honourable Rohit Sharma, the Honourable Virendra Lal will ask Question 95/2021. You have the floor Sir.

Bullying and Brawling in Schools
(Question No. 95/2021)

HON. V. LAL asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts update Parliament on the action undertaken by the Ministry to ensure that bullying and brawling involving school students are not repeated?

HON. R.S. AKBAR (Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts).- I take the floor to answer the question posed by Honourable Virendra Lal about how the Ministry can undertake action to ensure that bullying and brawling involving school students are not repeated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I start by saying that bullying and brawling are behavioural issues and neither the Ministry nor me can assure or ensure that such behavioural issues are not repeated. However, we do have a number of policies that act as a deterrent for students as a whole as to not engage in bullying and brawling.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry is committed to providing education to all Fijians apart from attending to indiscipline issues. We are committed to instilling good student values and behaviour and this is not only done to the teaching of curriculum content but to the entire school system.

Children in schools are geared towards education right from the beginning. Our teachers continued to shape, and mould future leaders into good citizens. To ensure children continue to display good behaviour in and out of school, we have a number of policies in place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these policies act as a guiding principle to our heads of school and teachers that also aid in controlling incidences such as bullying and brawling which involves students among other unwanted behavioural and indiscipline issues in school.

These policies are developed by the Ministry and are aligned to the:

- (1) Fiji Education Act 1966;
- (2) United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child 1993;
- (3) Child Welfare Act ; and
- (4) 2013 Constitution of the Republic of the Fiji Islands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our teachers and the Ministry are guided by five significant policies that protects and safeguards the welfare of students whilst they are inside and outside the school. We have the student code of conduct, the behaviour management policy, drugs and substance abuse policy, counselling policy, child protection policy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the heads of school and the teachers are mandated to abide by these policies and act upon it. Sir, while these policies enable the Ministry to instil good behaviour and values in our students, it cannot be done by the Ministry alone, we ask parents and the public to step up and

assist the Ministry and the Fijian government in ensuring that we continue to nurture good Fijian citizens.

Currently, we are drafting the parental engagement policy in line with the Pillar 4 of the reform in the education sector that will ensure students continue to display good behaviour inside and outside of the school. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the policies are also under review because of the changing behaviour of our students in and outside school.

The Parental Engagement Policy is designed to create greater communication between the children and their parents with the Ministry and while the Ministry continues to make significant investments in the welfare of our children, we urge parents to be sensitive to the needs of the children in teaching them good discipline and behaviour.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is evident that good behaviour stamped from good parenting, from homes and there are many factors that contributes to what a way a child behaves in and outside schools. We have found bullying to be a major problem with our government schools and recently, we met up with all the Heads of Schools of our Government boarding schools and we are in the process of finalising a document which will create an enabling environment between parents and those students residing on boarding schools. Of course, we encourage parents to ensure that children do not learn such behaviour from within their home environment. As much as we would like to provide our children with a much needed support, care within our schools, we urge parents to teach discipline to those students who do not exhibit such behaviour while and still in and outside schools.

In any case of bullying in schools and outside schools, schools are guided by policies to make sure that behaviour of the student is documented, counselling is done, parents are advised and of course, if it tantamount to assault and harassment then the other responsible authorities are involved such as the Fiji Police Force.

At all times, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we urge our students to display good behaviour within the schools. The only way we can stop these students from such behaviour is to have these policies in place to act as a deterrent. But we cannot assure that these behaviours will not be repeated by the student in and outside schools. Teaching our children good behaviour is a whole of community approach and we have school counsellors, we have child protection officers in schools who are trained to signal out such behaviours such as bullying and aggression, et cetera. The onus is on the Head of Schools to ensure that the children in the schools are protected. The Ministry should review its policies to allow the Head of Schools to manage such behaviours in schools. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the Honourable Minister for her response to the question about bullying. My question to the Honourable Minister is about the steps that are being taken or programmes in place to deal with online bullying between students and what is it that the Ministry is doing to deal with that when it is to do with students of a school because bullying just does not take place in person, it also takes place online.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- You know about it.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes, I do know about that because I have been called an “nincompoop” by the Honourable Attorney-General. So he should be ashamed of calling me that word because it takes one to know one.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Back to the Honourable Minister for Education is about online bullying and what it is that the Ministry is doing to deal with that issue?

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Sir. When it comes to online bullying, I am not sure whether the Honourable Member is talking about online bullying during school hours or outside school hours. As a Ministry, we take responsible of our students, and in this case when students are accessed to internet and computer lab, they may be engaged in such things, we have our teachers to be vigilant on that.

In case of outside bullying, I would suggest that students exercise caution in sharing information or postings that tantamount to online bullying. And of course, we have our online safety commission, and I am sure the public and parents are aware of the steps to be taken. We have a cyber-bullying unit in the Fiji Police Force, and we are working with them to address issues on cyber bullying and the steps to be taken by concerned parties if they feel that they are being bullied online. At all times, responsible use of social media is something that we encourage amongst our students.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the Honourable Leawere. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the Honourable Minister for her reply but a supplementary question, are there plans through good citizenship to strengthen traditional and cultural practices and integrate them into different subjects from early childhood?

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, you have the floor.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We have a valued moral education classes, values that are incorporated into a number of subjects within our school curriculum. We also have a specific time that is dedicated to teaching value education which includes moral value.

Last year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I put to all the faith based organizations in Fiji when we had our meeting that they come up with one curriculum that is universal, universal values that need to be taught, unfortunately the response I got from the various faith based organisations, they still prefer to teach their own faith values which is proving to be very difficult given the fact that in the school system, we have a curriculum to complete. So, we are still pursuing that idea, but very basic early education is still remains within our school system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I would like to suggest here is that in most cases, a lot of these things are shifted to the school systems, unfortunately, they failed to understand that values and discipline starts from home. I suggest that we strengthen our parental engagement with our children to ensure that teachers are not burden with everything. So we will see how much more we can do but we still have a value education curriculum within our schools by our teachers.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Qereqeretabua, you have the floor.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question to the Honourable Minister is in relation to counsellors. Could the Honourable Minister just explain exactly whether all schools have counsellors and if these counsellors are also going to teach or are they just counsellors and they stay as counsellors?

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I did not get that question.

HON. SPEAKER.- Could you repeat the question, Honourable Member? We can hardly hear you.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Honourable Minister, my question is in relation to counsellors within the schools. I just wanted to know if each school has a counsellor and do the counsellors also teach classes or are they exclusively counsellors? *Vinaka*.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Minister, you have the floor.

HON. AKBAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have two categories of teachers who look after the interests of our children. One, we have the Child Protection Officers who are trained. Every school has a Child Protection Officer who also teaches and looks after anything or incidents relating to students' welfare. We have District Counsellors and now with the more trained counsellors coming up from the APTC, we have distributed these counsellors within the Districts. They do not teach and they are responsible for counselling the children. Yes, we do not have a Counsellor per school but we have one Child Protection Officer per school. So, we have Divisional and District Counsellors who move from school to school on a need basis counselling schools on various issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may go back to what Honourable Tabuya asked me regarding Online Safety. You may asked about the online safety. There is a digital campaign on Save the Children Fiji and Facebook together and this is raising awareness against harassing or bullying children online.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, we will move on to the seventh Oral Question for today. I give the floor to the Honourable Rasova to ask his question.

Status of Mineral Exploration in Fiji's EEZ
(Question No. 96/2021)

HON. S.R. RASOVA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources update Parliament on the status of mineral exploration in our Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)?

HON. J. USAMATE.- (Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources).- Where are we?

HON. SPEAKER.- We are here but I know you are there. We would like to hear you.

HON. J. USAMATE.- (Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources).- Mr. Speaker, Sir,

HON. CDR S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- No, no. I think his connection to Parliament is disconnected at the moment.

HON. SPEAKER.- We will try and put the Question away for the time being. We will move on to the next Question, the eighth Oral Question for today. The Honourable Veena Bhatnagar to ask Question No. 97/2021. You have the floor, Madam.

Empowerment and Mobile Skills Training
(Question No. 97/2021)

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth

and Sports inform Parliament on how many empowerment and mobile skills trainings has the Ministry conducted since 2019?

HON. P.K. BALA (Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief because I do not have a curfew pass. Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2019, the Ministry has conducted 57 empowerment and mobile skills training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of 1,969 youths took part in this training. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not wish to go into the divisions of how many youths took part but I wish to assure this honorable House that we have taken this empowerment and mobile skills training to the maritime areas, to the peri-urban and urban areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank all the stakeholders who came on board to support the Ministry's effort in conducting these 57 trainings.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you have the floor.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the Honourable Minister's very short response to that question. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I noticed and I think the Honourable Member noticed that an increasing number of youths are actually involved in the communities and settlements to provide security for their communities.

I have not heard from the Ministry of Health about whether they have received any form of training or being told what the guidelines are but they are making their own attempts which is to be commended by these youths to provide security for their community. I am just asking the Honourable Minister for Youth if he has taken the initiative to work with the Ministry of Health to provide this training to our youths who are doing this very important job to assist in looking after their communities during this crisis.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, you have the floor.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I managed to contact all these youths, majority of them who are based at the villages, at the checkpoints, and I would like to commend all the youth who are taking part in this programme.

I also found out that they had the briefing from the District Office and also the Ministry of Health officials in regards to this Programme. So, all in all they are very much aware of these programme and also I would like to inform this august House that from Rakiraki to Ba, I have also been also with my team distributing masks to these youths who have been conducting this programme. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Aseri Radrodro, you have the floor.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the Honourable Minister for the distribution of masks at the various municipalities.

A supplementary question for the Honourable Minister: Mr. Speaker, Sir, the mobile skills programme that has been undertaken, as we know that there is a skills shortage in terms of getting genuine qualified electricians, qualified contractors, tile layers, so can you advise this House as to what sort of skills are you empowering these youths with that you engage in your mobile training?

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, you have the floor.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this mobile training, as a Ministry, we take this training to the doorsteps of our youths, that is what this mobile training is all about. The training

HON. SPEAKER.- We cannot hear you, Honourable Minister. Honourable Minister, you have the floor.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir,

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think we have come across some glitches this afternoon which we had anticipated in the morning but we have lasted until now. The staff will look at this during now and tomorrow morning's Sitting but I believe the questions are there for the time being. We will move on to Written Questions and I call on the Honourable Mosese Bulitavu to ask Written Question No. 103/2021. Honourable Bulitavu, you have the floor.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we have another glitch.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, can I ask the question, if you will allow it, on his behalf, Sir, so that it is tabled in Parliament? Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you have the floor.

Written Questions

Citizenship by Naturalisation – 2018-2020 (Question No. 103/2021)

HON. L.D. TABUYA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Foreign Affairs update Parliament on the number of people granted citizenship by naturalisation or registration during the period 2018 to 2020 and their countries of origin?

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA (Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Foreign Affairs).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I will table my response at a later sitting date as permitted under Standing Order 45(a).

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, between now and tomorrow's Sitting, we will try to work on the glitches so that we do not have any tomorrow. I thank you for your indulgence today. This is the first time we have had this Parliament and the Virtual Sitting and it is on the hold, it has come out well with those slight glitches and with practice, we will fine-tune it, I do not see any problems. I thank you for availing yourselves at short notice.

The Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow morning at 9.30.

The Parliament adjourned at 5.31 p.m.