

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

SATURDAY, 5TH JUNE, 2021

[CORRECTED COPY]

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SATURDAY, 5TH JUNE, 2021

The Parliament met at 10.05 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

HONOURABLE SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Honourable Members were present, except the Honourable Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 4th June, 2021, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome

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

Compliance to Rules and Procedures of Parliament

Honourable Members, at this juncture, I wish to reiterate that there must be strict compliance with all the rules and procedures of Parliament, as set out in the Standing Orders, including in particular, rules of debate and maintenance of order and decorum in Parliament.

Compliance to Standing Order 28

In that regard, all Honourable Members must note that pursuant to Standing Order 28, all speeches must be in English. Furthermore, Standing Order 29 requires all documents and proceedings of Parliament to be in English. As I have mentioned yesterday, if you are speaking in the vernacular, make a translation as well and get the translation right - it is not easy.

Therefore, Honourable Members must ensure that the requirement in Standing Orders 28 and 29 is strictly adhered to in all your debates, questions, speeches and in all your contribution in Parliament.

Thank you, Honourable Members. We will now proceed to the next item in the Order Paper for today.

POINT OF ORDER

Alleged Breach of Standing Orders - Conduct of Members

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to raise my Point of Order under Standing Order 74(1)(a) and also under 74 (2).

Mr. Speaker, under Standing Order 134, I had written to your Office on 11th February and the letter was delivered to your Office and had been received by your Office. In the letter under Standing Order 134, I had raised a Point of Order under Standing Order 29A about breaches by the Honourable Attorney-General and the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure and Meteorological Services which had been brought to my attention. The details are in that letter that had been delivered to your Office on 11th February.

I am raising this, Mr. Speaker, because yesterday, you had made a ruling on a Point of Order that was raised much later but almost immediate when you ruled on the Point of Order by the Honourable Attorney-General. So I would just like to ask, under the various Standing Orders that I have noted to you today, Sir, on when would the Office of the Speaker rule on that letter under Standing Order 134.

Standing Order 134(2) requires your Office to reply to us for the alleged breaches that we have raised to you. That is my Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, if you are referring to a letter that you had written to the Speaker, I will deal with that letter in time. We will leave it at that for the time being and I will look at that. We move on.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights Maharaj to table his Report. You have the floor.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Review Report on the Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2020

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Electoral systems are viewed as one of the most influential of all political institutions and of crucial importance to broader issues of governance. It is increasingly being recognised that an electoral system can be designed both, to provide local geographic representation and to promote proportionality. It can also promote the development of a strong and viable national political party's framework and ensure the representation of women, youth and the marginalised, in Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, the way in which a particular electoral system is chosen, is extremely important in ensuring that overall legitimacy is maintained. A process in which, most or all groups are included, is likely to result in significantly broader acceptance of the end result than a decision perceived as being motivated by partisan self-motivation alone. Therefore, it is essential to build a legislation that is accepted among all key actors that are involved in the political process.

Mr. Speaker, elections have changed since its inception, from “direct democracy” in Greece, whereby citizens voted on policies, legislation and executive bills to the modern system of democratic election process. The changes to the voting system around the world came about as a result of the growing ideology of democracy and to uphold the principle of good governance in conducting a free and fair election.

Such prominent change in the election process is the introduction of secrecy of ballot, which has been universally accepted as one of the fundamental principles of free and fair voting. This has also now been rooted in various treaties and international agreements, such as Article 21(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 5 of the Convention on the Standards of Democratic Elections, Electoral Rights and Freedoms in the member States of the Commonwealth of Independent States and Article 23 of the American Convention on Human Rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji adopted the principle since it believes that the process of secret ballot does not only include that a person’s vote is not disclosed, but it also enables a voter to mark the ballot paper in secret without any intimidation or influence from any political party or candidate before polling day. More importantly, it is the process that allows the voter to vote for a candidate out of his or her own free will and choice.

The new system of voting has also ensured that people are not marginalised, such as the elderly and people with disabilities, and this is evident in the provision of Fiji’s Electoral Act 2014, whereby presiding officers may offer assistance, only, upon request by a voter. Additionally, section 53(9) and section 53(4) of the Act, shows that consideration is given in ensuring that secrecy of ballot is maintained and, therefore, the principle of good governance and exercising voters’ constitutional right is paramount in electing a democratic government.

The Fijian Government is committed to this vital aspect of good governance, thus ensured that the regulatory framework that governs the elections is kept up to date. Therefore, through the Fijian Electoral Commission and the Fijian Elections Office, and at the conclusion of two General Elections under the new electoral system as embedded in the 2013 Constitution, a review was carried out on the election processes and there were certain changes suggested for amendments to the Electoral Act 2014. These changes are reflected in the proposed Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2020.

Thus, the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights, under the Parliamentary process, was handed the Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2020, to conduct a review and report back to the Parliament. The Committee Report will provide details of the Committee’s review process, which includes initial deliberation, public consultation and identification of key findings, and outcome of the review.

In the initial stages of the review, the Committee conducted preliminary deliberations and noted that the Bill aims to bring about changes to the Electoral Act that are based on the analysis by the Electoral Commission and the Supervisor of Elections, and the Multinational Observer Group, on the 2018 General Elections. Additionally, the Committee conducted deliberation on the Clauses of the Bill and I would like to take the Honourable Members of this august House through the key changes that the new law aims to introduce.

The Bill proposes to amend 33 sections of the Electoral Act 2014, which includes; sections 2, 6, 14, 21, 25, 30, 36, 40, 41, 45, 50, 51, 53, 57, 60, 70, 73, 77, 79, 81, 83, 92, 100, 102, 104, 109, 113, 114, 116, 140, 141, 144 and 153.

Part of the amendments proposed by the Bill is the insertion of a few new provisions, inclusive of sections, subsections and paragraphs; that deals with numerous electoral matters, such as, but not limited to:

- specifying the campaign period;
- changes to the National Candidate List;
- specific provision relating to the publication of the provisional results;
- restriction in the use of Government vehicles for campaign;
- authority of the Supervisor of Elections in directing any political party, candidate or police officer to remove material that breach the campaign rules;
- specifying a specific timeframe in which certain actions are considered electoral offences;
- providing for provisions to deal with the publication of false statements; and
- minimising the period for retention and storage of election records, before it is destroyed.

The Committee also conducted public consultation on the Bill and received support on the introduction of the Bill from the public that participated in the public consultation. There were also concerns and suggestions for improvements from numerous participants who were present at the public consultation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also want to confirm at this stage that the Committee had visited numerous communities around Fiji and I would like to mention these communities by name, so that the Honourable Members of this august House do take note of the extensive work done by the Committee.

The Committee visited Namosi Provincial Council; Sigatoka Police Conference Room; Shalini's Apartment Conference, Sigatoka; Nadi Town Council Hall; Mr. Vinesh Rai's residence at Sabeto, Nadi; Lautoka City Council Chambers; Vakabuli Primary School Hall; Ba Town Council; Moto Primary School; Tavua District Office; Rakiraki Police Headquarters Conference Room; Naria Primary School; District Office Conference Room Korovou; Naveivatuloa Village Namosi; Bilalevu Community Hall; Nakavu Village Hall; Vitogo Village Lautoka; Veisaru Sanatan Primary School, Ba; Tavualevu Hall in Tavualevu Village; Wailotua Village, Tailevu; Mr. Ramesh Kapoor's Residence at Urata Bulileka Labasa; Draladamu Primary School; Visoqo, Namuka and Wavuwavu Primary School; Vunivere; Basoga Macuata; Valelawa Primary School; Korokadi Primary School; Wainunu Village in Bua; Somosomo Taveuni; Vuna Taveuni; Bagasau Village Cakoudrove; Tabia at Mr. Zakir's residence; and at Bulileka Mandir.

The Committee also considered the alignment of the Bill towards meeting the targets of the National Development Plan and Sustainable Development Goal. The Bill ensures that Fijians are free to participate their right to vote in the free and fair election and ensure that provisions of the Bill applies equally to all person, irrespective of gender, age, socio-economic status and geographical location. There were also discussions held with the Electoral Commission and the Fijian Election Office, led by the Supervisor of Elections, which focused on the key processes of elections, which assisted the Committee in better understanding of the electoral processes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee, through submission, have gathered and noted that there is lack of knowledge about the counting process, declaration of results, transferring of sensitive material

and the final national results tally. This is one of the reasons the Committee had strongly recommended in the review of the Joint Report that training needs to be compulsory with regards to the electoral process for all the candidates, for any general election. This will ensure that a uniformed message is passed on to the general public by all candidates and political parties. I shall give specific examples of misled information given to the general public by candidates, politicians and political parties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me begin with the counting process. The Committee noted that there are five key steps to the counting process of ballot papers and these are:

- Step 1
The reconciling of all ballot papers received by the polling station, number of voters signature on Voter List, unused ballot papers, spoiled ballot papers and tendered ballot papers must equal to the total number of ballot papers received by the polling station. If there is discrepancy in the reconciliation of the ballot papers received, a recount of the above is conducted.
- Step 2
The identification of the five numbered seals on the ballot box is checked and verified. If the five seals have been reconciled, the ballot box is opened. If there is any discrepancy in the five seals, the ballot box is not opened. Reconciling the number of ballot papers in the ballot box with the total number of signatures on the Voter List.
- Step 3
Unfolding of ballot papers and then sorted into column number ranging as marked on the ballot paper before counting ballot papers for each candidate, counting of all the ballot papers in each column range including the invalid ballot papers, totalling each column to reconcile the total number of signatures on the Voter List.
- Step 4
Sorting of ballot papers by candidate number, proceeding column by column, counting the ballot papers for each candidate number that have received votes. The results are entered in the Protocol of Results worksheet in the Presiding Officer's Record Book.
- Step 5
Once the Presiding Officer is satisfied that all the numbers on the Protocol of Results worksheet in the Presiding Officer's Record Book is correct, the results are transferred in the Protocol of Results.

I must emphasise at this stage that the counting process is manual. There is no machine in which ballot papers are placed and it does the counting. This is a lie. It was very sad to note that the general public informed us that it is some current and some failed candidates have been spreading this information. The counting process also does not involve any software. It is done manually, contradictory to what some politicians have been informing the voters.

Declaration of Results - the results of the Polling Station is recorded in the Protocol of Results, the Presiding Officer will sign off on it and this is witnessed by any three Election Observers or Polling Agents.

Once the Protocol of Results is witnessed, the Presiding Officer will call the Call Centre to transmit the result recorded in the Protocol of Results. From the Call Centre, the result is submitted to the Results Centre where results from all Polling Stations and the Count Centre are received and

released as provisional results until counting concludes for the General Election and the last result is submitted to the Results Centre.

Subsequently, the Presiding Officer will place the original copy of the Protocol of Results inside the Tamper Evident Envelope and this will be transported to the Count Centre after the Polling Day Workers pack-up from the Polling Station. The second copy (pink copy) is detached and placed in a publicly accessible area outside the Polling Station. The third copy (green colour) is placed inside the Ballot Box for safekeeping.

Transferring of Sensitive Materials - with regards to transferring of materials by the Fijian Elections Office, it was noted that when packing is completed, the Ballot Box and the Tamper Evident Envelope containing the original Protocol of Results, Presiding Officer's Record Book, Voter List and Tendered Ballot Papers is collected by the Fijian Elections Office Officials. These sensitive materials are then transported to the Count Centre by Fijian Elections Officials and the Fiji Police Force. Any Polling Agent can accompany the transport of the sensitive materials to the Count Centre, however, this will be at the cost of the Polling Agent.

Final National Results Tally - briefly, once all results from the Polling Stations and the Count Centre are received, the Results Centre will prepare the Final National Results Tally and this is signed off by the Supervisor of Elections, who will then provide the Final National Results Tally to the Electoral Commission who will allocate seats to the candidates who have been elected as Members of Parliament. The Final National Results Tally will also be publicly displayed and made available to Polling Agents upon request.

After a thorough review, the Committee noted that there were a few issues raised from submitters and stakeholders who had appeared before the Committee during the public consultation stage. In addressing the issues, the Committee sought legal clarifications pertaining to matters noted from the Bill, to ensure that the primary objectives of the Bill are preserved. The Committee deliberated extensively on the issues identified and the legal clarifications provided and weighed all options and made efforts in coming to a conclusion that would preserve the main intentions of the Bill while at the same time, give consideration to the public's input.

I would now like to brief the Honourable Members of this august House of the outcome of the review, whereby I will provide details of the issues identified and the clarification provided to address these.

Firstly, there was concern raised on the authority vested on the Supervisor of Elections, provided under clause 8 of the Bill, whereby submitters believe that the provision should not give the authority of discretion to the Supervisor, to choose whether or not to include the Party Name and Party Symbol.

In addressing this issue, it was noted that this was also a recommendation by the 2018 Electoral Commission in the Joint Report. Additionally, the provision should be interpreted to mean that the choice is based on a Political Party's preferences, whether it wants the Party name or Party symbol, which would then be facilitated by the Supervisor of Election when compiling the National Candidate List.

The Independent Candidates will not have any party name or symbol and, therefore, amendments are, in fact, aligning the Fijian laws to the international instruments to a far greater extent. The availability of symbols or party name should strengthen the confidence of the voters of their choice. For example currently, there is only one party which has the party symbol and the party name which is the FijiFirst Party. In terms of SODELPA, they have party symbol or party name. It

will be dependent on the party during the election what they want to actually emphasise on whether they want to have the party symbol or party name. That is why the restriction is given to the Supervisor of Elections to choose at that point in time, depending what the party wants to go in the candidate listing.

Secondly, there were comments put forward regarding the tight timeframe provided for submitting voter lists as per the amendment provided in clause 9; it was clarified that the Fijian Elections Office (FEO) effectively has 14 days to finalise the Voter List and publish the official provisional voter list and then has only one more week to prepare the final list.

The number of voters that the Elections office has to deal with is quite substantial, 600,000 plus to be exact, which means it has a relatively more constricted timeframe. It was advised that any extension will compromise the FEO's ability to deliver a finalised voter list as required by the law.

The Committee also advised that in practice, the FEO works with all such relevant agencies well in advance of the election to compile the lists and once the election is announced, it becomes a matter of finalising the name for the election. The Committee is of the opinion that this clarification address the concerns raised and that clause 9 of the Bill needs no amendment.

There were also comments on clause 10, which amends section 9 of the Act, which intends to provide for the setting up of a special polling venue in Suva for overseas registered voters, who are in Fiji during Polling Day, to cast their votes; it was noted that at this point in time, there is still uncertainty as to who will be able to come to Fiji, if the registration team can travel overseas for registration. This proposed change in the law is a starting point in improving election process and assisting voters in voting.

If there is an extensive turnout at this location in the next general election, then it was advised that the FEO can open more polling stations in the following general elections. It should also be noted that overseas registered Fijians will be eligible to vote at this polling station provided they have not already applied for postal voting. The Committee is of the opinion that this clarification addresses the concerns raised and that clause 10 needs no amendment.

Certain submitters also commented on the publishing of provisional results. A portion of these submitters said that provisional results were good and the other submitters argued that it is unofficial and that it caused confusion amongst the public. If used again in the next general election, it may still cause confusion amongst the public.

To address this issue, I would like to advise Honourable Members, that provisional results are essential for peace and calm. This is a generally practised in every country that has a democratic election. Announcing results in bulk by candidates and parties allows voters to remain calm and maintain interest in the process.

It was advised that the provisional results provide the citizens with an indication that the counting is progressing. It reduces the chance of violence as a continuous flow of results takes place is starting from zero. Official Results are entered in the Result Management System after 7.00 a.m. the day after the election. Final results are directly transferred from the Protocols of Results received from polling stations from the night before. The count done at the polling station is final and the results that are forwarded from the polling station are directly entered into the Result Management Information System at the National Results Centre using the double blind data entry system.

Additionally, there were comments put forward regarding clause 27, which amends section 109, which intended to provide the Supervisor of Elections three months to submit a report to the

Commission on the election results. These submitters believe the three months is too long and the current one month period prescribed in the law is sufficient.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to address this issue, it should be noted that the report is published by the Electoral Commission as part of the Joint Report to Parliament and is highly technical and is used by observers and other stakeholders in their respective activities. Additionally, a practical term of existing period provided to the Supervisor of Elections also runs concurrently with and falls within the 42 days petitions period.

It was advised that the Supervisor of Elections Report of the last General Election was 150-plus pages long. There were comments put forward in clause 31, that the provision be reviewed to ensure respect for freedom from unreasonable search and seizure as per Section 12(1) of the *Constitution of the Republic of Fiji*. Submitters say that the clause will provide penal provisions for breaching the provision which also includes a police officer. Police officers will also be held accountable for not following the directives as provided under the provision.

To address this, it should be noted that the protections in the law are necessary for the voters. Any material that is a breach of the law no longer qualifies for any legal protection. This means that any public official, such as a police officer who, upon being lawfully directed, cannot refuse to prevent the breach of the law and must act in all capacity to uphold the law. The basic premise for the submission is said to be misconceived and based on incorrect interpretation of the constitutional law.

Penal clauses are necessary to ensure that there are consequences of breaking the law. Practically, the Supervisor of Elections or the delegated officer at the Fijian Elections Office will notify the Commissioner of Police or delegated officer and thereafter the Police would execute the instruction. The entire process will be formal and properly documented. Under the principles of public law, this power given to the Supervisor of Elections cannot be exercised unless the Supervisor of Elections follows procedures within the Fijian Elections Office.

Submitters also raised concerns on clauses 32, 33 and 34, noting that the proposed amendments to sections 140(1), 141 and 144(1) are not supported. It was submitted that the sections not be amended for the restricted period as this would not capture any related offences that would take place outside the campaign period. For instance, if the words “During the campaign period” substitute the term “any” in section 140(1), this would then be understood, as a person would only be charged and found guilty for the electoral offence at the relevant time during the campaign period. The provision would not include a person who commits the same offence but outside of campaign period.

To address this, it should be noted that the law only applies when the election date is announced. The proposed changes in the law expands the reach of the law to the full six months of the official campaign period. This is far greater than what the existing law captures. The campaign laws are dependent on certain legal considerations such as:

- there being an election in close proximity;
- the person is a political candidate or is formally a member of a party; and
- the action complained about has substantial impact on the outcome of the election.

It was also advised that if the rules were left open and applicable throughout the cycle, it would be unenforceable. The Committee is of the opinion that this clarification addresses the concerns raised and that clauses 32, 33 and 34 need no amendment.

Furthermore, there were concerns raised in clause 35 regarding the publication of false statements by political parties. Certain submitters argued that this provision could have the potential for abuse by the Elections Office. The offence carries a heavy penalty with a fine of up to \$50,000 or a five-year jail term or both, which contradicts Recommendation 5 of the MOG Report which says that penalties for electoral offences should be proportionate and generally civil in nature rather than criminal.

To address this, it should be noted that the 2018 General Elections saw a proliferation of false information and fake news. The actions also resulted in the MOG finding that the trust in electoral institutions were diminished. It was advised that it is necessary for a speedy action to be taken on any information that is false and also fake. The appeal process should be expedient. The penalties are high for breaches because the law needs to emphasise these as deterrents.

The Court will ultimately issue a penalty based on the circumstances of each case. The Committee was further advised that the Electoral Commission nor the Supervisor of Elections can fine any person. In terms of any grievance against the Supervisor of Elections, the law addresses such circumstances whilst ensuring that the impartiality of the Electoral Commission is protected under section 5(8) of the Electoral Act 2014.

Moreover, there were concerns raised on clause 36 regarding the authority vested with the Supervisor of Elections to be able to destroy election records after six months of an election. To address this matter, it may be good to note that the proposed amendment will enable the Fijian Elections Office to reduce cost of storage of the election records.

Additionally, the Committee was advised that from the electoral bodies reading of the law, the materials are required only for 21 days if any challenge is made under Section 66 of the *Constitution of the Republic of Fiji 2013*. The law also requires the Court of Disputed Returns to finalize all the election petitions in 21 days after it is filed. Therefore, the maximum timelines for materials to be stored is 42 days after the return of the writ for any post-election legal petition.

Finally, certain submitters also commented on other aspects of the electoral system, including suggestions that:

- persons with dual citizenship be allowed to stand for elections, without rescinding citizenship in the other country; and
- membership of Parliament should be expanded to also include members that are appointed by the elected Members of Parliament – these Members would come from specialised professions, such as doctors, lawyers, accountants, auditors, scientists, et cetera.

To address these issues, the Committee believes that Fiji is a sovereign country with regards to its laws, regulations and procedures for General Elections. Furthermore, the Committee agrees to the fact that any person participating as a candidate in a General Election should only hold Fijian citizenship.

The person holding dual citizenship should not be allowed to stand in a General Election as his or her loyalty will always be questioned, if there is a conflict between the two countries he or she is holding citizenship for. In very simple terms, the Committee highly recommends that Fiji should be led by Members of Parliament who are Fijians and have Fiji at heart.

As far as having allocated seats for specific professionals in Parliament, the Committee recommends political parties be empowered to give due recognition and representation of candidates

from diverse sector and groups of our own Fijian society, whilst selecting candidates for a General Election, and not specifically having select seats for any group.

At this juncture, I would like to acknowledge the team from SODELPA, especially Honourable Viliame Gavoka, whose submission was straight to the point and it addressed key issues that were relevant for the review.

At the conclusion of the review, the Committee took note of the clarifications provided and is, therefore, of the opinion that the issues and concerns raised are sufficiently addressed and that the provisions of the Bill ensure the preservation of the objectives of the Bill.

The Committee does not recommend any substantial change to the Bill that was tabled on 11th December, 2020, however, noted very few minor grammatical issues which have now been amended and these minor amendments are captured in magenta coloured texts of the amended copy of the Bill appended to the Committee's Report.

The Committee's review benefited immensely from the public consultations and the Committee would like to acknowledge all the members of the public and entities who provided their views on the Bill and for taking an interest in the proceedings of the Committee and Parliament which it has enabled the Members to compile, formulate and table a report as such to this august House.

Also, at this juncture, I would like to voice my appreciation to the UNDP Fiji Parliament Support Project for its financial support which enabled the Committee to conduct extensive awareness and visit various communities around Fiji and effectively conduct public consultations on the Bill. Also, I on behalf of the Committee, acknowledge your Office, Mr. Speaker and the Acting Secretary-General to Parliament for the support provided to the Committee during the review of the Bill.

Moreover, I sincerely thank the Honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights for their dedication and commitment; the Honourable Rohit Sharma, Honourable Ratu Suliano Matanitobua, Honourable Dr. Salik Govind and Honourable Moses Bulitavu.

Lastly, I would like to thank the Committee secretariat staff for their dedication, support and Parliament IT team for enabling the Committee to broadcast live, the public consultations which enabled public participation and engagement.

I, on behalf of the Committee, through this bipartisan Report commend the Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2020 to Parliament.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Please, hand the Report to the Secretary-General

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, pursuant to resolutions of Parliament on 11th December, 2020 and 22nd March, 2021, the Standing Committee has now reported back. The Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2020 (Bill No. 50 of 2020), will be debated and voted upon by Parliament at a later sitting date. Thank you Honourable Members.

I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to table his Report. You have the floor.

Review Report on the Electoral (Registration of Voters) (Amendment) Bill 2020

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The general election provides citizens of a country their right to vote to select a democratically elected government to lead the country for a period of four years. As a voter, a citizen should be well versed with five basic principles, that citizens:

- must be registered as a voter to vote;
- should know the venue, where he or she is supposed to vote;
- should know how to vote;
- should know whom to vote for; and
- citizens to ensure that his or her vote is not invalid.

Under a democratic process, it is important to continuously review and improve the electoral process to ensure that the above mentioned principles are reflected in the Act. Furthermore, the Act should ensure simple and easy processes during general elections for voters to cast their votes. Thus, the Fijian Electoral Commission and the Fijian Elections Office, after completion of two General Elections under the new electoral system as embedded in the 2013 Constitution carried out a review of the election process and suggested certain amendments to the Electoral (Registration of Voters) Act 2012. Thus, the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights, under the Parliamentary process, was handed the Electoral (Registration of Voters) (Amendment) Bill 2020 to conduct a thorough review and report back to Parliament.

The Committee Report provides details of the Committee's review process, which includes initial deliberation, public consultation and identification of key findings and outcomes of the review. The initial stage of the review included the Committee's preliminary deliberations, whereby it was noted that the Bill aims to bring about changes to the Electoral (Registration of Voters) Act that are based on analysis of the Electoral Commission and the Supervisor of Elections on the 2018 General Elections.

Additionally, the Committee conducted an in-depth deliberation on the clauses of the Bill and I would like to take Honourable Members of this august House through the clauses of the Bill and what the new law aims to introduce. Some of the key changes that the Bill is proposing to introduce, are as follows, that:

- there will be new voter cards and voters will be required to upgrade their voter cards for the next general election;
- the new voter card will now have the polling venues clearly stated on the card, as a result, there will be less confusion among the voters as to where to go to cast their votes on the polling day; and
- re-registration to obtain a new voter card can be done with a certified birth certificate, which would be returned to the voter once the registration is complete.

Now to briefly provide details of the Clauses of the Bill, clause 1 of the Bill provides for the short title and commencement.

Clause 2 of the Bill amends section 2 of the Act to insert the definition of "elections", "Fijian Elections Office" and "polling day" to align them to the definitions of "election", "Fiji Elections Office" and "polling day" in the Electoral Act 2014.

Clause 2 of the Bill also amends section 2 of the Act to insert the definitions of "publish" and "voter card".

Clause 3 of the Bill amends section 4 of the Act to give a voter the opportunity to select a polling venue closest to their residence.

Clause 4 of the Bill amends section 9 of the Act to capture the details that are currently in the National Register of Voters ('Register'), which include closest and alternative polling venues.

Clause 5 of the Bill amends section 10 of the Act to mandate the issuance of a voter card following the registration of a person as a voter.

Clause 5 of the Bill also amends section 10 to include a provision which states that all voter cards are the property of FEO and any card found must be returned to FEO.

Clause 6 of the Bill inserts a new section 11A in the Act to allow SOE to publish the Register. Clause 6 of the Bill also allows political parties to obtain a copy of the Register upon the payment of an approved fee.

Clause 7 of the Bill inserts a new section 13 in the Act to ensure that SOE publishes a notice annually to notify those whose names have been deleted from the Register, of the deletion.

Clause 8 of the Bill also inserts a new section 17 in the Act to allow SOE to either uphold or dismiss an objection within 7 days from the date the objection is delivered to him or her.

Clause 8 of the Bill also inserts a new section 18 in the Act to allow a person to make an application to the Electoral Commission for a review of the decision made by SOE in relation to an objection.

Clause 9 of the Bill amends section 19 of the Act to clarify that the Register will be closed at the time specified in the writ and from then onwards, no name is to be entered into the Register.

Clause 10 of the Bill inserts new sections 19A to 19F in the Act. The new section 19A allows FEO to verify any document with the relevant agency if the registration officer suspects that the document produced during registration is false or invalid.

The new section 19B allows FEO to seek assistance from the State and State agencies in relation to the verification of information submitted by voters during registration.

The new section 19C states that the data obtained from voters is protected and not disclosed to any person by the registration officer or any person employed by FEO at the time of registration. It also includes a provision which states that if a person contravenes section 19C, he or she is liable on conviction to a term of imprisonment not exceeding five 5 years.

The new section 19D mandates SOE to ensure that there are adequate security features on a voter card to prevent fraudulent activities.

The SOE is also allowed to upgrade the security features on a voter card and to also issue new voter cards to voters. The new Section 19E allows FEO to facilitate the replacement of a voter card when a person's voter card is damaged or misplaced.

The new section 19F ensures that FEO staff adhere to the provisions of the Act and also provides for a fine not exceeding \$50,000 or a term of imprisonment not exceeding 10 years or both if they are in breach of the Act.

Clause 11 of the Bill amends section 22 of the Act to allow SOE to delegate his or her powers to an officer of FEO.

The Committee also conducted public consultation on the Bill and received support and commendation on the introduction of the Bill, from the public that had participated in the public consultation. There were also concerns and suggestions for improvements from numerous participants of the public consultation.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee also had discussions with the Electoral Commission and the Fijian Elections Office, led by the Supervisor of Elections, whereby discussions were based on the merits of the amendments proposed to the law and the following is a summary of the main matters raised in the discussion.

In terms of the Voter Card, as is common knowledge, the Fijian Elections Office issues a voter card for every registration. Mr. Speaker, Sir, section 10(3) is being inserted in the law to now legally require that the Supervisor of Elections must issue every person who is registered as a voter with a voter card. The amendment in the law makes the voter card a property of the Fijian Elections Office and the new Section 19E introduces the legal provisions for replacement of these voter cards.

With regards to the selection of polling venues, the Electoral Commission states that every voter must be listed to vote closest to their residential address. As such, the amendments in section 4 will now register a voter based on a form approved by the Electoral Commission and secondly, the law now requires a voter to select a polling venue closest to his or her residence.

This removes the obligation on the Fijian Elections Office to individually allocate voters to polling venues and transfers the onus on the voters to select a polling venue of their choice. Although the Fijian Elections Office still retains the power to allocate a voter, who does not choose or make their choice at the time of registration, these provisions allow the Fijian Elections Office to make effective use of its polling maps to assist voters on making the choices on their venue.

In terms of details on the National Register of Voters, the National Register of Voters will now contain details of each voter and in addition to that, it will contain details of their polling venue. Furthermore, in regard to the return of Voter Cards; the law would now require the Supervisor of Elections to issue a voter card to every voter once they are registered. The voter card will remain the property of the Fijian Elections Office and should anyone find another person's voter card, they must return it to the Elections Office. This will cover voter cards that may have been forgotten at a Post Office or at a bank, for instance. Now, this obligates the institution to actually return all those voter cards that are in their custody to the Fijian Elections Office.

Next is Publication of the National Register of Voters. The Supervisor of Elections is now required to publish a National Register of Voters in the form approved by the Electoral Commission. If one looks at the amendments to the Electoral Act, it has been amended so that the Provisional Voter Lists are published by September every year and these amendments will enhance the level of information that is available to stakeholders, particularly political parties as they prepare for the next General Election.

Further, transparency amendments have been implemented where the Supervisor of Elections is now required to publish the notice of deletion - section 13(1) annually, for all those persons who have been removed from the voter roll. The Fijian Elections Office has already been doing such in practice and now the legal framework has been revised to strengthen the current processes. The notice, as you can see, will contain the details of the person and this publication will be done online annually.

In relation to the objections, provisions have been introduced with appeals provision, which allows for the review of the Supervisor of Elections decision by the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Commission's decision is final. I must emphasise at this point that it is required by law that when the Electoral Commission deals with an appeal against a decision made by the Supervisor of Elections, then the Supervisor, needs to leave the meeting and the meeting room to maintain the independence of the Commission. The Commission then makes a decision in the absence of the Supervisor of Elections and the ruling is delivered to him and to the individual that had filed the appeal.

Also, relating to the Close of the National Register of Voters, there has been an amendment to practically implement the close of the National Register of Voters. The registration is closed when the Writ is issued. The Writ will now specify the exact time when the National Register of Voters will close on that day.

In terms of the Authority of the Supervisor, the law further strengthens the powers of the Supervisor of Elections in the following manner:

- The Supervisor of Elections or his staff can take possession of any documents that have been produced that the registration officer believes is false or invalid.
- The State and all State agencies have been directed by the law to provide assistance in a timely manner. This is particularly necessary when the Voter List is to be prepared after the issuance of the Writ.
- There is now a specific law that prohibits any staff of the Fijian Elections Office from disclosing information in relation to any person at the time of registration, unless it is by a directive of a Court of Law.
- If any staff of Elections Office commits an offence, they are liable upon conviction to a maximum term of imprisonment of five years.

The security features of the voter card have also been introduced where the Supervisor of Elections must ensure that there are now security features incorporated in the voter card. The law specifically allows the Supervisor to upgrade the security features in design and printing of the voter card and it further allows the Supervisor to enforce these upgrades on voters, by requiring the voters to replace their voter cards following a security feature upgrade.

Additionally, consideration was also given to the impact of the Bill on Fiji's efforts in meeting its targets of the National Development Plan, which, in turn, contributes to Fiji's obligations and commitments towards the Sustainable Development Goals. It was noted that just as the other proposed amendment law to the Elections legal framework, the Bill was introduced for the purpose of carrying out the greater strides that have been achieved in ensuring that Fijians are free to participate in a free and fair election. Additionally, the objective of the Bill is such that it applies equally to all persons, irrespective of gender.

At the closing stage of the review, after reviewing the evidence received from both, the public and the electoral management bodies, the Committee identified a few key issues, which the Committee placed reasonable emphasis on and which the Committee believed needed legal clarification. The following are key issues that were identified, that the:

- Amendment to the Act will allow the Supervisor of Elections to insert the polling venue in the new Voter Card. This would ensure that voters are well aware of their polling venue

and where they are supposed to present themselves on the day of Elections to cast their votes.

- Proposed changes to the law, which would introduce an alternative polling location for a voter, is argued by certain number of people that participated in the public consultation; is an unnecessary change to the election process. These submitters argued that alternative polling venues does not solve the problematic issues regarding the election process.
- Proposed change to the law, which would require that voters upgrade and get new voter cards, is said to be a concern to voters.
- Provisions of the Bill aligns to the initiatives in place, which contribute to Fiji's efforts in achieving its national development plan, whilst also addressing the principles of gender equality.

After extensive deliberation, the Committee weighed all options concerning the issues that had been identified and had extensive discussions on these and consultation with Electoral Commission and the Office of the Supervisor of Elections so as to gauge the practical implications of issues raised on the electoral process.

The Committee also sought legal assistance from the Office of the Solicitor-General so as to ensure that all these relevant issues were appropriately addressed and that the objectives of the Bill were preserved. The following are the main outcomes of the Committee's review.

There were concerns raised regarding the burden being put on voters in re-registering and getting new voter cards, especially, with regards to obtaining identification documents, such as birth certificates. To address this issue, it should be noted that a voter could use a certified copy of the birth certificate. There is no need for obtaining a new birth certificate, if the voter already has an original or certified copy of his/her birth certificate.

The Committee also notes that the proposed amendment to the Electoral (Registration of Voters) Act aims to assist the voter to be able to easily identify which Polling Station the voter will vote in, during Elections. The Committee, therefore, is of the opinion that the provisions are adequate as they are and no amendments are needed.

Honourable Members, additionally the Fijian Elections Office also has a web-based application called Polling Venue Locator, which allows a voter to check where a polling venue is located. Currently, as we speak, the Elections Office is making certain developments to the application.

Furthermore, there was concern raised regarding alternative polling venues, and the Committee notes that this proposed amendment to the voter registration law aims to cater for any unforeseen circumstance that may arise during Elections, which may affect a voter from voting at his/her specified polling station.

To address this, it should be noted that the provision was intended to cater for such a circumstances that occurred during the 2018 General Election, whereby several polling venues and stations had to be closed and voting in these venues were deferred to a later date due to unfavourable weather conditions. The Committee took note of the clarification provided, however, had reservations on the wording of the provision and noted that there is a possibility of there being a lot of confusion created during registration of voters in regards of choosing their polling venues.

Moreover, there was suggestion that the recommendation from the public that the voter registration drive to be conducted in communities and villages and if possible, to be conducted in locations, which will be polling venues and to address this matter, it should be noted that the Fijian Elections Office will be having a voter registration drive commencing next year in March and there are plans in place to ensure that the venues for voter registration are situated in locations convenient to all persons that are intending to register.

Finally, apart from submissions from the public, the Committee also noted that there are issues that need to be addressed in the Bill, which includes the need to provide fraudulent activities regarding voter registration and procedures of removal of registration from the National Register of Voters.

At the conclusion of the review, the Committee acknowledges that there were a few issues identified and as highlighted earlier, these were adequately addressed. The Committee is, therefore, of the opinion that majority of the provisions of the Bill are adequate in ensuring the objectives of the law are preserved.

However, there were certain issues noted, which the Committee placed reasonable emphasis on and that required necessary changes to be made to the Bill. These changes to the Bill are as follows:

- Removal of the provisions and wording, which would have provided that voters can choose alternative polling venues, during voter registration and upgrading of voter cards.
- Inserting a provision which aims to address fraudulent activities regarding voter registration, specifically by empowering the Fijian Elections Office to be able to remove registration from the National Register of Voters, which were secured through fraudulent means.
- Rewording of subsequent clauses after the new addition to the Bill, which contributes to the objective of removing registration from the National Register of Voters, which were secured through fraudulent means.
- Consequential amendments to the Bill, which are syntax in nature and are consequences of the substantial changes made to the provisions of the Bill.

Additionally, the Committee believes that as we start implementing the provisions proposed by the Bill, this would be an appropriate moment to gauge the implications of the Bill on Fiji's electoral system in the next general election.

The Committee is also of the opinion that the Bill, as it is currently worded, is adequate to meet the key objectives of the proposed law, which is to assist in voter registration and ultimately enable voters to conveniently participate in the election process.

The review benefited immensely from the public consultation and the Committee would again like to acknowledge members of the public and entities that provided their views on the Bill and for taking an interest in the proceedings.

The Committee would like to actually acknowledge the Electoral Commission and especially, the Supervisor of Elections, for numerous times he actually appeared before the Committee to actually address the issues that were raised, Mr. Speaker, Sir. A big *vinaka vakalevu* goes to the Supervisor of Elections and his Elections Office.

Lastly, I would like to actually thank the Honourable Members who participated in the compilation of this Report and I would also like to thank the tireless work done by the Secretariat staff, Mr. Ira Komaisavai, Mr. Jackson Cakacaka and Ms. Darolin Vinisha in the compilation of this Report.

I, on behalf of the Committee, through this Report, commend the Electoral (Registration of Voters) (Amendment) Bill 2020 to Parliament.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Please, hand the Report to the Secretary-General.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, pursuant to the resolutions of Parliament on 11th December, 2020, and 22nd March, 2021, the Standing Committee has now reported back.

Honourable Members, the Electoral (Registration of Voters) (Amendment) Bill 2020 (Bill No. 51 of 2020) will be debated and voted upon by Parliament at a later sitting date. Thank you, Honourable Members.

Honourable Members, on that note we will take a break for half-an-hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 11.10 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.46 a.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to table his Report. You have the floor, Sir.

Review Report on the Political Parties (Registration of Voters) (Amendment) Bill 2020

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, globally, political parties are said to be the main gatekeepers for candidates to participate in Elections. Parties, therefore, have immense influence over the degree of citizen's political participation at local, regional, and national levels. Studies have shown that in most countries, parties determine which candidates are nominated and which issues achieve national prominence. They decide who will be placed on their candidate lists and at which position.

That is why transparency and accountability within the party, plays an integral role to enshrine good governance at a national level, in an event, if that political party forms the government to lead the nation. Political parties and candidates should always place their priority on each and every citizen and national issues rather than having their personal agenda on priority list.

A very good legislative framework should be in place to ensure that political parties are governed and perform their duties as prescribed in law. All loopholes within the legislative framework should be constantly reviewed to ensure transparency and accountability within the political party is paramount in upholding the principles of democracy in any nation. This in turn will administer the conduct of political parties and its members.

With consideration given to the aforementioned, the Fijian Parliament had referred the Political Parties (Registration, Conduct, Funding and Disclosures) (Amendment) Bill 2020 to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights, for review.

In the initial stages of the review, the Committee conducted preliminary deliberations and noted that the Bill aims to bring about changes to the Political Parties (Registration, Conduct, Funding and Disclosures) Act 2013, that are based on analysis of the Electoral Commission and the Supervisor of Elections on the 2018 General Election, with the main aim of bringing about a changes to the regulatory framework that is based on the lessons learnt from the 2018 General Election, namely changes to the registration of political parties for the General Elections and the rules governing the conduct and funding of, as well as the disclosures and reporting to be made by political parties.

The Fijian Elections Office, being the independent institution responsible for the running of the General Election and headed by the Supervisor of Elections who is also the Registrar of Political Parties, was invited by the Committee to make submission on the Bill. From the outset, the Committee heard the views of the electoral management bodies on the changes proposed by the Bill.

Additionally, the Committee conducted an in-depth deliberation on the Clauses of the Bill and I would like to take the Honourable Members of this august House, through the clauses of the Bill and what new law aims to bring.

Clause 1 of the Bill provides for the short title and commencement.

Clause 2 of the Bill amends section 2 of the Act to insert the definitions of "election" and "polling day". For consistency in our electoral laws, the definitions of "election" and "polling day" in the Bill are aligned to the definition in section 2 of the Electoral Act, 2014.

Clause 3 of the Bill amends sections 3 and 4 of the Act to enhance the administrative records of Political Parties in the Registrar of political parties to ensure easy accessibility to, and transparency of the record; Clause 3 of the Bill also amends section (3) of the Act by inserting a new subsection (5) to ensure that the Registrar updates the Register on an annual basis.

Clause 4 of the Bill amends section 7 of the Act to clarify that no political party will be registered from the time the writ for a general election is issued to the time when the writ is returned. This also aligns to the amendment made by the Electoral (Amendment) Bill, 2020 to section (21) of the Electoral Act 2014.

Clause 5 of the Bill amends the section 10 of the Act to ensure that political parties open bank accounts and provide the bank account details to the Registrar within 90 days of their registration. Clause 5 of the Bill also amends section 10 of the Act to provide that if a political party has an existing bank account, the political party must within 60 days of the commencement of the amending legislation, provide the bank account details to the Registrar. A political party must also notify the Registrar as soon as practicable, if there is a change in the bank account details.

Clause 6 of the Bill amends section 14 of the Act by amending the heading and subsection (1)(c) to include “in an election”.

Clause 7 of the Bill amends section 16 of the Act to allow the Registrar to assess a political party’s election spending and compliance with other laws.

Clause 8 of the Bill amends section 21 of the Act so that the proceeds of any investment, project or undertaking, in which a political party or independent candidate has an interest, no longer forms part of the sources of funds for the political party and independent candidate.

Clause 9 of the Bill amends section 23 of the Act to allow a political party to provide information on its sources of funds to the Registrar within 90 days, instead of the current 30 days, after the end of its financial year.

Clause 10 of the Bill amends section 24 of the Act to allow the Electoral Commission to assess the election spending as well as compliance with other laws. Clause 10 of the Bill also monitors donations, income and expenditure for the nominated candidates.

Clause 11 of the Bill amends section 25 of the Act to allow the Registrar to assess a political party’s election spending and compliance with other laws.

Clause 12 of the Bill amends section 26 of the Act to ensure that political parties publish their audited accounts in any national daily newspaper within 90 days after the end of each financial year.

Clause 13 of the Bill amends section 30 of the Act so that appeals are made to the Electoral Commission instead of the High Court.

Clause 14 of the Bill inserts a new section 30A in the Act to allow political parties to request that the Electoral Commission mediate or arbitrate where there are disputes on any campaign issue between the political parties.

The Committee also conducted public consultation on the Bill and received support on its introduction, from the public that had participated in the public consultation. There were also concerns and suggestions for improvements from numerous participants from the public consultation, namely the Political Parties.

After collecting submissions from the general public and political parties, the Committee had a thorough discussion with the Fijian Elections Office, led by the Supervisor of Elections and the Electoral Commission and the following are some of the deliberations that resulted from the meeting, with these two entities:

- (1) Register of Political Parties: That amendment to clause 3 of the Bill is to purposely enhance the administrative records of the political parties in the Register, in which it will ensure that the Register captures:
 - (a) The political party name;
 - (b) The terms of office and contact details of the office holders;
 - (c) The bank account details of the party;
 - (d) The name of contact details of the auditor and legal advisor, as well as any other particulars as required under this Act; and
 - (e) Ensures that the Register is updated on an annual basis.
- (2) No Registration during Elections: The amendment to clause 7 of the Bill specifies that no registration will be done for any proposed political party from the time the Writ is issued to the time the Writ is returned. This amendment is also aligned to the amendment made by clause 21 of the Electoral (Amendment) Bill, 2020.
- (3) Bank Account of Parties: The amendment to clause 10 of the Bill provides assurance that newly registered political parties are to open their bank accounts and provide the bank account details to the Registrar within 90 days of registration. Thus, for existing political parties that do not possess a bank account, they are required to open a bank account and provide its details to the Registrar within 60 days of commencement of this Bill.
- (4) Restriction on Public Officers: The amendment to clause 14(1)(c) will provide clarification on the non-engagement by public official in any political activity in an election that would compromise or be seen to compromise the political neutrality of the person's office in an election.
- (5) Sources of Funds/Declaration of Assets, Liabilities and Expenditure of Political Parties: The current role of the Registrar is to administer and regulate political parties. The Multinational Observer Group (MOG) had recommended that parties report on their campaign expenditure following an election. In order to properly assess these, there is a need for certain amendments to be made to the current legal framework.

After reviewing the evidence received from both the public and the electoral management bodies, the Committee identified a few key issues which it believes required legal clarification.

At the closing stages of the review, the Committee acknowledges that there were a few issues identified and in addressing these issues, the Committee sort legal clarifications on the same. This ensured that the primary objectives of the Bill are preserved.

I would now like to brief the Honourable Members of this august House of the salient issues identified from the review and the clarifications provided which were intended to address the issues. To begin with, there were concerns raised regarding the disclosures of sources of funds by political parties and candidates, which is said to be excessive, especially, since these disclosures will also be made for relatively the same period.

To address this matter, there are certain things to note, which are:

- (1) that the law will now allow for the amount of funds raised and spent by candidates in the general election to be identified. This is another international norm in elections and a recommendation by the Multinational Observer Group; and
- (2) fairness in elections is also evaluated based on the amount of money spent by political parties. A before and after declaration is necessary for this very purpose. This is also another recommendation by the Multinational Observer Group.

It should also be noted that disclosures are an essential part of transparency. Even businesses that take money from public via sales and purchases do report all the details of all money they get from the public, even a single is accounted for. So therefore, political parties need to provide and account for any source of funding regardless of the dollar value.

There was also concern raised with regards to the shifting of the onus of publishing in the daily newspaper the financials and disclosures of political parties. To address this issue, it should be noted that these laws are designed to promote self-disclosure and transparency. Parties seem to assume that it is a State requirement when actually it is a norm expected from the parties themselves. The transition to fully transparent in electoral functions is an essential component of modern democracies. Political parties are required to uphold a high standard of financial transparency.

Additionally, concerns were raised regarding the publication of audited accounts in the daily newspapers. To address this issue, it should be noted that it is a basic tenet of good accounting that the entire income is properly recorded. The Supervisor of Elections had in a number of occasions, highlighted the significant irregularities in political party accounts and this is an amendment that is designed to adequately deal with this.

Before I move on, I would like to emphasize at this stage that during during the election/campaign period, this is the period whereby a lot of funds are gathered and utilised by a political party. Thus it is important to have reporting on this. All such funding should be reported and declared so that the public, who are the majority donors and funders of the Party know that the money provided is actually being used for elections and nothing else.

Concern was also raised regarding the authority given to the Electoral Commission to be the final decision maker for appeals against the Registrar of Political Parties. To address this, I would urge Members to note that:

- (1) Pursuant to Section 75 of the *Constitution of the Republic Fiji, 2013*, the Electoral Commission is already an independent body whose head or the Chair of the Electoral Commission is someone who is either a judge or qualified to be a judge.
- (2) Pursuant to Section 138(9) of the *Constitution of the Republic Fiji, 2013* to proceedings of the Electoral Commission are similar to those as the High Court, thus Electoral Commission will have the powers of the High Court to summon witnesses, hear evidence and make decisions.

Also, if the Electoral Commission is charged with hearing of appeals of the decision of the Supervisor of Elections, it is simply carrying out its own role under the Constitution. Under section 17 of the Electoral Act 2014 the Electoral Commission already does this. In fact, this section is far more constricted in timelines, two days for appeals and within three days' decision. At least in this

one, there are 14 days. Furthermore, the last time the Supervisor of Elections' decision was challenged under this law, the decision came out two years later.

Furthermore, there were concerns raised regarding the option provided to political parties to seek mediation or arbitration for resolving political party dispute and the issues regarding the concerns about the Electoral Commission being the final arbiter. To address this issue, it should be noted that the Electoral Commission is overall in-charge of the process. It is best suited to deal with these instances. The laws should empower the institution directly responsible for elections instead of surrounding it with other institutions that siphons power from it and weakens the institution.

To conclude, after extensive deliberation, the Committee came to a resolution that the current wording on the Bill is sufficient enough to address the matters raised during the Committee review stage and at the same time gave consideration to the public input. Therefore, my Committee believes, that as we start implementing the provisions of this Bill, this would be an opportune moment to gauge the implications of the Bill on Fiji's electoral system in the next General Elections, and gather the lessons learnt.

The Committee is also of the opinion that majority of the provisions of the Bill, as they are currently worded, would enable the preservation of the key objectives of the proposed law, which is to strengthen the legal framework that caters for the registration of political parties for General Elections and the rules governing the conduct and funding of, as well as the disclosures and reporting to be made by political parties.

Moreover, despite the existence of adequate provisions in the Bill, the Committee also believes that a few minor changes can be made to the Bill, which are necessary and would contribute to the preservation of the objectives of the proposed law.

Firstly, the Committee appreciated the clarification provided with regards to the publication of information on disclosures in the daily newspapers, however, the Committee is of the view that such disclosures and information should just be provided to the Registrar of Political Parties and be made available at the Office of the Registrar in Suva for inspection by members of the public upon payment of an approved fee. The Committee therefore recommend that clause 9 be amended to reflect this.

Additionally, the Committee believes that it would be beneficial to the electoral process in Fiji, that the period of 30 days provided in the proposed amendment that will be brought about by clause 10 and clause 11 of the Bill, be extended to at least 60 days, which hopefully will provide political parties ample time to submit their financials as stated in clause 10 and the Party's audited accounts as prescribed in clause 11.

To add to this, Mr. Speaker, the Committee is also of the opinion that the publication of the audited accounts should be sufficient, if it is published through the Fijian Elections Office's official website. Thus, the Committee had recommended for changes to the relevant provisions in the Bill. All the relevant changes that needed to be done was carried out accordingly and these are reflected in the magenta coloured texts in the copy of the amended Bill tabled with this Report.

To close, Honourable Members, the review greatly benefited from the public participation, thus, on behalf of the Committee, appreciation goes to all the members of the public, the political parties, representatives of Fiji's electoral management body and entities that provided their views on the Bill and for taking an interest in the proceedings of the Committee and Parliament.

Also, at this juncture, my appreciation goes to the UNDP - Fiji Parliament Support Project for their support which enabled the Committee to conduct extensive awareness and visited communities around Fiji and effectively conduct public consultation on the Bill. Moreover, the Committee acknowledges the Office of the Speaker and the Acting Secretary-General to Parliament for the support provided to the Committee during the review of the Bill.

Additionally, I would like to thank the Parliament IT team for enabling the Committee to broadcast its public consultations. Along with this, I would like to thank the Supervisor of Elections and the Fijian Elections Office, along with the Electoral Commission for appearing before the Committee on numerous times to assist us with the clarification that we needed with regard to the Bills. Also, I would like to thank the Solicitor-General's Office for helping us in the drafting of the proposed amendments that the Committee proposed.

I also like to thank the Honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights for their dedication, deliberation and input, specifically Honourable Rohit Sharma, Honourable Ratu Suliano Matanitobua, Honourable Dr. Salik Govind and Honourable Moses Bilitavu.

Lastly, I would like to thank the Committee's Secretariat staff for providing support to the Committee during the compilation of the Report.

I, on behalf of the Committee through this bipartisan Report commend the Political Parties (Registration, Conduct, Funding and Disclosures) (Amendment) Bill 2020 to Parliament.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Please, hand the Report to the Secretary-General.

(Report handed to Secretary-General to Parliament)

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, pursuant to the resolutions of Parliament on 11th December, 2020 and 22nd December, 2020, the Standing Committee has now reported back.

Honourable Members, the Political Parties (Registration, Conduct, Funding and Disclosures) (Amendment) Bill 2020 (Bill No. 52 of 2020) will be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Monday, 7th June, 2021.

On that note, Honourable Members, please be advised that the two Bills that were tabled earlier today, the Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2020 (Bill No. 50 of 2020) and the Electoral (Registration of Voters) (Amendment) Bill 2020 (Bill No. 51 of 2020), will also be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Monday, 7th June 2021. Thank you, Honourable Members.

Honourable Members, I have been advised that there are no Bills to be considered today.

CONSOLIDATED OVERSIGHT REPORT - OFFICE OF THE AUDITOR-GENERAL REPORTS 2010 - 2013

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to move this motion. You have the floor.

HON. A.A MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I move:

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Oversight Report - Office of the Auditor-General Report 2010-2013 which was tabled on 25th May, 2020.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to 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.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for allowing me to contribute on the Report that is before us. As noted earlier, this is a Report backdating from 2010 to 2013 so majority of the issues mentioned do not appear in the current Audit Report that comes before the Committee. Basically all the issues that were actually raised have been resolved but just as a way of background, Honourable Speaker, in line with the Speaker's Ruling on Wednesday, 13th February, 2019 that all the pending reports before the Standing Committee from the last term are to be reported back to the House for consideration.

For the information of Honourable Members, this Consolidated Report was compiled by the previous Public Accounts Committee that was appointed in 2014 to 2018 Parliamentary Term. The audit of all Government Ministries and Departments financial statements for each of the four years was carried out by the Office of the Auditor-General (OAG).

It is important to highlight that the Public Accounts Committee has reported back to Parliament on the Whole of Government Audit Reports for 2014, 2015, 2016, 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 Financial Years. Many issues that are contained in this Report have been resolved but for transparency, good governance and accountability purposes, in these public sector entities including Government Ministries and Departments, provisions for appropriate oversight are reported on how these entities effectively manage and utilise its budgetary allocations on its planned activities for the financial year. It is worth noting that due to a much higher standard of accountability in a decade, the internal Financial Management Information System (FMIS) is now being used much better and internal accounting standards for individual entities and ministries is noticeably improving.

It should also be noted that Fiji's Financial Standards are improving and the recent release of the 2018 audit report reads well, as compared to many of the issues identified in this consolidated report. For this rapid improvement, I congratulate those involved. In politics, it is often easier to find faults than it is to praise. Secondly, there are gaps that the Office of the Auditor-General and the Public Accounts Committee have identified during the scrutiny process. However, agencies have reflected on and work towards resolving these issues. This work will be ongoing and this is why it is an important process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, I take the opportunity to thank all ministries and departments for their participation in the public hearings that were conducted before the formulation of this consolidated report and most importantly, for clarifying many of the issues involved. I also wish to acknowledge the parliamentary staff for their ongoing diligence in working through the details. In particular, I thank the Opposition Members of the Public Accounts Committee for being sensible about many of the issues raised and for recognising the importance of reading them in the context of the time of audit. This considerate approach is acknowledged and appreciated. Hon. Speaker Sir, I thank you for the opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and I give the floor to the Honourable Mikaele Leawere. You have the floor.

HON. M.R. LEAWARE.- Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament, I wish to highlight some of the issues in the consolidated report. It was an old report and recorded the result undertaken on the whole of

Government financials back in 2010 and 2013 and this still raises concern as it deals with how taxpayers money are used and managed and utilised back then.

Mr. Speaker, I will be very brief in highlighting some of these contemporary issues that was in the 2013 audit findings, to be specific. Mr. Speaker, the audit findings were as follows and I would like just to indulge the House and highlight this: The outstanding loans owed to Government have decreased by \$9.4 million or 14 percent from \$67.8 million in 2012 to \$58.4 million in 2013. The decrease, Mr. Speaker, was attributed to the write-off of government accounts in the general ledger, amounting to \$5.8 million as approved by the Ministry of Finance or the Minister for Finance.

Public debt, Mr. Speaker, owed in 2013 totalled \$3.8 billion and comprised domestic borrowings of \$2.6 billion or 69 percent of total debt. Overseas borrowings of \$1.08 billion or 28 percent and treasury bills of \$102.3 million or three percent. Public debt, Mr. Speaker, has increased steadily over the period since 2007.

Various Ministries, Mr. Speaker, did not reconcile their expenditure with the FMIS as required under Section 15 of the Finance Instructions of 2010 and the Office of the Prime Minister, Mr. Speaker, has an unreconciled variance of \$1.055 million between the FMIS General Ledger plus Cash at Bank and the Bank Reconciliation balance. The nature of payment Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Ledger Trust Fund statement of receipts and payments were also not disclosed appropriately to ensure the disclosure is consistent and comparable to the 2012 figures.

Further to that Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Office of the Prime Minister had a variance of \$6.3 million between the Office reconciliation and the FMIS General Ledger records in the drawing account. There was no Board of Survey conducted then to see the discrepancies involved during this period. And contrary to Finance Instructions, the Office of the Attorney-General does not maintain an Expenditure Ledger which means that the reconciliation of Expenditure in the FMIS General Ledger maintained by the Ministry of Finance was not possible.

The Judicial Department, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as at 31/12/2013 had a total arrears in terms of revenue of \$11.9 million compared to \$11.3 million in 2012. The Fiji Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Services Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of drugs and consumables worth \$369,328 expired as at 31 December 2013.

Also Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Services ordered items in 2012 and 2013 totalling \$8.9 million from overseas suppliers, which were not received when checked. The Committee's recommendation Mr. Speaker, Sir, should reflect upon comments made by FICAC at the public hearing of PAC on 24 June 2015 where they said and I quote, "We FICAC also note gaps in the FMIS system. The Ministry of Economy should engage consultants to review the FMIS system and most importantly, to ensure that all revenue and expenditure activities of all government bodies are accounted. These gaps lead to corrupt and fraudulent activities."

I am sure, as I have alluded too earlier on, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this happened from the 2010 and 2013 period and this must have been rectified for these various departments. The corrective measures Mr. Speaker, Sir, are needed going forward and I hope this would be addressed by these government departments and agencies. This should be the way forward to avoid disruptions and importantly develop effective and transparent institutions. On that note Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of audit issues that were not addressed until to date, it is relevant that appropriate action is taken by these relevant government ministries and departments, so that it is addressed as all taxpayers monies are accounted for. I thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I give the floor to the Honourable Professor Prasad. You have the floor.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. I note the comments by the Chair of the Committee that many of the issues highlighted in the 2010-2013 Audit Reports may have been dealt with, but Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to make some other comments. To begin I want to quote three paragraphs from that Report under the heading Background and it says the following:

“Improving financial stability and accountability, as well as removing the attraction to do wrong in Fiji, are core functions of the Office of the Auditor-General and the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee (PAC). This 2010-2013 consolidated report is the latest contribution to achieve these goals.

Like the previously tabled 2007-2009 report, the Committee is concerned about the Office of the Auditor-General which has raised issues that allege mistakes, maladministration, or potential corruption. In each case, it is not the role or authority of PAC to judge on any of these matters.

As with the 2007-2009 report (tabled in May 2015, it must be emphasised the Public Accounts Committee is not a court of law, nor is it the responsible body for such allegations. PAC remains dispassionate on each of the Auditor-General’s allegations. Instead, the role of the PAC is to provide oversight to satisfy the Parliament on fiscal management. This challenge occupies the resources of the PAC.”

I will repeat the relevant parts and these are: “It must be emphasised that the Public Accounts Committee is not a court of law, nor is it the responsible body for such allegations. The role of the PAC is to provide oversight to satisfy the Parliament on fiscal management.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Report is about the recommendations we had finalised after intense scrutiny of the Auditor-General’s Reports from 2010 to 2013. It was the Committee comprising of former Members of Parliament – the Honourable Balmindar Singh and Honourable Sanjit Patel; the current Members – the Honourable Alex O’Connor who replaced Honourable Patel, Honourable Semi Koroilavesau and the then Deputy Chairperson, Honourable Aseri Radrodro; and myself as Chair, who came up with these comprehensive recommendations.

At least, to his credit, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current Chairperson, Honourable Maharaj, has noted in the Report that we had completed the review after the scrutiny, and this report is based on recommendations made by the Committee appointed after the resumption of the parliamentary democracy on 6th October, 2014. It is clear that the current Chairperson and Members of the Public Accounts Committee endorsed these recommendations and that is why they are in support. I thank them for doing that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Yesterday, we heard as usual the Honourable Attorney-General (without naming me) but in his own rather dramatic style well known to those of us who know his theatrics, basically said I was politicising the work of PAC by making a running commentary at every opportunity as its Chair. I certainly, Mr. Speaker, did not do such a thing, like any Court of Law or Parliament for that matter, PAC was open and transparent about its dealings like other Committees. Given the number of the senior civil servants appearing before it, the media naturally was interested in the work of PAC in conformity with the Standing Orders.

Since the hearings, Mr. Speaker, Sir, were accessible to the public, the media sat in daily to hear the deliberations because there was a lot of interest as to why these reports were not presented before and made public. Now the proceedings of Committees are live-streamed. Does that mean that the current Chairs of select Committees are making running commentaries? I see a lot of them also make public comments when asked.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, I made public comments on the OAG Report from 2007 to 2013 as a Party Leader, before my appointment as PAC Chairman. This, in no way compromised my independent neutrality as those of other PAC Members. I also heard that the Honourable Attorney-General has been making many comments on issues - he is castigating lawyers, the Office of the Auditor-General, staff, opinionated about other lawyers, auditors and accountants; I certainly hope that he is not pre-opinionated. There is no place for pre-judging or casting aspersions at anyone without having a full appraisal of the truth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the indisputable fact remains that the first PAC after 2014 Elections, did not succumb to influences of pressure applied by the political masters and we remained true to the calling to scrutinise the use of the then military government, every taxpayer dollar between 2007 to 2013. The recommendations in this report are worth noting and should serve as a template for reporting on the use of public finances in any future scrutiny by PAC.

Before I conclude that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me say this that there was a lot of interest in these reports before the election and after the election, and I want to repeat - I made public comments on these reports in my role as Party Leader. When I was Chairman of PAC, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we gave all due considerations to the Standing Orders and we conducted our hearings in an open, transparent manner. I remember one day the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Attorney-General walked into the hearing that the PAC was having and I remember welcoming them.

So, Mr. Speaker, I have this great Members of the Public Accounts Committee from Government side, Honourable Koroilavesau, Honourable Sanjeet Patel, Honourable Balmindra Singh and we are all sort of geared to the ultimate objective for producing reports for improvement in financial management in the country.

I found those comments rather disappointing from the Honourable Attorney-General that I was using PAC to make political mileage. You know he should talk to the Government Members who were in that Committee and how we actually collectively work together in the interest of producing reports for Parliament so that Parliament can scrutinise.

I am happy, Mr. Speaker, and I want to thank the Members of the current Public Accounts Committee for finally producing this Report and bringing it to Parliament.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources. You have the floor.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Committee and the Chairman. He made the statement that a lot of the issues that are in this Reports have been addressed and I think this is true across all Ministries. It is true particularly in case of the Ministry that I have. I have looked at some of that issues we have on Page 19, where he talks about TMA in the Ministry of Works like I can inform the House that this shortcoming about the TMAs have been addressed.

He talks about procurement and payment procedures that have been circumvented. This is now been addressed through the Ministry also in terms of Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources

where it talks about arrears of revenue of land leased has been slow as a balance in the past years keep on increasing.

There are number of reasons why this was taking place and I can inform the House that as a result of the measures been undertaken by the staff, they have implemented procedures and measures to try to address this and make sure the arrears are reflected correctly. There have been field visitation to lessees, there have been improvements of lands record to harmonisation, there has been more engagement of the project officers for arrears in collection and there has been Ministry road shows. At the same time also, we are looking back at the data basis so that we can isolate the difference between the real arrears and those that arose because of other reasons. So, all of that work has been undertaken.

In terms of the points that were made on Page 20 of the Report, in terms of the Department of Water and Sewerage is in fact there is a lab in the Department of Water and Sewerage. What it does it mainly assesses the quality of water to make sure that we can meet the target that we have in our Constitution to deliver a healthy and safety water to everyone in Fiji.

At the top of Page 21, there is a whole lot of issues there about things that were projected and not completed by the Department of Energy. If I can state for the House today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that all of these issues have been addressed.

So, the main thing that I want to say is that, the reports have been there, the recommendation have been done and in the process of improving a service with all Ministries, most of these recommendations have been implemented as I have just shown from the Ministry that I have the privilege of serving.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport. You have the floor.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Just very quickly, Sir, I wish to contribute to the debate on this Consolidated Oversight Report.

It has been noted in the Report specifically with respect to what was formally known as the Ministry of Industry and Trade. I just want to clarify something and there was an advance of 60k for an officer in terms of Shanghai Expo which is not acquitted accordingly including a laptop.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report actually fail to note the actions that were taken by the Ministry upon discovery of this misappropriation of funds and the Ministry had undertaken a detailed investigation into the matter and the officer was sent on leave. In addition, the matter was referred to FICAC and in December 2011, the officer appeared in Court and he was handed a sentence by the court. So, the Office of the Auditor-General did not take into account the fact that the Ministry had taken decisive action of this particular breach.

Unfortunately, Sir, the Standing Committee did not acknowledge that and the decision to institute proceedings against the senior officer send signals to the staff and stakeholders that the Fijian Government does not take such matters lightly so immediate action is taken. We have been very proactive in all of this and the Ministry is actually maintaining an excellent financial management processes, Sir, and we continue to develop this and strengthen it. That is really all that I have to say, Sir, thank you very much.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Honourable Attorney-General.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Again, I will also be extremely brief. As highlighted by the others, this Report obviously goes back a few years ago and a number of things have changed since then, including the implementation of OMRS which has actually allowed for better capacity building and also quality of the accounting cadre in the Government services itself. We are now actually seeing that a lot of accountants and financially qualified people who are joining from the private sector into the Government Ministries which was actually unheard of, usually it was the other way around. They would leave us once they would get better qualifications so this obviously has helped in terms of the implementation of some of the recommendations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I also wanted to make was in respect of some of the observations by the Auditor-General's Report. In fact, some of them are absolutely not correct. For example, some of the areas pertaining to the information regarding ITC, a lot of these records that were requested were already handed over in time. Unfortunately, the report did not actually reflect that and I can give numerous examples which I actually highlighted yesterday which begs the question as to why were these reports in fact written up when there were already responses to it.

There is also contradictions because some of them actually whilst they highlighted anomalies subsequently when the actual audits were done, they were giving unqualified reports for those particular ministries. So, there are a number of anomalies that they pointed out. I am not going to respond to Honourable Professor Prasad's self-satisfying statements regarding his justification. The reality of the matter is just because there is public interest as Parliamentarians and Members of the Committee, you need to still hold yourself out and not give a run commentary which he actually did do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, regarding calling out names, it is not calling out names but actually calling a spade a spade, and that is what is required rather than sort of pussyfooting around the particular issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to very quickly and this will actually come up in the other sets of reports. I do not know if the Honourable Members of the Opposition have actually looked at it but if they actually looked at the Audit Act, it actually sets out exactly what the duties of the Auditor-General are and it says on behalf of this Parliament, for example 6 says, and I quote:

“The following duties to audit the accounts of the Consolidated Funds and the whole of Government financial statements and annual appropriation statement required to be included in the whole of Government Annual Report for a financial year under the Financial Management Act, 2004, audit all the accounts of State entities except the Office of the Auditor-General and Off-Budget State Entities that are exempted by regulations made under section 19 from the audit of the Auditor-General and financial statement required to be included in such a State entity's annual report for a financial year, audit the accounts of any entity whose borrowings have, in whole or in part, been guaranteed by the Government, but only if and to the extent the Minister has authorised or required the audit, if considered appropriate by Auditor-General to conduct special investigations into the financial management of any State entity or to audit the accounts of any entity to the extent necessary to ensure that any conditions of grant is to be made”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the next one, very quickly, because it does come to the other points, which can shorten the debates on the other ones, which states and I quote:

“The Auditor-General has the power to conduct performance audit. The Auditor-General may conduct any audit that the Auditor-General consider necessarily to determine whether the entity that the Auditor-General must or may audit under section 6 in achieving its objectives effectively and doing so economically and efficiently and in compliance with all relevant laws or whether the operations or activities of all State entities or one or more of those

State entities are being performed effectively, economically and efficiently in compliance with the relevant laws.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it states and I quote:

“In conducting a performance audit under sub-section 1, the Auditor-General may audit an entity together with one or more entities. Before conducting a performance audit the Auditor-General must prepare specification for the audit that sets out the particular objectives of the audit and any particular issues to be address. The Auditor-General is to determine:

- (a) the intervals at which performance audits of a particular entity or entities are to be conducted; and
- (b) the number of performance audit to be conducted in each financial year.”

This is not made known and is currently being weighed willy-nilly. This sort of thing should be available on their website. Entities must know when it will be conducted. How many audits will be conducted in particular to conduct performance audits? There needs to be transparency.

Then it says, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I will address many of the issues raised by the Opposition, it says nothing in this section entitles the Auditor-General to question the merit of policy objectives of the Government. This is in the Act, it has been there for decades. The Act has been there for a long time, Honourable Qionibaravi. It says in this section, policy objectives includes:

- (1) Government policy direction of a Minister.
- (2) a policy statement in a budget paper.
- (3) a statement of objectives in a corporate plan approved by a Minister.
- (4) any other document evidencing a policy decision of the Government or a Minister.

It is clearly stipulated in the law, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and clearly what the Opposition actually has not been agreeing with when it is clearly stipulated in the law. Mr. Speaker, Sir, with due respect to PAC and others, when they do get this Auditor-General’s Report, given the current track record of how these reports have been produced and some of the reports actually have been produced notwithstanding the fact that whilst the management has provided the responses to them, the Auditor-General did not want to include that in the report itself. The PAC and any other committee that is looking at these reports, they must themselves enquire with the OAG themselves as to how they have arrived at some of these conclusions and not take it as the gospel truth.

I think, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other philosophy that we must also understand is this, there needs to be transparency in the work of the OAG itself. They cannot just simply decide willy-nilly, one morning decide to wake up and say we are now going to audit this. Of course, if there is some special run of money, people have nicked money, it is well-known, of course they can do that but to have these performance audits conducted willy-nilly obviously, is not right and not in accordance with the law itself, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee to speak in reply.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I would just like to take this time to actually thank all Honourable Members who have contributed with regards to the reports and the new direction that has been actually set for PAC which is actually embedded in the Audit Act 1969. We will take heed of that and from now onwards, we shall ensure that what has been brought in to this Parliament is adhered to at PAC.

HON. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to move his motion. You have the floor.

**CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT-
MINISTRY OF SUGAR INDUSTRY 2012-2016 ANNUAL REPORT**

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir. I move:

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Report on the Review of the Ministry of Sugar Industry 2012 to 2016 Annual Report which was tabled on 26th May, 2020.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to speak to his motion. You have the floor.

HON. V. NATH.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Standing Committee on Economic Affairs tabled its review report for the Ministry of Sugar Industry 2012-2016 Annual Report on 26th May, 2020.

The Committee conducted a site visit to the Western Division early last year during which it met with the Director Sugar and his team at their headquarters. This provided the Committee with an opportunity to discuss the various changes and challenges that the Ministry has had to face during the period under review.

During its deliberations, the Committee noted that the Government in 2010, had engaged Deloitte, an international financial consulting firm from New Zealand to carry out a review of the industry with the sole intent to improve the Corporation's financial position and commended the Government for its vision.

The Committee acknowledged the crucial facilitation role played by the Ministry of Sugar Industry and agreed that it was important that all key stakeholders to collaborate with the Ministry for the sustainability of the sugar industry.

It was noted during the period under review that there was no overall policy related to rent allocation, conversion of sugar cane as opposed by other users. The Committee recommends the development of consolidated Overall Sugar Cane Land Use Policy with necessary powers to address this anomaly. This should also be addressed in the overall Land Use Policy with the objective to protect land suitable for agriculture, particularly for food production and security during unforeseen circumstances.

Given that Fiji is prone to natural disasters and the impact it has had on the sugar industry, the Committee recommended for the Ministry to develop a Disaster Risk Management Plan as it would cover climate change mitigation and other catastrophic disasters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee acknowledges the Ministry's efforts and progress towards substantial growth. However, the Committee also noted that the Ministry of Sugar Industry identified certain areas which could enhance achievement of its objectives. This includes strengthening monitoring and evaluation and optimum utilization of land to achieve production target.

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

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and I give the floor to the Honourable Kuridrani. You have the floor.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I will just make a quick response to the motion before the House. I thank the Committee for putting up this Report. I thank the Chairman and Honourable Members of the Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the Report, the Ministry of Sugar's responsibility is for the coordination of activities and functions of the various institutes that make up the Sugar Industry. This comprise of the Fiji Sugar Corporation, Sugar Cane Growers Council, Sugar Cane Growers Fund, Sugar Research Institute of Fiji, Sugar Tribunal and the South Pacific Fertilizers Limited.

I just want to draw your attention, in 2010 the IMF had advised that the guarantee the Government provided to FSC was no longer a contingent liability but a real potential risk for Fiji. This Government then engaged Deloitte, an international financial consulting firm from New Zealand to carry out a review of the industry with the sole intention of restructuring the corporation and recommend a way forward to revive the sugar industry.

In 2012, the Government endorsed the Deloitte recommendation and provided direct funding of \$138.3 million of the recommended \$174 million to FSC. With these findings, FSC should have made a turnaround of marked improvements in terms of its reliability and efficiency in the sugar mills.

In 2012, the Government in collaboration with its stakeholders put together a home-grown sugar industry strategic plan for 2013 to 2022 in an effort to achieve its mission to implement sugar reforms. This strategic plan, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was given to the Ministry of Sugar Industry following the dissolution of the Sugar Taskforce.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will just focus on Recommendation 1 of the Committee's recommendations which stated and I quote:

“The Deloitte Report which leads to the reforms in 2011 and 2012, that also leads to the Government in providing to FSC with a direct funding of \$14.9 million. The plan was aimed to take the industry forward from January 2018 to 2022.”

Let us look at what we are having today, what the results we have seen today. In the FSC Annual Report 2019, sugar production was 160,204 tonnes compared to the 180,000 tonnes in 2017; the reduction by about 10 percent. Tonnes of Cane to Tonnes of Sugar (TCTS), the TCTS ratio was 10.6 compared to the 9.0 in 2017 and that was about 15 percent worse.

HON. V. NATH.- A Point of Order. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are debating on the Consolidated Report for the years 2012 to 2016, not 2017 to 2019. They are two different documents. We are here

to debate on the Consolidated Report on the Review of the Ministry of Sugar industry for 2016. You got it wrong.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, stick to the subject. You have the floor.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, whatever the annual report, the results that we would be seeing should be around 2018-2019, that is the impact of those recommendations made in the Report. We need to see improvements in the FSC. I believe whatever the years, we have to see improvement in FSC's performance, but we are not seeing it.

As I mentioned, cane quality of 10.6 compared to 11.5 in 2017 is about 80 percent low, the total sugar exported was 111,000 tonnes compared to the 144,000 in the previous year; reduced by 23 percent. Mr. Speaker, Sir, where is the Ministry of Sugar's responsibility? Are they performing their duties?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the FSC Annual Report, the industry suffered another operation loss of \$80 million. This has increased by more than 300 percent compared to a loss of \$24 million in 2018. This does not reflect the amount of funds that has been poured into the industry. So where is the Ministry of Sugar?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently, we have around 16,000 registered farmers and only 13,000 are active farmers with an average size of 4 acres and majority are producing less than 300 tonnes per year. This is a failure by the Ministry of Sugar and this Government in performing their duties which has led to the suffering of more than 200,000 families that are directly and indirectly rely on the sugar industry.

The SODELPA Government will work with all stakeholders in the revitalisation of the industry.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you have gone over your time.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member. Honourable Members just stick to the period of the debate, not only to the years, but to the period of the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Prime Minister.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to support the Consolidated Report of the Standing Committee on the Review of Ministry of Sugar Industry 2012-2016 Annual Report. I commend my staff at the Ministry of Sugar Industry for putting together these five years of Annual Report under review.

Not only this, Mr. Speaker, but the Ministry has managed to table a total of 62 Annual Reports between 2018 and March 2021, seven of these reports are from the Ministry, 13 from the Fiji Sugar Corporation, 13 from Sugar Cane Growers Council, 12 from Sugar Research Institute of Fiji, 13 from Fiji Sugar Corporation, 13 from Sugar Cane Growers Council, 12 from Sugar Research Institute of Fiji, 6 from Sugar Industry Tribunal and 11 from the Sugar Cane Growers Fund consolidated with South Pacific Fertilizers Limited's Report. The institutions make up the sugar industry and report directly to the Ministry. According to the agenda, 30 of these Annual Reports are in the motion for today's debate while 23 Reports are for Monday's debate therefore I will be concise with my contribution.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry was established in July 2011 as a separate Ministry with the total of only nine staff. The Ministry received its first budget in 2012 with an allocation of \$1.38 million to upgrade cane access roads, \$2.4 million for cane development, revolving funds to assist growers affected by the 2012 floods and \$5 million to provide fertiliser subsidy of \$14.50 per bag of 50 kilogrammes fertilisers to growers. Additional operation grants were allocated for Sugar Research Institute of Fiji and Sugar Industry Tribunal.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry's Budget increased gradually between 2013 and 2016 with the inclusion of new programmes namely the Cane Quality Payment system in 2013 with an allocation of \$4.4 million. Geospatial Information System (GIS) with an allocation of \$0.9 million in 2015 and \$0.65 million in 2016 respectively.

The Sugar Cane Development and Farmers Assistance Programme commonly known as Cane Planting Grant with allocations of \$8.4 million in 2014 and \$5 million for 2015 and 2016 were also introduced. The fertilisers' subsidy budget increased to \$9.7 million in 2016 and sugar levy that was initially borne by growers was absorbed by Government with an allocation of \$0.6 million to Sugar Cane Growers Council.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry coordinates various activities of the six industry institutions and was formed to assist in the implementation of recommendations by the *Deloitte Report* that was endorsed by Government. Deloitte, as a consulting firm was engaged to carry out review of the sugar industry with the intention to restructuring FSC's debt and reviving the sugar industry.

The Ministry's budget allocated each year was mainly given to growers to boost cane production. A further \$174 million of direct funding was provided to FSC from 2011 to assist in improving their milling operations.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry also developed policies in close collaboration and consultation with the key stakeholders. The first strategic action document, the Sugar Industry Action Plan 2013 to 2022 was developed in 2012. This Plan was divided into two phases from 2013 to 2017 and 2017 to 2022. On the conclusion of the first phase, a review was carried out.

Based on the assessment, the second phase could not be implemented given the priorities of the industry had that significantly changed following the event of *TC Winston*. As such the Ministry has developed and is implementing its four-year Strategic Development Plan.

The Strategic Development Plan is in line with the five-year and 20-year National Development Plan, thematic area of the industry of trading a sustainable sugar industry. The Plan, Mr. Speaker, includes the monitoring and evaluation framework and reports are provided to the Ministry of Economy for regular update.

The industry institutions have also developed strategic plans in line with the Ministry's SDP. Mr. Speaker, the budgetary allocation of the Ministry have increased as per industry's demand serving more than 12,000 active growers and overseeing the six industry institutions.

The Ministry has adopted a smarter approach to implement its capital projects upon analysing the strength and capacities of each institution, the Ministry through binding agreements has engaged with Fiji Sugar Corporation, Fiji Cane Growers Fund and South Pacific Fertilizers Limited to implement the Ministry's capital programmes while the Sugar Industry Tribunal, Sugar Cane Growers Council and Sugar Research Institute of Fiji also provide support during implementation and monitoring.

All those institutions, Mr. Speaker, are linked to the well-structured in-house database system that contains excellent data on individual growers including farm records, cane planted, weedicide and fertiliser use, harvesting, transportation, production, grant assistance provided, cost as well as payment made.

The FSC and Sugar Cane Growers Council Field Officers interact with growers on a daily basis and serve as the Ministry's link to growers. While the Ministry conducts its independent monitoring, all these six institutions provide quarterly reports to the Ministry. As much of the Ministry had anticipated, it could not reach the target of two million tonnes of cane from 2012 to 2016.

The industry is battling with ongoing and emerging challenges, including shortages of labour, cyclones and floods, high transportation and harvesting costs and expiry of land leases. We have managed to resolve labour shortages for cane harvesting in flat land areas with the procurement of nearly 100 mechanical harvesters in the country we are now able to harvest at least 40 percent of the overall crop. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, we could not procure any harvesters for hilly terrain as there are none suitable for our fuel structure.

Mr. Speaker, we have again engaged the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC) to analyse possibilities of regulating lorry rates with the view to retaining a minimal rate, particularly after the success of regulated harvester rates. From 2012 to the present day, we have experienced cyclones almost every year.

Those natural disasters have caused massive damages and losses to the industry hindering much of our efforts. For instance, the Category 5 *TC Winston* itself amounts to over \$163 million worth of damage and losses to the cane farmers, the mills, the sugar industry infrastructure and major service providers within the industry, the lowest production in the history of sugar industry was recorded in 2016.

Mr. Speaker, the current cane payment system is clearly based on cane weight without any consideration to cane quality. Therefore with the intentions to improve grower equity, enhancing better utilisation of milling capacity by increasing sugar made, encouraging group harvesting, possible without grower equity issues and to enhance potential for expansion of crop size within the mill area across the group, the Ministry, together with the industry's stakeholders, work diligently to establish the cane quality payment system in sugar mills. Mr. Speaker, in 2013 the Ministry, through the Sugar Industry Tribunal, expended \$4.4 million to purchase and install infra-red equipment to set up the cane quality payment system. The system is being used by many sugar-producing countries where payment is made on cane quality than weight alone.

This system measures all ingredients, including sugar contents of pure obtainable cane sugar also referred as "POCS" present in the cane, the higher the POCS the higher the sugar content and the higher the cane payment. The system was trialled and tested in the Year 2014-2015 and it was ready to go live into 2016. Unfortunately, *TC Winston* damaged and destroyed some of the major equipment, mills, infrastructure and crops, leaving us no choice but to place projects on hold. However, the plan is to pursue this system in future once the growers and mills are ready.

Mr. Speaker, in the event of natural disasters, such as cyclones and floods, the industry conducts assessment to ascertain damages and losses to undertake rehabilitation activities. To minimise damages and losses, the Ministry, in consultation with the stakeholders, will prepare the disaster risk management plan that will include climate adaptation and mitigation strategies for the industry.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry funds the activities of Sugar Research Institute of Fiji (SRIF) that works with FSC to improve cane yield and overall production. SRIF is legislated to carry out research and development activities, including technology and transfer to growers. The Ministry fully participates and supports SRIF, crop production, crop protection, crop development and technology transfer activities. I can assure this august House that SRIF, together with FSC, has done exceptionally well in research and technology transfer.

Mr. Speaker, some of the major activities delivered by SRIF includes demonstration and transfer of technology, such as green manuring, use of modern farm equipment, hot water treated and certified seed cane and disease and provision of pest free tissue cultured seed cane to growers. Growers that have adopted these technologies have achieved fantastic results. A classic example is Tunalia Farm which I visited last year. This Farm adopted all the best management practices right from land preparation, planting certified cane varieties, utilisation of modern technology, mechanised harvesting and sustainable land management within the harvest of green cane and planting of vetiver grass to prevent soil erosion.

Mr. Speaker, the result is that this farm harvested 1,890 tonnes with an average of 126 tonnes per hectare last year. There is rising demand on agricultural land due to competing need for developments including industrial, residential and other commercial purposes. As per industry records, 10 requests for rezoning of agriculture sugarcane land are made every week on average. The Sugar Industry Tribunal, FSC and Sugarcane Growers Council together inspect the land in question and provide the opinion on whether it can be rezoned. Even if policies such as the Sugarcane Land Use Policy is developed, the enforcement would become a challenge given that the final authority to rezone rests with the Lands Department for State Land and Town and Country Planning for all other land.

Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, the Ministry with FSC, Lands Department and the iTaukei Land Trust Board are closely working together to protect the best agricultural land for the purpose of farming. With increased Government assistance and guaranteed cane price, approximately 65 new cane producers have restarted cane planting in the past three years.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, landowners have also joined the Sugar Industry through a joint venture scheme with FSC while 268 new farmers have been assisted through the Ministry's New Farmers Assistance Programme. Based on these remarks, Mr. Speaker, I therefore support the motion. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank you, Honourable Prime Minister. Honourable Members, it has just been pointed out to me that I have missed someone who asked for the floor.

Honourable Professor Prasad, you have the floor.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I note the Honourable Prime Minister's comment about the availability of timely reports from the Ministry of Sugar now and that is commendable, Mr. Speaker, and I also thank the Ministry for doing that.

Mr. Speaker, firstly, I refer to Page 7 of this Report. It actually contains statistics of sugarcane and sugar production as well as TCTS - tonnes of cane required to make one ton of sugar. I am surprised that the Committee and that too under the chairmanship of two Honourable Assistant Ministers, have actually incorrect figures recorded in a Report that we are supposed to take note and endorse.

I suspect, Mr. Speaker, the figures quoted in the Report are from the fiscal update or supplement to the budget that actually forecast production figures of any particular industry in a particular financial year and like the five-year, 20-year NDP, launched in Bonn, in November, 2017, these statistics are horrendously wrong and misleading, attempting to paint a rosy picture of an industry that is on life support.

Mr. Speaker, the Report actually starts well. It records the dangers involved in financing what we know to be a technically-insolvent FSC which resulted in a write-off of over \$170 million in loans last year or turned into equity that has no value whatsoever. I just want to give a few examples, Mr. Speaker: the Report states that in 2012, the Sugar Industry produced 2.1 million tonnes of cane with sugar production of 166,669 tonnes of sugar. The actual production is 1.547 million tonnes of cane and 155,000 tonnes of sugar.

In the 2016 Report, the Report records a cane production of 1.8 million tonnes of cane and 221,993 tonnes of sugar, when it was actually 1.387 million tonnes and 140,000 tonnes of sugar. So, essentially Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the Committee may want to change the figures on page 7 of the Report because I think that is not the actual production figures, when the Report actually says that that was the cane and sugar produced in those years.

If the Committee receives this from the Ministry of Sugar then perhaps they need to check with them. We cannot let this kind of erroneous figures floating around because people will have access to this Report and it is not helpful.

Reforms: First elections' later tactic in the past, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has led to the near decimation of the industry that bankrolled the economy for over so many decades, and as Honourable Kuridrani pointed out, almost 200,000 people depend directly or indirectly on this industry and tragically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have to say this that the micro-management by government and as often being said by people who really cannot differentiate between a root of a cane stock and its stock, in my view has actually strangulated what we now have - a pocket size industry. For example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2013 and 2022 Strategic Plan referred to in this Review Report also change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after realising it was unrealistic to achieve it, it became, to the best of my recollection, another strategic plan for 2018-2022. Yet again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the plans that the Fiji Sugar Corporation and the Ministry of Sugar has been making is almost like a 'pie in the sky' document. The only achievement has been the conversion of government of loans as stated earlier into equity to reduce FSC's extraordinary used there that is almost twice the value of all its total assets.

Talking of assets, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Chairman of the Fiji Sugar Corporation, Mr. Vishnu Mohan, while trying to justify the sale of assets of FSC, including large parcels of prime land, described them as lazy assets and it made economic sense to sell them, I consider this to be a real joke. Many properties and land are currently occupied by people, including FSC workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Chairman's statement is once again an admission that FSC actually fails to manage its finance effectively in the last several years. What you have failed to ensure appropriate cash flow in the company. Lazy assets, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also means that they are not the core assets of the company and meaning that it can do without you, use cash from that sale of lazy assets more effectively and efficiently.

But it is not clear to me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, how FSC has gone about classifying these land and assets as lazy. Also it makes no sense to talk about selling these assets in a depressed economic

environment because you are not going to get the value of what the asset is probably worth. Mr. Speaker, Sir, without proper assessment, without an independent expert analysis of what FSC asset-based is and what it could do with it in terms of generating additional income and making sure that there is efficiency and effectiveness in the area, I would say that the FSC and the Honourable Prime Minister should drag FSC to halt the sale of these assets, it is like selling one soul for 30 pieces of silver and if you are selling this in this kind of environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, right now what we need, of course, is a new and independent forensic audit of the Fiji Sugar Corporation. I know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the new CEO is a very experienced man with many years of industry experience and I have no doubt that he would be looking at the operation of the FSC already but I think, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as far as government policy is concerned, and if you want to revive the industry, we ought to take strategic decisions at various strategic moments.

We fail to ensure that farmers actually receive \$20 cane payment in the last payment because this is the time that they are going to prepare for others.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARMA.- What has that got to do with the Report?

HON. SPEAKER.- Your time is up. Honourable Members, I give the floor to the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to speak in reply.

HON. V. NATH.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. In reply to Honourable Kuridrani, being the Member of the Committee, in fact, anywhere we went for the consultation, and even during the presentation, it was very well ironed out and talked about by the people, the reason for the decline. I put a question to the Honourable Kuridrani, if your lease is about to expire, you have only four years left for the lease to expire, definitely you will not have confidence in there. So, Honourable Prime Minister has explained very nicely the reason for the decline which Honourable Kuridrani has just mentioned.

To answer Honourable Professor Prasad, the figures reflected on page 7 is given by the FSC when the financial controller was being interviewed. I am told it is correct. Nevertheless this is the real material which I got from the presentation during our visit to the Western Division and to the Northern Division as well. Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is all I have got. I thank you for the opportunity.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will take a break for lunch and we will resume when the Secretary-General invites you back.

Honourable Members the procedures for this debate is I give the floor to all the other Members who wish to speak and give it last to the Minister. Sometimes I try to see who wants to speak, but every time I indicate someone, they are not signalling, they are scratching their nose or throat. So, I am trying to get your attention at the same time. If I miss you out, I apologise, but we will try and improve the system. We break for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.13 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.32 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate. I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to move his motion.

REVIEW REPORT – PERFORMANCE AUDIT OF PREPAREDNESS OF SDGs

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

That Parliament debates on the Review Report on the Performance Audit of Preparedness of Sustainable Development Goals which was tabled on 26th May, 2020.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Account to speak on his motion.

HON A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will be actually highlighting some key matters with regards to the SDGs and the implementation.

Fiji's commitment as a UN member country in signing the 2030 Agenda came into effect from 1st January 2015 has declared its commitment to take ownership of the Agenda and be responsible for follow-up implementing the goals and targets over the next 15 years. The SDGs are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. The Fijian Government has endorsed the Global Sustainable Development Goals which aimed to ensure that no one will be left behind and endeavour to reach the furthest behind first.

The Auditor-General carried out the audit to ascertain the preparedness of Government in implementing the SDG Agenda 2030. This performance audit was undertaken under Section 6A of the Audit Act 1969 which was expected that the audit findings would be used by the Ministry of Economy for monitoring and evaluation with a focus in the implementation of findings as required under the NDP.

Mr. Speaker, in September 2015, 193 member countries of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a United Nations (UN) global initiative containing 17 sustainable development goals and 169 targets. The 15 years Agenda came into effect from 1 January 2016 following on from the expiry of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

The 2030 Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity, that is, it is aimed at improving people's lives economically socially and environmentally.

The Committee noted that the audit that was conducted involved the whole of government approach. The Auditor-General had assessed the actions undertaken by government since the signing of the SDGs in September 2015 in preparedness for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda by determining:

- the extent to which the Government of Fiji has adopted the 2030 agenda into the 5- year and 20-year National Development Plan;
- whether the Government of Fiji has identified and secured resources and capacities needed to implement the 5-year and 20-year national development plan; and

- the mechanisms established by Government of Fiji to monitor, follow up, review and report on the progress towards the implementation of the 5-year and 20-year national development plan.

Therefore, the main findings of the Performance Audit was focused on the integration of the 2030 Agenda, resources and capacities of implementing the SDGs, monitoring and reporting framework.

Mr. Speaker, the Fijian Government had begun its efforts in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development by integrating the SDGs into 20 year national development plan and supported with strategies for the immediate 5 year term. Government Ministries and Departments have inculcated in its Strategic Plans, Operational Plans and Corporate Plans and has key performance indicators and targets for the relevant SDGs targets which are detailed in the National Development Plans.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee was informed of Government's efforts in the implementation of SDGs and the progress made under its activities. Some of the achievements to highlight in this august Parliament, includes:

- (1) Building public awareness;
- (2) Fostering inclusive stakeholder participation;
- (3) Aligning national and subnational plans and targets to SDGs;
- (4) Assigning responsibilities and ensuring accountability;
- (5) Establishing relevant programmes;
- (6) Allocating sufficient resources/capacity;
- (7) Defining appropriate baselines and relevant targets/indicator; and
- (8) Developing robust systems to reliably measure, monitor and report on progress and achievements.

Honourable Speaker, the Committee noted that out of the 132 regional targets 80 SDG targets are monitored of which three targets have been fully achieved whilst 17 targets have achieved average to good progress towards achievement.

Mr. Speaker, overall I commend the Government's commitment in providing necessary strategic and resources support to all Government Ministries and Departments and to all other stakeholders in the implementation of the SDGs 2030 Agenda. Mr. Speaker, with these words I thank you for giving me time to provide some insights from the Committee's perspective.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I give the floor to the Honourable Kepa.

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- First of all, Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the Committee for their 2020 Review Report. This performance audit was to ascertain the preparedness of Government in implementing the SDG 2030 Agenda using the whole of Government's approach and seeing how effective it has been since the signing of the SDG in September, 2015.

We have learnt, Mr. Speaker, from this performance audit report that Government has adopted the SDG 2030 Agenda into its 5-year and 20-years National Development Plan. Because of time limitation, Mr. Speaker, I will only look very briefly at few of these SDGs namely SDGs 1, 4, 5 and 13.

Mr. Speaker, SDG 1 is on poverty and where it says "No poverty", it reads "... to end poverty

in all its forms everywhere.”

SDG 4 looks at quality education to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning and opportunities for all.

SDG 5 looks at gender equality to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, especially to look at expanding the economic growth, promoting social development and enhancing business performance so that all companies have baseline responsibilities to respect human rights including the rights of women and girls.

SDG 13, Mr. Speaker, is on climate action. To take urgent action to combat climate change and its impact to include strengthening resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related disasters. But at the end of the day, Mr. Speaker, I believe the onus on how prepared the Whole of Government and its political will in regard to the implementation of SDG will become an important factor in this, Mr. Speaker, where the SDG lie with Government and its machinery.

With the PM and the Cabinet Ministers and their portfolios, the Minister for Economy on the budget requirement for implementing the SDG and always, Mr. Speaker, we hear about the lack of budget resources into the SDG goals but that is for the Minister for Economy to look at and also the onus is on the ministers in how their ministries address the implementation of the 17 SDGs right down to their baseline workers to take ownership of the implementation.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, we can take a leaf out of how the Parliament is addressing this issue with their publication, oversight and the implementation of the SDGs were included in that, Mr. Speaker, as the guidance notes for the standing committees of Parliament to look into addressing the SDG issues.

Mr. Speaker, finally I am looking at SDG 3, in ensuring healthy lives and promoting wellbeing and looking at the COVID issues, I thank the Minister for Health, the staff of the Ministry, the PS, Dr. James Fong and all the frontline workers – military, police and nurses. I thank all those on the ground, in all the screening stations, settlements and villages. I thank, Mr. Speaker, the Nasali Screening Post, now in its seventh week of screening procedures.

I thank the donors overseas in getting this grassroots initiative off the ground, up and running. Their work so far has been very effective, Mr. Speaker, in helping contain the virus and assisting in keeping the Rewa Delta COVID free thus far and I also thank our villagers in providing nutritious and tasty catering for the workers on the ground. I thank all our *mata ni tikina, turaga ni koro, nasi ni koro* and the youth groups, working in the screening stations all throughout our villages right through to Beqa and *tikina* Raviraki and Sawau.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, on SDG 3 which is to ensure healthy lives and promoting wellbeing, I urge all those that have not been vaccinated to get the shot. Better safe than sorry.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I give the floor to the Honourable Pravin Bala. You have the floor. He seems to have disappeared from the screen. Honourable Attorney-General.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, Sir, unfortunately this Report again, highlights the fundamental problems within the Auditor-General’s office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Honourable Kepa pointed out the SDG was actually formerly endorsed by the UN member countries in September 2015. However, it came into force in January 2016 but the 17 SDGs were only make actionable in July 2017 when the UN General Assembly formally

adopted a resolution identifying specific targets and measurable indicators. That was obviously 20 months after September 2015, then Mr. Speaker, Sir, after July 2017 the countries had to spend at least six months to identify customised regional and national targets and indicators which pushed into the first quarter of 2018.

By this time, data collection, assessments for the performance audit was already underway. So, here we have the UN systems saying by the end of 2017 and early 2018 you start identifying your customised regional and national targets and then the Office of the Auditor-General decides to do an audit and we discovered, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they started their audit in the first quarter of 2018, unbeknown to anyone.

In March 2019, then they came along to Ministry of Economy and said, we have actually done a performance audit, what are your comments? Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you read the report, it says under the theme of Alignment of Budgets, Policies and Programmes and SDGs, the Report claims that the Ministries and Departments had not aligned their strategic plans to the -Year and 20-Year National Development Plan. This is of course preposterous.

The 5-Year and 20-Year Development Plan was launched in November 2017 in the middle of the financial year. The fact finding for this report by the Office of the Auditor-General was done in early 2018 within the same financial year. So, how can ministries be expected to align their strategic plans only a few months after the launch of the NDP and that too in the middle of the financial year.

Strategic Plans, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are multi-year and takes careful time and planning to craft. Mr. Speaker, Sir, so this audit report is actually completely misplaced. It should not have been done at that point in time, when it had just been launched, approved just by the UN Council.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, and then to do it in a clandestine manner and then come along one year later and say we have done it, what is your report? How can we have a proper assessment when the particular project has just been launched? Well, I am glad to mention, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that in fact, now all the SDPs (Sustainable Development Plans) are aligned to the 5-year and 20-year National Development Plan. The SDPs now inform the Annual Corporate Plans and this informs individual work plans for all civil servants. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the strength of this cascading linkage is in fact that by aligning to the 5-Year and 20-Year National Development Plan, Government, ministries intrinsically align themselves to the SDGs.

Such alignments needs to be further justified by ministries when they request for funding in the National Budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report fails to highlight the basic demarcation of data sets for SDGs and merely mentions the non-availability of data for 39 indicators. In fact, all SDG indicators are demarcated into three tiers which are:

- Tier 1 indicators that have standardised methodology of data, collection and data is currently being collected by countries.
- Tier 2 indicators that have a standardised methodology of data collection but data currently not being collected by countries.
- Tier 3 indicators that do not have a standardised methodology of data collection but methodology will or is to be developed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Government presented its first voluntary national review of the SDGs to the UN in July 2019. You can go online and see that the UN web page and we have then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, started our voluntary national review for the second one and which we are expected to present to the UN in 2022. But of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 has come along. We had

planned a number of public consultations to get feedback from members of the public as we did with the NDP.

What is really interesting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that, recently the UN Secretary-General published in April 2020 a document called “Progress Towards Sustainable Development Goals”, it clearly states that through the end of 2019, global progress of the SDGs are already slowing down, and achievements were mixed due to the global economic slowdown. COVID-19 has exacerbated that further, Small Island Development States like, Fiji are expected to be the hardest hit from the global economic shock and dependence on international trade.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that Report rightfully highlights the global crisis also affecting critical operations through the entire global statistics data system. Just very briefly, unfortunately, this Report by the Auditor-General’s Office was done very pre-maturely and therefore, the findings in the Report in fact, cannot be relied upon. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to speak in reply.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would just like to thank all the Honourable Members who have contributed towards this particular debate.

HON. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to move his motion.

REVIEW REPORT – AUDIT REPORT OF MUNICIPAL COUNCILS FOR 2014-2017

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

That Parliament debate the review on the Audit Report on Municipal Councils for 2014 to 2017 which was tabled on 26th May, 2020.

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

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to speak on his motion.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Section 5(1) of the Local Government Act 1972 mandates the Auditor-General to audit the accounts of the Municipal Councils, however, there is a serious concern on the financial accountability of Municipal Councils in terms of financial reporting and making available to the ratepayers of the council and the public on the audited financial statements.

Most importantly, pursuant to section 57(3), stated that “On or before 31st August in every year, the Council shall cause to be published in an English language newspaper published in Fiji and circulating within the municipality-

- (a) a balance sheet and a summarised statement of income and expenditure of the Council on 31st December immediately preceding, together with any report by the auditor thereon; and
- (b) notification that any ratepayer or any person holding any security charged upon the property of the Council may, at all reasonable time, inspect the Council's office, the full annual statement as certified by the auditor and the Council's annual report prepared pursuant to the provisions of section 19 and may take copies from any part of the statement of report".

It is important to note that the Councils have expressed their commitment towards updating their financial statements to 2018 by end of financial year 2019/2020. The issues discussed and resolved during the hearing require an immediate attention of the Special Administrator as well as the Ministry of Local Government on improving the financial accountability of the Municipal Councils.

At the outset, this Report focused on the findings of the Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji - Audit Report for various Municipal Councils for the 2014 to 2017 financial years. The Councils that were audited included:

- (1) Labasa Town Council from 2014 to 2017;
- (2) Sigatoka Town Council: 2014 to 2017;
- (3) Ba Town Council: 2014 to 2017; and
- (4) Rakiraki Town Council: 2014 to 2017.

The Committee noted that there were three major issues surrounding the qualification of the audit opinion based on the following factors:

- (1) Non-preparation of the financial statements under the International Financial Reporting Standards for Small and Medium-sized enterprises as required under the Fiji Institute of Accountant standards.
- (2) Unsupported balances recorded in the financial statements including unreconciled variances between the Council's general ledger balances and subsidiary records for balance sheet items, specifically the rates receivable.
- (3) Ineffective internal controls to ensure quality preparation of the financial statements and timely financial reporting to ascertain and determine the actual financial performance of the Municipal Councils.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee commends the "Go Green Initiative" that is currently adopted by the Rakiraki Municipal Market which other municipalities can tailor-made and adopt this initiative as this could address Sustainable Development Goals' commitments such as SDG 13 on Climate Change - Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts as well as addressing SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities and that too makes cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Overall, I commend the performance of these municipal councils and efforts in trying to improve its systems and processes and also acknowledge the Ministry of Local Government's support to place measures, to improve and standardise all Municipal Councils' systems and processes.

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

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Honourable Waqanika.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Good afternoon, Mr. Speaker and Honourable Members. This is my contribution to the debate. I have just picked up key issues on the recommendations in the Audit Report.

One of the key issues is the issue of good governance. I note from the Report, it is a challenge right across the municipal authorities for all the municipal councils. If there is one thing that the municipal council or the Ministry can take into consideration that when appointment of any Special Administrator is done, that the Special Administrator and the executive team, if anything, to undertake good governance courses and workshops and this is to be implemented in their KPIs. Most of the issues that we see in the recommendations will be addressed if they have good governance training behind them.

The other issue is as the Chairperson has raised is regarding the preparation of quality draft financial statements. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a former staff of Suva City Council, this is something that is not new. In fact it was there pre-2006 and it still exists now and I see that it existed during the tenure of this report. It has always been a challenge for smaller councils to attract the right competence skill-set especially in areas of finance and accounting. Now, you have a small councils like Tavua, Ra, Levuka, Savusavu perhaps consideration can be given where the Ministry appoints a competent, experienced and well qualified internal auditor to look after two or three small councils. In that way, it will address the issue that is being raised here.

If our Government can commit to sponsoring golf tournaments and giving cash handouts to our people, it will certainly help the Ministry and they are overseeing further to the local authorities. When you have the right competent people, especially internal auditors in place looking after the Councils and perhaps the Ministry can look into a cost-sharing where the Ministry pays half of the salary and the other half is footed by the Councils. The reason is this.

All Councils, Mr. Speaker, Sir, rely on city rates as their main income. This is one of the recommendations as well that has been highlighted in the Report, the collection of the city rates is the key revenue for all municipal authorities. It has always been a challenge for many, many years. When the city fathers and city mothers and councillors were still in place, there was a lot of push for collection to be collected development went to the various wards of the councillors. So when development goes as we know, election comes through and this is what they tell the people within their wards, "Money moves things".

Given now this COVID crisis, I know it is going to be a quite a challenge for all Councils to be collecting rate. Perhaps the Ministry or even the Government look into allowing people to tap into their FNPF, especially if they have got a good amount in their account to pay the rates because this will ease the pressure from the Council. So when you have a Council that gets support in their municipality, it eases the pressure of the Local Government. If someone owes city rates of \$1,000, \$2,000 and they got money in FNPF and they have got sufficient, I ask that the Government look into this where they can tap into it, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The other issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the fees and charges. This is another source of revenue for all municipal councils. You collect fees from the libraries, swimming pool, the usage of arts, given now the situation that we have perhaps, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry could consider informing all the municipal authorities to decentralise the mini markets. You have the Raiwaqa Market that is there as a white elephant, I do not know what the plans are for the Suva City Council but the market vendors are currently using a park that is normally used by the residents of Raiwaqa.

I believe there are other alternatives around that area. This additional revenue that comes to should be maximised as you do not want them sitting there and nothing is moving in that area. One of the other things that I have note in the report, Mr. Speaker, is the risk management policies and the disaster recovery plans. I note that the Report says that does not exist. I am not sure whether they do exist now but perhaps to assist the municipal council and the Ministry, standardise that policy right across, so it is easy when it comes to audit, it is also easy when it comes to reporting from the Municipal Councils back to the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just in conclusion, in April 2019, two Honourable Members in the House (Honourable Qereqeretabua and Honourable Premila Kumar) there was a debate regarding the election of municipal councils. The worst with effect that Local Government has a history of corruption, mismanagement and nepotism - whether it exist now, Mr. Speaker? I do not know. But the trees will always bear good or bad fruits.

For anyone who has worked in the Council or has been a council member, such as Honourable Parveen Bala, nepotism has always been a challenge, pre-coup 2006 and even now. My good friend, Honourable Premila Kumar, is also no stranger to Local Government, she was a former Senior Principal Officer at the Ministry, she is now their Minister and I am glad that she is there. I have had the opportunity of working with Honourable Kumar during my tenure at Fiji TV. In the 2019 sitting, it is quoted, “By calling for municipal elections, the Opposition is actually calling for a return to corruption and inefficient development.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am not sure whether one can validate or substantiate such a statement unless a study proves or shows otherwise. We had two elections in our nation (2014 and 2018) and still we see corruption at all sectors, whether in Government or private. So I guess, given that we have had two national elections, I cannot see why we are still holding back on the municipal elections, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is my contribution to the debate and just to end off, I thank the Office of the Auditor-General. It is good to see that we have an independent Government department that is doing their work and making sure the taxpayers’ money are being accountable.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Honourable Qereqeretabua.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- *Vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker. I thank the Committee for their Report. I will go straight into the first recommendation and the first recommendation I quote is:

“All Municipal Councils to adopt the Open Merit Recruitment System (OMRS) in its recruitment process and the Ministry to assist and ensure its implementation so that all human resource workflow operational related issues are addressed.”

This is what I will dwell on during my intervention, Mr. Speaker.

This recommendation, Mr. Speaker, is important but I wonder if the Ministry, and in this case the Ministry of Local Government is also practicing OMRS in the appointment of the Chief Executive Officers of towns and city councils. Perhaps, the Honourable Local Government Minister will appraise us fully at an appropriate time on the qualifications and credentials of the CEOs to justify that their appointments were based on merit.

We have heard concerns from ratepayers, citizens as well as from staff and ordinary workers of town and city councils about the conduct of some of the CEOs (I say some of the CEOs). While these may or may not have any basis, there is certainly no smoke without fire, Mr. Speaker. And we recently heard that the Employment Relations Tribunal reinstated 25 workers engaged in garbage

collection who were terminated from their jobs in December 2019. The report stated that all those terminated staff, who were members of the National Union of Municipal Workers and which they took their grievance to the tribunal. The workers also sought compensation for their loss and humiliation as a result of that termination.

Mr. Speaker, in the ruling, the tribunal noted that the workers were terminated to allow for new recruitment. In other words, kick out the current workers, make their families suffer and then hire new workers. This is inhumane to say the least, Mr. Speaker. My question is, was the Honourable Minister aware before this mass sacking took place by the CEO and administrators of the Nasinu Town Council whose work ethnics and conduct are controlled by her Ministry as they were appointed by Government and not elected.

This is the kind of acts that were carried out by some Government-appointed administrators and CEO who answer to Government alone, not to ratepayers and the citizens. That is why, Mr. Speaker, it is vitally important that Government now put power back into the hands of the people in their towns and cities. Let the ratepayers and citizens determine through their elected representatives how their rates are used. Let us put power back into the hands of the people to determine how their towns and cities are run and I thank the Committee for this Report.

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

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion that is before the House. I will go straight into some of the recommendations that were made by the Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, seven recommendations were made by the Public Accounts Committee which is being systematically implemented by the municipal councils in Ba, Labasa, Sigatoka and Rakiraki.

Recommendation 1: The Ministry through a consultant reviewed the existing human resource manual in close consultation with the municipal council. The manual was also vetted by the Office of Solicitor-General for compliance with the national laws.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Qereqeretabua mentioned about the OMRS. The councils' human resource policy is now aligned with the Civil Service Open Merit recruitment system and this will ensure consistency in areas of recruitment, training, performance assessment, et cetera.

At this juncture, I want to mention, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the CEOs were appointed on merit. Previously as I mentioned earlier on, the CEOs were appointed just because they were in the organisation for 20 years to 30 years and they did not have financial acumen. So, most of the CEOs that have been appointed, they are appointed on OMRS and most of them have financial qualification.

I will give you an example, Rakiraki and Tavua. We have a CEO. He used to work for the Ministry of Economy and now he is running two municipalities under shared services. So he is looking after Tavua and Rakiraki. This is how these two municipalities are run because we know for small municipalities, we cannot appoint CEOs individually to look after each municipality, so we have gone into shared services Mr. Speaker, Sir and in all other municipal councils in all other municipal councils, for example, Savusavu, we have a CEO who has got financial qualification. She has got experience in working with municipal councils, et cetera, which was one of the key requirements because we know for any organisation, you need a person with finance background,

you need a good HR person and you need to have very good internal control mechanisms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me move on to Recommendation 2 which calls for establishing an internal audit unit within all municipal councils, and again this has been done, most municipalities have internal control units and the Ministry of Local Government has assisted the municipalities in setting up this internal control mechanism. In fact, the Ministry assisted in drafting the Finance Policy in consultation with municipal councils so that there is uniformity in looking after the accounts in all municipal councils.

Some councils have also recruited internal auditors to ensure their books abide by strong internal control system and from time to time, the Ministry also undertakes internal audit check to ensure compliance. Honourable Waqanika mentioned about the implementation of risk management policies and disaster recovery plans. In terms of risk management policies and disaster recovery plans, I am pleased to inform that municipal councils have developed risk management policies and in most cases have implemented them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Recommendation 4, it calls for restructure of all municipal councils so that it can operate like any corporate body. This is where I want to put more time into having this discussion. As both the Members earlier on mentioned that there should be an election at the municipal councils and I had said earlier on that there is history of corruption at municipal councils, even when the elected councillors were there.

When the elected councillors were there, six times the municipal councils were dissolved, and under their leadership, the ratepayers have lost the assets for life, it is gone, it is not coming back. This is how the municipal councils were managed previously, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Talking about restructure and making municipal council a corporate body, this is where the Members themselves will agree in this House that, yes, we support the recommendation but they will be the first ones who will walk out of this room and start complaining if municipal decides to increase the fees and charges, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Do they know what kind of fees and charges are there in municipal councils? Some municipal councils, I will give you an example of what is being paid by some of the service secrets, for example, in Ba the parking fee is \$0.15 per half an hour, and it has been there for a while. As soon as we want to increase it to say, \$0.50 or \$1.00, then it is the Members who will start giving a commentary in the media of how important it is, “Why are you doing this? People are suffering”, et cetera, but here you are telling me, “run the municipal council as a corporate entity”.

Another example, I want to give you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, taxi-base fee in Nadi is about \$14, \$14 is not even dollar a day, if you take for 30 days. So, this is where the municipal councils are struggling financially. Another good example is in some municipal council, the bus stand fee is \$0.12 for the entry of each bus, whereas the bus company charges \$0.70 or \$0.75 for one stage fare. So, we are not getting that money, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Talking about the corruption in Municipals Councils, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the main reasons why Municipal Councils are suffering is because of the work culture at the Municipal Councils, and the work culture is guided by the collective agreements that are archaic and have unreasonable terms and conditions. In some collective agreements, there are provisions which is not offered by a private sector or even by the Government. I give you some examples.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, you are going well over time.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- No, you finish that point.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will just give you two or three examples. One is that, staff are paid \$200 sick leave allowance if they do not utilise the sick leave, staff are paid tea allowance of \$3.75 per week, and if you think this is not enough, you should listen to this one. It is interesting to note there is one particular Council that gives 32 days Annual Leave to staff who earn more than \$10,000 and they can accumulate the Leave up to 124 days.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some Council offer 24 days of leave to their staff who earn below \$10,000 and they can accumulate this Leave for 50 days. Not even Permanent Secretaries in the Civil Service get more than 10 days to carry their leave. They are only allowed to carry the Leave for 10 days. Officers who receive 300 to 500 leave allowances for every three years of service, which organisation classifies long service leave, if you have served in an organisation for only three years?

Not only that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if an officer continuously works for the Council for six years, he or she is entitled to long service leave of 10 working days per year of service. So six years that means times 10 (x 10) you get 60 days.

Also the last one, at Suva City Council, as the Honourable Attorney-General mentioned earlier on, it is in the collective agreement. They put their tools at 4.15 p.m. and they go home. If this is how the collective agreements are drawn, then how do you expect to bring in efficiency? Some of these collective agreements are truly out of order, not in line with the national laws. Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the Chairperson to speak in reply.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to take the opportunity to thank the Members who have contributed towards this particular debate.

HON. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I give the floor to the Deputy Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, the Honourable Dr. Govind.

REVIEW REPORT - MINISTRY OF DEFENCE AND NATIONAL SECURITY ANNUAL REPORT 2016-2017

HON. DR. S.R. GOVIND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review Report of the Ministry of Defence and National Security Annual Report 2016 to 2017 which was tabled on 27th May, 2020.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now invite the Deputy Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence to speak on the motion.

HON. DR. S.R. GOVIND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of Opposition, I come forward in this august House to virtually speak on the above motion. The purpose of the review was to scrutinise the Ministry of Defence and National Security Annual Report specifically on the Ministry's operations and administration.

The Committee, in its deliberations, observed two key issues during the review exercise:

- (1) The Committee is aware of vast amount of acting positions for senior officers for the above reporting period.
- (2) On the issue of Critical Asset Protection the Committee is concerned that there is little or no security policy, standard operating procedures and physical hardening of critical asset installations. Especially WAF Reservoirs, Catchments, Water and Sewerage Installations.

I concur with the two main two recommendations of the tabled Committee Report as follows:

Recommendation 1: The Committee recommends appropriate action is taken for the stability of the Ministry and retention of key senior specialised staff moving forward.

Recommendation 2: The Committee recommends that relevant policies be put in place to safeguard and protect critical national assets such as, water catchments, petroleum storage facilities, power stations, sewerage treatment plants, telecommunication sites, seaports and airports. Vibrant and efficient monitoring and evaluation, together with legislative framework for these critical national assets is the way forward for the Ministry. Critical assets need 24/7 security guards to act as deterrence to sabotage any criminal breaches.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on this item. I give the floor to the Honourable Bulitavu.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- *Vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker, Sir. First of all, I would like to thank the Committee for the Report that they have compiled. The Report is on the 2016/2017 Financial Year for the Ministry of Defence and National Security. They welcome submissions from the Ministry in March last year and I think and believe that that progressive steps has been taken by the Ministry to address some of the issues and findings that have been identified by the report and also the various recommendations.

I would also like to highlight given that it is mentioned in the report the National Strategic Framework in 2019, the Honourable Minister of Defence conducted a workshop for the Region in terms of the *Boe Declaration* which complements the *Biketawa Declaration* for regional issues of security on strategic focus areas pertaining to climate change, humanitarian assistance and other environmental problems which are now security issues in the Region, and also other things that we are now faced with in terms of the pandemic.

First of all, I would like to thank the Ministry of Defence, the RFMF, the Fiji Police Force and the Immigration staff at the borders who are front-liners, in trying to keep our country, our nation and our citizens safe. That is the important role and the security landscape that we have at the moment are in their

role in assisting the Ministry of Health and Medical Services in terms of trying to contain COVID -19, or for us to restore our COVID-containment status.

A few things that the Committee has recommended as I have said, probably the Honourable Minister will be in a better position to address us in terms of the recent annual reports and also the steps taken to address those, especially the data collection and other things that are part of the usual findings of the Committee in their scrutiny the annual report.

But generally speaking in terms of the Ministry of Defence and also Immigration Department in their role of keeping the country safe and everyone safe, I think they need a tap on their back. We also need to applaud their efforts given their life and commitment has taken place and that we look into the future on how the Ministry will develop into other areas that will see that our country is well protected. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the Honourable Tikoduadua.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, first of all I thank the Committee for their report. I thank the representatives of the Ministry of Defence and the National Security for the annual report that they have submitted and their corporation with the Standing Committee in the compilation of the report and in particular some of the recommendations within and the observations.

Mr. Speaker, I will stick only to one recommendation and one observation as a challenge at the bottom of Page No. 8 with regards to the National Security Strategy:

“The Committee noted that in the absence of the National Security Strategy yet to be tabled in Parliament, the Ministry of Defence, the RFMF and the Fiji Police conducted their business with a degree of autonomy with minimal policy guidance from the Ministry.²

This is not the first time I have raised this issue in Parliament, Mr. Speaker, because this has come up consistently as part of the observation of the Committee when it meets with the Officials from the Ministry of Defence.

I would just like to ask the Government, in particular the Minister for Defence, when will we see in Parliament the tabling of a National Security Strategy because I believe in his Ministry, there is a dedicated office for that. I believe under the leadership of Brigadier Kalouniwai looking at it and something that has been worked at in the past with Commodore Teleni and also with Captain Natuva in the past.

We look to that day because I think it is important that our services are guided by that so there is a link between the Ministry looking after these Defence Services and the services themselves particularly with visibility. Parliament can have visibility in terms of where it is going, particularly guided by the laws that keep the Forces in place or have it, give it powers to exist for them to do their job. That is the first observation I make.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, recommendation three on page six of the Report states, and I read; “The Committee strongly recommends that the Ministry encourage positive engagements with the RFMF in tabling its first annual report. Also Mr. Speaker, this is not a new issue. I had raised this before in the House and also the Honourable Minister has also made comments on it in terms of the effort that has been put into it.

I had noted earlier that at that time when we had met with the Commander, he had expressed that the RFMF would like to engage in a special way with Parliament and its committees. You know, we expressed and intended that it would be a good thing but perhaps they could start by making sure they follow the reporting line to Parliament, through the reports of the RFMF to Parliament is tabled within Parliament and it has been a couple of years now.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to conclude this short intervention and make an observation. We have been debating a lot about COVID and it brings to the fore the role of the RFMF. They have been doing a lot of work and it has been a year now. Mr. Speaker, unfortunately there is a lot of confidence-building issues that needs to take place. I hope that those who are in command of the RFMF do that because there are in-built, structures in place, particularly through military co-operation.

Rebuilding confidence can be achieved through formal education and training, also within the Force particularly with the change of mission that they are conducting right now - helping our people through COVID - they need to be helped, they need to be trained and we need to reconnect that because there is a lot of concern and it is a reality.

Sometimes I think back because fingers are pointed at them badly and wrongly because Mr. Speaker, what needs to happen is that we need to look at their welfare. I suggested this two days ago, that an allowance be given to them because they have been working long hours. What about their morale? Their families are being left behind, I know that. I know that soldiers come from the villages in Tailevu and Naitasiri and go all the way to Nadi, spend two weeks, come back for two days and go back. What about a relook at a reconfiguration of our strategic reserve? Maybe not let RFMF become first response.

What about recruiting more health-qualified people to go up and then work in our frontline, relegating our soldiers to the back and have them deployed when it needs to be. I believe now, it becomes a precarious situation when they are being affected by the disease and thereby brings into question the issue of the first protection, and what kind of protection are we giving them and their families?

I am raising this, Mr. Speaker, because for the last two days, the first time I have been travelling back home at night and witnessing the police standing on the street. When our workers are tired and they have no incentive of working harder, mistakes will happen, but we need to look after them first and realise that they are only humans. So, let us look after them so that they can look after us and look after our families. I am suggesting that maybe, those of you in charge can have a relook at the role that the RFMF is playing and maybe not the first response but maybe as a dedicated strategic reserve for government so that they can influence the situation when they need to.

I take this time again to thank them most sincerely. I thank the police, I thank them every night as I go past because there is little many of us can do. I can do very much in terms of trying to look after them but government has that capacity. Please, look after their welfare, look after their collective need and their personal need. Also our health workers are being hit right now. When they are vulnerable, we are all vulnerable as a nation and I can only pray that we can do more for them so that they can look after us into the future.

With those comments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reiterate once again and I ask government particularly the Minister for Defence to bring the national security strategy to Parliament as soon as possible and we continue work with RFMF. I think confidence building is very, very important, that

they first get their Annual Report to Parliament because that is going to build a better relationship between the Force and the people that they have sworn to defend and look after.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister for Defence and Nation Security, you have the floor.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise before this august House to support and present a response to Parliamentary Paper No. 19 of 2020 which was on the Review Report of the Ministry of Defence, National Security Annual Report 2016-2017 as alluded to by Honourable Members who have contributed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I go to the recommendations, Recommendation 3 is on the RFMF, Recommendation 5 and 6 are on the Department of Immigration which is now separate from the Ministry of Defence but I will probably give some explanation as well, with the recommendations.

The RFMF again Mr. Speaker, Sir, as raised by the Honourable Tikoduadua. He very well understands and the same thing for the police, that the Commissioner of Police and Commander RFMF are given executive command powers by virtue of sections 129 and 131 respectively of the Constitution and of course they are entities on their own. Although they come under the Ministry of Defence, they become Chief Accounting Officers for their respective institutions. Let me just touch very quick on the National Security Strategy as highlighted. All the consultations have been completed and that has come to the National Defence and Security Council, it has gone into Cabinet and Cabinet is undertaking further consultations now before it again comes into the meeting for Cabinet endorsement.

Very quickly on the COVID-19 work for all the Defence personnel and the frontline workers. Government is taking their responsibilities seriously and giving them the best it can support within the resources that it has but this is not something new. The Honourable Member, knows it well that when it comes to situation as such, the three areas of needs, the task need, the individual need and the group needs. So, it is the task need that is important now for the country and of course the institutions are focusing on that. But we are giving them all the support and the necessary protective equipment as well to support them and the welfare and of course for their families as well.

We know the difficulties particularly in the quarantine areas where they stay with those that are there and then remain again for few days before they are finally cleared. They return to their families and back into the same cycle. This is a challenge and, of course, that is monitored closely by both institutions. I will go straight into the Recommendations, Mr. Speaker, Sir. On Recommendation 1, it is about the retention or perhaps the development of the staff of the Ministry. This is something that we take seriously. As alluded to by the Honourable Bulitavu, progressive steps have been taken to address the issues highlighted in these Reports.

I am happy to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that in terms of staff development through the Australian Defence Co-operation Scholarship, a total of four from the Ministry have successfully graduated with their Masters programmes in the areas of Intelligence, Security, Strategic Policy and Human Resources. We also allow our people to do further studies on their own, and of course, two officers have graduated with their Masters and Post Grad Diploma in Diplomacy and International Relations.

Recommendation 2: On the critical infrastructure, I will just briefly say that there is a Committee that is responsible for this. This is our many strategic asset that will have some implications on the security and the economic wellbeing of the nation, particularly in the area of oil

and petroleum, broadcasting and media, electricity and energy, water supply, sewerage and of course communications. So the Committee is working very closely to address these issues.

Recommendation 3: On the RFMF, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I am committed, and the commitment made by the Commander as well that they are working on their annual reports. I have been advised that they have completed the 2018-2019 and the 2019-2020 Reports. They are starting from the current and then working backwards and of course, to go back to 2014. They have made some progress. I think it will come to the Cabinet soon, but we have 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 already completed.

Recommendation 4: On SDGs, as alluded to by the Honourable Attorney- General, all the Ministries are aligning together with the National Development Plan and the SDGs in the areas that have some direct implications on the work they do and how it contributes to the overall outcomes, not only here, but global issues as well.

Recommendation 5: Let me just highlight that the issue here is, we have two systems. In Fiji it is alright, the computer captures all the payments that are made particularly for passports. What is mentioned in here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the outstanding amount of \$3 million, this is what is not captured in the system, but because it is done manually with our receipt, Embassies, High Commissions, Consular Offices, payments are done there but the current system, I am told, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Immigration is now also connects those who are serving from abroad.

Lastly, on Recommendation 6, Mr. Speaker, Sir, work permit, this perhaps is something because of the different systems in the Ministry as well because this involves Immigration, Tourism and Trade, and the Foreign Affairs as well, they are clearing the issues from 1980 to 2008 involving volunteers and of course, from 2009 to 2018 as well. I am advised that monthly reconciliation is also being carried out between the Department of Immigration and the Ministry of Economy, Sir.

So, very briefly those are the responses to this Report. I thank and acknowledge the Committee, and let me assure this august House, progressive steps have been taken to address the issues, findings and the recommendations. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir,

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Deputy Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence to speak in reply.

HON. DR. S.R. GOVIND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have any other comments to add, except to say that I would like to thank the Honourable Minister of Defence for providing important information on the recommendations. I would also like to thank the other Members who have actively contributed towards this motion.

Finally, I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the RFMF and the Fiji Police Force for the excellent work in providing security and helping hands, Ministry of Health in containing this severe pandemic.

HON. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I call upon Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to move his motion.

**REVIEW REPORT – PERFORMANCE AUDIT REPORT ON COORDINATION
OF ACTIONS ON ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

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

That Parliament debates the Review of the Performance Audit Report on the Coordination of Actions on Eliminations of Violence Against Women which was tabled on 27th May, 2020.

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

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to speak to his motion.

HON A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker Sir, the audit assess whether the implementation of the Women's Plan of Action, in particular its thematic area on the elimination of violence against women is effective and realizing the commitment from key stakeholders in upholding the relevant existing legislations and policies that impacts the issues surrounding violence against women and children.

Mr. Speaker Sir, Section 26 of the 2013 Fijian Constitution provides the Right to Equality and Freedom from Discrimination that signifies government's commitments to the Sustainable Development Goal Number 5 that is Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all Women and Girls.

Gender equality and women's development is one of the priority outcomes of the state. This has been imbedded from the previous National Plans namely the Roadmap for Democracy and Sustainable Development Plan 2010-2014 and now the 5-year and 20-year National Development Plan. It is important to note that the Fijian Government has made a number of international and regional commitments for gender equality through the:

- (1) Convention of Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW);
- (2) Beijing Declaration Platform for Action 1995;
- (3) Sustainable Development Goals; and
- (4) Revised Pacific Platform of Action.

The Committee notes the initiative taken by the Executive on the various policies developed such as the Fiji Police Force No Drop Policy, National Gender Policy and Fiji's Progress Report on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action which has been fairly implemented. However, there are further opportunities for improvements to allow for consistency in the review, the coordination process and identifying clear performance indicators that will administer and implement the underlying frameworks more proactively and effectively of CEDAW.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, violence against women and children is a pandemic that is globally recognised as a political, social and health problem and this is a grave violation of human rights. In Fiji, 64 percent of Fijian Women who have been in an intimate partner relationship experienced either physical or sexual violence or both by their husband or intimate partner in their lifetime.

This is almost double the global average. The most alarming reality is that although women and girls make up the majority of victims for sexual offences, there were processes that were not in accordance with the relevant guidance materials pertaining to the reduction of crime against women and children in Fiji. This includes the administration of the National Domestic Violence Free Helpline, Zero Tolerance Violence Free Community and the integration of key stakeholders working collaboratively such as the Fiji Police Force and the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee notes that Fiji has made its commitment in the Beijing Platform for Action 1995 which addresses the objectives and empowerment of all women. The implementation of this platform is the sovereign responsibility to each State. This has result in the implementation of the first Fiji Women's Plan of Action for the period 1999 to 2008 which served as a blueprint to integrate women and gender concerns and prompting gender equality in the development process.

It is anticipated that the National Plan of Action on the Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls will soon be finalised given the Zero Tolerance Violence Free Community evaluation has been completed and necessary standard operating procedures and policies will be reviewed proactively. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for this opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Members, the floor is now open for the debate on this motion and I give the floor to the Honourable Salote Radrodro.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the motion that is on the floor. I acknowledge the Auditor-General's Report that looked at the Performance Audit on the Coordination of Actions on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. The same report was being reviewed by the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and I thank the Chairperson for those introductory remarks.

Mr. Speaker, we, on this side of the House, have continuously highlighted that violence against women and I also would like to include children is a national crisis. If it was a disease, it would be like a pandemic. This is heightened, again, by the COVID-19 pandemic that we are face with right now, particularly in regards to the humanitarian crisis that has been brought about by COVID-19.

The Performance Audit by the Auditor-General is a welcomed report, particularly because the biggest performance indicators that we are faced with it right now is what is on the reality on the ground and that is the continuous, increasing violence against women and also against children. Even though we have all legislations that are in place, programmes and policies even though I believe there is no specific policy for the elimination of violence against women but I believe it is incorporated in the gender policy.

The main aim of this report by the Auditor-General having to report on the actions of the key stakeholders and that is the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, the Police Force and also according to this report on the Fiji Women Crisis Centre. These are the key three stakeholders that have been under review in this report.

The intention of the Performance Audit by the Auditor-General is to determine whether these three key stakeholders are achieving their objectives effectively, economically and efficiently to achieve their targeted objectives. Also in compliance with relevant legislations in regards to elimination of violence against women and children, Mr. Speaker.

The Committee have made recommendations and likewise the Auditor-General's Report have also made recommendations. The Auditor-General's Report have made 29 recommendations and also the PAC have made five recommendations based on their Review of the Performance Audit Report by Auditor-General.

I would like to highlight the five Recommendations by the Committee and the first one is, "The Committee notes the work in progress by the relevant agencies in combatting violence against women."

The Committee recommends that more emphasis needs to be placed on recommendations by the Office of the Auditor-General in order for agencies to achieve more success in achieving its targets on elimination of violence against women.

The second Recommendation, "The Committee also recommends that the relevant agencies share their data." This is a very important aspect, Mr. Speaker, and that is also one of the challenges faced by the key stakeholders.

The third Recommendation, "The Ministry of Women, Fiji Police Force and the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre to collaborate more closely", but the question here is, who is playing the lead role? I would like to believe that the Ministry of Women is playing the lead role in having to collaborate these agencies.

Mr. Speaker, the fourth recommendation is, "The Office of the Auditor-General to follow-up on this Performance Audit Report."

The fifth Recommendation is, "For the parliamentarians to have male advocates or male champions to champion these issues according to the Sustainable Development Goal." That is something that we have also requested from across this floor and at such a time like this, when we are faced with this crisis and the continuous rise in violence against women, I would implore that the Honourable Prime Minister himself be the key, the main male champion advocate in Parliament. Mr. Speaker, like you do so, Sir, for our Fight Against AIDS, I am requesting the Honourable Prime Minister to take up that role.

Mr. Speaker, we would need more to stand beside the Honourable Prime Minister and take forward the mantle in our fight against the violence against women and children and for that it requires political will...

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- We are already doing it.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- ... and that is why my plea to the Honourable Prime Minister that we do take up that recommendation which is being recommended by the Committee.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, the Report of the Auditor-General specifically highlighted that there are also opportunities to improve with regards to aligning to international and regional plans of action, institutional arrangements and resource management.

On that, Mr. Speaker, I would implore on the Honourable Attorney-General, the Minister for Economy, for him to be the second male champion advocate for elimination of violence against women because at the end of the day, we would need the resource, Mr. Speaker, to be able to really make a change.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I now give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation.

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I hear the Honourable Salote Radrodro calling on the Honourable Prime Minister to be a champion for the elimination of violence against women, so I will start there with the initiatives that the Honourable Prime Minister, under his leadership, has brought to this country in relation to the elimination of violence against women.

On that note, I will start on our first legal platform in 2009, the Domestic Violence Act. Fiji did not have any particular law relating specifically to Violence Against Women until the Honourable Prime Minister, under his leadership, brought this law into place.

The first legal platform in Fiji that this country has ever seen to address the issues that pertain to violence against women in this country. Apart from that, we all know that the basis of violence against women lies in gender inequality and I would like to highlight a few initiatives that the Honourable Prime Minister, under his leadership has initiated in the laws pertaining to gender in this country, not only pertaining to gender alone but in other sectors that impact on gender inequality.

The increasing of the marital age. Prior to the reform of marital laws in this country, girls as young as 13 years were getting married with the consent of their children. The Honourable Prime Minister changed that to 18 years, such that only an adult can get married.

Bringing us up to international standards. The recognition of *de facto* relationships in matrimonial issues prior to the reform around this law, it would not matter if you lived in a relationship for decades without getting married, as a woman, you would not be recognised if you separated, you went your own ways. You would not be recognised in the distribution of property that you would have amassed with your partner. The Honourable Minister changed that.

Up until 2018, women in this country, it did not matter if you had the qualifications to work in underground mines, as a woman you were not allowed to work in underground mines because the Mining Act specifically prohibited women from working in underground mines. The Honourable Minister in his leadership removed that.

Let us go on to rape and the laws surround it. Until the reforms that the Honourable Prime Minister brought to rape laws to this country under his leadership, a woman who has been raped, appearing in court, had to have her evidence corroborated by someone else in order for the court to take her evidence as true. The rules relating to corroboration were removed from our criminal laws under the Honourable Prime Minister's leadership.

Last year, Fiji launched a National Action Plan. The consultation phase for a National Action Plan to eliminate violence against women and girls. A whole of population, whole of government effort to eliminate violence, to stop violence before it started.

It was the Honourable Prime Minister who launched this. It was under his leadership. He launched this and not only that, through this Ministry we invited Members of the Opposition, each and every one of you to come to the launch and join hands with us, not only as a government but as a nation with our stakeholders to carry forward this important work for this nation, not a single male Member of Parliament, apart from the Honourable Professor Prasad showed up.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- I call on the Opposition Members to join hands with us, to join the Honourable Prime Minister in his leadership to take this forward as a nation.

On that note, I would like to turn to the Report before us and echo very loudly the Honourable Attorney-General's concerns on the role of the Auditor-General when we were debating the first report under the Schedule. I refer specifically to the Auditor-General's powers to carry out a Performance Audit under section 6A of the Audit Act which is already been read out by the Honourable Attorney-General and in particular the need to set out the specification for a performance audit and the objective of the same before the audit is carried out.

I also reiterate the very clear proviso the Auditor-General is not entitled to question the merit of policy objectives of Government and yet against that legal backdrop we see numerous findings and recommendations of the Auditor-General in their report questioning the merit of the policy objectives of Government, they stepped outside of the law. With all due respect, these are important matters that the Public Accounts Committee must pay regard to before considering matters that come before it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know about our shameful statistics on violence against women. We also know about the great work that Government has done since 2009. I use 2009 as a landmark in this country in relation to the elimination of violence against women because of the passing of our Domestic Violence Act, putting in place a strong legal platform complemented with firm policies and programmes which aim to eliminate violence from our society.

We also acknowledge the invaluable work and contribution of NGOs over the years, keeping Government in check and partnering with Government and development partners to help us as a nation reach our goal faster.

We further acknowledge the support of development partners and donor countries who have helped with financial and technical aid to further our aim. With such partnerships and efforts on foot, it is critical that the entire national machinery geared towards the elimination of violence against women be consistently monitored and evaluated to ensure that it remains focussed, relevant and effective in achieving our aim.

I, therefore, welcome the Committee's Recommendation 4 to ensure that a follow-up audit is conducted on the coordination of action on the elimination of violence. But I ask, that the audit stay within the legal premises set out under section 6A of the Audit Act.

I support Recommendation 2 that relevant agencies need to share data to effectively implement strategies to reduce violence against women. To that end, I would like to advise Parliament about a multi sector initiative on foot in establishing a Gender Based Violence (GBV) administrative data system. GBV administrative is data collected by service providers, such as health, police, social services, crisis centres and national helplines while they provide care and support to survivors of violence. This initiative attempts to consolidate multi sector standard operating procedures and would facilitate enhancement of a GBV administrative data system with the aim of creating a safety net of services for survivors of violence.

On Recommendation 5 for Parliamentary training, I would like to acknowledge the work of the Parliamentary Secretariat facilitating (technical glitch) and getting funding from Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Regional Strengthening Funds for 2021 to hold a two-day gender (technical glitch) for all MPs planned for October this year.

On Recommendation 3 that the Ministry of Women and the Fiji Police Force need to collaborate more, the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, in relation to the elimination of violence.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, you are well over time.

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- I have this to say, Sir, as a nation and as a Parliament, we must not limit ourselves to a limited number of partnerships. (Technical glitch) ... identify partnership with Fiji Women's Crisis Centre. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are lots of NGOs who do great work here and I acknowledge the work that they do and stress on the importance of

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, you are well over time. I call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to speak in reply.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would like to thank the Honourable Members who contributed and the Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation for clarifying the issues with regards to the Report.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote to note the content of the report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to move his motion.

REVIEW REPORT- PERFORMANCE AUDIT ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR PREVENTING CORRUPTION

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

That Parliament debates the Review Report on the Performance Audit on the Effectiveness of Institutional Framework for Preventing Corruption which was tabled on 28th May, 2020.

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

HON. SPEAKER.- I call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to move his motion.

HON A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Sir, corruption is understood to be an ancient problem which has continued to affect livelihoods. It is expected to continue with its devastating impact on the lives of all Fijians if it is not addressed strategically.

Since corruption has a long history, it was able to pollute the minds of many by offering opportunities for quick gains and luxuries on the expense of others. Fiji is in dire need of strategies to change mindsets against corruption. The country needs measures which can also nurture young minds to refrain from adopting the long-live corruption culture as a way of life, and at the same time rejuvenate a sense of passion, patriotism, justice, pride and honest commitment towards societal and national developments, benefiting all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Section 115(7) of the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji, the Section states that “In exercising its powers and performing its functions and duties, the Commission shall be guided by the standards established under the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC).”

For the information of all Honourable Members, Fiji acceded to UNCAC on 14th May, 2008, and the eight Chapters and 71 Articles of UNCAC act as the standard guidelines and benchmarks for FICAC. The document provides the necessary framework, which participating countries need to achieve as part of the anti-corruption agenda and work towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals which the UNCAC document as a guide, FICAC foresees the purpose a National Anti-Corruption Strategy, a document which will contextualize UNCAC adequately to the Fijian context. Furthermore, FICAC intends to take a lead role in compiling this essential strategic document with the assistance of its stakeholders and credible research institutions in the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the objective of the audit was to assess the legal and institutional framework for fighting corruption and the extent to which the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) has implemented its strategies towards corruption prevention in the Education Sector. It also assesses the effectiveness of the systems to prevent corruption in the disbursement of the Free Education Grant by the Ministry of Education.

The review made on the performance audit on the Effectiveness of the Institutional Framework for fighting corruption focuses on the preventative side of corruption. It is important to note that the overall audit, targeted the whole of Government level on the adequacy of the legal and institutional framework that establishes FICAC and provides the powers and resources to effectively carry out its function. The audit review also looked at the corruption preventative activities undertaken by FICAC.

In terms of the sector level, the audit focuses on corruption preventative mechanisms that were implemented by the Ministry of Education on the Free Education Grant. The audit scrutinized relevant activities that were recorded and documented that were maintained by the Ministry of Education with respect to Free Education Grant for 2014, 2016-2017 and 2018 Financial Year.

The Committee strongly encourages two respective agencies, those are the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts and FICAC to take responsibility on the concerns raised in this Report and work towards addressing them. The clarifications provided to the Committee revealed that the 2 agencies have taken onboard the recommendations provided by the Auditor-General and are taking necessary actions accordingly.

The Committee was advised that the Ministry of Education has reviewed the draft Education Act in consultation with the Solicitor General’s Office. However, there needs to be additional work done following the draft review and as part of its 2019-2023 Strategic Plan, the Ministry of Education wishes to carry out a review of the Education Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education needs to review and improve its 2017 School Management Handbook and incorporate all relevant provisions that will strengthen and meet the expectation/demand on the ground in relation to the gaps found. The Ministry needs to also strengthen its internal control systems and monitoring throughout its district offices and schools, as these will promote accountability and transparency in the administration of the Free Education Grant by the various school boards and management. Also, proper documentation and record management systems is important for all stakeholders and the Ministry needs to facilitate and assist the schools on this matter.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FICAC needs to continue to increase its publicity as the Free Education Grant Stakeholders, in its term of awareness to the Ministry of Education Officers based in the Districts, Divisions and schools in the rural and maritime zones.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for this opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on this motion. I give the floor to the Honourable Tabuya. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee and the Committee for the work that has been done.

In the Review Report on the Performance Audit of the Effectiveness of Institutional Framework for Preventing Corruption, the Chairperson has gone through the review of FICAC, so I will focus more on the issue of the Performance Audit by the Ministry of Education in Administration of the Free Education Grant.

Mr. Speaker, the biggest issues that have come out of this (and this is also in the recommendation) is the lateness of the receipt of this grant. I commend the Ministry of Education and the hardworking officials on the work they have done so far. In the years since 2014, we hardly have any cases of corruption or reported cases where teachers or administrators have abused this fund, it has been going for its purpose.

However, Mr. Speaker, as I had mentioned, the biggest issue they face is the lateness of the grant received by the schools. I give an example as recent as last year where a school received the grant way in to the school holidays after Term 3, but luckily they were Committee-run schools, so they had reserved funds to help the school to Term 3 but what about the Government schools who rely solely on this grant, how do they cope during this time?

Some issues of improvement, I think there are some sentiments from the Ministry officials, I think it comes late from the Government. So the Government could look into that in terms of ensuring that the schools receive the grant on time or before the beginning of the term so that the school can run efficiently.

The other issue, Mr. Speaker, is in Recommendation No. 3 which basically talked about the school which must have a Constitution and it did go on to suggest or recommend that for Committee-run schools, they should have the Treasurer and that Treasurer obviously is part of the School Management Committee be part of that make-up. But interestingly it does specify here where they have recommended to say that the school head, who is the Principal or the Head Teacher, on the School Management Committee does not have any voting rights in the Committee and to be an advisor to the Committee.

But what has happened, Mr. Speaker, the School Management Handbook, which was mentioned by the Chairperson, it is now made the Principal or the Head Teacher, the compulsory signatory to the school accounts. That is the change that the school has seen, so you have a treasure established under the Constitution and is recommended, and then you have the school handbook saying that the Principal is the compulsory signatory which prevails.

We need to look into that especially for Committee-run schools where they feel it is unfair because they raise their own funds apart from what the school grants - the free grant. So they also

raise their funds to run a school and so we need to look at that there is no overarching role by the Ministry over what the School Management Committee is doing.

Mr. Speaker, the other issue that I want to raise is Recommendation No. 10, which requires an AGM by the schools. They need to submit their audited financial report which is good before the grant is issued. Mr. Speaker, we hear of schools that have not conducted their AGMs, have not submitted but they are receiving their grants, so there needs to be the rule applied across-the-board for all schools to submit their audited financial reports before receiving the grant.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, we have been inundated with queries during this COVID period about our kids who are at home and they need worksheets for their online schooling, and this is a big problem. I know the Ministry is trying their hardest to have the worksheets handed out so they are turning to the committees of these schools for help because our children and the families are all struggling and the need to print out these worksheets and have these available for them is a problem, perhaps that is something for the Government to consider.

The \$50 assistance that was given to families at this time, and it is for over 18 years old, perhaps the need to consider that the school children receive this kind of assistance during this time to assist them with printing out these worksheets so that they will be able to have a proper online school during this time that we are all stuck at home and they all wish to learn. That is all I wish to contribute, Mr. Speaker and I commend the motion before the House.

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

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I endorse the recommendations made by the Committee in its Report and just going through those recommendations, I can see that many of those recommendations are being implemented by the Ministry of Education, so I fully support those recommendations.

However, the point that I want to make, Mr. Speaker, is the disgraceful and I would say 'shameful attack' on the Office of the Auditor-General by the Honourable Attorney-General from yesterday and disappointingly, I hear the Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation also joining the fray.

Mr. Speaker, the accountability in Government of the taxpayers' funds rests on the fundamental principle of the independence of the OAG. I have heard both of them talk about the Audit Act.

Mr. Speaker, the OAG as per the Constitution is appointed by the Constitutional Offices Commission, of which the Honourable Attorney-General is a member as well as the Constitution requires that the Constitutional Offices Commission consults the Minister for Economy or Minister for Finance. If you look at Section 152(5), the Constitution requirement is very clear that the OAG shall be independent and shall not be the subject to the direction and control or influence of any person.

Mr. Speaker, what I want to suggest to the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister Vuniwaqa is that, the OAG has the capacity when the Parliament approves the budget, that budget goes to the OAG, the OAG has complete independence in the hiring, firing, determination of staff as well as the scope of work that it does from its own perspective according to the Audit Act. If, for example, the ministers think that the OAG should not have done an audit at this point in time or that

point in time, they, Mr. Speaker, have the opportunity when the Report of the OAG is presented to Parliament, through you and the Minister for Economy, that Report goes to the PAC and the Ministers and Ministry staff have the opportunity to make their views known there and to give any impression. They could write to the OAG but coming here, in the Parliament, Mr. Speaker, and saying the OAG should not do this or should not do that, should have this process, I am sure the OAG and the people out there are qualified. They understand the Audit Act and once the Report is presented to Parliament, it should be left to the PAC and that is where the ministers and everybody else who has issues with the OAG and the content of the Report, should go there.

I think it is very saddening and disappointing to hear that Ministers come to Parliament and attacking the Office of the Auditor-General. We are absolutely doing the wrong thing. We are casting doubt on the independence of the Office of the Auditor-General. So, I would urge the Honourable Attorney-General to stop talking about what the Auditor-General should do and not do.

I remember four years ago he got the Auditor-General to appear and said that the report ought to be corrected in the Public Accounts Committee, so let us not kid ourselves. Let us leave the Office of the Auditor-General alone. We have an opportunity, there is a process to respond to the Auditor-General's Report and that is where it should be instead of using Parliament to attack the Office of the Auditor-General on what it should do or not do in terms of the audit. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to respond to the motion for debate on the floor in relation of the Review of the Performance Audit Report in regards to Ministry of Education's Free Education Grant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to start by responding to Honourable Tabuya on her queries on the late pay-out to schools. For the information of the House, the pay-out for any school depends on the number of students and as a requirement, and the school Head must update the information system on the number of students they have in their school. As soon as we get the class audit, grants are released to the school. It is all about compliance, Honourable Tabuya.

The second issue raised by Honourable Tabuya was the signatory. Yes, the 2020 Handbook has been changed to make the Head of School, the Principal signatory and that has been done to ensure that we have a civil servant managing Government's funds so that he or she would be more accountable. Previously, we had the school managers being principal signatories and we cannot hold them accountable for government funds. I do not want to quote cases that went before the court and individuals were acquitted because they were not civil servants and that has been done because of that.

On the third requirement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the said account is separate from the Committee funds and right now Government is funding 100 percent of the school operations. The committee with whatever money they raise, they use it for the infrastructure development together with the government funds because buildings still remain the property of school managements and committees, apart from the government schools.

All schools have surplus funds that is normally carried on to the new financial year and we encourage our school heads and management to be managing these funds more prudently, especially in these times. Even during this period with the schools closed, we have released 30 percent of the

grants so that utilities and ancillary staff continue to be paid and minor maintenance will continue to be done.

In terms of worksheets, Mr. Speaker, Sir, worksheets are not compulsory but we have advised our heads of schools that should parents contact them, they are responsible for ensuring that parents are provided with the necessary worksheets at the cost of the school. The committee, Honourable Tabuya, does not need to fork out from their funds to help pay for the printing of the worksheets.

Yesterday Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Kepa spoke about work that our children can do while they are still at home. Honourable Kepa and Honourable Members of the House, all students have textbooks that they have taken home when the schools closed and these textbooks are, of course, another resource material for them to carry out work at home. Please, let us not complicate things.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Free Education Grant is given to Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres, our primary schools and secondary schools as per student numbers. It is mandatory that the schools use these grants for the student teaching and learning purposes and I will be mentioning the various categories of grants that come with that. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the grant is used for administration, teaching learning resources, payment for ancillary staff, office operations, building and compound maintenance and recreational resources and facilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the audit report highlighted three broad issues: compliance, monitoring, awareness and training. All schools in Fiji use the Fiji Education Management Information System that we normally refer to as FEMIS to assist in the administration of this grant. The Ministry had the range of internal controls stipulated in the Handbook 2020, on FEMIS to prevent and respond to mismanagement of pay.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the specified percentage that must be spent on each of the funding categories provided to schools and specific grant payment conditions, must be met before we release the grant to schools in order to avoid non-compliance and any abuse of these funds. After all, as the Ministry we are given a lot of funding and we are accountable to our taxpayers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has taken a stringent approach by not only centralising the school grants when these conditions are not met and these schools normally operate by requesting the Ministry to process payments, et cetera. Of course, we have referred cases to FICAC for further investigations. Today, we have 19 primary schools and 18 secondary schools that are centralised. We manage the grants of the Headquarters but the school operations continue, and when we are assured that all compliances have been met, we release the grants to schools.

The School Handbook 2020 has been revised and this has been done to exactly do that to ensure greater compliance, greater clarity on the roles of the school managements, school heads and other stakeholders. Mr. Speaker, Sir, school committees previously used to raise funds through fees, fundraisings, et cetera, now, the Government takes control of all the school expanses. We wanted our civil servants to be held responsible for the management of these funds that is why we now have the school principal as the signatory.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FEMIS is an effective platform for the Ministry to improve monitoring and compliance of these funds. And we have made significant changes to our finance module, and this includes automation of payment of school grants from FEMIS to 2020, the automation of grant calculation ensures that only eligible students are taken into account and grants are accurately paid out. From January, 2021, the Ministry has also automated the school bank reconciliation in FEMIS.

This started with the secondary schools and we will be rolling it this out in primary schools later this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this should provide a higher level of assurance in the grant acquittals prepared by the schools. From January 2021, Asset Register has been implemented in FEMIS and the Ministry has done away with paper and manual reporting. We have introduced a

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, you are well over time.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank the Standing Committee for this Report.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Honourable Attorney-General.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Just very quickly, Honourable Professor Prasad is getting all excited but the point of the matter is that, you have independent offices, all independent offices actually are created through law and the law sets out the mandate of that particular independent organisation and sets out the parameters within which that independent organisation should operate within.

I read on earlier on this morning about the powers of the Auditor-General and what he can do and cannot do. The law is quite clear, I urge Honourable Prasad to read the law, I do not want to regurgitate that. But by questioning the Auditor General's reports, which is what we are free to do here – that is what we are debating, does not mean there is interference with the Auditor General's work.

The Auditor General, of course, in order to maintain its integrity and “*mana*” if you like or independence, should follow the law; it is not following the law. It is also not in a very transparent manner, carrying out any SOPs available to all the organisations it actually audits. That is the point. They should do that. And any audit organisation, whether it is the Auditor General or auditors outside, governed by the auditor's guide manual by FIA will tell you that there needs to be complete transparency when you carry out audits.

What we have also pointed out earlier on, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you cannot have this performance assessments carried out willy-nilly. Any auditor will tell you when you go and audit you actually have an entry interview and you have an exit interview. Unfortunately, this Auditor-General has decided not to participate in these interviews. He does not come in. He said there is a conflict of interest. When previous Auditor-Generals all used to go and meet up with the Permanent Secretaries or the Permanent Secretaries used to go and meet up with the Auditor-General, this one has decided not to.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to point out that this particular Report of the Auditor-General saying “Performance Audit of Effectiveness of Institutional Framework for Preventing Corruption”. In the assessment, it has not even looked at the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), it has not even mentioned the UNCAC which Fiji has ratified unreservedly. It has not mentioned that Fiji actually has put itself up for the peer review where other countries come and assess our compliance with UNCAC - no mention of that.

The question that I am also asking, Mr. Speaker, is how has the Auditor-General, in his wisdom, decided to choose Ministry of Education? Why did he not choose Ministry of Forests for this? Why did he not choose Ministry of iTaukei Affairs for this or choose some other organisation?

Obviously, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also a confusion in the Auditor-General's Office about auditing finances and also auditing performance. They are mixing it all up.

If you look at this particular Ministry of Education, there are Financial Audits and then there are Performance Audits also, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would just like to very quickly highlight, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and unfortunately I think the PAC did not probably thoroughly look at this, there are areas in which they have gone into policy. As I read out this morning, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Auditor-General, under Section 6A, Honourable Prasad, get your lawyers to advise you on this – Power to conduct performance audit - if you actually read it ...

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- I have got better advice. Read the Constitution.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- ... it says:

“(5) Nothing in this section entitles the Auditor-General to question the merit of policy objectives of the Government.

(6) In this section-

“policy objectives” includes –

- (a) a Government policy direction of a Minister;
- (b) a policy statement in a budget paper;
- (c) a statement of objectives in a corporate plan approved by a Minister;
- (d) any other document evidencing a policy decision of the Government or a Minister.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every single Audit Report that has been sent to our office I am legally obliged to table it in Parliament and I do that. There is no interference. No one is questioning that. But I am questioning the quality of the Report. I am asking Parliament to consider the quality of these reports, and unfortunately, there has been a derogation in the application of the audit rules as set out under the law and there has been no transparency in that.

Earlier on, I informed Parliament about the SDG Assessment. How can you carry out an SDG Assessment when it has just been approved by the UN Council and all the countries have been given six months by the end of 2017 early 2018, and 2018 you start it and then you stop it. Then in 2019 you pop up again and you say “We have done this, give us your comment.” How can you measure that? How can you audit that?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point I also wanted to make very quickly and I think this is quite interesting because they talked about corruption, in an exchange of press statements that were issued between the Office of the Auditor-General and FICAC, it says and I will read it very quickly, Mr. Speaker, Sir,

“The Office of the Auditor-General has claimed that the Commission's (FICAC's) findings that the OAG relied on a single office of the Ministry of Industry and Trade for inspection are incorrect. We wish to reaffirm that, that was the correct position reflected in the Auditor-Generals documents obtained through a search warrant and later confirmed by the officer responsible for the audit in his interview with FICAC.

The interview verbatim is available as proof of that fact. FICAC further wishes to clarify the Commission's inquiry was of a criminal nature and under the Criminal Procedure

Act, there was no requirement to obtain any formal comment from the Auditor-Generals office. FICAC acted under the powers given to the Commission in requiring a public servant to answer relevant questions. ...” This is very interesting.

“Further, when FICAC requested for the relevant documents from the Office of the Auditor-General with a search warrant in the first place, the FICAC Officer was told that the documents were not available in the Office of the Auditor-General. When FICAC conducted a prompt inquiry again, it was found that the relevant documents were in fact still available with the Office of the Auditor-General contrary to the initial claim and the documents were then released to the Commission. This has not only misled the Commission but also delayed the enquiry”.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the FICAC had actually issued the initial statement the Office of the Auditor-General said, and I quote:

“We would like to remind, it says, in addition, the Auditor-General also responsible for the audit of the financial statements of the Commission. It is a threat. You make any comments we will come and audit you”.

This is what FICAC says. Lastly, the Commission fails to understand the relevance of the statement the Auditor-General is also responsible for the audit of the financial statement of the Commission as it is out of context. FICAC respects the function of the Auditor-General under the Constitution, the Commission will always accommodate the audit as long as the Office of the Auditor-General acts within its legal mandate. Unlike the audit enquiry conducted on the tender issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reality of the matter is that, the Office of the Auditor-General can do its work but it must follow the law, it must follow what good Office of the Auditor-General does, it must follow the Constitution and therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it must develop relationship. I would like to reiterate with all the agencies. What is the purpose of carrying out audit? The purpose of the audit is to carry out and see how Government money, our taxpayers funds have been spend by Government, do they stick to the policy? Then that is not it, that is not it. It goes to Public Accounts Committee, they have inquiries, they identify the gaps and the idea is to make sure it does not become an ongoing problem, to stop the gap so we get unqualified reports by the Office of the Auditor-General, it would be a wonderful thing, that is what we want. That is the whole objective of getting audits done. So eventually none of the taxpayers’ funds are in anyway lost, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, to speak in reply.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, I would like to thank all Honourable Members who have actually contributed towards the debate and I have no further comments.

HON. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote to note the content of the report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I call upon on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to move his motion. You have the floor

**CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – SUGAR RESEARCH
INSTITUTE OF FIJI 2008-2015 ANNUAL REPORT**

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Report on the Review of Sugar Research Institute of Fiji 2008-2015 Annual Report which was tabled on 1st September, 2020.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to speak to his motion. You have the floor.

HON. V. NATH.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs tabled its Consolidated Review Report of the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji 2008 to 2015 on 1st September, 2020.

The Committee visited the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji (SRIF) Headquarters earlier in 2020 to be able to better understand the development that has taken place since 2015. Honourable Members had an opportunity to meet with SRIF officials, as well as visit some of its model farms. SRIF was established with the intention of providing research, development and extension services in the sugar industry.

After meeting with the Officials and visiting the farm, it became very clear that SRIF plays a very important role in the sustainability of the sugar industry. Honourable Members agreed that there is a need for strong collaboration between all stakeholders involved with the institute, especially the Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC), as well as acknowledged the importance of timely funding received by SRIF to facilitate their research and experiments.

During its presentation, SRIF officials highlighted the challenges they face when introducing new varieties and the Committee felt that SRIF must engage in vigorous outreach programmes to raise awareness and educate farmers on the various services provided by SRIF. Constant education, guidance and motivation for farmers on benefits of diversifying into projects like inter-cropping and its impact of soil health is of great importance.

Despite the challenges faced by SRIF, the Committee appreciated the key achievements over the years which included commencement of technology transfer, setting up of disease control and productivity unit and GIS Pilot Project.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee acknowledges and appreciates the importance of SRIF's contribution towards the progression of the sugar industry. However, the challenges faced by SRIF during the period under review hindered their ability to achieve maximum potential.

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

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on this agenda item and I give the floor to the Honourable Gavoka. You have the floor.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Let me start by conveying a plea from the landowners in Nadi to the Honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Honourable Prime Minister. If the funds that are held in trusts by their children under 18 years, their share of the proceeds from the

leases, held with Home Finance, could be used during this period in some way to help during these difficult times. So Mr. Speaker, that is a plea from them and I am making it on their behalf to the Honourable Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, on the Report, I would like to speak briefly on Recommendation 4. The Committee further recommends consistency in educating, guiding and motivating farmers on the benefits of inter-cropping and its impact on soil health.

Mr. Speaker, inter-cropping is the way to go with the cane farmers. Speaking with some of the major cane farmers, they say that a cane farmer can live on a daily basis from the proceeds of the other crops, the cash crops and the cane proceeds can go straight into fixed deposits. That is the model that many have used over the years and over here, the Committee is encouraging this on the part of SRIF.

Mr. Speaker, I have been speaking this week about the villagers who have been farming on a subsistence basis. They would benefit greatly from assistance from SRIF to determine what they can grow in the land that they owned on a traditional basis. I even go as far as to say, Mr. Speaker, the time should come or is coming when SRIF should be all part of agriculture.

The research in sugar should be all encompassing and that it should be integrated to the other research activities in the Ministry of Agriculture. The Honourable Minister for Agriculture was talking about the output from non-sugar at about \$600 million. Imagine if the 13,000 active cane farmers and the 1500 villages are active in production of non-sugar produce with the assistance and intervention from the Ministry of Agriculture which includes research.

Mr. Speaker, I remember a time when I was a cane farmer once and the research station would know exactly the kind of soil in every area in the Western Division and I believe this is also true for Macuata. I mean, that was the extent on the depth of their research and that is what we need, Mr. Speaker.

Also, Mr. Speaker, on Recommendation 5, the Committee notes the need for qualified personnel in specialised areas and proper facilitation and the like. During the consultation on Bills No. 19 and 20 on sugar, Mr. Speaker, in the last Parliament, I was part of the consultation and some farmers have said that SRIF should come under one of the universities to strengthen its research capabilities. I think that is one thing that we should also consider as you develop agriculture we need qualified people to strengthen research if it comes under one of the universities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in many areas the quality, the health of the soil has been badly impacted and they need intervention by scientist, proper research. Let me give you an example. In the Sigatoka area, in Volivoli, we used to produce some of the best sweet potatoes in Fiji, today they do not and I ask them why the soil quality, something has happened to the soil quality. Are they not doing a research?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you remember the old days when we used to drive through Wainibuka, the old days of gravel road and we went through the rivers there and the banana plantation. You drive there now, you ask the question what happened to all the bananas?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is what I am saying, as we move away, as we move towards better production

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- As we move toward better production these are the crops that we used to produce in good numbers but we have lost focus, Mr. Speaker, Sir. COVID-19 is teaching us to relook at the model that we are using and it is time that we revisit, we go back on our strength. Where are all the bananas? Where are all the sweet potatoes? Why cannot they grow more crops? Mr. Speaker, Sir, research with SRIF can play a big role in this.

I would strongly advise the Honourable Minister for Agriculture to consider what I am saying here today because, Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday, we highlighted the fact with FDB now, I think we missed this point yesterday, they can now lend money to people who do not formerly own the land. If you have been farming on that land for quite some time, they have a facility now to lend money to help on that farm.

Most of these traditional landowners, it is subsistence farming, they have been farming it for generations. They can be assisted through the FDB but they need intervention from good research, they need intervention from equipment and good husbandry, production will increase, as I said last night. This \$600 million that the Honourable Minister is talking about, if you do this well, you will see nothing there. It can be improved significantly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we are depending on these soil, looking at SRIF because right now, the perceptions of SRIF in some farmers, is not very positive. Some of our soil are continuing crop in a cane, some of our soils have gone 40 years without being replanted. I think more than 40 years. That is an indication of what can be done and what I am saying here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is look beyond sugar, look after SRIF but extend its responsibilities to also non-sugar crops.

With that Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am grateful to the Committee and I was part of the Committee and a very exciting Committee, going around to the cane farmers and also considering the possibilities in other areas.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. We will move on to the next speaker. I call on the Honourable Prime Minister.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to speak in support of the motion on the Consolidated Report of the Standing Committee on the Review of Sugar Research Institute of Fiji 2008–2015 Annual Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, I must commend the valuable contribution of the staff and board of the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji since its inception in 2006. Pursuant to the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji Act 2005, SRIF is mandated to provide research, development and extension services and transfer of information and technology to growers that enhances productivity, profitability and sustainability of the industry. In 2010, the extension services component was transferred and now remains with the Fiji Sugar Corporation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, SRIF currently consists of 24 professional staff, one executive and 57 support staff regularly working in the field for cane plant breeding, planting and maintaining trials, disease trials and surveillance, fertiliser trials, assist in technology transfer and working to ensure the sugar industry is safeguarded against pest and diseases in all mill centres.

After 12 years to 15 years of continuous research and trials, the Institute released Qamea and *viva* cane varieties in 2014. These varieties have a minimum of 80 tonnes per hectare of potential yield. In the same year, SRIF attained certification under the Australian Soil and Plant Analysis

Council, quality control assurance scheme for its laboratory analysis. Additionally, the Institute ascertained the commencement of technology transfer and the setup of disease control and productivity unit. Amongst the Institute's recent development also include, the establishment of the tissue culture laboratory in Lautoka and chemistry laboratory in Labasa.

The Farmer Outreach Programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has a vital role in raising awareness and educating farmers on the use of quality seed cane, weed control with the theme of “zero tolerance to weed”, application of recommended rates of fertiliser, varietal spread, demonstration of farm mechanisation such as planter, boom sprayer and fertiliser applicator.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to-date SRIF has developed 19 different early mid and late maturing cane varieties. While growers in Viti Levu mostly plant *mana*, those in Vanua Levu prefer *naidiri* variety due to the climate and soil conditions. Despite this, SRIF in collaboration with FSC, is demonstrating trials to growers to illustrate the benefits of improved varieties. The target is to increase early mid-maturing varieties to 30 percent in Viti Levu by 2025 from the current ratio of 7 percent. This year, SRIF will undertake large mill trials for a new cane variety. Once successful, the new variety will be released to our farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FSC restructured its Extension Division last year and appointed dedicated farm advisors who will the Sugar Research Institute boost its farmers' outreach programme. The farmer-field school concept will be introduced and an estimated 3,500 growers will participate in this initiative.

We have trained 230 productive growers as lead farmers, who are now assisting in knowledge transfer to young and new growers. Sir, SRIF is also preparing to launch training programmes on best management practice for new lead *iTaukei* and female farmers. The Sugar Research Institute will now work towards improving its database to ensure information gathered can be used to promote women growers in the industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the strategies of the industry is to improve growers' income through intercropping which is an integral part of the farming system to enhance soil health. Sir, SRIF and FSC are in discussions with the Ministry of Agriculture to jointly carry out and demonstrate intercropping of cane with non-sugar crops, such as watermelon, long bean, cucumber and cow peas.

As part of soil improvement initiative, the Institute together with FSC has rolled out the green-manuring technology. So far, 174 growers have planted cane using green-manuring crop namely, black gram.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to earlier, the industry is faced with emerging challenges of climate change of either extreme rainfall or prolonged drought. Inadequate rainfall hinders both, the germination and growth of the crops. To ensure consistent and adequate water or supply to cane crops, SRIF with the support from the European Union had engaged Pacific Grow, a company specialised in irrigation, to carry out feasibility studies on water sources and benefits of irrigation in sugarcane farming.

The recommendation of the Report included the use of water tanks. Water tanks with drip irrigation, lift irrigation, water irrigation with parting network and recharging boreholes and water tables. The Report will be discussed with the Ministry of Waterways for possible implementation in the future.

In terms of plans, a subcommittee consisting of heads of all industry institutions is jointly developing a Five-Year Crop Development Plan that will be implemented for the sustainability of

the sugar industry.

Mr. Speaker, the Sugar Research Institute's line of work is highly technical and continues to face difficulties in recruiting capable staff due to the lack of qualified technical expertise locally in the areas of cane plant breeder, entomologist, agronomist and plant pathologist. Nonetheless, Mr. Speaker, with the appointment of a new board and a newly appointed Chief Executive Officer, I am expecting even better results from the Institute. Based on these remarks, I therefore support the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I now give the floor to the Honourable Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to speak in reply.

HON. V. NATH.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, very correctly picked up by Honourable Gavoka, a former Member, his contribution that the pH of any soil is important whether it is vegetable farming or sugar cane. So, in that contest he rightfully pointed that out.

Geographically, we already have the area by pH, the Minister for Agriculture probably has a better understanding of that and he will explain it later. The fact that people know that the pH of their area, that is why normally stick to the crops which they harvest and the plant and vice versa. So, looking at that, it is very important that SRIF has taken that initiative of finding the pH of the soil, same for the Ministry of Agriculture has started doing that in the Central Division and I thank the Honourable Minister for that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to correct Honourable Professor Prasad, he earlier mentioned that the Report, please allow me, Ministry of Sugar Industry 2012 and 2016 Annual Report, page 7, in Table 1.2.3. If you read properly, Honourable Member, it is written there 'FY' which is Financial Year. The report which we have tabled is for the financial year and not calendar year, so this is perfectly alright. This is a bipartisan Report, Sir. You always try to look at the negative part of it. Stop doing that. You can always praise this like how your friend, Mr. Prem Singh used to do. He was a very instrumental Member of this Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you very much for giving me the opportunity.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note, we will take a break and resume proceedings in half-an-hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 5.04 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 5.34 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the agenda. I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, to move his motion. You have the floor.

**PERFORMANCE REVIEW REPORT – AUDIT ON THE MANAGEMENT OF THE
WORKERS COMPENSATION TRUST FUND, AUDIT OF THE SOCIAL WELFARE
SCHEME AND AUDIT OF THE FIJI PROCUREMENT OFFICE AND THE
CONSTRUCTION IMPLEMENTATION UNIT**

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

That Parliament debates the -

- (1) Review of the Performance Audit Report on the Audit of Management of the Workers Compensation Trust Fund;
- (2) Audit of Social Welfare Scheme; and
- (3) Audit of the Fiji Procurement Office (FPO) and the Construction Implementation Unit

which was tabled on 1st September, 2020.

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

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to speak on his motion.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, firstly the audit on the Management of Workers Compensation Trust Fund is the responsibility of the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations. The provision of the Social Welfare Scheme is the responsibility of the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation and the Ministry of Economy is responsible for the Fiji Procurement Office and the Construction Implementation Unit.

At the outset, Mr. Speaker, the contents of the Performance Audit Report on the three key audit areas were thoroughly examined and scrutinised by the Committee prior to the scheduled public hearings being conducted with the relevant agencies as stated earlier. The compilation of this Report were carried out through the Committee hearings, collection of evidence and information of individual files, access to database, review of the individual Ministry’s Standard Operating Procedures and establishing whether compliance to the relevant legislations and regulations were adhered to.

For the information of all Honourable Members, the Committee took note of the performance audit that was also conducted for the Rotuma Government Subvention Fund – Council of Rotuma. The funds are allocated to meet the Council’s operational costs as well as the funding of development projects. Given that there was no Council during the time of the audit, the Committee has noted the audit findings and strongly recommends that the current Council takes note of the audit recommendations and take necessary action in addressing it.

On the Audit on Management of Workers Compensation Trust Fund, Mr. Speaker, the overall objective of the audit was to assess the effectiveness of the Workmen’s Compensation Unit under the Occupational Health and Safety Division of the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial

Relations in the processing of the Workmen's Compensation payments for the period August 2017 to May 2018.

The audit had examined a total of 84 compensation case files of which 48 were sector injury cases, 17 were government injury cases, two private death cases and 17 government death cases. Payments were made during the period of this review amounting to \$1.4 million.

Another 86 files were separately considered for detailed testing of the IT system to ascertain whether the database is updated and all the information is captured. A total of 81 withdrawals had been made between the period of 2016 and 2018 totalling \$67,422 for dependents trust fund bank accounts were separately reviewed.

Secondly, on the audit of Social Welfare Scheme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it focussed on assessing the effectiveness of the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation in compiling with the Standard Operating Procedures for the process of applications under the Social Welfare Scheme for the period August 2017 to July 2018.

At the time of audit, the Department of Social Welfare administered Fiji's recently reformed programmes which includes the Social Pension Scheme, Poverty Benefit Scheme, Child Protection Allowance and the Food Voucher Programme for rural pregnant mothers. In managing this programme, the Department is responsible for ensuring meeting these needs of those and eliminating corruption and fraud in the system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the audit of Fiji Procurement Office and the Construction Implementation Unit, the overall objective was to determine whether the Fiji Procurement Office (FPO) and the Construction Implementation Unit (CIU) are complying with the Fiji Procurement Regulations 2010, the Procurement (Amendment) Regulations 2012 and the Standard Operating Procedures and relevant guidelines. However, the audit only covered two main phases of procurement of capital construction works delivers and those are the Tender Process Phase and the Construction Phase.

A key detailed finding of the various initiatives undertaken by the respective Ministries in ensuring the Government's commitments towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals are reflected in the Report and are reported accordingly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Workmen's Compensation Unit of the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations consistently paid *bona fide* workers compensation claims in correct amounts. However, the progress of cases are not properly tracked to ensure that the processes are completed within the approved timeframe.

Furthermore, based on the audit conducted for the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, it can be inferred that the internal controls for processing and documenting applications for the various welfare schemes should be improved.

The examination of the FPO and CIU in all material respects have complied with the Fiji Procurement Regulations 2010, Procurement (Amendment) Regulation 2012, Standard Operating Procedures and related guidelines. Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few comments, I thank you for this opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Chairperson. Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on this motion, and I give the floor to the Honourable Leawere. You have the floor.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to contribute very briefly on the motion at hand and I thank the Chairperson and Members of the Committee for highlighting and compiling this Report. I need not go into details because as we are all aware that this is a Report that is a few years down the line but there are issues which I think for the purpose of this Report and to highlight it in this House, it is on the audit, on management of the Workers’ Compensation Trust Fund.

The Committee found out that the progress of cases is not effectively tracked to ensure that the processes are completed within the approved timeframe, and we hope that with these number of years, the responsible Ministry, especially the Ministry of Employment will have identified whatever there is to be done, so that they have a taskforce which had identified about 3,276 pending cases and these consist of 2000 plus injury cases and 397 death cases.

There were delays in enforcement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to provisions of Section 14(1) and (2) of the Act. However, with the ACCF in place, we hope that those pending cases, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will be dealt with in a timely manner. Also, the other issue is on the Standard Operating Procedures for the Ministry. We hope that these and the guidelines that are there should be a guiding light for the Ministry in order to process the cases but that was then but now it is now with the ACCF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another issue which I would like to highlight this evening is the inconsistency in data entry and this is why it is important to hire the right person for the position to avoid such anomalies in the future, and we hope and as I had alluded to, those have been taken care of.

There were some Committee recommendations and I hope that the Ministry has rectified the discrepancies that existed and one of which is the processing of our cases which should be effectively tracked and the Ministry should strictly adhere, as I have said, to standard operating procedures and all consultations on the Fiji Impairment Guide, the Work Care Guide are completed and endorsed by Cabinet. The Workmen’s Compensation Unit upgrades the information, Mr. Speaker, Sir, especially in technology systems to capture, generate and evaluate data which are crucial to appropriate correct compensation to be given out to the workers that are affected.

On the Social Welfare Scheme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee identified the following that the Ministry of Women re-engages in a Memorandum of Agreement with the Fiji National Provident Fund to verify the identity of the recipient to ensure that no person double dips into the system and that brings into mind what I had said yesterday, the need for Navua to also have a Fiji National Provident Fund Centre and also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Women, Culture and Poverty Alleviation to review and amend their SOPs for the various Social Protection Programme.

The Honourable Minister she spoke about the Elimination of Violence Against Women. The other issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is on the Procurement Office. What the Ministry found is that the time limitation of the projects should be strengthened considering the current situation in Fiji, Fiji Procurement Office to come up with a contingency plan on the tender process and the procurement process.

Also in line with the CIU with FPO to revise the current staffing structure as then, there were 23 vacant positions captured in the Audit Report and this did not show a very good reflection of these two sections. Setting deadlines Sir, as a whole must be thoroughly adhere to according to section 30.1 of the Procurement Amendment Regulation 2012 which states that that “a tender must be called for the procurement of goods, services or works, very realistic \$50,000 plus or more. Timeliness and meeting these areas are needed to have a compliant and transparent system in place.

Before I conclude, there are two issues that I wish to highlight and these are the forced vaccination of workers. We have been told that some of us are being forced to be vaccinated or if they do not agree they are dismissed and this is not a very good sign on government if this is happening, and we hope that this should stop because the people of Fiji should have the right, freedom to come forward and be vaccinated.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the teachers, we have been told that some teachers are told to give \$50 each by the Ministry of Education, and I hope that it is not true, and if it so ...

HON. R. S. AKBAR.- Honourable Member, get your facts right.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- ... to stop this immediately. On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I once again thank the Committee for the Report and also the Office of the Auditor-General and for their findings.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I wish to thank the Honourable Members of the Committee as well. I am reading, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to make a point of clarification. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are three recommendations and I wish to state to this honourable House that all those recommendations are in place now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the latest update now as at 31st May, 2021, the Ministry has set 2,537 cases of which 2,309 was injury and 228 death cases which is equivalent to 77 percent of the total pending cases.

As we are all aware, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that now these responsibilities have shifted to ACCF. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is fully committed to clear the remaining 23 percent, after all the due process are met.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. I give the floor to Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we recognise the need to reform the information system on which our social protection mechanism sits. Having to deal with over 84,000 beneficiaries who are being paid every month, digitalisation is the only way to make our system efficient.

In that regard, I advise this august House that there is already a reform on foot after a financial risk assessment was carried out in 2019, where the Australian Government has stepped in together with the Government of Fiji in financing a new IT system that they take into account the recommendations of the Committee inclusive of the revision of SOPs to ensure more efficient, effective delivery of the payments to our over 80,000 beneficiaries.

In summary, the core components of the entire programme will be to design, develop and implement an integrated social protection information system. The SOPs will also be enhanced to incorporate the reengineered procedures consistent with the new information system. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is on foot and the timeline for that is to be completed within two years. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. I now give the floor to the Honourable Attorney- General.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I will just speak on the last two aspects of the Report. The Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation and the Honourable Minister for Employment have covered the other two aspects.

The second two aspects, of course, the last two, I should say - CIU and Fiji Procurement Office. Suffice to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that since this Report was compiled, in fact, during the Report, we have already started, for example, through Procurement Office e-tendering and through the e-tendering system, there is, of course, less human intervention, you do not need as many people, therefore, there has been a restructure in terms of the personnel that is required in FPO. The e-portal has strengthened the transparency and accountability, and in the past few months, Mr. Speaker, Sir, FPO has also moved to e-valuation, a component of the e-tender system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now, we have got considerable effort has been made to disclose information to the public through our websites. Quarterly information of Government tenders are available publicly now. In addition, information of approved tenders are available in our e-tender system as soon they are approved so you can see that, members of the public can see or should be able to see who has actually got a particular tender. This effort has contributed in Fiji improving its public expenditure and financial accountability rating and procurement to B from D, used to sit at D, now it is on B.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, similarly, we have established a specific team in June of last year to review risks at tender stage and carry out compliance check on payments that go to the Government Tender Board to strengthen procurement compliance. We now have a team that is established to be on call to assist during disasters, they assist the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) with procurement and logistics during disasters. They are currently being used in the COVID-19 operations to assist those in quarantine and in lockdown areas also because there is quarantine and indeed procurement requirements too.

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, CIU has got what we call the ‘PM Web’. I have on several occasions invited Members of the other side to come to CIU to see how they do the rebuild programme, there is actually a situation room. Unfortunately, none of the Members of the Opposition have come to see how it operates. I still urge them to come and see that.

The PM Web now has every single document in respect of a tender that has been awarded for construction, concept design, stage report, development design report, full documentation prior to tender, all correspondences raised by parties during and after tender advertisement, contract management, financial management, asset management, project closure reports.

The PM Web also records office rental and Government quarters’ details including details for Help for Homes and Home Care Initiatives undertaken by Government. I wanted to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, CIU has been outsourcing a lot of Government constructions. That is why you see lot of it happening simultaneously.

But I just wanted to highlight, for example, in the Auditor General's Report, on page 25 they make an observation and it says: "the actual time taken at the preparation of contract document stage is noted to be significant, and varies considerably between projects. It can be as swift as four days and can prolonged as much as 97 days. We note that this is the only stage in the whole process from tender calling stage to construction stage that is not governed or guided by a standard turnaround time to complete the task."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, such observations are extremely representative of a lack of understanding. If we are going to build a standardised two-bedrooms Government quarters, the contract for that will be very basic and it will be applicable across Fiji. But if you are going to build, for example, a maternity hospital or a hospital in Navosa, or if you are going to build a police station, depending on the size of the contract not just the dollar value but the requirements of that, obviously the contracts will take much longer. So you cannot have an SOP in respect of turnaround times of contracts because it depends on the complexity of the contract itself.

I think there needs to be an understanding of it but I think for the Members, again I would like to urge them, to please if they want to come and see the situation room, come and see that (the CIU) and they will get a better understanding of what is happening in terms of accountability of construction and of course the Fiji Procurement Office. Thank you very much.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to speak in reply.

HON A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I take this opportunity to thank all the Members who have actually contributed with regards to this motion.

Question put

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to move his motion.

REVIEW REPORT – FIJI AIRPORTS 2017 ANNUAL REPORT

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, I move:

That Parliament debates the Report on the Review of Fiji Airports 2017 Annual Report which was tabled on 2nd September, 2020.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak on his motion.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Fiji Airports is a fully Government-owned Commercial Company which was established on 12th April, 1999 under the Public Enterprises Act 1996. Its core responsibilities are to:

- Carry out international, domestic and outer island airport operations, maintain and manage infrastructure assets under safe, reliable and efficient best practice principles;

- Carry out Air Traffic Management in the Nadi Flight Information Region and Fiji's Upper Airspace of 6 million square kilometers;
- Provide world class customer experiences to its passengers;
- Provide reasonable returns to its shareholders; and
- Continually invest and develop its ATM facilities, terminal and airfield pavement infrastructure to safe, reliable and world class standard.

The Committee, upon being referred the Fiji Airports Annual Report 2017, was unable to conduct a face-to-face public hearing due to COVID-19 restrictions around the country. In order to comply with health directives and social distancing measures in place, the Committee requested for a written response from the Fiji Airports in lieu of the annual review hearing.

Upon receipt of written responses from Fiji Airports, the Committee was enlightened on the following:

- the alignment of Fiji Airports' work to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
- Fiji Airports' future plans and initiatives;
- reforms undertaken at Fiji Airports to increase operational efficiency; and
- night flights at the Labasa Airport.

The Sustainable Development Goals plays an integral role in Fiji Airports' business objectives and development plans. As a state owned company, the Fiji Airports actively supports the aviation infrastructure development. The completion of Rotuma runway and Nausori runway extensions and upgrade are classic examples of how Fiji Airports comply with the SDGs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another milestone achievement of Fiji Airports was the development and completion of the Nadi International Airport Master Plan. The Master Plan defines the intended development of Nadi International Airport over the next 25 years based on forecast growth in passenger demand. This program of work is presently impacted by COVID-19 due to collapsed passenger numbers, however clear development plan linked to passenger demand and growth will be implemented at the appropriate time in future and the Committee noted currently all new projects are put on hold indefinitely.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Airports proudly received the Airports Council International Level 3 Airport Carbon Accreditation for Nadi. In their submission, they reassured the Committee that Fiji Airports will continue to develop new energy efficiency initiatives and are currently looking at ways to progress solar PV system for Nadi Airport Terminal to further mitigate its carbon emissions, as the main objective is to achieve Level 3+ as a carbon neutral airport. Fiji Airports has undertaken significant cost and revenue reforms in benchmarking and recognised as a low cost and efficient company in airport operations. Fiji Airports' landing and airport charges when benchmarked internationally are one of the lowest in the world.

In 2017, the Nadi International Airport became internationally recognised as the Skytrax 6th most improved airport in the world as a result of the \$129 million terminal modernization project which concluded in June 2018. It was also encouraging to note the continuation of development of the 13 Outer Islands Airports as part of the Fiji Airports' seven year development plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee commends the team of committed and motivated individuals at the Fiji Airports.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on this motion. I give the floor to the Honourable Tuisawau, you have the floor.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion at hand. Before that I would like to express my sincere condolences to the families in the passing of the Executive Chairman, Faiz Khan, a few months ago. I would like to acknowledge the work of the Board and the Chairman, and staff of AFL regarding their performance.

I refer to the report in front of us in particular Recommendation 3.2 on the need for review of domestic passenger charges for landing fees. Noting their comment, they said that it is one of the lowest in the world. We hope this is not passed on to the operators because at the moment the price of domestic tickets are already very high and any such cost will be passed on to the passengers.

The other point of interest regarding this report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that when you look at the Annual Report itself, in the notes to the Accounts, I note under the explanation of debt (Note 18) the company obtained \$85 million loan facility from Westpac, of which \$15.2 million was drawn in 2017 and \$23.1 million in 2016. There is a monthly payment of upto \$860,000. The loan balance in 2016 was \$42.4 million and in 2017 it was \$65.7 million.

We note also the net profit after tax \$64.2 million and dividends had been paid out for the year concerned, \$45 million. The concern is the debt which is there even though it is making a profit, the debt as indicated there - loan balance of \$65.7 million. The other concern is regarding Westpac; they have indicated that they will be selling their operations. I wonder what the arrangement is or would be between Westpac and Fiji Airports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we reiterate the social responsibility to the *vanua* - the tangible historical contributions. As mentioned, the site where the Government Commercial Companies are operating, as mentioned yesterday, FPCL, et cetera, including Fiji Airports - that must be recognised and compensated. We note the high profits so maybe a percentage of it, as we have been recommending all along, should go to the *vanua*.

The third point that I would like to raise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, particularly on the notes to the financial accounts, Note 7 in the 2017 Annual Report states that “As part of compensation for the services provided by the executive chair, the board of directors have approved a compensation amount of \$450,000 payable to Tropik Woods Industries Ltd. This has been accrued and included in the operating expenses and is subject to approval from the Government.” I am very concerned about this payment and I sought an explanation but was not satisfied with that.

If you note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2016 one of the findings of the Committee stated that under the structure, executive chairman is the CEO and Chairman of Fiji Airports. In addition, through the restructure, many general manager positions in Fiji Airports had been streamlined over the past five years; \$8 million had been saved over the last four years and further down, the executive chairman does not even have an employment contract with Fiji Airports. For executive chairman’s role at Fiji Airports, the Government, as the shareholder, has asked Fiji Airports to reimburse \$17,000 per annum to Tropik Wood Industries Ltd. One of the recommendations there - let me read it out - the current position holder of the executive chair of Fiji Airports should have an employment contract separate from his position as executive chair of Tropik Wood Industries Ltd.

My question is whether that was done or not, and regarding this \$450,000 payment, that is a concern which needs to be looked at and I am not exactly sure what constitutes that, because with that \$17,000 if you multiply that by four years, it comes to \$68,000 and even if you add another four years to account for up to maybe last year, it will still come to \$136,000. So where is this \$450,000 coming from and the concern is that it is not only in the 2017 accounts but it is also in the 2016 accounts, so does that mean that \$900,000 was paid or what. Those are the queries regarding this annual report, Sir.

I also address issues which were raised by the audit report on government commercial companies, 20160-2017. Some of these may have been dealt with and note the profits made. A lot of these was attributed to, let me read it out, the increase in revenue generated by air navigation charges, consents, landing, parking, international, et cetera. Alright, it is good to have higher profits, but what has been the impact on some of the partner organisations especially ATS, we have the Department of Immigration Officers there, FRCS, et cetera.

The other Office of the Auditor-General's issues in payment and assessment of office and plants and equipment, there is no evidence to the support management had carried out impairment assessment, review of depreciation rates, et cetera. So, that could have been address, I am not sure and the other one was on VAT reconciliation and taxable supplies incorrectly declared in VAT returns from the particular year that we are discussing (2017).

I also would like to emphasise with regards to the other side of the House, always emphasising that nothing was happening prior regarding a government commercial companies. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the whole setup of company commercial operations, public enterprises, this was initiated in the era from 1992 to 1998 and under that, we see the fruits of those reforms. That is something that we need to acknowledge...

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you are going over time...

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- ... incentive regulation, taxation reform, labour market reforms, public enterprises reform and that Mr. Speaker, Sir, include public enterprises such as Airports Fiji which was formed from the Civil Aviation Authority and other public enterprises such as FBC, Energy Fiji Limited by acknowledging the programmes from 1992 to 1998 in terms of the performance of today.

HON. SPEAKER.- You are well over time, Honourable Member. I give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Sir, I will be very brief. First of all, I just want to commend the Fiji Airports' Board and Management for phenomenal the work that they have actually undertaken since the impact of COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as frontline workers, their team has worked tirelessly and diligently in collaboration with the Ministry of Health in facilitating the arrival of our repatriate Fijians. Also, I want to take the time to offer my tributes, Sir, to the former late Chief Executive, Mr. Faiz Khan, and his family. He did a phenomenal work while he was there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2017 was a remarkable year for Fiji Airports, as mentioned and alluded to earlier, Nadi Airport was ranked as the sixth most improved airport in the world. Skytrax and phenomenal achievements with a strong board and management that actually delivered \$129 million airport state-of-the-art world class airport to our international and domestic visitors and I think we have all been through it and seen it.

Worth noting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the total of international passenger arrivals and departure increased by 5 percent to \$2.1 million whilst the maximum certified take-off weight increase by 7 percent which actually clearly shows the important role our airport plays in tourism and trade and most importantly, Sir, in strengthening Fiji's position as a regional Hub.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I understand the total revenue also increased by 90 percent to \$140 million and Fiji Airports managed to pay \$45 million in dividends to its shareholder and just to tell the earlier

speakers, Sir, they paid to the Fijian Government the highest dividend paying State owned enterprise. So, that is something that is phenomenal and they have done extremely well.

In short, I would like to reiterate that these businesses under the FijiFirst Government have actually grown to provide the best service and returns to the people of Fiji. I thank you, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. I now give the floor to the Honourable Attorney-General. You have the floor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir, just very quickly in particular, those members who are concerned about domestic air travel, as highlighted earlier on that in 2017 for example, the revenue from landing and parking fees was \$22.4 million and out of the \$22.4 million, Mr. Speaker, Sir, only \$800,000 was in fact from domestic landing and parking fees.

Just to put into perspective, Twin Otter aircraft pays \$15.18 in landing fees at the outer islands, so we can see the cost that the social corporate responsibility falls in AFL's hands. To fix up Rotuma, which the Honourable Prime Minister opened, cost about \$13 million to \$15 million, just to put it into perspective.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point is that, the only airport that makes a profit, I should say prior to the COVID-19 pandemic is Nadi Airport. All the other airports in Fiji make a loss. If you take into account the management of it, the maintenance of it, providing the various services that is required, they all make a loss, because we do not have the level of traffic even airports like Labasa, et cetera, to install now night landing lights, et cetera, all of that costs a lot of money so I think we need to keep that into perspective.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point I wanted to make is that, the entire funding of the Nadi upgrade was self-funded, there is no Government guarantee. Honourable Tuisawau talked about the debt and he said that they paid dividends but there was debt. Well, that is how businesses are run. What he should be commenting on is that despite the debt, they have the capability to service the debt and yet were able to pay out dividends. It is good to actually have debt in a private company or limited liability company because it goes to show that people actually can rely on the balance sheet.

In fact, Westpac lent to AFL at a very fantastic interest rate because they had a very strong level of confidence in their balance sheet. I think the Honourable Tuisawau was saying these reforms took place back in the 1990s, yes public enterprises was reformed then, however, what he fails to actually mention is that, prior to the reforms undertaken recently, AFL was giving pittance as dividends. Once we brought the commercial discipline into it, once we removed all the price controls et cetera it should not have at an airport, and people start paying, the right rentals only then AFL started actually making money. And when you had that kind of discipline that was brought in international best practices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a lot of projects that have been completed in the outer islands, for example Kadavu, Lakeba, Bureta, costing about \$4.1 million in recent times, Koro, Vanuabalavu, cost about \$800,000. A number of these projects have been undertaken and now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, AFL because of its strong financial position if you have seen the Budget books previously, it used to have a line by Government to give to AFL to fix up its airports. Now, we do not do that because AFL has the capacity to fix up those 13 outer station airports for continuous operations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just post COVID-19, Fiji Airports recently received the Airport Health Accreditation from Airports Council International (ACI). The Nadi International Airport became the

first airport in the South Pacific to receive this accreditation in November, 2020 in terms of its compliance with the COVID-19 protocols. I think it is good to be able to position ourselves.

A number of staff, of course, have been affected because of COVID-19, we reduced operations, some days there is no flights at all so obviously no one needed to work at the airport itself. Some of them have taken redundancy packages, the retirement age, they all agreed to go down from 60 to 55, so they were given redundancy packages. The staff hours were reduced from 80 to 56 hours per fortnight from June last year. A number of changes have been made, a lot of the tenants have been given discounts since March last year, because there is not obviously no business to do at the airport itself.

There were some issues that were raised about SDGs and AFL's compliance with SDGs. Fiji airports received the ACI level 3 airport carbon accreditation for Nadi International Airport in terms of energy efficiency and Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am glad that the work at Nausori Airport will continue to the extension of the run way and also the widening of the run way so that we can have bigger aircraft and the 737s actually can land and take off with full load which means that more traffic could be directed towards Nausori Airport directly from Sydney or Melbourne or Auckland, et cetera, because then we will also have an impact on tourism God willing when it opens up very soon. Just those comments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in respect of this Report.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney- General. I now give the floor to the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak in reply.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I do not have any further comments.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to move his motion.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – SUGAR INDUSTRY TRIBUNAL 2011-2015 ANNUAL REPORTS

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, I move:

That the Parliament debates the Consolidated Report on the Review of the Sugar Industry Tribunal 2011-2015 Annual Reports which was tabled on 2nd September, 2020.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to speak on his motion.

HON. V. NATH.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Standing Committee on Economic Affairs visited the Sugar Industry Tribunal Headquarters when conducting its site visit to be able to better understand the functions and operations of the Tribunal.

The Tribunal is responsible for encouraging and providing means for conciliation with a view to prevent and settle any disputes within the industry by amicable agreement. In cases where an agreement is not reached, the Tribunal must then explore methods of settling disputes with maximum of expedition and minimum legal form and technicality.

While presenting to the Committee, the Tribunal officials stated that a number of disputes were brought to the Industrial Commissioner during the period under review and the Committee commended him for his unwavering commitment in ensuring that all disputes reported to his office are dealt with efficiently.

After scrutinizing the reports and understanding the functions and operations of the Tribunal, the Committee was in agreement that the Master Awards is an important and essential instrument to have in place to ensure industrial stability. The Members believed a review of components of the Master Awards be considered where necessary.

To conclude, while the Committee appreciated the overall performance of the sugar industry tribunal, and looking forward for the upcoming Annual Reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with that contribution, as a Member moving the motion, I thank you for the opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on this motion. I call on the Honourable Saukuru, you have the floor.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to speak on the motion and that is the Consolidated Report on the Review of Sugar Industry Tribunal 2011-2015 Annual Report. I also thank the Committee for their report, Sir.

First, I wish to thank the Ministry of Health and Medical Services for finally lifting the West Containment Borders at Momi and Nacilau. Hopefully, they will do the same for the Yasawa Group and allow our people to access Lautoka City freely as it is their only trading centre.

The sugar industry was a major performer in Fiji's national economy. Although it has been challenged by a range of problems alongside its journey. The latest vulnerability of the amplifying pandemic has influenced the sugar industry and its interrelated ventures in Fiji and all throughout the world. The entire supply chain for the sugar industry has been affected by spill over effects.

The sugar industry contributed economically to Fiji's gross domestic products and triggered economy previously but from 2000, sugarcane yields charted a decline with the yields lower than 2 million tonnes per year, lesser than the 4 million tonnes it used to produce before 2000. The sugar industry in Fiji, Sir, which has benefited from numerous agreements and treaties in the past is no longer sustainable due to the expiry of the preferential sugar price contracts in 2017.

This decrease in sugar production is attributed to lower sugar recovery and by-product rates, higher agricultural costs including fertilisers, transport and harvesting cost. A decline in sugar acreage is attributed to untimely and non-renewal of land leases, higher labour requirements and increase shifts by farmers and their children towards white collar jobs and a fading interest towards the industry.

The pandemic triggered public health crisis and a financial crisis in Fiji. The effects of COVID-19 on the Fijian economy is enormous particularly the tourism sector, major disruptions to trade, weakened economic activities and a substantial effect on our public finances.

Sir, to make commentaries on the recommendations of the Committee, I agree with the Committee that the Tribunal needs to make a more comprehensive analysis of its performance against its objectives in a timely manner, noting that this report is dated. I wish to remind the Sugar Industry Tribunal of their role as prescribed in the Sugar Industry Act, that is, promoting efficiency and development of the industry, coordinating activities of all sections of the industry and promoting goodwill and harmony between them, describing standards governing the mutual rights and obligations of the corporation and growers and the keeping of an official register of growers. It is also responsible for encouraging and providing means for conciliation with the view to prevent and settle any disputes within the industry by amicably coming to an agreement in case where an agreement is not reached. The Tribunal must explore methods of settling disputes with a maximum of expedition and minimum legal form and technicality.

On the Committee's recommendation for a review of the Master Awards, I would suggest a total organisational review to determine its needs as mandated and ideal to achieve its objectives. On that note, Sir, may I add that the sugar industry has gone through a lot of organisational changes. Of course, all these changes were for the betterment of the industry as a whole. We have seen new faces at the helm, many leadership to bring about new vision and a renewed hope. Changes in life help us more and become better professionals and personalities. I suggest that Government should consider making necessary changes in leadership of this organisation.

On the sale of FSC properties, I would suggest and seriously hope that proper consultations are done especially with the traditional landowners as such, swift actions may have damaging effects on the industry that is already wounded in the future. I suppose on the standing role of the Tribunal within the industry, they could influence all stakeholders to uphold goodwill and harmony. Thank you for the opportunity, Sir, and I thank the Committee. I fully support the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member. I now give the floor the Honourable Prime Minister. You have the floor.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak in support of the motion by Honourable Nath on the Consolidated Report of the Standing Committee on the Review of Sugar Industry Tribunal 2011-2015 Annual Report.

Mr. Speaker, I must first thank the Committee and also commend the work of the Office of the Sugar Industry Tribunal and the Industrial Commissioner. As you may have noted, Mr. Speaker, the report highlights the performance of the Sugar Industry Tribunal including its achievements and challenges in the years 2011-2015.

At the outset, Mr. Speaker, the Tribunal was established under the Sugar Industry Act 1984 and is primarily responsible for encouraging and providing mediatory roles, ensuring prevention and settling of any disputes within the industry by amicable agreement. In addition, Mr. Speaker, the Tribunal audits the cane proceeds to determine the cane payment for the growers and assists FSC in the forecasting of the cane price to the commencement of each harvesting season.

Mr. Speaker, in reinforcing the roles of the Sugar Industry Tribunal, the Government provides \$0.4 million annually towards the operational and administrative functions of the organisation. In return, the Tribunal supports the overarching vision of Government in ensuring a leaner but efficient and effective structure which is evident in the Sugar Tribunal's organisation structure. Despite being the smallest office operating with only seven staff including the Tribunal and Industrial Commissioner, who holds the role of the Registrar, the Sugar Tribunal serves over 12,000 active cane growers.

Mr. Speaker, given its mandate for the amendments of the Master Award and registration of the sugarcane growers, the Sugar Industry Tribunal prescribes numerous provisions, including cane planting, cultivation, harvesting, sale and delivery of harvested cane to the mill, manufacturing and sale of sugar and molasses and settling of disputes arising under the Award.

The Master Award is a living document and the role of the Tribunal is not limited to making amendments only but also ensuring that consultations are carried out with the Council and the Fiji Sugar Corporation from time to time. Between 1998 and 2020, various sections of the Master Award have been amended through consultations that were carried out with relevant industry stakeholders. So when Honourable Members on the other side of the House come here and start to inarticulate, they shut Government out that our process lacks consultation, it is the shame, Mr. Speaker, because it makes us wonder if they know what they are talking about.

Anyway, Mr. Speaker, as I was saying, some of the key amendments through various levels of consultation include the provision for rail growers to change to lorry with conversion allowance, review and amend transport allowance, provision for growers to report burnt cane and calculation of penalty and review of forecast price calculation.

Currently as I speak, Mr. Speaker, the Tribunal's office is holding consultations with the Fiji Sugar Corporation, the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji and the Sugar Cane Growers Council to address the issue of extraneous matter from the mechanically-harvested canes which contributes to the high TCTS ratio.

I am not sure whether Members on the other side know what "TCTS" stands for but it is the Tonnes Cane to Tonnes Sugar which is in the ratio of tonnes of cane that is required to make the tonnes of sugar. The Tribunal's office also continues to explore and consult relevant stakeholders pertaining to the cane payment system due to deferring requests from the different growers.

Mr. Speaker, the Tribunal also keeps and regularly updates the Growers Register that contains detailed of growers' information. While it is true that the sugar industry is male-dominated, our policies are non-discriminatory but provides equal opportunities to both genders. With equal treatment we have noted increased interest from females into sugarcane farming.

Through the Ministry of Sugar Industry's small grant scheme, a total of 50 females have received assistance while 33 individual females and 12 females jointly with their spouses have been provided with grants under the new Farmers Assistance Programme to start cane farming. We now have a total of 2,147 female and 14,596 growers registered at the Tribunal today.

Mr. Speaker, as part of its ongoing function, the Sugar Industry Tribunal continues to assist all stakeholders in the sugar industry in implementing the Geographical Information System – the GIS Project. This project was developed to map out and capture all data and information to establish the first ever digital database for the industry.

A total of \$1.6 million was spent on the GIS Project between 2013 and 2017 to undertake base survey of all the 38 sectors and establish the digital GIS database. The detailed information for each farm collected was uploaded to the GIS web to be used by all sugar industry stakeholders such as production trends, crop age and variety, soil types, assistance provided, grower advice, need for infrastructure development, to name are few.

The GIS system is linked to the FSC's field information system used on a daily basis to monitor farmers' performance and keeping record of different types of grant assistance. The system also provides information to better inform the industry on corrupt practices by flagging abuses and

double dipping from the grant assistance. The system also assists the Tribunal and the Growers Council by generating orders for weedicides and monitoring subsidies and grants allocated under the Ministry of Sugar Industry's capital programmes.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Tribunal hears and determines unresolved disputes brought to its attention and I must commend the abilities of the Industrial Commissioner, given his competency and expertise in resolving disputes as his level. The industry always notes that there are rarely any disputes brought to the Tribunal's office.

Based on those remarks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I, therefore, do support the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Prime Minister. I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to speak in reply. You have the floor.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have any further comments.

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

Question put

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to move his motion. You have the floor.

REVIEW REPORT - FIJI MUSEUM 2015, JANUARY–JULY 2016 AND 2016–2017 ANNUAL REPORTS

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move that::

That Parliament debates the Review of the Fiji Museum 2016–2017 Annual Report; January–July 2016 Annual Report and the 2015 Annual Report, which was tabled on 2nd September, 2020.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak on his motion. You have the floor.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Fiji Museum is a statutory organisation established under the Fiji Museum Act 1929. Its principal activity is the safekeeping, preservation and the display of Fiji's historical artefacts. The Museum operates to ensure accountability and transparency in the dealing of the Trustees and the Museum Management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee, upon being referred the Fiji Museum Annual Reports from 2015-2017, was unable to conduct a public hearing due to COVID-19 restrictions. In order to comply with health directives and social distancing measures put in place, the Committee requested for a written response from the Fiji Museum in lieu of the annual review hearing.

Upon receipt of the written response from the Fiji Museum, the Committee was enlightened on the following:

- (1) Fiji Museum Strategic Plan;
- (2) Approval of new salary and wage structure;
- (3) Alignment of the Museum's works to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
and
- (4) Fiji Museum's future plans and initiatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Museum developed its Strategic Plan 2012-2017 which was used as a basis to finalise the three Annual Reports. The plan is premised on five key strategic priority areas:

- (1) Develop national and institutional reputation as a world class museum;
- (2) Enhance the Museum's potential to attract visitors;
- (3) Develop a centre of the repository of all Fijians archaeological sites;
- (4) Develop a collection and improvement of a collections storage; and
- (5) Develop staff and business practice and infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, strategic and operational planning has been critical to the Fiji Museum. With the lapse of the Fiji Museum Strategic Plan 2012-2017, the need for a new Strategic Plan was imminent, resulting in the drafting and endorsement of the new Fiji Museum Strategic Plan 2019-2028.

The Board, in 2017, approved a salary and wage structure for the Fiji Museum resulting in realignment of salary and wages of all staff based on their qualifications and experience. This has boosted the morale of staff greatly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee was also enlightened that the SDGs serve as the blueprint for the Fiji Museum to enhance its vision of creating borderless societies, link Museums and its connections to Fiji's communities, especially indigenous peoples celebrate humanity through it exhibitions, promote peaceful coexisting and prosperity and most importantly, create and maintain partnerships.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were informed that the Fiji Museum Board is in discussion with philanthropic donors on the provision of funding support to renovate and add extensions to the current museum structure. This also inculcates building a special collection storage facility such as preventing the maritime gallery.

The Fiji Museum has in the past engaged with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. This is mainly due to the important role that the Ministry plays in creating a doorway for Museum personnel to carry out their work in communities and cultural locals. For many years, Fiji Museum has stood at the forefront of academic research in Fiji's archaeological, paleontological and cultural history. We are happy to see the vast improvement in the Fiji Museum's operation from previous years and commence work of safekeeping and preserve Fiji's historical artefacts. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Chairperson. Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion, and I give the floor to the Honourable Doctor Ratu Atonio Lalabalavu.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give my response to the motion on Fiji Museum 2016/2017 Annual Report. At the outset, I want to commend and thank the Fiji Museum, its Director and staff, Trustees. Its role is to safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimen which they hold in trust for the site.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Chairman has mentioned our limitations on the Committee work due to COVID-19 restrictions, that is we do not conduct face to face meeting, but we have to rely on the Fiji Museum for their written submission, and could not conduct site visits.

The current situation, Fiji Museum was not spared by the impact of COVID-19 due to closure of our borders, reduction in tourist visits and school visits which affected its source of revenue. It is interesting to note that the allocation of \$2.5 million in the 2020/2021 Budget is understandable due to priorities under COVID-19 and also noted post *TC Winston*, whereby its allocation was reduced.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, audit results for 2015, 2016 and 2017 is of interest, as stated by financial discrepancies in the reports from the auditor, in my view, it is the issue of processing on the accounts.

In its written submission, it is stated that the audit of accounts was also a challenge to auditors as he did not have adequate documentation to assist in confirming or verifying the amount recorded as revenue from exchange transaction, however the Museums book for that financial year, this report kept these pertinent issues faced by the Fiji Museum in that period under review.

The Committee has made several recommendations to the Museum for the remedy of these issues. Allow me to highlight the issues, Mr. Speaker, Sir:

- (1) Non-functioning Board of Trustees;
- (2) Lack of resources to implement Fiji Museum Strategic Plan 2012/2017;
- (3) Absence of a Masterplan;
- (4) Depilated Museum infrastructure;
- (5) Need to enhance the Museum's potential to attract visitors;
- (6) Need for the Museum to generate alternative revenue streams;
- (7) Practice of good governance at the Museum;
- (8) Urgent need for review of the Fiji Museum Act 1929;
- (9) Preservation of Objects of Archaeological and Palaeontological Interest Act 1940.
- (10) Lack of expert conservators;
- (11) Post disaster needs assessment for cultural and heritage sites following *TC Winston*;
- (12) Partial payment of Government Grant in 2015; and
- (13) Lapse of Annual Reports for the Fiji Museum.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we urge the Ministry responsible which is the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts to take note of the Committee highlights of the pertinent issues I just mentioned and other with its recommendation.

The Fiji Museum states in the first line that it will become known as a world class museum. Around the world for centuries, museums have played an integral role in preserving the history of our society. Exhibits tell us stories about our nation, communities and our cultures. It came to be and without them, those stories could be forgotten.

Museums serve our community in a multitude ways. We urge the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts that Government to address the issues raised by the Committee so that Fiji Museum will fulfil its mission.

Once again, I thank the Fiji Museum's Director and staff and the trustees, and I thank the Standing Committee on Social Affairs and the support of the Parliament Secretariat of Parliament. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member. I now give the floor to the Honourable Minister Rosy Akbar. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would like to respond to the motion for debate on the floor in relation to the Review of the Fiji Museum 2016/2017 Annual Report, January to July Annual Report and the 2015 which was tabled on 2nd September.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me the time to speak. I would also like to thank the Board, trustees, Director and staff of the Fiji Museum, for the work that they do and the progresses that they have made, despite the challenges they continue to face.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Museum is a statutory body govern by the Fiji Museum Act 1929 and the Preservation of Objects of Archaeological and Palaeontological Interest Act 1940. Its principle activity is the safe-keeping, reservation and the display of Fiji's historical artefacts. The Fijian Museum reports to the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be talking about the following issues highlighted by the Standing Committee on Social Affairs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry in April 2020 uproot the Board of Trustees for the Fiji Museum and ensures that a fully functional board is in place for good governance and accountability. Fiji Museum has a Strategic Plan 2019 that ensures they work closely with the donor agencies to secure additional funding.

The Fiji Government has further increased the operational and capital funding for the Museum. Donor funding have been received from UNESCO and the International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region, Korea, Asian Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO, UNDP and local sponsors that have been supportive towards the initiatives such as holiday programmes and Open Days, et cetera.

The Museum Board and trustees and administration continues to improve on the systems and processes in relation to good and financial management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, furthermore the Fiji Museum Board and directors have commenced extensive consultations with international partners such as the Sainsbury Centre of Arts from Oceania, Africa and the United Kingdom, Los Angeles County's Museum in the United States and most recently, you can use that, including the British Museum to increase the visibility of the Fiji Museum. The input has been incorporated and is now reflected in the Fiji Museum's 2019-2028's Strategic Plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has been recommended that the Fiji Museum carries out a survey of the infrastructure and work closely with the Construction Implementation Unit (CIU) at the Ministry of Economy. The Museum is currently in discussions with the Construction Implementation Unit to draft a master plan and discuss the long term infrastructural plan, however, this will mean securing extra funding.

While we understand that the Museum needs to have greater visibility locally and internationally, we are pleased to inform the House that it is taking advantage of the COVID-19 closure to revamp its gallery and working on a storyteller concept where each section will have a little story for its visitors. This is work in progress and the Museum aims to have this completed before its re-opening.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to create an alternative income stream, the Board has re-introduced a child and student reduced entry fee. This will come into effect when the Museum re-opens and, of course, when the school re-opens and the public is free to move around. The Board is currently working on initiatives similar to international museums to implement visible, income streams. The Fiji Museum has also formed a working group to review the Fiji Museum Act 1929 and the Preservation of Objects of Archaeological and Palaeontological Interest Act 1940.

Mr. Speaker, Speaker, Sir, to ensure that the Museum has expert conservators, to pay international corporation agency has been approached to provide short-term scholarship programmes to upskill existing staff at the Museum. However, Mr. Speaker, as an immediate solution, the Pacific Island Museum Association networking with other international museums, such as the Auckland Museum - Te Papa Museum and Saint Grace Centre are providing membership and guidance to the conservation team.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally the Ministry is actively involved in monitoring the operations of the Museum. All grants are dispersed in a timely manner, Fiji Museum is also in the process of finalising their 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 Annual Reports which should be table to Cabinet in the next financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we take note of the Committee's recommendation and we will ensure that the Fiji Museum addresses these recommendations made by the Standing Committee on Social Affairs. I thank you Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Minister. I now give the floor to the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak in reply. You have the floor.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would like to thank the Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts and also Honourable Dr. Lalabalavu for speaking on the motion. Thank you very much, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to move his motion. You have the floor.

PERFORMANCE REVIEW REPORT - AUDIT REPORTS ON MANAGEMENT OF RURAL ELECTRIFICATION PROGRAMME AND PROGRESS OF IMPLEMENTATION POLICIES AND STRATEGIES IN THE FIJI FOREST POLICY STATEMENT 2007

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I move:

That the Parliament debates the Review of the Performance Audit Reports on Management of Rural Electrification Programme and Progress of Implementation of Policies and Strategies in the Fiji Forest Policy Statement 2007, which was tabled on 2nd September, 2020.

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

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

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, firstly, the audit on the Management of Audit Report summarised the follow-up that was conducted in 2014 to examine whether the Department of Energy, under the Ministry of Infrastructure and Meteorological Services, had effectively implemented the recommendations which were made in the first audit on the Management of Rural Electrification Program.

The scope of this Audit was conducted by the Office of the Auditor-General included the detailed review and analysis of the work undertaken by the Rural Electrification Unit under the Department of Energy in addressing the initial audit recommendations under the following key areas:

- (1) Management Framework of Rural Electrification Programme;
- (2) Administration and Implementation of Rural Electrification Programme; and
- (3) Monitoring and Inspection of Projects under the Rural Electrification Programme.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, the 2nd Performance Audit summarises the follow-up audit that was conducted in 2014 to examine whether the Ministry of Forests have effectively implemented the recommendations which were made in the Progress of Implementation of Policies and Strategies in the Fiji Forest Policy Statement 2007.

This audit was also carried out by the Office of the Auditor-General and had assessed whether the actions taken have addressed the underlying issues that led to the formulation of recommendations in the initial Report.

The scope of this audit was on its follow-up audit which included a detail review and analysis of the work undertaken by the Ministry of Forests in addressing the initial audit report recommendations are these focused on the following key areas:

- (1) Conservation of Forest and Biological Resources;
- (2) Integrated Forest Resources Management; and
- (3) Institutional Framework and Human Resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry advised the Committee that the Draft Electrification Policy has undergone the second round of consultation with the stakeholders. The Ministry expects to receive all comments by the 20 March, 2020 before onward submission to Cabinet for endorsement.

Some of the major highlights of the policy included the expansion of the scope or the boundaries of the policy to incorporate those households in the peri-urban and urban areas including improper and squatter settlements. However, this is carried out by certain restrictions and conditions. In addition, the policy also promotes the use of least cost technologies for the Ministry's electrification programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee was informed by the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Energy Fiji Limited ('EFL') when these entities appeared before the Committee was that the Rural Electrification Program consists of two types of schemes. These are Grid Extension Programme and House Wiring and Solar Home Systems. The Ministry provided a summary of the Rural Electrification Unit Programmes by Divisions with its associated costs as at March 2020.

In terms of the Grid Extension Programme - for the 2018/2019 Budget, \$18.7 million was paid to EFL for the Grid Extension to power 2,326 households. Currently, all these schemes are under design and construction stage with EFL. Some of the schemes which were mentioned in this budget are yet to be paid. Mr. Speaker, I would just like to mention that this is an old report so by now most of these programmes and projects have been completed.

The Department also have program for the maintenance of all Solar Home Systems and Diesel Generators. From the past two years, the Department has spent around \$600,000 to upkeep these systems.

Mr. Speaker Sir, with regards to Fiji's National Land Use Plan – Ministry of Forestry has, to-date, yet to develop a national land use plan as this requires inputs from other agencies as well. The Ministry has, under the REDD+ Readiness Project, started to develop land use plans for the 20 districts identified under the Emission Reduction Program (2020 – 2025).

This work will be continued in collaboration with the iTaukei Land Trust Board ('TLTB') and other relevant agencies. The 20 district land use plans will cover 451,360 hectares or 24.6 percent of Fiji's total land area. Other works on land use planning that has been completed includes:

- (1) the TLTB's work and development of land use plans for the Western and Lami-Suva corridors of Viti Levu; and
- (2) the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme ('SPREP') works under the Pacific Ecosystem Based Adaptation to Climate Change ('PEBACC') on the Taveuni Land Use Plan.

For the training and awareness programmess, Mr. Speaker, the Ministry's Extension and Training Division have been undertaking awareness as part of their core responsibilities. Apart from face-to-face awareness, the media is widely used to promote and advocate awareness on the work of the Ministry. The 30 Million Trees in 15 Years initiative is an example of the Ministry's effective Outreach program.

Mr. Speaker, to conclude, the Department of Energy has made considerable progress in addressing the underlying issues which were identified during the 2014 Audit. The regular monitoring and inspection of projects under the Rural Electrification Program are to be maintained.

With regards to the progress of implementation of policies and strategies in the Fiji Forest Policy Statement 2007, the Ministry of Forests has made considerable effort to address most of the issues raised in the 2014 performance audit report. However, the Ministry of Forests needs to implement those recommendations that are left to be addressed.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I thank you for this opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Chairperson. Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on his motion and I give the floor to the Honourable Bulanauca. You have the floor.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the Public Accounts Committee for their Report and I do support their recommendations. I will make a few comments and the rest I will direct to the Ministers concerned for comments and other suggestions they can make.

On the report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, particularly on the recommendation by the Auditor-General, only 50 percent have been implemented, the rest have not been implemented since 2014. This is very important for the Minister or the board concerned to ensure that the recommendations by the Auditor-General are carried out. It is now six years from 2014 to 2021.

I just need to re-emphasise that the Minister and board concerned should ensure that the recommendations made by the Auditor-General and also the Public Accounts Committee now, confirming those recommendations to implement them as soon as possible. The OAG's reports are there to ensure that the value of money is achieved and whatever audit they have made whether it is financial, performance or operational, it is important that they are carried out, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

On the Fiji Forest Policy Statement 2007, Mr. Speaker, Sir, only 23 percent of the Auditor-General's recommendations were implemented, and that is very poor, even worse than rural electrification...

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- It has been carried out, that was 2007

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- My emphasis is for the Minister and board concerned to ensure that those recommendations are implemented.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the review of the rural electrification policy and the Standard Operating Procedures have not been carried out. The policy itself is still in draft form to date, after six or seven years. So, it is important to have that policy intact so that they can have the procedures, SOP, et cetera. It is important for people to take heed and do whatever is required to be done so that we get value for money from it, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Secondly, on the Rural Electrification, the staff structure needs to be reviewed to ensure continuing efficient and effective administration of the Rural Electrification Program – that is important to be done.

On the Fiji Forest Policy Statement in 2007, I just want to pick on two areas. First, this is Fiji Forest Policy 2007 but it is now 2021 – 13 or 14 years already. They identified that there is a need for the forest certification but they have not done it since 2007. They identified it in 2007 which is good, but they have not done anything since.

In the initial response by the Ministry, the forest certification standard was drafted and presented and rejected by FHC as compliance to the standards is an extensive exercise with huge financial implications. So, it is important to go with the development rather than just bringing out a lot of conditions. It is important for the certification to be intact Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The Fiji Pine Limited has done certification in 2016. Fiji Hardwood Corporation has not had the certification and I beg the Mahogany Industry Council, the Chairman being our Prime Minister, to ensure that the Ministry does the certification of the Fiji Mahogany Plantation. They are still working on the native timber forests, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I request the Honourable Prime Minister, because he promised that to the Fiji Mahogany Trust last year to ensure that the forest certification is carried out as soon as possible.

That is very important Mr. Speaker, Sir, because the buyers of logs like Dayals, TABs, Mahogany Landowners Company Limited, et cetera, need to produce more logs and export them but it is important to have that certification in order to sell more for export overseas and get foreign

income for us here in Fiji. It is important to get that certification done. We request the Honourable Prime Minister to ensure that, that is done as soon as possible.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member. I give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would like to thank the Members of the Committee for the work that they have done in putting together this Report in relation to the Rural Electrification programme. Overall, the work on revising the policy has been almost complete. The revised policy is now in discussion with Cabinet before it is finally finalised.

The revised policy has been such that we have incorporated some of the decisions that Government had done earlier on. One of the major changes that we have had in rural electrification is that Government has decided that the community should not pay its contribution. In the past they used to pay a contribution, but now that has been taken away a few years ago - that has been implemented and that major change would be part of the new policy that we have.

The focus now on the new policy is to achieve the target we have in our NDP for over 100 per cent access to electricity by all the people in Fiji, inasmuch as possible. I will not go into the full details of the new policy because it is going to be discussed by the Cabinet before it comes back and then we will talk about the things that are incorporated into that policy. As part of that there are issues to do with the grid extension, with the handover of solar to the people who have the solar, all that will be included in the new policy.

Honourable Bulanauca talked about the staff structure of the people in the Ministry who look after the electrification. What we have done so far is that we have taken the people who are looking after the rural electrification rather than keep them in the centre, some of them are now located in the North and located in West so that they can be closer to the ground, they can monitor the projects and they make sure that it is easily accessible to customers and people can liaise with them so that its implementation can be done much faster.

In terms of the final numbers of people who will be involved in all of these exercises that is something that we will be finalised once the new policy has been approved by the Cabinet. As the Honourable Bulanauca and the Chairman had said, one of things that we have had in the past that we need to focus on is how we manage the funding of rural electrification. There have been instances in the past where money was paid to the EFL upfront but because there are a lot of programmes and activities involved, things got delayed. What happens now, from the Department of Energy, we pay up now for the portion of work that can be done in one financial year and the other portions are paid up after the work is undertaken. It is done in a stage sort of approach and that is something that has been happening not just when the new policy comes in but it is something that is already happening right now.

This allows us to manage the roll-out of the electrification of the rural areas whether it is grid extensions, whether it is solar home systems and whether it is a hybrid system between diesel and solar home systems. That Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been carried out so far over the years to make sure that we can manage all of this. One of the focuses that we have had in the recent past is managing the rehabilitation of rural electrification schemes as result of cyclones. We had a major exercise in the aftermath of *TC Winston* where I think there were 17 villages in which we had to rehabilitate their schemes. Out of this, 15 have been completed and the last two are on the verge of completion. The rehabilitation for *TC Keni*, has been completed.

There is an ongoing project, as mentioned by the Chairman, for the upkeep of all of our rural schemes that is something that the Ministry will continue to do. As I have said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the paper also talks about the need to establish the database and this is something that the Ministry is doing in conjunction with the Information Technology and Computing Services (ITC). The revised policy, as I have said, is about to be discussed by Cabinet after extensive consultation, there has been a lot consultation on it and once it is approved, it will be fully implemented. As a result of the decision of Cabinet, there is a structure within the Ministry to carry out rural electrification to be reviewed and then be implemented.

I fully support the recommendations, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Minister. I give the floor to the Honourable Prime Minister.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, in my expanded role as a Minister for Forestry, I rise to speak on the motion by the Honourable Maharaj in particular the latter part of the review which is on the progress of implementation of policies and strategies in the Fiji Forest Policy Statement 2007.

However, Mr. Speaker, before I begin, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the former Minister for Forestry, Honourable Naiqamu for all the work that he has done to raise the bar in the forestry sector and also empower the resource owners, travelling to rural, remote areas and outer islands covering more than 300 villages in about 24 months, Mr. Speaker, is no mean feat.

The fact that Fiji has planted close to seven million trees in this time is a testament to his efforts. Unfortunately, this is also taking a toll on his health and he has chosen to take a back seat for now. I wish to extend Government's most sincere gratitude and appreciation to Honourable Naiqamu.

(Acclamation)

Mr. Speaker, I thank the Standing Committee on Public Accounts for the Consolidated Report and commend their recommendations. I also convey my appreciation to the hardworking staff of the Ministry of Forestry. It would be remiss of me not to mention the 157 staff which represent over 50 percent of the total establishment currently deployed to the frontline in our efforts to contain the current virus outbreak.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to inform the House that the Ministry of Forestry has made considerable improvement in the implementation of Forest Policy 2007 while progressively resolving issues that were raised by the Standing Committee.

Please, allow me to briefly update the House on our response to six recommendations, Mr. Speaker, that were highlighted by the Committee for the benefit of the Members of this House.

Unplanned Land use is one of the reasons for natural resources degradation and the Ministry is committed to its role in supporting the development of Fiji's National Land Use Plan. We have developed maps on forest areas, including the various characteristics of forests. These updated maps are now available for inclusion in the National Land Use Plan.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, we have in place a schedule for the development of district level land use plans through the five year carbon emission reduction programme which Fiji signed with the World Bank earlier this year.

Mr. Speaker, our commitment requires the development of 20 district integrated land use plans to support the implementation of the carbon emission reduction activities.

The intention, Mr. Speaker, is to replicate these management approaches nationally and subsequently develop land use plans for all districts in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Lands and the iTaukei Land Trust Board, amongst other agencies. All harvesting operations under the Fiji Forest Harvesting Code of Practice, includes a monitoring mechanism which ensures that there are no deforestation in areas with an elevation of more 30 degrees inclination.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry recognises the benefits of its partnership with various civil society organisations in implementing community projects in alignment with the Forest Policy, Government National Development Plan and the United Nation Sustainable Development Goals. Mr. Speaker, we are in the process of facilitating formal arrangements with CSOs which will be formalised through Memorandum of Agreements providing a constructive partnership in community and national development.

Technology integration is key for modernisation and I would like to mention that we have digitised approval of import and export permits where decisions on permits can be facilitated on line with 24 to 48 hours. We are also in the process of completing an online application for harvesting licences with the purpose of ensuring that all data are properly managed together with the National Forests Monitoring System, a database that will capture all forest related information which are collected in real time transmitted through the use of hand held tablets.

Other development, Mr. Speaker, that are expected to be completed by the end of the year includes the construction and hosting of a safeguard information system and feedback driven redress mechanism on the national forest monitoring system. In conjunction with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, we are working closely with *Talanoa* Treks in the development of Nabalasere Eco-Tourism Adventure and Forest Park in Ra. We collaborated with Wildlife Conservation Society to advance Kilaka Forest Conservation Area management plan in Bua.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry has the mandate that is to ensure the sustainable management of forests including the development of the sector. We will continue to engage with resource owners, industry and all other stakeholders for the implementation of the policies for sustainability in accordance to the 2030 Global Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Based on those remarks, Mr. Speaker, I therefore, support the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Prime Minister. I now call on 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 would like to take this opportunity to thank the Honourable Prime Minister for his response and all Honourable Members who have responded towards the debate.

HON. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

**REVIEW REPORT – FIJI NATIONAL SPORTS COMMISSION
2017-2018 ANNUAL REPORT**

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review of the Fiji National Sports Commission 2017-2018 Annual Report which was tabled on 2nd September, 2020.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak on his motion.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The corporate objectives of the Fiji National Sports Commission is established by the Fiji National Sports Commission Act 2013 with the aim to enrich the lives and health of all Fijians through physical activity and sports at all levels outlined in the Commission's Vision.

The Committee, upon being referred the Fiji National Sports Commission Annual Report for August 2017 – July 2018, requested for a written response from the Sports Commission. The Committee received a written response on Thursday, 14th May, 2020 where it was enlightened, amongst other things, on the following:

- (1) The Sports Commission's Memorandum of Understanding with the Fiji Police Force in conducting sports training programmes for the central youth;
- (2) The collaboration of the Sports Commission with the Ministry of Youth and Sports to support and nurture the development of sportsmanship; and
- (3) Sports scholarship grants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, within the period under review, a key achievement of the Sports Commission was the facilitation of the Southern Division Youth Sports Tournament which involved more than 2000 youths from the Navua to Nausori corridor. This followed the signing of a working MOU between Fiji Community Police and Fiji National Sports Commission. A total of 16,945 people were reached through the Community Assistance Programmes.

We note that the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Fiji National Sports Commission and the Fiji Police Force was instrumental in the zoning of urban communities through the Duavata Community Policing Network. The collaboration has assisted the Fiji Police Force in keeping youth in the urban community zones occupied in Sports and out of crime. Through this programme, youths in the Central Division have been actively involved to the essential Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also the sharing of resources has had an impact on community awareness programmes, assisting in crime reduction in the red zone areas where sports training has been conducted, thus giving accessible data and information in those community areas, as such information on improving nation-building.

Under the Fiji National Sports Commission Act 2013, the Commission is mandated to look after sports for all Fijians while the Ministry of Youth and Sports programmes are targeted for youths

between the age of 17 and 35 years. As such, the Commission collaborates with the Ministry's internal sports unit in terms of compliance with the national policies and government requirements for sports. Furthermore, the Commission also provides scholarship grants to talented athletes and technical officials overseas for higher level training on a short term basis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, overall, the Committee is satisfied with the performance of the Commission for 2017 and 2018 and we commend their work.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Chairperson. The floor is now open for debate on the motion and I give the floor to the Honourable Ratu Matanitobua. You have the floor.

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA.- Good evening, Mr. Speaker, Sir and thank you for the opportunity to speak on the motion before the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think everyone in this House realise the importance of sports and its relevance to our lives and the economy of this country. I commend the work of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for the review of the Fiji National Sports Commission 2017-2018 Annual Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the principal activity of the Commission is to guide and enhance the delivery of sports programmes through a coordinated approach at all level of participation like government, statutory bodies and the community and to ensure the development of sports in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the impact of COVID-19 and the economic downturn we are going through has had incredible effects on the development of sports in the country. All the sports development programmes of the Commission for the third and fourth quarter were cancelled while National Sports Organisations, all funds released to them by the Commission had to be refunded, due immediately.

No grants under any grant allocation were released during this period. The Commission's Sports Development Programme was put on hold and the Sports Development Unit was tasked to update their sports development manually, guidelines to include revisions of same sports. COVID-19 sports programme rebooked in the communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly agree with the recommendation for a budget increase to the Commission when this pandemic is finally contained.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the same way, the Commission should be able to provide funding for the construction and maintenance of grounds, courts, related facilities and growing sports in cities like Suva, Labasa and Ba, to name a few. The lack of sports facilities has always been a hindrance to sports development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I therefore, urge Government if they can relook at the budgetary plan for for the Fiji National Sports Commission to assist them to deliver better services and enable the execution of its sports programmes and activities. I also agree, Sir, that during this time of restricted activity, the Commission should consult with national sporting bodies.

To conclude, Sir, the Commission can see this crisis as an opportunity to focus on its other objectives like the development of sports science by having discussions with USP and FNU to develop this critical area of study and practice. I thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir and I thank the members of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for this Report. Mr. Speaker, Sir, most of the things have already been mentioned by the Chairman and I am not going to repeat all those things.

But just for the information of Honourable Ratu Suliano Matanitobua, Mr. Speaker, Sir, right now Government's priority is the health and safety of our Fijians. Let me also inform him that Fiji National Sports Commission had always been given the required funds, so they should not be an issue in terms of funding.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will go on to recommendation on page 7 that the Commission works closely with National Sports Organisation, et cetera. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Sports Commission has in the past years established a working relationship with a number of NGOs, in particular UNESCO, UN Women, Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, Ministry for Women and they have developed programmes together with the various agencies providing funding especially in our rural areas.

We are also closely working with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs to extend our rural peri-urban and urban programmes. On the same page, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Recommendation 2, it talks about in consultation with other sporting bodies and local communities to draw up effective development programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is in place. The Commission has a close working relationship with all national sports organisations and not only that, annually they meet in conferences with all National Sporting Organisations to discuss and prepare their programmes as well. We also share funding with various NSOs, Mr. Speaker, Sir, through our programme and this funding is provided through grants from the New Zealand and Australian Governments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Recommendation 1 on page 8, it talks about to have a closer collaboration with the National Sporting Organisations. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Commission has assisted a number of NSOs on their plans and generally attends their Annual General Meetings as and when requested. We have held workshops on governance and the importance of sports development plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Recommendation 3 on the same page, that the Sports Commission conducts workshops and sports training programmes, the Sports Commission in partnership with the Ministry of Youth and Sports and other Government Ministries and NGOs continues to develop programmes for the community. We have held a number of workshops with the educators of special and inclusive schools and have prepared and printed a training manual for them which was done through the funding provided by UNESCO.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the Board members, the CEO and the staff of Fiji National Sports Commission for their team work. Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the recommendation on page 9, the Sports Commission has put in place a safe sports protocol and are working on providing videos and other means to encourage wellness activities that can be undertaken in each individual bubble. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all National Sporting Organisations for their understanding and support during this difficult time.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. I give the floor to the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak in reply.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I do not have any further comments.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note we will take a break for half an hour before we consider the rest of the agenda items.

The Parliament adjourned at 7.32 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 8.04 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to move his motion.

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**REVIEW REPORT - MINISTRY OF YOUTH AND SPORTS
2017-2018 ANNUAL REPORT**

HON. V. PILLAY.-.- Mr. Speaker, I move:

That Parliament debates on the Review of the Ministry of Youth and Sports 2017-2018 Annual Report which was tabled on 3rd September, 2020.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.-.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak on his motion. You have the floor.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Youth and Sports is responsible for engaging with Fiji's young people to help develop skills that help them to reach their full potential and enable them to access greater opportunity to better themselves and uplift their communities. The Ministry carries out work to foster and support community networks and run initiatives that help young people build character, learn valuable life lessons and promote entrepreneurship and innovation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry offers training to youth through five Youth Training Centres around the country and through mobile training in rural and urban areas. The training is run in close in cooperation with other Ministries, particularly the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Fisheries, Ministry of Forests and Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. The training is aimed at empowering our young people to be productive members of the community and equipping them with the knowledge and skills to venture into specific income-earning opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee upon being referred the Ministry of Youth and Sports Annual Report 2017-2018 requested for a written response from the Ministry. Upon receipt of the Ministry's written response, we were enlightened on the following:

- (1) The Ministry's plans to increase provision of its services in urban areas to women and persons living with disabilities;
- (2) Expansion of the Seeds of Success programmes to the Western and the Northern Divisions; and
- (3) The Ministry's partnership with other stakeholders to organise sports competitions in rural areas.

We note that in the course of the 2017-2018 financial year, 29 Assistant Youth Officers were appointment to demarcated areas including urban and peri-urban areas and no longer according to provincial or rural boundaries. With the appointment made, approximately 50 percent were women.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry works very closely with the Fiji National Councils of Disable Persons in terms of conducting disability programmes. They are also part of the National Youth Policy Multi Sector Co-ordination Committee.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry is currently embarking on online learning platform for effective and inclusive service delivery to all youths even to the ones not yet reached.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members ,the floor is now open for debate on this motion. I give the floor to the Honourable Rasova.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- *Bula vinaka* and good evening, Mr. Speaker, Sir. A *big vinaka vakalevu* to the Chairman and the members of the Committee on Social Affairs in finalising the review of the Ministry of Youth and Sports 2017-2018 Annual Report for debates this evening.

Thanks to Standing Order 109(2)(b) that allowed the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to examine matters related to health, education , social services, labour, culture and media. The authority on Standing Order 110(1)(c) to scrutinise the government departments cannot be discouraged.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the review report is bi-partisan and when it is debated, other views have to be accepted on consensus. It is another professional for best practice and best way forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Youth Development, this programme centres on the provision of assistance to youth through advisory, empowerment and capacity building including specific skills training.

In the Ministry of Sports Development, the programme focusses on the development of sports and its infrastructure nationwide through the provision of grants to the Fiji National Sports Commission and the national sporting organisations as well as the provision on basic sports equipment and the development of rural playing fields.

As of late, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have seen rugby and soccer played on public and private parks in some parts of Fiji. The grounds are not only in deplorable conditions, it is not a standard size and are OHS non-compliant, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

When will the Ministry going to complete the Vunisea Sports Stadium in Kadavu, Honourable Minister? Honourable Tabuya will be organising the Jiliva Sevens Rugby in Jiliva Village, Nakasaleka, Kadavu, the ground is 20-metre short and trust that your Sports Development Programme can assist, not only in Kadavu but all over Fiji where school grounds and public grounds be upgraded.

Is there anyway the Uprising Resort all-weather ground can be our feature to raise standards. Everyone in Fiji is looking forward to the rugby bubble in the near normal so its good grounds and better grounds and on that note, I wish the Fiji Rugby Sevens Team every success in July 2021 Tokyo Olympics - ‘Go for Gold Fiji’.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this side of the House fully supports the recommendations that the Ministry increases awareness and promotion of the various trainings offered at the five youth training centres. We note that there are five Youth Training Centres in Fiji, namely: Naleba, Labasa, Naqere, Savusavu, Nasau, Sigatoka, Yavitu, Kadavu and Valelevu in Nasinu.

In 2017 to 2018, a total of 324 students graduated from these training centres. The recommendation is that the Ministry changes its marketing strategy to attract more students at the Training Camp.

The Committee was informed of various challenges faced in trying to increase THE student enrolment in the five centres. This pertained to resources, funding, staff facility and location of the youth training centres. It is informed that particularly the Youth Training Centre at Yavitu, Naceva, Kadavu is too isolated which may be the reason for low enrolment of 15 students in the fiscal year, where it has reviewed the programmes offered at the training centres and funded Naleba, Macuata with \$109,000, Naqere in Savusavu with \$90,000 and Yavitu, Kadavu with \$70,000.

Mr. Speaker, the Boat Masters' Training is offered by MSAF which is responsible for providing the training and is the licensing authority of Boat Masters and Boat Captain Class 6 licences, the Ministry's role is to coordinate training only. MSAF's levy on Boat Masters' Training is so exorbitant where the Ministry pays for training fees and training transport, et cetera, for the duration of two-ten-days.

There has been a lot of changes and delay in incorporating training in remote and maritime areas in Fiji. Since late of 2009, I have been trying to attend the training in Suva and also in Kadavu last October. Talking to MSAF in Suva is highly likely that we may attend the FNU Maritime School to get a boat licence and with the fees really exorbitant, however, the rural maritime seeks the Honourable Prime Minister's indulgence for MSAF to do the training as usual at all maritime islands Fiji-wide.

On that note, we support the recommendation that the Ministry allocates more resources towards Boat Masters' Training and also strengthen partnership with other agencies.

Specific Skills Training accumulative a total of 178 youths managed to graduate from Five Training Youth Centres, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mobile Skills Training, the Ministry targeted 30 youths per training, 47 in total and achieve 40 percent individuals, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the highlights of 2017-2018 is the empowerment programme. It led up to programmes designed to empower youths that have disengaged from former education pathways and will be engaged in other development programmes.

Another highlights is the Duke of Edinburgh International Award where programme that was designed to accommodate globally-led like organise youth programmes and activities where local youths were exposed cross culture and foreign development programmes. As of the Report for 2017-2018, the recommendation should have been implemented and improved as realised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you and I support the Committee, being satisfied with the performance of the Ministry in 2017 and 2018. *Vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Before I go onto the recommendation, I just want to respond to the issues that have been raised by the Honourable Member in terms of grounds, in terms of the training centre in Kadavu and boat master's licence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, time and again, I have mentioned this Parliament in regards to the ground and the training centre and I do not want to waste my time on that but on the boat master licence, that would be my last contribution in terms of this recommendation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Members of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for this Report. The recommendation on Page 7 that the Ministry increases its awareness and promotion of various trainings offered at the five youth training centres. From the usual word of mouth and enrolment advertisements in the daily newspapers, the Ministry has utilised other platforms to advertise such as on our website and our social media page and also on the *Facebook*. Our participation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the quarterly radio talkback shows have helped promote our youth and sports programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has also participated in stakeholder and line ministry roadshows where youth training centre programmes are being promoted to the public. Mr. Speaker, Sir, attendance to the provincial, district and council meetings have also provided an opportunity to create much needed awareness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, lastly moreover our donor partners and stakeholders, NGOs such as Think Pacific, OISCA and Vodafone also have contributed to increasing and promoting our programme and services under the signed MOUs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Recommendation 2 on the same page, it talks about attracting more students in the training centres. Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Ministry considers this recommendation to be important but we need to be mindful of the capacity of the training centres that we have and the resources needed to implement the programme on an annual basis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Recommendation 3 on the same page, the Ministry reviews the programmes offered at the training centres. The Ministry has already started to review the programmes. The first review in 2019 was for the evaluation and review of the Ministry of Youth and Sports Training Centre at Valelevu. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this exercise is being carried out across all our youth training centres to ensure that they remain relevant to the needs of youths and the job market.

A new programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will be introduced at the centre beginning next year and this is the Certificate 1 - Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation.

Recommendation 1 on Page 8, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is noted and finally the recommendation on Page 9, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to allocate more resources towards the Boat Master's Training and also strengthen its partnership with other agencies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our clients are the youths aged 15 years to 35 years and so far, 998 Fijians have been graduated. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have conducted many trainings for our youths in maritime and coastal areas in partnership with MSAF. I really do not know where this information the Honourable Member is getting from that we had not conducted trainings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in recent months, we have noted an increase in the requirements by the agencies and we are in talks with Fiji Maritime Academy on this programme as well as to find ways and means of working together but I can assure the honourable House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that there is a lot of interest in terms of this boat master's licence and as I have mentioned earlier on that we have been working with MSAF and we are now also talking with the Fiji Maritime Academy just to make sure that we will roll out this programme once again.

With those comments, I support the motion before us, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank you for this opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Minister. I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak in reply. You have the floor.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir for the opportunity. I do not have any further comments.

HON. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources to move his motion. You have the floor.

**REVIEW REPORT – MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE
2014 AND 2015 CONSOLIDATED ANNUAL REPORTS**

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move that:

Parliament debates the Review of the Consolidated Annual Reports for the Ministry of Agriculture 2014 and 2015 which was tabled on 3rd September 2020.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources to speak on his motion. You have the floor.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Sir, I, as the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources move the motion, I take this opportunity to speak on the motion in regards to the Natural Resources Committee review report on the Ministry of Agriculture 2014 and 2015 Annual Reports.

The Ministry for Agriculture is a country's backbone in maintaining the food security, quick economic recovery and in assisting poverty alleviation by building capacities of farmers to increase production to which the Ministry has not left any stone unturned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee reviewed the consolidated 2014-2015 Annual Reports of the Ministry of Agriculture and its finding are reflected in the main Report. The Committee focused on the administration, organisation structure, programmes, major achievements and performance of the Ministry in the Years 2014 and 2015 respectively.

Upon deliberations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee verified its findings through the written submissions received from the Ministry of Agriculture in response to the questions formulated by the Committee.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Committee noted the consistency of performance of the Ministry for both the years under review. One of the highlights of the Ministry of Agriculture during the period under review, was its effort in prioritizing key output areas of responsibilities on the various activities and programmes. These key outputs were aligned towards the five government key pillars which were

enshrined in the People's Charter for Change, Peace and Prosperity (PCCPP). The following are five Government's Key Pillars of the Ministry:

- (1) Pillar 4 - Enhancing Public Sector Effectiveness and Service Delivery;
- (2) Pillar 5 - Achieving Higher Economic Growth while Ensuring Sustainability;
- (3) Pillar 6 - Making more Land Available for Productive and Social Services;
- (4) Pillar 7 - Developing an Integrated Development Structure at the Divisional Level; and
- (5) Pillar 8 - Reduce Poverty to a Negligible Level by 2015.

Mr. Speaker Sir, another achievement of the Ministry was the GDP growth of FJ\$504 million and FJ\$541.8 million in 2015 which was of 7.64 percent increase from 2014 to 2015. Furthermore, the Committee noted that the Ministry has increased the export by 10 percent and reduction in the import to 7.55 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2015 the Ministry rolled out the foundations of the Fiji 2020 Agriculture Sector Policy Agenda focusing on a theme of "Modernizing Agriculture".

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Committee commended the Ministry's effort in recognizing Women participation in areas of its operations in line with the SDG 5 on Gender. The Committee noted that three female officers held top positions in the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Natural Resources Committee has put its recommendation in the Review Report for the Ministry to ensure that it considers implementing.

Finally, I commend the effort of the Natural Resources Committee Members in the compilation of this Report and to the hardworking staff of the Ministry of Agriculture for their timely contribution in the compilation of this bipartisan committee Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few comments as the Member moving the motion on this Natural Resources Committee Report, I thank you for this opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Members the floor is now open for debate on this motion. I give the floor to the Honourable Adi Litia Qionibaravi.

HON. ADI L. QIONIBARAVI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to contribute to the motion on the review of the consolidated annual report for the Minister of Agriculture 2014/ 2015. At the outset, I wish to thank the Standing Committee and its Honourable Members for the report and recommendations.

The Committee made seven key recommendations and primarily, the Committee acknowledged that the Ministry should focus on agricultural based economy during the pandemic period by saving on import dollar through producing local products. The core functions of the Ministry of Agriculture is quite clear. The functions are realistic and relevant to our socio-economic development today. These objectives are also practical because we rely on agricultural sector for food security.

Further, almost 50 percent of our population reside in the rural areas and depend on agriculture as their main source of income and livelihood. These objectives have been the cornerstone of Government agenda at least in the last 20 years. It is unfortunate, that very little has been done to achieve these goals in the last 15 years despite the very clear objectives and precise agenda in the

Ministry's planning documents. Let me share some vital statistics to show that we have achieved very little and I will also highlight some of the reasons why that is so.

The agricultural sectors contribution to GDP continues to decline. In 1995, agriculture contributed 16 percent of our national GDP. The year 2000's contribution to GDP declined to 12 percent and in 2006 it was around 1 percent. By 2015 with the contribution of agriculture, the GDP further declined to 6.3 percent and in 2020 it nose-dived further to 3.5 percent of the GDP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is unfortunate that the figures clearly indicate that agricultural contribution will continue to further decline if Government continues to provide mere lip-service which I will touch on later.

The decline in agricultural production has led to the increase in food importation, Sir. In 2014 our food import bill was around \$784 million and increased to \$800 million in 2015, and surely it will continue to increase. Today our food imports are hovering it around 15 percent of our total imports valued around \$4.8 billion annually.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it shows that the tourism sector imports 52 percent of its fresh products and 74 percent of this is attributed to import of meat, sea food and dairy products. It is unfortunate to note the decline in our dairy products particularly commercial dairy capital. The number of dairy farms have decreased to 270 today from 1126 in 2009, despite the favourable environment for commercial dairy and cattle farming. This has led to the increase of our imports whilst our dairy farmers are left behind due to the review of Rewa Dairy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will highlight reasons for decline in our agriculture sector. The budgetary allocation of the Ministry of Agriculture continues to decline. On average the Ministry receives a mere \$60 million annually excluding sugar which is less than 1 percent of the total Government expenditure despite that fact that a majority of our population depend on agriculture. Sad to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture has not been given the priority it deserves. Last year, the COVID -19 response budget had slashed the agricultural allocation from \$75.3 million to \$58.5 million, despite the importance of the agriculture sector for food security during this crisis.

We are reaping these poor decision-making as many desperate families seek food assistance and the price of vegetables and root crops have gone up, especially in the densely populated lockdown areas: Nadi, Lautoka, Suva, Lami, Nasinu and Nausori. It is time that the Government seriously considers its priorities and directs more financial resources so that agriculture sector can achieve its objectives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is common knowledge that the contribution of the sugar sector to GDP will continue to decline unless some drastic measures are taken to improve value addition. It is unfortunate that we lost out the implementation of the Alternative Livelihood Programme funded by the ADB and supported by EU - the \$300 million grant for community support from all stakeholders, including civil society organisations and the private sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the alternative programme was a diversification within sugar industry to complement the rural and the outer island development programme. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have the potential and opportunity to invigorate the agricultural sector through diversification but there is clearly a lack of commitment by the Government. We should consider targeting a few low volume crops such as vanilla. The current market today is hovering at around US\$500. It is time we get our priorities right and focus on agriculture for our food security and support. I thank you, Sir, for the opportunity to speak on this motion.

HON. SPEAKER.-I now give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr Speaker, Sir, in a moment I will look at the seven recommendations in the report, but if you look at the statement by the Honourable Qionibaravi and also her statement last week, the gist of it was that the agriculture sector was declining. Repeatedly I have said to them that when they come to this House they should get correct data.

Once and for all, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Let me read out the value of agricultural output from 2014-2020 and after giving out this number, I ask them to never raise the matter here that the agriculture sector is declining. The value of Non-Sugar Agriculture was as follows:

- 2014 - \$501.93 million;
- 2015 - \$559 million;
- 2016 - \$932 million;
- 2017 - \$987 million;
- 2018 - \$1.07 billion;
- 2019 - \$1.2 billion; and
- 2020 - 1.23 billion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has been a growth from \$5 million in 2014 to \$1.23 billion in 2020 – what is wrong with them. Honourable Gavoka was saying that if we do this and that it will be a billion dollar industry; it is a billion dollar industry already. Mr. Speaker, when they come to this House I do not know who provides them the data. Go to bureau of stats and ask them to give the data so that we all share the common data. We all share the same page and then get the narrative out of it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were seven recommendations in this report. One was on SDG and I want to let you know that we have incorporated that into our strategic plan to see how we are meeting the SDG targets. The second recommendation focused on agro based economy. We have three key objectives, namely food and nutrition security; to expand commercial agriculture; and we want to contribute towards the export of fresh produce and agriculture products. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we announced 16 initiatives which we are progressively implementing.

Mr. Speaker, I want to tell the Honourable Gavoka that the bidding constrain in agriculture is the formal long term tenure in agriculture and the honourable Minister for Economy also mentioned this. Unfortunately he does not understand but I will take him with me to meet village youth who ask if they grow a certain produce, when it is ready for harvest, what guarantee was there that they will get the returns out of it and not the entire village population. Mr. Speaker, Sir, all of them want tenure security.

Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Prime Minister launched our village rice programme. I have \$100,000 from a donor to establish the village rice programme where the villages grow rice communally for their own consumption and not for commercial purpose.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, out of the 1,100 villages at the moment only 123 villages are interested. We are saying that for the first crop we will do everything with them but all expenses we will pick it up but to make it a sustainable adventure, they take over the project after that. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are only 123 villages, but I am challenging him to give me the names of 10 villages where would want to start that for communal rice production, forget about the commercial rice production. We are on the right path with the right strategy and we are getting there, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. I call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources to speak in reply. You have the floor.

HON. S. KIRPAL.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Honourable Member for his contribution and thank the Honourable Minister for Agriculture for finding the issues which the Honourable Opposition Members may have not been aware of. It is unfortunate for Honourable Opposition Members who always complain rather than getting their facts right. For example, before the Bainimarama Government there was only one exporter in Valley Road, Sigatoka but now there are five exporters like Manasa Exports, Salen Exports, Mahen Export and there are more.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Opposition should thank the Honourable Prime Minister for reviving the agriculture sector. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER. – I call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to move his motion. You have the floor.

REVIEW REPORT – NATIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY 2013 ANNUAL REPORT

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Report on the Review of the National Fire Authority 2013 Annual Report which was tabled on 3rd September, 2020.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I now give the floor to the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak on his motion. You have the floor.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Fire Authority's core function has expanded beyond fire response and rescue to provide a broader emergency management service such as Fire Response, Hazardous Material Rescue, Road Accident Rescue, Urban Search and Rescue, Flood & Swift Water Rescue, Natural Disaster Response, Community Education and Paramedic Response.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee upon being referred the National Fire Authority 2013 Annual Report, requested for a written response from the National Fire Authority. Upon receipt of its written response on Monday, 13th July, 2020 the Committee were enlightened on the following:

- (1) The alignment of the works of the Authority to the National Development Plan (NDP) which is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals;
- (2) The Authority's future plans and initiatives; and
- (3) The benefits of the amendments to the National Fire Service Act 1994

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Fire Authority's plans and initiatives for the five years from 2020-2025 has been incorporated into its new Strategic Plan which sets out its new Corporate Vision. As we

all know this is a 2013 Annual Report. I also know that todate the National Fire Authority has done progressed a lot and they have done a lot of work. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on this motion. I call on the Honourable Vosanibola. You have the floor.

HON. P.W. VOSANIBOLA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me the opportunity to make a short contribution on the motion before the House. First and foremost, I would like to thank the Chairman and Honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for the review carried out on the 2013 Annual Report of the NFA.

Sir, at the outset, NFA was established in 1994 to assume responsibilities to provide fire services for the entire nation. The NFA respond to a variety of fire services in Fiji which includes structure fires, vehicle-related fires, other emergency activities including fire evacuation assistance and specialist response to the activities.

Sir, based on the Report, I think it has only a single line recommendation and I wish to highlight the concern observed by the Committee and it relates to the lapsed submission of the Authority's annual reports by six years and, Sir, under the Finance Instructions 2010, Part 12 on reporting, as you all know, it clearly stipulates that each agency must prepare an annual report for submission to the minister or to its minister by 31st December in the following year.

Sir, on that note, the submission of annual report is an important element of accountability to Parliament and with a single recommendation to the NFA to submit pending annual reports for the year from 2014 to 2019 by the end of 2020-2021 financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as of today, it is sad to note that none of those annual reports have been submitted to Parliament, therefore, I request the NFA to be more vigilant on submission of such annual reports.

Sir, another issue, is the lack of resources, poor financials and necessary equipment within our fire stations and their service at times cannot meet the demand and the question I would like to pose; are the existing fire stations around the country well-equipped enough to handle the fire incidents?

Also Sir, I wish to highlight the concern of the Authority, as highlighted in the annual report with regards to public perception. There is still a need for change in public perspective and attitude towards fire safety as evident from the increase in the number of property fires from 95 in 2012 and 120 in 2013. Sir, the attitude of members of the communities should prevent unnecessary fires occurring in the first place and assist in educating our families and friends on fire safety and fire prevention measures.

Sir, fire causes can be prevented with a change in people's attitude towards the safe handling of fire and ensuring the necessary fire safety precautions are taken at all times. Nevertheless, Sir, with those concerns and issues raised, I wish to extend my sincere appreciation to the chairman and board members of the Authority. It is a great objective to monitor progress and performance of the Authority.

Sir, least, but not the last, I wish to thank our firefighter warriors for the great services rendered to our nation. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I commend the motion before the House.

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

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for this Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the financial statement in the annual report 2013 do not have any issues and the Report produced by the OAG is unqualified. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Local Government acknowledges the National Fire Authority had a lapse in six years in reporting on its operational and financial performance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in order to comply with the recommendations made by the Committee, the Authority engaged the services of Ernst & Young, Chartered Accountants for the completion of the Financial Statement for each financial year. This is mainly to expedite the clearing of the backlog of financial statements. NFA has since been working closely with the Office of the Auditor-General to progress the audit of the financial statements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the chartered Accountants have also provided guidelines for the pre-audit preparation which has enabled the Authority to ensure appropriate preparations are done prior to the completion of the Financial Statements and other documents. In terms of progress of the audit, the 2014 Annual Report has been submitted while 2015 to 2019 Reports are waiting completion of accounts and approval by the Board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, however, all narratives have been finalised. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Fire Authority and Ministry of Local Government further maintained that the authority needs to bring about changes to ensure greater vigilance in the timely submission of its Annual Report to the Parliament. In terms of sustainability and future actions, the Authority has incorporated plans and initiatives into its annual costed operation plans, progress of the initiatives and the annual costed operating plans is being monitored on a quarterly basis through individual work plans to ensure achievements of all targets every year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Member mentioned that the National Fire Authority whether they are well-resourced or not. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you know, I mentioned it earlier that the government has spent large sum of money in putting these Fire Stations around the country and NFA established itself in 1995 and till now, they have 21 Fire Stations around the country and every year, they are given resources to buy the equipment. So, it is in progress. In fact, the government also funds the installation of fire-hydrants around the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of public perception, I must say that fire is everyone's responsibility and not only National Fire Authority's responsibility, we all need to take precautions in ensuring that the house wiring is done properly and every year, the electrician come and check the place, we are able to put up the smoke alarms and so forth.

The National Fire Authority has been raising awareness in the community and the various methods of the way they raise awareness is already listed in the Report but I just want to mention the new initiative which National Fire Authority has embarked on, which is the Community Fire Wardens Programme. This is community engagement and NFA complete a training for six communities so far in the Western Division and two in the Northern Division. But due to COVID-19 lockdowns, and so forth they are not able to continue with the community engagement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to digress a bit, I would like to acknowledge and give special thanks to the NFA officers who have been working tirelessly in the national fight to control the spread of

Coronavirus. I receive daily situational report on the ground on the various types of works our firefighters are doing around the country.

Everyday, I receive reports and photos of a firefighter wearing protective garment and fumigating, disinfecting and decontaminating supermarkets, isolation centres, vehicles and trucks at the borders at Logani, Sawani and Taveuni.

On a daily average, Mr. Speaker, Sir, their fumigating and disinfecting over 120 vehicles and trucks. Our officers are at the boarder 24hours at Logani and from 4am-6pm at Sawani including Taveuni now that Lami has been lifted.

So, my special thanks to these unsung heroes and to their families for silently serving the nation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity to respond to the motion and I support this Report and its recommendations. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak in reply.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity and I do not have any further comments.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now vote to note the content of the report.

Question put.

Motion agree to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to move his motion.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – SUGAR CANE GROWERS COUNCIL 2007-2018 ANNUAL REPORTS

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Report on the Review of the Sugar Cane Growers Council 2007-2018 Annual Reports which was tabled on 10th December, 2020.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to speak on his motion.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs tabled its consolidated Review report on the Sugar Cane Grower's Council 2007 to 2018 Annual Reports on 10th December 2020.

The Sugar Cane Growers Council is recognised as the peak grower's organisation that represents the interest of all cane growers of Fiji. Despite the continuous challenges faced by the sugar industry, the Committee commended the efforts by the Council to continuously provide its mandated services. The Committee visited the Council's headquarters earlier last year to better

understand its functions and operations. The Committee was pleased to note that the Council's offices are conveniently set up and strategically located to assist farmers effectively in all cane growing districts. While hearing submissions from Council officials, the Committee noted that various essential services are provided by Sugar Cane Growers Council to the farmers. These include but is not limited to providing legal and advisory services, conducting Grower consultation meetings, resolving gang disputes, distribution of farm supplies, assisting in income tax returns and renewal of land leases.

While scrutinising the reports, the Committee noted that in November 2009, in an effort to facilitate efficiency in terms of costs and implementation of programmes, Councillors were replaced by the grower's representatives. Following this, the Councillors were relieved of the burden of paying a levy of approximately 29 cents to 44 cents per tonne when the government replaced the levy with an annual grant. Given the important services provided by the Council, the Committee recommended that a monitoring and evaluation mechanism be put in place by the Sugar Cane Growers Council in collaboration with the Ministry of Sugar and Fiji Sugar Corporation to ensure all capital grant programmes are monitored effectively.

The Committee was of the view that continuous information session, awareness programmes and forums would strengthen the relationship between the farmers and stakeholders, as well as help maintain harmony and cooperation. Furthermore, the Committee was of the view that to assist in the sustainability of the sugar industry in the long run, the Sugar Cane Growers Council could play a vital role in attracting young and willing entrepreneurs towards venturing into the sugar industry. To conclude, given the important roles played by the Council, they must continue to enhance the quality of services they provide to the growers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this contribution, as member moving the motion I thank you for the opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank you. I will give the floor to the Honourable Jese Saukuru.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Honourable Kuridrani will be speaking on our behalf.

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

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I will be very brief. I thank the Honourable Chair and the Members of the Committee for compiling this Consolidated Report for the Sugar Cane Growers Council Annual Report for the period from 2007-2018. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for me it is very important to note that the current performance of the Fiji Sugar Corporation is a clear manifestation of the performance of all stakeholders in the sugar industry including the Sugar Cane Growers Council.

Honourable Professor Prasad has correctly stated that it is under life support, so I believe that all other families that rely on the industry are all under life support as well.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- I have been hearing this for the last six years from Opposition.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- So, my contribution tonight is just to remind the Committee and all the Committees that it is very important to consider the economic and social implications of deliberating outdated reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to set a standard for the submission of Annual Reports. We need to consider the recommendation to provide penalties and disciplinary action against delayed submissions from organisations.

My fear is that when we consider outdated reports we become irrelevant because our effort holds no value and has no impact on the performance of the organisation. For now, I support the motion in the House.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I give the floor to the Honourable Professor Biman Prasad. You have the floor.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I had noted Honourable Vijay Nath was a bit agitated when he tried to explain the figures, I think, Mr. Speaker, he is still got it wrong. I do not have a big issue, I just wanted him to correct the figures. I think he should go back and look at the Fiji Sugar Corporation 2020 Annual Report and he will see that the correct figures that I gave was what he needs to put there.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, the Report is for the period when the military regime and later FijiFirst Government, effectively in my view ended a democracy for cane growers and this is how they did it.

First in January 2007, Mr. Speaker, the Sugar Cane Growers Council CEO, Mr. Jagannath Sami was forcibly removed from his office. The manner in which he was treated needed hospitalisation at Lautoka Hospital. His removal was legislated as termination through Decree No. 1 of 2007.

Second, Mr. Speaker, in the name of elections becoming an impediment to so called reforms in the industry, the Sugar Cane Growers Council elections scheduled for April 2007 was deferred to April 2008. Then the elections were again deferred by another two years in 2008 on the recommendations to the then Military regime Cabinet by the then Minister for Sugar.

Thirdly in 2009, elected Sugar Cane Growers Council was dissolved.

Fourthly in August 2015, Mr. Speaker, the FijiFirst Government repealed the provision of an elected Sugar Cane Growers Council in the Sugar Industry Act.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, I did not expect the report to take note of the developments that happened during this period of review apart from mentioning growers no longer pay the levy to the Sugar Cane Growers Council.

Mr. Speaker, the Sugar Cane Growers Council has a long history and it was created for a purpose under the 1984 Sugar Industry Act. Generations of cane growers fought for a democratic voice in their own industry. It is that history that the FijiFirst Government chose to bury, Mr. Speaker.

Our cane growers started off for dignity, justice and freedom which was given to them by the late Mr. A.D. Patel, the founder of our party who negotiated the Denning Award which is still, Mr. Speaker, forms the basis of the sharing formula proceeds from the sale of sugar.

The late Mr. Siddiq Koya, the former Leader of the Opposition and NFP Leader who negotiated the Sugar Industry Act in 1984 with the then Prime Minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara became the first Chairman of the Sugar Cane Growers Council. Since 2007, cane growers have been

reduced to mere pawns 9.00.15 battered from pillar to post. They have no say whatsoever in any decision making, decision affecting their livelihood and long-term viability of the sugar industry despite being its most important stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, this is almost like reminiscence of the days of CSR when the master imposed his will on helpless growers. It is telling the growers, “you just harvest and plant cane, we decide what is best for you and you pay for our indecisions through direct and indirect taxes, you do not question what we decide on your behalf”; it is almost like that, Mr. Speaker. The growers, their families, the cane cutters, lorry operators, lorry drivers, labourers and farm hands have every right to feel demoralised. They are entitled to the same transparency and accountability the Government repeatedly promises to various people, but now their Council is completely undemocratic and unrepresentative, selected for their loyalty to the Government and not to growers. I mean we know that, Mr. Speaker.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Sugar Cane Growers itself is now a toothless tiger and growers that I have meetings with until recently in Ba, Tavua and Sigatoka have actually demanded a return to a democratically elected Council with one representative from their respective cane sectors. We already have the result of this Government’s autocratic rule over the growers.

A number of active growers, Mr. Speaker, have fallen by more than 6,000 from 18,000 in 2006 to around 12,000 and the sugar cane production has fallen almost 50 percent from 3.2 million tonnes in 2006 to 1.73 million tonnes last season with a further decline forecast this year due to *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*. So how much more damage and destruction does Government want to see before realising its vision for the industry is a failure?

Mr. Speaker, I have always said that it is important for growers to have that space to elect their own representative because it provides that cohesion, discretion and unity amongst the growers to take their own issues. The Government will not lose anything, Mr. Speaker, by allowing growers to have their own elected representatives. When we go around the sugar cane belt areas, Mr. Speaker, they have no one to take their issues; simple things like Memorandum of Gang Agreements, simple things like quotas. These were all settled in the past in an amicable way by the growers’ representatives. In the absence of that, they have to rely on the Sugar Cane Growers Council staff and their administration, it is not working. This is what growers are telling us, Mr. Speaker.

So, I think we have learnt a lesson, we may have tried an unelected Sugar Cane Growers Council. Mr. Speaker, it has not worked and I would urge the Government to consider when we are done with the current COVID crisis, we should have the growers election and give the mandate back to the growers so that they can have the representatives in the Council then we can call this a Sugar Cane Growers Council. At the moment, it is not the Growers Council, it is the Government’s Council and what Government decides, that is what happens, not the farmers.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the Honourable Prime Minister.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.-Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I rise to the support the Consolidated Report of the Standing Committee on the Review of the Ministry of Sugar Industry 2007-2018 Annual Report and I also commend the work of the Council.

Mr. Speaker, before I speak on the Report, I would like to make a response to Honourable Professor Prasad’s comments on the motion early this morning where he commented on the misleading figures reported on page 8 of the Standing Committee Report. Let me tell Honourable Professor Prasad

that figures reported in the Standing Committee and the National Development Plan are not erroneous, not intended to paint any rosy picture nor to mislead the users of the Standing Committee Report as he said. The statistics provided are absolutely correct and they are accurate. The Chair of the Standing Committee has already clarified that the figures were submitted by FSC and not Ministry of Sugar Industry; that is true. If he was more observant

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- This is on record, Prime Minister.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Shush!

If he was more observant of the table on page 7, he would have noted that the Report clearly mentions, “meaning financial year” which is not the same as “season year”. Sir, FSC’s financial year is from 1st June to 31st May while the season year is harvesting year, normally from June to December, so as per the FSC’s reporting requirement, last year’s figures will be reported in this financial year. This is exactly the same way it was reported in the Report. The 2015 season production was reported in the 2016 financial year.

Honourable Professor Prasad should go and verify the figures before picking out on my Ministry and FSC or even questioning the abilities of the Standing Committee. He always calls himself an economist. A good economist will do a thorough research, verify, ask and then make conclusions but here, Honourable Professor Prasad portraying himself as a

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- My figures are correct, Prime Minister.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Honourable Professor Prasad is portraying himself as a good economist and is getting all hyped up. Why? Because it is all politics for him. Perhaps he should read the FSC’s published Annual Report that contains statistics for 10 years instead of questioning the Ministry’s and FSC’s reporting abilities. I will suggest that he stops joining the noisemakers club on sugar when he cannot even get his facts right.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Fact is correct, Prime Minister.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Shush!

Mr. Speaker, the Council with this Act amended in 2015 has worked closely with all growers. Of particular interest is section 32 regarding the members of the Council’s Board. Allow me to inform this august House on the regime of the Council prior to September, 2009. During that time, the Council consisted of one member elected from each of the 38 sectors, elected by the growers and one member nominated by the Minister from each of eight districts.

Mr. Speaker, this regime of the councillors elected by the Council until 2009 was a failure. It was highly-politicised by people like him, by few individuals to advance their political agendas.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- True!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- They include the National Farmers Union and the Fiji Cane Growers Association which were associated bodies of the NFP and FLP; Honourable Professor Prasad did not tell us that.

Mr. Speaker, the councillors’ divide and rule tactics were prevalent in the field and in office where majority of the time, amicable decisions were not reached, forcing growers to run around to

seek redress. It was a standard joke. The same growers that paid from 29 cents to 44 cents per tonne as a levy to the Council were made to suffer and were treated as political football by people like him. Management appointments and decisions were based on political strength, ...

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Absolutely!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... expired cane leases were not renewed because of their political interference which led to loss of productive growers. He did not say that. Services including loan approvals to growers was subject to political party alliances and favouritism. Growers received less cane price and there were deliberate delays in resolving grower grievances.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Absolutely!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, the highly-politicisation of the Council clouded their vision on what was happening in the industry, particularly the declining trend of sugar cane production. My Government, listen, Honourable Professor Prasad, my Government took appropriate actions to rectify these issues to avoid collapse of the industry.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... which supports more than 200,000 Fijians, both directly and indirectly. These critical issues left little or no choice but to relieve 38 councillors in September 2009 - useless. As a result of this decision, there was reduction in operating costs of the Council by \$400,000 annually. Much of these costs were mainly spent for board councillors' fees, meal allowances, local and overseas travelling and accommodation expenses for elected members. It was a standard joke when one of their leaders went on an overseas trip, everyone jumped on the plane.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- All 37 went.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- You did not say that, you did not mention that, Honourable Professor Prasad.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had my Government taken the decision to dissolve the failed regime earlier.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Our hardworking sugarcane growers would have saved a total of \$4.8 million over the 12-year period from 2010-2021.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the \$4.8 million was their hard-earned money which they paid in footing the bills from their share of sugar proceeds for these councillors. In accordance with the amended Act, the Council now comprises of only nine members, six of them are representative of growers and three are government representatives that include the Ministry of Sugar Industry and Commissioners (Western and Northern). This leaner structure is cost effective, allows for effective decision-making for the Council and has eliminated any political interference from bodies such as the National Farmers Union and the Fiji Cane Growers Council or for that matter, anyone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to reduce burden to increase income of growers, the Government has absorbed the annual levy paid by growers and since 2016, the Ministry is providing \$600,000 to the Council to meet its annual operational and administration costs for all of its eight offices located at district of cane belt areas.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- You did not say that.

Therefore between 2016 and 2021, the growers have saved \$3.6 million in addition to the \$4.8 million savings that growers realised after the dissolving of the 38 councillors - bunch of crooks, I think. With elimination bureaucracies and political interference, the 27 staff of Council, 12 of whom are females have been empowered to take additional responsibilities and to deal with day to day grower issues under the guidance of the management.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- How many females did they have before?

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- This has also enabled the growers to raise their concerns and issues directly to the Council staff to obtain first-hand and factual information. The Council has achieved its objectives through diversified platform. The demands for Council services to growers have increased over the years.

Currently, the Council is providing 50 different services compared to 27 in 2007. Among the major ones include regular stakeholder consultation, solving disputes, legal services and preparing income tax returns and more. Apart from its core role, the Council staff have also assisted in the implementation of the Ministry of Sugar Industry's Capital Programmes through consultation, advocacy and awareness, assisting growers in filling applications forms, handling and distributing weedicides subsidised through the Weedicides Programme, monitoring of cane access and cane planting programmes and regular advice. Together with FSC, the Council facilitates farm registration, establishment of grower gangs, contracts for engagement of cane cutters, resolve issues on matters related to cane harvesting, transportation and milling.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Council is also an active member of the World Association of Beet and Cane Growers and is represented in the boards of industry institutions. The Council, as growers' representative, has done tremendous work on caring for growers' welfare. Years before, there were no social security but now growers feel more financially secured with the introduction of bundle micro-insurance, FNPF Voluntary Scheme and Investment Savings Scheme.

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

HON J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Such welfare support, coupled with Government's various support in cane planting, New Farmer Assistance Programme, Farm Mechanisation, Input subsidies and guaranteed cane price is enticing potential and young people in to joining the sugar industry. Growers have also attended various training, facilitated by FSC. Based on these remarks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I therefore, support the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Prime Minister. I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to speak in reply.

HON. V. NATH.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Let us start with correcting Honourable Professor Prasad again. He is talking about FSC 2020 Report. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report has not

been presented as yet to Parliament and he is speaking from articles. I request him to, please, read the Report which I am quoting. If possible, whatever Honourable Prime Minister has just mentioned, you hear the record of it, he has basically covered everything which you should know. But no rather than taking side of the Members you are talking about.

Honourable Prime Minister, thank you very much, Sir, for your contribution in there. I hope Honourable Professor Prasad will take the note of those important things. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have any other issues. Thank you so much.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources.

**REVIEW REPORT - PETITION FOR GOVERNMENT TO PROVIDE
RELIABLE, SAFE AND AFFORDABLE SHIPPING SERVICES FOR LAU GROUP**

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review Report on the Petition for Government to Provide Reliable, Safe and Affordable Shipping Services for the Lau Group, which was tabled on 2nd September, 2020.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources to speak on the motion.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee had completed its findings and analysis on the grievances raised by the people of Lau on the shipping services provided by *MV Liahona* and *MV Briana* through the franchise programme. The Committee concurrently made recommendations as way forward for the Government and the relevant shipping stakeholders to consider.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to enlighten the House on a few issues in regards to the motion before the House. Firstly, the Committee commends the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport's efforts under its Shipping Services Division, that its strategically prioritising in providing a safe, efficient, reliable, and affordable shipping services to Fijians, as outlined in the 5-year and 20-year Fiji National Development Plan.

It was worthy to note that the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport's strategy is to get more investments for the acquisition of new vessels to boost Government Shipping Services' fleet (GSS), to support development projects and for passenger transportation to the maritime islands, in this regard the problems faced by the people of Lau. The Committee noted that over the years, the number of vessels has increased and the frequency of services has improved and viewed that an

extended contract period to 10 years be implemented by the shipping industry as an incentive to provide collateral for private sector investments in new ships to service the uneconomical routes under the franchise scheme.

Finally, I commend the effort of the Natural Resources Committee Members in the compilation of this report on the Lau Petition, the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport Senior Officials, Ministry for Rural and Maritime Development and National Disaster Management, Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji, Fiji Competition & Commerce Commission (FCCC), the Lau community in the Central Division, the people of Lau for their contributions in the compilation of this bipartisan committee Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few comments, as the Member moving the motion on this Natural Resources Committee Report, I thank you for this opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I give the floor to the first speaker. Honourable Anare Jale, you have the floor.

HON. A. JALE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Report before the House today is the culmination of the work of the Parliament, through its Standing Committee of Natural Resources, I did an investigation on the petition that you allowed to be brought to the House by the people of Lau.

The petition that the Lau people brought at that time, was signed by some very prominent people that had since left us: The former Prime Minister of Fiji, Laisenia Qarase, Rokosau, and a few others, Rokosau is still living and Enele Malele is a well-known person in Fiji too, they since left but there are other Lauans that have brought this petition to the House.

I wish to thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing this petition to come through because it is the only petition that has seen the light of day.

Most of the petitions have not been allowed to come to the House, and I thank all of us here. We all took part in the process, and I am so glad for the people of Lau, even if nothing was done about it, and even if there was no result of the petition that came through, the mere fact that it was brought to the attention of this Honourable House, I must say, I am so thankful to you: all of you.

The petition was accepted by this Parliament and this Committee went to do the work and its Report is before us today.

The petition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is on the improvement of the Shipping Service to the Lau Group: the “Government to provide reliable, safe and affordable shipping services for the Lau Group”. The shipping service is so vital for the Lau Group and maritime provinces. It is related very closely to their economic livelihood.

So, that is the reason and I may say, if they have to prioritise the priorities of the people of Lau and the maritime provinces (and I will talk about Lau) they will say that their shipping service is so critical for the livelihood and the economic development of the people of Lau. So I am so thankful that the Report has been able to be produced by the Committee and it is before us today.

The Standing Committee on Natural Resource Reports in recognition will not only apply to Lau. It certainly will have implication on other maritime provinces in Fiji who depend on the services of shipping, the shipping services that are provided to them.

The Island of Rotuma certainly will benefit from the finding of this Committee, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I would like to thank the Chairman and the Members of the Committee: ‘thank you’ for the Report. I would say, the Report is an excellent one and its recommendations are realistic and practical.

And one thing that I found from this Committee too, they become ambassadors of Lau. They went in a boat, they visited the islands, they saw for themselves the difficulties that these people are facing, and we should know, Sir, the recent household survey that have been done, they have identified the Eastern Division as the poorest of all the provinces in Fiji, all the more reason why this Government should take note and do something to bring up the standard of living for our people in maritime provinces, particularly in the Eastern Division.

It is pleasing to note that there are recommendations that are coming through and I will just mention a few: the turnaround time which has already been discussed before. Thank you, Honourable Minister Koya and your team, thank you for what you have done.

Even before you took action on this Report, we have found a lot of improvements about the services that you are providing to Lau. The people of Lau have come to see me to say that shipping services to Lau are more frequent and reliable. The conditions of ships are more improved than what it was before so I say, thank you for what is happening - you have updated us on some of the initiatives that you are taking in terms of putting together a policy about travel to maritime provinces. I look forward to that particular work of yours being completed as soon as possible.

In terms of hot water provision on the boats that service us – we not have any provision for hot water. People have to bring their own kettle to boil water in the boat. These are small things but they have to feed themselves and if they spend three days on the boat that is exactly what they face. The provision of hot water is important and you need to look at it.

The provision for disabled people. They have to be carried physically on board so some of these things you need to look into. I am not going to bore you with a lot of things. The report has spelt out very clearly what needs to be improved and I look forward to the Government to take note of what has been recommended particularly, Honourable Koya - thank you for what you are doing. I look forward to working closely with you in addressing the concerns of the maritime provinces in particular Lau, in regards to shipping service. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the Honourable Semi Koroilavesau. You have the floor.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a contribution to the motion before the House.

First, I would like to thank Honourable Kirpal and the members of the Standing Committee on Natural Resource for their assessment and recommendations on the petition for the Government to provide reliable, safe and affordable shipping services for the Lau Group.

Mr. Speaker, while supporting the transportation needs of most of our isolated maritime islands, it is important to understand the critical elements that need to be considered when seeking this assistance. This is vital because as we push for affordable services they also need to see issues and the using of commercial platform to ensure that companies operate viably.

This means determining the type of ships to be used which include the vessel size. The vessel should be assessed on its ability to access remote islands and villages, the propulsion consideration to be made for alternate power source to complement diesel propulsion to keep costs down; vessel capacity and capability - there should be consideration for accommodation to cater for different customers including tourists. For example, high-end cabins for tourists can be means of compensating low paying passengers. There is also need to consider the cargo and storage facilities on board.

Mr. Speaker, the type of ship that could be operating in our remote areas including Lau needs to be well researched. Ideally, when choosing the most suitable vessel, the financial viability of any commercial vessel needs to be considered. This is a commercial activity and the private sector prefers Government assistance and this will continue in the short and medium term. I would suggest that shipping owners seek assistance from funding agencies to effectively and viably service Lau especially with the distance to Viti Levu and between the various islands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in noting the recommendation of the Committee, I fully support the need for vessels safety adhering to many requirements which I am certain the Ministry of Transport is already administering. This is currently being mandated and addressed by relevant agencies like MSAF in which ships are cleared for departure if they meet the minimum standards.

Mr. Speaker, while supporting the finding of the Committee, I would like to highlight that there is work needed to assess the affordability versus commercial viability. This is certainly a commercial activity and is better driven by the private sector. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. I give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to contribute to this particular Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the actions that have been taken by the Fijian Government over the years to improve the connectivity through increased shipping routes to the Lau Group has meant that pretty much most of what is recommended in the Report has been taken care of. As you would have seen from Honourable Jale's comments, the recommendations in the Report are really no longer relevant as the Fijian Government has already taken those relevant actions that address the actual recommendations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to be specific, most of the recommendations in the Report were to do with either reliability, safety, affordability, policy, environmental and trade issues. Safety, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is everyone's responsibility, no matter where we go, no matter what we do and with whom we travel. We are working with vessel operators constantly to ensure the safety of travellers at all times and this is not just for Lau. This is for everyone, the work of MSAF, its enforcement and compliance officers is to ensure that checks are undertaken for the clearance of vessels and the primary objective in all of this is safety of passengers and its cargo - that is actually paramount, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are 10 routes operated under the Government Shipping Franchise Scheme and these actually include Rotuma, Northeast Vanua Levu, Yasawa, Lower Southern Lau which operates on a monthly basis, Kadavu, Lomaiviti, Upper Southern Lau, Northern Lau and *Yasayasa* Moala which operate on a fortnightly basis and the new routes of Beqa, Yanuca and Vatulele which are now servicing that area.

The scheme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, covers 80 ports of call and in the 10 franchise routes to all maritime islands. The franchise scheme provides services specifically for four out of the 10 routes to the Lau Group and these include Lower Southern Lau, Upper Southern Lau, Northern Lau and Yasayasa Moala, Sir. The services to the Lau Group are provided to 25 out of the 80 ports that I have just mentioned which is more than that of any other province or the other provinces, Sir, so they have been treated very well, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the total number of franchise trips undertaken annually is 84 trips to the Lau Group and these trips are actually crucial in enhancing the economic activities in the rural remote maritime islands and effectively, Sir, it means that there are seven trips to the group a month - seven a month, much more than the two that were actually recommended by the Report, Sir,

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the actual Scheme supports economic activities in the maritime islands through the provision of transportation and the following ports have recorded the highest movement of passengers and cargo to their respective routes and maximum utilisation of the franchise scheme - Vanuabalavu in the Northern Lau, Lakeba in the Upper Southern Lau Group, Ono-i-Lau from the Lower Southern Lau route and Lomati for the Yasayasa Moala route.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2018-2019 data indicates that the capacity in terms of passengers and cargo to the Lau Group (and this is a bit of negative but) I am sure the Lauan people will utilise it. The capacity is not fully utilised and I want to encourage everyone there to make sure that that is fully utilised because we have put the services in place at an only average of around 40 percent which is actually utilised for the passenger and cargo on the vessels.

So increase in the capacity and frequency, sometimes it would not make sense but we want the Lauans to actually fill that up and at the moment it is 40 percent and we want it to be 100 percent. We are encouraging more agricultural activity, et cetera, to happen, Sir.

The Ministry is working with all the stakeholders in providing services such as medical services, access to justice and immediate relief supplies during the disasters: fuel, oil, cement (to most common cargo transported from the main ports to these particular islands), oil, bags of coconuts and all sorts, this is actually developing a policy, Sir, also with respect to the fundamental rights of maritime travellers, all commence work already to achieve the balance between service provider and the travellers, Sir. Travellers need the mechanism for protection.

With regards to the recommendation on increasing the franchise tenure in the 2019-2020 National Budget, Sir, the Franchise Agreements will be issued for a longer term than 15 years. Otherwise, you can see so many of the recommendations have been taken care of and this gives surety and confidence to the vessel operators in terms of longevity of the franchise operations.

Operator will be confident investing in new vessels which we are trying to encourage across the board for all the maritime travellers. The Ministry acknowledges the recommendations of the Committee with regards to the environmental issues and we must also remember, Sir, with respect to transportation to the maritime islands, we must always be in protection mode. We must remember this whole protection because the marine environment to us is such an important aspect to our persona and our makeup. As a member of the International Maritime Organisation, the protection of marine environment is provided through international Treaties and Conventions which are then transcribed into our maritime law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst the Fijian Government's mandate is to leave no Fijian behind, we do not need to increase the shipping there at the moment any more. This is why I am saying that this

may be an exercise of utility because we have already done so, and they need to utilise as much as they can. There is a need to increase the utilisation of the available cargo and passenger capacity.

In this regard also, Sir, the Ministry has also collaborated with the Ministry of Rural Development, the Provincial Council, the iTaukei Affairs and we have tried to increase the emphasis on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and cooperative development from our Ministry which we are trying to do as much as we can in that specific area.

So we want the people of Lau to actually capitalise on their resources for their own socio-economic development. I hope that answers all the questions and I thank Honourable Jale for his positive comments and I only hope, Sir, that if there are any other petitions that are brought to this honourable House that they are in this particular mode, where we can actually work together to get things done. I appreciate the time. Thank you very much, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Honourable Vosanibola. If you are not there, I give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources. You have the floor.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I totally endorse all the comments that have been made by the Minister for Transport. I would just like to add that some of the recommendations there are in relation to infrastructure and most of the items that are listed in your No. 7 from 7.1 about Ports, the construction of jetties, the repairing of jetties, the maintenance work of jetties, the proposed Wainiyabia Jetty and also the existing Jetty in Naro.

All of these things are already part of the planning of the Ministry of Infrastructure, especially in terms of the Fiji Roads Authority. There is perhaps one there, No. 7.6, that will need to be considered over time but I think it also goes in hand-in-hand with the kinds of things that the Minister for Transport has talked about and the need to grow trade so that all of these things can become worthwhile. But the last thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot of the infrastructure suggestions there I think they are already in place in the Fiji Roads Authority. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. I now give the floor to the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources to speak in reply.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I want to thank the Honourable Jale for his contribution and also to the Honourable Minister for Fisheries, Honourable Minister for Infrastructure and Honourable Minister for Transport for their contributions and clarifications. With these words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have nothing more to say.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote to note the content of the report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to move his motion.

**REVIEW REPORT – AUDIT REPORT ON GENERAL ADMINISTRATION SECTOR,
ECONOMIC SERVICES SECTOR, SOCIAL SERVICES SECTOR &
INFRASTRUCTURE SECTOR FOR THE 2016-2017 FINANCIAL YEAR**

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

That Parliament debates the following reports:

- (a) Review of the Audit Report on the General Administration Sector- Audits of Government Ministries and Departments for the period 2016-2017 Financial Year, which was tabled on 11th February 2021;
- (b) Review of the Audit Report on the Economic Services Sector - Audits of Government Ministries and Departments for the period 2016-2017 Financial Year, which was tabled on 10th February 2021;
- (c) Review of the Audit Report on Social Services Sector - Audits of Government Ministries and Departments for the period 2016-2017 Financial Year, which was tabled on 8th February 2021; and
- (d) Review of the Audit Report on the Infrastructure Sector - Audits of Government Ministries and Departments for the period 2016-2017 Financial Year, which was tabled on 9th February 2021.

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

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to speak to his motion.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.-Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2016-2017 Audit Report on Whole of Government that is before the House for debates involved four Committee Reports and these captures the audit findings made on 38 Government Ministries and Departments.

The breakdowns of Ministries and Departments that were covered in these four Reports which were consolidated are as follows:

- (1) Social Services - six Ministries;
- (2) Infrastructure Sector - three Ministries;
- (3) Economic Service Sector - six Ministries; and
- (4) General Administration - 25 Ministries and Departments.

Mr. Speaker, I will be very brief in highlighting some of the findings of these four Reports. The Social Services Sector covers the audit results of the five Government Ministries and Departments under the Social Services Sector and these included the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, Higher Education Institutions, Ministry of Health and Medical Services, Department of Housing, Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation and the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

It is important to note that Ministries and Departments that were scrutinized by the Committee, were not invited for interview because of the COVID-19 restrictions that were in place at that time, but were requested instead to provide written response on audit issues that were raised in the audit report.

The audit highlighted that four out of the five Ministries in the Social Services Sector were issued with an unqualified audit opinion and one was issued with a qualified audit opinion. Out of these, four Ministries were provided with an unqualified audit opinion with attention drawn in some instances. The qualified audit report emanated from issues ranging from unsubstantiated and unreconciled general ledger account variances, accounting irregularities in account balances, non-disclosure of account balances, board of surveys either not carried out or carried out but the losses were not approved or not recorded as losses to government and stock take were not carried out.

Furthermore, the Committee's review of the Audit Report highlighted that capacity is an inherent issue with accounting officers lacking the basic fundamentals required for reconciling and maintaining accounts, lacking of basic financial report trainings, lack of monitoring and supervision by Manger Finance and Senior Management.

On the Infrastructure Sector, Mr. Speaker, the Review Report on the 2017 Audit Report for Infrastructure Sector specifically looks into the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport which has consolidated the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) and Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) receipts and expenditure with the Ministry. The Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport was issued with a modified audit opinion on its financial performance for the 2016-2017 financial year.

It is important to note that the Ministry that was scrutinized by the Committee was not invited for the interview because of the COVID-19 restrictions that were in place at that time.

According to the Budget Estimates, the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport was responsible for the policy and legislative formulation, the administrative and regulatory functions of WAF and FRA. The Ministry provided the capital and operating grants under Heads 41 and 43 to WAF and FRA respectively.

For information purposes, the detailed audit on WAF and FRA's financial performance were done separately and included under the Auditor-General's Report on Statutory Authorities.

The Auditor-General had highlighted a number of significant audit findings and the Public Accounts Committee wishes to stress the importance of taking serious consideration on all proposed recommendations given, as it will address audit issues from being repeated.

On the Economic Services Sector, Mr. Speaker, the Review Report on the 2017 Audit Report on Economic Services Sector covers the Economic services sector which includes the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Fisheries and Forests, Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources, Ministry of Trade and Tourism, Ministry of Sugar Industry, Ministry of Public Enterprise and Government Printing and Ministry of Local Government, Town Country Planning and Environment.

The Auditor-General had issued three unmodified audit opinion and four modified audit opinion to the various Ministries and Departments Financial Statements that were audited under this sector. It is important to note that Ministries and Departments that were scrutinized by the Committee were not invited for interview because of the COVID-19 restrictions.

The Committee noted that some of the Ministries had addressed some of the audit issues raised in the audit report while some are working towards resolving these internal control issues. The Committee strongly recommends that immediate action is required by the respective Ministeries and Departments Heads in order to improve financial accountability within each Ministry.

On the General Administration Sector, Mr. Speaker, the Review Report on the 2017 Audit Report for the General Administration Sector, the report covers the audit results of all Government Ministries and Departments under the General Administration Sector. This is the 2nd Volume of the five Volumes that were referred to the Public Accounts Standing Committee.

The Report shows the financial performances of the various Ministries and Departments that were covered under this sector and the audit issues identified during the time of audit.

The Office of the Auditor- General had issued audit opinions on 23 Financial Statements of Ministries and Departments in the General Administration Sector for the 2016-2017 Financial Year.

The Committee in its communications to Ministries and Departments requested for updates on the progress that they have been made in implementing the audit recommendations and actions taken to address the issues that were identified during the time of audit.

It was again noted that it was during the time of COVID-19 and restrictions applied, so Ministries are requested to hand in written responses.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee commended the performance of the Government Ministries and Departments. However, each of the four reports contains few recommendations and observations made by the Committee. These recommendations have been made in good faith, and we urge the relevant party to which the recommendation is made to consider and implement it accordingly.

Last but not least, Ministries and Departments to provide annual updates and achievements of funds appropriated for the National Development Plan (NDP) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) related programmes and projects for effective and efficient oversight by Parliament on NDP and SDGs implementations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, overall these Ministries and Government Departments Executives should work closely with the Office of the Auditor-General in the improvements of its internal systems and processes.

Mr. Speaker, with those words, I thank you for your time.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Chairperson. I now give the floor to the first speaker. Honourable Aseri Radrodro.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to make a short contribution on the last motion before the House today.

This motion is the summary of four reports and I fully hope that the issues highlighted by the Office of the Auditor-General could have been worked upon by various Ministries Permanent Secretaries to improve their control and financial rules and regulations comply with it, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is sad to see that the Government side is refuting the work of the Auditor-General and their report. Because there may be loop holes in the processes undertaken without being biased or self-righteousness. I would look at the substance of the reports and acknowledged they are pretty much spots on, Mr. Speaker. Many years later the OAG Reports still have the same issues being highlighted so that something that cannot be ignored.

In fact, civil service is now one of the most volatile places to work with no future guarantee because of the draconian work environment, now experience the results in a very high turnover of staff. Perhaps, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government should also accept responsibility that due to the rapid and continuous changes in the Heads of organisations in the various entities and the early retirements at 55 years. The OAG personnel truly struggle to carry out their work effectively.

In summary, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government Members just take a look at any OAG Report it will be very clearly stating their audit processes, that is their audit objectives, the audit methodologies and et cetera and et cetera. Of course, the Office of the Auditor General have to be supported to do their work independently, just as any other independent institutions, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In any event, I hope that there is various criticisms to be levelled by Government will not result in the demise of another local Auditor-General, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

On that note, may I offer advice to the Honourable Attorney-General, Honourable Minister for Women and some other Honourable Members from the other side of the House, that the work of auditing is evolved over a decades. From just a normal periodical financial auditing to now performance auditing, internal auditing and the lists goes on.

You have to accept that when you are audited in this case by the Auditor-General, you should welcome their audit findings, whether it reflects your shortfalls, reflects your weakness or your strengths because then assesses the processes that you have been engaging with. Use the OAG Report to better your performance so the next time around when you get audited by the Office of the Auditor-General they may actually report that there is an improvement on how the Government is doing its works.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this what SODELP Government would do. For example, as recommended by the Public Accounts Committee, the Government should ensure that the Ministry is giving out grants, need to ensure that the OAG audits the entities receiving those grants.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Chorus of interjections.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- To ensure compliance, yes, SODELPA. To best public finances practices, it is crucial that any form of corruption is eliminated totally. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it will be good for Government to remember that the work of auditing started when God called out Adam “Where are you Adam?” and while replying hiding and naked God asked again “Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” and all we know who wants to blame for eating the fruits? Mr. Speaker, Sir. A trust Government will be careful about the fruit they are eating.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an audit is the processes of checking on whether you and I are doing what you are supposed do or not, whether you follow the rules or not and the list goes on. Whilst we speak about weaknesses due to failure in the system of Government, it is now time that I call on Government and the Honourable Minister for Health to review the chaos that is now an occurrence at the Sawani Containment Border as the farmers and villagers of Naitasiri make their way down during the weekends to sell their produce.

I request the Government to review the current status and carry out an assessment that may guide and indicate when the border can open. We cannot continue with this Sawani Border closure, Mr. Speaker. Our people of Naitasiri are suffering and they need help. At least, Mr. Speaker, Sir, tell

us how long will the border lockdown at Sawani continue. For me, that is the process that needs quick auditing for improvement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, back to the various PAC Reports. Earlier today, a lot of them highlighted a lot of discrepancies which point to repeated offences and despite the Government reforms and the new financial reporting systems, this continues to be a challenge which impresses on me to share that human intensions and human ethics or honesty cannot be controlled because they are personal characteristics often influenced by circumstances and the only thing Government can do is to reflect and improve including getting the human resources to be empowered and to be agents of change from the past.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reports of the various sectors of Government highlighted similar characteristics of weaknesses which is a delay of various ministries and departments across all the four sectors of Government, to timely and properly submitting their financial statements to the Office of the Auditor-General for audit. This must be addressed seriously and without delay, and to do that, Government must be on top things and trust all our professionals instead of getting in expatriates who will take years to understand our people and the environment of existence, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, although a big number of ministries and departments have been rated very effectively in responding to the Office of the Auditor-General's management letter, some still have a lot of time management issues in this area and they must be impressed upon that delays suggest a lot of things including corruption and they do not want to be the doctor of books, so watch your processes consistently and do the necessary.

I fully agree with the Committee recommendations, Mr. Speaker, the annual reports should be requested to be part of the key performance indicators for chief accounting officers for the various ministries and departments. Ministries and departments to also consider gender budgeting and ministries and departments to provide an update on achievements on the funds appropriated for the National Development Plan and Sustainable Development Goals programmes and projects for the scrutiny of this august House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, let me just say that part of the Public Accounts Committee work has been limited by the COVID-19 pandemic and this Report is no exception. The Report that has been compiled has been based purely on the written responses received from the respective ministries. The danger in that is that what is written on paper may not necessarily be a reflection of actual work on the ground and as such, the reports may not truly reflect the reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I am optimistic that public service will get better, it has to, Mr. Speaker, Sir because when SODELPA is governing next year, we will assure that there is an environment of compliance, trust and growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just before I take my seat, I wish to take this time to wish your good self and all those Members here today in this august House and those members connecting through the virtual platform from the comfort of their homes and also all the people of Fiji, a blessed and a happy Sunday, Mr. Speaker, Sir. *Vinaka*

HON. SPEAKER.- I have got several others before you. Honourable Adi Litia Qionibaravi, you have the floor.

HON. ADI L. QIONIBARAVI.- Mr. Speaker, at the outset, I wish to acknowledge the Office of the Auditor-General who continue to forge on to perform their duty for the nation. They are not there to please politicians but to perform their duty, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is unfortunate that the

Attorney-General continues to attack the Office of the Auditor-General and his staff when they are not in the House to defend themselves.

The Office of the Auditor-General has been empowered by our constitutional set-up as an institution that works in the interest of the people of Fiji. On that note, Sir, I have taken note of the vast improvements in the manner in which they prepare their reports, the scope of their work and the number of reports that they turn out every year.

On that note I acknowledge the improvement in the Office of the Auditor-General that has been carried out by government. The strengthening of the Office of the Auditor-General that the Government has allowed that to happen and I wish to acknowledge that, Sir. Having said that, I must say that it is unfortunate that yet again the Attorney-General is at pains to show everything he does is for the people and that everyone including the Auditor-General is wrong and acting illegally. I need to say that, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is not so, just as Parliament have their role as thus the Opposition, so does the Auditor-General.

I now turn to the Report before the House, Sir. On the audit of the Administration Sector, I am happy to note that out of the 23 audits, I hear 25 by the Chair, but I note 23 in the actual report. Out of the 23 reports that were carried out, 17 opinions were unmodified equal to about 74 percent and 6 were modified opinions at 26 percent. In my view, this is a notable progress, Sir, as only six agency reports under the General Administration out of 23 are modified opinions at 26 percent.

The Auditor-General has also assessed the financial governance of each Ministry to evaluate effectiveness of internal control since three key focal areas for each agency. These include:

- (1) The effectiveness of internal controls;
- (2) The timely financial statement preparation; and
- (3) Timely response to the Auditor-General

So, in the summary of their Report, one can see quite clearly how the agencies or the ministries can compare themselves in terms of this key assessment on financial governance Sir, that is a major improvement that I have noted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the 2017 Economic Sector Report, out of the seven ministries that were audited, three ministries have come out with unmodified opinions whilst four have come out with modified opinions. At least higher on the modified opinions at 57 percent and 43 percent on the unmodified opinions. I am happy to note, Mr. Speaker, that the seven ministries are also assessed for their financial governance which I stated for the General Administration Sector.

Plus, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is general improvement in the audit opinions of the ministries and agencies for the ere the two sectors that I assessed for my contribution this afternoon. So, there are improvements from the previous audit opinions and the continuing efforts. I believe that the continuing efforts of the ministries as well as the Public Accounts Committee will result in the continuing improvement in the audit opinion of Government ministries, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you will allow me, I wish to respond briefly to the Honourable Prime Minister and Chairperson of the PSC comments on the Audit of Provincial Council Accounts yesterday, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister had attributed the lack of a plan to update the Audit of the Provincial Council's accounts to me, Sir. He probably did not hear me say that a plan was in place in 2006 for all outstanding audits to be completed by 2008.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. ADI L. QIONIBARAVI.- I am on the floor.

(Honourable Member interject)

HON. ADI L. QIONIBARAVI.- If the takeover of the elected government in December 2006 did not take place, the audit plan would have been completed in 2008. Sir, the Ministry of Fijian Affairs was one of the first ministries to develop its first Corporate Plan in 1995. It was

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- There is a Point of Order.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Provincial Councils was debated yesterday. We had Audit Report on Provincial Councils, this Report has nothing to do with Provincial Councils. I request the Member to stick before Parliament and debate on the four sectors and whole of government report. Provincial Councils is not part of this report. You had your time yesterday, you should have spoken yesterday. Please.

HON. SPEAKER.- You have made your Point of Order. Honourable Member keep to the agenda item. This is the last agenda item.

HON. ADI L. QIONIBARAVI.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stated that my contribution is based on two sectors. My colleague has done his and I am focusing on the two sectors. I have completed that and I have asked for permission to respond. If that permission is not agreed to, I will sit down.

HON. SPEAKER.- You have the floor.

HON. ADI L QIONIBARAVI.- Thank you, Sir.

I was saying that the Ministry of Fijian Affairs was one of the first ministries to compile its corporate plan way back in 1995 and in the plan we had included as the first key result area the establishment of the Vale ni Bose Levu Vakaturaga. That has been achieved under the plan. I am trying to say that planning has been carried out in that Ministry.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. ADI L. QIONIBARAVI.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee comments on nepotism in the appointment of staff, I would like to say that he should have asked two critical questions.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Point of Order. She is responding to what I said yesterday during Provincial Council. That is again not part of this particular Report. I would like to have your ruling whether she can actually continue on that or not, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you have heard the Point of Order, so take heed. You have the floor.

HON. ADI L. QIONIBARAVI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

All I am trying to tell the Chairperson of PAC that if the Committee had tried first to understand the linkage between the Ministry iTaukei Affairs and the iTaukei Affairs Board, a lot of matters could have been made clearer; two questions should have been asked: Who is the Chief Accounting Officer of the Fijian Administration....

HON. SPEAKER.- I think you should end.

HON. ADI L. QIONIBARAVI.- Alright, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is fine. I will end there.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we have not finished yet. Honourable Usamate, you have the floor.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. My apologies I have not prepared my....

HON. SPEAKER.- You are withdrawing?

HON. J. USAMATE.- I withdraw, Sir. .

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I just want to quickly contribute to the PAC Report Review of the 2017 Audit Report of the Economic Services Sector. I think it is actually quite relative in terms of what I am about to say and what Honourable Radrodro just raised. He sort of flew off with a warning regarding the Auditor-General and how we should be careful about grants and how we are checking it et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport, we are one of the ministries at the forefront in terms of grants that are given to members of the public and organisations, et cetera. I wanted to just explain something to him regarding this particular Report.

I can actually quite proudly say that the Ministry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and this is pretty much reflective of everyone, the Ministry has maintained excellent financial management processes. We have continued to develop new ways to strengthen our finance processes. Our procedures are clearly outlined, our checklist of requirements to ensure that all supporting documents are provided for, any payments of receipts or receipts of funds are proper and the technology that we use as we strengthen our procedures to eliminate gaps that may exist in the manual system.

This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has actually resulted in, the audit results stating, for us getting a completely unqualified audit opinion. So, when he makes those broad sweeping statements, he should think twice before he does, because this is reflective of pretty much the whole of Government. Of course, we have some issues, but the way he points it out is that the whole of Government is actually rotten,

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a quick summary, we spent close to \$71.6 million in 2017, out of which 47 percent was for our operational expenditure, whilst 50 percent was for our capital. So managing that \$71.6 million is no small feat, and to do so without any audit issues are actually quite remarkable and this is the positive story that needs to be told, so I caution him, Sir, when he does say such things to make it sound like that the whole of Government is actually rotten to the core.

Now being part of the economic sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, the Ministries actually cut across all different sectors and all different frameworks. Now that we have Transport, it complements the work we do, with our allocation which we have got well-thought-out policies. We carefully spent it on the tourism sector.

On the MSMEs, we reinvested about \$6.4 million to the MSBG grant as \$633,000 through the NDP (IHRDP). This was also transferred to the Ministry at that particular time and we established a good policy framework for us, Sir.

Now, we have established a good SOP, as mentioned and a policy to guidingly use our Trust Fund. This has actually enhanced our reconciliation, refunds to communities which are used for project funding.

So in short, Sir, the funds that were received by our Ministry were properly accounted for and I wanted to say this because this is a classic example of the rest of Government and it a classic example of one of the mainstays of Commerce, Industry, Tourism and Transport. We are actually a premium Ministry in terms of what he was talking about, grants, et cetera, that have handed out to the general public, Sir.

Through our MSME Programme, we have created a strong culture of entrepreneurs which is a result of all of these, and this has actually improved the livelihood of all Fijians, so that we can elevate their status. We have actually been a part of the major creation of a middle income society and this is a feat that has never been achieved before.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think that deserves some credit. I think the Honourable Radrodro, when he does say such things, he needs to caution his statement, Sir, and be very specific about who you are actually talking about.

I want to thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me the time, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Minister for Health and Medical Services, Honourable Doctor Ifereimi Waqainabete.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, since the Report, we have made the necessary changes that have had to be done in the areas that have been highlighted. Some of them could not have been done as quickly as we could. Some of the processes needed several layers to be able to align and those take intermediate to long term and, as we speak, they continue through those alignment processes. These include even the disciplinary actions that have been taken in the officer that has been exposed in the Report as working projects that will be helpful towards their own family business.

Mr. Speaker, our Budget is now nearly \$400 million, together with our extra normative roles. We also have been able to, with the support of the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Minister for Economy, solicit funds from the Central Government and multilateral partners to support

us in the work that we are doing, also with COVID-19. This requires rigid processes and also stringent or the team work.

We are now being able to do projects with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, to name a few, apart from projects that we are doing with DFAT and MFAT, including the current procurement that we are doing with the Government of Japan of \$10 million worth of equipment that we are expecting by the end of this year.

Mr. Speaker, at this moment, the Civil Service, contrary to what Honourable Radrodro has said, is a great place to work. It is a place where the salaries of our civil servants have been maintained. This is a great environment where everyone feels that they are part of something essential, all part of the frontline as they work together hand in hand - every one of them, whether they are in the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Welfare, Ministry of Infrastructure.

Not only with COVID but with the disasters that we have gone through and the development that Government continues to do despite all these.

The quick way in which the Honourable Radrodro had said that we should lift the containment area is an insult to these specialists that have made that advice then given it to Government, especially such as Dr. Fong, Dr. Jemese Tudravu, Dr. Aalisha, the Director of Fiji Emergency Medical Assistance Team (FEMAT), Dr Luke Nasedra, the Divisional Medical Officer, Dr. Quruniasi and the Divisional Health Inspector like Mr. Luke Vonotabua. These are people who work strategically and critically, and as we speak, they look through the numbers that are coming from the contact tracing and they give advice to Government on what is best in terms of containing the disease and then Government makes its decisive actions based on that advice. So therefore to stand up in Parliament and say, 'we should open the border now', I would say, "it is an insult to the frontliners who are giving that crucial advice". I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am rather amused at Honourable Aseri Radrodro's outburst, maybe he felt he had not spoken throughout the day and he needed to go out with the big bang. Quoting the Bible verse on one hand about accountability but on the other hand their side's support was actually the shenanigans taking place in USP. They support the shenanigans that took place previously, they do not want to call people to account and they have the ability or the audacity here to come and pontificate to us about accountability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I love the way that they quote the Bible. One of their Honourable Members quoting the Bible or some religious text or read this logic - not to get vaccines. Seriously, I want to sort of vent out too now because in the morning when we have the prayers, we say loudly "Amen", right, Mr. Speaker Sir, yet on the other hand did Jesus not say "Jews and Gentiles are alike" yet there are so many Honourable Members in SODELPA who want to differentiate against people based on ethnicity and religion.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- A Point of Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- That is not following the teachings of Jesus.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- A Point of Order!

HON. SPEAKER.- A Point of Order

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, please, can the Honourable Attorney-General just stick to the Report because it is late and this is the last Report, Mr. Speaker. He has to stick to the Report so that we can go home.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Sit down.

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

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- A Point of Order

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, they should not be hypocritical about what we are saying.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point, the Honourable Minister for Health talked about Honourable Radrodro saying ‘Why do you have the border?’. I mean the people of Naitasiri should be glad because they are being protected. This is an infected area, high levels of case then he wants to know when the borders will open up. I wish we knew as to when the borders will open up to Australia and New Zealand, no one knows about it. It is a simplistic logic, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The other point, Mr. Speaker, I also wanted to make was, they have this dichotomous approach to everything and we never said that the independence of the Auditor-General should not be there. All we have simply said is that the law needs to be followed. All we have simply said is that there needs to be proper processes and they need to be transparent; what is wrong with that? They say we are attacking the Auditor-General. Yes, every office needs to be held accountable.

If there is something wrong, we need to highlight that and in the end, if those processes are addressed, that increases the integrity of that particular office. That is precisely what we are doing. We have not debunked every single audit. Some Reports from the Office of the Auditor-General have flaws in them and it is our job, as Members of Parliament on this floor, to be able to speak freely on those matters - absolutely, nothing wrong with that. Let us get away from the simplistic nonsensical type of thinking, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the other point I highlighted was how they were hiding documents from FICAC and then FICAC actually had to go in with the search warrant. I mean what is this? Do we not have the right to highlight that? Should they not be following that if they want to hold themselves out to be a party that has got integrity - very simple questions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I also wanted to highlight is that, these reports go back to 2016-2017. Obviously, a lot has happened, new technologies have been adopted, for example, I highlighted about the e-tendering and about the winner. We have all the information available on the website, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So these reports obviously do not necessarily have the same kind of relevance as it did but a lot of things have changed. Also a responsible Civil Service must point out, I think the Honourable Minister for Health highlighted this - we have our greater retention of civil servants, much better qualified people now, people coming in from the private sector and we also have higher salaries. They actually miss out on that fact.

We have police officers being paid \$6,000 a year, just only a few years ago. We had doctors leaving the health profession in Fiji, in the public sector because they could not get anything beyond \$35,000 - \$40,000. Midwives got a pay rise of about 80 percent and some of the specialist nurses.

They do not highlight that, obviously the retention will be higher. Mr. Speaker, Sir, and he mentioned about the demise of another local Auditor-General. What nonsense? When was the last time we had an expatriate Auditor-General? I cannot remember any. I do not know what he is going on about.

What I was actually going to talk about, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that these anomalies need to be addressed. We had an audit being carried out whilst the \$30 million (MSME) was actually being processed, and they came and carried out an audit then. Gestapo style - no entry plan, no exit plan, the Auditor-General does not want to come and sit in the meetings. He said, 'No, I will be conflicted.' What nonsense! All Auditor-Generals prior to him went and sat with the permanent secretaries, planned the audits, had exit interviews.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in respect of some of the matters that were raised and in fact, I wanted to just highlight them generally and I will start off with the last matter which was the coordination of aid, the management of government aid. As we know we are getting a lot of aid, the coordination of the aid is done now through the Ministry of Economy. A circular has been issued, highlighting the responsibility of the permanent secretaries to follow the proper processes highlighted in the circular.

Apart from this, the Ministry of Economy constantly liaises with various agencies to assist, guide them with processes around management of aid. Untimely reconciliation has been highlighted in the reports. To resolve this issue, the Ministry of Economy is assisting finance teams and different agencies and ministries to speed up the reconciliation process. The permanent secretaries of respective agencies are also involved in the process as chief accounting officers, an official ultimately responsible for the proper management of financial resources, respective permanent secretaries of each agency is responsible to ensure that proper accounting, procurement and asset management processes are followed. The staff appointment has been devolved to the permanent secretaries as part of the Constitution. It allows permanent secretaries to get the right people, including getting the right people through OMRS. Apart from this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted in a much better salary structure now to attract and retain the right skills.

Last, but not the least, the issue raised was about the absence of an asset register. The Ministry of Economy, as part of the National Asset Management Framework Project, has provided training on the updating of asset registers and templates for asset management strategies and asset management plans.

The Government's focus has changed to a whole life approach to the management of assets. This is starting from the acquisition to disposal of assets. This is undertaken to ensure that Government extracts effectively or utilises its assets to generate the maximum benefit for taxpayers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those words, I would like to commend the particular motion and support the motion, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and say that a lot has changed and the ultimate objective of all of these Reports is to ensure that we improve our own internal processes so any issues that have arisen, where there have been lapses, that they actually contribute to get improved and hopefully very soon, we will get a lot of these agencies, in fact, hopefully 100 percent of them with unqualified reports.

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.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I would just like to actually comment on something Honourable Aseri Radrodro said during the debate that we were not able to carry out the work efficiently because of COVID-19 restriction.

I, as the Chairperson, do not mind actually deferring all the PAC till the restrictions are over so that the Opposition are also happy in fully scrutinising all these Reports, Sir.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we have come to the end of the day. It has been a long day. You have a rest day tomorrow but we have a full day on Monday. A lot of work on Monday. I hope you have a good rest. I thank you for your co-operation, good humour and forbearance.

We are adjourned until Monday, 7th June at 9.30 a.m. Thank you.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.26 p.m.