

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 22ND NOVEMBER, 2021

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 22ND NOVEMBER, 2021

The Parliament met at 10.01 a.m. pursuant to notice.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

Hon. Josia Voreqe Bainimarama, Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry, Foreign Affairs and Forestry

Hon. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Attorney-General and Minister of Economy, Civil Service, Communications and Housing and Community Development

Hon. Lt. Col. Inia Batikoto Seruiratu, Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management

Hon. Parveen Kumar Bala, Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports

Hon. Rosy Sofia Akbar, Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation

Hon. Dr. Mahendra Reddy, Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment

Hon. Cdr. Semi Tuleca Koroilavesau, Minister for Fisheries

Hon. Faiyaz Siddiq Koya, Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport

Hon. Jone Usamate, Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources

Hon. Dr. Ifereimi Waqainabete, Minister for Health and Medical Services

Hon. Premila Devi Kumar, Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts and Local Government

Hon. Alexander David O'Connor, Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services

Hon. Veena Kumar Bhatnagar, Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation

Hon. Vijay Nath, Assistant Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Disaster Management and Meteorological Services

Hon. Alvick Avhikrit Maharaj, Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports

Hon. Alipate Tuicolo Nagata, Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports

Hon. Jale Sigarara, Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Maritime Development

Hon. Viam Pillay, Assistant Minister for Environment and Rural Development

Hon. George Vegnathan, Assistant Minister for Sugar Industry

Hon. Selai Adimaitoga, Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs

Hon. Ratu Naiqama Tawake Lalabalavu

Hon. Mitieli Bulanauca

Hon. Mosese Dreca Bulitavu

Hon. Viliame Rogoibulu Gavoka

Hon. Dr. Salik Ram Govind

Hon. Anare Jale

Hon. Ro Teimumu Vuikaba Kepa

Hon. Sanjay Salend Kirpal

Hon. Inosi Kuridrani

Hon. Virendra Lal

Hon. Dr. Ratu Atonio Rabici Lalabalavu

Hon. Mikaele Rokosova Leawere

Hon. Ratu Suliano Matanitobua

Hon. Osea Naiqamu

Hon. Joseph Nitya Nand

Hon. Sachida Nand
Hon. Ratu Tevita Navurelevu
Hon. Niko Nawaikula
Hon. Prof. Biman Chand Prasad
Hon. Lenora Salusalu Qereqeretabua
Hon. Adi Litia Qionibaravi
Hon. Aseri Masivou Radrodro
Hon. Salote Vuibureta Radrodro
Hon. Simione Rokomalo Rasova
Hon. Jese Saukuru
Hon. Rohit Ritesh Sharma
Hon. Lynda Diseru Tabuya
Hon. Lt. Col. Pio Tikoduadua
Hon. Ro Filipe Tuisawau
Hon. Peceli Waqairatu Vosanibola
Hon. Tanya Waqanika

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting of Parliament. I also welcome all those watching the live broadcast and the live streaming of today's proceedings from the comfort of their homes, offices and electronic devices. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

Today is another special occasion in the Parliamentary calendar as it marks the Opening of the final session of Parliament for this term of Parliament. Today, the State Opening would be officiated by His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere.

Honourable Members, at this juncture, I wish to advise that as is customary, the honourable members of the Judiciary would be joining us to hear the Address of His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji.

I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to invite the honourable Chief Justice and the honourable Judges into Parliament.

(Honourable Members of the Judiciary escorted into the Chambers)

Honourable Members, please be upstanding to receive the honourable members of the Judiciary. Honourable Members, please be seated.

Honourable Members of Parliament, honourable members of the Judiciary, we will now proceed with the Opening of Parliament. The Secretary-General and I will now proceed to the entrance to receive His Excellency the President.

(His Excellency the President was escorted into the Chambers by the honourable Speaker to a fanfare of trumpets in the order – Mace Bearer, Secretary-General, honourable Speaker and His Excellency the President)

ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI

HIS EXCELLENCY RATU W. KATONIVERE.- The honourable Chief Justice and honourable Members of the Judiciary, the honourable Speaker of Parliament, the honourable Prime Minister;

honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members and my fellow Fijians, *mia'u sa bula re* and good morning. It is my privilege to open the 2021-2022 Session of Parliament.

I thank the Members of Parliament for their vote of confidence in me to assume this high Office. To my immediate predecessor, Major-General (Retired) Jioji Konousi Konrote, thank you, Sir, not only for setting such a high standard of leadership as our President, but for all the decades of service you have given to the pursuit of peace among people.

My fellow Fijians, the democracy created under our Fijian Constitution will wither with our complacency, but comes alive with public participation, as it does with values and principles. So wherever you are watching, listening to or reading this Address, I thank you for your participation in the vital business of our democracy.

As the youngest President of Fiji, I may not have the number of years in public life under my belt as some of you, honourable Members, but I have been in leadership long enough to see the difference between genuine democracy we share today and past systems that fell short of delivery for true equality for our people. I view the preservation and strengthening of our democratic society as my greatest responsibility as your President.

Honourable Members, with due respect, you know that I will protect the flame of our young democracy from all who seek to extinguish it for personal or political purposes. I will use my leadership to support the highest possible functioning of the State - the Executive, to realise the objectives of the Constitution. We have far too much left to achieve to let the sideshows dominate our national discourse. We must see the forest for the trees, for politicians and personalities come and go, but our institution and the ethos of equality and a strong nation State must endure, indeed, they must thrive.

As a Fijian who has watched these proceedings closely for years, let me offer some perspective from the outside looking in. I know you represent different parties and may have different priorities. Regardless, you must strive to serve the national interest; the best interest of all Fijians - all men, women and children and those yet to be born. This is not the 1900s.

We are not some far-flung colony in the furthest reaches of a sprawling empire, nor are we some backwater port in a vast Pacific. Our nation is home to a people who want stability and prosperity, and who are wiser and more educated than ever before. Fiji's global star is rising, our modernising economy sits at the cusp of recovery and the old style of politics has no place in this new Fiji.

We should not suffer the politics of pettiness and personalisation or exist in some perpetual state of political antagonism. Instead, we must see further than short-term political wins towards a long-term vision for the nation's progress, and each of you must strive to move beyond a perspective that is tethered to the past or to a single religion, a single gender, a single ethnicity or a single province because I assure you that the future does not wait for a single one of you and we do not have a single day to spare in meeting this century's challenges and opportunities.

After two full years of weathering the pandemic, I commend the nation on the success of the vaccination effort that has revealed a light at the end of this tunnel. Rather than cede the day to ignorance, we have come together in a spirit of knowledge, patriotism and progress to fully vaccinate over 90 percent of adults. I am proud, but I am not satisfied. I share our Honourable Prime Minister's ambition to vaccinate every eligible adult in Fiji and I urge small fringe groups of the unvaccinated to accept this powerful protection against a deadly disease.

It took political wisdom and diplomatic acumen to secure these vaccines. It took administrative will to incentivise their use. It took sacrifice from our frontliners to deploy them quickly and good sense from our people to embrace them. It took a caring and a compassionate government to pay out unemployment benefits - not in the tens of millions, but in the hundreds of millions of dollars throughout this crisis; the most assistance ever paid to any Fijian at any time of our history.

Now, our long and unrelenting effort against the virus is winning us back our freedom – a freedom we must now nurture and strengthen. We have paved the way to a new normalcy. Now, we must work towards it together and resume Fiji's service as the hub of tourism, finance, communications, business and transportation for our Blue Pacific.

We cannot be complacent on the path of progress. We must seize this chance to free our economy from the grip of the virus and fuel its full recovery. We must keep our sights focused on the greatest challenge that is before us and which lies ahead of us - that of climate change. I have seen over the course of my life what the climate and oceans crises is causing now in Fiji.

In my village of Naduri, my home sits 20 metres from the shore. I have seen piles of bleached coral become mountains on the beaches and I have watched those same beaches - as well as homes - disappear beneath a rising sea. I have watched coastal watersheds and crab-hunting grounds become permanently covered in ocean. I have watched fishermen travel further and further to catch smaller and smaller fish to feed their families and earn their livelihoods. I have watched cane growers' crops succumb to drought conditions, and I have seen arable land inundated by seawater and ruined for farming.

I have not only seen it all, I have lived it all, as a fisherman, a farmer, as a father and a grandfather. I know from what I have also seen around the world that this is a global crisis, a shared trauma for our children on both sides of the equator - that can only be addressed through global solutions.

I welcome back the honourable Prime Minister and honourable Attorney-General and Minister responsible for climate change and the Fijian delegation from the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow, Scotland. I was in Bonn during Fiji's Presidency of COP23. I know from my experience that these two short weeks of negotiations determine decades of climate action or inaction. In fact, I was scheduled to fly to Glasgow for this COP, but my election to this Office demanded I remain in Fiji.

Honourable Prime Minister, I wished to have been with you. It is appalling to learn that our small Pacific Delegation of negotiators were outnumbered by representatives from fossil fuel companies, the industry most responsible for the climate crisis by a factor of 12 to one. That means that for every Pacific negotiator fighting for our future, there were 12 corporate representatives fighting to sabotage it. If only we could have sent an army of Pacific people with you to COP26, they could have filled the halls of those negotiations and carried your message to the world. That is what we need, more of our voices - Fijian voices and Pacific voices in this global negotiations, not fewer. And I thank you for speaking and working so passionately in support of this cause and in support of our national security.

I worry that some of us do not appreciate the threat this crisis poses or the vehemency of the opposition Fiji faces on the world stage. I worry that some, blinded by political ambition and machinations, have lost sight of what is happening at the grassroots due to climate change. I fear they are blind to the forces of industry and to some of the high-emitting nations, who wilfully ignore the Fijians and countless others suffering on the frontline. I urge these doubters to look objectively at what the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement entail and how these negotiations function. Any sensible mind will see exactly why we must amplify Pacific voices within it.

But if you do not look there, look around you. Look at the communities and see what this crisis is costing us. I assure you that cyclones, rising seas, erratic weather patterns and dying reefs here in Fiji do not play politics. So, before you choose to attack our climate leaders and politicise an issue of such importance, please, pause and think of the suffering that climate devastation has caused in Fiji and across the globe. More importantly, think about what it will cost us, what will it cost our children, grandchildren and all those Fijians yet to be born. Their future is worth fighting for. You cannot claim to stand with those future generations or our people on the frontline, fighting out the climate catastrophe if you do not stand behind Fiji's climate leadership.

And, I need to remind us, the real work does not only happen in conference rooms, the real work is not only written on paper in pacts or agreement, the real work also happens at home. This is where the Government is leading most of all. I know, because I have seen that work and I have been privileged to be part of it and because of it, amid the tragedy of the climate crisis, I have seen hope. I have seen solutions come from nature, and I have seen solutions come from new technology and innovative practices. I have seen the wisdom of past generations being applied to these modern times and set us towards a sustainable living.

In partnership with Government, we legally recognise the sustainable management of the Great Sea Reef that falls under the stewardship of the Macuata Province, formalising measures I had long sought to put in place to protect local biodiversity.

We have seen hope in world-leading legislation. We have brought a Climate Change Act to the world at COP26 that legislates the same commitments that we are asking all nations because we do not only seek more hopeful future from others, we are creating it for ourselves.

We have banned single use of plastics and Styrofoam and we have successfully prosecuted developers who devastated our beautiful reefs and mangroves in Malolo, building a powerful wall of legal precedent to protect our ecosystems.

We have seen hope in Government's effort to build the resilience of infrastructure and of entire communities, and moved others to higher grounds and adopt green energy, like solar. We have seen how disaster readiness has improved to offer advance warning of storms that save lives.

We saw hope in Glasgow during climate negotiations, hope that Fiji helped deliver. I was proud that the honourable Prime Minister was one of the very few leaders in the world to speak openly and consistently against coal and other fossil fuels at COP26. And that the final outcome, the Glasgow Climate Pact, included the need to phase down coal and phase out fossil fuel subsidies. It was one of the many markers of success of COP26 owed in part to Fijian leadership.

The pool of finance we need globally to develop clean energy and adapt communities in climate vulnerable countries was doubled. The finance that has been pledged by developed nations will be carefully monitored, to ensure that it is actually delivered. Over 100 countries signed on to reduce methane emissions, the single most damaging greenhouse gas.

A dialogue between parties was established to discuss an arrangement to address loss and damage as a result of climate change, a matter that must be fine-tuned at COP27. Nations agreed rules on carbon offset markets, which the last two COPs tried and failed to finalise. For Fiji, that is a big win. I urge members of landowning units to work with the Climate Change Division to identify how carbon trading can produce sustainable livelihoods and income by simply keeping trees on the ground, planting more and adopting proper forest management practices.

But, perhaps, our proudest achievement is that, at long last, oceans have a home in the climate negotiations. The Ocean Pathway was a fragile idea that voyaged from our islands to the world through Fiji's Presidency of the negotiations in 2017. Now, the ocean-climate nexus forms the basis of global ocean climate governance, opening a vast new sea possibilities for Fiji and our 1.3 square kilometres of the Blue Pacific.

It is the most significant global development on oceans in years, and the time could not be better for Fiji as we lay the foundation for a sustainable economic recovery - a blue and green recovery that preserves Fiji as a frontier of well-managed and pristine natural beauty. I want to speak to your for a moment on that recovery, particularly the rebound of our tourism sector because of the profound importance it bears to so many families.

Our national carrier weathered this COVID storm with the support of Government and financiers, and it is ready to fly visitors to our shores from 1st December, 2021. As those tourists arrive, we must remain as COVID-safe as possible and unite our employers, employees and Government behind a sustainable comeback for the industry.

The recovery of our tourism sector and of our economy will not be measured in months, but in years. But it will not happen if we get greedy and try to sprint our way to recovery by hiking up prices in our hotels and restaurants. That short-sightedness will scare tourists away to other, attractively-priced destinations that are offering vacation deals of a lifetime.

Fiji's brand must stand out in this highly competitive sector. Government has empowered our hoteliers and tour operators to do so with practical incentives, reduced duties and attractive tourism packages so that we can be price sharp, COVID safe and capture a big share of the market. The next several months should not be focused on short-term margins but on long term market share so that our people will not only get their jobs back but keep them. And to build on this economic momentum, business and individuals should seize this opportunity for investment and commence now while convene constructions of homes, apartments, warehouses, shops and factories to take advantage of our economic recovery and help diversify our economic base.

To support our march towards a modern and caring Fiji, the Government will put forward the following Bills for consideration in this legislative session:

- (1) Child Care and Protection Bill;
- (2) Child Justice Bill;
- (3) Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (Amendment) Bill;
- (4) Landlord and Tenant Bill;
- (5) Investment Fiji Bill;
- (6) Water and Sewerage Services Bill;
- (7) Architects Bill;
- (8) Terrorism (Suppression of Financing) Bill;
- (9) Civil Aviation Bill;
- (10) Civil Aviation Accident Investigation Bill;
- (11) Civil Aviation (Security) (Amendment) Bill;
- (12) Statistics (Amendment) Bill;
- (13) Corrections (Amendment) Bill;
- (14) Search and Rescue Bill;
- (15) International Mediation Bill;
- (16) Industrial Hemp Bill; and
- (17) Development of Formal Settlements Bill.

Honourable Members, our third genuine election of equal votes of equal value may occur during this legislative calendar. The next election should not become a battle of dividers, of people who pit province against province, religion against religion, or ethnicity against ethnicity. We should not only ignore candidates and party leaders who engage in that sort of politicking, but condemn them, loudly and together. Voters deserve better.

Elections are their opportunity to choose who is best to lead them, who has the sound philosophy and policies that create stability, that build confidence, and ensure equal treatment and equal opportunity as provided for in our Constitution. Every voter must understand clearly and specifically what vision different parties represent, what ideas and plans they bring to the table, and how they plan to finance their socioeconomic policies and legislative ambition.

Those who seek office must approach the campaign with compassion, with dignity and understanding, and they must stay high by adhering to principles of ethical conduct rather than go low by seeking votes at any cost. Merit must matter in our elections, just as it does across our Civil Service or for our Boards that govern our companies.

I have personally served on a number of Boards, including Fiji Pine Limited, Tropik Wood Industries Limited, Fiji Airports, FSC, Fiji Coconut Millers and Fiji Rice, where I have been privileged to work alongside well-qualified merit-appointed colleagues. I cannot stress how impactful merit-based leadership can be in steering our industries towards success, better jobs and greater prosperity. Without merit-based selection, our companies, our Civil Service and even our Government would serve the interests of a privileged few rather than serve the people as prudently managed, sustainably profitable and service delivery centric organisations.

Honourable Members, do not forget that these are still the defining years of our new Fijian democracy. The eyes of the nation and the world are upon us now, as will be the eyes of the coming generations who will learn from the precedent we set. We have much work before us and your effort to address the challenges of the day must be embodied in the legislation, debate and discussion that empowers all Fijians through visionary leadership.

As I conclude, honourable Members, I beg your indulgence. To the people of Macuata, my people, the *vanua o Caumatalevu*, you have been part of my journey and I believe it is appropriate to acknowledge and thank you all. Although I am Head of State but I will continue to serve you as *Tui Macuata*. May God bless you all, may God bless Fiji. *Vinaka vakalevu* and thank you.

(Acclamation)

SECRETARY-GENERAL TO PARLIAMENT.- Honourable Members of Parliament, honourable members of the Judiciary, His Excellency the President will now take his leave and will be escorted by the honourable Speaker. Please be upstanding as His Excellency the President leaves the Parliament Chambers.

(His Excellency the President is escorted out of Parliament by the honourable Speaker)

SECRETARY-GENERAL.- Honourable Members of Parliament, the honourable members of the Judiciary will now retire from the Parliament Chambers. All honourable Members of Parliament to remain seated.

ADJOURNMENT

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

That Parliament adjourns until Monday, 29th November, 2021 at 9.30 a.m.

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

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the 2021-2022 Parliament session has been officially opened by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji. I take this opportunity to thank you all, honourable Members, for your presence on this auspicious occasion, as well as those joining us through the live-broadcast of proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for taking an interest in one of the most significant events in the Parliamentary Calendar, the State Opening of the new session of Parliament.

When Parliament next meets, we will proceed with the motion by the honourable Prime Minister to thank His Excellency for his most gracious Address. All honourable Members will be invited to speak in accordance with the Batting Order which has now been provided.

On that note, I thank all honourable Members and I now invite you all for refreshments which will be served in the Big Committee Room.

Honourable Members, Parliament now stands adjourned until Monday, 29th November, 2021 at 9.30 a.m. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 11.49 a.m.