

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

FRIDAY, 3RD DECEMBER, 2021

[CORRECTED COPY]

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FRIDAY, 3RD DECEMBER, 2021

The Parliament met at 9.45 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present except the honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport; honourable S.S. Kirpal, honourable M.D. Bultavu, honourable Ratu S. Matanitobua, honourable L.S. Qereqeretabua, honourable Adi L. Qionibaravi, honourable L.D. Tabuya and honourable T. Waqanika.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Thursday, 2nd December, 2021, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to the final sitting day for this week and this year. 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 gadgets. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

International Day for Persons with Disabilities

Honourable Members, today is "International Day for Persons with Disabilities". You may recall last year where I informed the house that the honourable Viam Pillay had been nominated as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Regional Champion. In conjunction with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Fijian Parliament has organised a half-day Open Day Programme for persons with disabilities today at the Holiday Inn from 8.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m. The honourable Viam Pillay and I, accompanied by honourable George Veganathan were there for the opening before we returned to Parliament this morning.

On the same note, when Parliament adjourns today, I request all honourable Members to join the Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPWD) Regional Champion, the honourable Viam Pillay and I for a photo session with the participants from the Open Day. The photo session will be held at the Parliament steps. Honourable Members, we will have the photo session first before proceeding for refreshments.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the start of this session, His Excellency the President issued an unambiguous challenge. He called on us to show leadership that inspired confidence and that furthered the course of equality. He also asked us to present the people with a specific vision and prudent policies. In his words, “they deserved no less”. From day one of this session, Mr. Speaker, the Opposition has stumbled over that bar of expectation. They have fallen face first into their usual chorus of criticisms, devoid once again of any logic or idea.

For almost four years, Mr. Speaker, all we have heard from that side of the House is, “The Government should not do this, the Government should not do that”, without a single credible strategy to offer as an alternative. Four years! They do not have one clear or sensible policy to show for it. Instead, Mr. Speaker, they stuck to a simple playbook – first they lied about what the Government is doing and what it intends to do, then they made outrageous demands, such as telling Government to spend more while also reducing revenues, and then they sprinkle in the bizarre “pie in the sky” promises with no mention of how to fund them, as we heard yesterday from the honourable Attorney-General.

Dreams are free, Mr. Speaker. The people of Fiji know that - that their dreams are free but policies must be practical. But it gets even worse, Mr. Speaker, because no sooner did His Excellency warn us of the politics of personalisation, did some Members of the Opposition began making personal attacks against him - attacking him personally, attacking his speech and his philosophy, even questioning his nomination by my Government.

It astounds me that this week, we heard some in the Opposition claim that he has been appointed on the basis of his chiefly status. Mr. Speaker, *Tui Namosi* is missing from this morning's session, I would like him to hear this. This is by the very people who have loudly lamented the absence of chiefly privileges in the 2013 Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, I need not defend His Excellency from these pretenders, his achievements speak for themselves. He has shown real leadership and a strong understanding of business. He has used his traditional leadership role to raise awareness on the climate and oceans' crises, he has shown everything we deserve from a modern leader in Fiji.

Let me be clear, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have never appointed anyone on the basis of their last name, family pedigree or based on where they come from in Fiji and we never will. Our President is not a Fijian who has coasted through life on the basis of his birth right. He has built his own name and his own career through his own hard work and the choices he has made.

Time and again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, he has gone well above what was required or expected and shown exemplary leadership in service of the national interest. He engages with everyone through a down to earth approach. That is why, he is loved; that is why we nominated him, and that is why we voted for him because he has proved that he has the merit to lead. Just as his immediate predecessor, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote, who is not a chief but had earned the right to lead and you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as well, showed the nation that same level of merit. SODELPA and the Opposition cannot fathom that sort of thinking.

They do not believe in merit-based leadership. They have never sought it, they never had it and we have seen the clear results. Their last leader simply ran out on his voters and just woke up one day, and decided to quit. I guess it was all too much for him and their current leader can barely run his party, so why on earth would anyone want him to govern the country. Mr. Speaker, the *Tui Namosi* had been very vocal about the appointment of *Tui Macuata*. I would be the laughing stock of Fiji and the region if I were to appoint *Tui Namosi* as the President of this nation. I had talked about their current leader who

can barely run his party, so why on earth would anyone want him to govern the country.

He is sitting on top of a collapsing house of cards, as we have heard over the last twelve months and the entire deck is, of course, filled with jokers - all jokers! The only values that the remaining members of this dwindling party seem to share is the contempt for good governance and a complete disregard for the value of merit. But merit matters to my Government, Mr. Speaker, and it matters to the young people of this country. They are sick and tired of these same old frauds, lamenting the good old days when they made all the rules simply because they were born to power - that era is over. And to hear someone like honourable Bulanauca, attack our President's legacy by talking about profits at Fiji Pine - honourable Bulanauca has sixty million reasons why he should keep his mouth shut because he was on the Board and that is exactly how many dollars Fiji Pine ran in losses.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker Sir, my Government had to ride that sinking ship and turn Fiji Pine into a profitable enterprise and our land owners have record breaking dividend payments to show for it. Honourable Bulanauca also called for Fijians to fear vaccination and instead, put faith in God. Mr. Speaker Sir, I am a man of faith as well and the fact that humanity is able to protect itself from COVID-19 is because the heavenly powers that be, allowed it to be so. No bogus interpretation of religion, honourable Bulanauca, should prevent people from protecting themselves against COVID-19. Every Fijian must get vaccinated and to dissuade them is to condemn them to disease and even death.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Lalabalavu complained to Members of Parliament that the ceremony of *qaloqalovi* should not have been held for the outgoing President, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote. I want to say, Mr. Speaker, his fibble attempt to weaponise culture was obvious to everyone and I am sure that if the *qaloqalovi* ceremony was not done, he would have been quick to criticise that move as well. That is how he thinks, Mr. Speaker, but what he does not realise is that by politicising our culture, he is the one who erodes it most of all.

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- You're the one, don't point at me!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, from Honourable Professor Prasad, we hear the usual 20-minute laundry list of complaints with zero alternatives and zero game plan. His contribution, Mr. Speaker, can be summed up as follows: I am desperate to enter government at any cost, I will say anything to get there.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Listen, honourable Prasad!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Not me, you the desperate one.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- I will jump into bed with anyone to do so, even the originator of *coup* culture in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, the people of Naidovi, Cuvu can attest to that - he knows that.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is the lie you are going to use in the next campaign.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- There has been a lot of quotes lately.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Don't worry about me.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- I would like to quote from someone who wrote in the papers just a couple of days ago about Honourable Professor Biman which says: "Unsatisfied Biman". Someone shared me a *Chit Chat* that looked like honourable Professor Biman Prasad's speech was written by a child. It was full of complaints; just like an Indian TV series.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Don't tell me that.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Someone shared it.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- I am just reading from a quote, Mr. Speaker. I did not write that. But, Mr. Speaker, the word of the most reckless Member of the week indisputably belongs to the man himself, honourable Niko Nawaikula. His call to scrap the iTLTB is more than insane. It is the most serious threat to the iTaukei since the Qarase Government stole land from the landowners.

Honourable Nawaikula had no such view when he worked for the iTLTB and he has provided no alternative for dealing with land issues. We have to assume he expects individual landowning units to deal with issues among themselves. That would not only decimate the value of iTaukei land but do away with all the checks and balances provided by iTLTB and the Ministry of Lands. It goes to show, there are no lengths he will not go to, to seek power and create disquiet among our communities, even if it costs the iTaukei people their income, their welfare and their future, even if it undermines the economic system in Fiji. I talked about honourable Professor Prasad, I am not finished with him.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Carry on, carry on! Read more!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- I am looking at the *Daily Hansard* Report.

Honourable Professor Prasad talked about corruption and I quote:

"Finally, Mr. Speaker, let me talk about corruption and sleaze which His Excellency the President referred to. After all, we were told after the 2006 *coup* that this is a clean-up campaign. We are going to clean-up corruption. You do not have to ask the Opposition, Mr. Speaker. We do not have to provide the evidence. All the evidence he says is sitting in Government."

Of course, we have the evidence.

He goes on to talk about the Accountability and Transparency Commission, and I quote:

"Eight years on, no Accountability and Transparency Commission has ever been appointed."

I do not know why he went to such great lengths to talk about the Accountability and Transparency Commission with regards to corruption because if he wants to know what corruption is all about, all he has to do is stand up, walk through that door, go down the road, he will end up at the University of the South Pacific.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- When you talk about corruption, you are targeting us, that is personal. That is all he has to do. Our university students are waiting for him to sort out the problem that

he is a part of and has brought about big corruption scandal at the University of the South Pacific.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Prove that! You created the mess there.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Calm down, calm down.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- If you listen to his speech in the last couple of days, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a conspiracy theory man. He talked about what we are going to do if we lose the elections as if we are going to do anything other than step down. But honourable Niko Nawaikula has picked up on that and this is his comment in the last couple of days:

“History is also telling us that our Constitution to be permanent will depend on the acceptance and acknowledgement of the people.”

Then he goes on to say, I quote:

“Even the military has a constitutional role and responsibility to remove Government. That is even worse, it is not a democracy any more with the provision like that.”

I do not know where he got that from? When he was questioned here, he said, “Well, read your Constitution”, that was what he said. With lawyers like him, we have to worry about our Constitution.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- unlawful.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a shame that our national discourse has been dragged down to this level, that we have to slog through this deluge of absurdity, lies, fanciful theories and petty concerns, rather than discuss the real issues our people face.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- That is what you mean, shame on you.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Now, I would like to speak directly to our people on the topic of actual importance, the topic that has been spoken about at every dinner table, every community hall and indeed every board meeting in the country which is - where do we stand on our economic recovery?

This week, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has marked the beginning of the end of this terrible pandemic for Fiji and for the first of many better days ahead. I want to thank the Fiji Airways staff, the Fiji Airports employees, our hotel and tourism workers, the drivers, the doctors, nurses, the police officers and RFMF personnel and every other Fijian whose combined-team effort helped us reopen our borders to tourists this week.

We were proud and most importantly, prepared to welcome those fully-vaccinated COVID-19-tested travellers from Australia. The same goes for the visitors who will arrive from our other green list countries. Those first two flights from Sydney, Mr. Speaker, on Wednesday represented nearly two years of careful preparation including the decisive effort to vaccinate nearly every adult in Fiji. We worked hard to earn every smile beneath the face mask of our visitors and to fill the seats of the planes that brought them here and since then five more flights have arrived from Melbourne, Sydney and Los Angeles (LA).

This is a victory, Mr. Speaker, that is shared by far too many people for me to thank here including in no small part the 560,570 Fijians who came forward to get both jabs of a vaccine. The people's trust in science and this government's sound leadership have earned us the right to reopen our borders. It has

earned us the right to fill our hotels. It has earned us the right to a recovery and that is exactly what every Fijian will get and they will get it because they have a government that has produced the stability and supplied the decisive leadership necessary to deliver it.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- When we drew up the strategy to reopen our border, COVID-19 had already produced 11 different variants. So Mr. Speaker, of course we expected a 12th and we have been monitoring the Omicron variant carefully since it was discovered. Like the other variants before it, there is no evidence to suggest it poses a serious threat to those who are fully-vaccinated, so if you are not vaccinated, get vaccinated.

We have adopted measures that are proportionate to the threat it poses when it does inevitably arrive at our shores. We quickly increased the quarantine requirement for travellers from over 150 red list countries and we are deploying booster doses to our frontline workers and to the most vulnerable Fijians. Soon we will make booster shots available to more adults and we are pressing ahead with a campaign to vaccinate our children over the age of 12. Of course every Fijian must also continue to keep our discipline. We must continue to wear our masks in public spaces, keep good physical distance and wash our hands often. So Mr. Speaker, let us review the record. We laid careful plans to free Fiji from the grip of this crisis, we worked hard with our partners to secure the vaccines we needed, we showed the leadership to deploy them quickly and we prepared the strategy to restart tourism - that is our record. And I shudder to think what would have happened to Fiji if the Opposition was in government during this crisis.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Much better.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- I heard honourable Gavoka talk about the many things he is going to do when they get into government.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Absolutely!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- If they get into government.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- But there is one thing he forgot to mention - the fact that he should be worried about the group on his side. They are all ready to stab him in the back but not only that, also stab him from the front so he should be worried about that.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Still standing strong! Still standing strong!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- As I said, Mr. Speaker, I shudder to think what would have happened to Fiji if the Opposition was in government during this crisis. They cannot figure out how to act as an Opposition much less lead as a Government.

There would have been fighting amongst themselves about what to do every step of the way. In fact the only thing they managed to unite around is the effort to halt our recovery. They have tried everything in their power to stir up panic, undermine confidence and distract us from the good news of

this week. Some going so far as to demand we shut the border entirely, someone is missing from the back there including honourable Tabuya and her soon to be leader. They want to scare people into believing that they face a false choice between lives and livelihoods. Two years ago, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that was true, today it is not. We can protect them both and we will.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the experts predict that we will see dozens of variants of the virus in a lifetime. It would be easy for me to slap my back and say, "shut the border" every time a new one emerges. That may satisfy some but it would be reactive leadership and terrible policy, as we found out. It would condemn our people to live in a perpetual state of uncertainty and set Fiji towards becoming a small, weak and isolated nation. My opponents may accept that, I will not.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have to make decisions based on what we know. What we know is that, all of these variants of the virus present a greatest threat to those who are not vaccinated. As for the rest of the Opposition, what they do not say is far more telling than what they do. If they really cared about the lives of our people, they would join the call to vaccinate the small holdouts of unvaccinated adults in the country. They would help us urge parents to have their children vaccinated but that is not what they spend their time doing.

We have to ask, why? Why do not they use their platform to advocate vaccinations we know will support our recovery? They do not, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because they know that every job we create and every dollar we help Fijians to make them more and more irrelevant. They want to hold Fiji hostage to a state where they feel they stand a chance at obtaining power and that is why they are erecting every roadblock possible to stall our recovery. That is why they are trying to sabotage every measure of support we offered our national carrier. We did not listen and today, they should be listening, Fiji Airways is the only airline flying tourists into Fiji.

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

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- And our fortunes are not left to the whims of foreign carriers; that is why they wanted to keep people locked in their homes and keep the doors of our businesses locked when we knew that made no medical sense. And that is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they will do or say anything possible to derail our recovery now. We will not let them, we will not be deterred, we will not fail the people who have chosen us to lead them.

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

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Humanity has become better and smarter at dealing with this virus, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and so as Fiji because we prepared for this moment. Millions of dollars will be coming into the country over the coming weeks and months. As the honourable Attorney-General has said, those dollars will go to our businesses, market vendors, tourism workers, farmers and to Fijians in all industries as this recovery ripple through our economy and the combined strength of our economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which is far more diverse than it was 20 years ago will help Government to extend even more services, build more roads and strengthen more infrastructure.

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

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- It will help us move more vulnerable communities, build more seawalls and expand more sustainable industries in forestry, agriculture, aquaculture and cutting edge industries like Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) and the ICT sector. It will set Fiji back on the path of prosperity towards a greener, bluer and more resilient society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have overcome much, the global financial crisis - more than a dozen serious cyclones and a global pandemic. Through it all, the people have known they have a Government that will support them when they need it and empower them to turn adversity into an opportunity. A Government with a plan, not to simply print more money, but to grant them the chance and earning a decent living for themselves, not to divide people, but to unite them in a common cause. Not to move backwards, but forward, towards better infrastructure, better services and the future all ordinary Fijian want for themselves.

Over the coming year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will advance a legislative agenda that continues the march of progress. That is how we lead, by delivering on our promises of progress to the people. And I will make a deal with honourable Qereqeretabua, unfortunately, she is not here, but she may be listening and watching this very moment - you keep coming up with scatter brain theories about how we govern and continue cursing children. We will keep running the country and taking Fiji forward. We will keep our laser focus on the bread and butter issues affecting our people and the long term challenges we know are headed our way. We will not distract the nation with small issues, but rather focus on holistic national approach. We will pass policies that make sense and that can be funded and which are part of larger agenda to build a stronger, more caring and more resilient country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Fijian people vote in our third genuine national election in history, they will vote on this Government's record of strong and steadfast leadership, on the recovery we have helped deliver, and on the real policies and practical promises that we should put before them.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Before I take my seat, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to once again thank His Excellency the President for his gracious Address and for those on the other side, honourable Jone Usamate is offering his statement from yesterday, for you to read.

Question put

Motion agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT

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

That Parliament adjourns until Monday, 7th February, 2022 at 9.30 a.m.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I kindly remind you all that when we adjourn this morning, we will proceed to the Parliament steps for the meet and greet and the photo session with the participants of the Open Day Programme for the International Day for Persons with Disabilities. On this special day, I appeal to all parents who have a child or children with disabilities, do not hide them away, include them in all family and community activities. If they need help, help is there. Do not be shy about that. They are part of us and we are part of them - include them.

HON. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I sincerely thank you all for your participation and contributions during the Parliamentary proceedings in the course of this sitting week and this year; 2021 has been a particularly difficult year for all of us. I thank you all for your perseverance, cooperation and dedication in ensuring that Parliament's constitutional functions continue during the pandemic.

Honourable Members, on behalf of the Secretary-General and the Parliamentary staff, I wish you all and your families a merry Christmas and a prosperous 2022. I now declare Parliament adjourn *sine die* until Monday, 7th February, 2022 at 9.30 a.m. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 11.27 a.m.