

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 29TH NOVEMBER, 2021

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 29TH NOVEMBER, 2021

The Parliament met at 9.58 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. 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, 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 Drecala Bilitavu
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 Niumataiwalu
Hon. Niko Nawaikula
Hon. Prof. Biman Chand Prasad
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

Absent

Hon. Faiyaz Siddiq Koya, Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport
Hon. Lenora Salusalu Qereqeretabua
Hon. Adi Litia Qionibaravi

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sittings of Parliament held on Friday, 24th September, 2021, Friday, 22nd October, 2021 and Monday, 22nd November, 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 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 taking an interest in your Parliament.

Thank you, honourable Members. We will move on.

DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament thanks His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will follow the Batting Order accordingly and I now call upon the honourable Prime Minister to speak on his motion.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address.

Before I speak on His Excellency's Address, I would like to congratulate our Fiji Sevens Team for their performance at the HSBC World Rugby Sevens Series in Dubai over the weekend, particularly our *Fijiana*, whose second-place finish has shown once again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that they are the team to beat in women's world rugby.

I also wish to take this moment to convey my thoughts and prayers to our brothers and sisters in the Solomon Islands for the turmoil they are currently experiencing. Tomorrow, Mr. Speaker, Sir, 50 Fijian troops commanded by Major Toanikeve will dispatch to the Solomon Islands as part of reinforced platoon embedded with the Australian Force elements on the ground. Another 120 troops here in Fiji will remain on standby for deployment if needed to help maintain security.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency expressed strong sentiments and hard truths in his Address at the opening session of Parliament. If you are like me, you were at the same time encouraged, inspired and admonished by His Excellency's remarks. He held up the strengthening of our democracy as his single most important responsibility. He rightly told the Fijian people that our democracy belongs to them - not only to us Parliamentarians sitting here today, not only to the candidates who will stand for the next national elections, not only to the political parties or the commentators or the privileged, but to all the people. The people have great power to tell us what they want, to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction and to give direction to the people they elect.

A democracy is more than elections. In a democracy, we protect the rights of all citizens, so we stand uplifted by His Excellency's words, but also admonished because he gave us a warning. Mr. Speaker, he warned us that our own actions in exercising two of the most basic and defining functions of democracy can actually undermine it. He was, of course, talking about elections and legislative debate. He warned us of the politics of pettiness, of the dangers of identifying so narrowly with one group, for example, on the basis of ethnicity or religion, that we undermine our identification with the nation or the nation-state. He also asked us to be civil and honest as we conduct our electoral campaigns.

Mr. Speaker, in the coming year, we will be vying for government, with every political party competing for every Fijian's vote. Elections often bring about criticism and attacks. I believe all of us have been guilty at one time or another of going too far, of saying things we should not have said or could have said better. His Excellency has asked us to stop, and we should heed him.

We can criticise each other's positions without misrepresenting them, without personalising matters, attacking the family and friends of our opponents, or worse, using ordinary Fijians as pawns for political ascendancy. We can criticise each other on the facts and stay within the bounds of decency. We can point out our differences without demonising each other. Is it not better, Mr. Speaker, that we adhere to decency, to the truth and to a genuine battle of ideas rather than sink to the depths of discourse to win votes at any cost? The people deserve better. They deserve facts, Mr. Speaker, real policies backed by real budgets, so that they can make informed decisions on who is best to lead them. That is what they will continue to get from my Government.

Mr. Speaker, my Government has worked hard to confront the major issues and solve the major problems this country faces. We have an impressive record of reform, and we have focussed on bringing stability to the country and consistency to Government's policies. Everyone knows where we stand because we have stated it clearly. The economic reforms, legal reforms, administrative reforms, social

reforms, financial and commercial reforms and the educational reforms speak for themselves, so does our commitment to uplift the most disadvantaged Fijians and reduce the disparities between the rural and urban communities. We have also confronted and dealt with crises, including terrifying cyclones and, of course, the global pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, we are still emerging from the horrible pandemic that we suffered and are just starting to recover from its economic devastation. Businesses are rebuilding, children will soon return to school, our borders are opening to tourists this very week, and people everywhere are resuming their normal lives. His Excellency made it clear that wresting Fiji from the control of this virus, took a national effort by the government, the medical community, the business community and Fijian people everywhere. It was a supreme effort.

Government swallowed hard and took extraordinary fiscal and regulatory measures to ease the financial burden on our families and businesses. We disbursed some \$500 million in direct and indirect payments to individuals and families. We summoned these resources, despite Government revenues being gutted because the alternative, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was to leave our citizens in a state of insecurity and eventually despair. We could not do that. Instead, we showed firm and strategic leadership and introduced decisive initiatives to get jobs in arms as fast as possible and save lives.

A few countries can boast of a vaccination rate of more than 90 per cent of our adult population. We can because the Fijian people understood that vaccination was the key to a normal life and a thriving economy once again. But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our work is not over. In two days' time, the first tourism flight will land in Fiji in almost two years. We have reached this point through a careful science-based strategy and by taking decisive steps to prepare Fiji for this opportunity, and I plan to be there at the Nadi International Airport, which has been recognised as one of the most COVID-19 safe airports in the world to welcome the first plane of visitors from Australia to Fiji.

But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in celebrating this progress, we must remain mindful of how we arrived there. We have come to this stage because of the serious measures we took. We also must continue to adhere to the measures recommended by our public health professionals. To complicate matters even further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all know now, a new variant has emerged, and the world's experts still do not know what its characteristics are. Is it more virulent, more transmissible and more deadly? We do not know yet, but countries have already began closing their borders to people from a few countries in the Southern region of Africa, where the variant was first discovered. Fiji has stepped up our conditions of entry for the red list countries and we must all remain serious and vigilant and keep up our guard.

What does this mean for us, Mr. Speaker, Sir? Firstly, it means that all those Fijians who are not yet vaccinated must arrange to get the jab. We are doing well, but as I said, this fight is not over. We need only to use our peripheral vision to see that countries like Mauritius and Singapore have saw a rise in cases when their borders opened to tourism. These outbreaks started with poor compliance from the members of the local population, and there are pockets in Fiji where very few people are vaccinated or none at all, and that is a worry. These pockets represent a potential risk to the country.

I am concerned that some communities in the Ra to Rewa corridor, which includes pockets of Ra, Tailevu, Naitasiri and parts of Rewa, along with are few villages in the Yasawas have very low vaccination rates. For their health and the good of the country, I urge those people to get vaccinated. We also have been waiting for the day when we could vaccinate our children, and now that day has come. So let us get our children vaccinated as well right now. They need to be back in school, and 15 year olds to 17 year olds are being vaccinated now and soon, 12 year olds to 15 year olds will be vaccinated as well.

Some countries, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are preparing to vaccinate children, as young as five years, such as, next door in the Cook Islands. We will do the same as soon as we can and we will have booster doses available for those most vulnerable.

Mr. Speaker, we are living with COVID, and the only way to have a normal national life is to treat it like the health issue it is, not a political issue. Nothing would please me more than to be able to announce that we were free of these protocol measures for all time, but I cannot. It would be irresponsible, it would be a dangerous lie. We all need to be engaged in this fight. We can debate other things, but we have to be united on this. We have too much work to do and too many lives are at stake.

Since the pandemic struck, we have been sailing against the strongest economic headwinds we have ever faced, and we have been battling them without our tourism sector. There is a saying that which does not kill you will make you stronger. Well, we refuse to roll over and give into economic death, and in some ways, this adversity has made us stronger. People have gained new skills, industries have become more competitive and we have done our part as Government by easing the burden on businesses. Now we have the opportunity to mount a recovery. To succeed, we have to set our sights higher than simply restoring the Fiji of 2019. We have to capitalize on the reopening of our borders to create momentum that will propel us to greater growth in 2023, 2024 and beyond.

I urge businesses in our tourism industry to heed His Excellency's advice. We must be a cost-competitive destination. In the critical months that lie ahead, we will be competing fiercely for regional and global market share, and we can take nothing for granted. We must fight for every tourist dollar.

I know we will succeed. We have done great things together before. My Government is the same government that led Fiji to its longest stretch of economic growth ever. That is not a boast, it is a fact. We will be the government that leads us to our strongest recovery ever and that is not a boast either, it is a promise. We have the leadership, expertise and the credentials to guide a strong recovery — and the Fijian people have the will, ingenuity, diligence, and now the confidence to build a strong post-pandemic economy.

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency devoted a good portion of his maiden speech before Parliament to climate change which was fitting and proper. Climate change and the consequences it is visiting upon us constitute the greatest threat to our people, our national economy, our national territory, our way of life and we are not alone. This threat is staring at every person on earth in the eyes.

His Excellency has been deeply engaged in the issues of climate change and ocean health. He is a steward of the great sea reef. He has led the people of Macuata to greater awareness of their situation and greater resiliency. He was a member of Fiji's delegation to COP23 in Bonn when Fiji held the presidency of the Conference. As he told us last week, Mr. Speaker, he was also scheduled to join us in Glasgow.

Mr. Speaker, we are indeed fortunate that our Head of State brings that kind of experience to this high office, but just as importantly, he brings an understanding of the nature and consequences of climate change, both physical and economic. He also brings an understanding of the international process in which Fiji has such an important role and of the complex issues surrounding transformation to a green and blue economy, building resilient infrastructure and climate finance. Fiji is a leading voice internationally on these issues, and our President is an able spokesman.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji took on an active and assertive role in the global effort to combat climate change because it was necessary. The Small Island Developing States, particularly Fiji and our neighbours in the Pacific were on the frontlines of the climate crisis and our voices were being drowned out as sure as the ocean was rising over our shorelines. We did not take this responsibility for international prestige.

We did not take this responsibility so that we could speak at a seemingly endless stream of international conferences. We took on this responsibility because it is our national interest and if we do not speak out loudly and clearly for the interest of our nation and our people, Mr. Speaker, who will do that for us? We are doing this because our relentless chorus of advocacy and the effort of our negotiating teams makes an impact on global agreements, standards and direction.

I am frankly dumbfounded that this role we have taken on has been a source of criticism. Climate change confronts us with our very survival. Our role has brought us attention. It has brought us financing. It has connected us with international organisations, financial institutions, private sector and philanthropic groups and governments. That will be critical to our wellbeing. It helps to ensure that our long-term strategic vision for the nation can come to pass and we are doing an undeniably good thing by fighting for ourselves and other vulnerable peoples of the world.

Fiji will continue to have a strong presence at COP because we must continue to pressure large global polluters to reduce their carbon emissions, increase their financial support for climate-vulnerable countries and transfer technology for the solutions we need to build greater resilience and develop our renewable-energy sector.

I see Fiji's role in the fight against climate change as a defining commitment, much like our support for international peacekeeping. As a world knows us and appreciate us for our contributions to peacekeeping, it will also know and appreciate us for defending this planet and the people and flora and fauna that inhabit it. That is something, Mr. Speaker, to be proud of.

I fully acknowledge that we were disappointed at some of the shortcomings and compromises at COP26 in Glasgow. That, Mr. Speaker, is the nature of international consensus-based agreement. But while some of the language was weaker than we wanted, we had a number of wins - big wins. We procured a doubling of finance available for adaptation, with an agreement to independently monitor the commitment of developed countries to mobilise US\$100 million by 2023. That is already three years late, but we have the mechanism to hold their feet to the fire, so to speak. We resolved disagreements about carbon markets, and we agreed to scale up NDCs once again by 2022.

Despite the very important role that our oceans play in our climate, there was no recognition of the relationship between oceans and climate change in global climate discussions at the United Nations. But we did gain the inclusion of an Oceans Work Programme in the UNFCCC, something Fiji has championed since COP23.

Mr. Speaker, we can say that Fiji's voice, Fiji's moral authority as one of the 15 most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, Fiji's leadership of the climate vulnerable and Fiji's unrelenting insistence that we continue to strive to limit warming to 1.5 degrees have been effective. We have been rewarded, and the world has been rewarded, for our sheer dogged insistence that every nation do what is necessary to control this crisis and that developed nations do much more to help developing nations adapt. That tells us that we should continue. Why argue with success?

Mr. Speaker, here at home, the most important thing we can do to protect this country from the worsening climate crisis is to make sure that we have strong and sustainable economic growth. We do not gain resilience by wishing for it; we build it ourselves with our own resources, our own revenues, our own sweat and ingenuity and through our own international diplomacy and engagement. That is what builds seawalls. That is what helps move communities. That is what enables us to grow climate-resilient crops and fortify our infrastructure. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is what can fund the kind of innovation that allows our society to adapt. That is what can help us recover from storms. So our focus must be on creating the stability, confidence and consistency that drive powerful economic growth.

Mr Speaker, His Excellency has already demonstrated that he has the capacity, the energy, the knowledge and the drive to lead us domestically and internationally over the next three years. He said in his remarks on Page 3 of the *Daily Hansard* on Monday, 22nd November, 2021 that he will use his leadership “to support the highest possible functioning of the State and the work of the Executive to realise the objectives of the Constitution.”

As Prime Minister, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome his leadership. I look forward to working with our young and very wise President, His Excellency Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, and to receiving his counsel and guidance.

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I make my contribution in response to His Excellency's Address on 22nd November, I would like to acknowledge the presence of the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of the Government side, not forgetting my honourable colleagues in the Opposition.

At the outset, I would also like to congratulate His Excellency on his appointment to the High Office of the President and more so, as Commander-in-Chief of our Armed Forces. On the same token, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would sincerely thank Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote for his unwavering commitment and dedicated service during his term of office, and wish him well in his future endeavour.

I would also like to thank His Excellency for his gracious and visionary Address, highlighting key challenges that we are facing as a nation and he reiterated the need for unity as we move forward. Sir, our President as the Head of State, symbolises a beacon of hope and unity and strong leadership that our people will always treasure and respect. To me personally, Sir, it is indeed a momentous and historic day when His Excellency addressed the nation. His Excellency Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, *Turaga na Tui Macuata*, is one of the direct descendants of the 10 chiefs that ceded Fiji to Great Britain in 1874.

Sir, in reviewing the instruments of the Deed of Cession to reflect on our history, it is worth noting that there were three basic reasons as to why Fiji was ceded to Her Majesty Queen Victoria. Firstly, the desire of our chiefs in securing the promotion of civilization and Christianity and increasing trade and industry within the said islands.

Secondly, in the interest of natives or indigenous people and so as the white population then, that order and good governance should be established. Today, our nation is a multiracial and multi-cultural society which we should all be proud of, Sir.

Thirdly, our chiefs requested Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, to undertake the government of the said islands. I believe, Sir, that the role played by chiefs then are still very much relevant today as a symbol of unity and hope and goodwill amongst our people. Therefore, Sir, the sentiment and suggestion that chiefs are irrelevant and should go and drink homebrew under the mango tree proves otherwise.

Sir, today, I see our nation is at a mid-course and in transition from yesteryears as we move into that unchartered territory and totally uncertain and very bleak future. If we continue on the same path or the course we have taken in the last 14 years without urgently making the necessary structural adjustments, we will be worse off than before. The onus is on the Government of the day to be a catalyst and to take the lead role in creating the necessary enabling environment, to start the ball rolling, genuine dialogue is a pre-requisite to foster unity and give confidence among our people.

I pray, Sir, that the Government should seriously have a change of heart in facilitating genuine dialogue. We must always recognise, appreciate and continue to embrace our different unique cultures

and values. Our differences should be considered as our strength and must be nurtured rather than forcing cultural autonomy and racial integration, which has failed miserably and brought disunity and mistrust amongst our different communities.

For our iTaukei or the indigenous community, our identity is not about how much wealth we have accumulated, or our professional status, or the religious denominations we belong to. Our identity, Sir, or who we are is based on the *vanua* concept. As individuals, we have a responsibility to the *vanua* and we must continue to embrace and uphold it since it is inbuilt in our DNA.

I am obliged to reflect on the significance of the *vanua*. Mr. Speaker, Sir, after observing the farewell ceremony of the former President and the inauguration ceremony of our incoming President whereby the basic tradition of protocol of "*qaloqalovi*" was not adhered to. It is unfortunate that the outgoing President was accorded the full traditional ceremony of *qaloqalovi* when he was being farewelled. The traditional protocol of *i qaloqalovi* ceremony should have and must be accorded to the incoming office holder and it is often said, "*Sa vaka e curu uciwai na noda i tovo vakavanua*", honourable Prime Minister.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Take note of that!

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Listen, honourable Prime Minister!

Sir, on the standards of our social economic development, despite the regular claim and hype of unprecedented growth or the Bainimarama Boom and the popular slogan where no one is to be left behind and all family matters, the harsh reality on the ground is totally the opposite. The reality of the matter is that our economic performance has been erratic and far more below our potential annual growth rate of 5 per cent.

The key challenges faced by the nation today can be summarised as follows:

- The lack of unity and mistrust amongst our different communities and uncertainty due to the dictatorial leadership by the Government in the management of our nation.
- Increase in corruption and the misuse of power due to the lack of effective and genuine consultation and dialogue.
- Low savings and investments which led to high unemployment due to the lack of confidence from both domestic and foreign investors.
- Increase in the incidence of poverty and more of our citizens are facing hardships to meet their basic needs.
- More and more of our people, almost one in every seven, are forced to live in informal and squatter settlements due to unprecedented migration into our urban and peri-urban areas.
- Weakening of our export base due to the lack of support and consistency of Government

Policy.

- Loss of valuable skills, experience and expertise due to the lack of targeted training and emigration.
- Increase in national debt stock which means that our limited available resources will be directed to debt servicing rather than capital infrastructure, utilities, and improving our existing infrastructure which are in a very dilapidated state.
- The breakdown of law and order amongst others.

Sir, I will only deliberate on a few of these key challenges whilst my colleagues on this side of the House will further deliberate on challenges associated with their respective shadow portfolios.

Although we anticipate that our borders will be opening soon to receive visitors back to our shores so we can revive the tourism industry which usually contributes to around 34 per cent of our GDP, its sustainability in the short and medium term is still in doubt, as highlighted by the Honourable Prime Minister, because of the possibility of a third wave. We have to consider other opportunities to minimise the risk of putting our eggs in only one basket, Sir.

Although other opportunities are quite limited and I would like to quote the famous line of the honourable Attorney-General, “the fact of the matter” is that our key macro fundamentals are weak and on shaky grounds. However, it is time that we pay more attention to our resource-based sectors, particularly on non-sugar agriculture, fisheries and forests to the cushion impact of any future crisis. The importance of non-sugar agriculture during the pandemic is a clear indication that we must relook at our priorities to ensure food security.

Today, our investment level is only hovering around 13 per cent of GDP, far below our potential level of 25 per cent, to support sustainable economic growth and provide employment opportunities for those entering the labour market after leaving the formal education system and those who are already unemployed and looking for jobs.

The low level of quality investment is mostly driven by the funding of non-priority projects with low financial and economic return by the Government. Most major projects undertaken are on *ad hoc* arrangements and majority of them did not get off the ground or are incomplete because of poor planning which has led to high wastage of our already limited resources, Sir.

The 2019-2020 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) Report on poverty by the Bureau of Statistics which was carried out prior to the COVID-19 pandemic clearly reflects the true status of poverty in the country, which is alarming and on an increasing trend, Sir.

The status of our public finance is now in dire strait. Revenue collection shortfall continue to be experienced, as far back as 2014 until today. In addition, increase in unnecessary spending due to poor forecasting and lack of targeting quality investment have led to wastage and increase in our debt stock which is unprecedented in the history of our nation.

Sir, based on the latest debt report produced by the Ministry of Economy, our total Government exposure, including contingency liability is around 90 per cent of our GDP. That is when we include the latest approval of guarantee for Fiji Airways and the FDB in the last session of Parliament.

The exposure of the workers' retirement fund held by Fiji National Provident Fund is a concern because 35 per cent of the total exposure is with Government. The increase in our contingency liability

exposure, particularly to Fiji Airways and FDB is also a challenge. We have been advised by our multilateral development partners, the increasing contingency liability is one of the biggest risk faced by the government today.

Questions that continue to linger in the public domain is the risk associated with guarantees, particularly with Fiji Airways, in the leasing arrangements of our aircrafts. We were advised earlier on that the two planes cannot be returned because of contractual obligations. Common sense tells us that in any contractual arrangement, there are always exit clauses to protect both the borrower and the lender, due to unforeseen circumstances or extraordinary events beyond the control of both parties. A couple of months later, we were informed that two of the planes under leasing arrangements had been returned to the lessor. We have been reliably informed, despite the fact that those two planes have been returned that they are sitting somewhere in a hangar in Dubai, to make it worse, we are still paying off the leases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji are not so naïve. The general sentiments expressed by the public is that, “something fishy is probably going on” due to the lack of transparency and clarity on the leasing arrangements. We urge the Government to come clean and inform the people of Fiji the reality of the matter.

Again, Sir, the public is still in the dark due to the lack of clarity on the sale of Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) to a consortium, a newly registered company in Singapore which was arranged by the honourable Attorney-General when he was there on medical leave.

The two key indicators commonly used as a benchmark of socio-economic status of a nation include the Human Freedom Index (HFI) and the Human Development Index (HDI) that is published annually by the UNDP. The HFI measures key indicators, such as personal, economic and human freedom. These indicators are associated with the rule of law, law and order and human rights in the country.

It is quite revealing, Sir, that Fiji's ranking continues to decline in comparison with the 162 nations. In 2010, Fiji was ranked 53, in 2015 we were ranked 59, and in the latest ranking based on the 2020 publication, our ranking has further declined to 77.

Again, Sir, our ranking on the HDI also continued to drop. The HDI measures life expectancy at birth, mean years of schooling, expected years of schooling and Gross National Income per capita. In 2010, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were ranked 86 and in 2015, it declined to 90. The latest report released in 2020, our ranking declined further to 93. Basically, our HDI ranking has declined by seven basis points in the last 15 years.

Sir, I know that the Government will fight tooth and nail to ridicule these findings and it comes with many excuses to discredit their reliability and credibility. These are reports that support these findings. There are other reports that support these findings and these reports include the United States Department on Human Rights, Global Status of Democracy Report and the Transparency International Global Corruption Barometer amongst others.

There are a number of recent developments that reflects and confirms these findings, Sir:

- The termination of the Solicitor-General because the Government lost the case against honourable Nawaikula and the immediate passing of a law to regularise Government's failure.

- The sacking of the Government Statistician in the release of the Status of Poverty in the Country including ethnic breakdown in the 2019-2020 HIES Report. The Report highlighted that more than 258,000 of our people are living in poverty.

This figure excludes the additional 125,000 who have lost their source of livelihood during the pandemic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and are currently facing hardship in meeting their basic needs or are living in poverty. Today, it is estimated that 40 per cent of our population are living in poverty and another 20 per cent are facing hardship to meet their daily basic needs.

In addition, Sir, the sudden resignation of the Chair of the Electoral Commission, Mr. Suresh Chandra, is certainly surprising after just being reappointed into his second term. He has come under public scrutiny on issues arising from losses to his law firm's trust fund account. This is a very clear indication that there is a lack of transparency in his re-appointment when Government knew too well of his status.

The point I am trying to make, Sir, is that the Government continues to refute and disregard sound and practical findings and advice, moreso, disregard international best practices. The Government rather than being defensive, should consider these findings and recommendations from reputable sources positively, and take necessary action to make improvements or adjustments for the betterment of the nation. Most importantly, Sir, rather than just preaching, but practice this to adhere to the basic principles of good governance. In doing this, it will give confidence to the people that concerns raised are addressed in a transparent and accountable manner rather than continuing with the blame game.

Sir, it has become a norm and practice that when things go wrong, rather than biting the bullet and addressing the issues constructively, the Government of the day continues to play the blame game. It is always a norm to blame previous governments for all the wrongs and the removal of senior public servants who speak the truth.

Sir, it will also be interesting for the Government to provide a report on the recent COP26 where our nation was represented by more than 40 delegates. Questions have been raised by the public in terms of the cost of the trip and the benefit that will accrue to our nation. I say this because our external relation is at its lowest ebb.

At the regional level, our relationship with our neighbours are quite sour. There are two issues hanging over our heads today, which include the USP saga and the intention of the Micronesian Group to pull out from the Forum which has been discussed on a number of occasions in this Parliament and in the public domain. Most importantly, the closing of the Diplomatic Missions in the United States, especially in Washington DC and the European Union in Brussels is a disaster for bilateral trade and development assistance for our nation.

Sir, effective diplomacy is all about dialogue, consultation, mutual respect and trying to find a common ground for the benefit of all parties. Trying to be dominant by punching above our weight will not help at all because we are only a small fish in a very big ocean. I hope that the Government would take those views constructively and act on them, rather than being stubborn, arrogant and continuing with its current self-centered dictatorial leadership.

Sir, Christmas is just around the corner when we will celebrate the birth of Christ. We must renew our commitment in rebuilding our nation and consolidate our faith in our Creator and most importantly, to one another.

On that note, I would like to wish you, Sir, and your family, Members of this august Parliament and your families, and the people of Fiji, a very merry Christmas and a blessed New Year. May God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Leader of the Opposition for his statement.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 10.49 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.25 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- I remind all honourable Members to keep to their timings. The first bell will be rung at 18 minutes and the final bell at 20 minutes.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and all those watching from home - good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to congratulate His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, *na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere and respond to his encouraging and inspirational opening Address of 2021 to 2022 session of Parliament. His Excellency made some very important points - the most important of which was unity and putting national interests above political gain.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, time and again, we have seen Opposition politicians put themselves before our nation. When COVID-19 devastated the world's economy and health causing damage to Fiji, this side of the House immediately went into action. We joined frontline workers around the country - nurses, doctors, military, police, food distribution teams and supermarket workers - we worked hand in hand to serve the people in this time of need. What were the Opposition politicians doing during this time? Rubbing their hands with happiness and cheering for COVID-19 failure?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they thought that this was their opportunity, together with the *Fiji Times* and *Fijivillage*, to attack the Government. They did not care....

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Listen!

They did not care that people were suffering and they could have done their part in assisting. No. They put themselves ahead of suffering people and ahead of the nation, spreading all kinds of lies.

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Listen!

Lies about the vaccines. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if honourable Prof. Biman Prasad is thinking that he is higher than me because of his PhD academic level, I believe that we are the same – we are in Parliament.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Listen!

In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just last week, the international Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) called out *Fiji Times* on lies they were spreading about a report. The *Fiji Times* lied and said that the military involvement in the COVID-19 pandemic was making our democracy fragile. International IDEA corrected their lie and said they had not observed any concerns of the military's involvement in the pandemic response as they acted under the leadership of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. This is publicly available and you can read it, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Just like with all the other lies that SODELPA, NFP and other politicians like Rabuka and Narube spread through the *Fiji Times* and not thinking about the country, only about themselves and their political survival.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Listen!

Our amazing military are risking their own lives to assist people and protect our borders. Imagine being a military officer, working long hours to save Fiji from COVID-19 and then reading this nonsense in the *Fiji Times*. I would like to remind honourable Professor Prasad, honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua and honourable Pio Tikoduadua that while they sit comfortably in their big homes posting on *Facebook*, it is the honourable Prime Minister, the military and frontline workers who risk their lives helping Fijians in need on the ground. I would like to remind wanna-be politicians like Rabuka and Narube that it is the honourable Minister for Economy who is bringing our economy back on track during a time the whole work is suffering.

Speaking of recovery, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we know Rabuka destroyed the Fijian economy through reckless spending and corruption, of course, under him, we lost the National Bank of Fiji.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Hear, hear!

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Speaking of recovery, I hope, honourable Gavoka and his SODELPA recover quickly from the snake bite that our honourable Prime Minister told them was coming the moment they got in bed with a snake.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- I would like to remind honourable Lynda Tabuya that Fiji Airways will play an important role in getting our economy back and assisting our people. Her *TikTok* video where she eats a plane is now being made fun of by young and old alike. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Airways is another one that these people love to attack and spread lies about. That is because they cannot see further than their own personal interest. Someone who cared about the country would think about the future. They would understand why Fiji Airways is so important. Our tourism industry cannot be left at the mercy of the airlines. We need our national airline.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COP26 was a great opportunity for us to remind the world that COVID-19 did not make climate change magically vanish. It was a proud moment for me as a Fijian to see Fiji play such an important role in a major world event. Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, guess who started spreading lies and attacking? However, despite their negativity and misinformation, the world heard our message and our call. We were not forgotten. They were reminded that Fiji and the small island states were being affected by their activities. We must never downplay the importance of our voices being heard when it comes to climate change because we are going to be affected by it first and hit the hardest.

His Excellency's message about putting our country first could not come at a better time and many need to hear this. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the next general election is around the corner. That means we will be hearing more and more lies as desperate politicians try their best to undermine all the great work that has been done to bring us to where we are today. We have indeed, as His Excellency said, the most educated population at any point in our history. Many of our parents and grandparents, like me, wish that we had free education, TELS and Toppers during our time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must ensure that we do not fall for misinformation that we see during the next year. Election years bring out the worst in Opposition politicians as we have seen in the past two elections, but I urge all to put the country before themselves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact is that, the current democratic process is the best we have ever had. One person equals one vote of equal power. You have as much say on the election results as anyone else. You will hear a lot of Opposition politicians complain about democracy and the 2013 Fijian Constitution. Honourable Viliame Gavoka will contest under the 2013 Constitution and take part in Fiji's democratic process, honourable Niko Nawaikula will contest under the 2013 Constitution and take part in Fiji's democratic process, honourable Professor Biman Prasad will contest under the 2013 Constitution and take part in Fiji's democratic process, honourable Pio Tikoduadua will contest under the 2013 Constitution and take part in Fiji's democratic process and honourable Lynda Tabuya will contest under the 2013 Constitution and take part in Fiji's democratic process. Yet, Mr. Speaker, Sir, mark my words, they will all complain about the Constitution and democracy while contesting under it. It is one of the biggest lies and acts of hypocrisy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with borders re-opening, I urge all Fijians to follow protocols set by the Ministry of Health as an extra measure of safety.

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA.- *Vamalu!*

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- You will get more from me.

(Laughter)

We must be smart, strong and look after each other. I once again congratulate His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere for his inspiring speech.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- First, I thank His Excellency the President of Fiji, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere for his first presidential Address on 22nd November, 2021. I congratulate him for his most gracious Address and achievement in rising up to the highest position on the land to continue to serve, not only the *vanua o Macuata* but Fiji as a whole. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to comment on a few areas of Government that we need to put right, improve on and to develop new ideas for the betterment of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me clearly raise this, the honourable Attorney-General had continuously labelled me when I called Mahendra Chaudhary and Jai Ram Reddy "satan" and told Indians to go back to India. Nothing is said in a vacuum. What was said was in retaliation to the statement, motives and what was said at that time.

The former Prime Minister, Mr. Mahendra Chaudhary signed a statement for a land use law without prior consultation with native landowners, NLTB chiefs, Great Council of Chiefs, et cetera, was an act of disrespect out of a spirit considered evil thus the *itaukei* labelled him "satan". The beautiful creation of Mahendra Chaudhary we respect that then and now but the evil spirit at that time was labelled as "satan". A satan is an engineer of the evil spirit out of any human being now with the FijiFirst Government and Party.

Similarly, to honourable Jai Ram Reddy when he announced a finding by a group of lawyers led by Dr. Sahu Khan and published by the *Fiji Times* in the late 1990s that all native land be State land. That to the *iTaukei* of native lands is an evil spiritual utterance. It was not the beautiful creation of Jai Ram Reddy speaking but the evil idea in spirit. We call that satan or satanic. To call the Indians to go back to India was a call in response to that statement. Indian descendants in Fiji need to recognise and seek the

ownership of native land by the *iTaukei*. Please, respect the ownership of native land as in the law of Fiji. I hope I have explained myself clear, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

His Excellency the President talked about leadership and genuine democracy and past systems that fall short of delivering true equality for our people. Let me make emphasise on “falling short of leadership and genuine democracy”. It must be noted that the FijiFirst Government and party was and still the result of sedition, accepting the legal authority powered by the people or in plain language *coup d’etat* by the military headed by the current Prime Minister, honourable Voreqe Bainimarama as Commander then in 2006. He did this when he failed to form a government of independent candidates that he filled, with the support of rich people of Fiji, tourism, hotels and business owners like Dick Smith, Richard Evanson of Turtle Island, et cetera. His *coup* was also to save him from going to prison based on allegations with the real evidence and seditious remarks against Soqosoqo ni Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) and the late honourable Laisenia Qarase giving authorities for *coup* of year 2000, authority to kill his own soldiers, murder, personal reasons for bad malicious leadership. All these are not genuine democracy, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Those allegations need to be heard by a Court of Law to clear him from such serious allegations, otherwise the stings still stick with him all the way. As a Christian he needs to confess his wrongdoing or it will haunt him for the rest of his life. But if he had confessed for forgiveness from the Lord the Creator and Saviour of mankind secretly, that is okay with me. However, before confessing his or our sins to the Lord, the *Bible* says in Luke 11:4 and I quote:

“... And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us.”

We first need to confess to who we have hurt, people of Fiji, SDL, families of those who were killed or murdered under him. Daniel 9:9, and I quote:

“To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against him”.

The Lord is good and fair and he forgives our sin. I have forgiven the honourable Prime Minister, Voreqe Bainimarama, I do not know about the others, but this life is a life of confessing and forgiving. We are all going to live and meet up with the consequences of our own decisions, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Major-General Sitiveni Rabuka had done that, confessed and many have forgiven him. I challenge the honourable Prime Minister to do the same and releases his spirit for inner peace; that is what matters. The *Bible* also states what benefits a man who wishes to conquer the world, yet losses his spirit in heaven, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

How can a human being have clear conscience to follow and protect the rule of law when the foundation of that leadership was and is by breaking the same law? How can it be? It is hypocrisy of the highest order. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the same goes for the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Communications and Minister for everything else. How can one become head of legal fraternity to protect the law of the country when he himself is a law breaker? In the eyes of the public, unless proven otherwise, a bomb blaster injuring people is a terrorist act. The Government of the day need to open doors to such allegations to be heard to clear their names, otherwise labels such as murderer and terrorist sits with each of them.

Justice done does not only need to be seen but practiced in a genuine democracy, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I remember earlier this year, the honourable Sayed-Khaiyum called me a “shame” when I supported the Denarau and Momi native land sales, the pine non-profitability and profitability and reversion of pine and mahogany industries to the landowners. I cannot withdraw nor water down my support for those Denarau and Momi sales, they were in accordance with the law at that time, Mr. Speaker, Sir,....

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- What for...

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Landowners were properly and fully consulted...

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- What for...

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. M. BULANAUCA..- ...beforehand with their prior written approval and consent...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- ... unlike their dealings with Bill No. 17.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Approved in Parliament first, obtained iTLTB' s approval later and then consulted landowners later. This is hypocrisy and dictatorship, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The landowners never lost an inch of their land. They ended up with their new native land portion, a much higher valued piece of real estate at the coast of Denarau, Nadi Bay...

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Nonsense!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- ... rather than small islands in the mangroves. All were to the landowners benefits, developers also benefited; a win-win situation. They lost nothing, they gained all, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Previous Governments - Colonial, Alliance , SVT, Labour and SDL initiated, established, planted and maintained pine plantation and started harvesting but with improved deficit awaiting harvesting of Bua Pine Forest to become profitable by 2007 as planned. Timber industry is never an easy business, it is a long term one. Fiji Pine Limited improved performance and profitability to break even by 2008 and became profitable by 2009 as planned.

Everything was done as planned, only for the FijiFirst Government and Party to come and harvest and reap the benefits or take the credits of something they did not sweat for, *dou yavu kana loto*. Reversion of pine and mahogany industries to landowners, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to own is not new but long standing aim of previous governments to help landowners involve in businesses on their own land. What is wrong with that? Landowners to fully own or majority shareholders in industries is fully supported by government's involvement and private enterprises. SODELPA will do that come next year (2022), we are going to make sure the profitability of both Fiji Pine Limited and in particular, Fiji Hardwood Corporation Limited.

The Government gets its money back and makes sure all linked businesses along the line to benefit and be profitable. Why should I be ashamed for saying that? It is already a given vision, a part of the expectation and aspiration and the aim of all concerned; governments, landowners, business enterprises, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, only the honourable Prime Minister, Voreqe Bainimarama and the honourable Minister for Economy, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum need to be ashamed of themselves with loud standing public labels of murderer and terrorist respectively and usurping of people's authority for self-personal grounds. Shame on the honourable Prime Minister, Voreqe Bainimarama for denying the Supreme Court's decision in 2009 and throwing away the people's Constitution of 1997! Shame on the honourable Prime Minister, Voreqe Bainimarama for dismantling the Great Council of Chiefs and calling them to go and drink home brew under the mango tree!

Now, he appoints a chief, the *Tui Macuata*, a descendant of one of the Deed of Cession's signatories likens to a dog returning to its vomit, *lesu tale na koli ki na nona lua*. Shame on you! Shame on honourable Minister for Economy, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum for the implementation of the Fijian Experience, Cultural Autonomy (sunset clause) Thesis. Shame on honourable Bainimarama for suppressing his own iTaukei culture because culture evolves anyway, no need to force it. Shame on both of them for the 2007 decrees to suppress the iTaukei culture and interests. That includes who supports FijiFirst Government and Party. Shame on both of you and the military for forcing the 2013 Constitution on the people.

Ownership of native land entrenched under the Constitution but the rights to make the decision of their own land has been taken out by the 2007 decrees aforementioned, for example, Bill No. 17 of 2021, laws to take away teeth of ownership ends up with owners with no teeth. The Constitution of 2013 is a forced document, forced on the people by the military headed by the current Prime Minister. How can there be genuine democracy when the Constitution is a forced document, now we have leadership governance based on marxism, socialism, communism, totalitarianism, it is dictatorial, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

This is a form of government where government is God, all things belong to government. All to be dependent on government, no longer depended on God the Creator, et cetera. That means no religion, churches, gods and worships allowed here in Fiji, in particular the Christian faith. It is a war to obliterate the Christian faith in the world and in Fiji here today, as I speak.

I request the Fiji Council of Churches and Christian denominations - Methodist Church in Fiji, Catholics, Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Church of England, et cetera, let Biblical values and principles known to the government. Do not just follow what a secular government is demanding us to follow. We must live by the Word, values and principles of the *Bible*.

I thank our former military leaders who fought in Solomon Islands where many died but not to allow communism into Fiji. Those military leaders in the Malayan campaign where many died to secure Fiji from communism in Fiji. However, our military leaders in 2006 without any war, allowed communism into Fiji and we are now experiencing marxism, communism, socialism and totalitarianism or dictatorial governance as a consequence of military negligence for not providing necessary security to Fiji. The military should be concerned only with security of Fiji, leave governance to the people represented by their elected political party system of government.

By the same Constitution, the honourable Prime Minister has becoming the Commander-in-Chief. How can it be justified having a military Commander-in-Chief be the leader of the Government political party? Where in the world had that happened? Only in communist countries. Are we now communists by our leadership and Government? Yes, we have become communist, *dou yavu kominisi* and it appears our former government, military, police, corrections service and leaders are all under siege now under honourable Sayed-Khaiyum's control.

Shame on the dictatorial Parliamentary Standing Orders which has strangled the Opposition since 2014, I do not need to elaborate on that. Other failures Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sacking of Government Statistician as has already been mentioned, the sacking of Solicitor-General - a Constitutional position

has already been mentioned, the USP saga where monies still has not been paid, why not? The lost legal case against honourable Niko Nawaikula, why not sack Saneem? Why did you let the Delta variant come into Fiji which killed 700 people? Shame on FijiFirst Party Government and Ministry of Economy for the decline of the economy in 2019.

At last, the realisation of reality with the reduction in the budget of nearly a billion in revenue and expenditure. The expenditure has been over 25 per cent rather than 10 per cent as accepted margin below budget over the years. Shame! While we support efforts to get our tourism back to enjoy the sun, sand, sea and smiles, shame on the decline in production of local natural resources, primary industries during the FijiFirst Government Party's leadership. Primary industries do support local population in times of pandemic or pestilences as we have just had experienced. Occurrences will be more frequent according to the *Bible*. Take heed and be prepared.

Native timber, a steady decline drop from about 60,000 cubic metres in production in 2009 to about 23,000 only by 2019. Over 10 years of FijiFirst Government Party leadership, we have dropped our output by 60 per cent. Sustainable production here, I believe, is 50,000 cubic metres. Why the 60 per cent drop in production? This is a challenge for the new government; 2022 to 2026.

Pine production increased from about 250,000 cubic metres in 2009 to 539,000 cubic metres in 2014 then dropped to 410,000 cubic metres in 2015 then to only 192,000 by 2017. For years 2018 and 2019, are not yet available as annual reports are yet to be produced. Late! Still with Cabinet. Why the huge drop, Mr. Speaker?

Mahogany production dropped from about 64,000 cubic metres in 2009 to about 16,000 only in 2019. (It peaked in 2011 and 2012 at above 93,000 cubic metres with the SMIs input.) Where are they now? Why have they left? Rock-bottom production was in 2017 at only 2,600 cubic metres. Shame! There are many questions. What happened or what is happening? What did we not do? Can we not manage the weather which is a given factor? Do we have the expertise, technology or not? Is the Government supportive enough with incentives for timber businesses to thrive? Are we not choking the timber business with cost of doing business, delays by various authorities, advance taxes, et cetera? Are the Fiji Hardwood Corporation Limited log prices not too high for profitability?

Foreign exchange dropped from over \$30 million to \$6 million only. How can this be? The FijiFirst Government Party had failed miserably over the last 15 years to arrest the decline, Mr. Speaker, Sir. What can we do under the circumstances to increase production and foreign exchange for years 2022 and beyond? That is a challenge for the new incoming government next year come 2022. SODELPA! Is this another implementation strategy of cultural autonomy, Fiji experience, for the *iTaukei* people of his/her own land? It is a shame.

Pine chips exported to Japan and China carried on despite COVID-19, a success story of previous governments' long-term agreement with buyers. However, we need to increase exports of value-adding products such as decking, plywood components, table tops, veneer, mouldings, finished products, to name a few.

Majority of our exports are still sawn timber. It recorded 82 per cent in 2014; 46 per cent in 2015; and 63 per cent in 2016-2017, which are high figures indeed. Figures for 2018 are not yet available as annual reports are yet to be submitted. What can be done to improve the situation for years 2022 and beyond? Fiji, during the period of total imports, imported 40 per cent, 33 per cent and 52 per cent sawn timber. It is a very high proportion of imports. Why can we not supply locally? Value-added products imported were plywood by \$3 million, poles \$2 million, hardboard \$2 million, tongue and groove \$1.3 million, flooring \$1 million, moulding \$1 million. This shows the lack of promotion and encouragement

of local and foreign entrepreneurs to go into value-adding products. We need increase in exports, foreign exchange, employment, livelihood and to reduce imports of value-added products.

On agriculture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from annual reports to-date contributed to GDP increased from \$473 million in 2011 to about \$545 million in 2016. Exports increased from \$178 million to \$224 million for the year, same period, however, imports increased from \$506 million to \$770 million in the same period. Exports increased only by \$46 million, imports increased by \$211 million with a balance of trade in deficit from \$328 million to \$438 million for the same period; a huge deficit. We need to arrest the increasing rate of imports by increasing the rate of exports, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Figures for 2017-2018 are not available yet. Annual reports have not been made yet. Have we arrested the poor trend during the last three years? What can be done to substantially increase production, employment, et cetera, for 2022 and beyond in our beloved Ministry.

Fisheries, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been doing well and can be improved for future supply of nutritious sea and fresh water foods, in particular, aquaculture with Fiji, which has been neglected over the years. There are prospects in there which can be capitalised and can increase production and our livelihood.

Average export was around \$95 million from 2011 to 2019, in 2020, it dropped to \$70 million - COVID-19 year. What can we do for 2021 and 2022 and beyond to improve our production? What happened from 2008 to 2010 when export increased from \$101 million to \$24 billion? What happened in 2011 when export dropped to \$95 million? These questions can only be answered by the next Government in 2022.

Sugar exports dropped from \$215 million in 2006 to \$102 million in 2020. Why, what happened despite the assistances, loans, guarantees, et cetera, it still failed to increase production. The honourable Minister should resign. The mineral exports averaged \$120 million from 2010 to 2020 with a drop from \$148 million to \$134 million. What happened? A decline - had failed, what can we do to improve for 2021 to 2022?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, petition is a way or door by which members of the public, stakeholders concerned and Parliament or Legislature can contribute to improving developments in a country such as Fiji. It involves failing issues identified by Parliament that requires more detailed investigation through a Parliamentary Committee making recommendations back to Parliament for the three independent governing powers, Legislature, Executive and Judiciary to take appropriate actions to improve developments, output of performance, processes and systems for all to benefit.

Most of the failing issues I have raised already such as forestry, agriculture, fisheries, minerals, et cetera, can be investigated through a petition to improve our lot. Yet, this FijiFirst Party continues to disallow petitions at Business Committee stages, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a shame.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, on Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations - now jab, now what? Is there now proof or evidence of Coronavirus being passed from bats to human beings? No, we eat bats anyway but no corona. Is there proof or evidence that corona is a biological weapon? There are plenty evidences from renowned scientists and frontline doctors (most now censored), Mr. Speaker, Sir, show that Chinese people's party and military experience in Wuhan laboratory financed from USA taxpayers through Dr. Fauci. There are legal cases in USA now to clear these issues. But one thing is clear by this health protocol, we are being conditioned in lieu of the coming of the beast spelt out in Revelation 13:16 -18:

“The beast forced all the people both small and great, rich and poor, slave and free, to have a mark placed on their right hands or on their foreheads. No one could buy or sell without this mark, that is, the beast’s name or the number that stands for the name. This calls for wisdom. Whoever is intelligent can figure out the meaning of the number of the beast, because the number stands for the name of someone. Its number is 666.”

Now our buying, selling, travel, hotels, other services, et cetera is dependent on vaccinations, as conditioning. These untested vaccines are to kill you or earlier than normal. Now we wait and see but live by faith in Christ and pray that you are not affected by the forced vaccination and protocols - until the 666’s time. Intention is, only those who are dependent on these secret societies, the few rich and clever playing God, Satan the beast, to live under one world government, under one world order, with global religious system and global economic system.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank His Excellency the President for his gracious Address.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members. I rise to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address on the 22nd November, 2021 in this august Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must firstly congratulate His Excellency on his appointment and I must say it is an honour to have listened to his passionate reminder on the call of duty on all of us. As we move into a new year in the Fijian Parliament, the message from His Excellency is indeed one that you set the focus for us as representatives of our Fijian people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I joined the honourable Prime Minister in congratulating our Sevens Team on the recent performance over the weekend in Dubai. I would also like to thank the Fijiana Team for their splendid ranking in this tournament. I know those days are not far away when we will top the table for any championship. Congratulations to our ladies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to stand in solidarity and pray for a peaceful resolution to the turmoil happening in the Solomon Islands, where our brothers and sisters are affected. I hope and pray for a peaceful and calm resolution, at the earliest, so that the sufferings of those brothers and sisters in Solomon Islands comes to an end.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year has not been the easiest for us as parliamentary leaders, and it was obviously because of the unprecedented situation we were faced since early 2020 - a situation that demanded quick decisions; a situation that demanded critical thinking; a situation that demanded proper reasoning; a situation that demanded compassion for our people and a situation that also demanded firmness in decisions, unlike ever before, and of course, a situation that not only threatened us at the given time, but also threatens our wellbeing in the future.

As a Government, a Government that has always considered the needs of the future as well as the present, this challenge was doubled because of the COVID-19 times, hard times unlike any other and the wrath of the second wave of the virus earlier this year had truly challenged us in ways we had never heard of. But, yet again, together as a nation we have overcome the challenges of the COVID-19 time and are back on the road to recovery. However, the protocols set by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services must be followed at all times because we are not out of the danger yet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having said that, I wish to thank all our frontline workers, hundreds of nurses, doctors, teachers, the disciplined forces, civil servants, essential service providers and volunteers, for their commitment and diligence in caring out the call of duty. I must also take this time to thank all those

Fijians who took it upon themselves to personally help other fellow Fijians in these trying times. Today, we remain one. This is the Fiji that they refer to when they say, 'Fiji, the way the world should be.' We could not have done it without you, so thank you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I applaud His Excellency's mention of the fact that it is the public's participation that will bring to life the democracy of the Fijian Constitution. I must reiterate that on our road to recovery, this is the very thing that we have to keep in mind. Our rights are very well enshrined in the Fijian Constitution, as well as economic participation which is an equal right of every Fijian. We cannot undermine the power of our Fijian people and their skills in helping us bounce back as an economy and as a nation, and this includes all our Fijian men and women.

I emphasise that we, as a people, must take steps to ensure that our women are fully empowered to actively participate in our economy. Again in reference to what His Excellency had said about public participation, may I take this time to reiterate that it is not only the constitutional right of all Fijians, I am talking about the age to vote, but also to be able to contest elections, and I encourage more women who aspire to attain political leadership or intend to go on the path to do so.

I say this - look around this room, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know that we are still under-represented in Parliament. I urge all those aspiring women leaders to, please, take part in the coming elections. Of course, I must say if we do not vote for women, then we will never make it to this Parliament. Women need votes to enter this Parliament as well. I say this because we have taken huge strides in creating more gender inclusive work environments, but there is still much work to be done.

While the far-reaching benefits of diversity and gender parity in leadership and decision-making are increasingly recognised in all spheres, women continue to be massively under-represented in leadership positions and the decision making processes in politics, business and communities. In order to advance gender justice and gender equality, it is critical that our women hold positions of leadership and participate actively in decision making processes at all level. This is also important for advancing economic, social and political progress for all. We need more women leaders on board now than ever before, and while we can see more women contesting elections, we should also be able to see more people vote for women leaders. Let me reiterate that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today more Fijians than usual, are in need of financial support, and the government did not at any time forget or neglect the fact that the most vulnerable would be the worst affected. It is a reality all over the world and only responsible governments have accepted it. I say 'responsible' because accepting the truth of the matter is the only way to find a solution to any problem. I say 'responsible' because at the time when incoming government revenue was and is limited, the cuts had to be made in every possible budget line, but the allocation for the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation received a demand-based increase, especially to ensure the beneficiaries under our six major social protection programmes continued to get their assistance. I say 'responsible' because the Fijian Government had already established great ties with other governments and development partners who have come to the aid of our people when we most needed them. I say 'responsible' because even when things were fine, this Government looked to better the future and this progressive thinking is to ensure that we remain stable even in the biggest crisis we ever faced ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- ... especially when it came to supporting the needs of the most vulnerable members of our society. Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry's REACH platform had successfully supported the Ministry of Health and Medical Services in the COVID-19 vaccination campaign. The three REACH buses had offered a walk-in service to Fijians in the urban and peri-urban areas who had faced difficulties in commuting to nearby Ministry of Health fixed vaccination facilities. To further demonstrate the Government's

love for every Fijian irrespective of their physical ability, geographical location or financial status, the Fijian Government in partnership with UNDP and the Government of Japan will continue to roll out a mobile one-stop service delivery which enables all our State and non-State organisations to conduct awareness-raising activities earlier this month.

I am very happy as I was blessed with my first grandchild. Obviously, I am overjoyed about this, but whenever I cuddle, hug and look into his innocent eyes, I ask myself this question, “what is it that I will leave behind for this little one?” That is the question I ask all of us here today - what are we going to leave behind for the hundreds and thousands of children and grandchildren for the future? Are we going to leave them polluted oceans? Are we going to leave them depleted marine and agricultural resources? Are we going to leave them barren lands with no water sources? Are we going to leave them with a life filled with daily challenges to even find fresh food, an environment where even breathing will become a hazard? I am sure, across the globe, millions of people are asking themselves the same questions. Thousands of leaders are asking themselves the same questions. I want to ask, “is it really too hard to look beyond ourselves to what we have today and think about the future?” Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the reason we need to fight climate change because it threatens the very survival of us and our future generation.

I support His Excellency's call on us to begin work for the future looking beyond our segregation as parties and politicians with this new session – and this includes work that can change mindsets, work that can change the way we treat our people and change that make human equality and dignity a norm, and not something we must have to constantly fight for, work that will secure the future of our children. If it was not for typical mindsets and stereotypes – maybe today, the impact of any crisis would not be particularly devastating for certain groups of our people.

Mr. Speaker Sir, we know the differentiated impacts that COVID-19 has had on our men and women, especially women, the most vulnerable population. The same differentiated impact is that of climate change on women and vulnerable groups. The entire region is highly vulnerable to climate change impacts. The London School of Economics estimated that across the Pacific Islands, home to 10 million people, up to 1.7 million could be displaced due to climate change by 2050. Half of this will obviously be women. That is something that we need to be really serious about.

Historically, climate change policies did not address the different ways in which climate change affected men, women and children. Given existing gender inequalities and development gaps, climate change ultimately places a greater burden on women. Men and women are affected by climate change in different ways because of the societal and cultural roles and expectations and the respective responsibilities imposed or informed on them by families and communities. For example, in many communities women are primary food producers and providers of water and cooking fuel for their families, therefore they need to have greater responsibilities for family and community welfare.

Understanding that climate change impacts men and women differently is therefore necessary to ensure that we have gender sensitive climate policies that are informed by women and address the reality of their needs. The Government of Fiji, especially our Honourable Prime Minister had given high priority to COP23 and aim to continue the momentum for action since the entry into force of the Paris Climate Change Agreement. We achieved new heights with the adoption of the Gender Action Plan at COP23 in 2017 and that was just the first step.

We achieved new heights with the adoption of the Gender Action Plan at the COP23 in 2017 and that was just the first step. Fiji has put in place actions which is why, as His Excellency the President had said, and I quote:

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

The big work is the implementation and the work is now doubly urgent with the coronavirus pandemic compounding the challenges faced by our people, especially for the future generations.

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Member who spoke before me talked about coronavirus, climate change and all that but the reality of the matter is that we, as leaders, have to understand the impact of this on our people. COVID-19 is a reality. To hear some honourable Members talk about it being something else, et cetera, is just absurd.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, real progress and human development is not only a matter of enlarging people's choices to lead a healthy long life, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living. It is also about ensuring that these choices are secure and sustainable and that requires us to understand and tackle vulnerability. Those who are particularly vulnerable such as the poor and other disadvantaged groups, do not have the same resilience when there is any form of instability.

There are two basic propositions. One is that people's vulnerability is influenced by their levels of capabilities such as health, education, income, personal security and their social position. The other one is that failure to protect people against vulnerability are often a consequence of poor social institutions. The Fijian Government recognises this well and I am glad that our ministry forms an important part of the latter for our Fijian people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, effective social protection are crucial to safeguard the poor and vulnerable when crisis hits. While we can boast of having political will to continue the Fijian Government's social protection programmes, the times we are presently in are demanding us to leverage the existing social protection system to help our families and businesses restore income, preserve livelihood and compensate for price hikes. It demands from us to enhance the preparedness of our social protection systems and build resilience against future crisis. Keeping this in mind, we now have in place Fiji's first ever targeted social protection policy which, of course, we will build on in the very near future to especially cover the missing middle or the people who are affected by the crisis in terms of income but would not generally qualify for the normal social protection programmes.

The speech by His Excellency the President has been a perfect reflection on the power of unity. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just could not agree more and if I add to it, the same whole of nation effort is needed and is truly the answer to end many social ills that we are now faced with at this day and age. By now, one must have guessed what my main concern would be - violence against women and children; violence against our women and girls, of course, what we know as domestic violence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's incidences of violence against women and girls is unfortunately amongst the highest in the world and situations like COVID and disasters often lead to an increase in such cases. And there is no better time for me to address this as we now stand in the 16 days of activism to end gender based violence period. Sir, philosophically as long as there is an imbalance of power we will always have violence, domestic and all other forms. We need to create awareness not just once a year for 16 days but almost on a daily basis, everyday, an ambit in our formal and informal education. We need to have measures in place to recognise the existence of it and how we can stop the vulnerable - basically create awareness at every possible avenue and level.

I urge all the honourable Members at your community level, organisation level, grassroots level please continue talking about it. Cases need to be reported. Domestic violence, violence against women, children and girls needs to be made a personal business. It is everyone's business. You can call the police. You can call our helpline and report this and of course, it is going to take us a long time before we can break this patriarchal and cultural norms that create this imbalance of power.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, violence against women and girls, as has been said again and again, is preventable. If you all get involved and make it our business to talk about it - to condemn it; to challenge the patriarchal foundations that uphold this; to raise children with good values; to stop blaming the victims; and to break the silence - we will make the change. We will make this country a country where a woman needs to feel and will always feel safe.

This year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was a great year of great efforts that our Ministry has been pulling together with funding support from governments of New Zealand and Canada with technical expertise from UN Women and the gender advisor to the Fijian Government funded by the Australian Government and with most of the commitments nearing completion.

The National Women's Machinery through our transformative ambition focus on policies has done a bulk of work around Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls, Women in Leadership, Women's Economic Empowerment Gender and Climate Action and Women's Access to Service. The three major initiatives of the National Women's Machinery this year and the upcoming events are the national Action plan for preventing violence against all women and girls. Of course, we are doing it with the partnership with Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations started in 2020 and we are still in the final quarter of consultations. We had the last consultation in the North, last week Thursday and we are learning the real causes of this attitude that lead to gender violence as we go along the country with our trading sectors, including our media as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Action Plan is a whole of government evidence-based measurable inclusive and funded 5 Year Plan 2021-2025 with the emphasis of stopping violence before it starts, and we can do that. Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Building, the Cabinet endorsed this on 6th February, 2022, and this initiative is also led by the Ministry and it is designed in response to challenges such as limited awareness, knowledge and technical skills and gender transformative concept.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Republic of Fiji Country Gender Assessment is a key report to be undertaken periodically by the Ministry and we will provide a comprehensive overview of gender issues in all sectors. Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency mentioned the introduction of the Child Care and Protection Bill and the Child Justice Bill in the upcoming year and we at the Ministry are very glad and we welcome that. These legislations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are important to safeguard the rights of our children and will further cement the Fijian Government's commitment to child protection.

Having said that, I wish to highlight that this year has been particularly hard for our children with lockdowns for months that restricted their movement, the impact of school closure on their education, the challenge of adapting to new methods and modes of attending classes, time away from their extra-curricular activities for a prolonged period and of course, away from their friends and teachers.

Of course, the effects of all these circumstances on their mental health and well-being. I urge all parents and guardians to try and understand the challenges that the children must have gone through. Please support them, especially with their mental health needs, spend as much time with your children as possible and I would also like to record my phrase again to the parents who assisted us in keeping their children safe at home, of course the teachers for the support they have provided.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, I would like to say that our foresight of the future has to be very clear. Let us not pretend that all is well, let us not pretend that shifting blame on each other will fix what awaits us in the near future. We, all of us need to act now in ways that considers the impact of our actions and decisions on our future, especially our children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to wish all the honourable Members of this august House a very merry Christmas and a blessed New Year, restful holidays, please be safe and we will see you in the

next sitting.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my response to His Excellency's most gracious Address. The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Members of Cabinet, honourable Members of Parliament, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and viewers who are listening in on television, tuning live on the Parliament live stream. First of all, I would say that the speech by His Excellency was fitting to the vision of the high office and that is to be the pillar of national unity which will, you know very well, as a former President. It had encouraged and also advised us leaders of this august House on how probably to conduct ourselves in the coming year and also what our people are expecting us as national leaders to be doing for the national good, public good, as well as those that look up to us as leaders.

The most gracious speech, Sir, called for unity and also talked about our consolidated effort on vaccination and also climate change as a reality. It also talked about wisdom, as leaders that we must possess in making deliberations and comments which we, as influential figures in the society, have power in our words and actions that people will learn from us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note, I would like to say that the *vanua o Caumatalevu* in Macuata is very proud and very happy. I have just returned from Labasa yesterday afternoon after the celebration at Subrail Park in Labasa by the *vanua o Caumatalevu* and the 12 districts of Macuata, who were at the *vakasenuqanuqa* celebrating the inauguration of His Excellency, as the youngest President of Fiji. There was many merry making in the villages. We were also at Naduri Village with the villagers and the *vanua o Caumatalevu* is fully behind and backing the Head of State of Fiji.

If you heard the speech, the speech was apolitical, it was above politics. I have heard the debate this morning, there is a debate on issues and policies and all other things, but the focus is on the speech and what we are really facing. I think last year, when I delivered my response to His Excellency's Address, I had quoted a quote from the late Sir Winston Churchill, when he said and I quote:

“To each comes in their lifetime a very special moment when they are figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered the chance to do a very special thing, unique to them and fitted to their talents. What a tragedy if that moments finds them unprepared or unqualified for that which could have been their finest hour.”

We had our finest hour from the first wave to the second wave of COVID-19 and it called for resilience and unity. I would like to thank all Fijians for their patience, resilience, whatever they had gone through despite all odds. We are recovering as a nation and you will remember well, Sir, when I supported the motion on the Fiji Airways, I was in a spotlight. But again, Sir, the benefits are just ahead of us. This is where our locals will be re-employed into the hotels and the tourism industry will be benefitting.

That is visionary, Sir, and that is something that comes with very decisive leadership on how we put in plans in preparation post-COVID and life must go on and how we are able to put in those steps for Fijians that should not be left behind and how we can give those stimulus. I also thank the various stimulus that have come in, in terms of the National Budget that has been passed, those COVID-19 budgets plus the other helps that have come in, have actually helped our people at the grass root level, not only finding alternative livelihoods and other forms of employment, but also a booster in terms of their business. Those that applied for FDB grant, for the \$360 grant, all those that were targeted policies to assist our people in a time of crisis we were in. We thank God for the recovery that you have made as a nation. That would not been successful if the whole nation had not focused on one aim and that is to survive and also change our status to go back to the life that we had enjoyed before.

That is something that the people must all celebrate and I would say that the appointment of the *Gone Turaga Na Tui Macuata* as the President is a blessing. I thank the honourable Prime Minister for the belief and confidence in the *Gone Turaga Na Tui Macuata* to be nominated in that highest office. I think it is no secret anymore in the nation that I voted for the *Gone Turaga Na Tui Macuata*, not only because of the *vanua o Caumatalevu* and also because of the close relations we have in the *vanua o Caumatalevu*, Bolatagane and Wasavulu in Labasa where my mum comes from. I shared with my colleagues well before I came down to do that decision over here that for all *iTaukei*, we are registered under the *Vola ni Kawa Bula* (VKB). For me, I am registered in Macuata, Dogotuki and that constituency is represented by the honourable Ratu Tevita Navurelevu and I am also registered in Cakaudrove where my father is a *vasu* and that constituency is represented by honourable Niko Nawaikula.

While I stood for the last two elections in 2014 and 2018 is where my mum comes from and that is where my *vasu* comes from. That is where the traditional relations between the *vanua o Labasa* and the *vanua o Caumatalevu* in Bolatagane are closely related in their chiefly roles. But again, the appointment of the *Gone Turaga Na Tui Macuata*, if you look back at history, in the 1940s, if you study British history, in the time Neville Chamberlain was the Prime Minister of Great Britain and at that time, the successor was Sir Winston Churchill. There was a campaign by the Germans in London. It was called the Blitz Attack, bombs attack in London and causing fear and uncertainty in the city of London and there was a famous song that was performed in 1940 by Eddie Allen.

To most of you who know those war years, will come to know that song. It is called “*Till the lights of London shine again*” and that was translated in a Fijian song which, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you will know it very well, it is called “*Me yacova ni waqa na cina mai Bolatagane*”. That resembles the coming or the ascending of the *Gone Turaga Bale Na Tui Macuata* in a time where London needed hope, where London needed leadership that will give them some kind of confidence and I think after the crisis, after we have come through the crisis, we have got a President of Fiji that has outlined the government's policy of the year and also I could say that *sa waqa na cina mai Bolatagane* and the *vanua o Macuata* is all behind the *Gone Turaga Na Tui Macuata* and we are all saying *sa siga damu tu na vanua*. That is the base we are in and that is how we are supporting our chief because we have prepared him well to go into national leadership and those that are holding the *vanua* fort are holding those traditional roles on behalf of His Excellency, the President of Fiji.

On the other note, His Excellency had urged for vaccination of all Fijians who are eligible and that is something that we must all push for as national leaders. The honourable Inia Seruiratu and I just returned from a funeral in Lakeba, Saqani on Saturday and I think there has been issues too around that area where the rules concerning those that are not vaccinated to be attending funerals. It was good that the honourable Inia Seruiratu and I were there. An uncle had passed on; the honourable Inia Seruiratu's wife and I are second cousins. These are the things that on my way back to Labasa, the honourable Minister will also confirm the weather in Labasa that we met in the weekend and on our way back from Nayarabale through Vanuavou to Labasa; heavy rain, I had to stop three times, the driver could not see the road. But those are the changing weather patterns that we have. Closer to the cyclone season and these are some of the things to expect. Climate change is a reality and it really needed our support.

As I have said, it is on record publicly that I had supported the delegation to COP26 because we from Vanua Levu have been victims on *TC Yasa*, *TC Ana* and also those who had been victims of *TC Winston*. Most of the time, we, the Members of Parliament and politicians do go around to deliver those rations but this is the measures that need to be in place. I think our voice was really heard of phasing down those fossil fuel in reducing emissions so that our plight could also be taken on board on the survival of the Pacific Islands in years to come.

Also, as a Member of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights, I was also privileged to be part of the consultation of the Climate Change Act. On that, His Excellency the President

has highlighted a very important point on a way forward for *iTaukei*, that is the carbon trading market or the offsetting of carbon which will benefit many indigenous Fijians who have forests; not only indigenous Fijians but everyone who owns land either freehold or lease. One can qualify and register once the register is open to register the amount of carbon that is in your land and also how that is offset that will be beneficial to the global aim.

On the Bills that have been announced by His Excellency, I think as a Member too of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights, we look forward to these Bills to be brought to the Committee and also public consultations to be conducted. They are essential as we move towards the elections and also the various developments that need to be in place so that our people (Fijians) who are awaiting our decisions to really benefit from our decision-making in this august House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President had talked about his village in Naduri which is 20 metres from the seashore. He talked about his experience on how fishermen have had to go far into the sea with small catch and also sugarcane farmers, crops being succumbed by the drought, and also the crabs being covered by the oceans. This is the reality of climate change. I think we need a national effort. This is not something to politicise on because people are really facing the effects of climate change, their seashores and shorelines and also their source of food and other areas which were plantable before have now been a challenge given the effects of climate change.

I thank the Government and also those who are trying to find finances and we hope the world out there and those negotiators will come to understand the reality so that they are able to pledge those to assist in our development and also building a greener and bluer economy as we move on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to conclude, I would say that we as leaders are called upon to make decisions on behalf of the people. We have four years in our tenure to make decisions and after that we are back to the polls to seek votes. I believe that our duty and our wisdom must guide us, we are to give our people the best they can so that they can make the best vote and best decision on what type of government should govern them and what kind of policy we must offer that we know will directly benefit them in all aspects of any sector that they engage in.

I would say, Sir, I will end by a quote by the late Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna when he opened the Queen Victoria School in 1953 where he said, and I quote:

“When the captains and the kings depart and the scene is again normal, today’s impressive ceremony, will surely be recognised as an outstanding landmark in the forward march of the Fijian race.”

I think it is all upon us - we have a new democracy, we have a young democracy through the 2013 Constitution and we have marched on from there, from 2014 to 2018.

I think the onus is on us, leaders of today, to see that the future of those that will come after us, our future generation will be secured by the foundation of the nation and the foundation of the democracy we build together, and that is what our nation calls for.

We cannot be criticising or saying that I can do better. It is time to rebuild, it is time to build together, it is time to put our hands together to build our nation so that we can become stronger and a voice to reckon around the world punching above our weight in the global arena. Just before, I take my seat, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg your indulgence.

On Saturday night, while I was at Naduri, I received a call that he had passed on. I had brought my Dad to Suva, he had suffered vocal cancer, so we had gone through to Doctor Om. I just would like

to thank him for being our father and for making me a man that I am, and also the promises that he had asked me to take him back to his village in Dogotuki, Macuata for his ritual and burial. "I thank you, rest in peace Dad, and I will be the person that you had asked me to be. Our prayers are with you as you leave us. We will be strong."

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my special thanks to everyone in the House and for allowing that and to the relatives around Fiji and abroad. To those Fijians who are facing difficulties, never give up, be there, help will come - God is always good all the time.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now take a break for lunch, but before we do, I just want to remind the honourable Leader of the House, over a message I was asked to deliver to him on one of my visits to Labasa when he was the Commissioner there, "Do not forget Tailevu."

Honourable Members, on that note we will adjourn for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.38 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.38 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and my fellow Fijians; it is my privilege to respond to the inaugural Address made to this Parliament by His Excellency the President of Fiji to open the 2021-2022 Session of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a pleasure to join my Parliamentary colleagues and the people of Fiji to welcome His Excellency the President to his new position. At this point, Sir, allow me to thank the former President for his wise counsel and leadership for all Fijians. His tenure as President marked another highlight to his career as a servant of the people of Fiji, which he carried out with humility, grace and charm. His messages of peace, unity and harmony were always at the forefront of his speeches and all forms of communication at all times. Mr. Speaker Sir, this tradition of wise counsel, humility and grace in leading our nation, was embedded in the words of His Excellency the President in his Address to this Parliament and to the people of Fiji.

In welcoming the wise words of Fiji's youngest President, it is important to remember that with his youth comes long years of leadership of his people as the *Tui Macuata*. His words showed wisdom beyond his years and provided a solid foundation for his coming tenure as the President of the Republic of the Fiji Islands and is an inspiration for all Fijians, in particular, our youth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it stands to reason that His Excellency in his Address has pointed out the need for truth and justice in our practice of democracy. Both truth and justice are areas where the FijiFirst Government has excelled in the past eight years of delivering to the people of Fiji. Genuine democracy has only been achieved under the FijiFirst Party, and its genuine concern and care for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker Sir, we know only too well how democracy has been failed in the past by insincere leaders who lacked the genuine commitment and leadership now shown by the honourable Prime Minister. As a leader committed to genuine democracy, our honourable Prime Minister towers above these other leaders, some of whom are on the comeback trail. I am not sure where their comeback trail will lead to, seeing that many of these are insincere leaders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President in his opening Address stressed on youth and the youthful nature of the Fijian democracy. I commend his statements on the need for all Fijians to participate in upholding democracy and the Fijian Constitution. It is a timely reminder, as we take stock of the past two years under COVID-19 and map our pathways out of it. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has demonstrated the strength of its democratic structures and processes in weathering the worst of the global pandemic. We are emerging out of it resilient, strong and united. This will be a key part of the recovery process. Resilience, strength and unity among all Fijians.

This is the strength of our nation, and as His Excellency the President mentioned in his Address, his commitment to all the people of Fiji and their place as equal citizens under our constitution. That is the big picture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must focus on. We cannot have people with little ideas and little minds focussed on little issues of little relevance to the nation, pretending to be leaders be given the time of the day. They are the sideshows in this House we do not need. They will remain sideshows, as we move forward towards a strong nation that is built on unity towards progress for all Fijians. Mr. Speaker Sir, this key message from His Excellency the President was expressed clearly, in the true spirit of an appeal in the national interests beyond the narrow vision of communal politics.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we welcome the wide appeal to all Fijians in the Address by His Excellency the President across a number of issues. As I have stated earlier, the key to a prosperous Fiji is a united Fiji, and this means upholding key principles of governance and Fijians have shown their unity in meeting our vaccination targets.

Mr. Speaker Sir, we fully endorse the statement by His Excellency the President on the vision and leadership under the honourable Prime Minister and the FijiFirst Government in steering a way through the pandemic. More than ever before in Fiji's history, this Government has delivered the most in cash, grants and in-kind to enable Fijians to live through this pandemic.

This includes hundreds of millions in unemployment benefits as well as access to various funding options. This has never happened, Mr. Speaker, Sir, before in Fiji under any other government. Not in terms of scale of the money made available, but also in terms of the length of time that this assistance has been sustained. While economic recovery is forthcoming, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government is committed to continuing assistance as we move back to the new normalcy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the same time, with our brave frontline workers in Health and at our borders, we have managed to keep the worst of the pandemic from our shores. I commend the honourable Prime Minister and our dedicated civil servants for their continued commitment to look at ways and means to best weather the worst of the pandemic. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the funding from the international agencies and our friendly bilateral donor nations is a vote of confidence in the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister and a proven track record of good governance and sound economic policies of the FijiFirst Government.

Goodwill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is never given, it is earned and the funding and continued assistance from donor agencies and bilateral partner countries shows that Fiji under this Government has earned its stripes as a sustainable and transparent democratic nation. The payback from that is that Fijians have been provided for in various ways to cushion the impact of this pandemic. As I have said before, this has been sustained during the past two years, and credit for this rightfully goes to the FijiFirst Government for its sound fiscal policies and good international standing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given these measures, as outlined in the Opening Address by His Excellency the President, we can look forward to the coming year, as a year of a great Fijian comeback story. A year to bounce back, and that will start with borders opening in a few days to the international tourism. Fiji will once again take its pride of place as the hub of the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker Sir, as we speak, commentators are busy making sense of COP26 in Glasgow and its impact on climate change. His Excellency the President has made a very moving statement on how climate change is affecting vulnerable communities on the ground. The honourable Prime Minister has been front and centre on the local, regional and global stage in his great efforts to bring about real change through forums like the COP forums. I am pleased to inform this Parliament that the Ministry of Youth and Sports has incorporated climate change awareness and mitigation programmes into its core activities, in particular, in its work with youth groups. This includes an annual Youth Climate Summit forum for an interchange of meaningful dialogue on the issues and climate related programmes such as Youth Coastal Care Club and Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation Training Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must commend the honourable Prime Minister and Fiji's climate change initiatives in its inclusion of our youth. I must inform this Parliament that our youths are more aware of and proactive as a result of climate change as an issue due to these initiatives. We are looking forward to more action on the ground from our youth on climate change as we move forward in our ambition towards the net zero target for Fiji and hopefully, the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the real work and the real world of climate change that His Excellency the President so strongly spoke about in his Address. Regardless of humps and barriers to action on the global stage, we will carry on with our efforts on the ground to ensure the stewardship of all creation on our planet earth is justly and sustainably looked after.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the call by His Excellency the President for the responsible use and promotion of brand Fiji must be heeded by all in the road to economic recovery. We must enter this path to economic recovery by extending goodwill and encouraging fair and just dealings. Fiji will join many other countries in striving for a piece of the economic recovery cake. We must show respect for brand Fiji, and welcome visitors and always value them for their contributions to our economy.

That said, we must also ensure equity and justice when it comes to employment and work practices from all parties. Rather than short term gains, we must all come together to rebuild brand Fiji into a resilient economy, one that can take hits like pandemics, yet still deliver livelihoods and jobs to all Fijians.

On the job front, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as borders open, we look forward to an acceleration of opportunities under programmes like the Pacific Mobility Scheme to further place suitable Fijians into rewarding international placements. The Ministry of Employment, Industrial Relations and Productivity will work closely with stakeholders to ensure that we are placed at the front of the queue in these opportunities. At the same time, let me remind potential workers for these overseas job schemes that all these opportunities will come with health protocols. This is a policy from both ends, from ours here in Fiji and labour market countries like Australia and New Zealand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also welcome the introduction of the Bills outlined by His Excellency the President in his opening address and there is more time for the Opposition to go through, do research and not complain when it is tabled in Parliament. So there is the whole of one year for you to go through those Bills and do some research and search. We welcome the Bills that will protect and nurture our children and youth and those that will provide fair practice in a variety of employment and professional fronts. These Bills are important to our functioning democracy and we look forward to a useful and positive input from all into the debates on these. We may not all agree on everything but these debates will provide a platform to discuss and be aware of the proposed changes. We look forward to constructive debates as we move Fiji forward through the reform agenda that drives these Bills.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as His Excellency the President has outlined, it is quite likely that the next general election will be held within the period of this legislative session. As His Excellency the President has stated that this will be Fiji's third free and fair election that provides equal representation to all citizens. This has become the foundation of Fiji's modern democracy since 2014. It is time that we show maturity and be responsible citizens first, rather than continue to lapse as political animals in our discussions and the visions we present to the people.

It is important we, as leaders, display this as role models for our youth. Our youth are better educated than ever before, with greater access to information and the ability for critical thinking than before. We have been reassured of this in the many youth forums and interchanges within our Ministry, but in the course of my interactions, it means that a large part of our population will not be misled easily. They will respond to positive messages and they will question critically the negative measures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, elections provide the platform for people to tick off on their choices for the best of the best to represent them. It is the platform that gives voice to their choices and why they choose some over others. We must respect that when we speak to them. Choice based on fear and favour, driven by appeals to the race card or other forms of division, will ultimately work against Fiji and all Fijians. Such appeals, unfortunately, raises its ugly head each time we have elections and leads to the giving out

of false and misleading information, and weakens our democratic foundations. We must abide by the clear message in His Excellency the President's Address to fight hard but fight fair. That we must as he said and I quote:

“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.”

I highly commend, Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President for setting this high benchmark for all of us here in this Parliament and those outside, aspiring for political office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, elections determine the daily lives of ordinary citizens and this knowledge is what drives me to work as I, and my Government colleagues have been doing since 2014, in the best interests of all Fijians. Politics is a call to duty and leadership; it must also be a call for service and dedication to bettering the lives of all Fijians. It is clear, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the call for duty and leadership by service to the people through deeds as we have been doing since 2014, and not mere words as the Opposition has been leaking only hot air with no substance or style since 2014.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note I must commend the honourable Prime Minister for his fair and firm leadership of government and of Fiji as a nation. A powerful figure who commands respect for bringing together and keeping together all Fijians. He has built a house on the Government side that works together and strives together for a common purpose. That purpose is the best of all things in a united Fiji for all Fijians.

Since 2014, we in Government have seen a house of unity, the home of justice and fairness. Unlike, the divided house of cards of the Opposition, where they do not know who holds the Ace or who is the next backstabber or may I add, who signed the so-called secret letter or who is the King or Queen. I do not want to add any more Jokers and all those things, but the message is very clear in their house of disunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this morning, honourable Bulanauca mentioned Fiji Pine. In fact he should be the last person to talk about Fiji Pine and he knows why I am saying this. Because during his term as a Board Member, Fiji Pine went with losses of over \$16 million that is huge, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- He has not been charged.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- It is, after all, a house that spends more time in the courts, social media, and all other platforms, fighting each other than fighting for a cause or issue. One must ask, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with all this in-fighting, when will they have the time to serve or lead the people?

HON. MEMBERS.- Tell them, tell them!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Honestly, sometimes I really wonder and I feel sorry for you guys. I have been in politics for 30 years...

HON. MEMBER.- Tell them!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- This is the worst Opposition that I have ever seen.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Do not worry about our house.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am worried because of you, because you are not telling us who signed the so-called secret letter.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- You just worry about your house, do not worry about our house.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order! Do not talk amongst yourselves across the floor. Address the Speaker.

HON. P.K. BALA.- And the people of Fiji are a very good example.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.K. BALA.- They are a very good example of a bad house. A house in a bad shape with no foundation.

HON. MEMBERS.- *Areh!*

HON. P.K. BALA.- It is no use saying, *areh*, it is already there. What *areh*? You better watch out!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Read your speech!

HON. P.K. BALA.- A house in bad shape; I will reiterate that – a house in bad shape with no foundation and structure to hold it together.

HON. MEMBER.- A house divided?

HON. P.K. BALA.- You are talking too much honourable Member, but we from this of Parliament, want to know who signed that so-called secret letter? Please, reveal that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we in the FijiFirst Government have been the best example of the family that sticks together and works together in holding a house together to make the most progress. And we, have served Fiji like no other government has and we will serve Fiji like no other government can.

I join my colleagues in welcoming His Excellency, the President to this high office. It has been my privilege to deliver this response in appreciation of His Excellency, the President's inaugural opening address to this august Parliament. Mr. Speaker, Sir, while Christmas is around the corner, and since this is the last Parliament meeting, may I take this opportunity to wish you and your family and the people of Fiji a merry Christmas.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I respond to the President's Address delivered on 22nd November, allow me to recognise the leadership of the Almighty - Yahweh, His Son - my Saviour Jesus Christ, and I acknowledge the companionship of the Holy Spirit each day of my life and the life of many in Fiji. I also acknowledge the traditional landowners of the peninsula, whom I hope one day to be fully compensated for what they have given to us Fijians, on which to build Suva, the premier city in this

part of the Pacific. Also I wish to acknowledge the loyal and dedicated supporters of the Party who have remained steadfast during the test of times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, SODELPA is 20 years old, a little much older than FijiFirst; SODELPA has won two elections and formed government; SODELPA was overthrown at the point of the gun; SODELPA was harassed mercilessly after the overthrow; SODELPA made it back to Parliament as Opposition on two occasions and SODELPA is confident that the 2022 Elections will turn out well for the Party.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- In SODELPA, people are not afraid to speak. If I can draw a line in here, the other half are totally handicapped with speech. I wish to also pay tribute to all people overseas who have kept the economy alive with remittances during the pandemic. Since the pandemic broke, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have remitted more than \$1 billion to Fiji to keep us going during the unprecedented downturn in our economy. I salute our people overseas for the remittances to keep us going.

Mr. Speaker, as I rise to respond to His Excellency the President's speech, let me also congratulate His Excellency on his appointment as the first son of the *vanua o Caumatalevu* to ascend to the Office of the Presidency. On the occasions I walked the main street of Labasa, a powerful voice would boom from his vehicle across the road, "*Dreu, ni bula*" making me feel welcome and giving me a sense of belonging to his *vanua*. Those were occasions I have always treasured.

Mr. Speaker, many of us during the last 15 years have been accustomed to big repetitive promises, raising expectations but little implementation. Nothing has changed – that is FijiFirst legacy. Together with the vast majority of our people, SODELPA believes it is time for change. Change should start with the way we do things. Informed decisions should be made only through consultative machineries and workable plans. Unlike the existing governments, decisions need to be made through broad participation using the structures of inclusiveness created over generations but ignored by the FijiFirst Government.

An example, Mr. Speaker, is the *tikina* councils. They still meet, largely toothless, have lost their relevance and where delegates no longer wish to serve. In a thriving democracy, an empowered *tikina* council would have asked (around the Natadola area) the Government why spend \$45 million on golf when we do not have water?

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Stale news!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- That water problem, Mr. Speaker, is still there today. Fully empowered councils such as those of the *tikina* would lead to more targeted developments. As watchdogs they will ensure timing, budgets, implementation plans are complied with, monitored and revised if need be. Pressure will be applied by the citizenry for the government to perform. It should be a case of government fearing its citizenry and not the citizenry fearing its government, like we have with FijiFirst.

On the platform of full participation across our citizenry, SODELPA will ensure its citizens have access to basic human needs; SODELPA will guarantee access to food, water, housing, utilities and that services are easily accessible, affordable, safe and secure. Let me just remind the other side that in 2014 you had 32 seats we had 15. In 2018 you came down to 27 seats and we came up to 21; we have grown bigger and you have grown smaller so do not forget that and you are growing smaller by the day.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, specifically on recovery or stabilisation plan, our national debt will rise 170 per cent by the end of 2022 with the inclusion of contingent liabilities. Our approach is to improve the capacity of our people to raise productivity in order to achieve trade surpluses in our natural resources-based sectors like agriculture, fisheries, forestry and minerals. Each sector will need to efficiently reduce cost of production and raise yield.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, the concentration will focus on the skills of human resources to achieve this plan. Our free tertiary education policy will make this possible; educating our people to execute better. It will take time to deliver but more emphasis made to planning, implementing, monitoring and review with actions. If, for example, we are able to deliver trade surpluses of \$1 billion per annum, and the nominal debt value is \$10 billion, then our target is to fully pay off our debt within 10 years.

Employment will be the core platform of this plan and overall fiscal and monetary policy indicators will support the local economy. This will demand more financial supervision in monitoring transactions to ensure more desired indicators are benefiting the domestic markets and its citizens. Cost of living will gradually be reduced, especially food, as less of them are being imported and the abundance of local foods to local communities means, healthier crops and vegetables are cheaply available.

Generally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, more economic transactions are generated from the consumption of goods and services. The revenue collection will improve. SODELPA will reduce VAT to zero on basic food items and raise minimum wage to \$5 to improve access to basic human needs. To accelerate participation of all ethnic groups and businesses, SODELPA will review and make progressive changes to make sure that we reduce the economic gaps between the “haves” and the “have nots”.

The *iTaukei* are generally known to be cash poor, resource rich which should change. Through training and hand holding, they will be provided with know-how and leadership skills in areas such as farm management, business management and develop spiritual maturity to persevere. The attitude towards the *iTaukei* will change, FijiFirst is known for taking away their advantages.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- No!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- For the owners of the *qoliqoli* of Tavarua, the people of Momi and Nabila where surfers from all over the world, who for years were paying to surf on some of the best waves in the world, FijiFirst had put a stop to it. Since its stoppage, more than \$10 million have been denied to the people of Momi and Nabila and here we are, they are resource rich and cash poor.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Stop lying.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- And here is FijiFirst, stopping the flow of that kind of money into the *iTaukei* community.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Stop lying, honourable Gavoka.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- SODELPA will reinstate the income from surfing to the people of Momi and Nabila and other *qoliqoli* owners across Fiji, similarly disadvantaged by FijiFirst.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the *qoliqoli* issue will never go away. It was promised to us, *iTaukei*, by Queen Victoria in the late 1800...

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Still there!

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Still there!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.-and there must be some accommodation. Last evening, I had this call from one of the far flung islands asking about the *qoliqoli*. We cannot close discussions on the *qoliqoli*.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- It still belongs to us.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Multiple approaches will be made for the *iTaukei*.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Previous governments, plans will be reviewed to identify where they did go wrong and necessary changes made. Land based developments will secure finances through putting dollar value to their assets to raise necessary capital to support ventures. We would encourage business ventures with 50 per cent ownership in partnership with proven players in businesses.

Overall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the economy, we will improve ease of doing business. We are excessively regulated, ministries are very territorial in the way they create regulations and do not see the big picture. As a result, investors are saying that the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing. Let me give you an example, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In Maui Bay, there is uproar by the investors as someone is extending his complex over the shoreline and the relevant Government agencies do not seem to be acting in unison. One agency has given the go-ahead, while another agency has issued a stop-work. It is in the courts but work continues. It is another version of Free Soul, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I wish FijiFirst would look into this.

For the Nadroga/Navosa Corporation which I chair, we are refurbishing our property in the CBD of Sigatoka with some \$2 million. The consultants had completed all the plans, secured approval from agencies, invited contractors, issued contracts and for work to begin on 1st November and then a clerk at the Sigatoka Town Council pulled out a form from his desk and like an afterthought said, "Oh, you also need to do an EIA". We felt like screaming. We have high valued tenants and we promised them that they would be back within 30 weeks. Why did they not tell us that from the many meetings we had that we needed an EIA?

Something is not right, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and it is across the aisle that we point our finger, they do not know how to control these things. And our experience is not an isolated one, it is pretty common with other investors. Fiji needs to up its act for more investments to occur. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had to go to the honourable Minister to try and expedite this and we are now 30 days indeed Minister, nothing is still happening. A refurbishment, why do we need an EIA for refurbishment and why were we not told at that time?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to touch on the issue of squatters. It is a universal phenomenon and one we can no longer ignore. I recently visited the settlements of Nanuku and Wailea and was quite saddened with what I saw. I know there are 175 other Waileas and Nanukus in Fiji or such settlements across Fiji, but we must focus on them. Immediately, we must provide them with the basic amenities, and that is water, electricity and sewerage. They are largely on crown land or private land which must be secured for them. For Nanuku, electricity cannot be provided in certain parts because they cannot secure access through a privately owned piece of land adjacent to the settlement. This should not be the case. The greater need of the people should be paramount. It will take a number of years, but we must commit through holistic strategies to improving the lot of our people by upgrading the informal settlements.

Many, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are third and fourth generations, relocating them is not an option, but improvement to their conditions is the answer. An example is in Navutu in Lautoka, home to the descendants of Solomon Islanders. They now have some basic amenities, but someone is suggesting to them that they should relocate to make way for an industrial operation. That should not happen.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Government is providing that!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Together, with this is the transition to better houses and housing schemes. We all know that these people have lived there for generations. They managed to pay their electricity and they are being told to make way for a big company to come into that area.

HON. MEMBER.- (Inaudible)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- So maybe you don't know because you don't listen to anyone.

We all know that the Household Income Expenditure Survey (HIES) for 2019-2020 told us, and that should be motivation to apply ourselves with vigour to uplift our people and better our lives.

SODELPA will not be afraid of reports that highlight the truth...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- ... and will not fire its author as was done by the FijiFirst to the Government Statistician with his HIES Report. We will not be afraid to hear the truth, you are afraid to hear the truth.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- This country has got almost 300,000 people in poverty and we will not be afraid to hear that, because that is the truth and we will do something about it. We will not fire the messenger. That is what you did, you fired the messenger. The task is enormous and will be successful with the public engagement of our people in these settlements and the bipartisan cooperation of key political players in resolving the issue for the greater good of our nation and our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are other settlements crying out for recognition, such as the people at Garrick Estate in Nausori. They have drainage issues, refuse collection issues, law and order issues and they get passed from government agency to government agency. No one is willing to take ownership of their issues. I went to visit them and it was quite sad, right on the periphery of Nausori, these are people who are neglected. They want to be included in municipal elections where they have a voice and they know that they get the recognition and services they deserve. SODELPA will give governance back to the municipalities through elections for them to run their own affairs and include neighbourhoods, such as the Garrick Estate.

Mr. Speaker, on employment generation, there is a direct correlation between income, the standard of living, level of education and health status. Sir, SODELPA firmly believes that the minimum wage should constitute a living wage so that many Fijians can be lifted out of poverty. Our leading economists share this view and contend that this would have widespread positive effects on our economy.

With a living wage, less people will need government assistance, consumer spending increases, expanding economic activities, with sufficient money for consumers to spend on products and services.

Mr. Speaker, SODELPA has always advocated for the need to increase the living wage to \$5 an hour. The escalating cost of living and the purchasing power of our dollar has diminished dramatically for the last decade. Of late, importers have highlighted the tripling and quadrupling of international freight charges impacting on the cost of goods on the shelves. A study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2018 had said the minimum wages can help and ensure that work is rewarding for everyone. When minimum wages are moderate and well-designed, adverse employment effects can be avoided.

Mr. Speaker, in the 2014 Human Impact Partners Study, Dr. Rajiv Bhatia said that those earning a higher minimum wage should have enough to eat, be more likely to exercise, less likely to smoke, suffer from few emotional and psychological problems and even prevents premature deaths. The raise in the minimum wage to a living wage would increase the incomes of significant number of families in the poverty sector meaning fewer would live in poverty.

Mr. Speaker, SODELPA will restore all the training elements like the Apprenticeship Scheme. Currently, over 22,000 school leavers will come out of the school system in the current calendar and it is the Government's responsibility to engage them in a meaningful way. In addition, SODELPA has noted the sense of insecurity within the civil service and will reassure members of the service that their conditions will be restored where it was lost and improved where it needs improving.

Mr. Speaker, SODELPA's desire is to make free tertiary education a reality. Any Fijian student who has the necessary entry marks into any technical college or university will be guaranteed free tuition. SODELPA will cancel all student loan debts for the thousands of Fijians who have graduated with a Tertiary Education Loans Scheme (TELS) contract.

Tertiary education, Mr. Speaker, is a new frontier, undervalued by the FijiFirst Government. Current Toppers and TELS schemes are absolutely bias, inequitable and burdensome, sending graduates into debts of \$30,000 or as high as \$100,000 before they even get a job. Watching the struggles of TELS recipients has brought profound sadness to me. It is time that we as a nation took a deep interest in the way we look after growing working population. Sir, TELS and Toppers have to go. SODELPA has committed itself to bringing about free education through to the tertiary level.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- How?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- What it is, Mr. Speaker, is providing full scholarship to Fiji citizens that secure a place in approved tertiary institutions in Fiji, making all universities in Fiji free for Fijians, providing full tuition scholarship to Fiji citizens that secure a place at an approved technical institution in Fiji, making all technical colleges in Fiji free for Fijians, demolishing the legal structures that hold up TELS and contractual arrangements that trap graduates in debt - SODELPA Loan Forgiveness Programme for 40,000 TELS recipients.

Mr. Speaker, for SODELPA deconstructing TELS and educating all Fijians is the new normal. Education is a must for Fiji. The *Bible* is uncompromising about education, saying in Proverbs 4:7 and I quote: "Wisdom is supreme, therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding". So the cost, Mr. Speaker, as it says, no matter what it costs you, get education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our health systems are currently in dire need for improvement. Our current health services need to be revitalised and aligned to the needs of its people. At the moment, many health services in our hospitals are not available and those that are available lack the quality we deserve. We are

told that only eight operating theatres at CWM Hospital, only two are operating. Equipment failure is the norm and patients are told to return home and wait as they cannot do anything more. With SODELPA, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will build new hospitals with full complements in densely populated areas such as Nadi. This will cater with the tourist industry also who will want world standard health facilities.

For Suva, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are talking about a number of options whether to build a new one in Nasinu or pull down CWM Hospital or refurbish it. These are the way forward for Fiji. In addition, all major divisional and sub-divisional hospitals will be properly equipped so that people are not sent home without treatment due to equipment failure. As a former hotelier, Sir, I know that service delivery is always compromised without the proper complement of operating equipment. I dare say the same is true in hospitals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are extremely difficult bureaucratic burdens for the citizenry. There is too much control by the FijiFirst. These are the impact on our way of life and affected the productivity of the work force. Labour rights have been further weakened, unionists made powerless contributing to the climate of discontent across the country. The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Parliament has a big role to play in lifting the spirit of the country, but with laws being made by way of ambush, the citizenry becomes despondent and wonder about the parliamentary system of governance we are embracing. His Excellency the President has highlighted some of the legislative programmes of the FijiFirst, but let us commit to doing them properly and raise the spirit of our people and that they believe in their Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is the Architecture Bill, can we please ensure that the Fiji Builders Designer Association are part of the dialogue because they are also part of this and they feel that they are being sidelined.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, elections are looming and preparations are underway but laws are being passed. If I may just remind honourable Members, His Excellency spoke about elections in his speech and we are responding to what His Excellency said. Without consultation, it can be difficult for parties to prepare.

We did not know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that laws were being made that require us to prepare a manifesto and to also prepare a full budget to reflect what is in the manifesto. As it is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, most parties struggle to find the resources to prepare for elections and the added burden of preparing a full budget makes one wonder as whether it is worth it.

In some countries, Mr. Speaker, Sir, public funding for political parties are the norm to strengthen the political process. For Fiji, only FijiFirst has the resources and we know from the record by IDEA that FijiFirst has spent \$6 million to campaign in 2018...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- ... and their number of seats came down from 32 to 27 (\$6 million). Mr. Speaker, Sir, no other party in Fiji would dream of having that kind of money.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there have been questions about the Judiciary, with the Chief Justice and the way the Solicitor-General was dismissed from his position, it was quite shameful and it is unfortunate the question has been asked of the Chief Justice, every effort must be made for the Chief Justice to regain the confidence of the citizenry in his high office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, I am very concerned that there is a general air of malaise in this country. His Excellency the President could have delivered an uplifting speech which we were all looking forward to but it was sad that, as has been the case for years, Qorvis wrote the speech, which many in Fiji have found wanting. We all want to move our country forward and we know how to do it and that is to be inclusive, to be bipartisan, to reach out and be stronger, SODELPA stands ready to play its part, Government has to make the call.

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and my fellow Fijians: *Ni sa bula vinaka, namaste, asalam walekum* and a very good afternoon to you all. I humbly rise to thank His Excellency, the President for his most gracious speech on 22nd November, 2021 in formally opening the 2021-2022 session of the Fijian Parliament. I render my best wishes to His Excellency, the President on his appointment and wish him well for his tenure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the words of His Excellency that still echo in my head are that of, and I quote:

“I will protect the flame of our young democracy from any and all who seek to extinguish it, for personal or political purposes.”

I am filled with veneration for His Excellency in this eloquent and earnest bid to protect the nation's interest at all cost, and I unreservedly endorse His Excellency's message of embodying quality leadership, which will lay a concrete foundation towards a fair, just, equal and inclusive political arena for our future. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Philosopher Richard J. Daley said: “Good government is good politics.”

A concept alien to the honourable Members of the other side of this House. But a concept that we on this side live by - standing tall through every storm we faced over the years with character, integrity and a virtuous political will - this is what good governance is all about. The interest of every Fijian and the life of every Fijian has always been at the helm of every decision this FijiFirst Government makes and there is no greater testimony to this statement than the hundreds of people who are returning to work, to school and to life as we know it to be. The smiles on the faces of our market vendors; the smiles on the faces of those who could celebrate *Diwali* with a few lights up and sweets to share with loved ones is the greatest victory of our government. We have learnt once again that FijiFirst puts Fijians first.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, echoing the sentiments of our President, it took a caring and compassionate government to pay out the largest ever unemployment assistance in our country's history; it took a caring and compassionate government to implement the free education policy including bus fare assistance for eligible households; it took a caring and compassionate government to progressively develop a social protection system to support those who cannot support themselves; it took a caring and compassionate government to subsidise water and electricity bills. At this juncture, Mr. Speaker Sir, listening to honourable Gavoka that SODELPA will do this, SODELPA will do that, actually one small story comes to my mind.

When I was a young girl, my grandma used to tell me, that this was the husband always promising the wife, ‘I will get you the moon, I will get you the stars.’ The wife told him, ‘Stop this nonsense, get me a bottle of gas.’ So basically, this is what SODELPA is all about, ‘I will, I will I will’ without any strategies, plans and alternative budget, you can say you can bring the moon and thunder. But well, FijiFirst is doing it. We are doing it. The spectrum of assistance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, initiatives and

incentives offered by FijiFirst Government is indeed exceptional. Our government has made sure that ordinary Fijians do not have to dig deep into their pockets to sustain their lives in these trying times. Our government needs this courage in every Fijian to turn opportunities into successes from multimillion dollar investors to our market vendors, the FijiFirst Government stands tall to assist and empower every Fijian.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the honourable Prime Minister for his genuine desire to achieve true equality and unity amongst all Fijians. Honourable Prime Minister, Sir, your will to ensure that the life of every Fijian matters and that our country grows from strength to strength is truly admirable and I am indeed privileged to work with a true leader in every sense.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji ratified the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2017 and a year later domesticated a national law known as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act. To assist policy makers, a five year Implementation Plan of the Act was formulated which guide Fiji's transition from Recognition to Realization of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Fijian Government has pledged their support by ensuring that there are specific disability budget lines and it is our privilege at the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation to administer the primary programmes and policies for persons living with disabilities which include the Allowance for Persons with Disabilities, Economic Empowerment Programme for Persons with Disabilities, Grants to organisations for Persons with Disabilities and the Fiji National Council for Disabled Persons Grant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Fiji, persons with disabilities comprise of 13.7 per cent of the population (that is three years and above) that have one functional challenge. In a country like Fiji that experiences tropical cyclones, flooding, drought and king tides we need to be proactive and raise our voices in solidarity to protect our most vulnerable from adverse weather and its aftermath. Climate change in a small island State like Fiji, can see more floods, more severe cyclones, hotter summers and droughts. Our oceans are getting warmer which in turn are affecting our ecosystems and adversely our food chain.

Climate change is making life hard for everyone in the world but harder for people living with disabilities. Aspects such as for food, clean water, medicine, healthcare and information they can understand, safe places to live and work access to proper hygiene means and education. These might sound trivial but imagine not being able to walk and being trapped in a house surrounded by rising flood waters; imagine hearing strong winds banging against your house walls and not being able to see a thing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is fortunate that we have a Disability Emergency Operation Centre which is manned by organisations for Persons with disabilities, National Council for Persons with disabilities with technical assistance from Pacific Disability Forum and National Disaster Management Office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Ministry was fortunate that prior to *TC Yasa*, Live and Learn with National Disaster Management staff accompanied organisations for persons with disabilities conducting awareness training on Disaster Preparedness and response to Rotuma and other parts of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a week after the training *TC Yasa* hit Fiji. The Disability Emergency Operation Centre worked closely with District and Divisional Emergency Operation Centers ensuring their members were evacuated on time. We thank the first responders as well as Emergency Operation Centers for identifying and ensuring the safety of persons with disabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, without the trainings and assistance from a multi stakeholder approach, the impact could have been a devastating one and I take this time to thank all national and international stakeholders and partners who work tirelessly in the best interest of Fijians living with disabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was fortunate to visit Vanua Levu after *TC Yasa* and be part of the disability sector response team visiting persons with disabilities who were affected directly or indirectly by the tropical cyclone. Members of the team consisted of men and women with impairments who were not hindered by their disability but strove to carry out scoping exercises identifying the need that was on the ground.

Last week I was fortunate to be part of the same group and return to Vanua Levu with the same team was headed by Spinal Injury Association and organization for persons with disabilities representatives including the National Council Secretariat with assistance from our Ministry. We revisited identified homes, handing out assistive devices, hygiene packs as well as much needed child and adult diapers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana* as well as COVID restrictions did not dampen the disability sector's will to ensure that our clients in the north received their much needed assistive devices as well as encourage families to prepare well for the cyclone season that we are currently in.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these men and women are making a difference and I am amazed how they continue to move forward fighting for their inclusion and showing everyone that given resources they can make an impact. Moreover, that they are the agents of change who contribute to inform and guiding climate mitigation and adaptation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge the work carried out by all in conducting preparatory work, visiting evacuation centres as well as working with partners such as Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), Live and Learn and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in taking Fiji forward to another level of disaster preparedness. Of course, we are still learning from each other and as we move forward to improve preparedness and response we can only get better.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, environmentalist Gaylord Nelson once said and I quote: "The fate of the living planet is the most important issue facing mankind." I could not agree more - climate change is a crucial issue of present times and we are at a defining moment as the world deals with this issue. From shifting weather patterns that threaten food production, to rising sea levels that increase the risk of catastrophic flooding, the impacts of climate change are global in scope and unprecedented in scale. Without drastic action today, adapting to these impacts in the future will be more difficult and costly.

I am proud to work under a leader who not only recognises this concern but is also pursuing the fight against climate change at the global forefront as a true Fijian warrior. I congratulate the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Attorney-General and the delegation that has recently returned from Glasgow following their successful negotiations at COP26. The voice of our nation roared loudest at the event and we are proud of the passion and the political will of our leaders.

Before I conclude Mr. Speaker, Sir, I share the sentiments of His Excellency the President as he said and I quote:

"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 modernizing economy sits at the cusp of recovery and the old style of politics has no place in this new Fiji."

Today Fiji stands united by patriotism; our journey of struggles and of triumphs has emerged us as a powerful Pacific island nation that is a force to reckon with. Our success as a nation is not owed to destiny. It has come because our people, our fellow Fijians with their diverse strengths and skillsets have together propelled Fiji forward. Together we have done great things, and together we will do more great things.

I salute every Fijian for your perseverance, resilience, humanity, sense of compassion and your belief in unity that has persisted us through trying times. Thank you Fijians. The character of our determination and our will to fight has empowered us to deal with many ordeals over the years and emerge stronger every time because our greatest strength lies in our unity. Together we are stronger, together we conquer and together we fight back stronger!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has been a challenging year for many of us to say the least but our will to persevere through challenges makes the upcoming festive season even more exciting. We are thankful for our journey as we embrace the new normal. I urge Fijians all over the country to keep taking heed of necessary COVID-19 precautionary measures, let us not become complacent. I also urge all Fijians who are yet to receive vaccination, please get vaccinated today. Let us continue to spread kindness and look after each other.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish everyone a very merry Christmas and a prosperous new year.

HON. A. JALE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to His Excellency the President's Address at the Opening of the 2021-2022 session of Parliament, and I thank you Sir, for allowing me the opportunity. His Excellency's Address touched on democracy, national interest, security, COVID-19, climate change and the climate-ocean nexus and I wish to respond to these issues in my response.

Before I elaborate on my points, I wish to convey to the people of the Solomon Islands our thoughts and prayers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I spent a number of years in the Solomon Islands as an advisor to the Public Service Commission, as a civilian under the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands known as RAMSI - an Australian-led security intervention following ethnic tensions. The unrest, rioting, looting and burning of shops and businesses in the past week is a concern and we hope for a peaceful resolution to the unrest and violence.

Sir, His Excellency made reference to democracy created under the Fiji Constitution. I wish to recall Abraham Lincoln's famous words in relation to democracy, I quote: "A government of the people, by the people and for the people". The 2013 Constitution was definitely not a constitution by the people, nor was it of the people as it was thrust upon the people of Fiji following eight years of military rule and it certainly has not delivered liberty and freedom that comes with true democracy.

Freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of speech are only words in the 2013 Constitution Bill of Rights. In reality, Fijians are denied our freedoms by various other legislations and regulations to suit the Government's agenda and it continues to violate human rights. Opposition MPs get taken at different hours of the day to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to be interviewed for speaking out with investigations going on in a form of intimidation.

This year on 15th September, as the world celebrated International Day of Democracy, here in Fiji, democracy suffered a blow with the unceremonial removal and dismissal of the Chief Executive Officer of the Fiji Bureau of Statistics. Then on the eve of the change of Presidential office, just over two weeks ago, democracy suffered another blow with the termination of the Solicitor-General by the outgoing President of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the violation of human rights and shocking treatment of two senior civil servants further confirms that merit based appointments is a farce and a slap in the face. It is clear that in both instances, there was political interference from the Attorney-General who is the Minister of Economy. In the case of Mr. Naiqama, the International Statistical Institute and the International Association for Official Statistics expressed concern in the sacking of Mr. Naiqama, stating that the "Government's action is a breach of UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and would in many countries be seen as unconstitutional".

While on senior civil servants, at this juncture, I wish to commend Mrs. Unaisi Vuniwaqa, who has been appointed by the United Nations Secretary-General as Assistant Secretary-General for Safety and Security. This has to be a smack in the face for the FijiFirst Government.

HON. MEMBERS.- Why?

HON. A. JALE.- It confirms that professional and well-qualified career police officers have been overlooked and bypassed in the appointment of Commissioner of Police in Fiji. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not know whether the Government realises the impact of this to the morale of the career police officers and their level of productivity.

On weathering the COVID-19 pandemic, His Excellency commended the success of the vaccination effort. While we are pleased that this has resulted in more ease of movement and socialising, the alarm has been sounded and the world is put on high alert over the new and latest COVID-19 variant, Omicron found in South Africa which is a source of concern as governments around the world scramble to protect their citizens from potential breaks. This should also be a concern for us here in Fiji.

The new mutation is reported to potentially be more transmissible, was first discovered in South Africa and reported to be detected in Australia, United Kingdom, Germany, Israel, Italy, Czech Republic and Hong Kong. What is alarming is that the new variant can be spread by those who have been double-jabbed. It is also reported that it could possibly be worse than the Delta variant and carries a high number of mutations, at least 10. With tourists coming into the country from 1st December, it comes with great risk and we need to hear from the Government on how they plan to bolster protection against this aggressive new variant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for whole year back, our Government is boasting about our successful COVID-19 containment strategy. Now we are boasting about 90 per cent vaccination for those who have been double-jabbed but we now learn that the new variant, the Omicron can be spread by those double-jabbed as there are already predictions of a third wave. Can the Government tell us, what is the plan to mitigate this third wave to avoid further loss of lives, further loss of jobs, business and economic collapse?

On COP26, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is pleasing to note that the Glasgow Climate Pact is the first ever climate deal to explicitly plan to reduce coal, the worst fossil fuel for greenhouse gases and it promises more money for developing countries to adapt to climate impacts. But it is disappointing that the pledges did not go far enough to limit temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius. It is understood that the current pledges fulfilled will only limit global warming to about 2.4 degrees Celsius.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, can the honourable Prime Minister and honourable Minister for Economy explain why there was a need for 40-plus Fiji delegation and what exactly they achieved? It is commendable that the long-term emission reduction target for Fiji, net zero carbon emission by 2050. But I refer to the sustainable development principle of polluter pays. Despite these rising emissions, Fiji is still a very small contributor to global carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions, representing approximately 0.006 per cent of global emissions in 2019.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the biggest culprits of CO₂ emissions are those burning coal. The top three polluters are China, United States of America and India. In 2019, China was the biggest emitter of fossil fuel carbon dioxide emissions with a share of almost 30 per cent of the world's total CO₂ emissions that year. This was roughly twice the amount emitted by the second largest emitter - the United States of America. At least US was at the table at COP26, but China, who is not party to the Glasgow Climate Pact, is still the largest emitter of carbon dioxide in the world.

HON. A. SAIYED-KHAIYUM.- They were there. Get your facts right.

HON. A. JALE.- We know the state of economic collapse in our country has forced us to become more and more dependent like never before. We are mortgaging our national assets and getting ourselves into a debt trap, irrespective of the intergenerational principle of conserving for future generations. We must be wary of boomerang aid from these polluters. They bring to us what benefits them the most.

We cannot place higher responsibilities upon ourselves and lesser on these biggest polluters. It is a crime of climate injustice. If the Prime Minister is really serious about climate change then he should put these big polluters on notice here in our backyard in Fiji, rather than going to Glasgow and succumbing to the dominance of these big polluters and their lobbyists.

Mr. Speaker Sir, His Excellency referred to oceans having a home in the climate negotiation and the ocean climate nexus. At the opening of the last Parliament, I did touch on Fiji's commitment to the 100 per cent sustainable management of our oceans and I brought to the attention of this august Parliament what the province of Lau, in conjunction with the Government and other stakeholders, is doing to work towards the attainment of that commitment through what is called the "Lau Seascape Initiative". I wish to share this information again with the growing attention to ocean management and the Blue Economy. Not everything needs to be driven and controlled by Government.

The Lau Seascape Initiative aims to build a coalition among government, the private sector, civil societies and local communities to improve natural resource governance in the province of Lau and its surrounding waters. It focuses on terrestrial and marine resource management and highlights the importance of achieving effective governance across all sectors and at all level, local, national and regional. It also provides a platform to apply integrated natural resource management across the 335,895 square kilometres or 26 per cent of Fiji's exclusive economic zone, from ridge to reef to ocean on small island systems with high climate vulnerability.

The high climate vulnerability leaves the Lau group of islands in the pathway of trade winds and on the forefront of the tropical storms and cyclones. The Lau group is almost always hit as the cyclones make their way to Fiji or as they leave Fiji. There should be a climate finance available to the Lau group and other vulnerable maritime areas with high climate vulnerability for adaptation to climate impacts.

The key strength of this initiative is coalition building, forming partnership and alliances to achieve sustainable management of our oceans. Lau as you would know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a vast area of oceans with many islands. It is only through the joint partnerships that such an initiative is possible and importantly, the involvement of the custodians of the *i qoliqoli*.

At the global level, the Lau Seascape Initiative is already listed as one of Fiji's voluntary commitments to the inter-agency mechanism, UN Ocean, under SDG 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.

Lau needs the support of everyone in Fiji, particularly the government, in the implementation and realisation of the vision of the Lau Seascape Initiative. It is a model that can be replicated to other areas in Fiji to achieve the government's commitment to 100 per cent sustainable management of our oceans.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, government assistance is needed in the enforcement of the marine protected areas, the training of fish wardens and to see that relevant laws are put in place to support the initiative.

On the mention of Blue Economy by His Excellency the President, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as well as the promotion and resourcing of marine protected areas, the government should also pay more attention to marine pollution and toxic waste management. On this, I wish to draw the government's attention to the poisonous effect of mercury on fish in our waters, and I ask why Fiji has not ratified the Minamata Convention on Mercury - an international Treaty already ratified by seven other Pacific countries to protect human health and the environment from anthropogenic emissions and release of mercury and mercury compounds.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency, the President has referred to the next national election, which according to the Fijian Elections Office, can be held as early as 9th July, 2022. I could not agree more with His Excellency, the President that voters deserve better. It is time for change and a new government. My humble plea to the Fijian Elections Office is to ensure that voters and eligible voters in Lau and the maritime areas are visited and able to change their registration cards well ahead of time. As this is the last session of the year, I wish you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and all the honourable Members of Parliament, a blessed Christmas and happy 2022.

HON. DR. S.R. GOVIND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; good afternoon to you all. I rise to respond to the thoughtful and timely speech by our new and youthful President, to Parliament and the nation at the 2021-2022 opening session of Parliament.

Firstly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to congratulate His Excellency the President on his appointment as the Head of our young nation, and through him extend warm regards to the people of Vanua Levu, especially the Macuata Province for giving up their son to serve the nation. Indeed, there is a lot to be learnt from his experience. As he tells us, he has worked at cutting cane and as a fisherman - such humility is worth emulating by all. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am glad that His Excellency the President made reference to the need for inclusiveness as a means to continue building the country, especially at moments and times when nature deals our country a deadly blow as in the recent and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The reminder by His Excellency the President is, once again, appropriate and timely as the country faces its unprecedented challenges of COVID-19. In this challenge the FijiFirst government once again demonstrated its resolve, foresight and hard work in meeting the crisis and working together to achieve good results. Through this and the slow easing of COVID-19 restrictions and the cautious opening of our borders, the economy will slowly bounce back. But as the economy bounces back albeit slowly we must not forget the lessons of basic healthy behaviour we have learned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us many important lessons similar to the HIV/AIDS pandemic which hit our shores in early 1980s. These lessons should never be forgotten and should become part of our daily routine. Important lessons learnt in the health sector such as the need to practice universal infection control measures throughout the entire health system and at all times, whether there is pandemic or not, should become our daily routine.

Practice of basic preventive measures such as hand washing, personal hygiene and wearing of masks will continue to be important for maintaining good public health and a productive workforce. While COVID restrictions might have overshadowed these individual practices by limiting our movements, it is time to revive these as restrictions ease and allow for other previous activities to be undertaken. We should all join hands with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services in working

towards a healthy nation. This is important in view of the caution of a possible third wave noted by the Permanent Secretary for Health and Medical Services, and very recently indeed a few days ago, the emergence of the Omicron variant of COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I would like to thank the hardworking healthcare staff in the entire health system who continued to provide essential health services throughout the pandemic. Also the security forces need to be thanked for maintaining law and order during the crisis. Fiji like many other developing nations is faced with a double burden of disease, in particular I would like to mention the impact of Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) on our society and our nation.

NCDs such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and preventable cancers of cervix and breast, remain the major causes of morbidity and mortality too. These diseases affect our people in the most productive years of their lives. The pandemic of COVID has overshadowed many of the programmes that are in place to tackle these diseases. The FijiFirst Government will continue to resource these programmes including the free drugs facility for those who qualify. At the same time, Mr. Speaker, I would like to express my gratitude to the cancer society and their relentless efforts and activities in advocacy and the national support of the Pinktober. Mr. Speaker, this is another sector that has been most affected by the COVID pandemic.

His Excellency the President also underlined and recognised the enduring efforts of our honourable Prime Minister in leading the country to grapple with the effects of climate change as well as being an advocate for the Pacific Small Islands Developing States (PSIDS) at the international level.

Indeed, Mr. Speaker, while there were disappointments from COP26, our Prime Minister represented the Pacific with pride and without compromising Fiji and the Pacific demands. This alone is a laudable achievement. In country itself, Fiji will continue to work to achieve its own Nationally Determined Contributions to respond to the challenges we face and we will again make a strong stand at COP27 planned to be held in Egypt.

The recent Climate Change Act passed by our Parliament is a good example of Fiji's leadership role in the Pacific and globally. Being the first country among the Small Island Developing nations and indeed in the world to develop such comprehensive Act, is the reflection that it is not only the talk but action that is required to mitigate the effects of climate change on our nation. To successfully implement such an important Act, we need the active participation of all; the business community, civil society organizations and our own community organizations and including ourselves as individuals.

Mr. Speaker, on the development challenges facing our young democracy, unity is most important as we have been reminded by His Excellency the President. Unity in purpose, its objectives and actions as the FijiFirst Government, under the leadership of our Prime Minister, continues to make significant strides in securing a strong basis for economic growth, while ensuring the protection of the most vulnerable and support to our business community from where jobs will come from.

Mr. Speaker, as we are in the final year of our Parliamentary term, it is important for all of us as leaders in our community, to evaluate and take stock of what we have achieved or not achieved and whether what we promised to our electorates have been fulfilled. Whether our contributions in the affairs of our parliamentary duty has made any difference to the lives of our people, especially those that are poor and disadvantaged.

As the next election draws closer and we begin to ponder our next actions, we should also think of improvements we should make in our leadership qualities at both the level of government and community for achieving better results. Mr. Speaker, we should not forget however, that we are in the

cyclone season in the midst of a pandemic and preparation by all, and adherence to the COVID-19 restrictions must be the way to go.

Finally, I once again extend my warmest congratulations to our new and young President and wish him the best. I also wish you all a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Thank you.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have five honourable Members who have yet to respond to the motion before the House and of course, item 5 on the Agenda, which is the Consideration of Bills, thus the request to sit beyond 4.30 p.m.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- On that note, we will suspend proceedings for afternoon tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.15 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.49 p.m.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT

MR. SPEAKER.- We will continue with the debate. The first speaker this afternoon is unfortunately ill, so she will speak tomorrow if she is better.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and the people of our beloved nation who are listening and watching via social media, a very good afternoon to you all.

I rise this afternoon to contribute my sincere support to His Excellency, the President's most gracious speech for the opening of 2021 – 2022 Session of the Parliament and would like to congratulate and best wishes to the President elect, His Excellency Ratu Wiliame Katonivere and the First Lady.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I contribute further, I would like to thank the former President, Jioji Konrote for providing his service with loyalty to the nation like a true statesman when our nation needed the most during this COVID-19 pandemic. I wish him and former First Lady, Mrs. Konrote all the best in future endeavours.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency, the President highlighted the importance of climate leaders representing Fiji in COP26, as our nation and the Pacific region deserves better place due to rise in sea level, cyclones and unpredictable weather patterns and they do not deserve the attack from the Opposition for their own political agenda.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, climate change will affect the coastal resources of Fiji in a variety of ways. Sea level rise may lead to increase in coastal erosion and coastal inundation, increased exposure of beaches to wave action as coral growth lags behind sea level rise and the retreat of mangroves. The main challenges to the environment in Fiji are deforestation, soil erosion and pollution. Over the last 20 years or so, 30 per cent of Fiji's forests have been eliminated by commercial interests.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, climate change in the Pacific Islands will cause continued increases in air and ocean surface temperatures in the Pacific, increased frequency of extreme weather events, and increased rainfall during the summer months and a decrease in rainfall during the winter months. If one attack our climate leaders rather than acknowledging them, it simply means how insane one can be.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, each of us has a duty to care for our climate, as nearly 710 million children are currently living in countries at the highest risk of suffering the impact of the climate crisis. However, every child will inherit a planet with more frequent extreme weather events than ever before and our country is not an exception. Extreme events, including wildfires, floods and hurricanes have become a frightening new normal. Hotter temperatures, air pollution, and violent storms are leading to immediate, life-threatening dangers for children, including difficulty in breathing, malnutrition and higher risk of infectious diseases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the effects of climate change on future generation will have the following adverse effects such as:

1. extreme temperatures leaving many families living in poverty with less food, less clean water, lower incomes and worsening health;

2. children's immune systems are still developing leaving their rapidly growing bodies more sensitive to disease and pollution;
3. extreme events can destroy homes, schools, child care centres and infrastructure critical to children's wellbeing; and
4. droughts and flooding can destroy crops and cut access to clean water.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the late Mr. Desmond Tutu said and I quote: "25 years ago people took excuse for not knowing much about climate change. Today, we have no excuse." I urge all Opposition Members to remember the quote I have just mentioned and rather than criticising the climate champions, let us do something good for our nation and our future generation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to commend the honourable Prime Minister for his wholehearted effort, in getting the people of Fiji vaccinated and through his effort, we have more than 90 per cent of adult population with age 18 plus as being fully vaccinated, while 12 years to 18 years vaccination campaign is vigorously underway by the Ministry of Health.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was the FijiFirst Government that fought a hard battle against the Opposition who all were sitting here in Parliament, full of complains about opening of borders, campaigning against the vaccination, lockdowns, no lockdowns and showing negativity against our own Fiji Airways. If our honourable Prime Minister had listened to them, it would have been a major disaster. Once the late Thomas Jefferson said, and I quote:

"The care of human life and happiness and not their destruction is the first and only object of good governance."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government has always put our citizens first and this has given them hope and prosperity during these difficult times. Due to our Government's proactive measures and wise decisions, which has led to our borders being opened from 1st December, there are over 200,000 visitors who have booked to visit our shores due to lucrative packages given to tourists by our own airline, in conjunction with our hoteliers to start a new tourism era.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are new smiles on the faces of our people, especially in the Western Division because of the opening of our borders as many new employment opportunities will come through which will be good for them and our nation as a whole. Sir, since the border is about to open, I would like to acknowledge the Ministry of Agriculture for their effort in *Operation Vesu Manumanu*, with a joint exercise with a number of stakeholders such as Fiji Police Force, Fiji Military Forces, Land Transport Authority of Fiji, Biosecurity Authority of Fiji and Fiji Roads Authority for their extensive stray animal operation which is divided into three phases.

The *Operation Vesu Manumanu* will stop stray animals from the roads which have taken so many lives on the road and the recent one is a young director, late Mr. Ebrsheem Makki of Amira Furniture. He was the only son of Mr. Amira, who died due to a stray horse on the road, so sad to lose a life because of other people's negligence. Mr. Speaker, Sir, since our roads will be busy once the borders open, this initiative by the Ministry of Agriculture has been highly-appreciated by motorists and the tourism industry, as it will reduce road accidents due to stray animals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, stray animals have also contributed to significant loss of crop output of farmers. Farmers have toiled their land, put in their hard-earned resources expecting to generate surplus. Stray animals have become a threat to this objective. Thanks to the Ministry of Agriculture that these farmers can continue to invest in agriculture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to guide us, we must be guided with a vision that portrays a strong, secure, peaceful and prosperous Fiji whose people are educated, healthy and manage their resources economically, environmentally and socially sustainable way. Our aim is to decrease poverty, promote equal opportunity, promote prosperity and enhance peace and stability to help Fiji achieve its long-term development vision.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we continue our journey towards 2022, we must always stop to give thanks for our many blessings that God has bestowed upon us. We must show gratitude for what we have. Despite our challenges, we are abundantly blessed. Never take anything for granted. Give thanks for each breath of life, each sunrise and each sunset.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I strongly believe that together, we can take our nation to new heights. We will be united and we will be a nation that will stand forever more. May God bless this nation for all of us.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my response to His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere's Address at the opening of the 2021-2022 session of Parliament.

Before proceeding to doing that, however, I wish to take this opportunity to again, acknowledge and thank a youth group from our Province of Nadroga/Navosa, called the "Hakwa Gang", who had used their time effectively during this pandemic by taking the initiative to respond to vulnerable members of our province, who have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since their inception in June this year, the Hakwa Gang have donated almost \$20,000 worth of assistance distributed over five projects and their most recent contributions were allocated to the Village of Toga in the District of Naqwalimare where \$4,000 worth of groceries was donated earlier this month and more recently on Saturday last week, \$4,000 worth of farming tools was donated to the youths of the two Villages of Tonuve and Vulinagerua in the district of Bemana as identified by the needs-based assessment provided by the Nadroga/Navosa Provincial Council.

With the recent restrictions to movement in place due to the pandemic, this inspirational youth group thought outside the box and revived the traditional *solesolevaki* approach to suit the context of the digital era by raising all their funds for assistance virtually. I applaud the Hakwa Gang for their vision and their tremendous efforts to bridge the gap and meet the needs of our people in the Nadroga/Navosa Province during this pandemic. If the actions of the Hakwa Gang is any indication of the quality of people that our province and our nation is breeding for the future, then the future of our nation is in good hands. *Vinavalevu djna* Hakwa Gang for showing the true Nadroga/Navosa spirit of love and unity that we are known for – "*Tju Vata tju Qata, Dju mata ga dhu yalo.*"

Mr. Speaker Sir, I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank Mrs Khan and her family, of Semo in Nadroga for their commitment, sacrifice and hard work in agriculture development which really impressed me during our Economic Affairs Standing Committee field visit to the Western cane belt earlier this month.

Mrs. Khan is the only woman in Fiji that owns and operates a cane harvester, which she acquired through an FDB loan and since, she has been harvesting cane from Sigatoka to Rakiraki on a 24/7 basis. This Lion Heart lady has been producing an average of 1,000 tonnes annually, in addition she also practice livestock farming, agro farming and intercropping. Last year, Mrs Khan won the best Sandalwood Farmer for the Western Division during the Agriculture Show but was only rewarded with a wooden shield. Without a doubt, Mrs Khan is a very successful farmer with a proven impressive record, but she states that the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Forestry's negligence to provide technical support or other incentives, so she could maximise productivity, has been disappointing.

For years she has requested assistance to have a borehole to water the nurseries and vegetables and water for livestock especially during the dry season but to no avail. I request my good friend the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of Forestry to pay this farming Iron Lady – Mrs. Khan a visit and identify ways to help each other. Apart from assisting her, Mrs. Khan's wealth of knowledge and experience is a resource that your two Ministries can definitely benefit from. If used to teach and train other farmers to improve stock and maximise productivity. Assisting farmers should be your most important priority, in order to improve agriculture and ensure our nation's food security and wellbeing.

In response to the President's address, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sorry to say that I was unimpressed and uninspired from listening to the same narrative by the former President, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote, had been repeated on Monday, 22nd November, 2021 by His Excellency, the President. His speech writers really have no shame in continuously praising the government for being caring, compassionate and practising genuine democracy and always putting the blame on the people, Opposition politicians and past governments for all their failures.

This blame game is becoming stale and really, it is like we are listening to little children, when they are trying to cover their wrong, but we know exactly what they have done. Grow up FijiFirst Government! Stop blaming the people when things go wrong. Take responsibility and be accountable for your 15 years of reckless management of Fiji's economy and resources that has led to Fiji's:

- poor GDP average growth rate of 2.4 per cent, while previous governments achieved 3.4 per cent and 3.6 per cent respectively;
- national debt is now 90 per cent of its GDP, an unprecedented level;
- health facilities is disastrous;
- minimum wage rate still stands at \$2.68 an hour; and
- rate of poverty has increased to 30 per cent.

Stop hiding behind pretty speeches! In fact, during my three years term as a Member of this august House, all you have done is present speeches based on manipulated and distorted data, that look good on paper and ignore the reality on the ground.

His Excellency, the President, spoke on genuine democracy that we have experienced with this FijiFirst Government, but which previous governments have failed to achieve. Was His Excellency, the President, joking or just completely ignorant about what genuine democracy means? I believe that genuine democracy is true democracy, in which the power is exercised directly by the people rather than through representatives. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker Sir, what we have been experiencing in Fiji in the last 15 years through this government, is democracy backsliding which means a gradual decline in the quality of democracy and it is getting worse day by day.

Genuine democracy was actually practised by the previous governments where we witnessed public protests, workers' strikes, trade unions disputes and agreements where people publicly voiced their concerns and disagreements with governments and stakeholders but were not arrested, victimised or intimidated by the people in power or higher authorities.

Have we seen that during this FijiFirst Government's leadership in the last 15 years? No! Why? Because we are being ruled by a dictatorship government, where power is only concentrated to the few. Just look at what is happening right here in this House. The honourable Attorney-General has more than seven portfolios. Why? Because he wants to control; he wants power; he is so busy trying to control everything in Fiji, yet the economy is collapsing before his very eyes and I have just shared the figures to prove it. The old saying definitely rings true here "Jack of all trades, master of none".

Mr. Speaker Sir, I say that Fiji is experiencing democracy backsliding, instead of genuine democracy because of a few of the many instances that prove this, which I will mention here:

1. The Veronica Malani Case: Mr. Speaker, Sir, this time last year, while responding to the former President, Jioji Konrote's address, I stated in this august House that the honourable Attorney General should step down, step aside and step out of Parliament based on the criminal allegations against him over a bombing case. Today, 12 months later from making that statement, I am surprised that the honourable Attorney General still sits comfortably in this Chamber. Honourable Attorney-General, I again reiterate my previous call in the name of fairness, equality and above all, genuine democracy and to maintain the integrity, sovereignty and the tradition of this House, you have to step down and step out now.
2. The day His Excellency the President delivered his maiden speech in this Parliament, he was sitting beside Fiji's highest Judicial Officer, the Chief Justice Kamal Kumar, who, in my view deliberately overlooked the judicial process that resulted in the termination of the Solicitor-General, Sharvada Sharma, who was accused of "misbehaviour". Why did this FijiFirst Government not follow the judicial process for the Solicitor-General to defend himself as stipulated in the Constitution? This government has no shame! I only hope His Excellency the President will reverse this draconian decision as he stated in his speech on Monday, 22nd November, 2021 and I quote:

"We should not suffer the politics of pettiness and personalization or exist in some perpetual state of political antagonism."

3. The termination of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Bureau of Statistics, Kemueli Naiqama, for performing his duties with integrity, accountability and transparency by releasing the data of ethnicity and religion in the 2019-2020 Household Income and Expenditure Survey.

The honourable Attorney-General claimed that the report was flawed, despite the fact that the Bureau of Statistics followed international standards as practised all over the world. Was the government fearful of the truth that the ethnicity data will unveil? Why was Mr. Naiqama not given a chance to defend himself as stipulated in the Public Service Workers' Process and Procedures? Now, we understand why Poverty Eradication Programmes introduced by this government has not showed results because it was based on lies.

4. The Introduction of Bill No. 17 is another glaring example of democracy backsliding. The FijiFirst government failed to consider the concerns and protests of more than 30,000 iTaukei that signed the petition against the introduction of Bill No. 17.

Some Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and Human Right Groups were also against this Bill because as iTaukei we felt that it was against our collective and indigenous rights and the government should seek our approval and conduct consultation with the indigenous people of Fiji since it will affect our rights as land and resource owners.

Even the *Turaga na Kalevu*, the paramount chief of the Nadroga /Navosa Province, Ratu Tevita Makutu accuses the honourable Prime Minister of gross disrespect for not consulting the iTaukei prior to these changes. Unfortunately, despite all this, the Bainimarama government had the Bill passed in this Parliament on 30th July, 2021.

5. The arrest and detainment of some peaceful protesters in the Province of Nadroga along the Coral Coast in the districts of Komave, Korolevu-i-Wai, Koroinasau and Conua by Police while engaging in a peaceful protest in their village boundaries. The villagers simply disagreed with the setting up of the quarantine facilities in the green zone and wanted prior consultation. This is proof that you cannot say anything against this government. Where is genuine democracy?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the deteriorating state of our democracy should be kept under close scrutiny, monitored and prioritised by politicians, stakeholders, the media and every concerned citizen, so that we are not continually subjected to what we are witnessing today whereby the Judiciary as one of the three arms of our democratic process is being compromised, influenced and tampered with.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I believe that the President's speech was focused on wrong priorities. Firstly, His Excellency the President spoke so much on climate change but I do not believe that this is our most urgent problem although I understand that those words have been written for the President to justify the government's large delegation to COP26. It is funny though that despite all the hype that the government builds over Climate Change in the years of attending COPs and other climate-related meetings the honourable Prime Minister still struggles to hold an interview and answer questions on Climate Change. It makes you wonder, what these people are doing when they attend the Climate Change forums? A complete waste of taxpayers' money!

Mr. Speaker Sir, I would have expected His Excellency the President's Address to outline our urgent priority areas, such as:

1. Revitalising our economy to create employment for the unemployed and to put food on the table. We need to focus more on developing our natural resources, such as agriculture, forestry, fishing and minerals. The Government:
 - needs to revise development policies to assist local entrepreneur accessing funding;
 - needs to ease business for local entrepreneurs by creating a platform that educates them on sustainable business measures in diversifying their products as well as merges directly with investors;
 - should re-introduce a special loan scheme for locals with the Fiji Development Bank and establish more cooperative businesses, especially amongst rural and maritime communities to encourage the "*solesolevaki* approach" which has proven to be successful in our *iTaukei* communities.
2. Disaster Preparedness; we need to prepare ourselves for future disasters such as the new COVID-19 variant which we have just recently heard about, Omicron and other natural disasters. It was obvious from previous disasters, especially with the last wave of COVID-19 that our health system and infrastructure facilities could not cope with the demand for service and we do not have the fiscal space to manoeuvre ourselves and minimize disastrous impacts.

It is time for the Government to:

- Train and empower village nurses and *turaga ni koro* as the first line of defence in villages and rural areas.
- Ensure that all hospitals and health centres have the relevant health support equipment.
- Ensure that backup power and service are available.

- Provide full staff establishment especially for some of the hospitals like the Navosa Hospital and make sure that all healthcare services are available.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government should stop infiltrating their propaganda through His Excellency the President's Address. They should understand that His Excellency is not President for the FijiFirst Party only but for all the people that are called Fijians residing in Fiji and all over the world.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first, I wish to take this opportunity to repeat the sentiments expressed by honourable Members who have spoken before me in congratulating His Excellency Ratu Wiliame Katonivere on his appointment as the new President of the Republic of Fiji.

I also rise to thank His Excellency for his most gracious Address in the Opening of Parliament on Monday, 22nd November, 2021 in which he recognised his predecessor Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote for his exemplary leadership which is accredited to his decades of service to the Fijian people in the pursuit of peace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency re-affirmed to this august Parliament as he rightly stressed to all Fijians the importance of our democracy as created under the 2013 Constitution. This Constitution is different from past Constitutions where the system failed to deliver equality. This has definitely been proven in our current Constitution which has created equal opportunities for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as clearly conveyed in His Excellency's Address, Fiji is home to people that want stability, prosperity, who are wise and resilient, people who have accepted the principle of one vote, one person with equal opportunities. Our unity has also been evident in our vaccination programme roll-out resulting in statistics that have grown to more than 90 per cent vaccination. This result has been achieved through the honourable Prime Minister's lead in encouraging all eligible Fijians to be vaccinated.

This in itself, Mr. Speaker, Sir, signifies our people's support and good understanding, patriotism and our willingness to achieve our nation's collective goal in mitigating and adapting to the challenges posed by COVID-19. These efforts and our ability to control the spread of this global virus are commendable and I would like to acknowledge those who have dedicated their time and effort to fight COVID-19.

To our frontliners, including our health workers, security forces, civil servants and our partners both overseas and local, *vinaka vakalevu*, thank you for a job well done. It is imperative that we continue the efforts and let us not put our guard down.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, mirroring the statement by His Excellency the President, it is certain that we cannot be complacent in our path to progress. While we continue to face challenges, we, as leaders and dedicated citizens of this beloved nation, we must seize every opportunity to participate in the progress in our economic recovery while closely considering the connections on our natural resources, our environment, our culture and our livelihood. And to re-emphasis, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the uncertainty of COVID-19 only reinforces the need for our long term commitment towards collaboration to achieve our medium and long term goals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I would like to commend His Excellency for recognising the efforts undertaken by our honourable Prime Minister in the climate negotiations during COP26. It is not a fair fight when one is negotiating with large and powerful developed nations, but similar to a single drop of a pin that lands on a large volume of water, the impact will not be instant, but we are still sending ripples that are taking effect and are being recognised. As we need to continue to push, these ripples will

ultimately result in changes that will benefit us and the generations to come. Fiji is fighting and punching beyond its physical size and leading the Small Island States to be recognised and noticed by bigger, richer and powerful nations around the world.

HON. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President has vividly expressed how climate change is being felt at all levels of our society. The loss of coastal watersheds, fishing grounds, coastlines, fish stocks, farming areas are all the results of climate change. We need clear actions, we need to take ownership and implement adaptation and mitigation measures.

Like His Excellency the President, I have also witnessed firsthand the impact of climate change as I am also one of those who grew up by the sea throughout my working life in the Navy and joining Tourism and now as the Minister responsible for Fisheries; the changes have been so dramatic over the last 50 years. The loss of natural habitats, coastlines and farmlands due to climate change signifies the importance of understanding the scale and intensity of this global catastrophe. The time to act is now. We are the generation that can make the required difference.

As the Ministry responsible for a sector directly affected by climate change, I would like to reaffirm to this august Parliament that the Ministry of Fisheries is determined and committed to address these challenges through adaptive and mitigating measures. These measures include:

1. the application of innovative technology and practices;
2. the development of clean and efficient energy;
3. boosting our efforts to protect reefs and ocean ecosystems;
4. having a supportive policy and legislative framework; and
5. creating a legal framework to effectively enforce and prosecute identified offenders.

All these, Mr. Speaker, Sir, were raised by His Excellency in his most gracious Address and are areas that the Ministry of Fisheries will address. As a responsible Ministry, we are implementing opportunities that are safe and that will not be of adverse cost to our children, grandchildren and the future generations.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to speak briefly on how the Ministry of Fisheries will continue to address this important message. First, as a country, we need to push for innovative technology and practices then apply these innovative technologies and practices on the ground.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, being innovative means thinking outside the box or having the ability to be innovative under the most difficult circumstances. In addressing our current needs, innovation is being practiced on how we mitigate and adapt to changes brought in by climate change. Through innovative technology, we are able to address the loss of farmland from salt water intrusion by converting these inundated lands to aquaculture or fish breeding purposes. This will need huge financial assistance and input by government, our overseas partners and the participation of the private sector investors. The use of improved technology has enabled us to use these farmlands into profitable and manageable aquaculture sites and the Ministry of Fisheries has identified suitable sites in Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. We will be initiating start-up developments to use these sites and boost economic activities through improved livelihoods under our aquaculture programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the support of our development partners, the Caboni Multipurpose Hatchery is now in full operation with white shrimps now available to be bred within the identified sites. In meeting the demands for clean energy and solar, Mr. Speaker, Sir, fisheries has been implementing this through the Solar Freezer Project for rural and maritime communities. To-date, we have been able to

strategically roll out units to rural maritime islands around Vanua Levu, Viti Levu, Lomaiviti, Lau, Kadavu and Yasawa.

In the coming weeks through the assistance of the Japanese Government, we will be installing eight solar units in Yasawa as means of improved livelihoods for those that have been displaced or have lost employment mainly from the tourism industry as a result of COVID-19. Additional projects to support the measure include the installation of the Rabi Solar Ice Plant Project, the Eco Refrigerant Project for Savusavu and Vunisea. Projects intended for completion in the next few months with an ultimate aim of replications to other areas around Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will continue to look for clean source of energy as it addresses the need to reduce carbon emission and is cost effective to communities, providing them with better livelihoods. Mr. Speaker, Sir, underpinning the need to protect the Great Sea Reef as highlighted by His Excellency, the Ministry of Fisheries through our legislative role is determined to help this important initiative through the establishment of Marine Managed Areas (MMA) and Marine Protected Areas (MPA). This addresses Sustainable Development Goal 14 of Life Below Water and will contribute to our 30 per cent commitment in the establishment of MPAs and MMAs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to this and noting the linkage between tourism sector and our ocean resources, I am confident to state that the Ministry of Fisheries has been working closely with the tourism sector in progressing this initiative. The three sites that we wish to finalise by the end of next month are Tavarua in Malolo, Navakavu and Nukubati in the province of Macuata in Vanua Levu. Noting the role of customary fishing right owners have in the establishment of MPAs and MMAs, I would like to urge our custodians, the *iTaukei* to please consider the benefits of employing good fishing practices which are inclusive in the development of MPAs and MMAs. All it takes is a reckless decision that would cost us our resources, so let us persevere to be wise and think of our future and the future of our children.

The importance of legislation, enforcement and prosecution will need to be strengthened. On the other hand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the importance of having the proper legislation to support enforcement and prosecution cannot be taken lightly. As highlighted by His Excellency, having the proper legislation will enable us to enforce our laws, prosecute those that breach these laws, and it also serves as a deterrent which helps protect the loss of vulnerable ocean and our natural resources. In support of an updated legislation, the Ministry of Fisheries will continue to review and develop fit-for-purpose legislation to suit the changes that occur within the national and international platforms.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with all the uncertainties that are occurring around the world, we all need to keep in mind that our decisions and actions will determine how well we fathom what is to come. It is true that we have reached the tipping point, and we must act now to reverse this worrying grave trend. If our generation fails to deal with this threat as boldly and swiftly as we must, then we will place at risk the future of our oceans and fisheries resources, the future of our country and the future of our children.

We all need to accept this reality and work collectively towards preventing it. I would like to end by urging all of us that we all have a part to play. In the context of climate change and fisheries, recovering our resources will not take years but decades and this will be at the cost of those we swear to protect, and that is our children and their future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as this is the last scheduled meeting for Parliament for 2021, please allow me to wish your good self and honourable Members of this august Parliament and all Fijians, a merry Christmas and happy 2022.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this opportunity in thanking His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, the *Turaga na Tui*

Macuata, for his most gracious Address at the opening of Parliament on 22nd November, 2021 for the 2021-2022 calendar year. On that same token, I thank and commend the former President Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote for his dedicated service to the country and wish him well on his retirement and future endeavours.

His Excellency the President's Address very much focused on climate change and its effects, particularly with rising sea levels which has affected our low lying coastal areas. As a champion of oceans, His Excellency must be commended and we are grateful for his commitment to continue to advocate the protection of our oceans for sustainability, not only in the interest of this generation but for future generations as well. Therefore, we must never forget and never allow unwanted practices such as the destruction of coral reefs through the Free Soul saga or the destruction of habitat similar to Nawi Island in Savusavu.

The planned project which involves the construction of new surf waves at Maqai in Qamea should be approached with caution and so far, the Taveuni Tourism oppose it and the *vanua o* Laucala which is the custodian of the *qoliqoli*, should be well informed.

The current COVID-19 pandemic which started early in 2020 has brought about challenges and strain to our already existing chronic and acute issues within our healthcare system and quality of care. An academic once told me that there was no current protocol on how to effectively treat, cure or contain COVID-19 because the last pandemic of similar magnitude was about 100 years ago, the Great Spanish Flu. What we are doing now, how we are doing it, what we can do better, is something that is current practice all over the world, and with today's age of technology, modern medicine, vaccine and medical equipment, we are able to save more lives.

His Excellency, the former President, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konrote, was correct in saying last year, that we bit the bullet early and did the hard work of locking down the country to protect our people. Earlier, during the emergence of our second wave, this side of Parliament strongly advocated that a lockdown was necessary to protect our people. However, the government thought otherwise because they were more interested in economic recovery rather than the lives of our own people. Unfortunately, it turned worse due to the delay and to full closure.

After the initial bungling, I personally believe that Fiji did moderately well in managing the pandemic in certain areas. The challenge was managing the COVID-19 pandemic in the beginning in identified hotspots. The initial lockdowns in red zones were not taken seriously, facemasks and the movements of people were not stringent at all, largely because people did not appreciate the seriousness of the situation. Misinformation also played a role, so while we did pretty well on the medical or treatment side of it, we could have been more aggressive on the awareness side for better dissemination of vital information. We also see a shift in the communication strategies worldwide where social media influencers played a major role - more trusted compared to traditional media.

We can all recall our experiences on what it was like during the early stages of the pandemic, lockdowns and restrictions, and what that brought about in our various localities and settings. The festive season is coming up and mass movement of people will follow, and we should all adhere to the necessary protocols and regular advice, follow the rules of law so that it will be good for all of us.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the Government and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to continue to ensure:

- Full and proper PPEs are made available to our frontline workers.

- Our frontline workers are adequately remunerated for working overtime. It has been brought to our attention that some of our frontline workers have not been paid overtime and other associated allowances. To some extent, this will reduce morale, and particularly, the risks involved.
- That those who plan to be repatriated or visit Fiji, follow the mandatory protocols. We continue to receive positive border cases and it begs the question on the credibility of testing from other countries.
- That strict protocols are followed by those who are in the front line to minimise the risk associated with infection;
- That those who are being quarantined are following strict guidelines with regards to the isolation requirements.
- That media releases are on timely manner to minimise fake news - there must be a dedicated information team within the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to counter misinformation.
- That our testing facilities continue to be credible and efficient.

Another area where the COVID-19 response could have been better, especially during the repatriation phase, would have been the issuance of clear instructions and one point of contact. The registration was not easy and the process of passes involved was shuttling between different agencies. It would be more effective and convenient if there was just one point of contact.

Vaccination hesitancy is something that we should expect. I am always a firm believer in upholding our Hippocratic Oath - "First do no harm" - and that the rights of an individual to his or her own health is paramount. What I find is that one of the causes of vaccination hesitancy is lack of trust and lack of information. If you supply them with the right information, gain their trust, our vaccination rate will most certainly closely reach 100 per cent.

Testing equipment should be made available at the sub-divisional level to decentralise the service. Lately, during the repatriation phase to the North, Labasa Hospital was overwhelmed with testing requests that they had to send some samples to Suva, Fiji CDC. That resulted in prolonged home isolation from seven days to 11 days or some even 14 days because of the delay in results. Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I request that a report be tabled in Parliament by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services on how they handle COVID-19 challenges, limitations, positive outcomes, et cetera.

From this side of the Parliament, we continue to thank and appreciate efforts by the Ministry through its new initiatives in trying to improve our healthcare system to respond to our need. On the other hand we will also continue to give constructive criticism and suggest alternatives on areas that need further improvement. Sir, COVID-19 has shown us that more of our resources should be directed towards health, education and food security because they are basic human rights and also minimise the risk of the health of our people in future. A healthy population is a productive and healthy nation.

Our health services and its quality has been an ongoing topic of discussion for some time now. The Human Development Index produced annually by UNDP, measures key indicators such as life expectancy at birth, meaning years of schooling, expected years of schooling, gross national income per capita and it shows that our ranking is on a downward trend.

The Human Development Index compares indicators in 160 countries. In 2010, we were ranked 86/162, in 2015 - 90/162 and 2020 - 93/162. I anticipate that our ranking will be affected for 2021 due to COVID which has overwhelmed our already existing healthcare system and services. This is an alarming trend where our ranking continues to get worse and can be attributed to the following facts:

1. The dilapidated conditions of all our health infrastructures (nursing stations, health centres and hospitals) which needs urgent attention.
2. Public Private Partnership (PPP) between Aspen has not been realised.
3. Patient/doctor ratio has improved but we are reliably informed of a shortage of doctors and nurses in some divisional and sub-divisional hospitals.
4. Medical speciality services without the necessary equipment needed to carry out their respective work is just lip service.
5. There is an increase in the number of patients attending the decentralised services but only to be told that further treatment or pharmacy supply to come from their own pockets. Shortage of medication supply especially essentials and perishable items, is a chronic issue and even made worse with the COVID-19 pandemic;
6. I had mentioned this before - if shift arrangement work is to be successful we need full capacity within the required workforce, the cessation of overtime payment will affect performance when staff are overworked, fatigued and mistakes can occur;
7. The lack of lab equipment and reagents issues, are a concern. Recently reagents for testing prostate specific antigen has expired;
8. Radiology Department - the shortage of films, equipment, scanning machine, MRI, etc continue to be brought to our attention from time to time; and
9. When retired surgeons like Dr McCaig highlight these issues, it is indeed a fact. When a prominent lawyer like Mr. Graham Leung, highlights appalling experiences of inpatients in a social media page, he is just stating facts. The fact of the matter is that there is serious deterioration of our health services and medical care in the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would have augured well for everyone in this august Parliament to support an earlier motion by honourable Professor Biman Prasad to “try and address the shortfalls of our medical system in general by the setup of a committee to holistically inquire into all aspects of health and medical care services and delivery into our public hospitals and centres,” because whatever the outcome of the findings would be, it would be of benefit to the government, to be used as a gauge or tool for future plans in addressing the problem.

The current pandemic has brought about shortfalls to the Government's development plans and initiative but nevertheless all me to thank them for the:

- Seawall (boulders) constructed by Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) in Vuniuto, Waitavala and Waica coastal areas. The effects of rising sea levels has eroded much of the coastal land and with the seawalls, it is very much appreciated.
- The development of the Waibula Bridge in the Tikina of Wainikeli is to be commended as

the older Irish crossing was easily flooded and made commuting impossible.

- The completion of the rehabilitation of remaining schools that were damaged from *TC Winston* namely in Kocoma (Qamea) and Yacata is to be commended as well. Thank you to the honourable Minister for Education and your predecessor.
- Looking forward with anticipation to telecommunication coverage in black spot areas particularly Sawana Mate area in Tunuloa, Navonu and Matei.

On that note, I would also like to reiterate some recurrent issues that I continue to bring to this august Parliament:

- Permanent water supply is very much a need within South of Taveuni. All the ongoing water carting and desalination plant is appreciated, permanent solution is needed, as source is available.
- Seawall request within the Navaca area mainly on the coastal area in front of South Taveuni schools, to protect the school structures and occupants.
- SMEs request from the Fiji Development Bank, as part of the COVID-19 recovery initiative needs feedback on its progress, as I have been informed by those that have applied are still waiting for a reply.
- We were informed earlier in this august House about the new jetty in Natuvu area and look forward to the commencement of the work for this very busy route between Taveuni and Vanua Levu.

Before I conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank our frontline workers, members of the Disciplined Forces and Government agencies, development partners for the respective roles during our fight against COVID-19. And on that note, condolences to those whose family members have succumbed to COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish your good self and members of your Parliamentary staff, members of this august House and to the people of Fiji a merry Christmas and a blessed New Year.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that is the last speaker for the day and we will continue with the debate tomorrow.

CUSTOMS TARIFF (AMENDMENT) (NO. 3) BILL 2021

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the –

- (a) Customs Tariff (Amendment) (No. 3) Bill 2021 (Bill No. 36/2021), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament;
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 2nd December, 2021 and that one hour be given to debate the Bill, with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a very standard Amendment to the Schedule. It is what you call a non-premature, which is the provision that is given by the World Customs Organisation which all the countries in the world have to adhere to.

It is simply just amending the schedule with these codes. It is very basic, it is a code throughout the world which we have to adhere to. The tariff rates have not changed, we simply are just putting ourselves in alignment. I had notified Parliament of this that it will happen, the World Custom Organisation has now come out with the re-configuration of the tariff codes. You will see all the codes are there and it is simply us adopting it in our law.

So, do not get overwhelmed by the size, honourable Professor Prasad. Size does not matter in this incident. What it actually does, I mean is that the codes are simply being adopted, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am certainly not overwhelmed by this, I know what it is but as I said before, there are two other Bills and I am going to make a general point so I am not going to speak when the Honourable Attorney-General presents the other two Bills.

This is just a general point about Standing Order 51 that we talked about, I mean I know you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you did say that you would allow urgent government matters. That is fine with me, but yesterday we got the Minutes around 10.00 p.m. and in the Minutes also, we were not told how many Bills, it just said Bills. Now, all I want to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know these two other Bills we could have debate on it as well. But what we have been saying is, I understand the honourable Attorney-General is the Attorney-General of Fiji and the Minister for Economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you are the Speaker of the Parliament. The Secretary-General is the Secretary-General of Parliament, these are Constitutional positions. The independence of the Parliament is very important and what we are saying is, we have been doing these things for a long time. The honourable Attorney-General will pop up with a Bill, without informing the Business Committee in the last minute. We have not even given the details of what the Bills are going to be.

The Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, like every other independent institutions, the Executives cannot consider your Office or the Secretary-General's Office as the arm of the Executive Government. The Executive Government is accountable to this Parliament, we, in the Opposition can also ask for an urgent motion, urgent oral question and we know, we have been denied some of these things in the past. I am seriously concern that there is lack of convention, or I must say ethics in terms of treating the Parliament, members of the Opposition with some dignity and respect.

You might as well not have the Business Committee, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we could save \$2,000 for every sitting in terms of allowances and all that and do everything by flying Minutes. Government ought to have some timetable, they cannot just pop up, at least they should come to the Business Committee and tell us in this session is the next ordinary session. It is not about Government business, it is about debating His Excellency's Address.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, popping in Bills in between, could be the Bill on medicinal products. It could be urgent, I do not know if the medicinal word, why is it not sitting and approving, if there is a need for approval? It does not have to go to the Minister all the time. It means that the Board is not functioning.

If they want to suddenly bring this Bill, these are the kind of things that we have said before, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we do not want the Government to dictate how Parliament should operate and they should not be putting pressure on you, Sir, and also on the Secretary-General to Parliament and to be able to railroad things that they want at short notice because it just makes a mockery of the way in which

Parliament ought to be and you know that very well, Sir, and you try all your best to do that. I think the Government must learn some decency.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Have some respect, not only for us in the Opposition, but for you, Sir, as well and for the Secretary-General.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is for us. The honourable Attorney-General is always fond of saying we have to protect the Speaker. We have that responsibility as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We feel it is important that the independence of the Parliament and the way in which the Speaker and the Secretary-General of the Parliament is allowed to decide things must be respected by Government. They must not get into this bullying habit, which they do in the Business Committee.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We oppose this kind of backdoor, last minute, railroading these last minute Bills. We understand the urgency of some of these Bills, we will accept that, we have supported these in the past. Do not come at 10 o'clock in the night and say, I have got Bills. We do not even know how many Bills. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Anyone else wishing to take the floor?

Since no one else wishes to take the floor, I just wish to say this about what honourable Professor Biman Prasad said. No one puts pressure on the Speaker. No one! You take that from me. No one has put pressure on me as the Speaker here or any of my appointments that I have held, I do not go down to that. I do the job that I am appointed to do.

Now, if I am woken up at the middle of the night by the Secretary-General because there is an urgent matter, I expect other members of the Business Committee to be woken up as well. It does not worry me, but my job is to ensure that government business is carried out, but everyone has the opportunity when that government business is carried out to debate that on the floor of the House and that is what we are doing.

Sometimes, it might be inconvenient. I tell it is inconvenient for me but on this occasion, I think the urgency of this is needed, so we have to carry that out. We will not have another meeting of Parliament until next year, so this is the time when we can complete the urgent business that needs to be done and that was the thing. It is the urgency of the matter. Do not take it for granted that anything that government wishes, is carried out. I consider it very carefully before I agree.

Honourable Members, there being none, honourable Attorney-General, you have the floor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I do feel compelled to respond to honourable Professor Prasad's statement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you, for clarifying that because we have never, as you would testify, we have never seen the Secretary-General to Parliament, nor your good Office, Sir, as an extension of the executive. This is a narrative that the Opposition has tried to paddle and in fact, there is no good reason, honourable Gavoka. The honourable Speaker has just clarified. This is the problem. The problem is, you have a narrative and irrespective of the facts, you will still harp on the narrative. It is a fundamental issue.

Honourable Prasad, I have said this before, Sir, he is a permanent member of the Business Committee but he shows his condescension by not turning up to those meetings and if he did turn up to those meetings, he would also know that whenever we have had information on the Bills, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have informed the Business Committee of the content of those Bills. Whenever we have had the opportunity, we have always commented on the upcoming Bills. We have done that and the Minutes will actually reflect it, Sir. In this particular instance, obviously, we were not there and obviously, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were not able to give all the information, and I think this condescension of the office, I think it is not actually, does not augur well, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that we would like to make is that, the harmonisation of the nomenclature is essentially in alignment with international standards. All the countries in the world are adopting this. There is nothing scientific about this. It is just simply including it in our Schedule that tariff codes are everywhere in the world.

He went on about the other Bills, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and it seems that he has opened the door on that, the other two Bills are also urgent. We are giving the honourable Minister for Health the opportunity to be able to allow the importation and you will see that in the Explanatory Notes about COVID testing equipment because the Medicinal Board is made up of individuals and some of these individuals are putting restrictions on the ability of pharmacies to actually sell or import these products. We have COVID-19 in this country, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We want as many suppliers as possible of the rapid tests and the PCR tests because that will bring down the cost. That is why it has been introduced.

Similarly, we have the Hotel Licensing Board. We are simply saying now (honourable Gavoka should know this, he was a hotelier before) that every year a hotelier had to go and file for a licence (annual renewal) every year. What we are saying now, Sir, is if a hotel wants a licence up to five years, he will get it, this is giving confidence. We still have a number of hotels in the Mamanucas, in the Yasawas that have not opened doors and they want to open doors. It gives them confidence to be able to get a licence for a longer period. This is helping the economy, that is all there is. If you read the Bills, they are very short and there is no significant impact on anyone apart from actually creating a particular robustness within the specific area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I really cannot understand what the issue is. It is not like they have to read the whole book. They have got four days to read these Bills. We have got one hour each for each of these Bills to be debated if there is not going to be any debate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would urge Members to please read the Bills and we can then debate them on Thursday.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HOTELS AND GUEST HOUSES (AMENDMENT) BILL 2021

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the –

- (a) Hotels and Guest Houses (Amendment) Bill 2021 (Bill No. 37/2021), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament;
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 2nd December, 2021 and that one hour be given to debate the Bill, with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted earlier on, this particular Bill again simply seeks to give the ability under the law for hotel licences to be issued for a term up to five years. So it is up to the person seeking the application to upgrade the hotel whether they want their licence for one year or five years. This, of course, creates efficiency, we have talked about the ease of doing business, this puts less burden because every year when you apply which is the current position, three months before you have to prepare all the documents, put all the documentation together and make that application process.

This essentially is what it does, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it gives the hotel the ability to apply for a long period of licence, removes the administrative cost for them and also the existing law does empower the Hotel Licensing Board to be able to, for example, if someone makes an application for five years and they get the licence for five years, it gives the Licensing Board the ability to go on to the premises and see if there is a complaint made to be able to verify that they are actually complying with the licence so it does actually create a lot of certainty and within the tourism sector itself. So I urge Members to support this Bill, thank you, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. At the end of the debate, we will have the right of reply from the mover. Does anyone wish to take the floor? As no one wishes to take the floor, honourable Attorney-General you have the floor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- I have no further comments, thank you.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MEDICINAL PRODUCTS (AMENDMENT) (NO. 2) BILL 2021

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the –

- (a) Medicinal Products (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2021 (Bill No. 38/2021), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;

- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament;
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 2nd December, 2021 and that one hour be given to debate the Bill, with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

HON. LT.COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the notion.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a matter of urgency. Currently section 35 of the Act actually provides for the requirement to acquire a licence from the Fiji Medicinal Product Board to import, manufacture, export, store, distribute, sell or offer for sale any product regulated under the Act. While the Minister responsible for Health and Medical Services empower to exempt certain products which in the opinion of the Minister, say, for general use and specified by regulations made under the Act. The Minister may only make such an exemption in relation to the storage, distribution, sale or offer for sale. The Minister, however, Mr. Speaker, Sir, cannot make an exemption in relation to the import, manufacture or export of products.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted earlier on, we are getting tourists coming in. One of the requirements under the health protocols we have set up is that, a person who comes, for example, from Australia has to do a Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test in Australia 72 hours before they get on the plane. When they come to Fiji, of course, they have to be negative when they come to Fiji within the two or three days, they have to do a rapid test, and the rapid test actually has to be paid for by them. Mr. Speaker, Sir, then, before they leave, for example, they are going back to Sydney, Australia will only accept them if they do another PCR test. At the moment, if people are being charged \$250 to do a PCR test on the way back home, and there is a family of four, that is a \$1000. If they are being charged \$40 to the rapid test when they arrive in Fiji, that is another \$160.

Now we obviously need to have a number of products and also people who actually can do the testing other than the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, because they have other things to do. We have seen a couple of medical service providers from the private sector now come on board. The Ministry of Health and Medical Services who wants to get more players in the market, they also want to ensure, and Doctor Fong has got a list of all the rapid tests that have been approved by WHO (about 10 or 12 at the moment). The honourable Minister of Health does not want to actually go through this process where the Medicinal Board has to then say, 'you have to get a licence', et cetera, he wants to allow for those rapid tests and those brands to come into Fiji as soon as possible. So if there are many players in the market, the tourists will actually have to pay less money, so the hotels actually have a choice of products to choose from.

It is also what we have seen now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is creating a lot of jobs in the private sector, because a lot of hotels are now engaging, for example, in De Asa, Zens and various other people who have been approved to actually provide those services. They are hiring and recruiting medical technicians, laboratory technicians, nurses, et cetera. What we want to do is to take a holistic view and this is the holistic view which is to provide an ecosystem as far as the COVID-19 protocols are concerned, that we have good pricing so that a tourist when sitting in Sydney, does not say, "Oh, if I go to Fiji, before I go to Fiji I have to do my test for the four of us to pay probably \$250, \$300 or whatever they charge in Australia come to Fiji then fork out another \$160 and before I leave Fiji I have to pay out another \$1,000. By the way Thailand is only charging us \$40 each. So where do I go to?" So this is precisely the reason why I brought about this amendment so that actually we can have more products available in the markets where there are better pricing and it is regulated from their perspectives, Sir. So thus the amendment, thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. At the end of the debate we will have the right of reply from the mover. Anyone wishing to take the floor? There is no one wishing to take the floor, the honourable Attorney-General, you have the floor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Sir, I have nothing further to add.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's sitting. The Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.12 p.m.