

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

WEDNESDAY, 1ST DECEMBER, 2021

[CORRECTED COPY]

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WEDNESDAY, 1ST DECEMBER, 2021

The Parliament met at 9.34 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications and Housing and Community Development; honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport; honourable M.D. Bultavu; honourable Ratu S. Matanitobua; honourable Adi L. Qionibaravi and honourable T. Waqanika.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Tuesday, 30th November, 2021, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR.- 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 their homes, offices and electronic gadgets. Thank you for taking an interest in your Parliament.

World AIDS Day

Honourable Members, I would like us to take note that today is World AIDS Day; a day to remember the millions of people who have lost their lives to AIDS related illnesses, and the millions who are still suffering from AIDS. AIDS has been around for 40 years and continues to threaten the lives of many around the world. On this World AIDS Day, the theme is, "End Inequalities, End AIDS, End Pandemics". This is highlighting the urgent need to end the inequalities that drive AIDS and other pandemics around the world.

Ministry of Health and Medical Services - Diabetes Fiji Team

Honourable Members, please also take note that as part of Parliament's health awareness initiatives, a team from Diabetes Fiji will be joining us this morning at morning tea, to share more information about diabetes. They are accompanied by a team from the Ministry of Health and Medical Services who will also offer NCD screening for Members who wish to have a quick check. The Health team will also be offering booster shots for COVID-19 for those Members who wish to have this. This would be available at the Small Committee Room until 12.00 p.m. today.

Presentation of Committee Report

Honourable Members, with respect to the next item on the Order Paper, I am allowing a request from the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to table the Committee's Report after the final item on today's Order Paper. Thank you, honourable Members.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, and honourable Members of Parliament; *bula vinaka, ram ram*, and a very good morning to you all. I rise in this august Parliament to provide my support to the motion by the honourable Prime Minister to thank His Excellency the President for his most powerful and moving Address during the opening of the 2021-2022 Parliamentary Session.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I join my colleagues to congratulate His Excellency in his appointment as President. I salute him for the spirit of servant-hood that he portrays and the sacrifices he has made to extend his leadership to the nation and not limit his commitment, resources and time to his province alone. I commend him for his aspirations to preserve and strengthen our democratic society, and for his determination to use his leadership to support the highest possible functioning of the State and the work of the Executive to realise the objectives of our nation's Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, indeed, we, as politicians, represent different parties and different priorities. Regardless of our different ideologies, we must strive to serve the national interest and the interests of all Fijians, including women, men, children and the future generation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one cannot go without acknowledging the support rendered to Fiji during our COVID-19 response. International co-operation has boosted Government's efforts in ensuring the equitable provision of vaccines to all Fijians, which led to the accomplishment of more than 90 per cent eligible Fijians now fully vaccinated and protected from COVID-19. The fruit of this collaboration will materialise today, as we are going to open our border and welcome our tourists and close family relatives to our shores after months of closure.

This is a big achievement for us. Not only will this benefit our economy, but also boost employment in our tourism sector. While the COVID-19 pandemic brings us to a new battlefield, there is a battle that Small Island Developing nations, like our beloved Fiji, continue to be confronted with the battlefield of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I echo the sentiments of His Excellency the President in acknowledging the national delegation led by our honourable Prime Minister, to the COP26 meeting in Glasgow. At the frontline of our climate emergency, achieving resilience is deeply personal for every Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, furthermore I concur with His Excellency's comment that one of the proudest achievements by Fiji in COP is the establishment of the Ocean Pathway. We should be proud to be a leader in voicing the Pacific's concern to bigger developed nations in our fight for survival.

Being an island nation with 75 per cent of our country living within 5 kilometres of the coastline and the marine ecosystem valued at \$2.4 billion and home of 5 per cent of the world's reef's it is crucial that it take action to ensure that our natural resources are managed in a sustainable way. Marine resources are certainly under threat through factors such as climate change and over exploitation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the government is taking bold steps for our sake and our future generations in the issuance of Blue Bonds to provide investors with attractive investment opportunities which support

ocean-friendly sustainable development. We were able to get support from the United Kingdom, United Nations Development Programme and United Nations Capital Development Fund to help us with arrangements for the new marine protected areas, green shipping, fisheries initiatives and nature-based solutions to protect vulnerable communities from sea level rise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I concur with His Excellency's comment in regards to the Government effort, and I quote:

"... build the resilience of infrastructure and of entire communities and move others to higher ground, and adopt clean energy, like solar. And we have seen how our disaster readiness has improved to offer advance warning of storms that save lives."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from 2016 to-date a total of 13 disasters have struck Fiji with approximate damages costing \$3.13 billion with 79 deaths recorded. This includes stronger cyclones, severe and devastating floods, long and distressing droughts, the looming threat of sea-level rise and as we know, the impact will continue to rise in the coming years. For these reasons, I am grateful for our visionary Prime Minister who leads the climate change fight against the biggest culprits.

The renowned Category 5 super *TC Winston* made landfall in Fiji as the Southern Hemisphere's strongest ever storm. In 36 hours the value of one-third of our GDP was wiped away; 44 lives were lost; 40,000 homes were damaged or destroyed and 350 schools were flattened. This is a reality and science has indicated that the frequency of these events will continue to rise in the near future leaving footprints of lessons learnt as we build a future of uncertainty for our children.

We need a people-centred approach emphasis on risk informed approaches to strengthen Fiji's resilience and as His Excellency the President said, and I quote:

"... We must not be complacent in the fight against climate change. Our hard-won development gains continue to be undermined with the ever-increasing complexities of crisis brought by climate change."

The resilience of our nation continues to be tested now, evermore so with the impacts of climate change. Beginning in December last year the nation braced itself against *TC Yasa*. Just as we were on the cusp of recovery, *TC Ana* made landfall. In partnership with the World Bank a climate vulnerability assessment was conducted that put the cost of climate proofing Fiji's development at \$9.3 billion over 10 years.

In the past, Fiji was fortunate to have some breathing space between the impacts of natural hazards. I still remember when we would have at the most, one major meteorological event in the cyclone season. This allowed us ample time to focus the right amount of effort into mitigation and preparedness activities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the global COVID-19 pandemic combined with the real threat of climate change has had to make us rethink our strategy towards development. Fiji cannot make progress as a country, if everything we build is wiped away every time a disaster strikes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am delighted to advise this august Parliament that we are building back better, not only in terms of infrastructure but also our governance structure. The National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) through lessons learnt from past disasters is continuing to improve disaster management operations by developing Policies, Manuals and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that will contribute to effective disaster management systems and processes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these documents have been developed as outcomes of lessons learnt from past disasters. Despite the fact that our nation is often in the front line of natural hazards, we have recognised that they provide an attribution of opportunities to build back better.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the development of these guiding documents, the NDMO has gone one step further to revise its disaster management training packages that are rightly aligned. This revised package is now cost effective consisting of a three-day training, with focused topics targeted to civil servants who are directly engaged in disaster operations.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must also highlight that NDMO has partnered with Partners for Community Development Fiji (PCDF), Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in conducting Community Disaster Risk Management Training. These trainings have been conducted in a number of communities in the country, as part of our preparedness and disaster risk reduction mainstreaming.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure that Government's effort to improve and strengthen disaster risk management governance, we also want to ensure that the beneficiaries, that is, the individual can appreciate them. And this is done through the legal mandated Annual National Disaster Awareness Week celebration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the main objective of the week-long celebration is to create behavioural change among individuals towards disaster risk reduction and to drive this the media has been leveraged through a seven month long national disaster campaign.

We will ensure that disaster preparedness messages will reach the remotest areas and individuals. This year, despite COVID-19 restrictions, we again leveraged technology to broadcast the launching of natural disaster awareness week and three webinars.

While the disaster awareness week addresses communication through community engagement, communication infrastructure is also being installed in our remote locations. Recently, the funding support from the Japanese Government, the NDMO installed HF radios across nine Emergency Operation Centres (EOC) in the Northern Division. In addition, I would like to acknowledge Live and Learn for the donation of computers to be used with the already donated HF radios. These backup telecommunications will ensure that there is continued communications in the North, even in the event of main telecommunication structures has been brought down by hazards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, following the conduct of national operation readiness check, our Government partners NGOs and CSOs stand at 70 per cent state of readiness to respond to an event. Preparation activities continued with these agencies to ensure a full 100 per cent achievement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of NDMOs preparation, we have prepositioned key strategic assets and Non-Food Items (NFIs) in the Western Division, Rotuma and plan is also in place to move the same across in the Northern Division this week. This will ensure quick deployment of assistance to affected communities in the aftermath of a disaster. Furthermore, the Preparedness, Mitigation and Prevention Committee and the National Disaster Management Council has convened a discussion of state of readiness, as we once again prepare the nation for another cyclone season.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a total of 39 Emergency Operation Centres (EOCs) spread across Fiji, four Divisional Emergency Operation Centres (DEOCs) and one National Emergency Operation Centre (NEOC). Operational readiness checks all our Divisional and District's EOCs have been conducted that identifies a 60 per cent state of readiness. We have pre-positioned strategic assets and non-food items to reach a hundred per cent of readiness across all four Divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the overlaps between multiple hazards are like to intensify as a result of climate change. Overlapping hazards, along with interconnectedness of economies at different scales are creating systemic risks that demand more sustained and rigorous approach. These are emerging issues that require a shift in disaster risk reduction and designing of strategies that will drive the localised solution on climate change adaptation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, climate change is again rearing its head and remind us of its impacts on our development range. This year, the Fiji Meteorological Services in Nadi has forecasted three severe tropical cyclones to make landfall. I cannot stress enough the words of His Excellency the President that we must not be complacent in our fight against climate change.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the impacts of climate change may not be reduced any time in the near future and natural hazards and pandemics may continue to reach our shores. Through the tremendous efforts of the Government, individuals, communities at large with the support of our development partners, our national resilience will continue to grow and strengthen to cushion the impacts of natural disasters. Only together we can do this.

With those few words, I wish members of this august Parliament a safe and merry Christmas and a New Year filled with amazing opportunities and prosperity.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and fellow honourable Members of Parliament, before I make my contribution to His Excellency the President's most gracious Address, I would like to offer my condolences to the family of honourable Bulitavu for the loss of his dear father. I pray that peace will be your portion and may the late senior old boy, Mr. Nemani Bulitavu, rest in peace. *Ni qai moce toka mada na kai bure Teri Kauwai*. I would also like to wish the honourable Adi Litia Qionibaravi a speedy recovery and prayers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now wish to offer my congratulations to His Excellency on his appointment as the 6th President of the Republic of Fiji. I must from the onset pay special attention to the acknowledgement of His Excellency the President that he is the youngest President to be appointed to the high office of the State. Mr. Speaker, Sir, such an appointment is crucial as it sets the platform for young people to aspire to the same kind of esteemed appointments at a young age. It is refreshing to see that we do not have to be very old and retired to enter these various crucial appointments.

It would be remiss of me not to thank the former President, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote for his services to our country as he has been President in the last six years. We thank him sincerely and whilst he may not have been the choice of the Opposition camp, every time we met or visited the State House, he treated us no differently, as he knew exactly his role which is to unify the nation and our people disregarding the political differences that are irrelevant to nation building. It is these shoes that the *Gone Turaga na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, in his new role as our new President will need to fill. I am comforted that he will do this even better, because his personality and background has taught him to value all people at all times, irrespective of race, age, creed, religion or other personal preferences.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today marks a special day in Fiji's history post COVID-19, as we again join our international friends in making Fiji an alternative place to live, travel, do business and holiday. Everyone has looked forward to this day, and I can imagine the prayers of each tourism industry worker, each hotel worker, each eatery owner who caters for this specific industry and all those linked to this extensive sector in some way or another. Everyone has prayed and looked for answers to the difficulties we have all faced as a nation, when COVID-19 hit our shores without warning, and robbed families of economic independence.

I know that we all know of a family that has suffered silently because their usual lives have been turned upside down. I know of families that have been torn apart, as a result of this cruel and unforgiving pandemic. We all know our children have suffered immensely because their usual needs have not been catered to, not by choice but by unfortunate circumstances.

Therefore today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must all celebrate as we slowly and carefully reopen our borders after almost two years without any international travel, and I know we have been all praying that our people who work in the tourism industry and have suffered extensively and unexpectedly, can now return to some normalcy in their lives.

On that note, I send my love and prayers to all those in our frontline as we all welcome our first visitors back to our shores. From airport workers, flight crew, immigration and customs officials, medical quarantine teams, police and security personnel, especially our hotel workers. You are in our thoughts and I wish you well, much safety and inspiration that you will hold your heads high and carry out your duties diligently so that any other threatening waves will not have to devastate our nation again, and no lives need to be lost because someone decided to lose concentration. It will be incumbent on you all to remember that you are our first line of defense and whilst we will be cheering for you all the way, we will also have faith that you will conduct yourselves in a responsible manner befitting the trust of the nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the nation picks up from where COVID-19 has reduced us, to one that is now highly dependent on international aid and assistance, may I also take this time to thank our friends from around the world, who did not turn a blind eye to our sufferings during such a time as this. Your assistance and support will be long remembered and it is such gestures that remind us all of the saying, "A friend in need is a friend indeed". *Vinaka vakalevu.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will turn my attention to the issue of Fiji's young democracy as outlined by His Excellency in his Address. I entered politics when I was 42 years of age, and I know of others much younger who have also entered into this august House likewise. It has been a turbulent journey for me and for our young democracy to try as best as we can to hold onto the fabrics of sanity most times as political differences and party differences have often threatened to compel me to walk away from such service and call of duty to our country.

Like, His Excellency the President, I have watched from the sidelines for a long time the challenges our nation and our people have had to go through as we fought to understand how democracy is supposed to run and be experienced through the election of leaders. I was one of the first persons to be unemployed and accused of misdemeanor in the 2006 *coup*. I am well aware, however, that there were hundreds and thousands of others who suffered similar or worse in 1987 and in 2000, and such experiences has left a sour taste in people's mouths as we discourse on Fiji's political journey.

I am, therefore, at pains to see that sadly, tribalism and egoism have been at the forefront of national politics and governance by so called leaders over time, who instead of carrying out the crucial business of nation-building, they have contributed instead to tearing down peace, tearing down unity and stability because for them, their own status, their own pockets and their own families have been more important than that young person, that young mother, that farmer, that villager who needs assistance and who went to the polls because they trusted that we would get to this august House and be true to our words to look after their needs.

Sadly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, many of us get to this House and never go back to see the people who gave us their votes. Many of us engage in lies during election campaigns and we get votes using misinformation and disinformation, and these distortions confuse our vulnerable voters to vote for leaders who, are only seen during elections campaigns and disappear into the forest for the next four years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the business of entering Parliament must be a noble job, one which we are soon to engage in again through our national general elections to elect the next batch of leaders who will come and stand in this very place where I am standing and advocate for the ordinary person on our streets and in our communities. Like the wise words of His Excellency, I long for the day I will see our people appreciate the guts of those who choose to come and provide services to our people through these historic hallways.

I join His Excellency in educating our people to appreciate the will to serve by those who will allow themselves to be candidates for the next Elections and I call upon people to engage in meaningful discourse. We must do away and denounce those who tear down aspiring politicians on social media and in public. We must denounce the personalisation of attacks against candidates, especially uncalled for attacks against our women who are already marginalised in a predominantly patriarchal society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important our people understand that election campaigns are a time for careful consideration of who we can entrust our lives to for the next four years as they become elected leaders. So we must extract only the much needed messages to make well informed choices and any extra noise must be denounced and discouraged.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now speak briefly on the issues of social and economic recovery. The world is being transformed by the COVID-19 crisis, whose impacts are expected to be more severe than the 2008 Financial Crisis. Global poverty is set to increase according to the World Bank for the first time in 30 years, and developing countries risk falling further behind in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is being affected via historical declines in commodity prices and remittances, and unprecedented reversals in capital flows which have fueled a deep loss of confidence and exacerbated vulnerability to other potential shocks. Already before the COVID-19 pandemic hit Fiji, we had been struggling with rising public and private debt levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not the time to be unnecessarily finger-pointing or playing politics with our situation. In a one-for-all and all-for-one effort, we need all hands on deck and all wisdom to collectively address our various challenges so that we can reduce the risks and losses the pandemic has brought about. Therefore, the potential stress on development resources makes a tailored and smart deployment of available resources more essential than ever, and thereby such support must focus on fostering a recovery that addresses Fiji's most critical structural challenges.

May I make a few suggestions, Mr. Speaker, our country must take a multipronged approach to focus extensively on development of our domestic resources for both internal and external use. A lot has been said over the years about our agricultural sector and I note that during this pandemic, families are being driven to now utilise land for their domestic consumption as well as for commercial participation.

That is commendable, Mr. Speaker, and it is incumbent on the Ministry of Agriculture to support this sector with well-planned assistance by way of capital infrastructure, tools, seedlings and other forms of technical assistance. I would like to request the Government to also identify markets for these much-needed products which can actually see a reversal of our import and export trends if well-planned and executed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are also ocean-related initiatives that have not had the focus they deserve. Fiji needs to make our ocean-based sectors more sustainable, resilient and this need to be priority in recovery efforts together with unlocking new sustainable economic opportunities that can foster diversification and resilience.

Fiji's vast ocean resources provide some of the most tangible opportunities for our more diverse set of economic activities supporting new and emerging ocean economy opportunities in ways that foster significant linkages and multiplier effects across multiple economic and social areas will be key to achieving a fast and resilient recovery. Such "blue" recovery will need to be centred around:

- Addressing the debt situation in Fiji to preserve fiscal space for investments for a sustainable and resilient recovery.
- Enhancing the sustainability and resilience of critical and highly affected economic sectors, such as tourism and other ocean economy sectors, making sure that support across these sectors include a climate and broader environment focus.
- Exploring new ocean economy opportunities that can sustainably foster economic diversification and resilience, including by exploring additional long-term development co-operation schemes, such as international cost-sharing mechanisms for the conservation and sustainable use of ocean assets and schemes to enhance expertise and risk assessment for emerging ocean-related economic activities. This is an area that will come under a lot of focus in the near future and if Government conducts the necessary dialogue to secure proper bilateral agreements that can enhance these sort of trade opportunities - that will need the coordinated efforts of Government, local resource owners, investors and international partners.

Mr. Speaker Sir, let us be innovative and daring in our efforts to rejuvenate our economy. Other sectors that need attention include the building industry. I have emphasised in this august House before that housing needs will always be a security issue and any responsible Government will make the connection between the building industry and housing for our people so that easy-to-build affordable homes become a private public partnership programme that is targeted to meet the needs of our first-time home owners, our squatter settlers and those in dire need for properties.

This industry can become a partnership project between Government and private sector players, something like the Housing Authority and Public Rental Board in association with Land Owning Units, but perhaps done with construction companies that would be keen to give back their services for the betterment of our people at more affordable rates. If there are lessons we should learn from COVID-19, it is to assist our people not to become displaced when unexpected occurrences happen which can place them at vulnerable positions beyond coping.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister along with the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy have just returned from Glasgow and I note their various recommendations and negotiations made, and my position on climate change resilience and mitigation remains the same – "Nothing for us, without us".

The Government of the day needs to remember that the Opposition Members of Parliament are also representatives of the people and make up almost 50 per cent of those who voted in 2018. Our involvement at such meetings would provide for a united effort to combat the effects of climate change.

On that note, Mr Speaker, here at the homefront, there are a lot of issues that need addressing to assist our people economically, socially and politically. These needs range from infrastructural needs to education and social welfare, and these are very crucial issues which Government is obligated to address.

For electricity needs, Mr. Speaker, Sir, five villages along the Nasau Road access in Ra, namely Nawairuku, Korovou, Namara, Sawanivo and Culanuku are requesting Government if it is possible to

consider giving them a Christmas gift by connecting electricity from the already existing Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) grid.

I am sure, with the honourable Minister's concurrence, such a gesture would go a long way in uplifting the lives of our people, who will appreciate the Government that is responsible for their needs.

HON. MEMBER.- (Inaudible)

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- That's where you come in, honourable Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the same token, my colleagues have also highlighted many roads around the country that need government attention and it is hoped that these will likewise be addressed. I would like to request government that the villagers and settlements along the new Kaba Peninsula Road request for bus services to be provided in that area, as currently they have to hire vehicles to transport them to and from Nausori Town.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Ministry of Health, maybe the honourable Minister can update this House on the new Rotuma Hospital Construction Phase 2. Some contractors are still awaiting payment from the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) for works already done two years ago.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year has been a bad year in terms of consistent water disruptions, especially along the Suva-Nausori corridor, as well as the Lami to Navua stretch and each single day and night, water disruptions will be occurring much to the sufferings of ordinary citizens who have had their complaints totally ignored. There is something that is just not right at the Water Authority of Fiji. Every time it rains heavily, water disruptions will occur and excuses provided will be broken down dams and blocked pipes. Sir, I have earlier said that the performance of a government will be measured during voting time, and I urge Government not to forget the promises that they had made to our people and deliver on them.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this time to wish your good self and your family a blessed festive season and wish all the Members of this august House a blessed Christmas and a safe passage to the year 2022. I also wish each and every citizen of this great nation and all our friends and allies a peaceful season of merry making as we celebrate the birth of Christ and prepare ourselves for what is in store for the new year to come.

I also pray for the safekeeping over our contingent headed for the Happy Isles and on that note, I want our brothers and sisters in the Solomon Islands to know that our thoughts and prayers are with them always as we traverse and manoeuvre their beautiful country through this challenging period in their lives.

I also wish each seasonal worker, rugby player, caregiver, nurse and all other professionals living and serving abroad and giving back to Fiji much success in their future endeavours and know that they are loved and appreciated always for all that they do for the people and our beloved country.

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the public watching this livestream from the comfort of your homes through your cell phones or listening to the live broadcast on radio; a very good morning and *bula vinaka* to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I, at this juncture, just on behalf of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence convey our well wishes to our colleague, the honourable Adi Litia Qionibaravi, who is at this present time admitted at the Lautoka Hospital, a speedy recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my response to the Address of His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji on Monday, 22nd November, 2021 in this august Parliament. I wish to start by congratulating His Excellency the President, *Na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, for being inaugurated as the sixth President and also the youngest Head of State of our beloved nation Fiji. May I take his opportunity to thank our outgoing President, His Excellency Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote for his esteemed and distinguished service to the nation and having served two terms with distinction and compassion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank His Excellency the President for his thought provoking Address, challenging all parliamentarians in this august Parliament today, that even though he may not have had the same number of years of service in public life, like many of us, he has been in leadership long enough to see the difference between the genuine democracy that is being shared today, and the democracy of the past systems that fell short of delivering true equality for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, fittingly outlined the struggles and progress Fiji has made democratically over the years, and has assured our nation that he will protect our young democracy from anyone who seeks to extinguish it for personal or political purposes. In my view, a democracy is where the power of the people does not begin and end at the ballot box.

Democracy means including our citizens at every step of the way in our policies and decision making process. Inclusivity is key to any democracy. Democracy may have its problems, but it is still the best system of large scale governance anywhere. I believe, having democracy means having a nation that can inspire and mobilise others to overcome threats like climate change, terrorism, poverty and disease.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the COVID-19 global pandemic posed a new challenge to governmental decision making, not only for this FijiFirst Government, but for many other democratically elected governments around the world. With a great level of uncertainty regarding the roots, spread, prevention and effects of the pandemic, and with scientific insights and recommendations changing on a daily basis, politicians like us, face the difficult task of reacting quickly, but wisely to these developments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our nation has been battling with this global pandemic for two years now and we are still counting. In April this year, Fiji went from having no COVID-19 to having the highest per capita infection rate in the world. The rapid spread and severity of the infection caught many by surprise, and our health system was challenged and occasionally overwhelmed, but as we know, health workers stepped up to the plate and responded professionally and effectively, ably assisted by members of the uniformed forces and civil services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what this Government does and the decision it makes in the next few days, weeks and months from now, will echo through generations to come, therefore, we must act with wisdom, foresight and urgency. As we approach the festive season, let us give thanks for all that we have, because if there is one thing that we have learnt during these difficult times, it is to be appreciative of life. I wish you all and your family, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a merry Christmas and a prosperous 2022. May God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will take a break for half-an-hour morning tea. Please, remember that the Diabetes Team will be in the Small Committee Room during the break. We take an adjournment.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.24 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.20 a.m.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- I thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to respond to His Excellency the President's Address for the opening of this new parliamentary session. I convey my congratulations to His Excellency Ratu Wiliame Katonivere on his appointment and I wish him well. *Siga damu 'a vanua vakaturaga o Caumatalevu.*

I also acknowledge the former President, Major-General (Retired) Jioji Konrote, for his term of service to the country which has come to an end.

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency the President had reminded us that democracy created under our Fijian Constitution will wither with our complacency, but comes alive with public's participation.

Mr. Speaker, I must say that I find this statement rather ironical. Therefore, in my response, I will focus on the issue and concept of democracy, as alluded to by His Excellency the President, and give corresponding examples to highlight the gaps that exist in our so-called democracy – the gaps that have come about in the implementation and application of the legislative framework, policies and programmes of the Government.

Indeed, our democracy has taken many forms and the examples will help us see how our democracy has grown, the shape and colour it has achieved, resulting from the decision-making of the leadership that wields power in Parliament in the Judiciary, the Executive and also through the media.

Mr. Speaker, at the outset, let me say that the people are not being complacent – people want true and genuine democracy. The people are eager, willing and ready to participate and promote democratic processes, practices and principles. But, unfortunately, it is the FijiFirst Government that has intentionally designed the 2013 Constitution to hoodwink the people into believing that it would bring us genuine democracy.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, they have continuously failed to consult the people and deliberately denied the people of Fiji that opportunity to participate in nurturing and promoting our democracy. For example, let us look at the Constitution and we will recall that the Yash Ghai Draft Constitution that involved wide consultation and participation by the people throughout Fiji, was burnt. And that was done by the same authority that now sits here as the FijiFirst Government.

That burning sent out clear warning signals to the people, not to disagree with the Government. That burning of the Draft Constitution warned the people that the ultimate power is with the FijiFirst Government and not the people. That burning signified the erosion of our democracy. Furthermore, that burning resulted in a huge loss of public funds and also humiliation and intimidation of the very well-qualified Constitutional Commission members.

The FijiFirst Government created and imposed the 2013 Constitution, which has been met with wide rejection by the people. And to counter this, the Government came up with a Constitution public holiday, and renaming of the street outside Parliament as the Constitution Avenue. Unfortunately, this has failed to buy people's acceptance because the 2013 Constitution is a product of the 2006 *coup* that was led by the honourable Prime Minister Bainimarama himself.

HON. MEMBER.- You are here because of the 2013 Constitution.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- This is the reality of the Fiji brand of democracy, which is looking more like Parliamentary dictatorship, Mr. Speaker. The Government side and their excellences' – the former and current Presidents - have always argued that this Constitution gives democracy to Fiji. But

in the past years, we have seen restrictive legislation to stifle media and curtail the rights of peaceful assembly and the freedom of expression even to the point of suppression of dissenting voices.

Mr. Speaker, freedom of expression, freedom of speech, freedom of association are cornerstones of democracy which are touted in the 2013 Constitution but with subtle limitations and restrictions. For example, we will recall Members of the Opposition - the Leader of NFP, honourable Professor Biman Prasad, honourable Gavoka, honourable Tabuya, honourable Qionibaravi - were all harassed by the Police and taken to Criminal Investigation Department (CID) for questioning because they voiced their criticisms on the lack of consultations with key stakeholders on Bill No. 17 to amend the Itaukei Land Trust Act.

Likewise, the NGO coalition on human rights raised their voices and demanded for greater consultation and collaborations with all relevant key stakeholders regarding any proposed changes to any laws. But unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, this FijiFirst Government does not listen to the people. So, what type of democracy is this? Are the members of the public complacent? Is the Opposition complacent in undertaking our Parliamentary oversight role or is the separation of power between the legislature, judiciary and executive becoming very blurred because of political interference? So, who is not allowing the people to participate in building our democracy, Mr. Speaker?

Having said that we ask the question again, is that the type of democracy His Excellency the President refers to when he said, and I quote:

“... he will protect the young flame of our democracy from any and all who seek to extinguish it for personal and political purposes and I will use my leadership to support the highest possible functioning of the State and the work of the Executive to realise the objectives of our constitution. We have far too much left to achieve to let sideshows dominate our national discourse”.

These words by His Excellency the President are sounding more like a threat rather than a call for unity to continue to build our democracy. We must note that His Excellency the President is the Commander-in-Chief of the Fiji Military Forces. Secondly, Section 131(2) of the 2013 Constitution mandates the Fiji Military Forces with the overall responsibility to ensure at all times the security, defence and wellbeing of Fiji and all Fijians.

That, Mr. Speaker, strongly suggests that Fiji is more like a military regime because in other jurisdictions, in other countries, this is the role of any democratically elected government and not the military. And it is very worrying to hear His Excellency the President making that call because one wonders who wrote his address. And what is meant by, what is left to be achieved? By whom? Why? How? For whom?

Mr. Speaker, another nagging issue brought about by this 2013 Constitution is Section 53(1) - the single national constituency. This Section has been deliberately designed to disadvantage aspiring candidates from other political parties in standing for the general election and this is because of Fiji's very challenging geographical layout too.

The single national constituency does not provide a level playing field. For those reasons I must say that the one constituency model is not suitable for Fiji because it does not encourage Members of Parliament especially those in the Opposition to know their constituents and their issues of concern in regards to poor public service delivery and any other issues they may have. Unfortunately for Fiji, Mr. Speaker, this is another perfect example of how the structures of democracy are designed in the 2013 Constitution, to ensure that the FijiFirst Government remains in power.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in any true democracy, Members of Parliament, especially Members of the Opposition, are resourced adequately to be able to effectively carry out their important role in visiting and meeting their voters and I will give you examples. In the previous term of Parliament, we, the women Members of Parliament at that time, went for a Parliamentary visit to East Timor and East Timor was just rebuilding from internal conflict.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, their system was that, they sit in Parliament for every week from Monday to Wednesday, on Thursday and Friday, everyone goes out for Constituency work and all Members regardless of whether you are in Government or Opposition, they are all provided with transport and the necessary resources. That is a true democracy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again in the previous Session, we have a twinning programme with Victoria Parliament and in one of our visits, we were also taken on a tour on each Members' office in their constituency. So, all Members were provided office, transport and all other required resources, to be able to undertake this important role of our Parliamentary duties to visit our voters. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been denied that.

Our system has been designed in such a way, that we are given \$15,000 per Member and that \$15,000 goes to the Party. There is prohibition that any of that money is allocated to any Member to undertake constituency work. And constituency work is a pillar of our Parliamentary work and this is why I am raising this because...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER. Order, order!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Even though His Excellency the President has alluded to genuine democracy, the democratic processes in place does not allow genuine democracy to happen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also we will note that here in Parliament and also on the formulation of the Standing Order which emanates out from Section 71(1) of the 2013 Constitution, mandates us to formulate our Standing Orders and particular parts of that Standing Order, restricts the work done by Members of the Opposition.

For example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we started this Parliament in 2014, we were doing very well and then as we progress, Standing Orders was changed I think about five times and because of that changes, petitions from the members of the public are killed on the floor of Parliament because we vote and the government deliberately uses its majority numbers to kill the people's voices carried in that petition on the floor of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also in our visits to other jurisdictions to other Parliaments, the honourable Prime Minister is given a one hour question time without notice on the floor of Parliament but in our Standing Order, we have to submit questions for almost two weeks.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- (Inaudible)

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Exactly honourable Koroilavesau, that is why I am trying to emphasise how our democracy is looking like.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, another aspect of our Standing Order is the removal of the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, Order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- What a lie!

HON. S.V. \RADRODRO.- Honourable Usamate, that is our role in the Opposition to keep you in check whether the roads are done, whether the waiting shelter in the rural and maritime areas are done.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Do not carry out a conversation between you two, just because you are seated opposite each other; it is through the Speaker. You have the floor.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They do not know what democracy is.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Still for the benefit of Honourable Usamate, last weekend, I went to Nadi and he should do that quite recently because the tarseal on the road is all melting and the road becomes very slippery. We wonder, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are so many accidents in Fiji.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I go to Nadi every Friday.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- That is the importance of why Members of Parliament should be given the opportunity, adequately resourced to visit the people and come to Parliament, let you know and listen and go and carry out the work that you are supposed to be doing.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Listen, listen to her.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, we have also seen the massive recruitment of expatriate CEOs,....

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Oh come on!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- ... overlooking our very well qualified people and that is part of this FijiFirst's Government's Public Service Reform. Mr. Speaker, Sir, a good functional government, ministry or statutory body delivering effective and efficient public service is paramount in supporting the democratic functions of the executive, as mandated under the Constitution. The civil servant has seen a big recruitment of CEOs from overseas and soon after they arrive, they are going back to their countries due to resignation of reasons like ill-health, family reasons or just any other reason.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- They are fed up of hearing comments about them in Parliament, that is why they left.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- They talk about merit recruitment. These are very meritorious people. Because the power in Fiji that does not agree to these expatriate Permanent Secretaries doing

their jobs the way it should be done, just like the burning of the Constitution. When it is not up to what they want, it is either their way or the high way and that is the practice by this Government.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash! Speculation.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- How can you say that, Honourable Usamate, when you know that people have come and gone?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, still on the civil service and the statutory bodies, let me highlight the sacking of the CEO of the Bureau of Statistics.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Oh, come on!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, he was sacked because he highlighted the poverty data in Fiji. In that, he highlighted the certain categories of poverty pockets in Fiji. In one of those, he highlighted that the poverty classification criteria included ethnicity which is race and religion. That was met with a lot of rejection from the honourable Attorney-General.

Mr. Speaker, let me remind the other side of the House that they should look beyond that and do not demonise race and religion. That poverty statistic is telling us volumes on the rate of poverty in Fiji and any responsible government will use those indicators and formulate new policies and new programmes that will be able to address this high poverty statistics in the iTaukei communities in Fiji. So instead of interjecting, what are the new ways you are looking at this poverty statistic? How will you address poverty in Fiji which has been heightened now by the onslaught of COVID-19?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on local government, after 2006, Municipal Councils' lawyers and Councillors that were elected were sacked and that demonstrated erosion of democracy, weakening of political rights; the very rights provided for in the 2013 Constitution. The former Ministers responsible for Local Government; two of them, honourable Praveen Bala and honourable Premila Kumar promised in this House that the Local Government Act will be reviewed. Now they have moved on and that has still not been done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they know that the current Local Government Act which has different councillors does not augur well and they cannot synchronise that with the national electoral system. That is why the Local Government is left as it is. They cannot find a way to rectify their own electoral changes in the Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Ministry of Women and Poverty Alleviation, I plead with all of us in this House and also in Fiji to observe the 16 days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence and that is from 25th November to 10th December. For all of us listening in, do something nice to the women of Fiji. Go and do the domestic work, go and bring in the food that you are supposed to be bringing in. Look after the children in the house and just be loving to the women in your household. As we know, love conquers all.

Money will not buy that, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is the individual that will have to play their part and love the women of Fiji as they loved themselves.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we in the Opposition are not complacent, we are speaking out and pleading with the Government to listen to the people, so together we can make the people's priority

be the Government priority and together, we build a more sincere and genuine democracy for the well-being of Fijians.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I make this call to all those that are watching TV or the Parliamentary Live feed, to those listening in over the radio, please wake up. *Ni yadra mada*, pull the wool from your eyes and see that democracy in our country is masked in Parliamentary dictatorship and let us vote this FijiFirst Government out in the 2022 General Elections.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of this august House, I rise to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Speech on the State Opening of Parliament 2021-2022.

I also would like to take this opportunity to congratulate His Excellency, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, on his appointment as the President of the Republic of Fiji. His Excellency has rightfully mentioned on page 5 of the *Daily Hansard* of Monday, 22nd November, 2021, and I quote:

“...the democracy created under our Fijian Constitution will wither with our complacency but comes alive with the public participation, as it does its values with principles”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Constitution continues to provide equal opportunities for all Fijians. It is rather sad to know that some members of the Opposition continue to discredit the 2013 Constitution. None of them had issues while contesting elections and taking oaths under the same Constitution. But to gain political mileage. It is disappointing to note that they continuously discredit the very document that allowed them to be inside here.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture is and will remain the backbone of our nation. It was evident when we were battling the COVID-19 pandemic in Fiji, we did not lack the supply of fresh fruits and vegetables in the local markets and the hard work of our farmers and the Ministry of Agriculture Officials must be commended. It was through their sheer determination, willingness and hard work that the supply of locally-grown agriculture products were maintained. The Ministry of Agriculture continues to support farmers and also over the last few months had rolled out some major initiatives to enable and maintain supply chain of agriculture produce for local markets and exports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture I wish to share with this august Parliament the Ministry's new initiative for 2021-2022 financial year. To be able to achieve the full desired impact of farmers progressively improving their scale of operation and as part of our intention to transform farming to modernise agriculture and rehabilitate the sector, the Ministry will be rolling out nine new initiatives ranging from the commercial farmers equity programme to the provision of fencing kits, hydroponic system programme, irrigation kit, intensive dairy farming, land clearing, establishment of fruit tree orchards, protected agriculture, small farming equipment and women in agriculture programmes.

This year, 2021 and 2022, the Ministry of Agriculture has redirected its support towards commercial farming to strengthen consistent volumes of produce that will enhance agriculture business ventures. Commercial farmers' equity package allows commercial farmers and agro-processors to apply for equity assistance through FDB commercial loans. The CFEP targets farmers and processors who are interested in investing and expanding their agriculture ventures.

Altogether, there are nine categories of packages for the CFEP targeting 29 beneficiaries within which the Ministry of Agriculture will make an equity contribution of 20 per cent towards the total loan package. The purpose of the loan offered is to fund farm mechanisation, agriculture infrastructure support and agro-processing equipment and infrastructure.

Eligibility for CFEP includes farmers with those over five years' experience in commercial farming and exhibit the ability to repay the loan even during times of uncertainty. The nine categories of packages are as follows.

The first Programme is Fencing Kit. Individual farmers and clustered farmers were encouraged to apply for fencing kit initiative and priority is provided to existing beef, goat and sheep farmers who are willing to show commitment in upscaling their farms towards commercial-level farming. The 2021-2022 fencing kit initiative targets 150 beef farms, 110 sheep farms and 80 goat farms with a particular focus on first time applicants, who will provide labour for developing relevant infrastructural support within three months of delivery.

Assistance provided by the Ministry of Agriculture towards this initiative includes 2.5 acre fencing package for goat and sheep farms and five-acre fencing package for beef farm. Part of the requirement is that, applicants have to be fully vaccinated, own a five-acre land title or a formal written consent from landowner, showing evidence of owning either, at least, 10 breeding cows and a bull or 20 breeding does and should possess three years of experience in beef, goat or sheep farming.

Also I would like to respond to the issue raised by honourable Kuridrani during his statement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, regarding one farmer, Mrs. Khan from Sigatoka that the assistance has not reached her, I have a report here with me - a brief report on Mr. Mohammed Shameem Khan and Mrs. Khan, and the beef farm registered WSB 184 is located at Ciri, Malomalo, Nadroga/Navosa.

The farm was registered in 2009 with the Ministry of Agriculture. Mr. and Mrs. Khan ventured into beef farming with purchase of beef stock and fencing of 44 hectares. Mrs. Khan approached the Ministry of Agriculture Office in 2010, requesting for assistance from the Ministry of Agriculture on stockyard and nutrition improvement. At this time, she had a total stock of 87.

In 2011 under the Food Security Programme (FSP), the amount approved was \$10,860 and project name was Nutrition and Infrastructure Development. A full stockyard of the capacity of 80 to 100 cattle was established with the planting of signal grass as nursery.

In 2014 under the Dairy Industry Support (DIS) Programme, the amount approved was \$5,217.06 - establishment of drying shed, a milk room, storeroom, milking parlour was established with water system.

In 2015 under the FSP Programme, \$13,063.50 was approved ...

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Stop lying.

HON. V. PILLAY.- ...nutrition improvement and intensive feeding shed with water system for steers were established, with the shredder for the cut, carry and feeding system.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Tell them, tell them!

HON. V. PILLAY.- In the year 2020-2021 under the DIS Programme, \$15,000 was approved. The extension of the existing dairy shed with stockyard and improvement of water systems were established.

There was another programme under ITC and under EU - Nutrition Improvement, whereby the farmer was supplied with electric fencing and normal fencing of five acres with full set of irrigation ...

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Plenty lies.

HON. V. PILLAY.- ... and establishment of mulato grass on the five acres. All those were implemented by the Pasture Section.

Also, Mrs. Khan's daughter is operating a seedling nursery, planting Yasi and vegetable seedlings. The Ministry of Agriculture has been paying for the seedling, for the farmers of Nadroga/Navosa.

The Beef Project that was assisted provides that the farmer will supply the steers to the formal market. However, this did not eventuate as the farmer still opted to sell from farm gate, saying she is fetching a good price. Today, Mrs. Khan has a total of 92 cattle, and it shows that there is no progress increment to her beef stock over the 12 years.

The second Programme is Hydroponic System Programme. The Ministry of Agriculture's Hydroponic System Programme encourages clusters or individuals to establish hydroponic farms. The programme targets 20 recipients who demonstrate the ability to sustainably operate the system, highlight sustainable growth in their farming venture and provide evidence of established market access.

Through this Programme, the Ministry of Agriculture will provide full hydroponic systems, contribute consumables, including nutrients, growing cups and media for first cycles. Successful applicants will be expected to set up their kits within the first three months of delivery and attend a training on installation and operation of the hydroponic system. Recipients are also expected to provide evidence of the agricultural knowledge and commitment, should have available area to set up hydroponic system and should be able to provide his or her own consumables from second month onwards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the third Programme is the Intensive Dairy Farm Programme (IDF) that seeks to raise individuals of clustered dairy farmer's capability towards agricultural commercial venture status. The programme focus is on developing large scale dairy farms where the total cost of development is \$450,000 is co-shared between the Ministry and the farmer at the rate of one third or two-thirds paid by the Ministry. The targeted beneficiaries for this programme is to the Ministry's contribution will include provision of machines, raese, fencing technology and other intensive dairy farming needs.

The Ministry will also provide improved genetic stock, establish pasture and corn for feed and provide start up supplementary feed for a year. Moreover, applicants for this programme should have a land lease for at least 50 years, provide a minimum capital of at least \$150,000 as his or her contribution must possess basic infrastructure with the stock of at least 50 milking cows and at least 20 hectares of suitable farmland for establishment of fodder.

The intensive dairy farmer needs to have been continuously engaged in dairy farming for the past five years reflecting sustained growth throughout the five years. He or she should satisfy the testing regime, actively follows the Ministry's disease management programme, possesses a basic scalable infrastructure programme in place and should be committed to long term growth.

The fourth Programme is Irrigation Kit. The National Irrigation Kit Programme focuses on individuals or clusters in dry zones to improve the quality of the production and ensure agricultural growth. The Programme target is 150 beneficiaries and include such assistance as farm irrigation kit worth \$2,000, at which, the Ministry pays 80 per cent while the farmer pays 20 per cent of the cost. This Programme also focuses on full time farmers whose main economic activity is agriculture, own at least one acre of land under active vegetable production and has a regular water source.

The fifth Programme is Land Clearing Programme. Land clearing is the development of land with the intention of creating a potential use of agricultural purposes. It means that the native cover of the land will be removed and the land breaking or removal of roots, stumps and rocks will begin. This

year 2021-2022, the Ministry of Agriculture has encouraged agricultural enthusiasts to apply for this initiative either as an individual or as a farming cluster groups. Successful applicants will receive full land development package, which will be carried out by contracted operators to make idle land suitable for cultivation. The above subject land are to have access to basic infrastructure.

The sixth Programme is Orchard Development Programme. The National Orchard Development Programme comprises of fruit trees, which are generally grown for commercial production. Orchards are also a feature of large gardens where they serve as an aesthetic as well as a productive purpose. Genetic diversity in an orchard will provide resilience to pests and diseases, reduced pollution, heating cost and consume carbon dioxide.

The Ministry of Agriculture encourages those who wish to venture into this commercial farming and establish fruit orchards to apply for the Orchard Development Programme. This Programme provides the following fruit tree seedlings: breadfruit, coconut, avocado, banana, orange, mangosteen and rambutan to successful applicants to cultivate on their land. Through this Programme, the Ministry of Agriculture will award 40 beneficiaries with seedlings, provide advice on the establishment of the orchard development and regularly monitor orchard development progress to ensure consistent progress of the programme implementation. The fruit tree acreage needed for this programme are: two acres breadfruit, two acres drinking coconut, two acres jackfruit, one acre avocado, one acre banana, one acre orange, one acre mangosteen and one acre rambutan.

The seventh Programme is Protected Agriculture (Plastic House). Mr. Speaker, Sir, protected agriculture is the use of technology to modify the natural environment: temperature, rainfall, humidity and wind, et cetera, that surrounds a crop to be able to harvest higher yields of better quality during an extended season. The protected agriculture initiative provides an enabling environment that allow farmers to ensure consistent and pest free supply of seedlings and vegetables, thus alleviating the farmer status from subsistence farming to commercial venture level.

This initiative targets 20 beneficiaries at which the Ministry will provide the full structure of the greenhouse, whilst the applicant will contribute labour for construction, including the provision of drip irrigation system in the structure. The Ministry of agriculture encourage applicants who have long term leases, a regular water source with some prior knowledge of working with the greenhouses and the confidence to scale up the operation towards the commercial venture level.

The eighth Programme is Small Farming Equipment Programme. Mr. Speaker, it encourages individual farmers or cluster farming groups to apply for small farming equipment to improve farming mechanisation, and ensure increase in the agriculture production. This initiative is aimed at stimulating recipients to be able to scale up their operation towards fully-commercial ventures.

The initiative package include: mini tractors, tillers, front end loader attachments, cutters, shredders, mills, mini driers, rotovators, rotor tillers, animal drawn implements and other small farming machines worth \$18,000 each. The small farming equipment initiative eases farmers' financial burdens by providing the farmer with the subsidy of 70 per cent of the total cost, while the farmer pays the remaining 30 per cent, and it is open to all registered farmers who have actively participated in agriculture as a primary occupation for more than two successive years.

The ninth Programme is Women in Agriculture. This is an initiative developed to increase women's participation and encourage women entrepreneurs or women clusters around Fiji to apply for a range of farming support. Women clusters should be registered with the Ministry of Agriculture or Ministry of Women and should have been active for at least two successive years with a minimum of five active members.

Altogether, there are 500 recipients targeted for this initiative and assistance provided include farming support for nursery materials, farming packages worth \$500 for individuals and \$2,500 for women clusters. This initiative targets woman in rural and maritime areas and is aimed at providing food and nutrition security, increasing commercial agriculture ventures and eliminating inequality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last but not the least, please, allow me to share with you how the Ministry worked with an NGO - Rise Beyond the Reef and Pacific Island Farmers Organisation Network (PIFON), to roll out an inclusive Women's Economic Empowerment and Leadership Development Programme.

The NGO - Rise Beyond the Reef led by Semi and his wife, Janette Lotawa, who are based in Nadi, recognised that nearly two in three women in the Pacific have been abused in their lifetime. Rural remote women face unique challenges, living at the intersection of geographic isolation faced by major climatic impacts, poverty and communal rights framework.

The Women's Development Programme is to build trust with women and men in rural communities and address more sensitive topics of harmful gender norms and violence. Through this development programmes, women are introduced to new technology, new farming practices, handicraft, financial inclusion and other technical support.

Two women cooperatives have been established at Yakete. In this cluster group, we have 101 women, and there is another group at Marinitawa in Ba which has 31 farmers, as a result of this development programme. It is further anticipated that remote women farmers will receive more technical support to boost their commercial activities. The programme outcome is "when women thrive the entire community will rise".

I would also like to thank the two clusters, Mr. Speaker, Sir. During the COVID-19 operations they supplied about seven truckloads of crops, vegetables and fruits free of charge to the operations centre in Ba. That was distributed with other food packs to the families that need support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year 2021-2022, the Ministry had begun awarding farming support to women clusters, orchard and land clearing programme initiatives to recipients from the Western, Central and Northern Division. To conclude, the drive to upscale agriculture towards commercial agriculture focuses on a more holistic approach to peoples' livelihoods. It is inclusive, sustainable and eliminates multi-dimensional vulnerabilities. Increased commercialisation of agriculture becomes a wealth-generating component within wider economic development having a greater impact on our poor rural communities.

The above initiatives contribute to enabling the marginal poor to overcome constraints that prevent them from making the leap from poverty to viability, leaving no one behind.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Mr. Speaker, at the outset, I wish to thank His Excellency for his most gracious Address. As it is conventional, we are now debating the contents of that Address that was delivered on this floor on Monday, 22nd November, 2021.

Mr. Speaker, I must say that I am extremely worried about His Excellency's speech. It lacks substance, it is incomplete, it does not tell us what the Government's co-ordinated plan is, its programmes and how especially all those will contribute to economic development growth. What is most worrying is that instead of being impartial the speech is very heavily political and even threatening.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have seen many speeches like this ever since I entered Parliament. Even in 2006 it was more than 50 pages and usually every single department, every single ministry will contribute to take the government forward are expressed in that document and in that speech. But more than that

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the speech always ties in very well with the National Budget and the National Development Plan - that is conventional. But not this speech; this speech is only seven pages long, it only talked about five things namely:

1. The 2013 Constitution and our democracy on page 1;
2. COVID-19 pandemic on page 2;
3. Climate Change on pages 3 to pages 5; and
4. Bills and next Elections on pages 5 and pages 6.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have concluded the reason why His Excellency's Speech was meaningless with the direction incomplete is because the nation does not have a functioning Planning Office, that is critical. The important role of the planning office is to coordinate the national programmes especially its development plan with the national budget to achieve National Development Growth. We do not have a functioning Planning Office, everything is ad hoc and unco-ordinated and dependant on honourable Attorney-General's will and desire, most of which do not make economic sense. And therefore the lack of context and direction in His Excellency the President's Speech is all because Fiji does not have a proper and functioning Planning Office.

So, let me tell this House that if and when we lead government will bring back in this very important and critical office of any nation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we only have to look to Malaysia and the success of these Asian countries and the reason for that is that they value the need of the Planning Office, because it coordinates everything and allows the nation to move forward in a coordinated manner and not ad hoc as we have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish now to address Parliament on the status of the 2013 Constitution. His Excellency the President said the following on page 2 of his speech about our Constitution and I quote,

“And I will use my leadership to support the highest possible functioning of the State and the work of the Executive to realise the objectives of our Constitution. We have far too much left to achieve to let sideshows dominate our national discourse.”

And the honourable Prime Minister as well, during his contribution, added that the protection of Fiji's democracy under his Constitution is the main theme of His Excellency the President's Address.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all these beg the question as to the status of our 2013 Constitution bearing in mind, of course, the claim by the Government side that once we choose to go to Election under the 2013 Constitution and be appointed under it, we thereby accept it. Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me begin by filling you in on Fiji's constitutional history. First, we had the 1970 Constitution. It was declared at a time by all, including our courts as sacred and everlasting, but no - it was removed in 1987 by the very people who promised to uphold it, namely the Military. They replaced it with the 1990 Constitution. This was subjected to review and therefore it was replaced with the 1997 Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again the 1997 Constitution was declared by all including the courts as sacred and everlasting but no, in 2000 there was an attempt to remove it, again, by the very people that promised to protect it, namely the military. The courts then declared that despite the attempt, the 1997 Constitution was still alive.

But then in 2006 and eventually in 2009, the 1997 Constitution was removed again by the very people that vowed to protect it, the military, some of whom are now in Parliament with us today. That was shortly, Mr. Speaker, after the court of appeal declared that the 1997 Constitution was supreme and ordered the military to return to the barracks by the Court of Appeal decision in 2009. The same people then convened the Yash Ghai Constitutional Review. They were not happy and burnt their draft. Then

in 2013, they drafted themselves the 2013 Constitution and then imposed the 2013 Constitution, conducted an election and here we are under that. That is the history of that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Sure we have participated in the election under the 2013 Constitution, in the very same ways MPs participated in the election under the 1970 Constitution, 1990 Constitution as well as the 1997 Constitution. It is simply because we respect the law even if we disagree with the contents of those laws. Clearly, Mr. Speaker, history is telling us that no Constitution is permanent for this country, and the same goes for the 2013 Constitution. History is also telling us that for a Constitution to be permanent will depend on the acceptance and acknowledgement of the people, especially the military and now, even the military has a constitutional role and responsibility to remove government. That is even worse, it is not a democracy anymore with a provision like that.

HON. MEMBER.- That is not true! Where do you get your facts from?

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Well you read your Constitution.

Following the same argument for a constitution to be permanent, it must comprise the common will of the people in order for them to be able to respect it. For the 2013 Constitution, there are many many reasons why the indigenous people of this country will never ever accept it. The reasons are that this is the basis of the sunset clause policy of their government to remove to our cultural autonomy and ethnic identity. All these are contained in the 2013 Constitution so how can you tell us to accept that when you have removed from that, the fundamentals of our ethnicity.

The common and equal citizenry is all about removing *iTaukei* group rights and ethnic cultural identity. This is illustrated, Mr. Speaker, in the constitutional provisions of the 2013 Constitution that has removed the constitutional role of the GCC and more especially the entrenched provisions that were there in Section 185 of the 1997 Constitution and also the 1970 Constitution. By the entrenched provisions, I mean the provisions that said that in relation to laws that deal with group rights namely *iTaukei* Land Trust Act, Fijian Affairs Act, the laws relating to Native Lands Commission that any government of the day will never ever change that unless it obtains the prior and informed consent of the indigenous people (*iTaukei*).

I am not even sure whether that side of the Parliament knows that. If you do not know that, please know now and I feel they know this, but they are in self-denial. That is the correct version that I am saying about the 2013 Constitution - it has removed our right as indigenous people to obtain our cultural autonomy and the right to prime, informed consent.

Mr. Speaker, my point is - yes, we are participating under the 2013 Constitution but it is only interim until the public comes to a common agreement that they will have to choose to accept. How do you do that? By putting it for a review, why have you not established a commission to review this?

I am saying now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if this Government will not do that, we will do it in the next government. We will make sure that we call for review and call for inputs, so that we will all come to accept a document that we will accept. For the *iTaukei*, I am telling you now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that Constitution must guarantee my ethnicity, cultural autonomy and my group right which is not in the 2013 Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is, of course, a way to resolve all these without waiting for another *coup*, it is by a Constitutional review. Much in the same way that Professor Yash Ghai and Sir Paul Reeves did to achieve the 1997 Constitution, so why have they not done it? My personal opinion is, the best person to do this is Dr. Brij Lal. He is very experienced and the person that we should call upon to re-look at the

2013 Constitution, so that we can maintain what are good in that, remove what has to be removed and bring in what has to be brought in. That is my own view.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me talk about COVID-19. I wish to say that COVID-19, in whatever strain, whether Delta or Omicron, remains a threat because we cannot trust Government protocols. In the last paragraph of page 3 of His Excellency the President's Address, he said the following, and I quote:

“It took political wisdom and diplomatic acumen to secure these vaccines. It took administrative will to incentivise their use. It took sacrifice from our frontliners to deploy them quickly and good sense from our people to embrace them.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the greatest respect, I disagree with this statement because it does not take political wisdom and diplomatic acumen to secure the vaccine. No, very far from it! Why Fiji has benefitted is because of the goodwill of our overseas friends and the least they deserve is a ‘thank you’. You did not go to the diplomacy to discuss to secure us these vaccines. Every other country were developed because they have an obligation to do that. You have no money! The tourist said this Government has no money to buy the vaccine or even to find the spread of the virus. It is only the goodwill of our overseas friends; Australia, New Zealand, India and the United States that has seen us through the pandemic.

Even worse, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has shown very well that it does not have the capacity or even the urgency to properly implement a Government protocol that can work. It failed miserably in the protocol that it did. Let me just illustrate that, so that you can understand. In March that was by who? The Protocol Officers, by those army personnel who interacted with that maid. What kind of interaction? We do not know, but it resulted in the virus coming into the country.

Then soon after that, our Protocol team failed, again, to stop the spread and it went to those in communities. They were trying very hard but they could not. It went into the community. Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the 31st of May, the same team under the Ministry of Health advised the honourable Prime Minister to prematurely call for movement and that further caused the spread of this virus.

During this time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Attorney-General and the honourable Minister for Health conveniently disappeared from our television. I am trying to illustrate here that our protocol measures does not work because we now have Omicron coming in and there will be four planes coming in. And we are saying, we are going to up the protocol measures but we do not have it. I can tell that soon after this, this new variant will come into Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my point is that, our COVID-19 protocol and frontliners cannot be trusted because they have miserably failed to stop the spread. Accordingly, given that the new strain Omicron is upon us, we must be cautious and not hurry to open borders and business unless and until we prove that our protocol procedures can work.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- It has worked!.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- It does not work. It is the same one, they sent it to Kadavu, they sent it to Vanua Levu ...

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- It has worked.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- It does not work.

Mr. Speaker, on climate change, I wish to say that Government should stop patronising itself because the international community know that it does not have the clout and is there only to beg for money. His Excellency the President said the following on page 6 of the *Daily Hansard* of Monday, 22nd November, 2021, and I quote:

“I know from my experience that these two short weeks of negotiations determine decades of climate action or inaction.”

HON. J. USAMATE.- (Inaudible).

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Well, you go and ask His Excellency the President. I am quoting from him. This is not my word. It is his word.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to make the point that climate change finance is like the human rights process. It means that we follow the protocol set by the international convention and the result is, we will get our money. It does not depend on how many delegates we send to the COP meeting and how hard we try to be relevant, making big statement in the convention or in the sideshows. Tuvalu may attend only by Zoom or sent only one delegate but it will get the same treatment that Fiji gets and any other small nation will get. So, in my honest opinion, neither Fiji's negotiating power nor the number of delegates will achieve anything. These big conventions have its international experts and more often, usually sponsored by them to rubberstamp outcomes, so most of the times, we are there only to enjoy the free trips, food and scenery and no point at all trying to be relevant to justify attendance. Climate change will be a lot more useful and meaningful if we address our local climate issues and let climate finance supplement that without us being ambitious.

On this, Mr. Speaker, I wish to remind the Government that its 2016 promise to help Waciwaci District School in Lau on the effects of the rising sea level is still unfulfilled, as promised to many villages after *TC Winston* including Nukubalavu, Naceakoro, Nagigi and others to remove them to higher ground is still unfulfilled. Nawi Island in Savusavu is always an eyesore with much environmental damage and disturbing marine lives. The one million trees they promised to plant, they did not achieve. Even the 20 million that they promised to plant, I have personally seen acres planted but only to die from lack of maintenance.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to say something now about the Industrial Hemp Bill. Some years ago, I promised to Parliament to say and was heavily criticised about this Industrial Hemp Bill. But I make the same point here that it has huge potential and huge risks, especially to our villagers. Properly regulated and supervised, this can be a turning point for rural communities, Mr. Speaker, but I fear that it can also be the catalyst for the exploitation to benefit only a few licenced commercial farmers.

Mr. Speaker, now I want to talk about our democracy. Mr. Speaker, on page 7 of the *Daily Hansard* of Monday, 22nd November, 2021, His Excellency said the following, and I quote:

“Honourable Members, do not forget that these are still the defining years of our new Fijian democracy.”

Mr. Speaker, I have also been observing the nature of democracy from 1970 onwards and I am very, very sad to say that compared to the liberal, open and uninhibited Fiji society in the late Ratu Mara's era, Fiji continues to sink in the abyss. We are moving from what was a true parliamentary democracy to a dictatorship, clothed by democratic institutions like Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Christmas is upon us and I want to wish you especially and the other side of the House and this side of the House, a happy and merry Christmas.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Member for his contribution to the debate. Honourable Members, at this juncture, I see fit to inform honourable Members that the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence and International campaign is underway. As you may be aware, every Thursday people around the world wear black as a symbol of strength and courage, representing solidarity with victims and survivors of violence and calling for a world without rape and violence. In that regard, honourable Members, I encourage all honourable Members to join the campaign on the Prevention and Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls by wearing black tomorrow to show support to end violence against women and girls.

Honourable Members, as the Speaker and also as the Fiji Ambassador on AIDS and as the UNAIDS Goodwill Ambassador for the Pacific region, I have to make an address today on World AIDS Day, as well as to receive the donations of live saving antiretroviral medicines from the Government of India and from UNAIDS.

Honourable Members, at this point, we will suspend proceedings and break for lunch. The Parliament will resume at 2.30 p.m. and the sitting will be presided over by the honourable Deputy Speaker until I return after the UNAIDS Day engagement. I beg your indulgence, but life goes on and we should now break for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.27 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.32 p.m.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of this august Parliament: I rise this afternoon to thank His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, for his most gracious Address while opening the 2021-2022 session of Parliament. Before I continue, I wish to respond to two issues raised on the day before yesterday and yesterday.

The day before yesterday, honourable Gavoka untruthfully playing in his response to His Excellency the President's Address that the Department of Environment delayed the processing of EIA application. The facts are these: the Department of Environment received an EIA's screening application for the refurbishment of the Nadroga/Navosa Provincial Corporation's existing building at Market Road, Sigatoka on 26th October, 2021. The Department processed the application within the 14 days and returned it on 3rd November, 2021.

The Department of Environment did not require the Nadroga/Navosa Provincial Corporation to submit a full EIA, but instead a detailed environmental management plan. Madam Deputy Speaker, what I am asking is that, honourable Members who speak in this Parliament should get their facts right.

Yesterday, honourable Qereqeretabua untruthfully claimed in her response to the Address by His Excellency the President that the Department of Environment did not act when a complaint over sedimentation issues at Wainadoi River was reported instead she alleged that the Department passed the buck to MRD and then to Ministry of Waterways. The facts are these, the Department of Environment received a complaint in 20th April, 2021 with regards to an illegal gravel extraction at Wainadoi.

The Department sent its inspectors to the site on April 2021 the very next day to verify the alleged complaint. This is in spite of the COVID-19 restrictions. Following all verification and thorough investigation the Department issued a prohibition notice to Mr. J. Varea who had the licence on 25th May not to discharge the sedimentation laden into Waisulubonu Creek. So operations would continue but they must not discharge the sediments in that particular creek.

The Department received another complaint against Mr. Varea on 26th October, that again there is sedimentation in the creek. Then the Department visited three days later, 29th October when another prohibition notice was issued and this time to stop the extraction.

The Director of Environment held a meeting with Mr. Varea on 22nd November and informed him of the reasons for the prohibition notice and the breaches under the Environment Management Act (EMA) 2005. So Madam Deputy Speaker, all I am saying again is that, please, *kerekere, kirpiya karke*, get your facts right when you speak in this august House, thank you.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency rightly highlighted the importance of a genuine democracy in our drive to deliver true equality for our people towards realising the objectives of our Constitution. This very statement challenges our capacity and commitment as Members of this august House on how best we can deliver on the interest of all Fijians.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency has laid out the platform for the new session of Parliament focussing on the following priority areas:

1. Our Pathway to full recovery from COVID-19;
2. Our adaptation plan and response to climate, ocean and biodiversity crises; and
3. Our economic recovery.

I share the same sentiment of His Excellency on our pursuit of a COVID free nation, and our progress to fully vaccinate every eligible adult in Fiji and I wish to share with this august Parliament that this message has always been emphasised by our Ministries of Agriculture, Ministry of Waterways and Environment during any organised official engagement with our stakeholders. On that note, I sincerely acknowledge and salute the honourable Prime Minister's leadership and ambition on Fiji's Vaccination Drive.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we also share and fully support His Excellency's call on the preservation and strengthening of Fiji's democratic society. Actions of the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Waterways and Environment reinforces the ethos of equality and a strong nationhood, its endurance and prosperity. A nation's democracy cries when our people feel secure and the food sources are secure and the very lives remain prosperous and protected.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the COVID-19 crisis highlights the need for urgent action to cushion the pandemic's health and economic consequences, protect our vulnerable populations and set the stage for lasting recovery. In this regard, I wish to provide a brief update in this Parliament on how our Ministries of Agriculture, Waterways and Environment have supported our nation's drive to assist general population to deal with the socio-economic aspect of the pandemic and raised national incomes and deal with climate change-related issues.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Agriculture through its five years Strategic Development Plan 2019-2023 plays a significant emphasis to Strategic Priority 1 - Food security; and Strategic Priority 4 - Commercial Agriculture as the basis of improving Fiji's Agriculture Sector post COVID-19.

Both priorities demand consistent awareness on farming as a business and modernising Fiji's Agriculture sector. Farmers are continuously encouraged to secure their food as well as to grow for market.

Madam Deputy Speaker, these are the key initiatives we undertook to deal with food security, increase production in farm income and raise export revenue during the pandemic:

1. We had mobilised the provision of planting materials to urban households and farmers.
2. We had mobilised land preparation support to farmers.
3. We had introduced the Cash for Cultivation programme where close to \$1 million was transferred to farmers at the rate of \$200 per acre per farmer for a new plot of crop cultivation. (This was made possible through collaboration with our development partners, particularly DFAT and I want to particularly mention here.
4. We had introduced and implemented the Back to Rural Agriculture Programme to support those urban dwellers who lost their jobs and were returning to rural areas to engage in agriculture.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we saw a surge in production both, for food security, as well as for the market:

1. The total gross volume and value of agriculture production increased by 5.6 per cent and 2.9 per cent respectively in 2020 as compared to 2019. Over the period 2010 to 2019, real GDP of non-sugar agriculture rose from \$443.6 million to \$630.2 million, nearly a hundred per cent increase.

2. Over the same period, production rose from 239.81 metric tonnes to 327,869 metric tonnes, substantial increase for the increase production has been supported by crops like *dalo*, assorted vegetables, rice, kava, ginger, *kumala*, turmeric and pulses.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while we saw increased supply of agriculture produce in local markets ensuring increase affordability and accessibility, at the same time we seized the opportunity and saw major increase in exports of agricultural produce:

1. The value and volume of fresh and chilled export commodities increased by 25.8 per cent and 16.3 per cent respectively in 2020, compared to 2019. Despite the increase in freight rates all the restrictions, curfew, borders, et cetera, we were able to raise the exports in volume by 25.8 per cent that is the substantial gain.
2. The value of domestic exports of fresh and chilled and crop livestock for the first six months this year in 2021 is \$51.5 million, an increase of 8.6 per cent for the same period last year.
3. Over the last 10 years (2010-2019), our exports have risen from \$54.1 million to \$106 million, we have surpassed the \$100 million mark. This is after feeding the nation, after providing to the local market, we exported more than \$100 million last year, first time ever we have surpassed the \$100 million benchmark.

Madam Deputy Speaker, at this juncture, I wish to thank all parties involved in the supply chain from the farmers to the exporters for this remarkable achievement. This is a remarkable achievement because we had our backs against the wall, yet we still manage to upper our gain on the back of an unrelented global health crisis.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry will continue to work towards commercialising the agriculture sector considering all segments of the population. As we raise production we are mindful that our rural interior and maritime farmers are part of the growth process. We need to provide market for their produce. In this regard, we have redirected the Agro Marketing Authority (AMA) to facilitate markets for the farmers in the areas where the middlemen and exporters do not reach out due to its remoteness and cost involved.

In the last financial year, AMA revenue grew from \$2.3 million in 2017 to \$5 million in 2021, this was a growth of 114.5 per cent which was achieved through export sales. This growth is mainly attributed to the increase in the AMA's international markets, expansion of purchasing areas of farmers around Fiji. The AMA operates collection centres offices in Sigatoka, Nadi, Lautoka, Rakiraki, Wainikoro, Bua and Savusavu. Produce is purchased from all 14 Provinces throughout Fiji. The AMA is also enhancing its outreach to the maritime zone to islands such as Kadavu, Taveuni, Ovalau, Lau Group, Rotuma, the Mamanuca and Yasawa.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as we are motivating and supporting farmers in the interior to expand production, we are also reorganising AMA to collect these produce and export them bringing more foreign currencies into the country. Some of the major achievements that AMA has managed through this new strategy include the export of 46 tonnes per month in 2019-2020 calendar year which increased to 108.1 tonnes per month now. So, Madam Deputy Speaker, the last financial year we were exporting 46 tonnes, we were lifting 46 tonnes per month and now that has increased to 108 tonnes per month. That is a substantial increase, more than 100 per cent.

In 2019-2020, AMA exported an average of five containers per month, now 12 containers per month are lifted, 140 per cent increase. A question that may arise is, what does this mean for our farmers

AMA lifting substantially? In 2017, farmers would transport on an average of \$126,620 per month. So \$126,000 was transferred every month to the farmers. Now, AMA is transferring \$441,887 to the farmers.

This is only AMA, Madam Deputy Speaker, if we add up all the other exporters, the substantial amount of money that we earn from overseas are transferred to farmers in the rural area, interior and maritime. Madam Deputy Speaker, we are not stopping here with regard to production, collection and exports. We want:

1. Non-sugar agricultural exports to be Fiji's top foreign exchange earner.
2. More money to be transferred back to rural areas and farmers for improvement of their livelihood and boosting our rural economy.
3. To see substantial developments in the rural areas as a result of the increase transfer of the export earnings, right to the farmers in the interior and maritime divisions.
4. To be a net exporter of agricultural produce and products from Fiji. For this, we need a strategy - read our strategic development plan.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we listened to honourable Viam Pillay this morning about the new initiative that we have rolled out to expand production, bring new land under agriculture, get into new technologies, for example, protected agriculture, to introduce irrigation technology into our agriculture, particularly the drier sides in the Western Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as alluded to by His Excellency the President on the tabling of the Industrial Hemp Bill in this session of Parliament, work has already commenced by the Ministry on the possibility of growing industrial hemp as an alternative form of agriculture produce; not *marijuana* as our honourable Nawaikula suggested some time back. The focus is on an industrial hemp with low levels of tetrahydrocannabinol that are used for medicinal purposes, manufacturing of fabric, paper, oil. A draft policy paper is in place and a series of public consultations have been undertaken with the guidance of our Research Officers. To further address the legal issues, the upcoming Attorney-General's Conference has a dedicated session on the Industrial Hemp Bill where a number of speakers will be talking - lawyers, legal officers and our Permanent Secretary for Agriculture as well.

The Ministry is certain that the Industrial Hemp Bill will provide guidance on the processes to be considered for cultivating industrial hemp in Fiji. Madam Deputy Speaker, as we anticipate the opening up of international borders and the return of our tourism sector, the Ministry is already focused on coordinating and implementing its agro tourism initiative to support farmers who supply to hotels and resorts. A major announcement on this will be made in the upcoming weeks on how we will be backwardly integrating farmers and villages who are closer to the hotels.

Pre-COVID-19 hotels and resorts in Fiji's main tourism areas spent was \$74 million on the procurement of fresh produce and of this amount, 52 per cent was spent on imported produce. Fiji has the potential to cut this substantially by focusing on growing our own and buying from our own. We are urging the tourism sector from now onwards to buy from within Fiji and we are focusing on ensuring that there is enough produce to supply to the tourism sector, there is consistency in supply and quality.

Madam Deputy Speaker, let me now turn to the Ministry of Waterways and Environment and how it has supported Government's collective strategy to mitigate climate change issues and what its plans are going forward. Madam Deputy Speaker, the establishment of the Ministry of Waterways and Environment is evident of this Government's commitment to all Fijians that this Government is proactive and forward thinking in its approach to crisis, be it the pandemic and climate change.

Madam Deputy Speaker, a fitting example of this are the four programmes mandated under the Ministry of Waterways with each programme tied to the ongoing protection of our communities from the disastrous effects of climate change:

1. Coastal Erosion Protection
2. Land Drainage and Flood Protection
3. Drainage for Farmland & Rural Residential
4. Irrigation Support for Farm Development

Madam Deputy Speaker, the drainage and flood protection programmes will continue to arrest, protect and reduce the riverbanks erosion caused by flood water. A number of our towns, cities, villages and crop fields situated alongside our riverbanks are being eroded. Infrastructure worth millions of dollars face peril including buildings, schools, roads, bridges, as well as livestock, crop and rich fertile lands. We are clearing waterways to restore the discharge capacity, undertaking river alignment works and stabilisation of river banks

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry is engaging with the private sector to undertake emergency desilting works at a number of rivers and waterways to ensure the discharge capacity of these waterways are restored. Over the years, these rivers, creeks and waterways have been silted or filled with silt because of what is happening in the upper catchments, logging activities, agriculture activities and all these results in filling up of the waterways in the lower flood plains and reduces the discharge capacity. We need to regularly de-silt and remove this so that we can at least restore the discharge capacity and the water does not spill over to the nearby infrastructure or farms to settle down.

As I speak now, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry is preparing to undertake the Ba River Dredging Works. A total of 19 kilometres of the river channel will be dredged below the Ba Bridge (right to the river mouth and also open the river mouth) with an approximate volume of 3 million cubic metres of silt material to be removed.

Madam Deputy Speaker, a number of our coastal communities needs to be protected from sea level rise. We are progressively protecting these communities via nature-based solution. This future-fit operation has and will continue to protect Fijians through erection of highly cost-effective, yet durable nature-based solution seawalls. Tis nature-based solution innovated in-house by our Ministry has gained popularity, not just here in Fiji but has gained international acclaim even as far as France. We now have governments and organisations knocking at our door to extend our knowhow and the designs to them.

Madam Deputy Speaker, our future readiness is exemplified through the unique design and the multiple ingredients, including a scientifically arrayed mangrove systems. These systems not only protects our communities from losing their ancestral properties, livelihood and food sources in most cases, the reef systems are protected from the back flow of the eroded soil - a direct futuristic outcome that ensures the food security of our future generation.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry has completed eight nature-based seawalls in the last 18 months and intends to speed up its construction efforts to double the number of seawalls system over this financial year. As of now, the Ministry has received over 150 sites for construction of nature-based seawalls to protect the villages.

Madam Deputy Speaker, one can see the gravity of the situation and I am sure there are other sites which gradually the villages will bring them to our attention. Nearly every second week, we are receiving either a text message or a call or email from a village that they also want Ministry of Waterways to erect a nature-based seawall.

Madam Deputy Speaker, when the health of our reef system declines, the biodiversity declines too. This comes at a time when around one million species are threatened with extinction. The Ministry is highly motivated by His Excellency the President's wealth of experience and knowledge on natural conservation of marine bio diversity and his passion for environmental protection.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry is aware of the valuable role played by the people of Caumatalevu for being part of His Excellency's journey, particularly their support in conserving marine biodiversity within their *Qoliqoli Cokovata*, which is the heart of the Great Sea Reef, sustaining an exceptional wealth of marine biodiversity and endemic species. This supports the food security and livelihoods of local communities. This extensive barrier reef (260 kilometres), locally known as *Cakaulevu*, is the third longest continuous barrier reef in the world. This unique reef system covers a vast expanse of coral reefs, intertidal areas and coastal wetlands and feeds about 80 per cent of Fiji's population today, contributing to nearly \$20 million to Fiji's inshore economy. It is also one of the five marine priority conservation areas in Fiji for the Ministry of Environment.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we are also conscious of the fact that this vast network of wide range of coral reefs forms the associate seagrass beds and mangroves that support foraging and nesting grounds for globally threatened turtle species including hawksbill, green turtles, leatherback, loggerheads and at least eight globally threatened and near-threatened finfish species.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Environment, being the focal point for Ramsar Conservation on Wetlands successfully got *Qoliqoli Cokovata* declared as a second Ramsar Wetland site in 2018 in Fiji. I would like to take this opportunity to thank His Excellency, the President in his capacity as *Tui Macuata*, the people of *Caumatalevu* for their staunch support and assistance in achieving this very significant milestone under the Ramsar Convention.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Environment has in place a policy on conservation and management of Fiji's coral reef and associated ecosystems and I would like to say that very soon, we will be working on declaring another site under the Ramsar Convention. As we are drawing up plans for the protocols towards declaring a third Ramsar site in Fiji, I wish to thank all those involved in the journey.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the jobs for nature restoration programme is yet another fitting response to continued biodiversity that we have launched and the biodiversity parks. Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address and I join my staff in wishing him and the people of Fiji a very merry Christmas and a happy New Year. God bless Fiji.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- The honourable Deputy Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, Members of Cabinet, honourable Leader of the Opposition, Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen watching on television and livestream, *sa cola vina*.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this will be my last response to His Excellency's most gracious Address during this parliamentary term and before I proceed, kindly allow me to make some acknowledgements. First and foremost, I thank the Lord Almighty and the Creator of the universe for His blessings and unconditional love that has helped me through this term. I wish to thank all the prayer groups, prayer warriors that have been supportive of our role as Members of Parliament through their prayers.

I thank the *Vanua o Vitogo, Momo na Tui Vitogo; Vanua o Yasawa, Momo na Tui Yasawa; Vanua o Drola, Momo na Tui Drola; Vanua o Yaqeta, Momo na Tui Yaqeta; Vanua o Marou, Momo na Tui Marou; Vanua o Naviti, Momo na Tui Naviti; Vanua o Waya, Momo na Saubuli; Vanua o Viwa, Momo na Tui Viwa; Vanua o Koronubu, Delaniyavu Naweiveiluri, Momo na Tui Ba; Vanua o Naloto, Momo na Tui Naloto; Vanua o Yakete, Momo na Tui Yakete; Vanua o Magodro, Momo na Tui Magodro;* and all my voters within Fiji and abroad. Thank you very much for your trust and support that has allowed

me to walk the hallowed halls of Parliament. Having said that, I wish to highlight that this term of Parliament was no smooth sailing for Fiji as a nation as the impacts of COVID-19 penetrated through the functional arms of the economy. I seek your forgiveness if I have fallen short and was unable to properly represent you in Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I take this time to congratulate the *Taukei Bolatagane, na Turaga Bale na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, in his appointment to the high office of the President of the Republic of Fiji. On behalf of the *Bose ni Momo ni Yasana o Ba*, the people of the Ba province wish you well, Sir, in your term in office.

It is also fitting that I also take this opportunity to congratulate the *Momo na Tui Nadi*, Ratu Vuniani Navuniuci, for being the first President of the People's Alliance Party and the *Marama na Taukei Naua*, Adi Tema Varo, for being the new President of the FijiFirst Party. Madam Deputy Speaker, whatever it is that is happening on the political front now is simply reconfirming what George Washington said about the truth, and I quote: "Truth will ultimately prevail where pains are taken to bring it to light."

It is interesting to note that the same group of people that the honourable Prime Minister famously ridiculed and publically attacked in 2006 to go and drink homebrew under the mango tree are now being recalled to be the architects of Fiji's new political landscape.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, today is quite a significant day in the history of the world because on this same day in 1955 there was violation of segregation laws in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks an African American seamstress was jailed. She was commuting home on Montgomery's Cleveland Avenue bus from her job at the local department store. She was seated in the front row of the coloured section when the white seats filled - the driver James Fred Blake asked Parks and three others to vacate their seats. The other three black passengers complied but Parks refused. This sparked a 381 day bus boycott led by Martin Luther King Junior.

Madam Deputy Speaker, today we also commemorate World AIDS Day, the 335th day of 2021. The AIDS epidemic was caused by Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) which found its way to the United States as early as 1960. For several years after the Centre for Disease Control first realised that the illness cropping was up in communities around the country, the American Government did little to address epidemic, a failure to act that many attribute to the fact that HIV/AIDS was primarily affecting gay men, intravenous drug users, immigrants and racial minorities. The global AIDS epidemic is far from over - 1.7 million people around the world were infected in HIV in 2019, bringing the total number of people living with AIDS today to 38 million.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I will deliberate my response based on four important issues. On democracy, allow me to quote from the second paragraph of His Excellency's Address, and I quote:

"My fellow Fijians, the democracy created under our Fijian Constitution will wither with our complacency, but comes alive with public participation, as it does with values and principles. Our nation is home to a people who want stability and prosperity, and who are wiser and more educated than ever before. Fiji's global star is rising, our modernising economy sits at the cusp of recovery and the old style of politics has no place in this new Fiji."

Madam Deputy Speaker, democracy draws on the principle of government of the people, by the people, for the people. The 2013 imposed Constitution include freedom of speech, thought, religion,

belief, information and the press, protection of privacy, property and land ownership, the right to assemble, demonstrate, present petitions and make political choices.

However, the recently appointed Army Commander, Brigadier-General Ro Jone Kalouniwai, characterised Fiji as a liberal democracy and then argued that at times of national emergency such as COVID-19 pandemic, and I quote:

“Our leaders have good reasons to stifle criticism of their policies by curtailing freedom of speech and freedom of the press.”

Madam Deputy Speaker, that message itself goes against the very essence of democracy. On petty politics, His Excellency mentioned this, and I quote:

“We should not suffer the politics of pettiness and personalisation or exist in some perpetual state of political antagonism”

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- You just did that.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the CEO of the Fiji Bureau of Statistics, Kemueli Naiqama, was terminated without being given the right to defend himself. This is outright disgraceful ...

HON. MEMBER.- He disobeyed the law.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- ... shameful and unethical. On a similar instance, former Solicitor-General, Sharvada Sharma, whose appointment has also been terminated without even the pretence of a hearing before an independent tribunal as the Constitution requires.

Madam Deputy Speaker, is this the democracy that the Government is harping about? Though our democracy might be young and green, we owe it to ourselves to practice good governance and ensure our actions are carried out in a transparent and an accountable manner to build confidence, not only within our nation, but also for our regional and international partners.

At the 26th Conference of the Parties, allow me to respond to the trip to Glasgow, and I wish to quote from His Excellency the President's Address:

“If only we could have sent an army of Pacific people with you to COP26, they could have filled the halls of those negotiations and carried your message to the world. That is what we need, more of our voices - Fijian voices and Pacific voices in this global negotiations, not fewer. Any sensible mind will see exactly why we must amplify Pacific voices within it. You cannot claim to stand with those future generations or our people on the frontline, fighting out the climate catastrophe if you do not stand behind Fiji's climate leadership.”

Madam Deputy Speaker, we, the Members of the Opposition stand with our future generation in preparing our communities over any climate catastrophe. However, we do not believe that sending an army will make wonders for those climate negotiations. Our sensible mind had already discerned that the Government would use the Office of the President to try and justify the army of people that went to the COP26.

This reminds me of Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, who assumed the position of Prime Minister of Singapore in 1959, and led Singapore to reach its current thriving affluence. He is respected in every Singaporean hearts for his unparalleled role in creating a flourishing Singaporean economy, that of which our current

FijiFirst Government is trying to emulate. As a matter of fact, we are fast becoming more like Pakistan, unable to pay its debt.

In his memoirs, *From Third World to First, The Singapore Story: 1965 to 2000*, he gives many recollection of his efforts for a prosperous Singapore. On page 406 of his book, it was something about Bangladesh that he recalled from a Commonwealth meeting in Ottawa in 1973, and I quote:

“Another person I remember from the Ottawa Meeting was the Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the hero who had opposed Pakistan and led East Pakistan to independence as Bangladesh. He arrived in style at Ottawa in his own aircraft. When I landed, I saw a parked Boeing 707 with ‘Bangladesh’ emblazoned on it. When I left, it was still standing on the same spot, idle for eight days, getting obsolescent without earning anything. As I left the hotel for the airport, two huge vans were being loaded with packages for the Bangladeshi aircraft. At the conference, Mujibur Rahman had made a pitch of aid to his country ... So I made a virtue of arriving by ordinary commercial aircraft, and thus helped preserve Singapore’s third world status.”

Madam Deputy Speaker, when will such trend of luxurious tours of our leaders with an army of people stop? When can we revere our leaders as the Singaporeans revere Lee Kuan Yew?

On climate change and carbon trade, the third issue that I intend to raise in this august Parliament, is related to climate change and carbon trade. I do so by quoting from paragraph 20 of His Excellency the President’s Address, where he made the following statement, and I quote:

“We have seen hope in world-leading legislation. We have brought a Climate Change Act to the world at COP26 that legislates the same commitments that we are asking all nations because we do not only seek more hopeful future from others, we are creating it for ourselves. I urge members of landowning units to work with the Climate Change Division to identify how carbon trading can produce sustainable livelihoods and income, by simply keeping trees on the ground, planting more and adopting proper forest management practices.”

Big words indeed! But let us look at the plight of the landowners closely and find out for ourselves what is actually happening to the interests and aspirations, or the grudges and grievances of the landowners. Bringing his experience in the pine industry, His Excellency must never allow the weight of his high office to be used to strongarm the landowners in the exploitation of their resources while allowing government to access climate funds through carbon trading.

Madam Deputy Speaker, allow me to put the records straight by responding to the comments by honourable Maharaj yesterday and reminding him that the seed of success for our nations’ wellbeing today, was planted a long time ago by previous governments.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. SAUKURU.- The late *Tui Nayau, Sau ni Vanua o Lau*, the first Prime Minister of our beloved Fiji, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara introduced 20,000 hectares of new plantation of *pinus caribaea* in 1972, as Fiji’s green gold. However, after a long period of waiting for the harvesting of the green gold, our landowners were put on the backburner while the big players were given lucrative contracts in the logging of pine trees. Madam Deputy Speaker, this must stop. If government is serious about climate change and carbon trading, it must stop.

In responding to the Climate Change Bill during the debate in the last sitting of Parliament, I had asked the government not to show off the soon-to-be-passed Climate Change Act but to do proper and

wider consultation with the resource owners who will eventually execute their intended activities and programmes on the ground.

However, Madam Deputy Speaker, at this point I wish to offer a better alternative to our climate change mitigation effort and, that is, to look upon the God Almighty. Malachi, Chapter 3 vs 11 says, and I quote: "I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground."

On legislation allow me to quote from His Excellency's Address, and I quote:

"... To support our march towards the modern and caring Fiji, the government will put forward the following Bills for consideration in this legislative session."

Commendable words indeed, Madam Deputy Speaker, but we are still here to see that wider consultation on every Bill brought to Parliament, is duly carried out. Despite the objections of prominent chiefs from the Province of Ba and Nadroga on changes to the iTLTB Act in Bill No. 17, it was hurriedly debated on a Friday, passed by Parliament and given presidential approval the next day.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Fiji's previous Constitutions of 1970, 1990 and 1997 made it very difficult to change *iTaukei* land laws without their consent. Consultation with stakeholders and the people generally in the law-making processes were a prerequisite of participatory democracy. A petition signed by more than 20,000 people against Bill No. 17 was also ignored and the amendments to the iTLTB Act were railroaded through Parliament. Government's belated attempts to consult the people on the enactment of this Bill No. 17 through *Tikina* meetings did not go down well with many landowners in our province. Bill No. 17 is a good example of government legislating changes to land laws without prior consultation with Fiji's indigenous people and the *vanua*.

Similarly, Madam Deputy Speaker, we have already passed the Electoral Registration of Voters (Amendment) Bill after debate for an hour. As a result the law now requests the applicant for registration as a voter to state the person's full name as specified on his or her birth certificate and provide his or her birth certificate. We have debated in this honourable Parliament that the new laws would disproportionately burden many married women and members of communities, who will need to add their married names on the Birth Certificate, should they wish to keep their married names in their forms of identification such as voter cards, driving licenses, passports, to name a few.

Standing Order 51 is being abused with more and more Bills now being rushed through Parliament excluding the Budget and its consequential legislations, 104 laws were hurriedly passed through Parliament under Standing Order 51 during the 2015-2017 Parliamentary Sessions. Most of these laws took one to two days to go through all the Bills' readings, to its final adoption.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the changes in Standing Orders have effectively weakened our role on this side of the House and the oversight function of Parliament, making it more difficult for us to hold the Government accountable to the people. Just before I conclude, I wish to take this opportunity to encourage our voters to participate in the 2022 General Elections.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in conclusion, I wish to remind Government of what the reef said to Maafu in Armstrong Sperry's book, titled *Call it Courage* and I quote:

"And the voice of the reef seemed pitched for his ears alone; it seemed to say: "You cheated me once, Maafu, but someday, someday I will claim you!"

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to thank your office, the Parliament secretariat, the Office of the Leader of Opposition for the services rendered to properly carry out our role as Members of Parliament.

Nevertheless, I take this opportunity to wish you and your staff, all Members of Parliament and the people of Fiji a blessed Christmas and a Prosperous 2022.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and members of the public joining this live Parliament Session through Livestream Channels; I rise to lend my support to the motion by the honourable Prime Minister and to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address on the occasion of the Opening of the 2021-2022 Parliament Session on 22nd November, 2021.

At the outset, I wish to congratulate His Excellency Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, the President and our Commander-in-Chief, for his appointment and for taking up the challenge at such a time as this, where we are confronted with varying degrees of threats and challenges while at the same time, aspire to transform and modernise our nation state.

It calls for and demands good leadership and being Fiji's youngest President and a high chief, his able leadership and wisdom will be an essential ingredients in the continuation of the fundamental political transformation of our young, genuine democracy and realising our true development and economic potentials. This is what the honourable Prime Minister saw in this young chief and great leader and to say, yes, to such a calling is utmost, admirable and inspirational.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it was His Excellency the President's maiden Address to Parliament delivered with humility, passion, empathy and patriotism. He highlighted quite clearly to Fiji's premier decision making institution and all Fijians the most critical challenges immediately facing our beloved nation. Challenges which will have a major impact on our future as a nation.

However, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is most unfortunate that some Members of this august Parliament continued with their usual rhetoric to criticise and oppose for the sake of opposing because they are Opposition Members rather than taking time to listen, digest and analyse the general theme of His Excellency's Address. Those who are quick to speak against His Excellency's Address without caring to listen and be guided by the wisdom therein unfortunately miss out on the lesson and direction it intended to convey.

Madam Deputy Speaker, please, allow me to refer to a few key statements made by His Excellency which I personally believe will be helpful to every honourable Member and likewise to every Fijian for now and in the years to come. His Excellency the President clearly outlined in his opening remarks and reminded us to guard closely the democracy created under our Fijian Constitution. He went on to state that although young, he had been in leadership long enough to see the difference between the genuine democracy we share today and past systems that fell short of delivering true equality for our people. What does that statement mean?

Madam Speaker, to me, His Excellency is reminding us that previously, we were a democracy but struggling with the crisis of inequality. I am sorry to say while this inequality issue was glaringly obvious and denied us progress, it suits the politics of old cannot to remove it at all. Why? Because it suits their purpose and political ideology. Ethnic politics occupied centre stage often prompting violent conflict and political changes but unfortunately, these political changes were for their own benefit without addressing the core issue.

I have always referred to the cobweb and the spider, Madam Deputy Speaker, we were just dusting off the cobwebs but to get rid of the cobwebs, we need to kill the spider. That was what previous governments were supposed to do. Fiji needs to undergo a fundamental transformation. That is our history and that is why His Excellency is reminding us that he sees the preservation and the strengthening

of our democratic society as his greatest responsibility as our President. What a powerful statement indeed.

Furthermore, Madam Speaker, His Excellency has vowed to protect the frame of our young democracy from any and all who seek to extinguish it for personal or political purposes. This statement perhaps, was not well received too from the Opposition side, but His Excellency knows too well that as we are moving closer to election, politicians and political parties still tethered to the past, will exploit the opportunity to do so for their short-term political will. May I, again, quote the words of George Bernard Shaw:

“Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything”.

Madam Deputy Speaker, let me go back to the statement that I have made earlier that Fiji needed a fundamental transformation because we were a democracy suffering from inequality crisis. This transformation came about as a result of the nationwide community consultation undertaken by the National Council for building a better Fiji through the state of the nation and economy report and the People's Charter for Change, Peace and Progress under the then Bainimarama-led Government.

Again, based on our history, Madam Deputy Speaker, the People's Charter of a Change, Peace and Progress reviewed our system of Government, Constitution, laws, economic resources development, leadership values, policies, et cetera.

Fast forward, Madam Deputy Speaker, the 2013 Constitution and the 2014 General Elections was the beginning of this new era. For Fiji embracing the concept of a common and equal citizenry because again, according to His Excellency's Address, our nation is home to people who want stability and prosperity and who are wiser and more educated than ever before. This is not the 1900s, we are a great country but held back by the politics of old and His Excellency in his gracious Speech is calling on us to continue to build our institution and the evils of equality and a strong nation state.

Madam Speaker, as clearly outlined by His Excellency, the style of old politics has no place in the new Fiji. That is what the FijiFirst Government stands for under the strong and visionary leadership of Prime Minister Bainimarama.

Madam Deputy Speaker, let me talk about national security. His Excellency's acclaimed address is a call for solidarity, a call to bind forces to make the voiceless heard in the global arena, a call to protect the democratic frontier for the younger generation, a call for patriotism and a call for unity to embrace challenges made before all Fijians.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as a nation, our greatest threat is climate change and more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and these issues concern people's lives. The other side of this Parliament must understand that this is what we must not politicise because of the ramifications. Let me talk about the response to COVID-19. Fiji is moving forward on the process of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and we need all Fijians to be vaccinated. It was a huge achievement for government to procure vaccines for all Fijians. Despite the major challenges, frontline workers have sacrificed a lot throughout the pandemic. We can only be safe when all Fijians are vaccinated. The message to those unvaccinated Fijians is simple. Get vaccinated.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the whole of government approach to confront and combat the deadly virus of COVID-19 has certainly brought positive results. This is evident by the improvement in our economic data as stated by the Governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji in his recent press release on 25th November that economic performance has gradually improved, particularly in our forestry, mineral water

and energy sectors. This was coupled with a positive movement in domestic consumption, retail and investment in October.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this confirms that Fiji's economic condition has improved and it is in a better position compared to five months ago. I am sure that this is attributed to the improved business confidence both locally and abroad because of our post-COVID-19 strategies and policy interventions introduced by the honourable Prime Minister. These initiatives plus the many support programmes announced in the government budget are directly contributing to our economic recovery and sets a good base for quick economic recovery and the future growth over the short to medium term.

Madam Deputy Speaker, a few weeks back, we were fortunate to have with us Australia's Minister for International Development and the Pacific and he quoted that Fiji's COVID-19 response measures were world-leading.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, that demonstrates that we, as a country, under the leadership of the Prime Minister for faring well in the pandemic that is confronting us. I acknowledge His Excellency's statement on the unwavering support rendered towards the vaccination drive throughout Fiji.

The success rate of 90 per cent achievement and reduction in hospitalisation and deaths from COVID-19 is a show that there is light at the end of the tunnel and such government intervention is visible with the international border reopening today. Madam Deputy Speaker, both my Ministries, together with respective line agencies namely the RFMF and the Fiji Police Force, will continue to rapidly adapt and align their operational postures and responses to protect all Fijians and promote economic security.

On climate change, Madam Deputy Speaker, the climate crisis is clear. It is real, it is here. As I had alluded to earlier, climate change is a matter of national security so any responsible leader would understand that COP26 is a conference where we must make our voices heard amongst big global emitters. It is clear that none of the Members or I do not know how many from the other side have been to a COP. I do not know how many have been to a COP meeting. They do not understand the scope of work required to attend the conference of such magnitude.

Usually, COP delegation would comprise of leaders, ministers, senior and technical officials, negotiators and we have non-government and civil society organisations and all interested stakeholders, who had all dynamic roles to play. Our delegation to these important international forums continue to be underrepresented, although we are the most vulnerable and on the frontline facing the devastating impact of climate change. We need more voices speaking and negotiating at these international forums to get what we want out of the international responses to a crisis which was not of our making.

It is unfortunate, Madam Deputy Speaker, Opposition Members cannot understand this and, instead of supporting our plight at COP26, have been asserted to negatively criticising the size of our delegation which were unfairly outnumbered. The lives of all Fijians and our future generations will depend on the outcomes of these forums, internationally, we need to be clearly seen to engage, to be heard, in order to be heeded.

Madam Deputy Speaker, why is the attendance of the honourable Prime Minister and the delegations so important? I have before me what we call the "Suva Declaration". This is a document by the leaders of all Pacific Island countries, we the leaders of the Pacific Islands Development Forum, following open transparent and inclusive discussions with stakeholders undertaken during the Pacific Islands Development Forum, Third Annual Summit held in Suva, Fiji between ...

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- ... 2nd to 4th September, 2015 and it goes on, Madam Deputy Speaker, but let me refer to paragraph 19 and I quote:

“We the Leaders of the Pacific Islands Development Forum following consultation with and the agreement of all stakeholders at the Pacific Island Development Forum Third Summit therefore call for:

- (a) the 2015 Paris Climate Change Agreement to limit global average temperature increase to below 1.5 degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels in order to transition towards deep-decarbonization.”

Why it is important to the Pacific?

Madam Deputy Speaker, the late Tony de Brum, Foreign Minister of Marshall Islands, his famous statement in COP was ‘1.5 to stay alive’ because if we do not get to 1.5 most of these low lying islands, Madam Deputy Speaker, will be under water in the next few years and that is why our leaders must go to COP.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- And it was a great achievement, it was a win, particularly because that 1.5 degree Celsius that was in the Suva Declaration went through the Alliance of Small Islands States (AOSIS) into the G77 Plus China and it found its way into the text of the Paris Agreement.

HON. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Article 2 of the Paris Agreement, and I quote:

“This Agreement, in enhancing the implementation of the Convention, including its objective, aims to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change, in the context of sustainable development and efforts to eradicate poverty, including by:

- (a) Holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels, recognizing that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change;”

Madam Deputy Speaker, there was a compromise, you cannot go and win everything that you take to COP. There is a give-and-take when we do the negotiations. I was there in that room in Paris in 2015, when our negotiators came back we still wanted to get 1.5 degree Celsius but the negotiators gave their advice, it is a win already for AOSIS, it is a win already for Pacific Small Islands Development States (PSIDS), it is already a win for all vulnerable people. But the compromise is the 2 degree Celsius and then work towards the 1.5 degree Celsius. We cannot just make a statement or declaration and sit here in the Pacific and hope that things will happen.

HON. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We have to be there, we have to be heard, we have to be represented because Paris Agreement is about human life, human life is a human right, Madam Deputy

Speaker. We have a right to life and any national leader will not just sit here and hope that things will happen.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- It is the biggest threat to national security and it must be a concern to a national leader and those aspiring to be national leaders.

HON. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, let me quote the opinion by the former President of the National Federation Party. Yesterday, we were given the definition of dictatorship and dictators but she defined intellectuals:

“The term intellectual in the dictionary means a learned person, a thinker and intellectual that will think about an issue, the pros and cons and set out those to make up their own minds. Thinkers do not just oppose an idea for the sake of opposing. No matter how good or probably possibly good it is, a thinker will offer suggestions and solutions to improve an idea that has been put forward by another or the government, so that the idea is made much better or so that governance is improved and is much better for the greater number of citizens. Unfortunately petition politics overtakes the greater good for the Suva Intellectuals.”

So everything that comes from the other side of the House I suspect must be drowned or snuffed.

Let me highlight about the comments of the Leader of the Hope Party on COP26, former President of the National Federation Party:

“Since COP26 is currently in progress in Glasgow, let us take a look at how the Suva thought leaders behind the Opposition Parties have addressed the related and very important issues of climate change, and Fiji's part in finding solutions. I assume that since climate change involves the survival of the human race, the Suva thought leaders will try thinking and offering substantive policy ideas and alternatives for the Fijian Government to adopt and take away with them to Glasgow. I was wrong. Petition politics was on full display from them through the last two years of COVID-19, and so climate change was going to be no different, be it human survival or Fijian survival, petition politics was going to be propelled at force from that end of the political spectrum, come what may.”

And so we can see in their newspaper articles, *Facebook* and *twitter* posts, their offering on climate change largely flows between (listen to this, Madam Deputy Speaker) complaints, sarcasm, sneering, petty and then come back to complaining. Substantive policy ideals and commentary on climate change of our climate change legislation - nil. The first unthinking complain and we only have room to focus on one complaint in this article, it was about a number and for Fijian delegation to COP26. That very much summarises the mentality on the other side of Parliament, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We are in the cyclone season, please, let us prepare for the cyclone season. The forecast has already been given, we might expect three to six to pass over the region probably. Let us pray that it does not come Fiji's way may be three. But, let us not only focus on the cyclones, it is *La Nina* season, let us expect a lot of rainfall.

As rightfully said by His Excellency the President, the future of Fiji is worth fighting for. Therefore, the work of climate action is a coalition of all Fijians irrespective of our age, gender or ethnicity. We do not need the devastation of severe weather conditions to separate us from our existence,

but we count our actions to keep the faith and our children and grandchildren will have a brighter future. Madam Deputy Speaker, last but not the least, I reiterate my congratulations to His Excellency the President for his inauguration and also commend Major General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote for successfully setting a high exemplary selfless service to Fiji, the region and the global community during his Presidency.

Finally, I take this time to convey my best wishes to the 50 RFMF Troops that were deployed to the Solomon Islands on Monday, led by Lieutenant Colonel Asaeli Toanikeve. This is our commitment to supporting our Pacific Island neighbours during times of crisis as we stand in solidarity with the Government and the people of the Solomon Islands.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to address this august Parliament in support of the Address of His Excellency the President for the opening of this new Parliament session.

May I also take this opportunity to wish you and all honourable Members a blessed Christmas and a prosperous and safe 2022. May God bless our nation.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, in fact, it is really nice to have you presiding today. It is the first time for me to have you preside, so congratulations.

I rise to give my reply to the President's inaugural Address. I congratulate *Na Turaga Na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere and to the *vanua o Caumatalevu*, and wish him the very best.

However, Madam Deputy Speaker, just like this side of the House, we were really surprised that this Government did a total turnaround and you have heard it a few times from saying that the chiefs should go home and drink home brew under the mango tree to appointment a chief as President of the country and appointing another chief as the President of the FijiFirst Party. I was also surprised when the President proudly proclaimed in his inaugural Address that and I quote: "We should not suffer the politics of pettiness and personalisation or exist in some perpetual state of political antagonism" ... when his very appointment, Madam Deputy Speaker, as the former President of the FijiFirst Party does exactly that - perpetuate this cycle of political antagonism.

Now, Graham Davis aptly describes the President's appointment as a "puppet head of the State", whose Qorvis-written speech was nothing but a rubber stamp of approval for this regime. Now, how can the President vow to quote: "... protect the flame of our young democracy..." when his Chief Justice defied the Constitution to advise the former President to dismiss the Solicitor General, Sharvada Sharma without a hearing? How can he protect the flame of our young democracy when this Government led by his party continues to summarily dismiss civil servants such as Kemueli Naiqama and many others? There is no other way. The Government has failed to keep Fiji safe.

The reality of the matter is, Madam Deputy Speaker, the last time we on this side of the House called for stricter border controls, this Government brought in the deadliest strain of Coronavirus to date. The Delta Variant via a flight from India, a flight that the honourable Attorney-General joined from Singapore and he personally escorted Delta to Fiji.

Now, I more than anyone want our hotel workers and the rest of the tourism sector to thrive again but not at the cost of opening our borders again. We have just begun to regain some sense of normalcy, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I firmly believe that the Government should have postponed the opening of borders. It should have postponed until we understand the risks of the new Omicron variant. Australia has just done it. They were going to open today but they have delayed till 15th December.

Japan has just done it. They have completely shut their borders to all visitors. Initial reports are that the Omicron variant may be less deadly than the Delta variant. But the Australian Government is not going to put the lives of its citizens at risk and is postponing opening their borders until there is no more certainty. Why is Fiji not doing the same? Why are you not doing the same, government? Shame on you for putting our citizens at risk; shame on you. Madam Deputy Speaker, our lives are more important than our livelihoods.

While Australia has reassured its citizens to remain calm as they look for answers, our Government is waiting on the Nadi Airport tarmac to greet the world. Time and again the Government has shown it cannot keep our country safe.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency the President commended the Government on its vaccination efforts praising its political wisdom. Political wisdom is not opening the borders leading to nearly 700 deaths and over 50,000 cases. Political wisdom is not allowing the honourable Attorney-General to charter an airplane that brought the deadly Delta variant. Political wisdom is not boasting about how the government helped the people when the majority of Fijians helped themselves through their FNPF. Stop boasting about that! Political wisdom is not having a token three-day quarantine to protect us from the Omicron variant.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Government cannot even keep our communities safe. Look at what happened in Nabua! All-out brawl between Nabua *Koro* and Topline Housing. When you listen to their pleas, both the communities blame the police for inaction. So, if the police force cannot protect our people, then who will? I was grateful for the opportunity to engage and listen to the people there, even though I was then later blocked from furthering engage with the people. Why? Because the promise of a multi-purpose hall might be taken away. So, please, Government do build that multi-purpose hall; keep that promise.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I believe that illusions of grandeur go to the very heart of this Government and why they have failed. On the one hand, His Excellency the President spends most of his Address praising Government's climate change initiatives and on the other hand spending hundreds of thousands on their allowances, the 4-wheel drives and the posh cars that took the 40-plus contingent to COP26. What a stark contrast to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tuvalu Mr. Simon Kofe, presented in a zoom in a humble setting standing in knee-deep water in an area now underwater that was once land. Illusions of grandeur, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The honourable Prime Minister in his reply to His Excellency's Address pleaded with us all to adhere to the truth. Here is the truth, the reason why this Government has failed to keep us safe because this Government is corrupt to its core, it is founded on nepotism and cronyism; a Government for family and friends.

Now, one simply cannot claim democracy when the institutions that form the pillars of that democracy are as corrupted and mangled as the way you came into power. The honourable Prime Minister continued by asking us not to attack the family and friends of our opponents. But what happens if our opponents are hiring family and friends to influential positions and use them to garner power? So, you place them in their position that are open to personal attacks.

Madam Deputy Speaker, absolute power permeates and corrupts all facets of our society. This Government has held onto power for too long and has pulled our country backwards with its dismal human rights record and North Korea-like censorship of the media. That is the truth.

When you have your close family and friends appointed to positions of power through Government institutions then you no longer live in a democracy. In the President's own words, politics

should not be used “as a means to a pay cheque or a way to gain power or status” but that is sadly the case with this Government.

The honourable Prime Minister in his contribution proudly stated, and I quote: “My Government has worked hard to confront the major issues and solve the major problems this country faces.” Has it really? Has it really?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Yes.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I can tell you the first thing about what this Prime Minister should really be doing right now.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- In 2019, he should have locked down the borders when he had the chance.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Samoa did it and they still are COVID-19 free and no one died!

I would have embarked on an ambitious COVID-19 vaccination programme as soon as they were readily available in February 2020, using religious groups, NGOs and community leaders. I would not have forced vaccination but slowly built trust in our community towards taking vaccination. Now, I would have switched into long term assistance and ensured the local economy thrives while bolstering our health facilities.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would have divested away from other import based sectors and focussed on growing the agricultural sector, ensuring that food security and prices were kept reasonable with the removal of taxes. I would have worked closely with neighbouring countries like Australia and New Zealand and adapted strategies to suit our local needs. Agriculture as we know is still under 10 per cent of GDP. It is the same GDP as construction. So, he is talking about farmers, he cannot even quantify when it is still 8 per cent of GDP. So, stop over-inflating Minister about what is going on in your Ministry.

Madam Deputy Speaker, what about our debt? The honourable Prime Minister right now should look at this one solution which I have been talking about for the past year. Yes, I have been advocating it, and that is printing money or quantitative easing.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Our Government has either negligently or consciously decided not to use monetization as an economic tool to finance a stimulus budget which would have injected hundreds of millions of dollars into our economy at a time when we need it most. Other than insinuating I am a fool for suggesting it and potential inflationary concerns, they have failed to adequately explain why this is not possible.

Nevertheless, Madam Deputy Speaker, let us presume for a moment their concerns regarding inflation is valid. Here is a new idea that would inject hundreds of millions of dollars into our economy without significantly affecting inflation. This idea is bold and perhaps even controversial but unprecedented times call for unprecedented measures.

Right now the honourable Prime Minister should look at the same monetization and quantitative easing principles to compensate every single FNPF member for every dollar they withdrew to finance their own survival during this pandemic. Replace every single dollar when you use this quantitative easing method.

HON. MEMBER.- From where?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- See you weren't listening. Printing money through quantitative easing. Not listening.

As we know, the reason our Government has not been able to go into lockdown or help manage COVID and mitigate deaths is because it cannot afford to pay people to stay home to isolate. It literally has no savings and no emergency funds from which to draw in the situations we have faced. While the Government has helped with some food packs and a few hundred dollars here and there, the vast majority of people have had to help themselves by depleting their life savings and raiding their FNPF retirement accounts.

As a sovereign nation, we have the ability to pass our own laws and print our own currency. If we had the political will and a creative out of the box thinking government, they would seriously consider reimbursing all the money our citizens have unnecessarily spent from their FNPF accounts during this pandemic...

HON. MEMBER.- (Inaudible)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- ... just enough for what they have withdrawn, Mr. Prime Minister.

And because this money would go into savings and be spent over the next 30-plus years as people retire, it would not significantly impact inflation. This bold new idea is not only possible but very achievable and while it does not inject money straight into the economy in the short term, it would be a massive gesture on the Government's part to make this commitment to our people.

Sadly, Madam Deputy Speaker, the FijiFirst Government has been in power too long to think outside the box. They are no longer inventive or motivated by a sense of urgency. They are out of touch with our people and so for these reasons, I am not confident they would make this commitment.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in the last three years, I have been able to serve as a representative of our people, I have come to learn the three most important issues that affect our people.

HON. MEMBER.- (Inaudible)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- You might want to listen, this might help you.

Number one is the cost of living. I find it disheartening that at a time when we are barely getting back on our feet, the prices of kerosene and diesel increased by at least 20 cents a litre. I am particularly concerned with all the cars that are on the road now, 22 cents a litre increase in unleaded fuel. This means that if you fill a full tank on a Prius, you will be paying \$10 more with today's price increase. I stand with the NFP leader, honourable Professor Biman Prasad in calling for the removal of the extra fuel tax. Our exhausted population is just getting back its feet and to continue to impose this 22 cents is ignoring the plight of the population as fuel prices affect all prices (it is actually our number one import) and is a major contributing factor to inflation.

On employment, further disheartening (the Government should listen to this) is the number of civil servants who are joining the unemployment pool in our country. Around 600 staff of Fiji Revenue & Customs Service in total, 60 are going home this week, another 100-plus in the middle of December and more in January. These are breadwinners who have dependents, children, grandchildren and even parents who stay with them. Breadwinners with bills, mortgages and daily expenses that they need to meet.

As they approach Christmas and school to begin soon after, it is too much of a burden to bear. They join thousands of Fijians, especially our youth, who on our community visits are confronted with the high amount of unemployment and underemployment. I have school teachers who are still waiting for postings, almost up to 12 months now and they are working in restaurants on minimum wage. They are waiting for their postings still, Madam Deputy Speaker. What are we going to do about this? That is the question for the Government.

On agriculture, Madam Deputy Speaker, yes, industrial hemp is a big bold idea to replace sugar. Thank you, honourable Prime Minister, for actually listening. Thank you. Maybe it is out of desperation because desperate times call for desperate measures.

Listening is not something this Government knows how to do but I predict there will be more listening as we lead-up to the election. I always say, "Every year should be an election year." There will be more pretend listening by the Government as well as the free flow of freebies in the run-up to election as they finally realise they have no choice but to humble themselves, listen to the people and recognise. That is probably the only hope that they might have of securing a government seat next year. Now unfortunately for FijiFirst, this is it. It is a little too late because our people will gladly take the freebies but they will vote you out. Madam Deputy Speaker, 16 years of rule of a dictatorship is enough. It is too long. The people are ready for change.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in housing the number of our people now in informal and squatter settlements continue to rise, going over a hundred thousand people. Our people in the urban areas continue to live without electricity and water supply. Our people living in Public Rental Board (PRB) housing, who have become unemployed have their arrears piling up in the thousands of dollars. Please government, consider this. To the Minister for Housing, consider this. Wipe out all the rental arrears of PRB housing tenants for the last nine months since lockdown. It will be a great help to relieve our people who are very worried about being evicted from PRB housing for failure to pay their rental arrears. A reset for them, a new start in the new year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while some may say we have the benefit of history, for this Government it is a classic case of history repeating itself. It is like they are on a loop, year in and year out for almost 16 years. Madam Deputy Speaker, 16 years! That is equivalent to four terms of government. The Government has not learnt from history because it continuously makes the same mistakes. The large democracy of the United States of America constitutionally limits the term of the president to only two terms. President George Washington set the precedent by refusing a third term and it had become practice until it was made law in 1947. While passing this law, congress stated that and I quote: "Too much power for too long is a threat to our freedom."

It is time for change, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is time to *kajao, dou lako*, time to go. So, to the people of Fiji watching, please vote them out.

HON. DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, for the purpose of complying with Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move his motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

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

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I second the motion.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Madam Deputy Speaker, we have are few remaining speakers to contribute to the motion by the honourable Prime Minister on item five. We also have item six listed but I understand that there may be no Bills but thus the request for us to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now suspend proceedings for a break and Parliament will resume in half-an-hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.00 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.37 p.m.

(Mr. Speaker resumed the Chair)

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament. Good afternoon and *Namaste* to you all.

I rise this afternoon to contribute my support to His Excellency the President for his gracious speech at the opening of 2021-2022 session of Parliament. It is indeed a privilege and an honour to respond to the speech of the new President of Fiji. I was quite emotional after attentively listening to all his words and contents of His Excellency's speech.

His Excellency spoke on concepts that will surely strengthen our relationship, unity and peace. I fully concur that the preservation and strengthening of our democratic society is our greatest responsibility as citizens of this nation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must strive to serve the national interest, the best interest of all Fijians, all women, men and children and those yet to be born. Our nation is home to a people who want stability, prosperity and who are wiser and more educated than ever before.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been catastrophic to our people and the global stage and getting every individual fully vaccinated is the way forward. Apart from this, we have climate change being another big challenge faced by our leaders and people. The robust measures with the accompaniment of an effective strategy, yielded good results. Most importantly however, is the regular presence of the honourable Prime Minister to speak to the nation and present a picture of where the pandemic is in the country.

Together with this were the recovery and social protection measures that were immediately put in place to stem the tide of a potential economic collapse. From small businesses to households, the protection packages contributed in maintaining livelihood in the context of reduced employment and productivity. There is no doubt that the challenges were enormous, but equally significant lessons have been learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic to lead to further strengthening of the health system to withstand another crisis of the health and well-being of the nation.

Mr. Speaker, indeed COVID-19 has had and continues to have negative effects. However, it has, at the same time, provided a context in which we have tested our health system, public health regulations and the fortitude of citizens to respond to crisis. Every effort must be made to ensure the sustainability and protection of our resources for the future. As His Excellency the President emphasised on our individual responsibilities, we must remember that we have to be mindful of our future generation and become true climate warriors. The efforts by the Government towards the fight against climate change is indeed praiseworthy.

It was an eye-opener for all as the speech by His Excellency kept unfolding and focused on the economic status as well as strategies for recovery. As His Excellency the President has reiterated, every step must be carefully planned before execution to ensure the safety and growth of our nation's economy, gradually. Fiji's brand must stand out in this highly competitive sector. Government has empowered our hoteliers and tour operators to do so with practical incentives, reduced duties, and attractive tourism packages so that we can be price sharp, COVID safe and capture a big share of the market.

The next several months should not be focused on short-term margins but on long term market share so that our people not only get their jobs back, but keep them. And to build on this economic

momentum, businesses and individuals should seize this opportunity for investment and commence now with the constructions of homes, apartments, warehouses, shops, and factories to take advantage of our economic recovery and help diversify our economic base.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no better time than now, to make good use of the opportunity provided by Government in educating our children. The FijiFirst Government has invested a lot in our education system with the objective to advance Fiji to a level that is at par with the developed world. We want Fiji to be an educated country with a high literacy rate; to be in the forefront of research and development, to be the centre for businesses and finance, and to be a leader especially in the Pacific Region and in the world. That vision can only be achieved if we invest our resources, our time, and our efforts towards the education of our children. Their education should be our priority. Therefore I urge you all in this august Parliament for your continued support. Let us give them the best we can as they will replace us and will continue our legacy to their children and to their children's children for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government believes in true democracy, transparency, equality without any form of discrimination such as gender, race, colour and ethnicity. And it is this faith held by every Fijian provided through a vast array of political, civil and socio-economic rights enshrined in our Constitution and the Government's commitment towards a bright and secured future for all. I believe there have been prudent and disciplined financial decisions made to ensure that we achieve a balance in terms of expenditures and revenues and investments, with strong relationships with development partners along with the extreme climate vulnerabilities we face.

The FijiFirst Government has always invested in our people by caring for those that are vulnerable, building resilience to worsening climate impacts, empowering the disadvantage to lift themselves out of poverty and give all our people a fair shot at success in our economy. Tremendous efforts have been made by the FijiFirst Government in looking after our oceans and protections of our marine resources. We would like to have our ocean free from plastic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our 2013 Constitution is a landmark achievement for a great nation that has ensured we all are equal and at the same time guarantee opportunities for all. It has also laid a solid foundation for the future growth and progress of our nation. It has also given great hope to our younger generation to forge ahead with much vigour and enthusiasm as this great Constitution supports them in every way.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Parliament Standing Committees play a pivotal role in ensuring that opinions and ideas are brought to light thus paving the way for greater participation and inclusiveness of our citizens. Committee Members must engage with the public to ensure greater achievement, and as a result our Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights on a number of occasions has done public consultations and reported back to this august Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as rightly pointed out by His Excellency our rural development programs are on the forefront of the government agenda - more roads, bridges, road-side stalls, have been built to ensure our citizens get better access to our towns and cities for the purpose of businesses and also doing business in the locality. Mr. Speaker, Sir, on an unprecedented scale, our landowners have been engaged to ensure that their land is used productively thus benefitting their own communities and households. It has also given them opportunities to actively participate in the nation's economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our lead towards technological advancement to digitise Fiji has been embraced with open arms by our responsible citizens. It has provided great platforms for our younger entrepreneurs to do business in a smart way. Our relatively small economy has maintained a steady growth. Our role as honourable Members of this august Parliament is to give positive feedbacks to the members of the public who are curious to know about the developments in our economy and the impact of measures

taken. As rightly pointed out by His Excellency, we must not politicise our economy. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is noteworthy to say that our younger generation has seized the opportunity to start new businesses taking advantage of many tailor-made initiatives, policies and programs that has enabled them to contribute to our nation's economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we play a pivotal role in climate change issues, our honourable Prime Minister has gained respect and adoration not only in the Pacific Region but on a global scale as well. With the support and co-operation from our Pacific neighbours, we are playing the leading role in enacting the climate change law. Also our beloved citizens have played an important role in giving valuable ideas during national consultations on the Climate Change Act.

The need to have fair elections and true democracy has been another important aspect for greater stability and a progressive Fiji. The next national election should not become a battle of dividers of people who pitch province against province, religion against religion or ethnicity against ethnicity. We should not only ignore candidates and party leaders who engage in that sort of politicking, but condemn them loudly and together. Voters reserve better. Elections is their opportunity to choose who is the best to lead them; who has the sound philosophies and policies that create stability that build confidence and ensure equal treatment and equal opportunity as provided for in our Fijian Constitution. Elections must not be viewed as something that is bringing more divisions, instead it must be viewed as a constructive way towards better service delivery, better co-ordination and creation of a better Fiji.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we as leaders must work in harmony towards building this nation. There must be greater integrity, honesty, commitment and dedication from all so that we are able to accomplish all the shortfalls and goals.

As I conclude, honourable Members, I wish and pray that His Excellency the President is blessed with abundance of knowledge, wisdom, good health and prosperity. I pray that our new President from my beautiful province of Macuata will have all the support from all the people, in ensuring that Fiji reaches the pinnacle that we all have been aspiring for. May God bless Fiji.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I join my colleagues to congratulate His Excellency, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere for his ascend to the Presidency of the Republic of Fiji. Through marriage, I am related to His Excellency the President *Na Gone Turaga na Tui Macuata*. He is an uncle to my nephews who are *vasu* to Caumatalevu.

It was on the evening when he was informed of his nomination by the honourable Prime Minister, that I sent him the following message, which I want to share with you today. With your indulgence, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I read the text message in the *vosa vakaviti*, which I will translate afterwards and I quote:

“Congratulations Ratu. O ni lumuti ena dua na gauna dredre enai lesu ni sala kei Viti. Mo ni cina rarama ka masima vei keimami na wekamuni na luvei Viti. Ni vakadabera nomuni cina ena kena itutu dina. Ni maroroya na vu ni rarama kei na vu nomuni tuituina. Me kakua ni ubi na vu ni nomuni rarama. Me kua ni seavu na vu ni nomuni tuituina. Be salt. Be light. May God be with you.”

Mr. Speaker the meaning of my text was, and I quote:

“Congratulations Ratu, you have been anointed at a decisive time at the critical juncture in our history. May you be salt and light to us your fellow Fijians. Place your lamp at its rightful place. Uphold the source of your light and your saltiness. Do not allow anything to cast a

shadow or cover your lamp's brightness. And may your saltiness never lose its taste. Be salt, be light and may God be with you".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I take this opportunity to wish His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere well during his term as President of the Republic of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I surely hope His Excellency will respect the separation of powers between the Executive and the Legislature. The reason I am saying this is from first-hand experience as a Member of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

When we were written to by the Office of the former President not to invite certain personalities, one being a former senior military officer and the other a renowned academic to make submissions on national security issues training which the Committee was conducting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this should never be repeated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have reiterated many times, the military must always be subservient to civilian rule. In the Constitution, the President is the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, but the holder of that office cannot exert pressure or command over Parliament. The same applies to the RFMF and the Fiji Police Force.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the moment of truth or the day of reckoning for the future of our beloved nation, which His Excellency referred to in his Address will happen between July 2022 and January 2023. And that moment of truth will be Fiji's 13th General Election since 1972, two years after our Independence. His Excellency requested all of us to keep it clean. In other words, make it a battle of ideas, instead of religion, ethnicity, provincialism, et cetera. Like religion, Mr. Speaker, politics is also best defined as the ultimate truth. Truth, transparency, accountability, good governance, national interest above self-interest is political religion and most importantly, a government and leadership that is free of corruption of any kind; be it monetary, policy, equitable sharing of resources or creation of employment for the benefit of the nation and her people.

These are the basic principles of ethical conduct and political religion. They have to be religiously followed, protected, cherished and upheld at all times. Corruption does not only mean personal enrichment of rulers and leaders of nations, it happens in many forms, shapes or sizes. But firstly, let us talk of an ethnic and racial free election campaign.

Mr. Speaker, Sir the honourable Prime Minister reiterated and reinforced His Excellency's message throughout. Unfortunately, and deliberately or otherwise, his message has been totally ignored by many on the Government side who have responded during the debate since Monday. We will not waste our time wondering why, because we know this is a preview to what is coming when election campaign starts.

The tirade, frivolous remarks, character assassination of those not in Parliament to defend themselves and invoking fear that people will only be safe under FijiFirst current leadership reminds us of exactly the same tactics used in the 2018 election campaign.

Essentially, Mr. Speaker, the message of ethical conduct by His Excellency and the Prime Minister to make elections a battle of ideas and not personalities has been buried under the mountain of debt, social and moral decay that has plagued our nation. I am sure that digressing from the issues by launching gutter-level campaign is an attempt by Government to camouflage its failures. And the latest tactics is to try and make the Prime Minister look good but to do his bidding most likely upon the orders of their leader's right-hand man.

I am saying this because FijiFirst is already fear mongering over the last two days and will no doubt continue to do so in the lead-up to the elections. This is a similar tactic to what was practiced in 2018, despite the dirty tactics of FijiFirst at that time. The NFP had stuck to its objective of making the elections a battle of ideas. As early as July 2017, some 16 months before the polls, the NFP had publicly launched its first 10 policies aimed at alleviating the hardship of people. We were transparent, accountable and expected the election campaign to be on issues.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our assumptions were wrong. We faced barrage after barrage of attacks and voters were subjected to threats by none other than the Attorney-General and Minister for Elections who is FijiFirst's Registered Officer and General Secretary. He said on Sunday, 21st October, 2018 at Samabula Primary School, "If you do not support a leader like Voreqe Bainimarama, you are actually putting a dagger to your neck." Quite a dramatic threat, totally against ethical conduct but more suited to for a role in a play at the Fiji Arts Club.

But three weeks after the 2018 Elections, the same politician threatening voters felt so threatened by an Election Petition that he led his entire team into hiding on Level 9 to strategize low-hanging fruits. Three years later, Fiji's fruit import bill is still high while low-hanging fruits have seemingly shrunk.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, against that backdrop comes Government's latest statement of intent, through His Excellency, of ethical conduct and totally shirked by many in Government since Monday. The comments by honourable Alvick Maharaj, where he attacked our former leaders and founding fathers of independence, as well as accusations against a former PM and the immediate past Leader of the Opposition, who his party leader embraced after he announced his resignation on the floor of this Parliament about a year ago, speak volumes about the political immorality and double-talk of Government.

Mr. Speaker, the NFP puts on notice the FijiFirst Government, its puppets and every other political party that intends to fan the flames of racism and stoke fear, ill will and hostility in their despicable attempts to win votes. This time, they will not succeed. Those included in these gutter-level tactics succeeded in 2018 because we chose to stick to our principles and fight a clean battle. The forthcoming election will be quite different, Mr. Speaker. We will not resort to race, religion or lies. Nor will we make a threat of people daggering themselves, if they do not vote for us. But we will come down hard like an avalanche on those engaged in electoral treachery because the vast majority of people no longer believe in politics of fear, connivance and deceit that has plagued this nation for the last 15 years.

Mr. Speaker, our people believe in truth, righteousness, justice, unfettered fundamental freedoms and genuine democracy, not a two-man rule version of the nascent democracy that we were told of more than a week ago. What has this so-called nascent democracy given Fiji, Mr. Speaker? I will give some examples to you now.

1. Total 1,300 deaths in almost eight months either directly from COVID-19 or COVID-related.
2. A public health and medical system in a state of decay with the health minister and his officials, misleading the public about the state of equipment. An example is the angiogram at CWM. Two days after the NFP Leader raised concerns about it being dysfunctional, the Ministry said it was working but patients needing diagnosis tell us it is not working.
3. A dairy industry milked dry due to preferential treatment given to a private company. The dairy pastures are barren of healthy grass that now seems to grow very well on the walls of CWM Hospital.
4. A record number of unemployed Fijians in both the formal and informal sectors, as well as a record number of workers on reduced wages and salaries assisted with \$30 per week or

- \$4.28 per day for six months when the Prime Minister was getting over \$3,000 per day in allowance while in Glasgow for COP26.
5. A pocket-sized sugar industry under the Prime Minister's leadership with fraud being committed against cane growers through the deduction of bundled insurance premiums of more than \$52 per grower for those who produced over 141 tonnes of cane in 2020 and the government-controlled and toothless Sugar Cane Growers Council is fully backing this fraudulent act.
 6. A dysfunctional education sector due to announcement and implementation of policies threatening the future of teachers and provision of quality education to students.
 7. A besieged FRCS in charge of filling the treasury but itself being emptied of hardworking loyal employees under the pretext of digitisation when the real reason is economic stagnation. Ironically, both the FRCS Board Chair and Acting CEO were Government's nominees to the Council of the University of the South Pacific – an institute of repute and international recognition, mostly benefitting Fiji. Yet, this Government continues to withhold grants to USP because it does not want the current Vice Chancellor who is responsible for the BDO Report that exposes corrupt practices, implicating many associated with the governing party.
 8. Sky-rocketing cost of living worsened by rising freight and fuel prices, with Government extorting 20 cents per litre extra duty for fuel for the last 20 months. Yet, no show of compassion and duty of care to remove this extra duty burden.

Mr. Speaker, the immediate worry for the people of Fiji is the outbreak of the third wave of COVID-19. Even the Permanent Secretary for Health is worried about it and yesterday, he said it was inevitable that the latest deadly variant of the virus known as Omicron would reach our shores, and this has been made more likely with the reopening of our borders.

The nation's leadership obviously believes in welcoming visitors with *salusalu* while the rest of the world is waiting for another two to three weeks to view concrete scientific evidence about this variant. Last week, Mr Speaker, Sir, Members of our Parliamentary Committee, during our tour, went to Black Rock, a truly impressive facility for peacekeeping training funded by Australia.

We were warmly welcomed by the Deputy Commander of RFMF, Commodore Humphrey Tawake. We were briefed and also asked critical questions of him. I was impressed by his forthrightness, Mr. Speaker, Sir. He assured the Committee that the RFMF is a professional force and understands that it is subservient to the people. I am reassured by the Deputy Commander's commitment and wish both him and the Commander RFMF all the best during the tenure of their command.

On that note, Mr Speaker, I would like to call for a national dialogue in relation to RFMF's role under Section 131(2) of the 2013 Constitution.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- (Inaudible)

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- I am raising this point because many Fijians, Mr. Speaker, Sir, perceive these constitutional provisions as legitimacy for RFMF to intervene freely in the governance of the State. During our visit, we witnessed soldiers and policemen training for what we were briefed as state of readiness for the third wave of COVID. We were also told that the security forces who are our frontline workers, were disappointed in the manner the second wave was handled due to inconsistent decision-making.

I wonder who is to blame here, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Is it the Permanent Secretary for Health who is responsible for the implementation of the Public Health Act or is it politics that rode roughshod over sound and sensible health measures, opting for the containment to container strategy, which resulted in

senseless deaths of 1,300 citizens? Will we be faced with similar nightmare if and when the 3rd wave or Omicron variant arrives here?

Let me reiterate, Mr Speaker, Sir, Government cannot even clear weeds from growing on hospital buildings, let alone paint them. What are the plans and strategies that the Minister for Health and Medical Services said a few days ago they have in place to prevent what could result in a calamity? Why is political superiority more important than science and the lives of our citizens?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if there was ever a political culinary competition, there is no doubt who the undisputed winner will be. The saying that “too many cooks spoil the broth” has been proven wrong.

In a post 2006 Fiji it is ‘the cook with the cosmetic touch and his clueless master chef’. Their cooking statistics whether it be financial, economic or social have resulted in debt levels hitting the ceiling, bequeathing every citizens of our country as well as future generations, the burden of around \$10,000 debt by the time the current financial year ends in July 2022.

Most painful though is the two-man rule’s legacy of animal farm, Mr. Speaker, Sir, resulting in massive inequality. The enrichment of the “haves” most of whose names will appear on the donor lists of FijiFirst, and excruciatingly painful, the endemic corruption starting with wastage, pilferage and mismanagement of taxpayers’ funds by government itself.

Mr. Speaker, time is no longer a great healer because this time, it is time itself that is warning them.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Time is up.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- At the beginning I talked about politics of religion as being the ultimate truth. And that is politics and policies that benefit the nation. Ethics and politics go hand in hand which is the people’s welfare at all times and not only during an Elections year. There is no greater religion than patriotism. The welfare of our people is patriotism. Equal opportunities, equal benefit for one and all, irrespective of class or creed is patriotism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a leader should not have greater dream than the nation’s welfare. A leader should not dream of greater reward than the nation’s benefit. We must live and die for our motherland. This is the gift that we can give Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as this is our last sitting before Christmas, may I take this opportunity to wish you, Sir, and all the honourable Members of this Parliament, the secretariat and the staff, a very holy and safe Christmas. May God bless you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, God bless Fiji and her people.

HON. J. SIGARARA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and the honourable Members of Parliament: I rise in this Parliament to show my support to the motion by the honourable Prime Minister to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Speech during the Opening of the 2021-2022 Parliamentary Year. It would be remiss of me not to congratulate His Excellency the President for his appointment as President. On a personal note, I am grateful for his desire to serve the nation, and at the same time, proud to be from the same province of his maternal links.

On the same note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to express my utmost thanks to the Major-General (Ret’d) Jioji Konrote for setting a benchmark of excellence, not only as the President, but also as a distinguished servant of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is, indeed, blessed to have a President who stands ready to defend our democracy. His Excellency the President's vision for the future is appreciated, and with his unity ambition, it is a mission to build peace and harmony for all the Fijian people. The past two years had been difficult for many Fijians but we are comforted by the Government's vision to be at the wellbeing and safety of every Fijian at the core of the planning and actions.

As we have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic that has had a severe impact on the lives and livelihoods of all Fijians, it is very heart breaking to see the health impacts on our people and economy. However, the pandemic also highlights the importance of the rural economy to which it provided a source of the national food security and a social safety net for those who are able to do subsistence and commercial farming.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, reports on the immediate impact of COVID-19 in 2020 indicated that food security was greater in the urban, 5.9 per cent than rural 2.5 per cent households. While the pandemic may have forced an urban to rural migration for most affected sectors because of unemployment, this has however also brought some positive impacts on the rural Fijians. The return of Fijians to the rural areas has been the induction of skills and expertise into the rural economy with unmeasured benefits, and this seemed to have moved the economic development in the rural areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these circumstances would identify businesses, sports development, morals and unlocked new business opportunities the rural areas. Additionally, Fijians who may have lost connection to their communities, land and the traditional knowledge are now also connecting with the traditional knowledge and skills including engaging in agriculture, fisheries and learning of traditional skills, such as fishing, farming and weaving techniques.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I concur His Excellency the President's statement about our ambition to vaccinate all the eligible members of our population, so that we can bounce back to normalcy. This intervention is a pro-active mode to provide an enabling environment to empower ordinary Fijians and contribute effectively to the socio economic development of Fijians, especially for those in the rural and maritime communities. I acknowledge the firm and sound leadership of the honourable Prime Minister through the impacts of COVID-19, which provided a steadfast decision to ensure that essential services delivered by Government continues and no one is left behind from our rural and maritime communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I agree with His Excellency that through the support from government finances and multiple interventions by government today receive the assumption of international flights into the country as we finally reopened our borders to fully vaccinated travellers. In less than two months from today, we will see more of our children back in their classrooms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in alignment with His Excellency's Address, I quote:

“I cannot stress how impactful merit-based leadership can be in steering our industries towards success, better jobs and great opportunities.”

Although it depicts more of strategic leadership, it also endorses strategic partnership to which we can recover post COVID-19 and build our nation to boost economic recovery.

Aligning the Ministry of its work to this, the Ministry recently launched its tenth year Strategic Development Plan which has the platform to strengthen partnerships and create an enabling environment and promotes sustainability and resilience on all rural communities in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will be unique through post COVID-19 to guide a whole of stakeholders' approach that will share maximum resources to alleviate standards of living, empower Fijian and

ultimately leads to national development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our planet continues to be in great danger as the impacts of climate change continue to intensify. Here at home this is an issue. Our only concern is our future but our daily survival especially now that we are into the new cyclone season. For the past decade, Fiji has suffered more than 10 cyclones killing more than 70 people. This is the reality we have to live with here at home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President stated in his Address that he had to first witness throughout his life what the climate and ocean crises cross Fiji. For me personally the issue of climate change hits me hard. I beg your indulgence that I will share my painful experience about the devastation of *TC Yasa* on a place I called home since birth.

As many of you may recall my village of Cogea in the District of Wainunu in Bua was one of the severely impacted communities in the Northern Division when *TC Yasa* made a landfall on 17th December last year. Mr. Speaker, the trail of devastation left behind the Category 5 cyclone had accompanying floods something that we will never forget as it was one of the worst we had experiences in the past 20 years.

The impacts of climate change on vulnerable nations like ours is real. I had my first share of experience when my family and I lost our home during the height of *TC Yasa*. We were one of the 18 families whose homes were completely washed away, while others were left partly damaged structures. Despite all those tragedies, I am forever grateful to our Lord and Saviour for not injuring any lives of the community. I am comforted that “it is not by might nor by power His Spirit, says the Lord” that covers us all day to keep us going.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now is not the time to be sitting political leverage at any given opportunity but rather, we should be working together as leaders to build our united voice on international forums. It is to ensure that policies implemented to safeguard our future, our children's future and most importantly Fiji's future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to by the honourable Prime Minister at COP26, the alarm bells had been sounded loudly and this time it is louder than ever. This is the new normal right throughout our world from sea level rise, flash flooding, cyclones, storm surges, droughts and bush fires. If we continue with our current actions or inactions, we will set a blue planet, our global canoe sinking to the bottom.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after experiencing *TC Winston* in 2016, the Ministry adopted a new development model to include resilience in development programmes, closely linking to a whole of stakeholder partnership. We will also take into consideration a sustainable and risk informed approach that will reduce the impacts of future disasters.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this new session of Parliament, I wish to take this opportunity to once again remind Members of this august Parliament and all Fijians joining today that we are now in the cyclone season. It is my sincere hope that we will use our duty as parliamentarians, leaders and responsible citizens to lead by example by using our platforms to communicate disaster safety messages that would help save lives in times of disaster.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we also journey towards recovering from COVID-19, I urge us all to remain vigilant and ensure that we will remain COVID-19 contained. Let us not be complacent, we must ensure that we adhere to the all safety measures still in place. I wish you a very blessed Christmas and a happy New Year and may the blessings of our Lord and Saviour be upon us all.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Members of Cabinet, honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to His Excellency the President of our nation, *Turaga na Tui Macuata* Ratu Wiliame Katonivere's Address in the opening of our Parliament. I, first congratulate the *Turaga na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere for his election as President of our nation and wish him well in the term of his appointment and that he will serve the President's Office with diligence and fairness.

I also thank the outgoing President, Major-General (Ret'd) Konrote for his services. I do acknowledge His Excellency the President's messages of goodwill and positive outlook for the nation. However, his overall outlook and optimism is not reflected in the reality on the ground. I would like to begin my contribution by looking into the process of the appointment of our President. Of course, without rancour or prejudice to the *Turaga na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere or *vanua o Caumatalevu* but looking into the process itself.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have just witnessed the machination of the election of the President by Parliament. The appointment of the President is governed by Section 84(2) of the 2013 Constitution which states and I quote:

“Whenever a vacancy arises in the office of the President, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition shall nominate one name each to the Speaker who shall put both the names to the floor of Parliament for voting by the members of Parliament.”

Section 84(3) states, and I quote:

“The person who receives the support of the majority of the members of Parliament present shall be appointed as the President, and the Speaker shall publicly announce the name of the President.”

In the 1997 Constitution, the Great Council of Chiefs was responsible for the appointment of the President. This worked fine until the FijiFirst Government decided for irrational reasons that the Great Council of Chiefs was politicised just because it did not support the illegal overthrow of the legitimate government of Mr. Laisenia Qarase in 2006.

The most concerting part of the appointment of the President is that under the 2013 Constitution, the appointment is not done apolitically but now politicised where politicians choose the President. In fact, the FijiFirst has politicised the chiefs of Fiji by abolishing the Great Council of Chiefs where they used to have a voice and there was no need for the chiefs to be part of politics.

It is shameless to see the FijiFirst actively dividing and misleading the chiefs for their own survival. Under the FijiFirst Government, only FijiFirst supported chiefs can become President. That is the reality of the appointment process at the moment.

Under the FijiFirst Government, only FijiFirst supported chiefs can become President. That is the reality of the appointment process at the moment. This is unethical and the election of a president must be either by the Great Council of Chiefs or citizens in general. This has been expressed by the public at large. The President must not owe his or her appointment to high office to politicians as is the situation now. This is just one of the many reasons to review the 2013 Constitution.

The President also raised the issue of the expectations of voters of Members of Parliament or politicians. What do voters expect from the Members of Parliament? A member of the public provided good feedback which is also good lesson for all of us, including the Government Members, stating that:

- Voters become very important to politicians at election time.
- Voters become discontented if leaders ignore them.
- You need to listen and understand.
- Voters are not heard when there is lack of consultation and there are consequences for Government, for example, the Draft Police Bill in March 2021 which was shelved due to lack of consultation and the iTaukei Land Trust (Amendment) Bill was passed, despite massive outcry.

The Government lost a lot of support in relation to Bill 17 and this will show in the votes which are coming up in the 2022 Elections. Consultation with voters demonstrates inclusiveness, responsiveness and encourages confidence in Government. Voters are frustrated with FijiFirst's style of leadership where there is lack of compromise as experienced in this House. The absence of political middle ground shows there is increased polarisation.

On the operations of Parliament, it has been a frustrating experience where Tables and Business Committees had rejected substantial motions, questions and petitions of national interest. This is tantamount to parliamentary dictatorship and the people of Fiji must remove the FijiFirst Government to ensure true genuine democracy.

The Standing Orders of Parliament must be changed so that the Opposition chairs Standing Committees including the Public Accounts Committee. This will ensure greater accountability and transparency in comparison to what is happening now. Let me touch on three very important national matters which I had called for special committees under Standing Order 129 which were rejected.

Suvavou Land Claims - this was a public petition to seek a settlement on the Suva Peninsula Land claims by the *Tui Suva* and the *vanua o Nadonumai*. Twenty seven thousands acres of land on Suva Peninsula was occupied by 10 *mataqali*, *Yavusa Vatuwaqa*, *Nauluvata*, *Nayavumata* before the advent of Europeans into Fiji. On the advent of Europeans in Fiji, Ratu Seru Cakobau sold 200,000 acres of land which he did not own to the Polynesia Company to discharge a \$45,000 claim by the American Government due to the burning of a shop on Nukulau Island. It is noted that the Crown returned all such lands to the native owners except Suva lands where it gave Crown Grants out of grace of over 2,000 acres to white settlers who had no claim of right, took disallowed claimed area, took 300 acres originally leased as a reserve and later claimed it had been bought.

The eight *mataqali* and three *yavusa* sought relief through High Court Action with no judgement on the matter in 2006 and 2007 and the matter was transferred to Justice Inoke who heard the matter in 2010 and held that the native titles of such *mataqali* had been extinguished by Ratu Cakobau's sale. The appeal could not proceed because the transcripts were not signed by Justice Pathik and copy record not given. This is a very important issue which must be settled by the State which we will do when we form the Government after the 2022 Elections.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- The FijiFirst has continuously failed the people of Suvavou, despite all attempts in the last 15 years of their rule. FijiFirst even offered part of the Botanical Gardens to the Government of India despite the objections of the Suvavou people.

The other issue was on Fiji Airways. This has been raised several times. I called for a Committee of Inquiry into the sale, purchases, leasing including intermediaries and commissions and, of course, on Waqavuka but information had been coming in dribs and drabs by the honourable Attorney-General.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- You do not understand!

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- I tried to move a motion for inquiry also into the viability of purchases but this was rejected. His Excellency the President had raised the issue of transparency and I ask, where is the transparency in this particular case?

On COP26 and climate change, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this formed a substantial part of the President's Address. The question is, what is the return on investment of this 40-plus delegation to Glasgow? We have not heard any return on investment except the campaign which was done there. There is too much show by this Government on climate change on the world stage pretending it is some sort of world leader.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- You don't understand.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands made more tract than Fiji with international partners and the media such as *BBC* and *CNN*. The Tuvalu Minister making a press conference from the middle of the lagoon in Tuvalu made headlines. Marshall Islands and Kiribati's very existence are under serious threat, more serious threat than Fiji. Did Fiji even offer to coordinate with our small island states as the honourable Prime Minister is the Pacific Islands Forum Chair or did they operate on their own?

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- It was done. That is why I said that you do not understand anything.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Still on the region, please pay your dues to USP before you ask for favours from USP.

On another matter, why is the Government continuously silent on the issue of continued human rights abuse in Papua by the Indonesian State? This is total hypocrisy. The environment continues to deteriorate, Sir, with uncontrolled gravel and sand extraction. Has anyone from the Ministry of Environment or Lands done a survey of the Rewa River banks where sand extraction companies are operating?

In Muana Village in Rewa, the riverbank has eroded by nearly 10 or so metres and this happened rapidly after a Chinese company started sand extraction up river nearby. A lot of farmland is lost and severe flooding is now frequent. Waterways continue to be killed. Another current issue, there was an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) advertised to alter a reef at Qamea Island to create more surf. Is this a joke, Minister of Environment? Please stop the abuse of the environment.

Here in the *qoliqoli* of my province of Rewa, the water surrounding Suva City, there is uncontrolled pollution which has destroyed the livelihoods of the people of Suvavou, Namakala, Togalevu, Kalokolevu, Waiqanake, et cetera. The people of these villages are sick and tired of the pollution. They have raised these issues several times including derelict vessels which lie around the Suva Harbour area. The villagers have stated that the Ministry of Environment has never raised awareness on toxins and they are only there where are big developments and to conduct tests on marine life.

Dr. Maata from the School of Biological and Chemical Sciences of the University of the South Pacific has stated that the Suva foreshore and harbour was heavily polluted with heavy metals from steelworks, garages, marinas, rubbish dumps, et cetera in the surrounding areas.

Sir, this FijiFirst Government continues to pay lip service in this particular area when at the same time the operations of the Fiji Ports Corporation Limited with its foreign partners are earning millions and not even a single cent is going to the native *iTaukei* traditional landowners and fisheries owners. This is a shame. No compensation has ever been discussed or any share given from the profits to the suffering native people. This is the kind of behaviour, Sir, that will change after we take Government in 2022.

Sir, I move on to the issue of the FijiFirst Party ideology. We have heard a lot about this issue and they have repeatedly said in the last few days the concept of equal citizenry.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Tell them!

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- We really need to understand what equal citizenry is and in order to understand this ideology, you need to understand the person who is driving it, which is the honourable Sayed-Khaiyum. It is not the honourable Prime Minister or any one or any other MP. In order to do that, you need to read his writings and thesis: Cultural Autonomy - its Implications on the Nation State. Some key elements or statements from the thesis:

- Cultural autonomy does have a tendency to create and promote elitism - select few and their networks and generally created in times of uncertainty and continuation of such to elites and institutions which are self-serving.
- European contact established new elites of hereditary families and their clientele, such as Madraiwiwi, Sukuna, Cakobau, Mara, Ganilau and lately Qarase, perpetuated by a separate administration.
- There was a quote inserted there by one of the leaders to emphasise the issue: “You are a man, you are an individual and I respect you but for goodness sake your old chiefly system must go - it is not helping you, it is not helping this island and us, so let us change and move forward.
- Cultural autonomy has its limitations. Its application as a long term solution is limited, a threat to the nation state, promotes culture ethnicity as *modus operandi* leading to politics and constitutions of ethnicity.
- Therefore cultural autonomy must have a sunset clause or it will hinder a vibrant and coherent nation state.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are the underlying values which derives the FijiFirst ideology and some direct results are:

- Anti *iTaukei* laws;
- Removal of the Great Council of Chiefs;
- Anyone talking about *iTaukei* or indigenous issues today is labelled a racist;
- There is non-recognition of indigenous people as a sector in development planning and there is non-acceptance of separate representation as recognised in ILO Convention 169 and in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. What is wrong with provinces choosing their own constituency indigenous members to Parliament? They determine their own development agendas and priorities.

The problem with the FijiFirst ideology, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that it is driven by one person. It is driven by his own views, his own ideology rather than a compromise for us to move forward. The use of common Fijian identity can hide racism, nepotism and unfair practices in the economic sectors.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- What ideology?

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- There is a common discussion around *talanoa* sessions and we, as leaders, need to take heed and charter a better way forward.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- *Sa levu na talanoa.*

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Ethnic disparities in development, wealth and economic control and poverty are disregarded and these are considered racist. Why sack the CEO of Fiji Bureau of Statistics by conveying the finding that 74.8 per cent of the poor are *iTaukei*? This must be discussed openly and addressed.

There is disdain for ethnic data by the government of the day when statistics professionals and international statistics practice, say otherwise. For example, Dr. Eddie McCaig saying that having access to ethnic data is important for health authorities especially when it comes to profiling diseases. He made that comment in response to the honourable Attorney-General criticism of the Bureau of Statistics for releasing the religious and ethnic data in the 2019-2020 Household and Income Expenditure Survey (HIES). He said that disease profiling was part of the Ministry of Health's work and having access to ethnicity data helped them ascertain which ethnic group recorded the majority of non-communicable or communicable diseases.

HON. O. NAIQAMU.- Why do you want to know that?

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- This would ascertain which group needs assistance and assist in mapping out an effective strategy that could direct them.

Professor Steven Ratuva, Director at the MacMillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies at the University of Canterbury stated that ethnic blindness (which is currently the ideology of FijiFirst) conceals underlying ethnic inequities and divisions, which has potential to spawn grievances and long term instability. He made the comment in response to a newspaper article...

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- That is his view.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- ... that ethnicity and religious data would not contribute to Fiji's progress as a nation. Professor Ratuva further states and I quote:

“... policies of ethnic blindness is a form of ethnicity denial which dictates that no ethnic-based statistics is used. This policy was used by authoritarian states such as the Soviet Union to suppress other cultures and take total control of power to ensure submission to the singular ideology of authoritarian state elites.”

That is exactly what is reflected in the thesis which I read out by the honourable Sayed-Khaiyum.

That is what is being put into practice through the FijiFirst Government. I am not sure whether they are aware of it or not in terms of moving forward. You do not have to do that because your way forward is not the Bible and there needs to be discussion on the issue - the way forward would be peaceful co-existence through diversity. These are the government policies in Australia and New Zealand. They have diversity policies, for example, in one of the ministry diversity policies in New Zealand and I quote:

“Diversity means all the ways we differ. It includes everyone. Diversity is about the unique blend of knowledge, skills, perspectives and thoughts people bring to the workplace. Diversity can include characteristics such as gender, being Maori, ethnicity, cultural, and socioeconomic background.”

When you bring this together, you celebrate your differences and you mould it into an effective grouping or moving forward. They look at it different levels, for example, in recruitment, they identified that there is unconscious bias in any situation so they deal with that through unconscious bias training.

Even in the recruitment committees, they ensure that there is diversity in the panel, where there are different ethnicities - this is to ensure that there is fairness and transparency as we move forward.

I am not a racist, if someone thinks that. We are just proposing a way forward which is rational and which takes into account the different ethnicities in Fiji, the indigenous people of the nation and the concerns. I have mentioned the policies on the way forward can be modelled on such diversity policies, and of course, can be based on data which is derived by our Bureau of Statistics, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I conclude by addressing another phrase which is regularly used by the Government of the day, the most genuine democratic elections, which we are about to hold now and it has been held under the 2013 Constitution. But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is total hogwash (using that term), because it uses the superstar-type of ideology and methodology where one person collects the votes and takes everyone in. That is not democratic, that does not reflect one vote of equal value, because the honourable Prime Minister took with him a few MPs who managed less than one thousand votes to become MPs, while some of those who contested the election had close to 3000 or 4000 votes are not sitting here. So, this is a system which is of course totally unfair. Again, I am just trying to express here, the most genuine democratic and just looking at those examples, it is not genuinely democratic. The other one is the threshold.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- The threshold system is totally unfair. I end by wishing you a Happy Christmas and New Year and also to the honourable Prime Minister and his Cabinet and Members of Parliament on the Government side and also of course to the Opposition side.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, and members of the public watching live coverage through social media platforms, good afternoon to you all.

I wish to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious speech at the opening of the 2021-2022 session of Parliament. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are indeed fortunate to have a person who has so much passion and love for his country and fellowmen, holding the highest office in this country. His Excellency brings a wealth of experience and knowledge on natural conservation and conservation of marine diversity. He also has special passion for environmental protection.

We sincerely look forward to working closely with His Excellency, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere for the peace and prosperity of our beloved nation. Please note that His Excellency was not chosen for his position because he was from a chiefly blood line. He was chosen to this high office because of his merit. His humble beginnings in life speaks volumes of the wealth of experience His Excellency brings to this esteem office. I also take this time to thank the outgoing President, Major-General (Ret'd) Joji Konousi Konrote for his great service to the nation. I wish you well in your future endeavours, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these past years have been incredibly testing for our beloved nation as we not only grappled through a global pandemic but had to battle through literal storms escalated by the devastating consequences of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the economic and social consequences of this pandemic has been nothing less than brutal. Fijians were amongst the tens of millions around the world who lost their jobs due to this pandemic. Closure of borders and overnight lockdowns has had significant negative impacts on people

all over the world. Working from home with little interaction with colleagues, being cut off from the rest of the community and loved ones, is definitely not an experience we would want to live through again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite all these challenges the resilience of our people as they finally grasped the reality of the situation and accepted the new normal, is commendable. The only silver lining of this crisis is that it made people more innovative as they tapped into the latent talents to try out new things, new careers, new businesses and new ventures to just mention a few. The country as a whole either read or visually saw their success stories through social media or television, and of course the government wasted no time in stepping up by providing support to these budding entrepreneurs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as rightfully stated by His Excellency, we must commend the nation on the success of the vaccination effort. We all may have seen photos being circulated on the social media of our health professionals reaching out to all parts of Fiji no matter how difficult the terrain is to reach vulnerable groups living in remote areas. It fills my heart with pride to see the resilience and determination that is embodied in every Fijian.

I am thankful to the Fijian government that every health professional who weathered the storm to achieve the targeted vaccination rate in Fiji, because of which we are able to enjoy the uplifting of various restrictions today. Each and every front-liner, including police and army personnel, deserve special acknowledgement for their contribution in assisting the health team and the public as and when required.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this point in time, I will be failing in my duty, if I do not thank the honourable Prime Minister for his prudent and decisive leadership. He has continued to work hard and tirelessly to put our beloved country back on the path to success. Thank you Sir.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Hear, hear!

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- The fact remains that the global pandemic did not suddenly make climate change any less detrimental to our vulnerable country. The sentiments shared by His Excellency about his village in Naduri, where he mentioned at page 4 of the *Daily Hansard* of Monday, 22nd November, 2021, and I quote:

“I have seen piles of bleached coral become mountains on the beaches and I have watched those same beaches, as well as homes, disappear beneath a rising sea.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to rising seas, six communities have to be relocated and there are 40 more to be moved. This stands to be the reality faced by Fijians today, Sir. On my visits, I have personally seen and heard of losses suffered by our farmers living in rural and remote areas because of climate change. Farmers watched helplessly as sea water infiltrates into their farms, leaving them uncertain of what the future holds.

The recent *TC Winston*, *TC Gita*, *TC Josie*, *TC Keni*, *TC Sarai*, *TC Tino*, *TC Harold*, *TC Yasa*, *TC Ana* and *TC Vina* not only affected the livelihood of thousands of farmers but also cause severe damage to roads, infrastructures, bridges, homes including railway tracks. This inflicted a combine total of billions on our economy. However, one does not need to be on Ministerial post to give testimonies about the devastating impacts of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we feel it every day. This is our live reality and we must commend our government for its continuous efforts and commitments in trying to gather support at international level to help our people. Despite being outnumbered by delegations representing fossil fuel companies, our honourable Prime Minister and honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy with the dedicated team, fervently advocated on the importance of acting on climate crisis urgently. This note,

I said outnumbered by fossil fuel companies. Why were they present there? Why could not they do join virtually? Because they want their voice to be heard strongly, that is why and that is the only reason why we have the delegation from Fiji going out strongly up on that stage to present our case.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is understood that under the current emission settings by 2050, low lying nations in the Pacific is likely to become completely uninhabited and Fiji is among one of the most vulnerable nation that will be severely affected. It does not matter whether you are sitting on the Government side of the Chambers or on the Opposition side, climate change does not discriminate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all have a part to play in positively educating one and all about what climate change is and the individual role each one of us can play, to ensure sustainability and prosperity for our future generations. Instead of misleading the people by politicising the efforts made by the Government, we must fight fake news and in fact, positively contribute to government's initiative. Doing otherwise is setting ourselves out for further challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, though we have shown resilience and fought through the many hardships that came our way this year, this difficult road that we are on is far from reaching its destination. We must continue to be proactive, vigilant and determined. It took a lot of dedication, comprehensive planning and strategies to be able to come this far, so we must not put our guards down.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as eager as we all are to welcome international tourists from December 1st, we must ensure that all COVID-19 safe protocols put in place are held to the highest standards. We must follow directive that have been put in place for the safety of all. This is the only way to move forward as a nation and leave this virus behind once and for all. Anything other than this would ruin the efforts that have been made by each and every responsible Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, and honourable Members, at this point in time, our focus should not only be on COVID-19 safe protocols, but we should be vigilant about natural disasters. As we are all aware that November to April is Fiji's cyclone season. We know from unfortunate experiences, guided by the past that this must not be taken lightly at all. As the detrimental impacts of climate change continue to test our strength, we must not make things harder by having a relaxed attitude. It is in every one of us must have a contingency plan if and God forbids, a cyclone forms, this last minute preparation never yield a favourable outcome. We must be prepared.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the hallmark of our FijiFirst Government is that, it has set out to deliver what was promised to the people in 2018; stability, realistic programmes, holistic vision, sustainable growth and social equality. The onset of COVID-19 did stole the rapid progress, but nevertheless progress continued in all sectors, despite the hindrance. It is anticipated that with the opening of the international borders, the economy will pick up and many of the produce on our own will take off.

The FijiFirst Government is solving the problems of current time, is laying ground foundation to confront upcoming challenges. The Government has once again demonstrated its ability to endure tough times while supporting its people through various initiatives and programmes such as MSME, Grants, self-employment initiatives and cash assistance, just to name a few. These targeted assistance have been provided to ensure all Fijians have a stable source of income to uplift their living standards.

I would like to end my speech by quoting the UN Secretary-General, Sir Antonio Guterres, COP 26 World Leaders Summit, I quote:

“It is time to say enough; enough of brutalising biodiversity, killing ourselves with carbon, treating nature like a toilet, burning and drilling and mining our way deeper. We are digging our own graves”.

As I conclude my speech, I wish all honourable Members of this Parliament and citizens of our beloved country a merry Christmas and happy New Year. God bless us all.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members that brings to the end of the number of speakers for today. We will continue with the debate tomorrow morning.

Honourable Members, I have been advised that there are no Bills for consideration today.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Report on the Fiji Institute of Chartered Accountants Bill 2021

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, I stand before this august Parliament once again, as the Chairperson of the Justice, Law and Human Rights Committee to report back on the Committee’s work that had been entrusted to us by the honourable Members.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin by giving a brief background of the accounting services in Fiji. The accounting profession in Fiji had been governed by legislation that is five decades old. The current framework based on this legislation which is titled the “Fiji Institute of Accountants Act 1971”, saw the establishment of a self-regulating authority for the accounting profession, known as the Fiji Institute of Accountants, which I will be referring to as “Institute” which controlled and held an restrictive hold over the accounting fraternity. It was noted that even though there are numerous members of the Institute, majority of these members that had achieved accounting qualifications were not able to even sign off on accounts to carry out their general accounting services.

Currently in Fiji, accounting services provided via accounting firms is limited to only a few locations in Fiji. There are no accounting firms in every town and main centres around Fiji. The existing firms are only situated in main cities like Suva and Lautoka and in very few towns such as Nadi and Labasa.

Mr. Speaker, this has led the government of the day to step up and try to address this issue and as a result in collaboration with the Institute and other key stakeholders, the Fiji Institute of Chartered Accountants Bill 2021 (Bill No. 35/2021) was introduced in this Parliament. It is also vital to note at this stage, that it was the Institute itself that had begun the process way back in 2005, by conducting several reviews of the current Act. I would like to commend the Institute for being receptive to changes to its governing framework and for actually leading the way in this process.

Mr. Speaker, in this era of globalisation, Fiji is not immune to changes to the business environment, which includes the accounting profession. These changes is what the Bill aims to address and keep the accounting profession up to date. The Bill will create a level playing field of business and employment opportunities for all persons in the accounting fraternity. The Bill will address the requirements of today’s accounting profession in terms of registration and regulation, and updates the categories and requirements for membership to the Fiji Institute of Accountants. It will also rename the Institute to “Fiji Institute of Chartered Accountants”.

The Bill will also, among other things, remove obsolete provisions from the law, such as provisions on licensed accountants which is no longer in use. It will create categories for accountants

and provide a roadmap by which accountants can progress and develop their qualifications. A few of these new categories are named, Accounting Technicians, Associate Accountants and Chartered Accountants in Limited Practice and Chartered Accountants in Public Practice.

With the inclusion of new categories of membership to the Institute, more persons will be able to practice in the accounting profession and would be able to provide accounting services to more areas in Fiji. This opening of accounting services in Fiji, also allows individuals to set up accounting firms of their own without unnecessary restrictions. It would also create a level playing field and create business and employment opportunities. It would also mean that micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) would be able to more readily and inexpensively access professional accounting services. This would result in mainstreaming of MSMEs into the financial system and thereby giving them better opportunities to access credit.

Mr. Speaker, I will now go into the actual work of the Committee, beginning by covering the process followed by the Committee for the review. The Committee firstly looked into the formulation of the Bill and a briefing was conducted by the Fiji Institute of Accountants and the Ministry of Economy on the technicalities of the Bill. The Committee conducted its own deliberation on the Bill and noted the following issues:

Firstly, the title of the Bill and the proposed title of the Institute seems to project that the framework is only for a specific category of accountants within the accounting sector/industry; which is 'chartered accountants'. Secondly, the Committee also queried the proceeds and funds collected by the Institute, through the subscription fees and penalties prescribed by a Disciplinary Committee of the Institute.

There was also a query on the potential of there being a conflict of interest in the leadership of the Institute since the President is also the Chairperson of the Council and the powers of the Chairperson of the Council in regard to voting power. Additionally, there was a query on the role of the Executive Director in the hierarchy of the institute as stipulated under Clause 15 of the Bill. Furthermore, there will be new categories that will be recognised in the Institute, which includes Associate Accountants and Accounting Technicians and it was queried that these two categories of accountants can and cannot perform and what type of qualifications are needed for each category.

Also, it was noted that there will be new categories introduced by the Bill, known as 'Fellow', and the query was raised on the requirement of being recognised as fellow is that a member must have paid his or her annual fee for a period of not less than 15 years.

There were also other matters noted from this initial deliberation, which included the:

- role of tax agents and where they fit in the accountancy framework;
- reasons for removing a Member from the Assessment Committee, Disciplinary Panel and a Disciplinary Committee; and
- duration of the validity of the Certificates of Practice for accountants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee then conducted its own public consultation, whereby the public, including the political parties represented in Parliament, were invited to provide their views on the Bill, either in writing or in person, via in-person public consultation meetings, which were held in several communities around Fiji.

There were a number of pertinent issues identified from the review, which were raised by the public and the Committee gave due consideration to these, by having extensive deliberation and seeking legal clarification on all issues, so as to ensure that these were properly considered.

At the final stage of the review, the Committee resolved to make changes to the Bill, which could contribute to the achievement of its objectives. I will not take much time and will just highlight a few key changes out of 19 changes that the Committee recommended to be made to the Bill, and these include adding:

1. a protection of liability provision for acts done in good faith by Members of the Institute;
2. a protection for members of the Disciplinary Committee from being removed unduly by the Council;
3. a guarantee that the membership of the Disciplinary Committee will be made up of both members who are part of the Institute and those that are not part of the accounting profession; and
4. a provision that enables the Institute through its Disciplinary Committee to be able to refer matters to an appropriate agency, as and when necessary.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee also had a roundtable discussion with the Fiji Institute of Accountants (FIA) and other key stakeholders on all the issues identified from the review and from this discussion, the Committee also puts forth a few general recommendations for consideration of the Institute.

One such key recommendation is that the Institute is to review the law in every three years as noted in the proposed amendment to the Bill, which is captured in a new Clause 54.

The Committee also recommends that the FIA reviews all its administrative processes including that regarding the development process of accountants, inclusive of mentoring programmes, from Associate Accountants all the way to full Chartered Accountant with Certificate of Public Practice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to sum it up, the Committee believes that the Bill is a good piece of legislation and with those added changes, it has the green light from the Committee for its consideration by this august House. The Committee is hopeful that once the Bill is enacted, the fee charged by accounting firms would be levied at a reasonable cost given that more person will be able to practice the accounting profession which would in turn increase the services in all communities in Fiji. It will also create opportunities for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and even farmers to access chartered accounts at affordable cost, in order to maintain good financial records for its businesses.

Additionally, as earlier noted, the Bill will introduce new categories that recognise accountants and their qualifications in order to become a chartered accountant. There will also be bridging requirements for certificate holders to pursue in order to progress further in the hierarchy of levels in the accounting profession. It should also be noted that the bridging process, which allows for a chartered accountant in the Limited Public Practice to become a full chartered accountant in the Public Practice will be properly facilitated by the Institute, in collaboration with the relevant stakeholders that can undertake mentoring of the accountants both in the private and the public sectors.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the public consultation, it was noted that the issues raised were common across all the communities that were visited by the Committee. It was also noted and confirmed from the public submissions, that there were not many accounting firms available in Fiji. Accounting services were only accessible to major towns and cities whereby entrepreneurs and other business persons, including those in macro-small and medium enterprises.

I would also like to comment that the pandemic that the world is currently facing, had been an added burden to everyone. Thus, this is another reason why this Bill is needed and that Parliament sees the benefit of having this Bill passed, as it will contribute to easing some of the burdens of the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FIA is a self-regulating institute and the Committee commends the efforts and the intentions of the FIA in initiating this Bill that will have a great impact, not only to the business environment, but also to the least considered communities. Thus, we urge and reiterate to all honourable Members the need to quickly expedite the processing of this new Bill.

At this juncture, we would like to thank the members of the public that participated in the public consultation, the FIA, the Ministry of Economy and other institutions that provided their input on the Bill, which greatly assisted the Committee in its review. Appreciation also goes to the Secretary-General to Parliament for providing support to the Committee on matters pertaining to the review of the Bill.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee also acknowledges the Parliament IT Team for its support, which enabled the Committee to have virtual meetings and have its public consultation meetings broadcasted, which enabled public access to the work of the Committee.

Finally, I would like to thank the honourable Members of the Committee, honourable Rohit Sharma (Deputy Chairperson), honourable Ratu Suliano Matanitobua, honourable Dr. Salik Govind and honourable Mosese Bilitavu, for their invaluable input.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee, through this bipartisan Report and consensus, commends the Fiji Institute of Chartered Accountants Bill and its amendments to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Friday, 22nd October, 2021, the Standing Committee has now tabled its report accordingly, and the Bill be debated and voted upon by Parliament tomorrow.

Honourable Members, that brings us to the end to today's sitting. I thank you for your cooperation and forbearance. The Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.15 p.m.