

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

FRIDAY, 25TH MARCH, 2022

[CORRECTED COPY]

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FRIDAY, 25TH MARCH, 2022

The Parliament met at 9.37 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Adi L. Qionibaravi; the honourable Lt. Col. P. Tikoduadua and the honourable P.W. Vosanibola.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Thursday, 24th March, 2022, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

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

Fijian Elections Office Voter Registration Team

Honourable Members, take note that the Fijian Elections Office Voter Registration Team will be present in Parliament today from 9.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m. to undertake voter registration services. The Team will be based at Level 2 outside the Party Offices and I encourage honourable Members to utilise the services that they will provide. At this juncture, I extend my gratitude to the Supervisor of Elections and his team for accommodating the request from Parliament.

Chamber Seating Arrangement

Honourable Members, following the Budget announcement last night pertaining to the removal of the social distancing protocols, be advised that we will revert to the normal seating arrangement in the next sitting of Parliament, so you can get more cosier.

Late Commencement of Parliament Sitting

Honourable Members, on a final note, I apologise for yesterday's late start of Parliament. Remember that the timings in Parliament is decided by the Speaker and no one else; no one else is

to blame. Unless I am satisfied that everything is ready, the session will not begin, and that was the reason for yesterday's delay. Unlike His Excellency the President, he is always on time but if he is late, it is not the President who is late but it is the Aide-De-Camp (ADC) who is late.

DEBATE ON THE REVISED 2021-2022 APPROPRIATION BILL 2022

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament passed on Thursday, 24th March, 2022, we will now proceed with the resumption of debate on the Revised 2021-2022 Budget. Honourable Members, take note that each Member may speak only once to the Revised Appropriation Bill as well as all the Consequential Bills.

I now call upon the Leader of the Opposition, the honourable Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu to give his response to the Revised 2021-2022 Budget.

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also rise to offer our response from this side of Parliament to the proposed Revised Budget which was presented last night by the honourable Attorney-General and Minister of Economy.

From the outset, Sir, it would be remiss of me if I do not acknowledge the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of the Government Backbenches. I also acknowledge the presence of the honourable Members of the Opposition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the same token, I would also like to take this opportunity, on behalf of the honourable Members of the loyal Opposition in welcoming our honourable Prime Minister back into the country, particularly in this august Parliament after a very successful medical procedure in Melbourne, Australia. We would like to wish him the very best and we will continue to pray for his health. We acknowledge and thank his family and the people of Fiji for their moral support and prayers during those very difficult times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the same token, we are also saddened to hear the shocking news of the untimely loss of your youngest brother, the late Ratu Keni Vuiyasawa, and, of course, your cousin, Ratu Visawaqa Cakobau. We would also like to share our deepest condolence to you, personally, Sir, your family and the *vanua vakaturaga o* Kubuna in the unexpected loss of two members of the *vanua vakaturaga*. The two chiefs are very close relatives of mine as well, and our prayers are with you, your family and the *vanua* during this difficult time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me get back to the Budget Address and we all agree that we have just gone through a crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We feel that we are not out of the woods yet. Sir, there is an environment of uncertainty, fear, mistrust and lack of confidence amongst our different communities. There are many reasons for the cause of uncertainty in our nation. One of the major reasons is the lack of confidence in the Government of the day due to manipulation, and the lack of transparency, particularly in matters of national interest in the last eight years or so.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we were advised that there will be a Revised Budget, the first question that came to mind is that, do we really need to have a Revised Budget, taking into account that we are only three and half months away from the end of the current financial year?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we expected a Revised Budget in late December or early January. This is in line with the honourable Minister of Economy's commitment when announcing the 2021-2022 National Budget, when he clearly stated that a Revised Budget will be announced if the need arises.

Sir, in considering the Revised Budget, a number of factors have come to mind. As at 20th February, 2020 we have received more than \$1.8 billion of assistance from abroad and this is unprecedented. This includes \$838 million in grant, direct budget support and loans and aid-in-kind of about FJ\$10.86 million. This excludes the \$200 million loan from Japan and the sale of 44 per cent of the EFL share. In addition, Sir, in the last five year's Government, on average, usually underspent around \$500 million. The Government should consider funding urgent expenditure through reallocation from existing resources.

I am fully aware that you cannot transfer funds directly from one Head of Expenditure to another, but there are already adequate funds in Head 50 to be utilised for urgent expenditure request from Government agencies, if it cannot be sourced from within the ministry's budget which are normally underspent. It is time that the Government should show some humanity, compassion and be more transparent to the people of Fiji so that we can all be united and move forward together as a united nation living in this extraordinary time rather than creating further uncertainty.

Sir, in 2014, the Government fiscal strategy we could say was very well articulated and very sound but in reality, they practise the opposite. According to the fiscal framework of 2014, the Government will gradually consolidate Government finance over the medium term and will continue to increase its operating savings by strengthening collection of operating revenue and prudently managing operational expenditure. Most importantly, a large share of Government expenditure will be directed towards investment.

The 2016-2017 Budget Strategy stated that the Government will stimulate the economy to generate growth to provide the fiscal space needed to consolidate Government finance. Again, in the 2018-2019 financial year, the Strategy stated that the Government will reduce the net deficit gradually to 3 per cent and reduce it further to 2.5 per cent in 2019-2020. I will be deliberating further in detail on the failure and inconsistency of the FijiFirst Fiscal Framework when highlighting the status of the nation.

Basically, the truth of the matter is that, nothing has been achieved thus far but the nation's socio-economic indicators continue to decline and we are currently in a very poor state. The claim that we will be like Singapore and be better than Australia and New Zealand, I think, is rather a sick joke. We should not be comparing ourselves with Singapore and New Zealand most importantly, Australia.

The focus of our development agenda must be based on the premise of availability of our natural resources, our own human resources capacity and at the same time, be mindful of our vulnerability as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS). Most importantly, we must ensure that people are generally happy rather than be rich, unhappy and with unsustainable debt.

Sir, when we turn to the future outlook, there is no doubt, we will all appreciate and agree that the whole world is now living in extraordinary times and Fiji is not excluded, as highlighted by the honourable Minister of Economy. Although we have gone through three waves of COVID-19 with different intensities, we still have to live with the pandemic and must continue to make the necessary adjustments to live with a new norm.

Again, we are now facing an uncertain future because of the crisis in Europe, which could further escalate, particularly in the increase in the price of petroleum products and the major strain in the supply of chain of goods and services. Those two events have brought a very clear message that we must make hard decisions to ensure that we brace and cushion the impact of those unprecedented events in the short, medium and in the long term.

Sir, it is time that we take a united front as a nation. We must put aside our personal egos, small differences and collectively work together in our resolve for the interest of our people rather than self-centred interest or the interest of the selected few, which has become the norm under the Bainimarama-led Government. I say this with all honesty and sincerity because I believe that we are all patriotic.

Sir, I urge the Government not to politicise issues and consider our comments constructively and recommendations positively, and make adjustments when necessary rather than continue to be defensive as usual.

Sir, it has been the norm of the honourable Minister of Economy to call Members of this side of the House “unpatriotic”. When we constructively criticise and suggest alternatives to be considered, his latest buzzword when people disagree or suggest alternatives, they are accused of being un-Fijian. May I suggest to the honourable Minister of Economy that he must be more sensitive in the choice of words in the public domain, particularly in our multiracial and multicultural society. I believe that we are all patriotic in our own ways.

Sir, for me personally as a traditional leader and as an indigenous Fijian, I continue to be patriotic based on values and traditional norms, which I will continue to embrace for the common good so as other people in other different communities.

It would be interesting for the honourable Minister of Economy to explain the meaning of the term “un-Fijian” because everyone embrace values that are close to their heart, based on their belief, faith and culture. Generally, the word “un-Fijian” creates an environment of uncertainty, mistrust and disunity amongst our different communities, particularly at a time when we must all be working together as a nation of one people with one common goal for a progressive and prosperous society.

On the budget announcement, Sir, generally, the people of Fiji and those who are abroad always take a keen interest and look forward to any budget announcement based on their own individual or group interest. Basically, they will be asking the fundamental question on what is there for them in the budget. As I say this, I would like to refer the Government of the day to the amount of revenue that has been generated by the people who live abroad and send money back to Fiji, Sir.

The basic question there and now I am asking, is there something for them there in the Budget? Because remittance has surpassed other major sectors of our economy and we do not need to emphasise that in this august House, Sir, it is clear as daylight. But, again, when you have \$600 million coming annually from overseas, what has the Government done to, at least, address the plight of our poor people when they do return home or when they make visits home?

I have already echoed this in this august House, it will be similar to the Philippines. They are providing certain percentages of allowable kilogrammes in freight when they come back home. This is to support them in the great work that they have been doing for their motherland in sending money back home. The question that we would like to ask is, what has the Government of the day done towards the plight of our people who have been leaving abroad and sending money back home?

Sir, the private sector and business community will always anticipate that there will be incentives available to support their businesses to grow and give them confidence for additional investment. Workers will be looking forward for relief to cushion the impact in the substantial increase in the cost of living that we are currently experiencing and the possibility of increase in minimum living wages. On that note, Sir, we, on this side of the House, are quite happy that at least we have heard from the horse’s mouth that he finally agreed on \$4 minimum wage per hour. I only wish if he could re-visit what we had stated in this august House in 2018 where the mention of \$4 an

hour basic wages was proposed from this side of the House. My fellow honourable colleagues will be dwelling on that, and will elaborate further on that.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Four years late.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Members of the general public will be hoping for improved services, particularly in health, education and better infrastructure facilities, whilst those in the maritime zones will be looking for better and improved shipping services so that they can replenish their supplies in a timely manner and the availability of regular, reliable and effective social services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the national budget is an integral part in the planning and development of our economy. It is unfortunate that the FijiFirst Government has not taken this as a serious exercise. Sir, with this budget presentation, we now have a record breaking trend by the Government – in that in the last 24 months, we have had four such budgetary presentations and adjustments. Four, Sir!

It is obvious from this that the Government just does not have the ability to properly plan anything. It has grossly failed in its efforts to effectively lay out its 12 months revenue and expenditure proposal, and this ad hoc conduct of Government seriously worries us and we know this is an election budget. That is the bottom line of the budget that was presented last night. Sorry Minister, it is an election budget.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Absolutely!

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- At the time of the 2021-2022 National Budget presentation, many of us could predict that there would be another budget within 12 months and here we are, Sir. The people and all those who care about the country's economic future note this is another bad planning of Government. The Government needs to think hard. We all know that national budget making process goes in tandem with the long-term economic planning of the country.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- From my experience, in 2020-2021 during the time of the pandemic, it was clear that Fiji, like other small island developing countries needed a new approach to policies to alter the structure of the economy. We stated this very clearly in our presentation at the last Budget session.

The Government should have considered a long-term structural adjustment policy. Alternatively, that plan (2021-2022 Budget) and now this adjustment could have aimed to materialise and reflect the plan for future economic development and growth. Clearly, Sir, it is not. This is all about election in 2022, Sir. We know that the FijiFirst Government is desperate to make a huge impression on the people of Fiji.

HON. V. NATH.- We have been doing that for seven years now.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Desperate!

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- People have seen the Government's gross failure in everything from bad policies to managing the COVID-19 crisis related to mobility restrictions, healthcare facilities and support services to economic policy blunders. So far, Government's policies have not shown much result to spin the economic recovery. An efficacious budgetary process involves incorporating valuable suggestions from the line ministers, public officials, parliamentarians and most importantly, the citizens through public forums.

The budget systematically transforms those demands and proposals into allocations embedded with policies for implementation for the progress of society. Moreover, a sound budgeting practice stimulates trust amongst citizens that the Government is taking into consideration concerns raised by them, and is dedicated to implementing the plans that are designed to achieve the greater needs of society. Those goals and objectives must be prescribed by policies and be within the reach of the country's realisable stock of resources. It then becomes the obligation of the State to implement them with absolute proficiency, and render it sustainable within a timeframe but definitely for at least, in 12 months. Many studies have shown that well-structured long-term policies are very effective in creating growth. Policies must clearly send out positive signal. Our policies do not bounce out any such signal. As a key stakeholder in the economy, the Government should exercise clarity, that is, objectivity, transparency, credibility and reliability to provide direction to all other stakeholders. Those have been distinctly missing in the last four budget presentations since March 2020.

The National Budget is not a mere document, but rather a contract between the citizens and the State, depicting the plan for nurturing and allocating public resources for rendering services to the people. The Government has grossly failed in this regard. Waste and misuse of public resources has been the hallmark of the FijiFirst Government since long and as a result, we have only seen the sufferings of our people in the last 24 months.

Hundreds of deaths during the height of the second wave of the pandemic occurred due to negligence and massive gaps in our health system. If our health system was any better, we could have avoided many of the deaths that happened. Without international tourists and lacklustre industries, the Fijian economy is doomed.

On that note, Sir, I am quite happy to note that the honourable Minister of Economy has announced certain improvements in the way our health officers are to be treated. They have slowly made a piecemeal arrangement in getting together the old policies of overtime payment for our nurses and they have the various descriptions of how the overtime is going to be paid because this has seen to the slow mass movement of nurses to better opportunities abroad and that has created the gap. Even though we have two outlets of training nurses through the College of Nursing and that of the one run by Sangam, yet we are still short of our nurses.

Sir, some of the fundamental questions that I have been raising in anticipation for the announcement of this Revised Budget includes, will the Revised Budget:

- stimulate or reinvigorate the economy in crisis;
- address the low level of investment;
- generate employment opportunities;
- reduce poverty and hardship;
- cushion and address our unsustainable debt;
- consider sustainable revenue options;
- improve productivity in the economy;
- address the increase in price of goods and services; and
- address the increase in the price of fuel?

Some measures were announced last night and we are grateful for that, Sir. At the sectoral level, whether the Revised Budget will –

- provide additional resources to support and improve our health services (infrastructure and supply of basic medicines) and manpower after mass resignation, particularly from nurses (I have just highlighted);
- improve our education system - Pre-School, Primary, Secondary and Tertiary;
- ensure food security and export-led growth;
- improve production in resource-based sector (Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry and Manufacturing, et cetera) which are performing well below potential;
- improve basic infrastructure; and
- support our rural people?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the current state of the economy, if I may turn to that now, our economy is in a precarious position with very few options available. The risks and uncertainties to the economy are quite enormous. While the risks such as climatic calamities and pandemic-related uncertainty continue, new global shocks continue to pose risks. While these are largely beyond our control, the Government needs to be imaginative in providing new options. The Government's vulnerabilities have been magnified due to its own faults and lack of understanding of the issues. As the IMF puts it, Fiji remains at a very high risk. The recovery and medium-term outlook in the baseline scenario also hinge on a full recovery of tourism, but it is unclear whether the pre-pandemic tourism and spending patterns will re-establish favourable conditions.

I would like to pause for a moment and go back to some of the data that was provided in this august Parliament by the honourable Minister responsible for Tourism, that they have been getting very good bookings before the opening of our borders. Correct me if I am wrong, but I think there was 80 per cent booking but only last night, I heard the reality that it was just around 50 per cent. As we were informed, maybe most of the tourists bookings have been withdrawn and then rebooked but they have been taken as something that we could be relying upon. Yet when the borders open, we are grateful that some at least have come, but not that it was suggested in this august House. This is the reason why the Government needs to re-examine contingent liabilities that exist as well. These entities need appropriate implementation policies to remain viable and economically competitive.

There are already nasty observations about the Fiji Development Bank (FDB) in the social media and there are allegations of biases and favouritism in disbursement of Government backed loans. Broadly speaking, as the IMF puts it, the sustainability of the economic outlook will rest critically on the Government's ability to embark on policy reforms necessary for macro-fiscal stabilization and to begin reducing public debt, while at the same time creating economic growth via business confidence and productive investments.

I will now turn to the status of the nation's debt stock. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issue regarding our national debt has been in the public domain for some time and there has been a lot of discussion on the unsustainability of our national debt level. Before deliberating on our high unacceptable level of exposure due to our current stock of unsustainable debt, I would like to revisit statements and claims made by the honourable Minister of Economy regarding our national debt. First, he continued to preach that we must borrow smartly and, second, in his statement published in the *Fiji Sun* on 11th May, 2022, claiming that, and I quote:

“The previous government left inter-generational debt. Previously, government used to borrow money to pay for Operating Expenditure, however the FijiFirst government has focussed its borrowing on Capital Projects.”

This was during his face to face consultation on the proposed Revised 2021-2022 National Budget in Nadi.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is so sad and unprofessional as usual, for the honourable Minister of Economy to continuously blame previous governments when things do not go right. The FijiFirst Government has been in power for more than 15 years and continue with the blame game like little kids rather than taking the responsibility head on. The people of this country know the truth and they cannot be misled or be deceived anymore. The “fact of the matter”, if I may quote his usual lines, is that our total accumulated debt since Independence up to 2005 for a 35-year period was around \$2.42 billion.

Today, just within a span of 15 years, our debt level has ballooned four times to almost \$9.6 billion. This is, in addition, to our contingency liability for the same period which has increased from \$1.2 billion to \$1.7 billion. This means that our total national debt exposure today is hovering around \$11 billion, more than our current level of GDP in real price.

The claim that previous governments used to borrow money to pay for operating expenditure, I think, is a lie. It is quite mischievous, deceiving and amount to misleading to the public at large. Most importantly, it undermines the integrity of previous leaders who were being patriotic and prudent in managing our public finance. I remember, as part of the previous governments on many occasions, we were always reminded that we must borrow and live within our means and only borrow for capital formation.

The claim that the current Government only borrow for capital expenditure is an outright lie, Sir. The state of affair in our nation truly reflects the opposite. Sir, one just have to look at investment trends in the country since 2010. The highest level of investment on record by this Government was in 2013 during the upgrading of the Nabouwalu/Dreketi Road at a cost of \$228 million funded through a Chinese Government loan which was completed in 2015. Due to this project, our investment was 27 per cent of GDP. Since then the investment in the country continued on a declining trend.

In 2019 prior to COVID-19, our investment level was only hovering around 17 per cent of GDP, far below the 25 per cent level required to ensure that there is always going to be a sustainable growth if we hit 25 per cent. This is despite the substantial increase of our loan portfolio and Government claim that it continue capital expenditure allocation.

Sir, it is worth reiterating that previous governments always have a well-planned investment programme under its Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP) targeting infrastructure projects with both, high economic and financial return (not less than 25 per cent and 15 per cent respectively), which are prioritised and properly-sequenced to ensure continuity and generate investment in other sectors so as to generate employment opportunities.

The major reason that loan funds were directed to infrastructure development purposes was because Fiji was classified as a developing country and not as an under-developed country, and could only have access to ordinary capital resources from multilateral institutions. Most importantly, Sir, to ensure our unemployment rate remains low, today our unemployment rate is hovering around 4.8 per cent, compared to the average rate of unemployment of 4.2 per cent previously under previous Government regimes.

It is unfortunate that the nation’s status has been downgraded which is quite embarrassing, not because of the impact of climate change but because our GDP has declined in real terms and,

which I had stated earlier, that we are back to the 2014 level. It underscores the fact that while other similar SIDS continue to progress, Fiji continues to lag behind.

In addition, our international credit rating has been downgraded to show a high risk associated with our current high debt. Despite the reminder from reputable experts and multilateral agencies, this Government continues with its unsustainable spending spree. The poor management of our Government finance and the lack of accountability and transparency has led to the increase of our debt stock which is unprecedented, Sir. We cannot blame COVID-19 since our debt level was already on the high side before 2020.

Another reason for the sad state of our debt is the marginalization and removal of institution that provides independent advice to the Government and ensure that there is always a “check and balance” in place to ensure that processes and procedures are followed as required under the law. The removal and marginalization of key institutions has undermined transparency and accountability, which is a hallmark of the dictatorial approach of the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no such thing as borrowing smartly. At the end of the day, debt has to be paid, whether it is concessional loan or interest-free loan. Therefore, Sir, it is fair to say that this Government will leave a legacy of intergenerational debt, and not the previous governments as claimed by the honourable Minister of Economy. We can confidently say, Sir, that our accumulated debt is getting from bad to worse. The existing debt to GDP ratio is extremely high and currently hovering around 90 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the prevailing conditions, any added government expenditure would squeeze the remaining fiscal space to near zero. This puts Fiji in the league of “Highly Indebted Poor Countries” (HIPC). Sir, we expect the debt to GDP ratio to reach as high as 95 per cent by the end of 2021-2022 fiscal year, if the current national budget 20 expenditures were executed fully and contingent liabilities were taken into consideration.

It is unfortunate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Government’s planned medium term strategy to reduce the debt ratio to 80 per cent by 2025-2026 and 60 per cent by 2035-2036 may be reasonable, but requires many fiscal abstinence during the first phase of this process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the IMF in its December 2021 consultation statement has already stated about the severity of the debt situation Fiji is facing right now. It states that Fiji’s public debt situation worsened significantly in the wake of COVID-19 with a record economic contraction and sizeable fiscal deficits.

Sir, it further stated that public debt increased to 70.8 per cent of GDP by the end of 2020 and it increased further by about 22 per cent points in 2021. As per the IMF report, the debt reached 86 per cent of GDP by the end of 2021.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is worth noting that the IMF conditioned the reduction of Fiji’s public debt over the medium term only if there were:

1. a steady recovery in economic growth;
2. implementation of a phased fiscal consolidation plan; and
3. no new major shocks occurred.

In the post-December 2021 eventualities, Sir, all the three conditions laid down by the IMF for the fiscal consolidation to occur, seem nullified, the:

1. Economic recovery does not seem to be steady due to diminishing global demand due to war in Europe and US-China tensions.
2. Government's approach to fiscal consolidation does not seem to exist.
3. Economy has already felt shocks, which could be long lasting. This refers to the recent floods in Fiji, our Pacific neighbourhood and rising fuel prices globally, which are ominous signs of continued effect of the climate change and global conflict.

Therefore, the solution to our economic problem boils down to local action. Effectively, Fiji will need local resources to address the economy, which the Government barely has at its disposal, pertaining to stiff fiscal space.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the impending consequences of additional Government outlays in the near future would raise the debt levels even further. With the debt level reaching 90 per cent of GDP, relying on domestic resources is not possible. It is certain that the Government's hoodwinking tactics will not work anymore, Sir. Real problems need genuine solutions. Blaming the past governments will surely not work. We need creative solutions proposed and delivered by those who know the issues and solutions that are effective, innovative and efficient.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now let me look at the review of our GDP growth. Finally, the chicken has come home to roost, despite the claims of unprecedented growth in the last 15 years under the Bainimarama-led Government, the Government cannot hide any more from the truth.

Today, Sir, our real GDP growth is the same level as we had in 2014. Therefore, very little or no progress has been made in the last eight years. I would like to reiterate the point I had made earlier that we will never be the same as Singapore or better than Australia and New Zealand, as usually championed by the honourable Minister of Economy.

The fact of the matter is that our real average growth for 10 years between 2011 and 2019 is only around 3.24 per cent, much lower than the growth period between 1971 and 1980 which was around 4.85 per cent. If we look that the real growth average between 2011 and 2020, it is only 0.75 per cent.

The low level of growth in the last 15 years or so is clearly reflected in our key macro and sectoral indicators, which clearly shows a declining trend. Whilst my esteemed colleagues on this side of Parliament will be deliberating on the details of the performance in their respective shadow portfolios, I will just provide a broad overview, Sir. It is unfortunate that our investment as a percentage of GDP continues to decline, despite the fact that Government continues to take an expansionary approach. There is nothing to show for the unsustainable debt level which I have highlighted earlier.

Our investment, at the end of 2019 was just 17 per cent of GDP, far below the necessary level to ensure sustainable economic growth. Unless we change the strategy or direct our resources to meaningful investment, our economy will continue to be driven by consumption support by handout and freebies since we are in the election year and we will continue on a declining trend.

We thank you, honourable Ministers for your generosity in going around the country with boats and vehicles. It is for the good of the country and at the same time, you are preparing for the elections as well.

(Laughter)

Today, Sir, we clearly notice that Ministers are going out....

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- If I may repeat what I have just stated earlier on, especially the provision of tractors, agricultural tools, fiberglass boats by the honourable Minister for Labour.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Direct assistance to the poor people.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- I am thanking you, honourable Minister.

Our current employment rate is hovering around 8.4 per cent which is unprecedented in the history of this country.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALVU.- Look at that.

The Government should review figures readily available rather than manipulating the facts to suit their own narrow agendas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, associated with the low level of investment and high unemployment rate, we are experiencing today the increasing incidence of poverty. Again, this is quite alarming when the urban population has increased, including that of the peri-urban, and the rural population has decreased, yet poverty is on the increase again. Today, we can confidently say that, at least, more than 40 per cent of our population are living below the poverty line and an additional 20 per cent are facing hardships.

These figures are based on the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) Report which was carried out by the BOS before the COVID-19 pandemic struck our shores. At the end of 2019, 30 per cent of our total population were living below the poverty line and majority of them reside in our rural areas and the maritime zone.

It was unfortunate that the messenger was sacked because the Government did not like the message. Rather than sacking the messenger, Government should look at sustainable ways of reducing poverty rather than the band-aid solution of giving out non-targetted assistance to those who do not really need them.

On a positive note, it is interesting to note the high level in our foreign reserve which sits at around \$3.2 billion which is equivalent to more than eight months of import of goods and services. Our liquidity level is hovering around \$2.9 billion and remittance continues to increase and is now a major source of foreign exchange.

It is also interesting to see that our foreign reserve has increased during a period when our nation is in crisis and production is low. That, again, is very interesting. The foreign reserve has increased, yet our production is low.

Again, Sir, as a layman, I always believe that foreign reserves are mostly earned through income from export of goods and services. But in our case, foreign reserve is generated through

grants, especially budget support and loans. The question is, what happens when we start repaying those loans and they are not used for investment to generate income?

With regard to direct budget support, this is the first time in the history of this beloved country of ours that we have received such assistance. It is not the ability of this Government to negotiate such support as claimed. Budget support are given on humanitarian grounds, honourable Minister, and decided by the donor to help the hardship that the people of Fiji are facing due to the pandemic. The Government, as usual, should stop boasting and misleading the people.

Sir, sooner or later, the direct budget support will run out and we have to consider other sources. Therefore, the Government should ensure that funds are used in the most productive manner rather than the handout of freebies in anticipation of buying votes.

It is interesting to note the high liquidity level in the domestic market which is hovering around \$2.9 billion. High liquidity may be good in the short term but it continues to increase substantially after 2017 prior to the pandemic. To me, Sir, this means that the people are not borrowing and financial institutions are reluctant to lend because of the high risk associated with lending, and the borrower being reluctant to borrow because of the lack of confidence.

This is a clear indication of the general lack of confidence in the economy, particularly foreign investors, due to poor governance, poor policies, poor law and order situations and human rights abuse that are critical to ensure confidence. The risk is just too high for all parties, Sir. As I have said earlier, remittance continues to increase, particularly personal transfers which has surpassed revenue generated by tourism.

On many occasions, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have highlighted the importance of remittances for our economy in this august Parliament. I have also stated this and alluded to it just a while ago, and suggest that Government to consider ways of incentivising our people who are living abroad to send more personal remittance. The Government should, at least, support them in reducing the cost of transferring funds to Fiji and at the same time, look at ways to ensure that remittances received are invested in productive sectors with high returns. I believe with the support from Government, our people from abroad will send more money into the country. We are grateful for what we heard last night, yes, rugby investment opportunities that have been created.

On the sectoral performance, the poor performance of our natural resource-based sector, including tourism, just confirms the low growth rate experienced in the last five years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the contribution of our agricultural sector continues to decline, despite the fact that it is very important for our food security and export. We all understand the hard work that the Government and the honourable Minister for Agriculture is undertaking, going around supplying seeds, et cetera, but what is the likely turnaround time? Another 10 years, 15 years? The agriculture sector used to be right at the forefront since Independence.

In 2016, agriculture including the sugar sector contributed almost 20 per cent of our GDP. In 2020, it contributed 3 per cent and in 2021 down to 1.1 per cent. Government should seriously consider allocating more resources to the agricultural sector in providing employment opportunities and increase production for domestic consumption and export, rather than encouraging the import of food products which will continue to drain our foreign reserve.

Sir, we just need to take a look at the government of Israel. We spent quite a lot of time in the government of Israel together with the honourable Ministers on the other side who served in the military. They only became independent in 1948, yet they are self-sufficient in food and there is a

surplus, now they are exporting. Their total land area is only 22,000 square kilometres, ours when we put all our 300 islands together, it comes to about 18,000 square kilometres. The difference is not that much, yet they do intensive grazing. They are self-sufficient in dairy products.

During the first Gulf War they supplied dairy products to the allied forces that were based in Arabia. This is just to show how a country like Israel can turn things around and be self-sufficient in a very short time and more importantly, they then have a very healthy population because of the surplus of food and the availability of food, which reduces the recurring cost of maintaining hospitals. They only have about two major hospitals - one in Haifa and another one in Jerusalem. The rest are just health clinics. Was that not part of our plan soon after Independence - health centres? However, those health centres are very much neglected now. Maybe we will see the interlinks between the agricultural sector and other sectors of the economy coming together or contributing to each other and that affects the healthy growth of the people.

We should consider alternative and diversification within the sugar industry. The SDL Government came up with the idea of alternative livelihood. It is good to hear what has been proposed by the honourable Minister of Economy last night in trying to help the sugar industry, or the low production farmers relying heavily on their leaseholds to provide them with shelter. But I hope they should vigorously work on that to ensure that there is better feedback from the returns from the agriculture sector, or the overall economic sector at large.

Sir, we are now looking at mechanization through co-operative arrangements to assist smallholder farmers. Our forestry sector, despite the increase in the harvest of mahogany and pine plantations, its contribution to our economy continues to decline. In 2014, the forestry sector contributed to around 36.7 per cent to our GDP and in 2020, its contribution was only around 3.2 per cent. Rather than exporting wood chips and sawn timber, we should consider more value addition to support employment, foreign exchange earnings and improve the income of resource owners.

I turn to fisheries and aquaculture sector which is also important for our food security and its contribution to GDP, I am sorry honourable Minister, it is still marginally low. The industrial fishing sector continues on a declining trend and we need to look at innovative ways to entice foreign industry players to return to our shores. There must be incentives, the right mix of policies to support the industry by making Fiji a viable port for them to offload their catch and at a competitive cost for the provision of auxiliary services such as bunker, ship repairs and the replenishment of supplies of quality and most importantly, it should be at a reasonable cost.

Sir, there is very little improvement in our manufacturing sector. Its contribution to GDP has declined from 16.5 per cent in 2014 to 2.3 per cent in 2018 and only 0.3 per cent in 2021. Again, it is a clear indication to the lack of confidence from our manufactures to extend their productive capacity due to the lack of confidence in the government of the day. The sad reality is that, only a few selected companies have been given preference and priority. There must be a consistency of policy so that we have the confidence to compete on a level playing field.

Another major contributor to our foreign exchange is through transshipment. In 2014, we earned \$1.1 billion and in 2019, we only earned \$990.4 million. The decline in re-export is a challenge because our services are getting quite expensive. Therefore, other island nations are considering other options and alternatives which are cheaper and reliable. It is unfortunate that we have not improved our port facilities in order to be more cost effective and become more competitive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, taking into account the background information that I have earlier elaborated on, I will now turn to the revised budget proper. As usual, the revised budget continues to be bullish and sugar-coated to say the least. We all know it is full of promises and will not be

fulfilled and programmes that will not be implemented. The marketing gimmick by the honourable Minister of Economy to attract voters as we move towards the election will not work because the people of Fiji know the truth since they have been misleading the nation in the last 15 years.

Basically, it is anticipated that revenue is to increase from \$2.085 billion to \$2.253 billion, an increase of over \$200 million while expenditure is expected to increase by over \$100 million from \$3.691 billion to \$3.715 billion. As I had stated earlier, these figures are unrealistic because of the following - on average, the annual revenue shortfall is around \$500 million in the last five years and average annual under-expenditure is always around \$600 million. Therefore, how realistic are these revenue and expenditure figures, taking into account the shortfall in revenue and under-expenditure?

On the revenue side, it is interesting to note that the VAT for, at least, 21 basic food items will be zero-rated and there will be an increase of VAT of 15 per cent to the 21 items. The bottom line here is that, the poor will not only benefit from the zero-rated VAT items but also the rich. They also eat flour, they also eat everything that you are now promoting that would attract the poor people but you are excluding the rich because they also eat that.

It also means that the poor will have difficulty in accessing items, such as textiles and footwear. The basic principal of VAT is that, it is broad based and everyone share the burden with a small increase, everyone pays equal tax.

To help the poor and most vulnerable, a more targeted approach is more feasible to increase existing assistance due to the increase in VAT, rather than directly removing VAT on basic food items which will also benefit the rich. That is my solution, honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts and Community Development.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It will never work.

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- It will.

On the increase in the minimum wage to \$4 per hour, although it will be in four tranches, its impact on our suffering and narrow-based manufacturing sector will be unsustainable for small manufacturing businesses.

Sir, it is common knowledge that our manufacturing sector performance is on the decline since 2014. In 2014, the manufacturing sector contributed 16.5 per cent to our GDP. In 2018, it was only 2.3 per cent and in 2021, it further reduced to 0.3 per cent.

It is unfortunate that very little attention is given to this sector. Whilst we recognize that it is important that we should expand our health services through Private General Practitioners, it is also important to upgrade the existing public health facilities which are in very much dilapidated state. The WHO Report status of health service in the country indicated that very little has been done to improve existing facilities since 2016.

We, on this side of the House, welcome the increase in the allocation for our public utilities but the question is, whether these institutions will have access to additional funds when required or they do not have the capacity to fully implement projects and have been earmarked for implementation. The following entities in the last five years on average have underspent or did not utilize funds allocated to them - Water Authority - \$110 million; Fiji Roads Authority - \$227 million; Ministry of Agriculture - \$32.9 million; Ministry of Fisheries - \$9.53 million; Commerce and Trade - \$19.83 million; Sugar - \$17.55 million; Local Government - \$13.18 million and Miscellaneous Services - \$239.97 million.

Basically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I am saying is that, most of the ministries underutilized the fund allocated to them. In total, government average under expenditure is around \$500 million annually.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is very clear in our mind is that, the Revised Budget presented by the honourable Minister of Economy last night is sugar-coated to deceive the people of Fiji, and which in simple term, is just an election gimmick to buy votes, give false promises and hoodwink the people of this nation.

I say with confidence, Sir, because the inconsistency in messages delivered by the honourable Minister of Economy and the reality on the ground differs. The budget figures, at least, in the last five years shows a lot of inconsistency in commitment outlined in fiscal framework in paper which is totally inconsistent or opposite from the action taken on the ground.

Our debt level will increase and is unsustainable. Our revenue measures, sound good on paper but the reality there is always a shortfall year in and year out. This Budget adjustment is a desperate measure to remain in power by the FijiFirst Government. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not an adjustment, this is entirely a new budget altogether. It is not a supplementary budget. This raises many questions about the authenticity and sincerity in our budget making conventions. It seems like this budget is a full national budget for the next 12 months and, again, it comes with a statement of review. This does not seem like an adjustment. Indeed, this is not genuine. This is another hoodwinking exercise, in fact, it is a crude joke on our country.

There are the fundamental reasons why the Government is not opening up for debate on this Appropriation Bill. Putting down Standing Order 101 is a mockery of Parliament and the Opposition condemns it in the strongest terms possible. Not given time to the Opposition to respond appropriately to an Appropriation Bill, is contrary to democratic norm. While measures taken in this adjustment to reduce food and fuel prices is welcomed, the question is, why now? This reduction in VAT on basic food items should have been done in 2021 and the Budget was considered in July 2021. However, the VAT increase from 9 per cent to 15 per cent on non-essential goods and services is an aggressive policy move.

While on one hand, food and fuel prices are reduced, all other prices including investment commodity will increase. It is obvious that the Government is financing this budget using grants from our donors and developing partners. This is the reason why the Government is suppressing the necessary debate on the Bill. Is this the reason for the honourable Minister of Economy not to show clearly the revenue streams in the Budget? If the Budget is, indeed, an adjustment, all actual revenues in the last period need a clear disclosure. Why are those disclosures not being made?

The measures taken under this adjustment has no clear indication for a long term policy adjustment towards economic growth and development. On the contrary, increasing VAT from 9 per cent to 15 per cent on non-essential goods and services will only increase the production cost. The honourable Minister of Economy intends to fix healthcare services overnight by tweaking a few policies. The people have suffered terrible healthcare services for quite some time, while the rich, including the fellow Government Ministers have the luxury of overseas treatment. Some of the measures, such as pharmaceutical policies may be helpful but the shortage of doctors and nurses in the country will not realize the shortages.

Many of the Ministers assertions about better health services due to change in policies are pipe dreams and utterly wishful. We cannot produce doctors and nurses in a short period. It takes years to train them.

Only last year the Minister declared policies to withdraw MBBS scholarships and now it brings back 20 scholarships provided with Government grant.

Only last year the Minister effected policies to increase the qualifying marks of TELS to 280 and now reduces it to 250. This is the very same thing that happened when the SVT Government came in, when we introduced the Fijian Affairs Scholarship and the Multi-Ethnic Affairs Scholarship because most of our indigenous Fijians and rural Indians of Indian descent are late starters. That is something that we have to accept as part of us in this small world. When you are a late starter, why can you not be accessible to scholarships with low entry marks? Compare that to other Pacific regional countries that are part of the University of Fiji with low entry marks and us, we have to be moving it right up to 280. For sure we are just creaming off, and the poor will suffer here more. Otherwise, you go through the TELS arrangement, when you are qualified or graduate, you are confronted with a high debt level. That is a cause of problems in affluent countries, like the United States of America, right now, Sir. High level of people committing suicide because they cannot pay the high debt level that they have to encounter. The Budget seems attractive and populist in a number of ways, such as price reduction by duty and VAT reduction but some economic growth you expect from tourism and infrastructure.

Sir, before I take my seat, I hope it will be not in the too distant future when we would be seeing another mini-budget being proposed in this House, just to help us guide through the Government in its preparation for the elections. In view of those inconsistencies and lack of transparency and accountability in the management of our public finance, we are not in a position to support the Revised Budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note, we will take an adjournment for morning tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.57 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.32 a.m.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today in support of the Revised Budget submitted to Parliament by the honourable Attorney-General and Minister of Economy last night.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to congratulate the honourable Minister of Economy for an announcement that so clearly made the global context local for every Fijian. It was an eye-opener and a lesson in economic statecraft for the people who heard it and I suspect that even a few disappointed honourable Members from the other side of the aisle had to concede grudgingly and silently, of course, so no one would hear them that we were right. Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, seeing where Fiji is today, I am going to give myself the right to tell the Opposition and every detractor where we were right.

We were right to loosen the public purse, of course. Virtually every country in the world did it because it is a proven way to prevent an economic collapse and the social chaos that would follow. We were right to seek cheap and highly concessional loans abroad, and we were right to lower taxes and keep money in the pockets of the people and businesses of Fiji. We were right to support families in the formal and informal sector with unemployment assistance. That was a small price to pay to keep households afloat economically and keep our society cohesive and strong.

We were right to mandate vaccines. We were right to re-open the border and start our recovery. We were right to return our children to school and time will prove the announcements made yesterday to be the right decisions as well. Just as we adapted during COVID, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have adapted to the food shortage and supply chain crisis as a result of the pandemic and Russia's senseless war on the Ukrainian people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 21 essential household items will be zero rated VAT from 1st April, a measure that reaches far beyond what was called the six basic food items that were once VAT exempt. These six items were frankly more of a political ploy than anything else but that was then and this is now and the measure that was announced last night makes living more affordable for ordinary households because we know that the listed food and non-food items are essential in all homes. It is practical and wide enough to give actual relief.

I know that honourable Members of the Opposition no matter what, will rise to oppose, as they have a track record of doing so. Ridiculous as their objections would be, but this time around I do not think their hearts would really be in it because the truth may be inconvenient or politically not in their favour at times, but it is still the truth. The proof, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is in our bustling streets, our busy shops and the planes of Fiji Airways which are bringing people back to Fiji; Fijians abroad who have missed their native home and their families, people in transit and tourists. Tourists are coming back, Mr. Speaker, Sir, whether you believe our policies were right or not, we should all rejoice in that.

Our economy is rebounding under difficult global circumstances, of course, as the honourable Attorney-General explained, but we are meeting this challenge as well. We have suspended the fuel tax, adjusted the VAT and lowered or eliminated duties on many items, all to help our citizens absorb the impact of higher global prices. These high prices will not last forever and we will adjust again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the many initiatives announced under the umbrella of the adjusted budget are truly remarkable, remarkable because a majority of them cost little or nothing but promise to produce great dividends, some right away and of course some over time. Rational reform has been a defining feature of my government, and we are redoubling our efforts to change laws, regulations and practices that stifle initiative and limit the choices available to Fijians. The medical reforms will

free the resources of our public system while giving Fijians more choice and access to more services, expanding access to private practitioners and dentists and we will break up the shameless system that has kept good doctors out of private practice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am extremely proud of the reforms announced last night that will make the iTLTB a more efficient organisation in the service of our landowners, tenants and the growth of the wider economy. As guaranteed for all time under our Constitution, iTaukei land is protected and will remain with our landowners forever. Developing this resource for their benefit is vital to our recovery because when our landowners receive the right returns and tenants have security of tenure, the rest of us Fijians succeed with them and that is the mission we have instilled in the iTLTB as part of this reform programme.

Mr. Speaker, every time we do something to help our iTaukei communities preserve and use their land, most of the Opposition figures inside and outside Parliament try to stoke fear amongst them that their land is threatened. Yet, the only threat they face is from the status quo and the politics of fearmongering, which keeps them from using their most valuable asset to become wealthier. And despite all the fear that the Opposition seeks to brew among our landowners, we are forging ahead with reforms.

On a daily basis more and more iTaukei landowners are coming forward to partner with us in these reforms because they are realizing that the politics of fear, fear without any rhyme or reason will not get them anywhere. The only group that will get somewhere will be those politicians who simply want to gain political office by misleading their own people.

So, Mr. Speaker, under my chairmanship, iTLTB will modernise its practices. It will improve customer service, both for the landowners and tenants. It will outsource to engage professionals to carry out their subdivisions, as opposed to doing it in-house without the necessary professionalism and accountability. It will work intimately with and develop synergies with the Department of Town and Country Planning, Ministry of Lands, Ministry of Economy, municipalities, professional surveyors and valuers. This will mean, Mr. Speaker, subdivisions and zoning being carried out professionally. No more disputes regarding boundaries and valuations. Therefore, unlocking earnings for landowners and, of course, creating greater opportunities for all Fijians that will rapidly grow our economy. No more working in isolation but working together for the benefit of all.

Failed iTLTB subdivisions will be regularized again through this Budget. This will fix the longstanding problem of landlocked lots by funding the development of access roads to all tenants which has been a problem so far. Imagine, Mr. Speaker, that you leased a plot of land that was completely blocked in by other parcels and you had no access to a road. That is what some tenants have been facing. The unlocking will, again, result in more earnings for landowners as they will get fully paid premiums and start earning market rates, and the tenants on the other hand will obtain proper and secure leases, again, growing the economy.

Soon partner entities will be connected to the iTLTB Land Development Vetting Committee (LDVC) portal, which will make cooperation easier and allow all to track surveys to ensure that bottlenecks are identified and timelines are reduced. All of these, Mr. Speaker, means that development can happen faster, sending subdivision of professionally well-planned schemed lots into overdrive, alongside our recovery.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, all of these reforms at iTLTB are separate to the iTaukei Land Development being carried out through the Ministry of Economy. The subdivision initiative was devised by my Government because we understand that we need to help our landowners solve a very simple problem. It is this - many of our landowners have huge assets at their disposal. They have

large amounts of land but they do not always have enough cash at their disposal to develop that land for their benefit. Rather than leave these communities vulnerable to third-party developers who will get the windfall, Government has stepped in. We want to ensure that landowners receive the maximum benefit of developing and leasing their land at fair market rates. That is our commitment and that drives our policies. Again, unlocking the economic potential for Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, this Budget was also unflinching in addressing the massive increase in the cost of the inputs needed to grow cane, despite almost no rise in the world price of sugar. Fertilizer is breaking price records - a spike that could break our cane farmers' backs. We are paying millions to shield them from global events that did nothing to cost but which could destroy the bottom line. Still, many farmers are starting to recognise that their future is not in cane growing but is in other more lucrative, more stable and promising crops. This is especially true among the majority of cane growers, the 43 per cent of cane growers who harvest less than 100 tonnes annually.

Many of those farmers were trapped in cane growing, held hostage to leases that did not allow them to do what every farmer in the world does - follow the market and grow the crops that make economic sense. Some rightly feared they would be homeless if they ever dared to plant different crops, because they would be evicted as the lease does not allow that flexibility. I know this, Mr. Speaker, because when my team speaks with sugarcane farmers, we do not seek to exploit them for political purposes or see them as a voter bank. I see them as Fijians who need genuine assistance to give them long term security and sustained livelihoods, so they can live and work in peace and security and with dignity.

We are stepping in to help convert the leases of any cane grower who seeks another agricultural purpose, or even simply for residential purposes. We will do so by conversing with landowners, seeking their consent, working with TLTB, Ministry of Agriculture of course and providing a package to make this transition. So whether they choose to grow another crop, or simply reside on the land that they lease, they have the government's support. You cannot make a firmer commitment than that, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, as the President of the Fiji Rugby Union of course, I would not be more excited about Government becoming the majority shareholder in the Fijiana and *Fijian Drua*. These teams are the future of Super Rugby, and we all see that weekend after weekend. For years, our athletes have competed in the league on teams based overseas. Now, our rugby players are, I believe, the best players in the world and have the chance to compete for Fiji. Investing in them is the smartest investment we can make. It is an investment in the Fijian brand that we could not match if we spent 100 times our investment on advertising. And I hope very much to have this Budget passed in time to watch them take on the Rebels tonight.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many of the members opposite, as well as those who have turned tail on their voters and abandoned their posts, have opposed every measure that carried us to this point. Our recovery undermines their political narrative, and they know it. This is why their analysis, if one can call it that, will become more wild, nonsensical and silly and of course, as seen last night, out of touch with ordinary Fijians. Their policy prescription for response to the economic crisis driven by the pandemic was simple.

They thought we should take to our bed and pull the covers over our heads until the crisis passed. That is why they demanded we keep the border shut, they demanded we keep our children from returning to school, they went so far as to claim we should cut the salaries of the civil servants whose courage, commitment and compassion carried us through the pandemic. They were wrong every time. We confronted the crisis. Now, they have a chance to show they care about the country and care about Fiji's recovery by wholeheartedly supporting the Budget, without reservation.

There is a saying that fortune favors the bold, Mr. Speaker. Fiji, as I have said in the past, is a bold country, we are bold people. Fijians deserve bold leadership and that is what we are giving them tirelessly. So this is our challenge and our invitation to our colleagues across the aisle and those listening in the streets, be bold with us, support this Budget and the measures that support every Fijian. A wise man knows he cannot change the mistakes of the past. What makes him wise is his determination not to repeat them. Members of the Opposition, please, for once become wise.

Mr. Speaker, the Opposition votes will speak louder than anything we have heard or that they can say in this session, will they be bold or will they go back to bed?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and fellow honourable Members of Parliament, firstly, I would like to join my colleagues, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and those from this side in taking this time to welcome the honourable Prime Minister back into this august Parliament. It is good to see that you are in good health, Sir. I also take this time to remember those Members of Parliament who remain unwell during this time and let us keep them in our prayers and wish them a speedy recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I join my colleagues from the Opposition side of the House in making a snap contribution and oppose Bill No. 6 of 2022 which is for an Act to appropriate a sum of three billion, three hundred and two million, nine hundred and fifty six thousand, one hundred and eighty seven dollars (\$3,302,956,187) for the ordinary services of Government for the year ending 31st July, 2022.

First, let me just say that this Supplementary Budget looks like a fully-fledged budget, instead of a revised budget. After listening to the honourable Minister of Economy for more than two-and-a-half hours last night, I would like to be excited about it, but then I realised that it is an election year so we should never be surprised when things seem too good to be true.

Earlier in this august Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when responding to an Appropriation Bill, I had stated that the devil is always in the detail. Sir, we all understand that a budget is a plan that is to be implemented but whether they really are implemented will be the question, and I begin by looking at the zero-rated VAT products. During this period of pandemic recovery any savings will be appreciated, however, 99 per cent of the time businesses do not pass their benefits to consumers. They find ways to retain existing costs and I note, for example, zero rating of flour, sugar, rice, to name a few, and this comes a day after the prices were increased.

Sir, the question is, how will Government monitor the effective implementation of these policies, given that recently, entities have increased the prices of their products? The Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC) is going to have an important task to ensure that zero-rated initiatives are truly passed on to consumers. What seems to be the current norm now is that, price policy initiative announcements are made in this House but prices on foodstuff on shops and supermarket shelves still remain, so nothing has been passed on to consumers.

Mr. Speaker, I must say that a lot of things that the Opposition had raised is in this Revised Budget and for that, I must thank and commend the honourable Minister of Economy for listening, and listening is a biblical act, it is also a skill. The *Bible* says, "When you listen to advice, you gain wisdom in the future." It will enable you to grow, gain knowledge, know the problems and resolve them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2016, SODELPA and I had been advocating in this House for an increase in the minimum wage to \$4 per hour. That is well established in our *Daily Hansard* and the gradual implementation this year is welcomed on behalf of our people. To support such an increase,

businesses must and should be assisted with necessary policies and environment conducive for economic and employment generation and participation, and so I will continue to be the devil's advocate.

Whilst we appreciate the generosity of the increase, there remain areas which Government needs to focus on to be able to assist businesses and employers meet this increased working capital. For instance, improve the ease of doing business and provide better import reliefs for raw materials and equipment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I noticed that the honourable Minister has given assurance that the long awaited electronic shuttle will begin its inception in Fiji around the Valelevu area. Way back in 2015, I had raised in this august House that a US company had expressed interest to Government to assist with the monorail system for Fiji as a means of reducing our travel hours and giving us better travel experiences. So seeing the implementation of such recommendation confirms to me that the honourable Minister of Economy is recognising the value and experience in contributions coming from this side of the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will now look forward to seeing this project get off the ground and hopefully, it does not become another Waila City project or One Hundred Sands Casino project, whereby they look and sound beautiful on paper, but are absent in reality.

One of the things I have always said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that in leadership, you need political will and I note that Government is recognising the important role of civil servants and is re-instating a lot of entitlements, such as rural allowance and overtime due to respective cadre of employment. I said entitlements because that is what it is, these are payments long overdue to them and in making the payments, Government is acknowledging that it had failed in its duty in the past to be a good and responsible employer when it had removed or suspended those entitlements in the recent past.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reiterate that the Open Merit Recruitment System (OMRS) is not working or serving its stated objectives. Nurses, for example, have resigned in massive numbers, as acknowledged by the honourable Minister in his speech yesterday where he is saying that the recruitment of new student nurses will now be 350 for 2022 from the current 100 students' intake per annum. Sir, it takes three long years for a student nurse to graduate, which means there will remain a gap in the health system provision, particularly from that provided by the nurses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2014, I stood in this House asking Government to consider the plight of nurses and their entitlements. Again, these are well documented in the *Daily Hansard*. It is always advisable to listen and act when the time is right. These few years are too late, but now that it is being implemented, we must ensure continued implementation and consistencies. It must not only be for an election year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I see that the honourable Minister has removed paternal and family care leave. I would not have fussed about that had the Government provided stability of employment, especially in the civil service. I am receiving complaints from the civil service, especially those at the Ministry of Education, honourable Minister for Education, saying that a lot of them are sitting on six months contracts. I can name the department if the honourable Minister for Education wants to refute that. I raise this because I wonder if this practice is known and accepted by Government. No employer must subject its workers to this kind of inhumane employment condition.

Mr. Speaker, in the past, I had asked the Government to be consistent by giving a minimum of three-year term contracts to civil servants to allow them quality of life. I note that in recent days,

the honourable Prime Minister had highlighted the pass rates of rural schools that seems to have fared better than urban schools.

I must congratulate all hardworking teachers and heads of schools in this country. While some incentives have been reinstated for them, many more continue to suffer from depressing working conditions. Some heads of schools in the secondary school sector may be losing their jobs by 1st April, 2022 should they not be called for a job test which is a requirement set by the Ministry of Education.

I had raised this question in this august House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as to why only some people are being called for a job test, while others with equally impressive qualifications and experience are being overlooked. Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have names of schools where these possible practices are being inflicted. I am reliably informed that even the Teachers Union have raised this issue with the honourable Minister for Education.

Mr, Speaker, Sir, Government must be an equal opportunity employer and, again, I question whether these inequitable practices are known to Government. The legacy of leaders must always be your ability to walk the talk and ensure equitable distribution of wealth from all sectors in Fiji and not just favouring a particular province, for example. Anything less, screens discrimination, nepotism and cronyism, which ultimately robs the nation of an aspired workforce, an ingenious pool of entrepreneurs and suppresses creativity and productivity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, generally speaking, there remains a depressed environment in the area of housing in Fiji, as we all know. Whilst we appreciate the assistance being provided for first home owners, we need to conduct a special audit on the budget provided for this scheme since its inception and its effective implementation, given the amount of requirement that is usually demanded from the applicants.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been raising with Government to consider imposing a price cap for real estate sales around Fiji, to allow for the level of income in Fiji and to commensurate with the affordability of housing prices.

I had warned about the deplorable living conditions, especially university students receiving housing allowances - some who have had to rent in squatter settlements because of affordability. This goes back to the fact that housing prices are just too high. The honourable Minister of Economy may suggest that this is market-driven but history is there for a reason and for us to learn from.

Developed nations, like Australia, New Zealand and Singapore are now a market for the wealthy and the elite where the entry of real estate companies have skyrocketed prices in the housing industry, making and buying a home a very rare dream to achieve. Fiji is only a developing nation and we have seen international real estate companies entering our domestic markets.

The honourable Minister in his address last night said that the real estate market will now be regulated, limiting commissions charged by real estate agents on residential properties to no more than 2 per cent of the sale value. While this would mean a very small difference to the continued escalation of housing prices, I reiterate that Government has to have political guts to impose a cap on real estate houses, for example, standard sets of homes in certain areas, like Namadi Heights, should not sell for more than a specific ceiling. We have to be humane and logical about this, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, there are a lot of areas for improvement needed in this Budget, especially in the areas of monitoring and implementation. I am happy to see the extension of provision of electricity

will be provided hopefully to areas like Waisa, Naterumai, Waisere, Nawaisomo and the other areas around Fiji where work has already started and villagers are waiting eagerly to switch on the power and receive electricity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst we talk about infrastructure, some landowners in Naitasiri have raised with me that their current lease arrangements for the electricity towers that runs from Monasavu to Cunningham is being a measly rate of \$200 plus every four to six months. The landowners are well aware of the revenue generated from the provision of electricity to homes and the greater CBD areas along the mentioned corridor and they are crying for an equitable return for the use of their resources over the last 44 years and in the future, especially when restrictions have been placed on them on the use of this land.

May I also throw in the plight of the landowners of Wailoa Power Station who are also crying for the proper leasing and compensation of those buildings and infrastructure on their land. I remind this House that the landowners of Wailoa Power Station are a separate landowning unit from the Monasavu Dam landowners. The manner in which compensation has been paid in acknowledgement for the provision of electricity from Monasavu Dam has totally ignored the contribution from the landowning units of Wailoa Power Station where they have hosted not only the hydro power station but also staff quarters for Energy Fiji Limited. This is a long standing act of discrimination and deprivation to the landowning units of Wailoa and I ask the honourable Prime Minister to, please, intercede on this issue since earlier communication to the line Minister and to EFL has not yielded any results or responses, at least. Mr. Speaker, I learnt by saying that Government officials, including Ministers are servants of the people and they must respond to those raising issues to them, especially from fellow Members of Parliament.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, we acknowledge the new and continued initiative highlighted in this Revised Budget, given that it is only four months until the end of the Government fiscal year to 31st July, 2022. I hope that this would be a good year for everyone, especially our voters.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians; I thank you, Sir, for allowing me to take the floor to deliver my statement in support of the Revised 2021-2022 National Budget.

From the outset, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a Minister responsible for Commerce, Trade, Tourism, Transport and Town Planning, I wholeheartedly support the revised Budget presented by the honourable Attorney-General and Minister of Economy. A lot has been said about the purpose of the special revised Budget but what people forget is that, the revised budget is to bolster our economic recovery in the post-pandemic period. How short a memory does the Opposition have?

In fact, it was said during the 2021-2022 National Budget Address that the Government will review and revise the Budget according to our recovery and that is all that is being done, Sir, there is nothing sinister about this. Yet, again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have lived by the expectations of the Fijian people. We have understood their needs and we have delivered. For this particular side of the House, it is about the continued welfare of the Fijian people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from what I see, it is difficult for the Opposition to comprehend that the Revised Budget has not shifted the policies of the Fijian Government. Our policies and our direction from day one have remained consistent and resilient. It has been the consistent, proactive, resilient policies and initiatives that have led to consistent economic growth which led to robust MSMEs creating a thriving middle income class.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is because of our consistent policies and vision, we have received overwhelming support from international partners. If our partners did not have the confidence in what the Fijian Government is doing and that we will succeed, they would never have provided the funding. It is actually quite astonishing that only the Opposition is not understanding what is being done, everyone else seems to understand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition, honestly, truthfully has no idea of how a Government must function. I shudder to think what would happen if they were sitting on this side of the House. They keep changing their tune on a daily basis - they change their tune here, they change their tune outside the House, it seems like they have no tune at all, their instruments really need retuning, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, until last night, the Opposition claimed that the minimum wage was not sufficient for unskilled workers to survive. But today, the honourable Leader of the Opposition claims that the gradual increase in the minimum wage to \$4 per hour will be difficult for small manufacturers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want the people of Fiji to know that your interest have actually become irrelevant on that side of the House. If it is not suiting their agenda, they will change at the drop of a hat and it is actually visible, Sir, it is absolutely visible; in this House it is visible, in the newspapers it is visible outside the House, change at the drop of a hat.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our recovery process as the honourable Attorney-General and the Minister of Economy stated was each day at a time, we had no choice but to do that. We made the hard decisions, just like the honourable Prime Minister pointed out this morning. We trusted the science to support our decisions and today, we are here with a budget that will turbo-charge our recovery. The positive recovery trajectory since the opening of the border in December 2021 has ignited confidence that our rebound will be better than expected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the last two years and the last two budgets, our focus for the tourism sector has been on restarting. For that to happen, our national objective was to get 80 per cent of the eligible population fully vaccinated and we did just that and more. Today, our international borders are open, Fijians have returned to work, more hotels and businesses are opening and our economy is back on track to building back. It is in this Revised Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our focus will be to shift from reopening to recovery of the Fijian tourism industry. Since our borders have opened on 1st December last year, we have welcomed back 50,742 visitors. Over 90 per cent of those visitors were from Australia and the US markets alone.

As we approach our peak months, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we expect these numbers to increase and fuel the recovery. With more markets opening up as we all know, just like New Zealand, we expect even more visitors but just as we have opened up, so have our competitors. As the honourable Minister of Economy stated, we need to be there fighting for our share of the tourist dollar because if we do not, we will all miss out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are now easing our entry conditions alongside many other countries to remain competitive. That is why we have made policy changes to, firstly, ensure we are attractive to tourists and, secondly, to ensure that the industry who are at ease that supports our goal to be competitive.

With the removal of the travel partner classification, irrespective of where you come from, you will be bound by the same conditions. We are basing this on assurance that we are a highly vaccinated nation. Anyone who comes is vaccinated with a negative COVID-19 test. So from 7th

April, all a visitor to Fiji needs to do, is to pre-book a Rapid Antigen Test for their 24 hour in-country test. This policy shift also creates transparency where all service providers (whether a hotel, laboratory or a pharmacy), list their prices online. This way, we are giving visitors the option to choose where they want to book their test.

How the system actually works, Sir, there will be an online test booking platform which will centralise all the testing services. So, for example, if I am booked to stay at Hilton, I can go online and either book my test with a laboratory, pharmacy or in-house at the Hilton, or somewhere in Nadi Town, if I see that as a cheaper option. If I intend to visit my family in Lautoka, I no longer have to stay at a hotel. Instead, I go online and look up laboratories and pharmacies around the area and book. To ensure that there are no defaulters who do not turn up for their test, we will have in place fixed penalties. Over the next few days, the Ministry will support the industry to get through this transition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we first started the Blue Lane Initiative in 2020, it was the only means of getting visitors into Fiji. At that time, Denarau Marina was our only designated port of entry for yachts. Today, yachts can come from Denarau, Savusavu and Vuda Marinas, and they can do so without having to get the approval of the COVID-19 Risk Mitigation Taskforce. Instead, they declare their interest directly with the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service, as was the practice pre-COVID.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to further support the industry, we are maintaining the low taxes so that is reflected in how we package and sell Fiji. With the numbers picking up from next month, we are going to ramp up our marketing efforts, and Tourism Fiji's increase in the marketing allocation of \$893,000, an increase of \$700,000 for operations will help us over the next few months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we continue on our path to full recovery, we must also seize the opportunities that come with it. And as we have heard yesterday, we need to seize these reform opportunities to meet new demands, leveraging technology and creating flexibility. We have, over the past few months, identified areas of improvement to support building and construction activities in Fiji.

The amendments to the Town Planning Act is the beginning of the gradual process towards a fully digitalised system or Project bizFIJI 2.0. The streamlined processes and procedures allow us to ease doing business, especially at a time where we need economic activities to thrive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the change to the town scheme amendment process is a big step towards achieving a more simplified process. By reducing process timelines from three months to 14 days for the whole of scheme revision, and from 30 days to 21 days for individual scheme amendment applications, we are not doing something out of the blue. In fact, we are bringing Fiji on par with other jurisdictions, such as Queensland, Australia, where the public notification period is between 15 to 25 business days.

With those amendments and the digital system, we are modernising Government processes in the setting of benchmark for service excellence and efficiency in the building and construction sphere.

The FijiFirst Government understands with a great deal of compassion the struggles of Fijians to make ends meet. Many MSMEs have taken the initiative to start up home-based businesses and to earn a living. In order to support these initiatives, as stated in the budget, home-based businesses can now operate from residential zones, without having to rezone. This means that these entrepreneurs will not be required to make an application for scheme amendment to the Municipal Councils. As control measures, these home-based businesses will, of course, be bound by certain conditions.

As we are relaxing these requirements, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we want Fijians to take responsibility too also. So that means you should not inconvenience your neighbours and you cannot operate any non-commercial business in a residential area, like opening a garage in a residential area.

The growth in the building and construction sector is a strong indicator of growth in the economy. We will continue to undertake reforms and improvements that will ease the burden on our developers and homeowners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been quite concerned with operations in the Fijian real estate industry. Since about 2018, over 90 complaints have been received by the Consumer Council of Fiji and the Real Estate Agents Licensing Board. Many of those are related to the inconsistencies of the commission rates and the lack of professionally trained and experienced licensed agents. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this affects Fijians.

Sir, with the emerging trends and irregularities of the purchases and sales of properties, the Government has developed provisions to protect our consumers and our first-home buyers. Compared to international markets, commission rates charged by agents in Fiji are actually towards a much higher end. In fact, it ranges from 3 per cent and as high as 25 per cent sometimes of the total value of the property whereas in jurisdictions, like Australia and New Zealand, the market commissions are up to only 5 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, therefore, reducing the commission on residential properties will enable prices of properties to be maintained at a reasonable level, which means Fijians will be able to afford a decent home without being ripped off. So everyday everyday, Fijians will benefit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the heart of our policies also are MSMEs and the Trade Enhancement Programme (TEP) initiative was developed through consultations with MSMEs and by listening to the people, the TEP aims to expand our economic base and strengthen our domestic trading activities. Whether it is a tailor asking for new sewing machines or someone asking for some farming materials which does not cost much, this programme is for those Fijians.

I wish to strongly emphasise that this is not a handout gimmick, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do not do that. Our grassroot programmes have always been appreciated and continue to be successful. In fact, 75 per cent of our recipients were operationally successful. Obviously, all businesses, particularly MSMEs have been impacted by COVID but our programmes serve their purposes. Additionally the TEP initiative will supplement other MSME related programmes such as the Young Entrepreneurship Scheme (YES), Integrated Human Resources Development Programme (IHRDP), Northern Development Programme and the National Export Strategy.

From a transport perspective, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we welcome the policy changes that are being announced in the budget as this will ensure that the people of Fiji are able to provide the much needed care and services through carriers and shuttle service whilst at the same time, also providing the basic necessities for their families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the policy changes have been established to ensure that processes are streamlined and centralised requirements. This will enable agencies such as the Land Transport Authority (LTA) to ease the way they serve their customers and at the same time, reduce customer serving and waiting times.

As indicated by the honourable Attorney-General and Minister of Economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Open Taxi Ranking System (OTRS) is a reform being undertaken after 33 years of running the base and stand system for taxi operators.

In the ranking system, taxis will operate on a First-In-First-Out basis or rotational basis at the ranks literally exactly what happens around the world. That means that the first taxi to arrive at any rank will take on the passengers and when taxis arrive at the ranks they will have access to passengers and move out and then queue up for the last taxi on its return at any allocated rank.

We also urge our taxi commuters and passengers that will also mean that they will need to change their way of how they use taxis. This in a way will help ease our congestion and have a more orderly manner on our roads particularly with taxi services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I stated earlier, the Revised Budget is there to boost Fiji's economic recovery process. It is about putting our people first. We will continue doing that no matter what it takes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, might I also just take a few minutes to say a little bit about the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation in the absence of the Honourable Minister. The Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation has received a budget allocation of about \$138.5 million. The Social Protection Programme makes up the largest portion of the Ministry's budget allocation. Why? Because it goes directly to the most vulnerable, including children, persons with disability and the elderly. It is across life spectrum from cradle to the grave.

It is, therefore, important that the Government continues to ensure that at no stage in life will a Fijian be ostracized on their crib. Instead, every Fijian is given the opportunity to access support from a Government that ensures their wellbeing and welfare. The Ministry is actually very happy with their new budget that will help maintain the current Social Protection Programmes which include the Social Pension Schemes, Poverty Benefit Scheme, Care and Protection Allowance, Rural Pregnant Mothers Programme and the Disability Allowance Scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the newly filled position of National Coordinator for Social Welfare Reform shows the Government's commitment to provide greater functionality and strengthening accountability and improve data management through digitisation, as highlighted by the honourable Minister of Economy. Furthermore, the Ministry will also restart the Annual Re-Certification Programme to validate the eligibility of social welfare recipients. In this way, we can ensure there is no duplication or misuse of Social Protection Scheme funds, thus ensuring that our assistance benefit Fijians who actually need it most.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been working diligently to ease the burden on Fijians in whichever way we can. Bus fare recipients can now expect the monthly Bus Fare Assistance to increase from \$10 a month to \$25 a month with an allocation of \$6 million benefiting over 40,000 odd Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the senior citizens have significantly contributed to where we are today as a nation and it is only right that in their golden age where they need love and care, we continue our duty of care and the three golden age homes located in Samabula, Lautoka and Labasa will receive budgets with Labasa now in its final stage of renovation.

Further to the grants to the organisations, the Ministry will strengthen its partnership with organisations whose activities and outputs support the Ministry's strategic objectives. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Poverty Monitoring Unit under the Ministry, through the Integrated National Poverty Eradication Programme (INPEP) received an allocation of \$185,000 and with this they will continue to monitor, evaluate and report on the progress and impacts of Government's Poverty Alleviation Programmes.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly support the budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members on that note we will take a break for lunch, after lunch these are the first five speakers:

1. Honourable Mikaele Leawere;
2. Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts;
3. Honourable Salote Radrodro;
4. Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services; and
5. Honourable Viliame Gavoka.

Those are the first speakers - be ready to speak when we resume. We adjourn for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.27 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.04 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with our agenda item.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Cabinet and fellow honourable Members; firstly, I would like to welcome the honourable Prime Minister back after recovering from a successful surgery in Melbourne and I pray for his good health and abundant blessing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to share my condolences to you and your family and the *vanua o Kubuna* on the passing of your youngest brother, Ratu Keni Vuiyasawa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make a short contribution to the Bill before Parliament which I will describe as an election stunt, cosmetic touch to winning the confidence of this beleaguered Government, a band-aid solution to problems created by this uncaring Government and one that has too little and too late delivery to bring any relief to the plight of the ordinary people.

This Supplementary Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a gamble undertaken by this Government after getting a good rub during the budget consultations, pacify an angry electorate whose discontent with this Government, its leadership, its policies and programmes were at brazen display. Now, with the campaign period opening up for the next Election, next month, they are attempting to hide all their sins and omissions under the guise of this Budget to make up an image of a caring government when the fact remains that they are the same wolf in a new sheep skin.

Sir, on one hand, we are made to acknowledge the impacts of the natural disasters, monstrous pandemic and effects of global economic scene while on the other, economic recovery resultant from the Bainimarama Boom. The question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is if there is indeed a Bainimarama Boom then –

1. Why do we continue to rely heavily on borrowing and budget support?
2. Why do we need a Band-Aid solution on direct taxation?
3. Why has the quality of life and standard of living of our people remain stagnant or has gone worse?
4. Why has our GDP and GDP per capita shrunk in the last two years?
5. Why is our social and public infrastructure and utility in shambles, creating a daily havoc for our people?

No water and patched roads are problems we face daily. Honourable Vijay Nath can attest to that from my many calls that he has received about lack of water.

Sir, the hard, cold fact remains, which our honourable Minister of Economy refused to acknowledge, are more than one finding after another by the ILO and lately the ADB - the gross mismanagement of our economy by this Government and its egocentric leadership and melodramatic policies, good at not solving the problems of the nation and its people. That is the root cause of our economic decline and deluge. It is a heavy price we are now forced to pay for the populist stunts by this Government which boomeranged on its face.

Had this Government managed public finances and State assets and machinery prudently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was thrift about economic development than mere handouts, committed to developing our resource-based sectors than relying on tourism, concentrated on the needs of the ordinary people than massaging the cause of the elite class and upholding the ideals and principles of good governance, our situation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, would be much, much better today. We would not need a revised Budget like

this to create smokescreen to baffle our people and hoodwink them with the maxim that all is well. We are on the path of recovery when the truth is our economy continues to limp towards a certain catastrophe under the leadership of this Government and we are engrossed deeply in its own string of deceptive propaganda.

On the education sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Minister for Education is duty-bound to urgently call a National Education Summit either in person or via virtual meeting with all the stakeholders to disclose plans and work out logistics and strategies for our schools, and moreso deal with the completion of teaching syllabus and the promotion of our students. At the same time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important for the stakeholders in the Fiji education sector to take interest and proactively participate in any consultation process initiated by the Ministry of Education and to give frank views rather than supporting the ideas floated by the Ministry just to appease the Government of the day. Everyone has a duty to this nation insofar as our teaching and learning process is concerned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government in its attempt to please the students already learning under TELS and the prospective students to be included in the initiative has, by the pronouncements made in this Budget, demonstrated to us beyond all reasonable doubt, how they want to introduce discrimination by marking criteria for certain course work to qualify for the grant of TELS. This is making a mockery of equal opportunities, right to self-determination in education and is going to jeopardise the interests and aspirations of hundreds of our young men and women. The TSLB has a competent CEO and I suggest that they are left alone to map out the strategies especially with further cut-off marks to 200 with no interference from the government of the day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the next issue on which I intend to speak is the gradual increase in the National Minimum Wage which we welcome with reservations. It is amusing to witness this Revised Budget, how the money from the pockets of the ordinary people are taken away by taxes, duties, tariffs, fees, fines and other levies and yet when it comes to putting money into the pockets of the people, it is not instant as it is taken but rather gradual. Keeping the high cost of living in mind, I think it warrants an explanation on this gradual increase.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Revised Budget may have raised some hopes and given hype to myths on our economic recovery but judging by the track record of this Government on the implementation of its pledges and policies, the goodies remain a castle in the air, a pie in the sky and a carrot dangled at our people to once again mislead them to vote for FijiFirst.

I had stated in this House advocating the importance of providing opportunities for our young to have the necessary skills and I thank the honourable Minister of Economy in realising the shortage in the building trades. There is nothing new in this Budget; rural allowance, boarding allowance has been with us during the past governments. This is a budget put up due to desperation and my colleagues on the Government side should start thinking and packing. No amount of “Hear, hear” and banging the desk in this Parliament will make any difference. This Government is on the way out. The flowery announcement looks promising but where will the money come from to implement the budget commitments?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- You do not worry about it.

HON. M.R. LEAWARE.- We will not worry about it because right now, when we come to Government, we will have to worry about it. When talking about fools in the Budget announcement, we will see who will fall in this category after the 2022 Election. The trick of freebies and fear-mongering worked for them in 2014 and 2018, and they think our people are vulnerable enough that it will work for them again this year. Let me finish off by a sagely and timely reminder to them

quoting from a Russian who had this to write for those who take the goodwill of their people for granted and I quote: “You can fool some people some of the time, some people all the time but not all the people all the time”.

Yet, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me again quote: “Those in power must empower the people. The moment you rob the people of their power it will not be long when the people will rob you off your power.”

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians, I rise to respond to the 2021-2022 Revised Budget. I thank the honourable Attorney-General and the Minister of Economy for the post-COVID economic and social recovery budget. The Revised 2021-2022 National Budget is a continuation of the Fijian Government’s commitment to Fijians.

As the honourable Minister of Economy stated recovery is underway, as shown by many indicators, including the 25,000 jobs added to the formal sector and a similar number in the informal sector, as well as the increase in hotel bookings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ordinary Fijians must be given relief from the external shock that has pushed the price of basic needs such as fuel and food. This budget provides relief to ordinary consumers to adjust the cost of living through increase in minimum wage rate, zero rating of VAT on 21 basic consumer items, reduction in fuel duty, increased allocation for TELS, restoration of rural allowance and many more.

Not too long ago, honourable Leawere did question about the restoration of the rural allowance and I remember that very clearly. Today, he did not even acknowledge that the restoration of the rural allowance have been made, despite the current situation.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- The budget that was delivered, focused on social recovery from the economic shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine that has pushed the price of goods and services. Considering that the crisis affects not only Fiji, but the whole world, the Government has realistically and comprehensively addressed issues across the board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation for my two ministries have been increased. The 2021-2022 Revised Budget has kept the funding for the sanitary pad initiative. This initiative is part of the Government’s commitment to promote the safe menstrual health of our girls. This initiative is keeping our girls in schools. Each year, the Government allocates an average of \$60 million in Free Education Grant to schools. To equip our Heads of Schools better with financial management skills and knowledge, the Ministry has rolled out the Online Financial Management course, to ensure a high level of compliance with the Financial Guidelines. We are targeting to complete the training of the rest of the Heads of Schools in the upcoming months.

With the global shift towards adoption of technology in Education, it is imperative that the Ministry continues to evolve and embrace technology to enhance teaching and learning. In order for us to achieve this, it is important that schools are connected to the internet. This was made possible through the Government’s initiative of connecting the unconnected communities by providing connectivity to 26 rural-remote schools in the Northern Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, good education requires good school infrastructure, including teacher's quarters. The Ministry received an additional \$2.4 million for capital works in the Revised Budget to improve or build teacher's quarters, ablution blocks and driveways for schools in remote rural schools. The Ministry continues to encourage teachers to upgrade their qualifications. While the Opposition and Union created negativity and uncertainty amongst teachers, but teachers understand the importance of upgrading their qualifications. The Ministry has been allocated an additional \$1.7 million to increase the salaries of teachers who have upgraded their qualifications.

The Ministry welcomes new policy announcements and initiatives pertaining to TSLS. Given the circumstances faced by Year 13 students, temporarily lowering the cut-off marks for TSLS awards to 250, except for Commerce category will allow more students to enter tertiary institutions.

I must say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I express my disappointment with the *Fiji Times* and Communications Fiji Limited (CFL) and *fjivillage* for irresponsible and unethical journalistic behaviour. Those two media organisations isolated a single comment and presented it without context, insinuating it was directed at the student in question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the role of the National Toppers Scheme's is to enable the Government to strengthen sectors of the economy where employees are needed by providing scholarships for students seeking an education in those fields. It is to ensure that the gaps in under-served economic sectors in Fiji are filled, so we have enough engineers, pharmacists, laboratory technicians, nurses, plumbers, electricians and agricultural specialists and many more to keep our nation progressing.

We are investing in students, not just for them to attain higher education, but also making sure that they get into areas which offer better job prospects and, of course, meet Fiji's needs. This is a common-sense based and practical initiative to provide support for those sectors where there is a demand.

Predictably, honourable Professor Prasad has jumped on CFL and *Fiji Times*' sensationalised misinformation. It is common knowledge that CFL and *Fiji Times* will provide headlines for NFP on statements from Government Ministers in a negative way - many a times commenting without due care on the context of the statement. Can honourable Professor Prasad explain to law students why they are not eligible for NTS? Can they explain to students in other fields that are oversupplied with graduates why they have not received scholarships? Do they not have aspirations and dreams? What about those students who have been adhering to this policy and understand why this criteria was applied? There are over 500 students studying law at the three universities in Fiji. Can the honourable Professor Prasad go and explain to the hundreds of law students why he is only pushing for MBBS scholarships and not LLB scholarships? We urge everyone to think about national priorities. Under the 2013 Constitution, everyone is treated fairly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the Bainimarama-led Government, education was made free up to the end of secondary school and university education is subsidized with extremely cheap loans and scholarships. In 2019, three years ago, Fiji had crossed the World Health Organization's threshold of one doctor for every 1,000 people. However with the change in dynamics caused by the pandemic, TSLS reviewed the policies based on needs not only in the public sector but also in the private sector. I must say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the TSLS is a statutory body which is governed by the Board and it has its own CEO, they do their own due diligence, surveillance, research and fact finding – that is when they are able to either increase or decrease a particular quota.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the regulation for TSLS is very clear. It simply says that if a quota is not filled, then TSLS can reduce the marks to fill the quota. So that provision is there and TSLS can use that provision whenever it is needed. It is very important for TSLS to consider Fiji's needs when it comes to giving scholarships or giving loans for their studies.

Today, I would like to highlight, there is shortage of teachers in special and inclusive education - ECE and primary teaching and what are we doing about it? What we have done, we have increased the scholarship in this area and we are encouraging Year 13 students, if they wish to join the teaching field, this is the area they should be applying for because they will get the job immediately.

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in secondary school, there is a shortage of teachers in Maths, Physics, Computing, Physical Education, Music, Arts and Industrial Arts. We also have surplus teachers in the fields of Chemistry, Biology, Accounting, Economics, Agriculture, et cetera. These are the teachers who graduated from 2018, 2019 and they are still applying for a job but we do not have a vacancy, Sir, so those are the constraints we are facing.

But I would like to highlight one simple point here that the dynamics of workforce is changing globally. I am sure the Opposition have heard about mass resignations taking place in certain countries around the globe. It is after COVID-19 that the job seekers have decided that they do not wish to be employed anymore and that has created a lot of shortages in the market. Today, we see that our people who are well skilled are being recruited by companies in Australia, New Zealand, US and other places. So based on those needs, definitely the dynamic has changed and, therefore, we have to increase the number of scholarships and also reduce the marks so that we can fill the quota and get our workforce ready.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving on to the Ministry of Local Government and the 13 Municipal Councils are working closely with the Department of Town and Country Planning to accelerate block rezoning, building and subdivision in areas where growth pressure has been realised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to the effects of the pandemic, market vendors stall fees was paid by Government to the Municipal Councils. This was done to provide some relief to over 8,000 vendors. In this Budget, an additional \$2.6 million has been allocated to extend the waiver of fees to all kiosks and sweet cart operators.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a sum of \$2.5 million has been allocated in this financial year to pay base fees for PSV owners. This allocation has, again, strengthened the revenue stream of the Council and support the operations and infrastructure projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the removal of business licence has contributed towards ease of doing businesses as well as investments. The provision of business licence grant to small Municipal Councils will continue with the service delivery without any disruption.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the pandemic has had a huge impact on the implementation of capital projects due to supply chain disruption and travel restriction. Despite the hurdles, the Ministry of Local Government will continue to implement capital projects that make our towns and cities more vibrant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a sum of \$348,000 has been allocated towards the maintenance of Ratu Cakobau Park, particularly Pavilion B to improve the stadium and its facilities for sporting purposes. Work on Pavilion A is already complete but the work on Pavilion B requires additional funding which has come through this budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also progressing with our Nakasi Farmers Market. The market is targeted to assist farmers and to provide the much needed fresh vegetables, root crops and fruits to the people around Nakasi and Davuilevu. A budget allocation of \$300,000 will ensure that the market is completed in a timely manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the funding of \$81,000 has been allocated to Namaka Market complex and this amount will help in completing the remaining works which was mainly the car park area so that the Council can start generating some revenue.

Now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me turn to some of the comments that were made earlier and particularly on OMRS. It appeared as if OMRS is only used in the teaching field or in the education sector but let me clarify that OMRS is for the whole of civil service. It is an equitable transparent process just like any other sector, employers select the best person for the job. But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been hearing this from the Opposition quite a bit but let me give a bit of a history in terms of how teachers were selected in the past.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, did you know that Union representative sat in the Central Board to strongly advocate for the teacher of their choice? Why else would they be part of the panel? It was wrong for them to sit in a panel or even recommend promotion. Their sitting on the panel led to promoting their favourite teachers, who were Union members, and not those who were not members. What business does the Union have to sit in this Board to even recommend, particularly in the recruitment process? I would like to ask, which other Ministry or private sector entertains that? Which Ministry or private sector has a Union representative who makes this recommendation? We have not heard of this before, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but this was the practice.

The system of appointment was flawed with the Union, given the unreasonable leeway to be part of the Board to push their members' agenda. The role of the Union is not to recommend who should be appointed, but it is solely the prerogative of the employer. Unions are not employers of teachers. This flawed system and processes had been noticed and corrected in 2008, and this has been further streamlined in a very transparent manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to reiterate that in the OMRS process, it is not just for the Ministry that PS sits, but there are other people who sit on this process and if a person misses out or is not happy with the way the interview was conducted, they have all the right to take the matter to PSC for a review, and that is an open process, unlike what was happening before.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issue of TELS loan was also raised, that the loans are very high and how will they pay the loan. However, we had streamlined the process and I want to say that now the interest rate for the Loan Scheme is low, based on household income, including the recipient's annual income. For example, if the household income or the recipient's income is up to \$25,000, there is zero interest, in other words you do not pay any interest. If it is between \$25,000 and \$50,000, then it is 0.5 per cent interest and \$50,000 to \$100,000 is 1 per cent interest. So the interest amount is very low. If the recipient pays in the first two years, they will receive 50 per cent discount, Sir.

Once again, we have heard from honourable Leawere and this is a confusion that we normally see with the Opposition. When we talk about consultation on one hand, we are saying, "Why are you consulting? You are not consulting enough, you should be having more consultations. You do not know what is happening in that particular field." But when we do consultations, then it is seen as electioneering. In other words, we are participating or involving ourselves in election but that is not the point because we are the Government, we have to do our job and we are doing our job.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the 2021-2022 Revised Budget. At the outset, I will say that I do not support the motion. After the 2014 General Elections, the very first budget that was brought into Parliament by this Government had the theme, "Turning Promises into Deeds." In my response, I had titled it, "Turning Promises into Debts," (Turning Promises into *Dinau*).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that trend has continued until to date; false promises and high debts. The honourable Leader of the Opposition in his response this morning had elaborated on our escalating debt level which now sits at about \$7.7 billion, equivalent to 79.8 per cent of the GDP. Therefore, I also support the call by the honourable Leader of the Opposition that it is best that we live within our means and according to Calvin Coolidge, I quote: “There is no dignity quite so impressive and no independence quite so important as living within your means.”

Mr. Speaker, we also continuously hear the Government side flaunting high economic growth but how does that high economic growth translate to tangible positive impacts to improving the lives of our people?

The reality of the matter is that people are faced with more poverty, increased unemployment, poor public service delivery in the health, education, housing, local town councils, to name a few. For example, Mr. Speaker, the Fiji Bureau of Statistics clearly captured this in their latest Report of 2019 to 2020 and any responsible government would have taken that Report for policy formulation and implementation purposes so as to address these problems but instead this politically motivated and vindictive government sacked Mr. Naiqama, the CEO for simply doing his work.

Mr. Speaker, we also acknowledged the assistance given out to the various Social Welfare Programmes but a nagging issue which I continue to raise in this House is on the subsequent dependency syndrome impact that would be created in the absence of any Workfare Programme to wean able bodied people of the social welfare system.

Another area of concern is with regard to those who have lost their jobs to COVID-19 and have assisted themselves by accessing their own FNPF, whereby Government has not said anything about replacing their FNPF contributions that has been used up. Those that have received direct Government Top-up Assistance, a lot of these people are still unemployed and therefore will potentially fall into the social welfare programmes in the future. However, Mr. Speaker, we also acknowledge the zero VAT food items but people be warned that this will be revised and reviewed as announced by the honourable Minister of Economy.

Mr. Speaker, moving on to women, the women in our country continue to be disadvantaged. For example, on the latest law that says that women have to change their names in the birth certificate so as to align themselves with the requirements by the Elections Office.

I am happy that a group of women, NGOs have taken their case to the court. Even though we hear a lot of talk from the Government side that women have been empowered, that they uphold the development of women but in reality, Mr. Speaker, speaks otherwise.

On the increasing rate of Violence Against Women, Mr. Speaker, I have continuously raised this in the House whereby we in the Opposition moved a motion that a commission of inquiry be established to look into the increasing rate of violence against women and children. But the Government themselves did not support it. They did not see it fit that the commission of inquiry would be able to constructively put forward recommendations to addressing this big problem in our society. However, instead of that, they moved a motion that the Auditor-General be investigated for doing his work and presenting into this House a Performance Audit Report of relevant Government agencies.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, I would urge the Government to also move motions that a commission of inquiry be undertaken for the health sector, education sector, agricultural sector, Fiji Roads Authority and Water Authority of Fiji. Let the Auditor-General undertake a performance audit of those agencies and present reports to this House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving on to the Ministry of Health, during lunch time, I read a Report by the *Radio New Zealand* which stated that Fiji has the highest death rate of diabetes in the world. Sir, it is unbecoming and we cannot just tie up - to have that kind of statement reported by *Radio New Zealand* and then we see the honourable Minister for Health going out into the communities, opening toilet blocks in the rural areas.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- What is wrong with that?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the Government side does not see anything wrong with that when we hold the highest death rate from diabetes worldwide yet the Minister is out there doing all those opening of toilet blocks rather than looking at policies, ways and means of addressing this problem.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am raising this and the honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services and Lands and Mineral Resources cannot see the connection. The connection is the high economic growth which they continuously and constantly flaunt in this House does not translate to good or successful implementation of public service delivery, for example, in the health sector. That is why we are holding the highest death rate from diabetes in Fiji.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Is that a priority for us, honourable Minister for Health?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- It is the people's choice.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Is that a priority for us or the priority is to go and open toilets?

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, those kinds of activities arise because this Government is now so desperate.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- They are desperate. Instead of looking at policies and making sure that your budgetary allocations are fully utilised, you are out there taking boats, taking horses, what next? That is not your job, your job is to look at policies and programmes, utilise your budgetary allocation so that you make an improvement in your various portfolios. That is your duty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while still on the health sector, you just have to go to the CWM Hospital and check out the deplorable health infrastructure there. I had a relative there in the last three weeks. We had to take linen, we had to take cutleries and we had to take food.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am bringing up this issue because that is exactly my point. Their economic growth does not translate to the improvement of our people's lives. Sir, there are shortages in essential medicines and, again, we hear the Free Medicine Programme. In the previous term of Parliament, the Free Medicine Programme was just in words - patients had to go and buy because those medicine were not available in the various outlets where they are supposed to be provided.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also we had contacts of nurses or medical officials raising their concerns on the payment of overtime and allowances. We are happy to hear it in this Budget that it will be implemented. But, Sir, in the COVID-19 Supplementary Budget, this was also mentioned but still not everyone has been paid the relevant allowances and overtime. So, my question to the honourable Minister for Health is to do a national check and all those identified who are owed overtime and allowances, will they be paid in retrospect? Will they be back-paid for those overdue allowances?

Whilst we welcome that the additional intake for nurses training has been increased but from a holistic perspective, Mr. Speaker, that demonstrates a poor public sector reform being undertaken. That is a reactive strategy to human resource need, to the nurses need because the nurses have left. Why have our nurses left, honourable Minister for Health? The nurses have left because of unfavourable working conditions, lack of manpower, they are overworked, no overtime pay and no meal allowances. They are asking, what are you going to do?

If we were in Government, we would review their working conditions. That is a more proactive approach to human resource need, Mr. Speaker. That is the problem - all is not linked up - the public sector reform and all that is happening in various Ministries and Departments.

Also, Mr. Speaker, we acknowledge the remittances that our people, our families, our relatives overseas are injecting into our economy. In my view, this is the biggest lifesaver for us in Fiji right now and in that, I commend our family units, especially in the *iTaukei* communities whereby we have *solesolevaki* and all kinds of arrangements in place which has been able to assist families in their times of great need. Honourable Minister for Health, I said that because I am only privy to have that kind of full information that I am able to share in the House.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, I would say that hearing this revised Budget, only fools will believe it because false promises have continued from 2015 up until now. All the false promises!

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Honourable Bala, you promised in the House that the Local Government Act will be reviewed. Nothing has been done!

MR. SPEAKER.- Do not carry out a conversation between you two. Address the Speaker!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, the revised Budget is sounding more like an election budget and on that note, let us pause for a little while. I would urge the people that if the freebies, if the lollies reach them, accept them with a smile but do not vote for this Government. Vote this Government out in the next election.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity to express my support for this Budget and I must say it must be quite shocking for a lot of people that have been listening,

to hear the kind of drivel that has been said in this Parliament. We have heard so many honourable Members on the other side who have said that they do not support this Budget. So to everyone out there when they heard that we were going to have zero VAT on all those products, this is what they are saying, they would prefer that you pay a higher price for each of those items. That is what they are saying; honourable Leawere, honourable Aseri Radrodro and honourable Salote Radrodro.

They are telling the people of this country, we want you in this time when people are finding it difficult to pay for things, they want you to pay a higher price for each of those items. They are telling the civil servants of this country, this Budget is saying that your meal allowance which used to be \$20, which had to be brought down to \$10, they want you to keep getting the \$10 and not the \$15 that this Budget is talking about. They are telling all the civil servants in this country that are working out in the maritime areas, we have to stop your maritime allowance because of COVID-19, we want you to continue not getting the maritime allowance. That is the kind of thing that they are saying, that is the kind of message they are giving to the people of this country.

They do not want what this Government wants which is to provide support to people that need that support in their hour of need, when the price of food items are going up, the cost of freight is going up and we import so many things into this country, the Government is trying to give a helping hand to people who need that assistance and they are saying, they should not be getting that assistance. You are showing your true colours and it does not matter what sort of assistance Government gives to the people of this country, you just want to rubbish everything that Government does. Your true colours are being seen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the time this Bainimarama-led Government started to the FijiFirst Government, it has a record of being a very decisive government in everything that it does. It has shown over the years that it looks at the context that we face in a particular situation, it assesses that situation, it makes the necessary amendments then it is very decisive about what it does. It does not dilly it does not dally, it makes a decision and implements it because it sees that that is what needs to be done for the benefit of the people of this country. As a result of that decisiveness, we had, for the first time ever, nine years of consecutive growth.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Historic! People have said that the growth was too low. You will have a lower growth if your base is very low, then it is very easy for you to have high economic growth rates. When you become a middle income developing country, then the growth rates that you have are going to be lower. That is normal in the progression of a country, we have had nine years.

During the height of COVID-19, we looked after our people, we made sure that the people who needed social welfare still got that social welfare assistance. There were people on that other side that were making fun of this COVID-19 jobs. They talked about 666 and what not, they sent false messages to the people of this country not to get the COVID-19 jab. Imagine if you had listened to that kind of drivel and hogwash that was being spread. We never did that, we never devalued our currency. We never even thought about printing our money, imagine if we had devalued our currency at this time of inflation, our money would be almost virtually worthless because we knew what we had to do, we were decisive and we made sure we carried out what we needed to do.

We decided that we need to manage COVID-19 and at the same time, get ready to get our economy running again; we managed to do those two things. We managed to raise the vaccination rates of the people in this country. That is why today, all of us are not wearing masks because we did it. We did what needed to be done, we told the workers, “no jab, no job”. We forced that issue through. Other countries followed suit because we did it. That is what I am telling you, this is a

Government that has proven that it is a decisive one. When something needs to be done, we do it to the very best of our ability. That is the kind of thing that we need in our country.

Today, as I was reading about the COVID-19 situation, there are so many other Pacific countries that are now gripped by COVID-19; Samoa, Tonga and all these other countries. We have managed to go through that and I think the only reason that we have been able to do that because we have listened to people, we have listened to the experts and we have strong decisive leadership that is not afraid to make tough decisions and stick by those tough decisions, no matter what people say, for the benefit of the people of this country; decisive leadership. That is what we see all along from this side of the House.

This Revised Budget addresses the issues of the day. When we do a budget, a budget is not created in some sort of vacuum but it is created in some context. You look around, you see the context, you see what is happening and you make a budget at that time based on that particular context. When the Budget was done at that particular point in time, we knew that things would change. Things are beginning to change so when things begin to change, do you still use the same plan that you had, it was developed in that particular context or do you adjust it to suit the context that you are in now? Things are beginning to happen now. The tourists are coming back, people are starting up businesses. We need to change and that is what we are doing in this Budget. We also know that we have the war in Ukraine and the prices are going up, so what do you do? You adjust it to address those issues. You are saying we are electioneering - this is not electioneering. This is looking at the needs of the country and having a revised Budget that addresses those precise issues. That is what governments do. They address the issues at hand and this is what this Budget is doing.

We are beginning to make some headway in our economy. Yes, there are still people who were unemployed as a result of COVID-19, some of them are still unemployed and a lot more people are beginning to be employed. If we look at the number of advertisements coming up in the newspapers, it shows that jobs are being created and more jobs are opening up so things are beginning to move along. You have seen the focus that we have on reducing the red tape to get the businesses going.

Someone on the other side said that investors have not been coming through. Last week, we were talking to a group of almost 20 investors who flew in from America. That is not a reflection of difficult times when there is no capital around, these people still want to come and invest in Fiji. Why? Because they recognise that the Government in place is decisive, it wants that investment and they are putting in place the grounds for which they will be able to invest and they can get a return on their investment.

Those are the kinds of things that I wanted to say today. We are beginning to make headway where we look at this Revised Budget it is talking about getting rid of red tape, making the processes much better so that investors can come in and create jobs that will benefit everyone in this country.

We are giving relief to students. They had to pay back their TELS. We are moving it back to two years because we know that in that two- year period they can take their time. We are assisting farmers who wish to transition from sugar to other agricultural products but we are not abandoning those who wish to remain in the industry.

The development of the national minimum wage. Some people said that they suggested this national minimum wage, five years ago. You make a decision - you look at the context of that point in time and you make the decision to increase the national minimum wage at the right time. Just because you suggested that this should be done 10 years ago, it does not mean that that was the best time to do it. You decide to do it at the right time.

We have just gone through COVID-19 now. The Budget was supposed to be reviewed back in 2020, but we had COVID-19 in the interim so that is why it is being done now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the things that I liked about this particular Budget in terms of one of the biggest issues that people always talk about and I admit there are a lot challenges in getting clean water to everyone in this country. Some of these challenges are legacy ones that we will continue to address over time. But this particular Budget has given us a grant of around \$195.2 million to the WAF - about \$8.7 million is for operating expenses which has increased by \$8.7 million to boost the provision of water and sewerage services and we also look forward to being able to use this to address major issues that we have had in this country.

Over the past few months I agree that we have had some severe water disruptions in the greater Suva area. Thankfully, through those disruptions, this Budget is trying to address some of the issues that led to the disruptions of water in the greater Suva area. There is about \$3.9 million that is being provided in the Budget to try and address those issues. That money will be used to fund valve operations, to control the amount of pressure, where the water is going in the system and to also buy emergency tanks that we can put in densely populated areas to fill those tanks so we can cut down the amount of money that we use on water carting. It will also be used to purchase bulk main repair clamps to minimise the disruption on the water flowing through the system while they carry out the repairs that they need to do.

Also, part of that money will be used to install pressure reducing valves to regulate pressure in the system along the upper Tovata system. The upper Tovata system is an area that we have had the most problems so far. This upper Tovata system includes areas like Tovata, Makoi, Naveiwakau, Tacirua East, Tacirua Heights, Sakoca, Savutalele, Dokanaisuva, Upper Princess Road, Cunningham and Tuirara. So there are five pressure reducing valves that are earmarked for installation and we hope that this will have an impact on those particular areas. We know that ultimately, a long term solution will be the project that we are developing in Viria. More water coming into the system should be able to help us address some of the major issues that we have there. We have also had issues of water in the Rewa Delta, the greater Tebara area.

In this budget, we have the Natakiciqa Outlet Mains, this is the outlet mains in the Kaba Peninsula, there is going to be \$1.1 million to extend that outlet mains to benefit around 1,250 people along the Nakelo to Kaba Peninsula and to improve water supply and water pressure. There will be \$4.5 million to upgrade and replace the existing 200 millimetre PVC water mains along Tagitagi for 6.3 kilometres to address intermittent water supplies in Tagitagi, Qalela, Nasivi, Matakawa, Honey Road and Lubulubu areas benefitting 4,000 people. There is \$3.38 million assigned to complete water supply projects in the Western and Northern regions – Malake Island, Khalsa Top, Vatavata No. 1 Road, Olosara Sewerage Road, Malomalo Village, Nalagi Primary School, Yalava, Samusamu Settlement, Vanuakula to Drasa Tropik Wood, Koroivolu, Matalevu, Navudi to Navai, Nasarava and Vunikawakawa.

Also as part of this, you will see in this Revised Budget, we are bringing back rainwater harvesting. A lot of rainwater harvesting projects have been stopped from 2019 because of various reasons, but now we have \$1 million provided for the pending applications from 2019 and some of those were also put on hold by COVID-19 that has impacted us over the past two years.

The Viria Project which is, as the honourable Attorney-General said is the greatest investment that we have had in the water system in this country over time. This first phase is going to cost us \$270 million. There has been a lot of issues that have addressed the speed at which it could develop but we are looking forward to be able to commission this in 2023 and even provide an additional 40

megalitres or 40 million litres into the system. Some of that water will feed into Suva, other waters will go into Tailevu and into Rewa areas.

For electricity and power, Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$187 million has been used by Government to bring electricity to rural and peri-urban areas. There has been a total investment of over \$187 million to provide this electricity. Grid extension and house wiring, there is \$1.6 million in Head 50 for this, with 48 schemes – Central Division will have 13 schemes, Western Division will have 29 schemes and the Northern Division will have 6 schemes to benefit 5,000 Fijians.

The EFL subsidy for residential customers of income of less than \$30,000 for the first 100 kilowatt hours, more than 50,000 benefit on this on a monthly basis and this is not the selected few, these are the people who need the assistance are being provided that assistance. The EFL subsidy for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises for those with a turnover of \$1.25 million has been extended for an additional 6 months until 31st July, 2022.

In the energy sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a number of major targets, one is 100 per cent access to electricity for all households in Fiji. Secondly, to move entirely from fossil fuel-based energy to renewable energy in order to reduce greenhouse gas emission. The third is to enhance energy efficiency. One of the biggest challenges that we have in reducing greenhouse gas emissions in energy is in the transport sector. As we know, the transport, most of it runs on fossil fuel, so the proposed electric shuttle bus project is therefore a very welcomed development. We look forward to the trialling of system in the commercial centres with system centred around Valelevu. I think that is going to be something that we are looking forward to the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, roads have continuously been a challenge. I have expressed these sentiments this year in a number of places that I speak. I speak to about the cost of floods that we have on the road infrastructure that we have in Fiji. In just these two incidents that we have had so far this year, FRA has estimated the damage will cost around \$100 million to completely rehabilitate. So that is a lot of money.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this Budget, we have a \$338.2 million increase of about \$65 million, \$72.9 million will be used for essential road maintenance, \$60 million will be used to expand FRA road renewal and rehabilitation programme, in particular the rip and remake. If you go around Suva or along the Western Division, you will see roads being ripped up and remade. A lot more of our sealed roads have been ripped and rehabilitated and that is the programme that we will continue to do. There is \$34 million for upgrade and replacement of bridges and \$14.5 million for rural road programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as announced by the honourable Minister of Economy, there is also \$5 billion that is being provided for non-FRA roads. As he has pointed out, there will be very strict criteria applied to selecting which particular roads will be used for which this money will be spent. In particular, there will be a focus on roads that provide access to schools, health centres, settlements, communities, villages and markets. This is one-off funding because normally FRA budget is meant for the FRA roads. In Fiji, we have around 11,000 kilometres of road and FRA roads comprises slightly over 6,000 kilometres of that 11,000 kilometres of road in total.

The \$102 million for the Transport Infrastructure Investment Sector Programme (TIISP) to rehabilitate major roads along King's and Queen's Roads and complete designs of 40 major bridges and the crucial jetties that we have in Natovi, Nabouwalu and Savusavu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2015, FRA has built 65 bridges and crossings. Currently, we are building 11 bridges with another 40 bridges and three jetties in design phase. So, there is a continuous focus, we have around 100 critical bridges in Fiji that we are planning over time to rehabilitate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for land related issues in this Budget, there is an increase in budget of slightly over \$2 million that will assist the Ministry of Lands addressing the renewal of *itaukei* land leases used by the State in areas, like Nausori. Also part of this funding will assist in the continuing development of a lease administration digital platform focusing on continuing our plans to speed up our processes within the Ministry of Lands. Part of it will be used to clear up the survey plans so that leases can be processed as part of the approach to try to address all issues that have been addressed in terms of speed developing the subdivisions and problems that people are having with the surveys.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I was thinking about what to say, there was one question that the honourable Minister of Economy kept asking during his Budget Address was, the question that people were asking is what lies ahead? I think what this Budget is telling us, what lies ahead that we have a clear path on what Government is going to do, to try to move the economy forward, to move the country forward and to address that particular need. As I said before, this Budget has been developed by a Government that is decisive, the Budget itself is decisive, it is timely and it is a focussed Revised 2021-2022 Budget. So, I fully support the Budget and the motion that is before the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before I give the floor to the next speaker, I would like to announce the following speakers who are going to be next:

1. Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services;
2. Honourable Prof. Biman Prasad;
3. Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports,;
4. Honourable Anare Jale;
5. Honourable Assistant Minister for Youth and Sports; and
6. Honourable Niko Nawaikula.

So, it is in that order.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we considered the Budget, we asked a number of questions at the macro level. The questions such as, “Will the Revised Budget stimulate or reinvigorate the economy in crisis, address the low level of investment, create employment opportunities, reduce poverty and hardships, cushion the unsustainable debts, et cetera?” It has not addressed all those and I think they were very clear that the Revised Budget was meant for one thing only, that is, to prepare for the elections, to pave the way for FijiFirst to call for the elections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last night was the first time I saw the honourable Prime Minister after he returned from Australia. I had actually on the day that we were told that he was under treatment in Australia, I asked our people to pray for him and for his family. We are very happy to see him back. Last night, I saw the honourable Prime Minister as good as new and in perfect health. When he came, remember there was this headline saying, “I am ready to rock and roll.” He said that. And last night’s Budget was confirmation that is he is ready to rock and roll towards the election. That is the confirmation that it is an election Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of this country are a lot smarter than that. Let me give an example, if they had voted for SODELPA in 2018, the \$4 minimum wage rate would have been in place now and not wait until January 2023. So, the people are saying, “We could have got that in SODELPA, why did we elect the wrong party into Government?” And there are many more of that, which I will touch on.

I love this comment by the honourable Usamate, “dilly-dally”. Well, you dilly-dallied on the minimum wage rate for four years. I am pleading and asking the people of this country not to make the same mistake because SODELPA will put in place a \$5 minimum wage rate in 2023 when it comes into power. Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is it. So the people of Fiji, do not make the wrong choice and wait again for many years to get what you should be getting.

As we talk about this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also want to touch on the other people who need to be brought into the formal sector, whose employment should be formalised. As we talk about the \$5 minimum wage rate, if SODELPA is in Government, that is what it is going to do, we will also look at those who are in the informal sector such as domestic duties. They should be brought in formally, they should be given contracts and they should be recognised as an integral part of the labour force of this country.

We tend to be very dismissive and casual in the way we look after these very important segments of our population. To the extent, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I raised this in Parliament some years back, which our women are being hired for domestic duties in the neighbouring islands. They go to Tonga and to other islands, these are the Fijian women, because we do not look after them.

We will put in place a minimum wage rate for them with proper conditions.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- When?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- The election is happening very soon and that will happen once SODELPA comes into power, Mr. Speaker. It can be done, if we put proper structures for our women to be employed in domestic duties.

For real, Mr. Speaker, I see this overseas where women would be contracted to clean a certain number of homes or a certain number of hotel rooms and it is formal and they move around to other contracts during the day.

Four families can afford to hire a domestic worker, each contributes \$50 and that is \$200 a week for a woman doing domestic duties. With the proper contracts they can even raise loans, they are as normal treated equally like everyone else. This is a segment that SODELPA will look after, Mr. Speaker. Together with the gardeners, we can hire gardeners that could be one gardener for four families and the like, Mr. Speaker.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- This is all part of the Revised Budget, honourable Usamate. You are falling short of what you have presented to the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, we keep talking about TELS and it has come out here. As you know, Mr. Speaker, with SODELPA education will be free to tertiary level. We will not be talking about TELS with SODELPA, Mr. Speaker. That will be the way forward for this country, a country that is well

educated, a country where people can execute better on the programmes we put in place, a country that will be the envy of most developing countries in the world, Mr. Speaker, Fiji because we have the foresight and we are decisive to say that. We will educate our people to the highest level available to them, Mr. Speaker.

Trade, the honourable Minister for Education talked about our people being in demand in New Zealand and Australia. There will be more trade training in this country. I do not know why she brought up technical college and then you removed it. I am told it was something personal between someone and the honourable Minister for Education and someone who was at the university at that time, but that will come back and people will be qualified with trade and they will be in demand in the region. The new global economy is largely dependent, Mr. Speaker, on labour mobility and Fiji will train its people so that they are in demand in the region.

Mr. Speaker, we still hear that they have re-instated the conditions for the civil servants which has always been recommended by us from this side of the House for the last couple of years and it has eventually come into being now because again I say you know that the civil servants will not vote for you in 2022 unless you do this. But you are not going far enough. We want to give the civil servants' security of employment. They fill unsecure, Mr. Speaker. We will do away with this OMRS which has failed. We have a Performance Monitoring System (PMS), that was working and it will work. Our career civil servants, it will be a life time calling.

Mr. Speaker, let me touch on tourism. Tourism is on a bounce back and has always been the backbone of Fiji's industry in terms of foreign earnings and it will come back. I spoke right from the beginning about pent up demand. We saw a bit of that during Christmas and New Year period and it is going to come back in a big way.

The thing about tourism, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that, we have the inventory and people keep forgetting this. The inventory is there in terms of airline seats, hotel rooms, transportation system, including the boats. So, when that happens, things will change quite dramatically and I agree with the forecast that has been shared with us but, Sir, tourism of the future goes hand in hand with health. Health has to be upgraded.

A survey was conducted at the University of Queensland some time back and the respondent said, and I quote, "I will go to a country for my holidays where the health system is of a satisfactory level". So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot compromise on this, my colleague honourable Salote Radrodro had highlighted some of the huge challenges in our health sector, we cannot afford not to attend to these, it is very important. I noticed from the honourable Minister that they have two choices - build a new wing at the Lautoka Hospital or build a new hospital.

What we will do Mr. Speaker, Sir, is build a new wing at Lautoka Hospital and build a new hospital in Nadi in the heartland of tourism. It will be a modern hospital and I have said this many times in my speeches here and it will happen because if you want tourism, you need to upgrade the health system Mr. Speaker, Sir, and a hospital of that kind of quality has to be in Nadi.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we have today is the lack of confidence and I have spoken about this a number of times that we will need to put in place confidence-building measures and one of them is to have an economic summit. I have said this over and over again, for people to sit together and look at the economy of the country in a collective manner, not the selective way that the honourable Minister of Economy goes around the country virtually prepping people to answer his questions in the ways he wants them.

We have to have an economic summit and I have recommended this a number of times; we should do it. Mr. Speaker, confidence comes when the citizenry feels safe.

Law and order is very important, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is unfortunate that our people today live in a country that is almost like a police State.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I travel a lot now, I visit a lot of villages and every time ...

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- I am the Party Leader and, Sir, I cover a lot of areas being a Party leader and it is very sad when I come to a village, they whisper to me, “the Police is here”, that is what I get. When I go to a village they whisper to me, “the Police is here” and these are the people who are not accustomed to this type of control of this nature. These are free people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government is misusing the Police Force. I would talk to the people in the room and I would feel sorry for the police officer, he is out of place and these are professional people and they are being asked by FijiFirst to spy on their own people.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- You should see the reaction of the people when there is a police officer in their midst. Please, do not degrade our officers, they are professionals, do not ask them to do this for you.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Do not ask them to do this for you. Let them have better things to do, they are professionals, they are trained at the highest level of law keeping, et cetera. Do not ask them to follow a politician around. That is what they are doing, they are following a politician around. I do not know why they are following me around. And it is sad, Sir, when the villagers, like I said, whispered to me, “the police are here”. We will not use the Fiji Police Force in that manner, SODELPA will not use the Force in that manner. Let me be very clear about that.

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Minister spoke about electricity. I went to the village of Namarai in Ra, beautiful place, beautiful people, on the beach. They have had electricity there for the last year, poles and all the wires and all that but not connected to their homes and it is a very remote part of Ra. Getting there is quite difficult, you come through Dawasamu or you come through the other part of Ra. They have been saying, “Look, one year, it is here, we know the wires arrived, why is it not connected to our homes?” Someone said, “Well maybe because you voted for SODELPA in 2018”, but I actually ended up apologising. I said, “no, it is not true.” I know my buddies in the Government, they are really not that, they would not stoop to that level but please, people of Namarai, they have this electricity and all that, connect it please. That is not the only place where I was told that maybe because they voted for SODELPA, that they are not doing what they promised to do to them. So, Mr. Speaker, that is my contribution.

I just wish we had a bit more time to do this. You will not have the time to talk on the Bills. We are only commenting now on the Budget. I just wish next time, Mr. Speaker, that we are respectful of the people and we arrange matters in Parliament to give us sufficient time to do justice to something of this importance.

Mr. Speaker, let me just again remind our friends that confidence building is very important and the people are not confident right now, they are actually very fearful. When you talk about confidence, a happy citizenry, Mr. Speaker, creates confidence and that is where we are today. Create the confidence, do what needs to be done, do not bulldoze. It has been 15 years of that and people are tired of it and change is coming, Mr. Speaker, when this election happens which I believe will be very close.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; first and foremost, I would like to, again, welcome the honourable Prime Minister and thank him for being able to join us and we reiterate how happy and excited that he is here with us and looking well and for the role that is before us and also his decisive leadership over our nation at this difficult time.

I would also like to thank the honourable Minister of Economy for the Budget and I can say that we, at the Ministry of Health, have been very fortunate that despite the challenges that we have had over the last two years, we have been able to be supported, given that other Ministries have had their budgets reduced in certain areas but to be able to do the role that is set out before us. So, certainly over the last two years, our main focus has been on the COVID-19 response and also on the vaccination campaign. Now, that we are coming to the tail-end of that pandemic as it is, we are now able to reach out and to also tackle the other emerging threats whether it be communicable or non-communicable diseases, that is upon us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, I would like to commend again the Government's move in re-establishing overtime pay for all civil servants at Band E, and for the nurses, they have been at the frontline. They are the spine and the skeleton of the health system. I heard last night that all throughout the country, they are very happy, not only for that but also that the maritime and rural allowance has been restored when this Budget will be passed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also the increase in meal allowances is well received and the honourable Minister of Economy had alluded that when these allowances and overtime was withheld in that budget speech, that all of us were indeed sacrificing, including us in this Parliament, with salary cuts and they were done to be able to support the nation during that difficult time.

We are thankful that the allowances will be brought back and it will support them and also the fact that appropriation has been set aside to be able to reward those who have been at the frontline and those who have been working 24/7 some days whilst the rest of us were contained in our own homes and throughout that time until now. We have been very fortunate that recently we have been able to give leave to a lot of our staff and they are now coming back refreshed at the work that is before us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the GP Scheme has become very important. It is important because it increases again the access to primary healthcare services. We are fortunate and again I would like to thank the honourable Minister of Economy and the honourable Prime Minister for setting aside appropriation not only to continue the scheme but also to increase the number of general practitioners and more importantly the work that they can do such as blood tests, tests for diabetes or tests for ECG, nebuliser treatment – as we know, some of our people when they front up to the nearest GP they may have an asthmatic attack and now, the checks have been paid for and subsidised by government.

This is something that all of us should be very happy with and that our people would be able to be provided to the next available health facility, whether it be a GP or health centre close to them and the numbers have again increased, as I have alluded to earlier. The old school way of lining up

at the health centre is now beginning to go out of the window. The honourable Minister for Economy had said in the previous Budget Address that we are moving towards having a doctor looking after a person or family and that is what family medicine is all about. By doing this, it creates a trusting relationship.

When I worked in New Zealand for three and half years, and I know all of you here have worked overseas, you would have had a private GP that looked after you and your family. That confidence that you have with your GP allows you to be able to share the most intimate and difficult things that needs to be sorted and that is what this programme is beginning to do.

We are very grateful again that we are able to open it up to a lot more GPs and also the appropriation of \$200,000 to look at having this available also in rural areas, such as Nawaicoba, Malolo, Drasa, Sabeto, Seaqaqa, Dreketi and Nasarowaqa. Imagine having a general practitioner who is like your family doctor, looking after you in these places (unprecedented) and again, I commend the honourable Minister of Economy for his foresight in supporting this incentive and this will again continue to strengthen our resolve to have access everywhere so that we are definitely leaving no one behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Sunday, 22nd March, 2022, I had the pleasure of spending the day predominantly with our oral health professionals around the country and I want to thank them for the work that they have done and during the pandemic, they were part of the frontliners. A lot of them were being used as swabbers – as we all know, oral health professionals know the anatomy of the oral cavity very well and they can be trusted. So I thank them on behalf of the honourable Prime Minister and on behalf of the grateful nation.

This week is National Oral Health week and it is being celebrated right across the nation where free oral health checks are being done. It was pleasing to note that in yesterday's Budget address the honourable Minister of Economy also alluded to the fact Private Dental Practitioners will now join the GP subsidy scheme. This is another step forward in increasing access to all our people. Not only would they have dental checks but the ability to deal with acute dental issues.

Again, I have begun to receive messages from dentists, oral health professionals not only in the public sector but also in the private sector. In our public sector when a person comes for a dental check-up, it is not like a doctor where you can see someone for 10 minutes. They need an appointment of at least 30 minutes so on occasions, they may have just forty rostered for the day because certainly you need machines to be up and running; you need the equipment, you might need to use the anaesthetise the mouth before you actually take out the tooth - so you can see that now we will be able to spread that and people can have dental appointments not only in the public sector but also in the private sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the outsourcing of biomedical services will continue to support and streamline operations and this a key part of the approach to ensure that the ministry works in tandem with the biomedical services provider. We can hold them accountable if the machines have challenges and also improve on the quality of care. I also note that the kidney dialysis scheme continues with the availability of dialysis not only in the government hospitals but also the subsidy that is set aside for \$1.2 million and I am very thankful for this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the experts, the researchers in nephrology continue to talk about how we also have to address the preventative measures with kidney dialysis. The work that needs to be done to continue to ensure that we are protecting our kidney. So whilst these services are available in our three main hospitals and also, in our Nadera Kidney Dialysis Unit, and also being subsidised in the

private dialysis unit, they work around the preventative health aspects in preventing chronic renal failure and that is also very important.

The free medicine scheme was alluded to by the honourable Minister of Economy and that was something that was never there until 2015 and this move has benefitted many Fijians. In 2015, 72 medicines were made available free of charge - since then we now have 140 medicines, 136 comprise of medicinal products and also 4 consumables mainly wound dressings. We have more and more Fijians registering onto the scheme and they need to apply through the Ministry and simply show they qualify for any of our many social welfare schemes.

We also worked it so that if someone who qualifies for social welfare, qualifies for this scheme and also potentially qualifies for the Kidney dialysis. So you can see that we are actually aligning those three together. The Fiji Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Services Centre will launch an improved implementation model for the Free Medicine Programme beginning next month. And under this new model, participating private pharmacies will dispense listed medications from their own inventory and will be reimbursed by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services.

One of the things that we wanted to do and we could not do during the COVID-19 period was to actually change the way that we did our systems of logistics. We are slowly able to transit it, at the moment they have a new supply chain software called MSUPPLY which they are now running. They have also changed the way they actually deliver and now they do a door-to-door logistics exercise, whereas before, they were dependent on third parties such as courier companies but now they actually do door to door. Because of the appropriation that was given in the previous Budget, they now have a transport and the people to be able to do this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to talk about a project that has also been very important and that is the WASH project that our environmental and health officers have been working very hard on. Sir, it has been estimated that, at least, 80 per cent or more of houses that were damaged during a cyclone would also have their WASH and sanitation damaged significantly. We have had since *TC Winston* 14 severe cyclones and a lot of them, because of the challenges they had with support, they were able to receive from Government, they were able to provide a roof over their heads and some of them struggled with latrines. I know this because as I worked as a doctor and as a surgeon, I have operated on many people who have ruptured their intestines; ruptured it because of typhoid and diarrhoeal diseases. Some of them died.

When I was in that operating theatre, I never saw honourable *Koko Kuridrani*, I never saw honourable *Salote Radrodro*, I never saw honourable *Professor Prasad*. This is our people dying and it was very close to my heart. That is why when the cyclones went through Fiji and we did assessments, for three weeks we were in *Lekutu* and the honourable Minister for Defence was in *Labasa*. When we traversed through the communities in *Vanua Levu*, I never saw them, never met any of the Opposition Members who are saying that opening toilets is a waste of time – never met any of them. When we had many houses in *Kadavu* that were damaged, and our facilities were damaged, I never saw honourable *Simione Rasova* there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I am trying to say is very simply our people went on the ground, they identified a problem, there were typhoid outbreaks, diarrhoeal outbreaks, leptospirosis outbreaks, they decided what needs to be done, we found funding for it and if you look at the budget book, there is nearly \$1 million set aside for WASH; that is what they have done. What are the numbers?

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- You said Bua. Let me make it very clear, honourable Salote Radrodro, that a lot of work has been done in Bua and if a typhoid outbreak broke out in Bua, you could be sick, your life has been protected.

Mr. Speaker, let me tell you the numbers. The numbers indicate that with the work that they have done, they have been able to put in 1,286 latrines. These are people who have struggled to put up latrines after the cyclones in the middle of Viti Levu, Navosa where honourable *Koko* Kuridrani and I come from, when there was a leptospirosis outbreak in Ra and you were making fun of our people walking through. Where were you? I was there with them. I went to a village called Navavai. We hiked for more than an hour, where were you? I never saw any of you. So why do you make those comments?

Let me tell you one thing, if someone gets diabetes, it takes times to get diabetes, we have time to deal with the issues, we have time to be able to talk them and advocate. When someone gets typhoid today, he can die two days later. When someone gets leptospirosis today, he can die two or three days later. That is the difference between communicable diseases and non-communicable diseases. So once we fight this NCD, we must remember that the emerging threat of communicable diseases can kill people.

There is a high mortality from it. It can affect those who need to be able to put food on the table. It can affect people who are going to work. It can affect our people who are going to work in areas where visitors might come and inter-mingle with them. That is why it is so important to deal with all the threats that we have, not only non-communicable diseases but also communicable diseases. We need to deal with leptospirosis and nip it in the bud. We need to deal with dengue and nip it in the bud. We need to deal with typhoid and nip it in the bud and they have done it magnificently.

To make certain comments such as that is to insult the hard work these environmental health officers have been doing. Some of them have been sleeping in communities, working with them, supporting them and they have worked very, very hard. So the next time you want to make a comment, think about the sons and daughters of Fiji who worked very hard as frontliners for COVID-19, they will have to work very hard as frontliners for leptospirosis, typhoid and dengue, so remember them. If you think that you are supporting civil servants, they are the ones who carry out the policies of Government, they are the ones protecting our lives and they are the ones who are putting their lives for our lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition have criticised the Budget but they have not done so in measured terms. They have not provided viable alternatives that will help create realistic opportunities to reposition the Fijian economy to operate under the new normal. Honourable Salote Radrodro said, “Only fools will believe this Budget.” After yesterday’s event, the *Facebook* went viral with people across this nation saying how good this Budget was. And you are saying “they are fools”, you call the people of our country who say that this is a good Budget “fools”.

The criticisms and judgements cannot change the fact that at this juncture in the Fijian economy, there cannot be a smarter and more responsive Budget than this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the Government’s view that all Fijian families matter and no one gets left behind. My Ministry will continue to effectively mobilise its allocated Budget and programmes to deliver an effective response to the pandemic, tackling other emerging threats and improve the delivery of medical services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know that when Fijians unite in the face of challenges, our nation will emerge stronger and better than before. Therefore, I support the Revised 2021-2022 Budget and I

call on all Fijians to unite and help in the transformation into a more resilient and stronger people and nation.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will take a break for half-an-hour for afternoon tea. After that, we will continue with the debate and we will start with the honourable Prof. Biman Prasad. Parliament is now adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.47 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.17 p.m.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also take it that Bills are part of the speaking time that we have, so I may be able to say a few things on two Bills as well. I rise to speak on this Bill with many different thoughts and emotions in my mind.

The first emotion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is anger that this Government, in particular, the honourable Minister of Economy treat this Parliament and the people of Fiji with such contempt. This Government is so arrogant that it is ready to spend hundreds of millions of dollars of the people's money without letting us representatives, especially the Opposition and the representatives of the people to look closely at how they are spending.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, why is that and what is the reason? Let me tell this Parliament why. Because the Government, in my view, is actually afraid. It is afraid that if we have a chance to look at this Budget properly, if there is more time, we will draw to the people's attention the failures, the broken promises and the incompetence in their past performance, in particular, the incompetence of some of the honourable Ministers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me tell the Government, and I think it is important for us to do that from the Opposition, that you are the managers of the people's money; people in business, the poor, public servants, doctors, nurses, teachers and many others. They make the decision based on the things the Government does or the Ministers do and say. These are things they do and say and I repeat with the people's money, with the taxpayers' money. It is not our money, or the Minister's money or Government's money.

Government Ministers, I have seen, Mr. Speaker, wander throughout the country any time they want while people actually wait for them. I know people have told me that they had to wait for Ministers to be present. They behave as if they are very important than anyone else, that their only time is valuable.

We saw this during the recent budget consultation, Mr. Speaker, and the example that I can quote is in Kulukulu, Sigatoka. When a member of a public actually asked critical questions about health, cost of living, minimum wage rate, he was labelled by the honourable Minister of Economy as talking like his friend Biman. I do not know the man at all and the man does not know me at all.

Mr. Speaker, if the Ministers were employees in the business, they would be fired for this kind of attitude, but they work for the people of Fiji. Let me assure this Government that when the time comes later this year, people are going to remember that and the people who get the government in, who fire the government; it is the people.

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Minister wants to come into this House, praise himself for two hours, throw around economic goodies and then rushed away. He does not want to be here. He does not want to listen to scrutiny and criticism. He does not want to hear how things could be done better because he knows and a lot of the Ministers on the other side know that things are a mess. The people are telling them. I know the people are telling us and they are also telling the Government that things are in a mess. They need to understand that, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, if you look at the budget for the last 15 years, this Government has spent \$50 billion of the taxpayers' money. Think about it, Sir, it is \$50 billion. That is how much they have spent in 15 years.

As I said, Mr. Speaker, in one of the sessions in this Parliament that between 2015 and 2020 in my estimate, on average, about \$500 million has been stolen from the taxpayers of this country through pilferage, wastage, corruption and mismanagement. Imagine, what we would have been able to do with that kind of money. It is about \$3 billion in six years. Look at the mess we are in. I mean, it is visible around us, Mr. Speaker.

I heard the honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services and Lands and Mineral Resources, again, his talking about something that they are going to do in 2023. There is no water in the taps. The roads are ruttled with potholes. There are plants growing out of the main hospital but no drugs inside, I mean, we have talked about this. The plants are still there. We have many times raised this issue in Parliament and no one seems to be doing anything about it. The evidence of their incompetence is everywhere, Mr. Speaker, unfortunately. Everyone knows, except they themselves.

Let us not forget, no matter how much they have bragged about how this Government provided leadership during our worst ever health and economic crisis, hundreds of people died, jobs disappeared, people were forced into a sudden poverty by the impact of the pandemic. Where were our Government Ministers? Where were our national leaders at one point in time, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Minister of Economy thought when he went out on his so-called budget consultations with the people that he would receive the usual silence, if not, respect but this time, he heard from them loud and clear, as we are hearing ourselves. He even brought himself to the point of apologising for the services of this Government. It is of course good to apologise when you are wrong and when you have failed to deliver but, of course, these apologies from this Government are not sincere. They are made with one eye on the people and one eye on the election.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my second motion is really sadness; sadness that the people of Fiji have to suffer such a government and so much financial mismanagement and, of course, now arrears of taxpayers' money as the Government tries to spray freebies in every direction.

The emotion, I did not expect to feel, Mr. Speaker, Sir, though was amusement. What are the cornerstones of the honourable Minister's Government's Revised Budget? Zero VAT on basic food and consumer items, increase in the minimum wage to be introduced in stages but these have been the National Federation Party's policies for years. The honourable Minister has ridiculed, many of them ridiculed and criticized these policies for years. Why has it taken them so long to realise or to see the light?

The honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services and Lands and Mineral Resources was talking about timing ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Yes, timing.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- *Areh!* What are you talking about - timing? You have been talking about unprecedented growth. When you had unprecedented growth, that was the time to raise minimum wages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me also remind them. The honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services and Lands and Mineral Resources bragged about unprecedented growth. He should understand, he knows that, he is an Economic Statistician, he should understand that better, the economy had a negative growth in 2019, that the poverty rate was not reduced even before COVID-19. In fact, it went up. So, where was this unprecedented growth that they keep harping on in the last so many years? They pretend that they know what is going on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the announcement that the 20 per cent fuel surcharge will be taken away to relieve the burden of cost on the people. This is what we, the NFP, called for three months ago and what did the honourable Minister say, he may pretend that he does not but the public remember. He puffed himself up with the so-called expertise and called the idea, let me quote, “stupendously stupid” and yet, it is that so called stupendously stupid idea that we are introducing now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, nothing is more amusing than watching government politicians throwing overboard all the things that they were saying. They have been saying things from 2014 - they opposed minimum wages, they opposed zero VAT on basic food items and yet they do not have the audacity or the decency or the honesty to admit that they were wrong.

I could not believe my ears, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the honourable Minister gave this House a mini lecture on the policies of the great economist, John Maynard Keynes, and the honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services and Lands and Mineral Resources and the honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment would know and the need for deficit spending when the economy is low. Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister, I would expect that from a C-Grade economic student at USP, who would not have read the whole theory or the whole part of the textbook, he only read the part that suits him. During his life, John Maynard Keynes who also had to tell politicians that deficit spending was for the bad times. It was not for all times, it had to be balanced with surpluses in the good times and that is what this Government has failed to do, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It has borrowed and spent in good times and now it is doing the same in bad times. It has kept borrowing and spending, that is how it has created the so-called unprecedented growth and that is why debt to GDP will increase by almost 90 per cent or will be around 90 per cent in a few months’ time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the honourable Minister and those in his Government will not believe me, perhaps they should ask the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and they know that. The ADB did not give this Government a C-Grade, Mr. Speaker, they gave them a D-Grade.

In November 2021, Mr. Speaker, the ADB downgraded the Fiji economy in its country classifications. Why? Because it is burdened by debt and will have trouble fighting its way back. But what did the ADB say about Government debt, Mr. Speaker? The ADB told us that for a debt management strategy, the Government actually got a D-Grade, a fail grade. Why is that, Mr. Speaker?

It is because there is no strategy. The Government’s economic strategy is very simple – look at the voters, borrow and spend. This is what they did before 2018 Elections. This is what they are planning to do now and when the election is coming, look at the voters, borrow and spend some more. This is why, Mr. Speaker, I have been warning this Government since 2015 that I have been in Parliament and this is why I think today this country is in the mess that it is in.

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Minister of Economy finished his speech with a dramatic flourish. He said only a fool would oppose zero VAT on basic items, only a fool would oppose higher minimum wages, only a fool, he said, would oppose the reduction of the extra tax. And Mr. Speaker, let us be very clear; who is the fool who opposed the NFP manifesto on zero VAT? Who is the fool who told us the minimum wage could not go up? Who is the fool who refused to reduce the fuel surcharge only three months ago? Mr. Speaker, there is only one set of fools in this House and they are on the other side and yet, they are still fool enough to believe that they are good enough to be re-elected.

Mr. Speaker, I say this to the honourable Minister of Economy and the Government – you have had your time. You are so short of ideas now that you have decided now to take the NFP’s

ideas instead and I am at least a little bit happy about that. If that is the case, Sir, it is time to hand over the reins. If you want NFP's ideas, you are best to just leave them to a NFP Government.

Mr. Speaker, there is one remaining emotion I feel in this House today. Relief! Happiness and relief for the people of Fiji because we all know what is coming, Mr. Speaker, even the other side of the House, some of them know that. Trust is the key to good governance and fulfilling government's moral objective of care and compassion at all times – not only in an election year. How can this Government be trusted to ensure continuity of zero VAT on basic food items? Already people are telling me that if they win, they will put the 9 per cent VAT again.

So trust, Mr. Speaker, is a very good example. How can this Government be trusted to ensure continuity of zero VAT on basic food and essential items when it betrayed the people, Mr. Speaker, after the 2014 Elections? You look at their manifesto. It is clearly stated. Honourable Reddy knows that. They said the Government will never put tax on those basic food items. What they did? After winning the election, it was in the 2014 Manifesto, go and look at that.

In the 2014 Manifesto, FijiFirst promised to keep basic food items and prescription medication VAT free. Yet a year later, the Government imposed VAT on them. For six years people have suffered and bore the brunt of high cost of food and essential items exacerbated by VAT. For two years, the Government has earned almost \$115 million from 20 cents per litre extra duty on fuel.

The Government rubbished our blueprint to reduce cost of living and raise minimum wage to a living wage and got their businesses cabal to slander us and warn workers of job losses. I remember the honourable Minister of Economy going to the garment factories and the cabal was taking him around and saying, "If the minimum wage goes up progressively, you are going to lose your job, factories will close." This is the threat, this is the fear they were invoking, Mr. Speaker, and I am glad today that they have seen the light of the day. There is absolutely no basis for the argument they were making about the living minimum wages in 2014 and I am glad that they have seen the light of the day.

There is nothing that would prevent this heartless Government and I know why they have done this because they are scared, they are hearing the people, the people are angry. They do not believe it in their hearts and minds that they should do this, but they are responding to the anger that the people already have. So there is nothing that would prevent this heartless Government for reneging on these pro- people's policies yet again, should they retain power after the Elections.

But this time thankfully, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have lost the trust of the people who will no longer be taken for a joy ride by this Government. In fact, the people are sick of this Government. They want them out. The people's time is coming and I say to the Government, all of your smooth talks, all your freebies, all your fake lies, nothing will help you. The people will speak and you will be sent into the history books.

Before I sit down, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me respond to the honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts. I think she has also got into this habit as this FijiFirst Government, of not understanding. She is desperately trying to save her tarnished image with the education stakeholders and totally misrepresenting. I mean, the gaps she made in her comments, she is trying to correct it out. But let me say that when you talk about student's choice, yes, on scholarships you can decide or you can have a criteria or cut-off, but if you are giving loan to the students which the students have to pay, then you do not tell them, "You cannot have loan in this area or loan in that area." That is the point that we are making, Sir. So instead of trying to defend the indefensible, the honourable Minister needs to take a bit of a rest, think carefully, consult key stakeholders within the education sector and come up with some credible policies and announcements.

The habit that some of the honourable Ministers have is when they go around, they say things to the people without thinking because they are responding to them. And then when we say that this is not right, they accuse us of politicising or taking them personally, we do not do that. Let me just talk about the two Bills, in particular there are many but the two that I want to briefly talk about and I hope the honourable Attorney-General will clarify some of these.

The first one is the development of informal settlements for related matters.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will go by your decision.

This Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is about relocation of the informal settlements and it says that the Government which will be the leaseholder of 40 development sites to compulsory relocating formal tenants whose dwellings obstruct or likely to obstruct the development of the construction of infrastructure and other things, and it states that:

“If an informal tenant refuses to relocate within the period specified by the lessee in writing for relocation, the informal tenant commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding \$20,000 or imprisonment for a term not exceeding 10 years or both.”

I am assuming that if the Government is relocating them, then it is the Government’s responsibility to put them into

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Yes, yes!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this law has a catch. What if the Government is not the development lessee because this law does not say that it is only the Government? If a private developer gets a development lease, what is the provision and what would be the laws or regulations - we need clarification on that.

On the second Bill, I want to mention and I have said this before, this is in relation to building confidence. They talked about investment but let me tell you, people do not have confidence in investment. In the ADB report, they are ignoring that and it is very clear that private sector investment has been very modest. Young people with children are thinking of leaving this country because they do not have confidence in the health system and infrastructure. The honourable Gavoka talked about remittances- they do not talk about that.

In 2020, \$652 million to be exact came into this country through remittances. In 2021, \$842 million, a total of about \$1.5 billion and that money, coupled with budget support, vaccine support and other support kept this country going. This Government had run out of ideas and run out of money. When we look at this Bill, we have made it a requirement for 20 consecutive years or an aggregate of 15 years before you can get a naturalised citizenship. Look at all the countries around the world - Australia, USA and UK – they have five years for naturalised citizenship after Permanent Residence (PR).

We are trying to get people to come to this country, live here and invest here and we are putting out laws without thinking. I have said this before in this Parliament that many laws have been brought under Standing Order 51 (and I would say corrupt laws) that have later on found out to be designed for certain individuals. That is why, when laws come to the Parliament, they need time,

they need our understanding and people need to understand these laws better so that we can build the confidence that we are talking about. At the moment, we are not providing that confidence by doing this.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable members of Parliament. Let me start by saying that the Opposition is in shock and cannot digest the assistance announced last night by the honourable Minister of Economy for the poor of this country. In particular honourable Prasad, and not only that, they already see themselves in Opposition come next election. Because the presentation by the Leader of the Opposition this morning, I have not heard or seen such a poor response to a Budget anytime in this Parliament.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition was just here and there. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to clarify the matter that was raised by honourable Prasad on the development of the informal settlements. There are almost 40 development lease with the Government. Those leases have been given to the Government in consultation with the respective *mataqali* and they have been paid the required premium, so the developer will be the Government. There can be a private contractor to develop that subdivision but not a private developer, so the development lease stays with Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support this practical and well-thought Revised Budget presented by the honourable Minister of Economy that provides balance to recover and grow Fiji for all Fijians. This is a budget that is timely and will provide the platform for Fiji to enter a new phase of economic recovery during the ongoing pandemic crisis. And the war is taking further hits from the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. This is not a “what if” budget, but a sustainable budget that addresses the new normal that we now live in, Mr. Speaker, Sir. As in our previous budgets, this is a people’s budget that will enable every Fijian to prosper in life with assistance from the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important that this revised budget is seen and heard for what it is, to provide for the people of Fiji. The Government is mandated to provide for and deliver to the people of Fiji. I can already hear the critics and of course the Opposition, all ready to deliver judgement on this Revised Budget. They can do all the judgements and big talk they want, at the end of the day, this Revised Budget delivers to and for the people of Fiji and that is what the FijiFirst Government does and does best. It delivers to the people of Fiji so they can have jobs, build livelihoods and have a future to look forward to. We, as the FijiFirst Government have sustained the delivery of jobs and a secure future for all during the most testing of period for the modern world.

From the first day when the first case of COVID-19 hit Fiji, the FijiFirst Government acted in a pro-active manner under the visionary leadership of the honourable Prime Minister to protect Fijian lives and well-being. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we enter the third year of the pandemic - confident country that has now opened its borders. Let me say that no other leader and no other government could have led Fiji through this pandemic; that is a fact. This confidence is reflected in our high vaccination rates and the continued excellence of our frontline workers and the Ministry of Health and all cross-sectoral ministries in minimising the impact of the pandemic. This is not an easy task nor did we, the FijiFirst Government think it was but we tackled it with confidence and faith in the resilience and strength of the Fijian people.

The rewards are coming and will continue to come under the FijiFirst Government as underlined by the range of immediate measures from VAT removal to a new minimum wage for all Fijians. These are practical measures that address the needs of all Fijians. This Revised Budget offers hope, a path forward with immediate measures to provide relief from the effects of global issues such as the pandemic and Ukraine crisis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not the time to make empty promises or empty statements. I am sure that we will have plenty of this emptiness coming in the remarks from the Opposition, after all they are the masters of making a lot of noise from their empty pots and as we all know, empty pots can only make a lot of noise but it does not offer food on the table or a job or a future to look forward to, to fill it up. I can already hear the empty pots from the Opposition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the noise that they have already made.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this timely and practical budget that provides immediate relief for all Fijians. Allow me to make some important remarks relating to the National Minimum Wage. The National Minimum Wage of \$2 per hour was implemented on 1st March, 2014 by the FijiFirst Government and later reviewed and implemented in 2015 within a span of one and half year. The new wage rate of \$2.32 came into force on 1st July, 2015 which also included the review of the 10 sectoral-based minimum wage. The National Minimum Wage and the 10 sectoral-based minimum wage was again reviewed in 2017 through a nationwide survey with the assistance of an international consultant Professor Partha Gangopadhyay and the current \$2.68 per hour of work was implemented on 30th September, 2017.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry continued to work on this with the consultant in 2018 and 2019. A nationwide survey was conducted for the formal and informal sectors in 2019. However, the report was not presented in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. And I am so surprised that from this morning the Opposition have been saying, why now? What did we go through in 2020 and 2021? This National Minimum Wage is a step in the right direction to ensure that both workers and the employers' interest are taken into consideration to have a balance approach. The review undertaken by the consultant was to ensure that we continued to work in the best interests of all Fijian workers and employers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the implementation of the National Minimum Wage and the sectoral-based minimum wage will provide the framework and timeframe for employers and workers in ensuring that we have a uniformed approach on the implementation of the National Minimum Wage. This will see a gradual increase from \$2.68 to \$3.01 to be effective from 1st April, 2022. The second increase from \$3.01 to \$3.34 to be effective from 1st July, 2022. The third and the fourth will increase from \$3.34 to \$3.67 and from \$3.67 to \$4.00 to be effective from 1st October, 2020 and 1st January, 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in one of the consultations, I read in the media someone was saying \$5, \$6 and I said in the consultation, if you even say \$8, the Opposition will come by saying \$8 or \$9 or \$10 but we have to be realistic and we know what we are supposed to do. Sir, this will provide a historic increase in real wages for all Fijian workers and it is only possible because we, in the FijiFirst Government remain committed to ensuring a fair and timely review and implementation of the National Minimum Wage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 10 sectoral job classification is a decade old and needs reform to reflect the current industry needs and the market realities, to ensure employers pay the right skills and job classification. For example, the wages for the manufacturing industry regulations currently has two job classifications that is any other worker and casual worker. This will help to raise the productivity and increase new employment opportunities such as quality controllers, machine operators, et cetera. To improve industry performance, the National Minimum Wage review is useful in providing recommendation to replace and modernise such outdated mechanisms with more relevant and practical classification to move the Fijian people and the economic forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the new minimum wage rate will ensure that the minimum social protection is accorded to our workers in consideration of the current economic realities. The National Minimum

Wage and the Sectoral Based Minimum Wage Review is to ensure a decent wages for all workers while balancing the employer's ability to pay. The FijiFirst Government has done this to ensure that no one is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry and the consultant conducted a nationwide consultation from 20th February to 5th March, 2022 Fiji-wide. As part of the process, we received submissions from the employers, workers and individuals, giving their views on the National Minimum Wage and Sectoral Based Minimum Wage. I thank them all for their efforts and support.

However, I wish to express my gross disappointment towards the Fiji Trade Union Congress and the political parties for their failure to attend any of the 11 consultations, nor did they provide any written submission on behalf of their workers whom they claimed they represent. It is unthinkable that these Union officers choose not to represent the workers who pay their wages and foot the bills for their fancy office, air condition, four wheel drive and international travels where they are always first in line.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the workers of Fiji need to take these unionists to task for non-representation of their interest in this important forum. They need to ask their leaders, what are they getting paid for, if they cannot turn up for these consultations, and why they were unable to make written submissions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 23 out of 27 IRP members, which equals to 85 per cent attended the meeting, with four FTUC members being a no-how despite been formally invited to the meeting as members of IRP. Once again, raising the issues on whose interest are they representing. Definitely, not that of the Fijian workers, a process that the Unions and their officials choose not to be part of for political reasons rather than as representatives of Fijian workers.

In this context of the new minimum wage rate and additional budget measures, such as the removal of 21 items from VAT, the proposal to amend the Employment Relation Act, 2007 through the Revised Budget (Amendment) Bill No. 15 of 2022, will provide a balancing act, suspending the Family Care and Paternity Leave will lead to increasing workplace productivity. This is a practical way of assisting employers to cope up with the effect of COVID-19 pandemic, which is likely to be felt over the next two years at least.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 200 per cent tax deduction for the next three years will be applied to those employers who will be paying maternity leave for their staff. This will ensure that our female workers are given the best assistance needed during this period.

MR. SPEAKER.- There is a Point of Order.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I just wanted to correct the honourable Minister. He said no political parties made submission. Mr. Prem Singh, the former Member of Parliament presented NFP and made a submission and it was recorded as the NFP submission to that consultation. So, get your facts right.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I do not have to get my facts right. What I said was, political parties, I never said 'NFP.' So you should get your facts right.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Make an exception.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the generous assistance of 100,000 marketing grants for the next three years provided to the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Council will see more job

creation of the industry and will result in the rise in export as well. As part of my Ministry's contribution towards our economic recovery, and as highlighted by the honourable Minister of Economy during last night's Budget Address, the Honourable Prime Minister visionary leadership in making a bold decision of 'No Jab, No Job Policy' at the height of the pandemic is bearing fruits now through our Labour Mobility Programme.

Our *Vuvale* Partnership, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the Australian Government has resulted in an influx of current and new Australian approved employers now attending to Fiji for Fijian citizens for employment opportunities. Sir, as of now, a total of around 4,500 Fijians are in Australia and New Zealand under the Pacific Labour Scheme and Seasonal Work Programme. This shows that the Scheme is not a stop gap or band aid fix, but it is a sustainable long term means of providing meaningful, highly paid jobs with upskilling opportunity. We are thankful to our Australian and New Zealand neighbours for the continued expansion of these Schemes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on this note, I thank the current participant for creating a good impression of the Fijian Labour force not only by been productive and model workers but by contributing to their local communities as witnessed in the high profile coverage of Fijian workers providing voluntary services to help the flood victims in northern New South Wales in Australia. Projections in Australia to well-paid and long term demand for Fijian labour and a good reputation of our workers will ensure that we remain big contributors of this workforce in the years to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to improve the workplace innovation and promote productivity in the country, the National Productivity Commission will be established. As mentioned in our 15 year National Productivity Master Plan, there is a genuine need of the Commission to raise the profile of the productivity movement and for a right approach in addressing all the factors affecting the productivity. Sir, this Commission will set directions and advise Government on the measurement and improvement of productivity in Fiji.

The Ministry is thankful for the allocation of funds for the establishment of the productivity commission. My Ministry is liaising with the International Labour Organisation for their expert advice and assistance towards the establishment of the Commission, to oversee the productivity agenda in the country, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the allocation of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. It will allow us to continue valuable work in areas like National Youth Training Centres and through the Youth Farm Initiative Programme. The Ministry of Sports continues to work with all stakeholders, in particular the national sporting bodies to move this sport forward.

We are all familiar with the value of sports to our health and wellness, especially during this time of crisis but we must not forget the high economic value of sports. This is an area that continue to grow, not only through player remittance but through increase sports sponsorship, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This means taking a more corporate approach to sports where Government and private partnerships are the key to growing our sporting bodies. This is no longer the age of sports organisation at the elite level relying on an ad hoc support. We have to provide structure and have a business model to sustain such sporting ventures.

As the honourable Minister of Economy has highlighted that in 2021-2022 Revised Budget, the Government will allocate the first investment of \$3 million which is equal to 25.5 per cent shareholding in this year which was established by the Fiji Rugby Union to own and operate the new Super Rugby Franchise.

We welcome the announcement that the additional \$3 million will be undertaken in December to secure the total 51 per cent shareholding. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must say that this investment will be money well spent as the Fijian Drua sides are already becoming household names in Australia and across the region. Sir, I must compliment the Fijian Drua for the impressive performance in leading the Super Rugby Women Competition for inspiring the next generation of women.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on this sporting note, I once again thank the honourable Minister of Economy, for the revised Budget that delivers big time for all Fijians by providing the immediate relief for their day to day life and delivering a sustainable pathway for our continued economic growth for all as a nation. I thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I reiterate my support for this Revised Budget.

HON. A. JALE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me the opportunity to respond to the debate on the Revised 2021-2022 Budget. I will start with a story from the Bible. A man approached the Lord Jesus and asked that Jesus restore his sight, I think you know the story, Mr. Speaker. His sight was restored by the Lord Jesus and then when he went away as a happy man, he met the other people and they asked him, who gave your sight back? Who restored your sight? The man said, I do not know the person who restored my sight, the only thing I know is that, I was blind and now I can see.

The Budget Address by the honourable Minister of Economy to me is quite amusing because I felt that he feels and I feel too that his sight has been restored. He was also deaf before but now he can hear. The people of this nation have been crying and pleading for help. They have been crying about the low wages that they have been receiving for years, they have been crying about the cost of living and the cost of food items in shops.

But it is quite interesting, the messenger who delivered the Budget Address is a messenger of FijiFirst Government, him and the FijiFirst Government have been deaf and blind to the needs of the people of this nation, particularly the people who are living below poverty line and I am glad that he has seen the light now, he has admitted that he can see things properly now and can hear the people's cry. I am going to address the issues in Government and I must say at this juncture, that the SODELPA will not support any move to cut the salary or wages of the civil service. I know the FijiFirst Government stand is the same...

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. A. JALE.- There have been calls by some political parties for a cut in the salary and wages of the people in the civil service. The SODELPA Party will not support that, the reason is because the civil servants in Fiji have suffered a lot and suffered for long. The first thing is that, they do have security, that has been highlighted by the Party Leader of SODELPA. The people have been given to sign contracts for three years, not long enough for them to be able to secure loans from banks to be able to invest in housing, et cetera and I think you people know about it.

The situation in the past was that, they have a lifetime employment and we have a system in Government which is called Performance Management System, this was a check system on the performance of the people in the civil service. We have yardsticks to use, they have to produce their work plans and what to be delivered and at what time and the role of the supervisors were to assess the performance on a particular, certain period of the year, either yearly or six-monthly so that they can ascertain the performance of that particular person. If a person is not performing then is given a warning that he must pull up his or her socks. And that is the way things should be. If people perform then they should be acknowledged and rewarded. The way the Government is doing right now, it is

not giving the security of employment to people and no wonder the productivity of the Civil Service is in question right now.

The other point that I would like to raise, the politicisation of the civil service at this time. People in the region used to look at the civil service in Fiji as a sample - sample for this region and is also a sample for countries nearby. But we have politicised appointments of civil servants in the Constitution of this country. Ministers are involved in the appointment of people to the civil service. Why should ministers be used? It is there, if you are not practicing it but it is in the Constitution, that is it. You are politicising appointments of people in the civil service.

The purchasing power of the dollar, the salaries of civil servants are very low and poor. The reason is, you have not been giving them increases in salaries for long and they have suffered. The purchasing power of similar number of dollars to purchase a basket of food in 2005, you cannot purchase the same basket of food with the same dollar these days. That is what I would like to point out to you. No wonder why these people are living in poverty, the people in the civil service, I was quite amused when I heard about civil servants also applying to get COVID-19 assistance. They could not hide the fact that they are suffering, they are facing a lot of hardships with the sort of salary that you people or the FijiFirst Government is paying them. The pay relativity that is used is in question. You have not done job evaluation for a while. When you talk about pay relativity, you compare jobs of similar nature, jobs of similar weighting.

You know what has happened now, the pay for certain sectors in Fiji has increased so high, leaving the civil servants' pay behind. They have not been able to catch up. No wonder why the Minister for Civil Service is hinting about a job evaluation now. You know the role of job evaluators - it is much bigger than the exercise of reviewing the national minimum wage, this is a big exercise. It will take two years to complete at least and take a lot of time to negotiate and be able to get an agreement on that exercise. So, I am glad that this thing has come up. We have to see that the wages of people in Civil Service are pegged to the right level. That is the only way as I see, you are going to bring back productivity in the civil service otherwise it is going to be very difficult. Thank you very much.

I had the view about zero-rated VAT on basic food items. We have been telling you people about this. You did not want to listen to us. What has made you change now? Why have you heard us now and did not hear us some years ago? People have suffered so much. Why have you chosen this time? It is just because it is eve to Elections. We are getting to Elections and that is the reason why you are doing it? You should have done it long ago, to give these things because we have been telling you, now you are hearing us. The people have suffered for too long. You should do the right thing.

Honourable Bala has been talking about minimum wage for quite a while. He was going to deliver that to us but this proposal to give a national minimum wage increase and set up a minimum wage increase came as a surprise. It has overtaken what he has been doing, that means we have been wasting time on that exercise that we have been doing. We wasted government money and there has not been a result. He has to produce that Report to Government so that we can do something about it.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I start, I would urge the Member speaking before me to apologise to honourable Bala for referring him as 'Bala' in this august House. He is an honourable Member, he should be respected and he was actually referred to as only 'Bala' by honourable Anare Jale. He should apologise to honourable Bala for disrespecting him in this Chambers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of the Parliament; before I start on my speech, I would like to clarify certain things that were said by the honourable speaker speaking before me, it is not about the support. FijiFirst Government is not reducing the pay of civil servant, in fact, we have reinstated overtime for civil servants on certain bands.

Also honourable Mr. Speaker, Sir, meal allowance has been increased from \$10 to \$15 for civil servants. The Member speaking before me was talking about productivity, I totally do not understand which productivity tool he was using to determine the productivity of civil servants. The productivity and the service is increasing in the public sector under FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, civil servants are also recruited on Open Merit Recruitment System (OMRS). The honourable Ministers are not involved in the recruitment process. A panel is set up and the panel recommend the best candidate for the job through OMRS policy. He is totally misleading the Parliament. It is this Government which has given the highest increment to the civil servants with regards to their pay in the history of Fiji. Our civil service bill is close to almost \$1billion that stands today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in full support of 2021-2022 National Mini Budget as delivered by the honourable Attorney-General and Minister of Economy. I do support the Budget that had exceeded all expectations, predictions and it is better for all Fijians in light of the current social and economic situations. I must express my gratitude to honourable Attorney-General and Minister of Economy and his team for a well-thought Budget to address the needs of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while a lot has been said about how we manage the COVID-19 situation, here we are, out of COVID-19 situation, much stronger and united than ever before, regardless of every decision taken by the Government that was criticised by Opposition. They need to appreciate that we are one of the countries today to open our borders to the world, that too, with minimum requirements.

We were able to do so because of the decisive decision taken by FijiFirst Government. Let me tell the Opposition, whether this is an Elections Budget or not, the beneficiary at the end of the day are the ordinary Fijians. We need to think about the ordinary Fijians rather than thinking about it in action. We have been hearing these for the past so many years whenever we announced the Budget that this is an Elections Budget from Opposition. Come on Opposition, get over it and move on! Bring something more constructive to this Chambers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to thank the Government for understanding the plea of parents and students who were not able to study as usual, due to COVID-19 and bringing the cut-off mark of TELS from 280 to 250 for certain programmes. This will assist a lot of parents to send their children to tertiary institute. The FijiFirst Government used to and will continue to brighten the future of our children. Also on the same note, I would like to comment to the people of North to apply for \$100 who were affected by COVID-19. There were a lot of people affected in the North and this assistance will help them greatly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the support towards the Fijian Dua Team. The Team is already doing wonders and with this support, it is only a matter of time when we will have Fijian Dua as one of the most glorious teams in the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, safe and clean drinking water has been the constitutional right for every Fijian. Reinstating the rain water harvest programme will assist thousands of families to collect and store water for household purposes.

Our Ministry will continue to maintain and improve the efficient and effective service delivery under this new Budget allocation. To name a few, these will really help in concluding with the deliverables and at the same time recognising the value added customer service.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as announced by the honourable Minister of Economy, the customer service guideline for all Government Ministries will be implemented that will certainly help in strengthening the customer service with respect and value to all Fijians.

The Ministry of Employment will continue to promote voluntarism for all Fijians, including graduates to undertake volunteer work as part of their capacity building to prepare them for the world of work under the Fiji Volunteer Service Scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will also be able to ensure the reduction of workplace accidents and continue with the overall health and safety at workplace and enforce the relevant OHS legislation. I strongly believe, that this is the right time for the national minimum wage rate to be increased as the last review was done about more than four years ago due to the challenges faced globally through the pandemic. As announced in this Budget by the honourable Minister of Economy, the minimum wage rate will increase to \$4 an hour in stages over one year period from its current level of \$2.68. This will give time to employers, to adjust to this change coming into effect in four phases.

As highlighted by the honourable Minister of Economy, we are optimistic and proud to see that the recovery of Fijian economy is underway. Thus, the increase in national minimum wage rate should not be a burden on employers and should be taken confidently.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I firmly believe that the current minimum wage will assist the marginalised workers and meet the test of decent work. The recent research on the impact of national minimum wage rate suggests that its introduction did not have a substantial negative impact on the employment as most of the employers are already paying way above the minimum wage rate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget provides other initiatives and assistance to business such as putting the family care and paternity leave on hold which will give some relief to businesses. In addition, the waiving of VAT on 21 essential food items with the increase in minimum wage rate is definitely going to increase spending by people where businesses can benefit from.

Reducing the VAT to zero will have huge positive impact on the cost of living. While talking about tax, both employers and employees will benefit from the removal of 20 cents per litre tax on fuel. While the global market price of crude oil continues to increase, the removal of this tax will for sure have a positive impact on everyone.

To further reduce the burden on Fijians, one of the assistance of \$50 to social welfare recipient and increasing the bus fare allowance from \$10 to \$25 will be of great assistance. It is interesting to see that even for such a Budget, the Opposition continues to oppose the Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the establishment of national productivity commission is a great move as well. This is expected to set up the key criteria that should drive effective and efficient policy making in economic, social and environmental areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in sustaining our service delivery, our Ministry will continue strengthening collaboration with our stakeholders to ensure that our unemployed Fijian citizens find new employment opportunities or become job creators through other Government initiatives with relevant line ministries. The budget has been delivered in clear and concise terms. The benefits of growing fiscal policies are based on innovative ideas and will directly benefit all Fijians. This is the result of

teamwork and a delivery of caring and profound thinking Government led by a strong and decisive leader.

The FijiFirst Government has given every opportunity to businesses including workers to ensure that we promote business and at the same time maintain and create employment. The tax measures announced in this budget is a bold step and only takes a strong government and a strong leader to put this into action for its people whom we care the most. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members, I thank you all and reiterate my full support for the 2021-2022 Mini-Budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I give the floor to the honourable Nawaikula , the next batch of speakers, after that will be honourable Veena Bhatnagar, honourable Inosi Kuridrani, honourable Minister for Waterways and Environment, honourable Simione Rasova, honourable Minister for Defence and National Security and honourable Mitieli Bulanauca.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me this opportunity. Let me say at the outset that I oppose the budget along with my colleagues on this side of the House. Allow me, Sir, by quoting from the speech previously made by the honourable Leader of the Opposition because I feel that expresses in a very neat way the status of this budget. He stated that:

“What is very clear in our mind is that the Revised Budget presented by the honourable Minister of Economy last night is sugar-coated to deceive the people of Fiji, it is an election gimmick to buy votes, give false promises and hoodwink the people of this nation.”

Then, later on he said this, and I quote:

“This 2021-2022 Budget adjustment is a desperate measure to remain in power by the FijiFirst Government. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not an adjustment, it is an entirely new budget. This raises many serious questions about the authenticity and sincerity of our budget making conventions.”

Further down, he said, and I quote:

“Indeed this is not genuine, it is another hoodwinking exercise. This is a crude joke on our country.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that to me says, and I am sincere and I wish to say at least at the outset, that the Government has lied to the nation of the need for this mini-budget or what they are now calling a “Revised Budget”. The reason for my saying that it lied is because the Financial Management Act that authorises this kind of budget says in section 12 that it must only be done where you have what is called an economic shock and the effect of the economic shock cannot be accommodated through the annual budget process. Only when that happens do we need a special budget or revised budget.

That is the reason why I am saying that the Government lied to us because last night we were waiting for the reason, we were waiting for the Government to explain to us what the shock was and we were anticipating that it might be as expected, that we do not have enough wants out there to carry us through to the end of the financial year. But alas, that was not the case so they were lying. In fact, if you look at what the honourable Minister of Economy was saying, he said that we are having this Revised Budget because we have managed to have a quick turnaround. We have surplus collection in the revenue. We have also managed, in this very short time, to have a lot of savings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he lies again and the lie is this, if you look at Page No. 22 of the Supplement and it says:

“The favourable fiscal performance relative to the budget for the first six months was largely due to a \$207.5 million over-collection in Government revenues ... and tighter controls on public expenditures....”

I have said that and it goes down:

“The over-collection in Government revenues was largely attributed to \$185.9 million in non-tax cash inflows from one-off budget support grants received from Australia and New Zealand ...”

So the lie is that we did not collect this by ourselves, we did not earn it by ourselves but it was the result of aid and donation from Australia and New Zealand for direct budget support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, further down is the lie in relation to the savings in expenditure which we debated last year. So many ministries after ministries after ministries did not spend their budget allocation, so these were held back and we were told yesterday that this was the savings. This resulted in the quick turnaround and therefore have the so-called Revised Budget. And what was the purpose of that? The purpose of that was to give out election goodies for this election.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my concern is that the Government has lied to the people of Fiji about the need for this. They asked us and I quote the honourable Minister who said, “We will be a fool if we do not agree to the zero-rated VAT. We would be a fool if we do not agree to the return of overtime.”

But our answer to that was zero-rated VAT was the motion from this side of the House. All the time, all the time and all the time, they did not become only poor now at the eve of the election. They were poor 10 years ago and honourable Professor Biman Prasad said when you claim that unprecedented growth that is the right time for that. So, why now? Then in relation to the return of overtime this was always there and our message to the voters out there is that take this but we are not supporting this Budget because we will remove all this and we will give you much, much more than that. We will give you security of employment - six months contract, three months contract is not security of employment. So those are the reasons why we are not supporting this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just go back to some of the comments that came from the other side of the House. Honourable Koya said that the purpose of this Budget is to bolster the economy - bolster the economy in what sense? If you look at the allocation when he says “bolster the economy” in my mind it means that there will be injections on primary industries, but no. If you look at agriculture, if you look at the Ministry of Fisheries, if you look at the Ministry of Forestry - Agriculture even has a negative, it is down so we cannot say that we are bolstering the economy, so do not say bolstering.

On the other hand, Mr. Speaker, we can say from this side that the economy is already boosted. They have probably had their first and second doses of boosters. If we look at the amount of finance that we have allocated or we have approved last year to this Government to run its government business; the grants and direct budget we approved was \$838 million, Aid in Kind was over \$10 million, and the total of all that was \$1.8 billion. So, what other boosts do you want? We already have enough money there to take us to the end of the financial year, so there was no need for this. It was also not authorised by our laws. The honourable Leader of the Opposition told us, in two years we had four budgets. We are just doing budgets anyhow, whenever they want to - that is not how you manage. That is a reflection of how bad they are managing the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Usamate stated that when we are opposing this, we are saying no to zero VAT and to the allowances. That is not the point. The point is that we will take it away and give you much more than you deserve. The other point he said was that, they had nine years of unprecedented economic growth. Absolute lie, because Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have the figures here. If you look at 10 yearly performances from 1971 to 1980, and we all know that was the time of the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, the growth was 4.85 per cent.

Then, between 1981 and 1990, that was the time of Sitiveni Rabuka, the growth was 2.46 per cent. From 1991 to 2000 again that was the time of Sitiveni Rabuka, the growth was 2.44 per cent. Then from 2001 to 2010, the growth was 1.36 per cent. The unprecedented growth that they often refer to was for the period 2011 to 2019 which was 3.24 per cent. During the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's time the growth was 4.85 per cent, your time the growth was 3.24 per cent so stop the lying! I am here to ask them - stop the lying! Do not lie to us, and do not lie to the public.

Then, what is unprecedented is that only one year after that, there was a negative growth. There was never ever a negative growth in this country except the time that they were here in 2019, and that was even for COVID-19. We all remember what happened, they projected \$4 billion collection to be collected in revenue, and they only achieved \$3 billion. As a result during the budget year of that side, we were cutting off, cut, cut, cut - capital projects and operational costs. So what is unprecedented here is that, during that time, the growth was negative.

The other point that he said was that, they have decisive leadership. But if you look around, Mr. Speaker, Sir, look at the state of their roads - that is the outcome. We only look at the outcome. Look at the state of their hospitals in Fiji. What do you see? The hospitals even lack basic hygiene. Go to Nadi Hospital, on the front side and you will see some old beds, just piled up there; go to Nausori Hospital and you will see old equipment all just packed outside; go to Levuka you will see basic hygiene and that is unprecedented. That is what we look at.

The other point he stated about the Budget is that, we must look at it in context. The context that we are looking at the Budget, from my point of view at least, is through the Financial Management Act, and I am telling the honourable Minister that, that Act does not authorise a budget like this. So, his Government is lying to us. Lying to the public that we need this so called Revised Budget because the law do not authorised that. The law only said it only needed when there is an economic shock, not as a tool to fight an election as they are doing.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Waqainabete was almost crying inside the House, sympathising with the comment made by Honourable Salote Radrodro about him opening the toilets. Let me tell him that the joke came from his own Ministry. But the point we want to emphasise is that, instead of opening those toilets which was not given by Government any way, which was the result of aid and donations, that should have been delegated to his staff or the commissions in Vanua Levu. He should be in his office doing policy, especially in relation to NCD or diabetes which at the time, he was distributing those toilets, it was announced in New Zealand that Fiji has the highest death rate of diabetes. That is where he should be. That is the point that we wish to make.

Mr. Speaker, if I might just add the comment from the Honourable Bala. He made a comment in relations to the law that we are about to pass. There is a law that has been sneaked in which is called an Act to provide for the development of informal settlement. This allow the lessee just by a notice. If the lessee has a development lease to give notice to the occupier to vacate and if he does not vacate, then he will be penalised.

Mr. Speaker, as a lawyer, I am engaged in so many cases for eviction. Summary process we do that under SI69 and that Order 113. But what is fundamental is that the right to a home is a

fundamental right whether it is in a title or whether elsewhere. And for that the court is always very, very careful before it gives an order to evict a person. He will always have that as a right. In S169 proceedings, the tenant will produce his title but then the burden sits to the person who is sitting there to prove to the court that he has a right.

Now, this law also ignores customary tenure. A customary tenure is when an individual native or otherwise takes the mover in accordance with customs and he is sitting there. This law is saying irrespective and all that just by giving a notice. He will be evicted. It is very, very poor and it is inhumane. It only tells me that this law has not been properly consulted.

I just give you an example, Mr. Speaker. In Khalsa Road, there are about 200 poor people who are currently been taken to court. These people did not just go there any how. They went to the landowners. They took drums of kerosene, they took *tabua* and now this law is limited to the Government. I will ask them just to be given by a notice and they will be out. So sad.

Mr. Speaker, and I do not support the Budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution to the debate.

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians; *ni sa bula vinaka, namaste, assalaam alaikum* and a very good afternoon to all of you. Sir, I humbly rise to contribute to the debate on the 2021-2022 Revised Budget announced by the honourable Attorney-General and Minister of Economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the world as we know, has evolved much greatly in the past few years. Many calamities have encircled the world and Fiji was no exception. From living through a pandemic to weathering severe cyclones, experiencing damaging floods and facing the effects of war. We have been through a lot in the past few years and words cannot begin to describe the unprecedented challenges that we have faced. However, as fear and volatility cumbered many countries around the world, bold leadership, prompt actions and principled crowned strategies gave Fijians a sense of security and the will to fight against all odds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our leaders stepped up with great commitment in this testing times of crisis to ensure that Fijians are provided with every possible opportunities to live through and recover from the economic and social repercussions in these times of global crisis. The foresight, the confidence and the decisiveness of our leaders has not only saved Fijians lives but has also saved our economy from a catastrophe collapse.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank and applaud the honourable Attorney-General and Minister of Economy as well as his team, for once again devising a Budget that reflects our county's evolving economic landscape. With extensive public consultations, collaborations with businesses and financial institutions, the FijiFirst Government has created a practical solution to cater for our current economic needs with a core aim of achieving sustainability and stimulation in our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this new Budget continues to prioritise what matters to our people the most, free education, free medicine, housing benefits, continuation of social protection programmes, provisions of more scholarships and loans for students pursuing g higher education, removal of VAT on basic food items and the removal of duty on fuel prices and many others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government has listened to the grievances of Fijians and the ability of our Government to emphasise with the daily struggles of our people is evident in the 2021-

2022 Revised Budget. Not only that this Budget have the Fijians at heart, has it naturally addressed the day-to-day issues that encompass our people, without jeopardising the ability of our economy to recover and to grow.

Talking about FijiFirst Government listens to people, the honourable Nawaikula said that the honourable Minister for Health should sit in his office and make policies and not go out and commissioned the toilets. The Ministers goes out to commission the roads, bridges, toilets and anything. What do you think? They only go to commission things...

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR.- ...as it gives them an opportunity to meet the people; to listen to them, hear them out. Come on grow up! That is all I want to say.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every little win we celebrate today be it the open borders, jobs, sporting victories or our children being back in school is a testimony of the type of characters and prodigies leadership of our honourable Prime Minister. Thank you, Prime Minister Sir. Thank you for your great leadership.

Civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr. once said and I quote, “the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in the moments of comfort, but where he stands at the times of challenges and controversy”, and our honourable Prime Minister together with his Government stood with and stood by every Fijians through this dark and difficult times. Whether it be historic unemployment benefits paid to the Fijians who lost their jobs during the pandemic or implementing stringent policies such as “No Jab, No Job” to allow us to fight and recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Come what may our leader stood tall to protect every Fijian and work in the best interest of every Fijian. Thank you, Sir. Once again, Mr. Prime Minister, Sir, for being a true custodian on the wellbeing of every Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my capacity as Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, I have been entrusted with the responsibility of progressing programmes related to persons living with disabilities in Fiji and the 2021-2022 Revised Budget is yet another reminder that the Fijian Government has the best interest of its most vulnerable at heart, no matter what the crisis is.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly welcome the increase in the bus fare subsidy for our elderly and the disabled persons. This increase of \$15 from the current subsidy of \$10 to \$25 per month will benefit close to 40,000 Fijians and provide much-needed relief to our clientele and we, the Ministry, we also welcome the one-off \$50 payment to our recipients and I know every recipient, it will bring smiles on the faces of every recipient.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also thank the FijiFirst Government for programmes such as the Special Needs Grant Programme under the Ministry of Housing and Community Development to address the issues related to persons with disability. The Ministry through the Economic Empowerment Programme for persons with disabilities will continue working with persons living with disabilities and starting businesses on a small scale and work with both State and non-State parties in lifting the economic capacity of persons living with disabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to close with a promise that the Ministry for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation is equipped to look after the welfare of those living with disabilities. We

will continue to reach out to Fijians living with disabilities at the community levels to the best of our capacity to ensure they are heard and they are helped. Mr. Speaker, Sir, time and again we have overcome great ordeals together as a nation. Our unity is our greatest strength and I urge every Fijian to unite with us in our efforts to build back stronger. Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the stability, the prosperity and the wellbeing of every Fijian, I wholeheartedly support the Revised 2021-2022 National Budget. May God bless Fiji, May God bless us all.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be also brief. I agree with honourable Salote Radrodro in mentioning about the importance of remittance in this House and I would have thought that the Minister of Economy, in presenting the revised Budget yesterday, would have acknowledged and thanked the people of Fiji living in overseas for their financial support through remittance that kept our economy sustained during the social and economic crisis.

According to the RBF Annual Report 2020 and 2021, it was the remittance that kept the economy afloat and investment going and helped with circulation of funds. It was the remittance that enabled most of the poor and disadvantaged families to seek medical service, to put food on the table, get our children to schools, meet obligations of the families and communities and importantly, provide hope during those times of hopelessness.

Remittances have gone past all other renowned industries that normally dominated our economy such as tourism, agriculture and sugar. The Government should provide incentives such as investment opportunities, reduce transaction fees, special air tickets for our people living overseas through our airline, the Fiji Airways for their great effort. I, therefore, plead to this Government, please give some acknowledgement and thanks to all Fijians living overseas for being a good Samaritan in time of need.

Regarding the revised Budget, Mr. Speaker, I consider this as a ploy considering its timing and the recent movement by these Ministers around the country. It confirmed that it is a cunning strategy by the FijiFirst Government to bribe people for votes in the next election. Why I said this is that, if you look at the Budget Strategy Framework, this Government is not fully utilising its allocated Budget since 2018; meaning that there was a plan already in place well before the honourable Minister of Economy announced last year that there will be a Revised Budget this year. The plan was for the honourable Minister, these honourable Ministers not to fully utilise their budget and that the unused accumulated funds be used for their campaign budget as we are witnessing it today.

Sir, this has deprived the people to actually receive what was intended for them and planned for them in the Budget. So, the honourable Minister of Economy has been lying all these years about budget allocations. The consequences of his plan has made nurses and medical officers who were not paid with overtime, teachers were not paid with rural and maritime allowance, even teachers that look after students in boarding schools during COVID-19 were not even paid any allowance for their special responsibilities, the poor state of our hospitals and health centres, the lack of medical supplies and relevant life support equipment.

However, it is interesting to note the standard in this Budget Summary on page 22 that due to the Government tighter control on public expenditures resulting in the \$440.6 million in underspending, but Mr. Speaker, Sir, this contradicts what the Auditor General's findings that most of the ministries and government institutions lack internal control to assure that funds are disbursed to each intended purpose.

The failure to comply with approved accounting systems, poor recording systems, poor monitoring, lack of standard procedures, and these have made the Auditor-General unable to determine the expenditure that was incurred in accordance with approved funding provided by the

Ministries. So, here we can conclude that this is the reason why most Government Ministries and institutions are not submitting annual reports. They deliberately delay the submission because they know it will reveal their incompetency and corruption dealings, that is why they are so desperate to remain in power.

All the honourable Ministers should be reported to FICAC for abuse of taxpayers money and failure to comply with approved standards of accounting process and procedures, that is why millions of dollars are being abused and ended up in corruption dealings such as the payment of \$33.6million for a digger for 18 months of contract work with the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF), unfinished swimming pool that has cost more than \$12 million in Lautoka (unfinished), the unfinished FNU complex in Labasa, where is the Nausori Hospital, where is the Sports Complex to be constructed in Naitasiri? Where? This is a very serious and warrants investigation by FICAC and police, it is one of the reasons why we are in an economic mess and social crisis.

Now, we have a Revised Budget but a quick look through, I do not believe that it will address our basic problem areas such as improve our economic growth as it has declined or stagnant since 2016, increase investment at its lowest level and remain weak, inflation will continue to rise due to increased imports, to improve our depleted state of infrastructure, health, roads and bridges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to make a special mention about the high liquidity which has now exceeded \$2.4 billion. What is the point of having this high liquidity when investors cannot access these funds, there is a problem with this Government. Maybe, they are having a wrong policy mix, there is no confidence in the investors to borrow money and no confidence with the bank to lend money, so they need to review their budget policy. I reiterate that this Budget will not address our priority problem areas that should bring hope and good health to the people who have been suffering silently over the last 15 years under this government's dictatorship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me have a quick look at the Agriculture Budget. It has been reduced by 2.0 per cent, this is the sector I believe should benefit from this Revised Budget based on the revitalisation of our economy and food security, but it has been reduced. Why? The Ministry to stop giving basic tools such as knives, forks, spades, wheelbarrows, as what the honourable Minister has been doing. Please, provide machines, diggers, bulldozers - if you want them to be commercialised as you have promised. You need to provide these machines. Where is the cold-storage that was promised to the people of Sigatoka Valley to be constructed in Kavanagasau? Where is the cold-storage that was supposed to be constructed in Nanukuloa in Ra? Please, if you want any culture to survive, to improve production - look at this infrastructure. To conclude, I strongly believe that the Revised Budget is a budget to legalise bribe for the sake of buying goods. It is sad and shameful that they have gone this far and confirmed that they are not here for the interest of the people but for their own interest.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note we will now adjourn for dinner for an hour and we will resume after that. When we resume, we will take on the honourable Minister for Waterways and Environment, honourable Simione Rasova, honourable Minister for Defence and National Security, honourable Mitieli Bulanauca, honourable Tanya Waqaniika, honourable Jese Saukuru, honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau, honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua and the honourable Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs as the last speaker on my list.

We adjourn for dinner.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.02 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 7.00 p.m.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise today to deliver my brief response in support of the Revised 2021-2022 Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the honourable Minister of Economy for delivering a masterpiece of a budget that balances the limited resources that we have amongst the numerous competing demands at Fiji's most difficult time. I congratulate the honourable Minister of Economy for such a meticulously-crafted masterpiece budget that captured and alluded to the following key points that we cannot be ignorant towards:

1. limited resources;
2. Fijian economy's numerous competing demands; and
3. we are faced with the most challenging times in our country's history.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, amongst these difficult times, delivering a budget that best addresses the concerns of all the constituents in the society is indeed a hallmark of an articulate, intelligent and visionary economic Minister. The budget attempts to assist and stimulate the economy, raise wages of low wage earners, cushion the impact of rising cost of living of households, widen study choices of Year 13 students by providing increased finance for tertiary education, recognising hard working civil servants, protection of wages and salaries of civil servants, opportunities for house ownership for first home buyers, leverage to affected households and aged people in the Northern Division, medical care to Fijians who otherwise would not be able to afford it by travelling to hospitals outside Fiji. These are some of the key deliverables amongst others in this Revised 2021-2022 National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, noting the above, if we were given a multiple choice question to describe the budget with options as:

- Growth industry package;
- Social package to address low paid workers and households;
- A distribution package; and
- All of the above.

We would clearly opt to say, it is all of the above.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the honourable Minister of Economy for his continuous support to our agriculture sector. The sector's output has been steadily increasing over the last decade despite several external shocks particularly that of cyclones.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, unfortunately, commentators and particularly Members of the Opposition are not able to understand the state of Fiji's agriculture sector. I do not know what data they are referring to or who does their analysis for them. Currently as I speak, the agriculture sector is valued at approximately \$1.5 billion. Overall, agriculture's contribution to GDP in 2021 stood at 8.1 per cent. If we remove the sugar sector's contribution to GDP of 1.1 per cent then the non-sugar agriculture sector contributes to 7 per cent of the overall GDP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, numerous times in this Parliament, I had explained that it will be erroneous to say that five decades ago agriculture's contribution to GDP was 21 per cent or over 20 percent and now it has gone down to 8 per cent and therefore agriculture is declining. No. Agricultural output is not declining. Agricultural output has increased over time but what has happened is because of

the non-agricultural sector, some of those which were not existent at that particular point in time have now added on or come into being or has been expanding. For example, tourism, manufacturing, service sector and industrial sector all these sectors now have expanded over time and naturally, the rate of growth of these sectors have been higher than the gradient, the slope, therefore the share of agriculture's contribution in the overall GDP has declined but in agriculture the volume of output has not declined. At the moment, \$1.5 billion is not a small fee for a small developing country like Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the journey to this level of output has not been easy. The entire Ministry led by the PS and myself have been on the ground talking to all stakeholders of agriculture, getting them to mobilise and expand production. We have discussed with landowners to fully utilise their land and any unutilised land to allow it to be leased and to be put under productive use.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the late 1980s and early 1990s former politicians including some on the Opposition, like honourable Niko Nawaikula and them, misguided and misinformed the landowners in saying "do not renew your leases, you can make windfall gains by using it yourself and we will help you and guide you." The poor landowners listened to them and decided not to renew a large number of leases. If you travel towards Wainikoro, you will see large tracts of land lying idle because leases were not renewed. When the leases were not renewed the landowners were looking for them, but they were abandoned. The landowners were looking for them for guidance on how to utilise it on a commercial basis but they were nowhere to be seen, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these former politicians have done gross injustice with the landowners because lying idle land is not providing any return or any benefit to anyone. The landowners have lost a steady rental income and the members of the *mataqali* have also lost income.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are going around, talking to the landowners to utilise the land and put it into productive use. As I have said numerous times, unutilised land does not provide any returns and is value less, it has no value. If it does not generate positive return then its value is zero. For any resource the value is based on how much return it can generate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been talking to farmers to get them to pay full attention and commitment to the farms they have and treat it as a business. We have been telling them that they must save. Research that has been done demonstrates that unfortunately farm households in the rural areas do not save much and there are several reasons for it. That is a critical issue that needs to be dealt with because when there is an external shock the first call is their own savings and then Government comes in to support them and get them out of the shock.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very important, going forward, that we work hard to ensure the rural households understand the importance of savings. Also with the savings we are saying that then you can get into investment. One of the basic prerequisites of creating surplus in any business like agricultural entrepreneurship or otherwise is that you must save and part of it you must invest, without investment there cannot be any growth so we are convincing them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also telling them not to shy away from new technologies whether it is a new breed of livestock, whether new varieties of crops, or whether it is new machinery. We can see now that they are responding to this call, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We have seen that they are coming forward to adopt new varieties, high-yielding varieties of crops willing to renew and get in new breeders to change their stock herd.

These breeds are high yielding and adaptable to tropical climate. We also talk to them about looking at ways to reduce costs, increase efficiency and productivity. No country with a developed agriculture sector, has developed without investing on increased efficiency, cost and technical

efficiency as well as raising productivity - it is very critical. Mr. Speaker, Sir, my own research, when I was at USP, demonstrated declining productivity in Pacific Island's agriculture sector – there were about seven to eight countries' agricultural panel data, time series data and cross sectional data.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also talking to labourers in the rural areas to convince them to engage in full time agricultural activities. We are also talking to the financial institutions, in particular, our own Fiji Development Bank to give the financial support to these farmers so they can tap into those pool of finance and make productive investment. I have said it in this Parliament, when the national output increases, in this case when agricultural output increases, then this surplus created by increased production will benefit all those who are engaged in this sector.

The beauty about the agriculture sector is that it will allow a lot of people to be engaged, particularly, in the rural interior maritime, which is quite peculiar about agriculture rather than manufacturing which centres around the core of the urban area. So it allows the government to fulfil its mandate of redistributing income. The land owners will get increased rent; the farm households will get increased income; the labourers will get increased wages and the financial sector will get increased interest income.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while doing that, we also looked at how we could give these farmers leverage. This year we announced nine programmes to support the farmers getting into commercial agriculture. We provided 155 farmers with full irrigation kits so that we can extend their production into the drought period. We provided nursery sets and hydroponic sets as part of the protected agriculture so that we can have production under protected environment; fencing materials so that we can migrate small farmers having 10, 20 or 30 livestock and hold medium sized farms or larger farms.

Interestingly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year, we provided fencing materials to 633 farmers: 233 beef cattle farmers and 400 goat and sheep farmers. If all these farmers are successful as commercial farmers, our abattoir here can run five days a week. At the moment it is running at two days a week, or three days a week because we do not have enough animals for slaughtering. We need to get into expand our livestock sector because we have strategic advantage of that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$48 million every year is spent on importing sheep meat into the country, while we have the strategic advantage in producing the sheep meat or its close substitute goat meat. We are also importing beef cattle, beef meat which we can raise in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also provided land support to 20 *mataqali* and 33 individual farmers in the settlements to bring in new land under production, bulldozers to clear the land, tractor to prepare the land, planting materials to expand the production into the new areas. We have also provided substantial amounts of funding allocation for farmers to procure small equipment on a 30-70 contribution.

We have also started two years ago the establishment of orchards for fruits. Hotels are using fruit pulp to make smoothies and they are importing. We are saying, 'look we need to get this hotel to buy local from within.' And for that, we need to set up the ground production and supply.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have got a dedicated programme to support women engaged in agriculture. We are very fortunate to see that with this support, agricultural production and expansion at the ground level has expanded rapidly. With that, agriculture after feeding the entire nation we need to get the surplus out so that we can attract foreign currently into the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the first time ever in 2020 non-sugar agriculture exports surpassed \$100 million mark. In the same year it also surpassed sugar exports. In 2020 sugar exports was \$101 million and non-sugar agricultural export worth \$106 million. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2021 there was a 13 per cent growth in agriculture export from \$106 million to \$121 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our vision is that in nine years' time from today, we want agriculture to be a \$2 billion industry. The surplus that we exported last year \$121 million to raise to half a billion dollar in terms of exports. That is where we want to take agriculture to, Mr. Speaker, and for that this is the strategic that outline. We need to mobilise the farmers, landowners, households, labourers, exporters, middlemen and the processors. We can do it if we all get together rather than the other side going around saying that land is insecure; they will take away your land; do not renew the leases, et cetera. This mischief-making must stop. They have done enough damage to the country following 1987.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the honourable Minister of Economy for providing an additional \$350,000 under the successful entrepreneurs in livestock farming which will be utilised immediately. Once a budget is passed we will be advertising to provide additional support to the additional livestock farmers who have been left out from this earlier on of assistance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now wish to take this opportunity to invite good, productive and efficient farmers engaged in the sugar sector to come and undertake commercial farming in the non-sugar agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I said I want the productive, efficient, committed full time farmers who want to treat agriculture as a business to come forward engaging in non-sugar agriculture. The others who are not very efficient - who pass time, part time, lazy farmers they can opt to pick up the support provided by the honourable Minister of Economy to get the residential lease and the land can be utilised by those who want to do full time farming. We will continue to support them to give the initial leverage but they need to treat agriculture as a business.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must say and submit that we have a full grasp of the entire supply chain. We have identified the critical binding constraints and we are addressing these constraints progressively bit by bit. I wish to thank all the stakeholders for their contribution in raising agriculture output and export, our landowners, exporters, farmers and I must say the job is not finish yet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with these words I again convey my congratulation message to the honourable Minister of Economy and his team for allowing me an opportunity to address this august Parliament on the revised 2021-2022 National Budget. I urge the Members from the other side to join us in supporting this Budget. If they do not do this they are denying support to the people on the ground.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- *Bula vinaka*. Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me to debate on the Budget. The honourable Prime Minister is in good health in God's speed, we welcome you back. Honourable Ministers and Assistant Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition and Members of Parliament. I wish to thank the honourable Minister of Economy for his motion on the new Revised Budget 2021-2022.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to acknowledge the passing of some good friends and families of ours especially the *Tui Rara Levu* of the Raiwaqa Methodist Church, Mr. Mataika Koyamainavure Baleilomaloma, *Taukei* Senimoli, Mualevu, Vanuabalavu and Mr. Saimoni Ravuso *Turaga Naita* from Gau, my cousin, Mr. Jovilisi Tuimoce Voliviti Vatu of Naqara Ono Kadavu, who passed away

in Nadi and the lately passing of my *Turaga Naita nai tikotiko e Mateiwelagi* Ratu Tanoa Visawaqa Cakobau and *Turaga Naita enai tikotiko e Naisogolaca*, Ratu Keni Vuiyasawa. May all their good souls rest in forever loving and eternal peace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to contribute briefly to this Revised Budget that was delivered by the honourable Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum at around 9pm last night and here we are since 9.30 this morning debating on the issue.

Your loyal Opposition does support the deceptive arrangement in which we debate this revised budget as not Parliamentary friendly, not Fiji friendly or un-Fijian and it is not healthy and transparent, as promoted by the FijiFirst Government.

I will seriously allude to the ineffective manner of suspending Standing Order 6, Standing Order 68(1) regarding time beyond 20 minutes. Standing Order 108 which is about procedures for supplementary estimate, committee of supply and amendments and Standing Order 23(1) for Friday sittings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the suspension of these Standing Orders has taken that right for the loyal Opposition to thoroughly go through the revised Budget Estimate and debate efficiently and here we are, not even before 24 hours and we are doing great for the very limited time because SODELPA is Fiji's Government in waiting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji takes a note of the increase estimated revenue of \$168.1 million for the next four months until July 31 2022, an increase of \$24.5 million in the total estimated expenditure which decreased the estimated net deficit by \$24.5 million, decreasing the debt repayment by \$20.2 million, and decrease in gross deficit by \$163.7 million

Major expenditure measures and budgetary allocations include; Tourism - \$700,000 million; Dialysis Subsidy - \$1.2 million; Free Medicine Programme - \$8 million; Victims of the PCN Scam - \$2.27 million; Private Public Partnership arrangement - \$13 million; FRA - \$338.2 million, Capital Projects - \$325.1 million; WAF - \$195 million; EFL - \$9.7 million; Survey of Agriculture Land - \$500,000, Teachers who have been upskilled - \$2.7 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is unfortunate that the honourable Minister of Economy was on the revised Budget Address tour since the advice on 28th February, 2022. However, when the time to scrutinize and efficiently debate on it, the effect on the suspension of the same Standing Orders 6, 68(1), 102, 104, 108, 23(1) and 34 does not give the loyal Opposition and the people of Fiji to publicly know the real intent of this budget.

We have almost 17 Bills to debate here, Sir, in front of me, Bill No. 6 for an act to appropriate sum of three billion, three hundred and two million, nine hundred and fifty six thousand, one hundred and eighty seven dollars to ordinary services of Government for the year ending 31 July, 2022. This is the kind of money that we are debating within 24 hours, it is not good for the whole people of Fiji and the other Bills are here, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Bill No. 8, 9 & 10, there are a lot of Bills, the Tax Administration. The Bill to Amend the Income Tax, Bill No. 10 - Airport Departure, Bill No. 12 – Amend the Customs Act 1986, the Act to Amend the Financial Management Act 2001, Bill No. 15 – Amend the Employers Relations Act 2007, Bill No. 16 – to Amend the Citizens of Fiji Act, Bill No. 17 – the Act to Amend the Surveyors Act, Bill No. 18 – To Amend the Real Estate Act, Bill No. 19 of 2022 – to Amend the Town and Country Planning Act, Bill No. 20 – for an Act to provide the refund of monies paid for the housing units constructed under the Lagilagi Housing Development Project and for related

matters. A Bill for an Act to amend the Medical and Dental Practitioners Act, Bill 21. Bill No. 22, for an Act to provide for the Development of Informal Settlements in Fiji and Bill 23. So, I have briefly read through these last night and I have no idea on the legality of this, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The big mega question is, what about the people of Fiji out there? Do they know what is happening in this Parliament because this side of your loyal House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, does not support anything in this manner. It was tabled and debated and will be passed by the majority, who do not have the slightest knowledge or anything about these Bills. It lacks transparency, accountability and is unpatriotic. There is no dignity so quite impressive and no independence quite so important as living within your means.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as shadow Minister for Fisheries, I wish to debate the revised Budget estimate of the Ministry of Fisheries. These has been an increase on the Established Staff and Government Wage Earners, Maintenance and Operations, Capital Constructions of \$290,000, a total increase of expenditure by \$393,700. Capital construction of fish cage culture research project of \$117,000, Pearl Oyster Research and Development Programme \$108,000 and Fisheries Resources Conservation Programme \$108,000 and an upgrade of office and quarters \$390,000. It is unfortunate that the FijiFirst Government is not really focusing on our natural resource-based sectors. Since 2018, the budget on fisheries was \$21 million. In 2019, it was \$18 million, in 2020, it was \$15.4 million, in 2021 - \$13.1 million and this revised Budget is \$13.3 million.

Our GDP growth on fishing and aquaculture in 2014 was minus 23.3 per cent. In 2015, it was minus 4.5 per cent GDP growth. In 2016, it was minus 10.3 per cent. In 2017, it was a well-to-do fishing - 6.9 per cent. In 2018 – it was minus 14.7 per cent. In 2019 – it was minus 4.1 per cent growth. In 2020, it is minus 1.4 per cent. In 2022 this year, it is forecasted at 3.5 per cent. The average GDP for those is minus 5.99 per cent.

Upon those figures of the Ministry of Fisheries, something is wrong, something is not right but everywhere else in the region is right. Are we facilitating sustainable economic growth that economically empowers our people and national economy? How is our support for our coastal fishers and also our fishing industry? Has this revised Budget provided this relief by decreasing the cost burden to our stakeholders, so as to give them more financial breathing space? How has Government renewed efforts with facilitating a landing facility for companies that are keen to keep their engine vessels more energy efficient and with adequate storage capacity to step in the right direction? How are we with ongoing efforts to invest in technology and help with the scientific research and with monitoring and compliance, including reduced illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how is the aquaculture Caboni Multispecies Hatchery operating? Is it producing its consistent supply of at least two million shrimp larvae to farmers in Fiji within the financial year? How are the hatcheries in Naduruloulou, Galoa, Ba, Dreketi and the production of tilapia, prawns, sandfish and grass carp and the research in the culture of high value species such as rabbit fish and groupers? Is this 2021-2022 revised Budget and our collective efforts and commitment be able to do much more including meeting Fiji's national, regional and international goals that will address poverty, ensure health, wellbeing, promote gender equality, achieve decent work and economic growth, promote industry innovation, ensure responsible consumption and production, address climate actions and more importantly, sustain lives on land and below water? These are vital questions that we need to ask Government with its natural resource based sectors and Fiji waters having to spread over 1.2 square kilometres. Fiji should be number one in the region on fisheries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will like to thank all the former Fiji residents and citizens who have supported our economy through their personal remittances with a growth of 14.6% which is around

\$842.2 million. It begs the questions did all these former citizen of Fiji were ever awarded a Government scholarships: well that is for SODELPA to know and for you all to find out.

Sir, SODELPA's call for free tertiary education is evident herein. SODELPA will give free tertiary education as continuously alluded by SODELPA Party Leader, honourable Viliame Gavoka, because for better education for every qualified citizen, there will be no restrictions going overseas because the remittances are evident and will keep growing in years to come when SODELPA takes over Government this November 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji needs to seriously look into its health problems and education because these are two key components of our nation building. Once you give good health, good insurance and assurance to our citizens, they will be healthy to strength fully contribute to our nation building. Educating our nation will be e important for our nation.

So, the honourable Minister for Health, thank you for visiting the Province of Kadavu since the opening of our boarders and also to the honourable Minister for Education for visiting Vunisea Government School and Richmond Methodist High School, we all trust that you will both do your best efforts before SODELPA takes over to form the next Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not support motion on the revised budget estimate in its current deceptive elections form.

HON. LT.COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; thank you, Sir, for giving me the opportunity to address this august House regarding the Revised Budget for the financial year 2021-2022 and in particular the allocation given, not only to the Ministry of Development & Disaster Management, but also key government Ministries that contribute and creating the environment in rural Fiji and most importantly, on Defense and National Security. I know that I am limited by time, but I will try as much as I can to address some of the issues and maintain the focus, particularly on the intent behind the Revised 2021-2022 National Budget.

Let me tell the honourable Rasova and maybe all the Members of this august House that one cannot deny that it is quite a challenge to live up to this standard and the achievements of the FijiFirst Government under the abled leadership of the honourable Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under this Government and under the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister, Fiji recorded its strongest period of economic growth in the decade leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic. And we need to continue to remind the Opposition on that, with nine years of consecutive economic growth from 2010 to 2018.

As a result, Mr. Speaker, Sir, per capita income levels rose to over Fiji \$13,000 and the unemployment rate fell to a 20 year low of 4.5 per cent. Socio- economic conditions improved and all Fijians had better and equitable access to education, healthcare, roads, transportation, electricity, clean water, legal services, and digital connectivity amongst other things.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wish to go back to the early years under the Bainimarama Government in 2007 and 2008 as I have stated, we cannot deny and it is unprecedented. The development that has taken place in Fiji in the last 15 years or so.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after the events of 2007, the then Bainimarama-led Government put together what we call the National Council for Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF). Most of what the FijiFirst is

still continuing on today is based on the findings and the recommendations by the National Council for Building a Better Fiji in the areas of leadership and good governance because we needed that political stability and strong decisive, visionary leadership. This is one of the areas that was covered under this work by the National Council for Building a Better Fiji. As a result of that we saw the 2013 Constitution based on our political history, let us not forget our political history and the problems that we have gone through over the years.

As I have stated, our problem is, we just brush it aside and we leave the cobwebs but we need to get rid of the spider in order to move forward and clean up the messes from yesteryears. We have had coups after coups but we have not taken the necessary step to address the issues, and this was one of the major focus of the National Council for Building a Better Fiji.

We were voting along ethnic lines and the issues are obvious, and I do not have time to go through it in detail. The state of the economy as a result, again this is nothing that is plucked out of somewhere and say, 'oh let us have an economic summit, let's have an education whatever', it has all been done in 2007 and 2008 by the National Council for Building a Better Fiji. Probably, we just need to review because we have progressed and there will be changes as well in the environment that we are in and most recently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the state of economy back then, maybe I will relate this to the GDP.

What was the GDP level back then and what is the GDP today because that relates to our ability to borrow and finance our debts because we cannot be given finance for that matter if we have not increased our revenue or GDP for that matter. So the state of the economy, there was a special report about the state of the nation and the economy report, if I remember correctly, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Related to the economy is the infrastructure because we need to create the environment for investment. That is why we need to modernise our infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister has stated in his address today and I have stated this in the Parliament that the state of the infrastructure that we inherited was in a bad state, let us admit that fact. Most of the infrastructure- the honourable Naiwaikula and I had a good discussion when we were flying across to Labasa last week because when I did some researches on development, post-Independence and over the years, Fiji was following closely the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). That was the model that was put in place by Ratu Mara and all the developments that were happening in Fiji were consistent with the UNESCAP model.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, back then, we had two guiding documents for development in Fiji. One is the national document that focuses on the macro level planning and the beauty about development back then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is, there was a separate document that guided regional development, particularly on the primary industries and the infrastructure that were needed to support the environment.

If we look at what we have today, according to the model we have Suva, then we have Nausori and then we have Korovou and then they had what they called the "service centres" that is, Dawasamu, Nayavu, Vunidawa. In Vanua Levu we have Saqani, Tukavesi - the outposts. They were supposed to be the collection centres as well according to the model that was in place and Ratu Mara had placed all the infrastructure back then, but unfortunately through neglect and poor maintenance, as I have stated already in this House, when FRA came into being, 89 bridges had to be built.

As stated by the honourable Minister this morning, from 2015 till to-date we have constructed 65 new bridges for Fiji, 11 are currently under construction and of course we have a few that are under-designed (more than 40) because we need to create the environment so that the economy can

grow more. Fiji still has a lot of potential but we have to create that environment. That is why we need to continue to invest in our infrastructure and probably if I have time, I will go through what is available in this Revised Budget.

Civil Service Reform: Mr. Speaker, Sir, we value the work done by our civil servants but of course we are in a different era altogether. The environment back then is different from the environment today but principles remain the same. So we need some re-engineering to take place, we need some reforms to take place. The structure of the Civil Service needs to be reviewed and importantly the organisational behaviour, terms and conditions, the branding; so many things need to be done for our Civil Service. I can confidently say to the honourable Jale that there has been significant improvements in the Civil Service, better than what it was during his days.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Including terms and conditions.

There were a lot of people leaving when I joined the Ministry of Agriculture, Sir, there was only one Vet Officer and he was not even a Fijian. Why? Because they have all left. But look at the pay that the Vet Officer is receiving now given by this Government. That is creating the environment for them to stay because the terms and conditions are far, far better than what it was. While still on Civil Service Reforms, in the Ministry of Rural Development, I have talked about what was created back then by Ratu Mara and it is only this Government that has added more of these service centres into the rural areas, and I will name a few.

In Dada in Namosi, we have a Government Station there now. In Kubulau in Bua, there is a Government Station there now. In Namarai in Ra, there is a Government Station there now. In Kavala in Kadavu, there is a Government Station there now. In Wainikoro in Macuata, there is a Government Station there now. Only by Ratu Mara and by this Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

A few more, talking about the electricity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have already brought the electricity there. It is just the matter of the tender process so that they can be connected to the grid. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have already brought electricity there, it is just a matter of the tender process so that they can be connected to the grid that we have already brought. It is this Government, no one is not going to deny it that brought electricity to the people of Naitasiri who only used to see the wire running above them, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We brought electricity to the interior of Namosi, we brought electricity to the interior of Ra, we brought electricity to Nadroga/Navosa no Government has ever done that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the growth.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Tell them.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, no one can deny that. I have been to Ovalau and Moturiki lately, I have been to Kadavu, Vanua Levu and next week I will be in the West.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Campaigning.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I am doing my job, visiting all the projects that we have implemented, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They have a big issue because their lies and their words follow them. The Honourable Salote Radrodro talked about turning promises into deeds. The deeds are there before their own eyes, they are there but their problem is the people know their lies, that is what the people of Kadavu told me, Mr. Speaker, Sir: Honourable Minister, keep up the good work, now we see what the FijiFirst Government is doing.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- These politicians come and they lie to us. Unfortunately, it is catching up on them, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is why they hated this Budget and that is why they are so worried about the next Elections. For us it is about serving the people, that is priority.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Let us serve the people, Elections is another issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but we are called to serve the people, let us do it when we have the opportunity. It is not only about decentralisation in Government services but it is about empowering them.

Last week, Mr. Speaker, Sir, after the opening of Black Rock, we gave Nawai Police Post a vehicle. After that Vatudradra Police Post another vehicle, before that we have given one to Cuvu Police Station, after that we left one in Kavanagasau and one for Tukavesi, one for Raviravi.

Last week, I took three to Labasa, one to Labasa Traffic Department, one to Tukavesi, one to Saqani and one for the DO's Post in Lekutu in Bua. That is decentralisation that is empowerment. So the public service is much, much better than where it was during the honourable Jale's time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and no one is going to deny that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, land issue: I am talking about what was undertaken by the NCBBF. People criticised the land bank, people criticised subsidy that is given to *iTaukei* landowners so that land leases can be renewed. Out of that subsidy, Government has given them \$80 million to date, Mr. Speaker, Sir, topping up the 6 per cent UCV that they used to receive before. Now the honourable Minister of Economy is talking about market rates that will benefit our people because that land reform issue was addressed way back then in 2008.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the National Council for building a better Fiji because land was heavily politicised and that resulted in the decline of our economy, Vanua Levu suffered significantly as a result. Therefore, this Government has to bring in the Northern Development Programme so that Vanua Levu's economy can be salvaged and that Northern Development Programme is still running today Mr. Speaker, Sir. When we talk about investments, Government is also supporting Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and NDP is one of those programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last week I was in Naqumu, seeing and witnessing the joy in the women on the commissioning of projects there as Government has signed and ratified the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). When it comes to leadership, it is not only about giving women opportunities in places of leadership, but CEDAW is also about the economic empowerment of women.

Four of the projects I commissioned in Vanua Levu last week, Mr. Speaker, Sir, were for our women. It is about their economic empowerment, in Naqumu in Macuata, Bokonikai in Rabi, and Wainigadru in Tikina Tawake. Is it necessary to revise the Budget? Definitely, it is necessary.

Because we all know that it was a forecast, but the borders were opening up since December, revenue is coming in and we want to see that that revenue trickles down to every member of the community.

I say that again, we want to be ensure that the revenue that we have gained as a result of the good leadership, the decisive leadership that the honourable Usamate has talked about, is trickling down to the communities, and to the people, because our focus from day one is to ensure that no one is left behind. We are here for all Fijians, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that is why, this Budget revision is necessary.

It is not about elections. We have been told here that we are giving freebies in all direction according to the Leader of the National Federation Party. But after every communities that we visit, we have a *talanoa*, we listen, we engage with them, we empathise with them and as a result, we come back through the budget consultation, we hear their cries, and that is reflected here in this Budget, because it is about every Fijian. So this Budget is necessary.

Most importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, things are improving and of course, we see that the Revised Budget builds upon the better and the earlier anticipated recovery in the tourism sector, but not only that, it addresses some of the new challenges that we are also facing, particularly, in this post pandemic world. With those contribution, I strongly support the Revised 2021-2022 Budget.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset I will say that I oppose the Revised Budget.

HON. MEMBER.- Why?

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Good question and I have to answer that. Not enough, not enough. This budget has got many names – mini budget, Revised Budget, desperate Budget, deceitful Budget, *rere lamu* Budget, foolish Budget, election Budget, freebies, but to me it is a vote buying Budget and the people are not going to buy it. They will accept the freebies and thank you very much indeed, it is part of the Government of the days' development and work to do. They will vote for other parties but not the FijiFirst Government, not FijiFirst Party.

Why, I will explain later, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Recovery, yes there has been recovery on tourism and we support that after pandemic, due to COVID-19 a global scam, I keep saying that. But we thank the Ministry of Health and Medical Services for what they have done.

We have gone through the conditioning period and more will come, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They will announce it. They will make films about it, lockdown, vaccination and so on. These are evil groups. They want to be God. They want to form a one world government a one world order and world economic forum such as Schwabs, Gates, Rothschild, Soros and so on. These are the evil groups who are initiating all this kind of things. We must be mindful and be aware. The Holy Bible has already warned us about that. Pandemic will continue to come, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but we are thankful to the Ministry of Health for their work during the pandemic.

Again, during the pandemic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, people panicked particularly the FijiFirst Government. They forced people - no jab no job, no buy, no travel, no entering into that and so on, social distancing, masks, vaccinations, untested and experimental. There is no proof yet given here for this COVID coming from the bats to human beings.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- But you got vaccinated.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Yes, I have been vaccinated on my trust, belief, I prayed for it, I got God given herbs which I prayed for and got healed. I will share with you my experience, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I brought COVID to my family, four of us. We had already been injected with one dose. We suffered from it but we survived using simple medicine - simple herbs, simple steam to breathe in, ventilation and so on, and we prayed and prayed to the Lord Jesus. Now we are not sick.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- I am not the Speaker. Do not talk to me. Just talk to him and he will instruct me to sit.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, he is an Honourable Member of Parliament. People are listening. People actually follow what Honourable Members say in this Parliament. Here he is standing in this Parliament and preaching that we should bring COVID to our own family. This is not on, Sir. People are following us. We should not be tolerating this kind of speech in Parliament, Sir.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- I'm sharing my experience.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- It is a shame on him to say this kind of things in Parliament, Sir.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am just sharing my experience for what they have asked. I brought it to my family but we used the herbs and prayed to our Lord Jesus Christ and we were healed within three to four days. We were tested and swabbed and given the okay.

On another occasion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my daughter went to Lautoka. She probably got the virus. She brought it home and only three of us there by that time. My daughter and my wife got it. My wife is a kidney patient and she is on dialysis FOR almost five years now.

Sir, we made those herbs, prayed and got healed within two or three days. Even myself – I was amongst those two everyday talked to them, we ate together and I never got it. There are many other ways of solving COVID-19, Delta, Omicron or whatever variant that we talked about but not to force people, not to take away the right of people to decide for themselves. It is very important.

The FijiFirst Government was taking the rights of individual people away. We need to fully inform them, but the decision should lie on the public, on each individual. If he dies by his decision, so be it. Die in his own decision or die in God's hands rather than die in the human beings hands.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Oh, No!

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- So, it is important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we do not take away the right from any individual, do not take their freedom away. The FijiFirst Party will take away your right to express, freedom to relate, freedom to whatever. So, it is important that we focus the right way.

Yes, I have taken my double dose but not the booster. Why booster? I have double dose but I took it with faith. I prayed to the Lord for any poisonous thing within this vaccine not to affect me, that is why I am here healthy and alive. So, there are many other solutions, ways and means to fight COVID-19 or any other variant about it. So, it is important Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I always emphasise for us here in Fiji is to have good health. You strengthen your immune system to fight any kind of COVID-19 or any disease that might come across. So, it is important to do the right thing rather than

panicking and taking the right and freedom away and force things on the people. So, it is important that the next government to come, will take the freedom and rights into account.

In the Budget, there are many pluses and minus - Communications +\$3.6 million; +\$6.3 million for the Military, but for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation it is -\$7 million. Why the -\$7 million for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation? That is why I did not agree with the Revised Budget. The Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation should be looked after.

So, it is important Mr. Speaker, Sir, to re-adjust all these figures as I said it is not enough. Even in the Ministry of Agriculture, a reduction by \$900,000, it is our main stay here, it should be more. Ministry of Fisheries increase \$400,000 - should be more, Ministry of Forestry increase \$600,000 - should be more.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Ministry of Forestry, the native timber production is going down and also the mahogany production is going down. The export crops from \$38 million to only \$6 million now only \$10 million or \$12 million. We have to focus and improve our primary industries and get more out of it. Plus \$11 million to Sugar Corporation and I hope they will be profitable and produce more with that funding.

Fiji Roads Authority increase \$66 million to us that is less, should be given \$100 million, more to FRA to open up new areas to plant more cane and everything else and open up in Vitilevu and Vanualevu. So, it is important to properly fund FRA to open areas for all those kinds of things. That is why I oppose it because that is not enough and we need more.

What honourable Seruiratu is saying is right. That is part of government's job to do but it is not enough. You see, you need more so it is important that we also give incentives like we give to the tourism. We also give incentive to agriculture, forestry, fisheries and also the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources particularly on taxation or duties or some financial incentives for them to survive and produce more.

At the moment the suspension of logging licences in the North in February just last month and the mills in the North are all at a standstill because there is no log supply to them. Why the suspension of logging licences because they did not meet the EIA requirements? We should not be using EIA as a stumbling block to production but we should be using environmental for development purposes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we should give them time to comply and also help them to comply. As long as we keep getting the supply of logs to the mills and get the production going and solve those problems of EIA for the time being. At the moment, all the Labasa mills are out of stock, on standstill or struggling to get minimum supply of logs because of that overall suspension of logging licences, so it is important to make the right decision, continue the supply, the manufacturing and the production are going and solve those kind of things.

The Minister of Lands and Mineral Resources, only plus \$100,000 more but you need to encourage survey of leases for registration and also with agriculture and TLTB, identify idle lands and make them productive. Although what had happened last time for non-renewal of leases, had happened, we cannot go back, you have to look at today and go to tomorrow. We know where the idle lands are, encourage them to produce, so it is now, do not look back, do not think back, just look at today, what we can do and go on forward tomorrow. So, it is important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to also open up more new lands for cane, agriculture and et cetera. This is where FRA should have increased up to \$100 million as it is important to open up new areas. There are lands there available which can

be used for cane, can be used for other agricultural products, et cetera. It is important, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Assistances to landowners, it is important to promote subsistence level of farming to commercial and we must provide incentives for agriculture, forestry, fisheries as I have already mentioned. Also manufacturing, Mr. Speaker, Sir and assist provincial businesses, family and partnership businesses, individual business with financial incentives, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so it is important to look at those areas.

The honourable Prime Minister in his speech said that the decision was right for mandating of vaccines. No, it is not right because you are forcing people. Democracy – you should not force. Leave the decision to the public or the individual. You just fully inform them because all these vaccines are untested and experimental as I have already said and I can prove to you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, iTLTB and iTaukei land ownership is intact too in the 2013 Constitution. Fine, accepted! But the Bills come through here at night and passed in the day by a mere 51 per cent. You are depriving the right of that owner. You are reducing mitigation and the right of that ownership. You are taking away his right – right for prior consultation on land. So, it is important, Mr. Speaker, Sir. But those Bills, they come into here, passed through only 51 per cent in this House, it affects the right of that owner and that owner will sit there toothless. I can explain more to that but leave it at that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after election this year, also I cannot see the USP grants here, probably under Head 50. After the election when we come in, the first payment, we will pay USP. Get your grant, get the education going for USP students and enjoy your education. That is confirmed, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Also, I thank the Minister for the Nakasi Market, the sooner the better. Also, the honourable Prime Minister mentioned about bold leadership. It is not bold enough for me. When we come into government this year, we will be having bolder, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We will revolutionise agriculture, revolutionise forestry, revolutionise fisheries, revolutionise the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources, manufacturing and civil servants to be localised and create opportunities, educate them, train them, encourage them and trust them, rather than just sacking them willingly. Give them justice, give them opportunity. That is my contribution regarding the Revised Budget, as I said, I oppose because it can be better.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- I know that we are 30 minutes away from the rugby match which will have the Fijian Drua and the Rebels, I was reminded by the gentlemen in the House, Tanya, just keep it short, so I will just get straight to the point.

From the outset, I do not support this Revised Budget and I agree that Fiji is not immune to the COVID global challenges and we can all agree that the Government had to make drastic economic & financial decision but when times are tough, a good government is transparent, keeps everyone well informed of their decision and importantly, state the facts with accuracy and truth.

Mr. Speaker, we all know the saying “desperate times brings desperate measures” and this is what this budget is all about, we are four months away to the end of the financial year and let us call it what it is; it is the election year and we now have zero VAT basic food items that should have been announced earlier in the financial year. That is when our people need it the most.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- No.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Well, you do not get it, they do.

What guarantee is there for our people that these zero rate items, concessions, discounts and so forth will not be increased again or removed or unfulfilled in the next financial year, mind you, we have yet to debate and pass the Budget for the next financial year and I believe it is only three months away.

We all know too well the many promises that this Government made in their annual Budget announcement and whilst they fulfil some and many have not, this Revised Budget is no different.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have heard honourable Aseri Radrodro stated earlier, ‘the devil is always in the detail’. I read through the Supplement Booklet, chapter 3, page 22, paragraph 3.4, “I quote:

“The favourable fiscal performance relative to the budget for the first six months was largely due to a \$207.5m over collection in Government Revenue.”

In layman’s term because I am not a finance person, the Government says that from September 2021 and February 2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic when businesses were still struggling (mine included) and many are still recovering, their so called “favourable fiscal performance” they over collected on their Government revenue during the six month period. When we read para 3.5 of the same page, it reads:

“The over collection in Government revenue was largely attributed to \$185.9m in non-tax cash inflows from one off budget support grants received from Australia and New Zealand in December 2021.”

That is where the money came from because the over collection in government revenue, a big chunk of it came from donors. Let us call a spade a spade, this Government so called favourable fiscal performance was largely attributed from the budget support from the Australia and New Zealand Governments.

I will speak on Tertiary Educational Loan Scheme (TELS). Now, I commend the Government in reducing the TELS entry mark to 250 in this Revised Budget, however, we still have an oversupply of graduates who are unemployed. I know this because, I see a lot of young legal professionals who graduated two or three years ago, are still looking for jobs. Job creation, with all due respect, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is lacking in this Budget. This Government announced at the beginning of this financial year that they will not make its annual grant to USP of \$61.3 million as long as Professor Ahluwalia remains the USP-Vice Chancellor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- No , no.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- The honorable Minister of Economy said that the Fiji Government had a number of governance issues with USP. In the *Fiji Sun* article of Wednesday, 16th March, 2022, the honourable Minister of Economy responded to.

MR. SPEAKER.- There is a point of order

HON.A.SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Member is misleading the Parliament. We never said that the grant will not be given until Pal Ahluwalia leaves. We said that we wanted an investigation in the allegation that was made by the independent body and only then, we will do it. She is completely misleading, in fact she is lying. She should stop.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- I will continue, Mr. Speaker, Sir. In the *Fiji Sun* article of Wednesday, 16th March, 2022, the honorable Minister of Economy responded to the regional Vice President of University of the South Pacific Student Association (USPSA) and said, “I am sure you will acknowledge that none of your students have not had their fees paid. If they are under TELS or Toppers, they still get the money. Over a \$100 million have been paid to USP so you are not affected by that”. Now, this is common sense that without this annual grant, USP’s services to the TELS students and the other Fijian students at USP will be compromised. Budget cuts should be anticipated– cuts in teaching staff, cuts in admin support, cuts that will ultimately affect our own youths that attend USP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Minister’s response is immature and irresponsible. USP is a regional organization which breeds our Fiji and Pacific leaders of today and tomorrow. And this Government TELS and Toppers contribution alone on a yearly basis is not sufficient to cover for the services that USP provides to all our Fijian students in Fiji and throughout the region. So, if anyone is affected by the shortfall of any of USP’s services, it is our own people, our student youths, including those on TELS.

I have said this in my Budget response last year and I will say it again, you cannot give what you do not have. This Government withheld the grant because there was never any money to give in the first place. The budget support is the case input. Now to our youths of Fiji from the ages of 18–30years old, do not be hoodwinked by this Revised Budget. Whatever this Government has given to you in freebies, that money was from the overseas donors. Do not make the same mistake in 2018, where a total of 176,967 youths within this age bracket has registered to vote but only 107, 585 went to vote. A total of 69,382 did not vote. And this is the Government that is withholding the USP grant that acted to educate our future. That is the priority of this Government.

I had mentioned earlier that the Minister of Economy had said that the Fiji Government had governance issues with USP and then the honorable Minister said do not lie. When I hear the word governance, I link it to accountability, transparency, and more importantly, integrity. The definition, the understanding and the application of “good governance” is certainly different from what we know from this side of the House.

I think the Minister of Economy forgets what he did back in November, 2014 in the Suvavao House in his boardroom. I would refresh his memory, in my presence and the two other former Fijian holding board members, the former Solicitor-General and the other two Fiji TV Executives. The Ministry of Economy, vote out a press release and told us that we are to sign this press release and you will agree to share IRB 7s to FBC. So if anyone here is a liar, he is a liar. When you talk about integrity, make sure your own house is clean.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- How does it prove that I am a liar. What did I lie about in that context? Where is the lie? There is no lie.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- I will continue, Mr. Speaker, from that day till now he has never denied.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Retract.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am addressing you and I will continue ..

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Where is the lie?

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we did not sign the press release nor did we did compromise our integrity.

HON. A. SAYED-KHIAYUM.- Move along.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- When we talk about governance, when we talk about lies we make sure that our own backyards are clean.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is shocking that a public listed company that a Minister could interfere at that level because in any true democratic country he would have been fired back in 2014. Please do not use loosely the words “good governance”. Those are some key points, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I will speak on.

I am glad to see that over time we will re-instated especially for civil servants on Bands E and below. I only wish that this overtime could be back-dated. I pray that the civil servants that worked hard during the COVID pandemic period do not forget this because we are only four months away, this Revised Budget is only four months away till the end of the financial year. I am sure there will not be any overtime for those in Band E or Band F and below.

Mr. Speaker, I keep hearing about the unprecedented growth. From Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and till about 10 minutes ago, my kids have told me, “mum, we still have no water at home.” Let us start first with the basics. I am one of the fortunate ones because I have water facilities in my office, we can always go and have shower in my office, so when we talk about basic infrastructures, start first with water. We have not had water for three days but I am one of the fortunate ones. So I am glad that honourable Usamate has stated that they are going to ensure that they will address this. I pray that we have water tomorrow, honourable Usamate.

Mr. Speaker, with regards to the informal settlements, the growth of the informal settlements with all due respect cannot be largely blamed on Government because iTaukei landowners, some of them or most of them had given it out to people who were looking for land to lease. But what concerns me are the penalties that are in place; you have \$20,000 or 10-year leases for the informal settlers that refuse to leave, we are penalising them.

The issue for us is, where is affordable housing? They have talked about unprecedented economic growth, they have been in power since 2006, we need more affordable housing and we have professional people who are staying in informal settlements. We need to empower people, we need to stop spoon-feeding them. Most of us here, our families came from the villages and see where we are now? I refuse for my children to be given fish, I tell them, “you need to learn how to fish.” This is not the way our forefathers lived.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- You will have your time, Honourable Member.

The honourable Minister for Employment spoke about confidence of getting Government through this pandemic with a high vaccination rate. Now, what he forgets to mention that many lost their jobs as they chose not to be vaccinated. Do not get me wrong, I got vaccinated. But for many businesses, they were told, “If you do not have the COVID protocols, your business will close.” So let us call it what it is. A lot of our civil servants, a lot of our teachers have lost their jobs because they chose their democratic right not to be vaccinated and we respect that.

In regards to the Vuvale Programme, I believe either my friend the honourable Minister for Employment or honourable Minister for Agriculture mentioned about this. We have had over 4,000 people who have gone overseas and just this evening I saw the Fijian Elections Office had stated that those abroad that wished to register, they need to make their way to the embassies.

When I shared this information with a friend of mine, she said, “My goodness, do they know how far it is to travel from Auckland down to Wellington? This is not like travelling from here to Ba or here to Navua.” There needs to be a better system because our concern, apart from the 4,000 that have gone for the Vuvale Programme, we have a lot of Fijians out there that want to register, that want to vote, and more importantly they want this Government out.

When I read through the FEO Report of 2018, we had a little over 1,000 postal ballot votes that came from abroad (that is tallied) and now we heard this evening ballot votes that came from abroad, a little over 1,000, that is tallied. Now, we heard this evening 4,000 of our people went under this Vuvale Programme and that should be a concern to all of us because we want our people to vote.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will wrap it up now but just to add, we can come here give all our glorious speeches, we can scream and shout but let me ensure every one of us here, our people already know who they are going to vote for. They already know, but this is to you FijiFirst Government, your season in power is over.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- You are on borrowed race card, you are finished and your season is over.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Revised 2021-2022 Budget financial year that was presented by the honourable Minister of Economy in this august House on 24th March, 2022.

The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Members of Cabinet, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament: from the outset, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also share my disappointment in the way this Revised Budget Estimate has been railroaded through Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the words of Calvin College, the 30th President of United States, I quote:

“There is no dignity quite so impressive, and no independence quite so much, as living within your means.”

There are only three scenarios that the Financial Management Act under Section 13(a), allow for a Revised Budget Estimates:

1. An economic shock occurs, and if you are referring to the pandemic, we had already passed the COVID-19 Response Budget in 2020 and our economy is slowly recovering.
2. The effects of economic shock cannot be accommodated through the annual budget. Assistance provided to Government through loans, grants, direct budget support and aid in kind totalled \$1.8 billion. Therefore, the honourable Attorney-General should have enough money in the kitty to take us through.
3. The deviation must be approved by Cabinet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we thank the honourable Attorney-General for finally listening to our plea from this side of the House for the last three years we are very much suspicious of the timing

especially when we are simply three months away from the end of this financial year and we are in the Elections, Sir. We have always asked for an increase in minimum wage from 2018 and we thank you for doing so.

Interestingly, Sir, SODELPA had planned to do that from day one with the minimum wage of \$4 an hour. The SODELPA Government would have taken back our port of entries operation in order for Government to absorb any fluctuations in free charges at our ports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the removal of Value Added Tax on the basic food items, it is only proper that they do that since it was FijiFirst Government that levied the 9 per cent on the supply of goods and services from 1st January, 2016. The honourable Attorney-General should have waived VAT in his COVID-19 Response Budget then.

It was the Opposition side that had been asking Government all along to restore all the allowances that was supposed to be paid to civil servants, especially for those selfless ones serving in the frontline. But it pains me to inform this House that most of the civil servants are silently enduring living in pathetic conditions in Government quarters all around Fiji. You just have to visit some of these quarters in the West and see the extent of damages together with termite infestation, because Government is not prioritising routine maintenance as the past governments used to do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to give credit where it is due, I thank the Government for supporting the Fiji Rugby Union through the Fijian Drua. Allow me to share some important facts that are already public knowledge. Our economic growth has been on a declining trend or stagnant since 2016, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, investment is at its lowest level and remain weak, poverty and hardship continue to increase and 40 per cent of our population are living below the poverty line and 20 per cent are facing hardship. This was clearly pointed out by the former CEO for the Fiji Bureau of Statistics - my old boy, Mr. Kemueli Naiqama and his secretary; debt stock is at unsustainable level, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I now speak for the silent majority that are watching the Television livestream and say that we are tired of being lied to by the FijiFirst Government. It is the same Commodore Bainimarama that illegally took over a legitimate government that had a debt of only \$2.5 billion, that is now changing its tune, that it is okay for our future generation to inherit a debt level that is already forecasted to reach \$9.1 billion.

Unemployment continues to rise, import of food continues to rise and export is on a decline, increase in the cost of living, a lot of issues faced by our people were directly imposed by Government because of some poor policies and decisions made that I have already mentioned before. We are only hopeful that the Government's Public Private Partnership (PPP) initiative will not burden our people further. Key infrastructures are in depleted state: health, road and bridges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no matter how smarter we may try to paint the picture here, the reality of the matter is outside of this Parliament and that is what our people have to endure. Our health facilities, for example, is in a very deplorable state and our people do not have a choice, like some of us here. Our health services continue to be a challenge.

Production of timber products continue to decline, our economy continues to be driven by consumption. High liquidity of \$2 billion, my colleagues had already indicated that this indicator is showing the reluctance on the part of the banks to lend money - *sa rere*. They do not want to take risk.

High foreign reserve \$3.1 billion, that would take us for the eight and a half months of import. The increase in foreign reserve today is more to do with the money we have been receiving from overseas through loans, direct budget support and others and it is not what we earn. There is a reduction in remittance by 4 per cent. Import increase by 9 per cent in January, export only increased by 3 per cent, an increase of trade deficit to 13.7 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to keep the trust of those who sent us here, is a huge task for this Parliament and there are three essential rules for winning trust:

1. Be trustworthy - to be trustworthy literally means being worthy of trust. That is, you need to be kind of a person who can be depended upon to follow through on commitments that you make. This is what we have to say - you have been awake, you have been measured and you have been found wanting.
2. Create a reputation - to create a reputation you must transform your commitments into publicly available information.

Sir, if we have to go around Fiji and ask the people for a word synonymous with the reputation of the FijiFirst Government, the word will be 'dinau'. We say that you have been weighed, you have been measured, you have been found wanting. When people realise that you are capable executing simple task day after day they naturally believe correctly that you can be counted upon to deliver, day in and day out. The FijiFirst has been consistent with its false promises and for that we again say you have been weighed, you have been measured and you have been found wanting.

Mr. Speaker, Darlene Ouimet, a mental health advocate pointed out and I quote:

“Controllers, abusers and manipulative people do not question themselves. They do not ask themselves if the problem is them. They always say the problem is someone else.”

Sir, our people can no longer be fooled by this campaign budget and come what may, they will surely respond accordingly to the FijiFirst Government - you have been weighed, you have been measured and you have been found wanting. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to contribute to the motion at hand specifically on some of the issues raised, not wanting to repeat what has been mentioned particularly on the overall economic situation as mentioned by the Leader of Opposition and other speakers.

Specifically the revised Budget refers to the First Home Programme. I note that a budget of \$4 million was allocated assisting 211 families assuming that is divided evenly we are looking at \$18,900 per family. The revised Budget is providing \$5.9 million in funding for this particular support. Just next to that there is a Social Housing Programme of \$10,000 grant, so when I look at the two this Social Housing Programme Grant is basically geared towards our villages and settlements. If you divide that \$18,900 and the other is \$10,000 - my question is the difference between those two - it would be good to relook at that in terms of that difference.

First Home Programme and the grant under the Social Housing Programme. It seems discriminatory against those in villages and settlements. In terms of the Social Housing Programme again if we look at the two there is one budgeted for \$600,000 Social Housing Programme and the First Home Programme \$5.9 million. So, there is a huge difference of \$5.3 million which again is something which needs to be looked at. In terms of the First Home Programme it would be good to expand that into not only First Home Buyers under the current terms and conditions but also for those

who are building their houses in villages. This is something which we have been asking and requesting also pointing out to the Government.

I also notice the iTaukei Land Development - \$4 million has been allocated. There are specific areas which have been developed and that is very positive. But in comparison again to other developments I see that has something which needs to be improved in terms of iTaukei Land Development not only that but in terms of overall development of iTaukei standard of living and also business development and from my perspective that is something which this government has ignored and I do not think their heart is really in it.

Basically, because of the ideology of the government which is equal citizenry, maybe they see that as discriminatory. When we come in after the next Election that is something which we will be developing not lip service to the iTaukei landowners but fully involving them in business development and partnership with investments.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- What about you?

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- I will partner with you. Not only that Sir, but we had consistently requested the return of State lands which have not been used. I had brought up to this House the petition on the Suvavou lands in terms of around the Suva Peninsula and some of the State lands which have not been utilised by the State needs to be returned and gain not only in Suva but there are other parcels of land around the country.

The FijiFirst Government had mentioned something about land claims tribunal but they have never actioned it. I have not seen them action that and Tui Suva had written to the Suva City Council at one stage about the Botanical Gardens which had been taken up at one stage by the Indian High Commission but that did not eventuate. So, on behalf of Tui Suva and his people, I am asking that, that land be reverted back to Tui Suva and his people. He had written to the Ministry of Lands and so far there has been no response on that and again I am reiterating here that this government is just paying lip service to the indigenous people of the nation. They need to be serious.

(Honourable Members interject)

They need to be serious about the development of the indigenous people. As mentioned also in the Budget, Nadi floods. It is mentioned there that they will be pressing ahead with the Nadi River Flood Alleviation, it was held by COVID-19. I am not sure what was the issue there but the people of Nadi have been raising this issue not only in the past two years but before that and there has been unsatisfactory progress regarding this project. We are hoping that will be fast tracked soon and not only that, in terms of ...

In terms of riverbank erosion, I also would like to mention the Rewa River Banks which have been rapidly deteriorating not only the ones which was constructed before your government came in, but in other areas too. So, there is rapid erosion of the river bank not only from rise in sea level but also from the operation of those extracting sand. If you go to Toga, Muana Village, the Chinese operation there, the riverbank has eroded by about maybe 50 metres in the last five to ten years and that has claimed farm lands et cetera and I am urging that that be looked at in terms of budget preparation.

Another issue on fertilizers, government has mentioned that it is stepping in to cover the enterprise of a bag of fertilizer which was \$45 per bag, now it is \$80 per bag in which the farmers pay \$20 and the government will pay the remaining \$60 through an additional \$9.7 million as a form of assistance. That is fine, but the issue that I wanted to raise is what about the non-sugar farmers.

What kind of assistance is given to them in terms of fertilizer? However, also the weedicides and pesticides. In the last 12 months the price had gone up about three or four times. It used to be \$8 now it is nearly \$20 and again that has severely affected our non-sugar farmers like dalo, tavioka and all those farmers. Unfortunately, I did not see that and that is another criticism of this Budget.

The next one just quickly, Sir, I did not hear them mention cost-cutting measures or expenditure control and we believe that should start from the salaries of the Prime Minister, Ministers, Assistant Ministers, cost cutting should start there and we have always stressed that these are excessive for a developing country such as Fiji and with those cost cutting and cutting operational expenditure for example, leasing of vehicles, grants to certain government entities, those who have not provided their annual reports and all that, we would certainly see an improvement in the financial situation of the government.

The honourable Attorney-General had mentioned yesterday that only fools will oppose the revised Budget. Only fools! The premise there is that the Budget is perfect but it is not. The revised Budget is not perfect and I would like to change that phrase to read – Only fools think that their revised Budget will not be scrutinised or legitimately opposed and that is why all my colleagues here have mentioned, the various reasons why we are opposing the Budget and I do not want to repeat that but just labelling anyone who opposes it as a fool is uncalled for.

Sir, one of the Ministers, I believe the honourable Minister for Education, had mentioned recruitment – open, merit, recruitment system and the merits of this that it is a system which is perfect that is working perfectly et cetera, but one of the persons in one of this selection committees told me that they were told to rank a particular candidate to be higher than the other candidates. That is the problem with this system. That is the problem and it is not as perfect as what they are saying and I have mentioned in the past, the system is not full proof because biases come in and there is undue influence from outside and there needs to be a review to ensure that those kinds of biases and undue influence needs to be minimised or eliminated and that is the current issue with this.

Honourable Koya mentioned we do not do handouts, I mean that is a joke because handouts are going on left, right and centre at the moment. It is just going on, we see it in the paper, everywhere. They saying it is development but these are basically handouts because it is near the election and it is intensifying. In the past 12 to 24 months, we have not really seen this kind of handouts but now it is going on nearly every week. Cane knives, forks, tractors – you name it, rice mills and I believe the whole system needs to be reviewed, the whole governance system, the Constitution, the laws relating to elections because right now in the 1997 Constitution, it used to cater for a caretaker government which comes in and then everybody goes out.

But now they become the caretaker government until a new government comes in under the 2013 Constitution, so we need to revert to that kind of system so there is a level playing field and when the race starts, we all start from the same point but here when the race starts, they are already at the 50-metre and we are still at the one metre point because not only that because they are also utilising, we are using money from our pockets to go around to our electorate, to create awareness, we are using it from our salaries but for them, they are using their ministerial budget. We are doing the same thing. It is awareness, campaigning, awareness, campaigning – it is the same thing. The only difference is we are not giving out anything but they are giving out a lot of taxpayer-funded handouts.

Sir, before I finish, I would like to mention also the honourable Prime Minister had mentioned, I am really concerned about this that the Opposition is stoking fear amongst landowners. The politics of fearmongering. I mean, I have not seen that, I have not heard it. I have not heard anyone say that.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Bill 17.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Yes, Bill 17.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Sir, on Bill 17 the main problem there is because they did not bring it here for colourful consultation, they brought it under Standing Order 51 and they did not do the consultation until after the Bill 17 became an Act, so that is the problem we are facing now regarding that issue. It was not fear mongering, for example for myself, I was just explaining some of the issues relating to Bill 17. I went and also consulted with some of the landowners and we followed the legitimate process for example, I told them. I did not tell them to come and stand in the middle of the road and block the road or do a protest. We followed a legitimate process, or we need to write to the honourable Prime Minister.

That was a very legitimate peaceful process. You get what I am saying, that is what I am trying to get at. You are saying that it was fear mongering, it was not. I do not know who triggered the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to pick me up from my home close to midnight, so I do not know which one of you? I asked the CID who told you to pick me up at this time? That was during the curfew and they said, it is orders from higher up. Of course, they will not tell me, they might get sacked the next day, but anyway that was not fear mongering.

What is fear mongering is the Commissioner of Police maybe three or four days ago saying, “police ready to prevent potential unrest” headlined in the *Fiji Sun*. That is fear mongering and he said, the elements from past *coups* in 1987 and 2000, et cetera are still around. He did not mention 2006, what happened in 2006, it was an overthrow of a legitimately elected government. He did not mention it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I am trying to emphasise here is that, the Commissioner of Police is being selective, I think he has become a politician. He should stand in the Election, not only him, but there were few other civil servants who were making political statements. They were replying directly to the elected Members of Parliament as if they are honourable Ministers, so they should resign, they are making political statements. This is uncalled for, the Government is trying to create economic stability and this kind of statement chases away potential investors and in terms of the iTLTB was also mentioned and we would like to emphasise that in the previous Constitution, we had the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) which were the overall governing body of the iTLTB.

When we come in, we would re-establish them, because at the moment, they removed the GCC and then replaced it with the honourable Prime Minister as Chair, but we do not want any politician to be involved there. That is what needs to be done, to create an independent iTaukei institution.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, please a Point of Order because the honourable Member again is misleading Parliament. He has got his law and his facts wrong. The Chair of iTLTB prior to 2007 was always the honourable Minister responsible for iTaukei Affairs, not the GCC. He knows that, honourable Lalabalavu was the Chair of iTLTB, Laisenia Qarase was the Chair of iTLTB, not the GCC. He is again misleading Parliament, Sir.

The Ministers responsible for iTaukei Affairs had been Chairs, it is not the GCC. You are talking about Director, we are talking about Chair and he said the GCC is incorrect, Sir.

HON. RO. F. TUISAWAU.- Anyway, thank you honourable Attorney-General. Yes, what I was trying to emphasise was that, when we come in, we will ensure that the Great Council of Chiefs nominees are in overall charge of iTLTB and not elected politicians. Because the whole iTaukei

Affairs structure- iTLTB, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Provincial Councils have been politicised under the FijiFirst and that is something we need to fix when we come in. I will continue at the next session of Parliament.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- As the nation waited with bated breath last night for the delivery of the revised budget, many Fijians waited without having had a decent meal. Many Fijians waited without water in our taps and many still do tonight. Many Fijians waited while not being able to afford a decent home, a decent roof over their heads. Many Fijians waited wondering what their children would have for lunch today. The majority of the Fijian people today are tired of waiting. So last night, the least the government could have done was to have some decency and show up on time.

Waiting, waiting, waiting—this is the legacy of the FijiFirst Government. Promises made so eloquently, so vigorously, so loudly are meant to be kept. The greatest test of any budget is getting things done. Unfortunately, the government has shown us time and time again that behind all the puffery and the chest beating and the long winded speeches is a chronic inability to get things done right.

The Budget reflects the Government's character of being strung along by short-term gains rather than long-term vision. Our economy was already slowing before COVID ever existed. The growth was slumping, wages were stagnant, productivity was declining, investment was slowing and debt was rising. And yet, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this government had the temerity to try and convince all of us that everything was okay, that times had never been better. And the promises just kept coming. We are still waiting for *Waila* City. We are still waiting for the Lautoka Olympic Swimming Pool. We are still waiting for the Vunidawa Sporting Complex. The grounds for which was graded and now has turned into a lovely grazing paddled for bullocks, cows and horses in Vunidawa. We are still waiting for the Ba Hospital to open. We are still waiting for the New CWM Maternity Unit. We are still waiting for the Lautoka High Court Complex. We are still waiting for local government elections. This list is too long for me to complete - waiting, waiting, and more waiting.

I am sure, however, polished last night's speech was, the result will be the same again. More waiting, more promises left unfulfilled and more families left disappointed. Why does the government think that it was so hard to convince the public last year to adhere to their COVID-19 measures? It is because the people do not trust them. And the people can no longer wait to kick them out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do have to say that NFP supports three policies in the revised Budget only because if you look at it closely, it is merely a repackaging of what NFP has been saying all along. When we said that we were going to introduce a decent living wage, the government said we cannot afford it. When we wanted to have 23 basic items VAT exempted, the government through its former FRCS Board Chairperson, Mr. Kodagoda, said, "It will not benefit any Fijian and that its implementation would be chaotic." Just three months ago, Mr. Speaker, when we wanted a removal of the 20 cents fuel tax, way before the price of crude oil increased due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the honourable Attorney-General is on record saying, "the idea was stupendously stupid." How bitter must it be for the honourable Attorney-General to eat his own words "stupendously stupid".

But let us put FijiFirst aside for a second, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I want to address the Fiji people directly. You are what makes this nation great. In times of need and trouble, we show that we could come together regardless of what shenanigans the Government was up to, to help our fellow Fijians in need. Fijians overseas, through remittances kept this nation afloat. Fijian health workers braved weather and long distance travel to get us vaccinated. Civil Society Organisations including FRIEND and the District Council of Social Services all over the country and other NGOs took the

lead in helping fellow Fijians. Fijian bus drivers, road workers, security guards and everyone else, all of you gave your hands and your hearts to keep this nation going. All the credit should belong to you, not to the politicians in this Parliament. ‘

It is your courage, your determination and your sacrifices that should not go to waste. This pandemic recovery is a once in a generation opportunity to re-assess the status quo and re-balance the scales. This should be our opportunity to launch ourselves on the trajectory to a more sustainable, more green, more fair and more secure future for all of us, a future we can be proud to bequeath to our children.

That future begins with education. The NFP has already announced that it will continue ensuring that education remains free all the way through to Year 13 but free education does not mean quality education. To that end, we have made it our policy to establish an Education Commission to conduct a full scale review of our education system. We want to know if our students are getting the best education they need to prepare them for the challenges facing the 21st Century. This will be done within the first month of an NFP Government. We will consider the Commission’s recommendations seriously and consult all stakeholders; teachers, parents and students themselves to bring the recommendations into full effect.

Second, for those of us who cannot afford to jet overseas every time we need quality medical care, our only choice is to rely on our health system at home. For many of us, that is a death sentence. This is the not fault of the hardworking nurses and doctors who are doing their very best with what little they have. The fact is that proper investment and oversight in the health system has been lacking over the last few years. This will have to change.

We will be conducting a full scale inquiry into the wastage and inefficiencies plaguing the health system. We will consult experts and we will hold those who have contributed to the deterioration of our health system to account. Our people deserve better. Under an NFP Government, hardworking Fijians will get what they deserve.

Thirdly, of course, is our economy. The NFP Leader has made it clear many times in Parliament that at least \$3 billion had been lost between 2015 and 2020, stolen out of the hands of everyday hardworking Fijians through wastage, pilferage, mismanagement and corruption. We will be lodging a full scale inquiry into all instances of corruption, shady dealings, under the table handshakes and the rest. Let me be clear to you, whether you are in Government or out of it, if you have been involved in corruption, we will come down hard on you. You will not escape, the long arm of the law will follow you wherever you may try to hide.

Back to the FijiFirst Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is clear that this is the Budget of a Government desperately gasping for its last breaths. But there is no doubt, nothing will save them now. They are all tired and the Fijian people are tired of them. The title of the 1978 song performed by John Mathis and Deniece Williams and I am sure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you know the song and you would have probably sung it as well, should have been the title of this Revised Budget. The song is “Too Much, Too Little, Too Late”.

I conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the capital grant to Water Authority of Fiji was last night cut by a staggering \$8 million. This a few days after the Minister responsible was forced to admit that they do not have enough money for upgrade projects. The Fijian people have no reason to trust FijiFirst ever again, they cannot even keep the water on.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Attorney-General, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members and to the thousands of Fijians watching this on

Fijian Government Facebook page; Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to fully support the Revised 2021-2022 Fijian National Budget.

Like many Fijians, I would to thank the honourable Minister of Economy, his hardworking team for leading us through the times to get where we are today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget is further proof that FijiFirst Government listens to the people. Many of the benefits are directly provided from feedback given during nationwide consultations. We have seen the direct impacts of both COVID-19 and more recently the war between Russia and Ukraine.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when *TC Winston* hit us, the Opposition cheered hoping that that would be the end of us but we came back again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when COVID-19 hit us, the Opposition cheered again hopping that this would be the end of the FijiFirst Government. The Honourable Pio Tikoduadua actually said on record that the FijiFirst Government was lucky that COVID-19 came along. There are screenshots he cannot deny that. What kind of person says this “no one is lucky because COVID-19 came”. Millions of people died worldwide, the only thing lucky is that NFP was not running Government or we would still be on lockdown. In fact you are lucky that the FijiFirst Government, under our Prime Minister’s leadership, saw us through this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, inflation has increased all around the world and if the Opposition were truthful they would tell the people that this is because of the war in Ukraine. Russia provides 12 per cent of the world’s oil and this means that prices will naturally increase. Fuel will also increase the price of everything else and Fiji has no choice in the matter because we are price taker, that is why I commend the removal of the fuel tax as it leaves the burden of Fijians. It is a smart move considering the current global climate.

Meanwhile, Mr. Speaker, Sir, *Fiji Times* continues their irresponsible and unethical reporting. They falsely claimed that there was additional duty on oil prices to help compensate for revenue losses. If honourable Gavoka and honourable Professor Prasad were really honourables they would call the *Fiji Times* out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also commend the honourable Attorney-General for responsibly increasing the minimum wage rate which will be done in several steps. This is the proper way to do it, because many factors need to be considered. Honourable Professor Prasad claimed that we had followed his failed manifesto that lost him his second election.

In any other party, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you lose on election, you get replaced, but for some reason honourable Professor Prasad refuses to let go. His manifesto irresponsibly wanted to bump the minimum wage rate to \$5 without consultation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason that the NFP was rejected for the second time, was because of their leader, his lies were caught.

First he said that he would make the minimum wage rate at \$5, then in the next interview he said he would give it 100 days and then in the third interview he said he would consider it after 100 days. What kind of manifesto and leader is this? We all know that the true leader of NFP is Sitiveni Rabuka. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am a cane farmer, it is like what honourable Professor Prasad said that minimum wage rate should be \$5, it scares farmers like me. How will we pay our workers? The truth is, honourable Professor Prasad, honourable Gavoka and Sitiveni Rabuka will never understand cane farmers like us. These people do not understand that you cannot just grab a random number out

of the air, it has to be done progressively. We cannot raise the minimum wage rate all at once, as some Opposition MPs suggest. Instead, we must increase it slowly over a year.

If minimum wage rate is increased all at once, prices for everything from bread to clothes will sky rocket. The Fijian Government has acted prudently to keep domestic inflation low and imported inflation as controlled as possible. What the Opposition wants to do, would undo over 15 years of hard work and progress overnight. The minimum wage rate increase will, by January next year, ensure that all workers on minimum wage rate receive \$50 more every week for the same amount of work. This Government is also taking actual steps to assist cane farmers through fertiliser subsidies and many other incentives which really help because of the global shortage of fertiliser.

For those farmers who are looking to plant other crops but are afraid of losing their leases, through the alternative lease option for sugar cane growers/farmers, Government will be stepping in. Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$500,000 is allocated to support cane growers who are looking to convert their sugar cane leases to agricultural leases to plant other crops or even for 99 year residential lease - what a wonderful initiative. That again shows the FijiFirst Government is committed to leaving no one behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am proud to be part of the Government that provides free GPs, medicine, 24-hour open heart surgery in Lautoka and soon dental. This practically unheard of in other more developed countries. This Budget gives us everything from free medicine to open heart surgeries. What else does the Opposition want? Despite being a small Pacific Island nation, we are able to afford these services through prudent and smart management of the Government's resources and our economy, and work to remove the unnecessary bureaucracy that prevents talented doctors from being able to practice their own.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the Opposition to stop spreading fake news because it hurts all the poor souls who believe their lies. I also urge the Opposition to have a bit more guts and honesty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Professor Prasad has the habit of picking on honourable Attorney-General and stays away after making his statement. He has done exactly the same, running away like a rat, he quickly scurried away after chattering and squeaking like a rat.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Can you understand what I am saying? I am not saying he is a rat, I am saying he is like a rat.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before Sitiveni Rabuka stand struck SODELPA, he was the Opposition Leader. He removed honourable Professor Prasad from all the Committees. (He is supposed to be here) His team is spreading fake videos of honourable Qereqeretabua on social media and they are on the verge of taking Charan Jeeth Singh from NFP. Yet, honourable Professor Prasad continues to run under Rabuka's table at every opportunity. They are willing to stage themselves and all Fijians just because of their personal hate of the Honourable Attorney-General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I say these things because it shows these people are opposing for the sake of opposing just like last night when the whole nation once angry at them for delaying the Budget announcement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many large countries are still trying to fight this virus and navigate through poor economic conditions. I am proud to be part of the Government that looks at the smart solutions

for their people and do not just put ideas and numbers out of thin air. We are focussed on recovery because we owe it to our people.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the Revised 2021-2022 National Budget and I hereby declare it a Budget that will help Fiji to recover.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings to an end the list of speakers and I now call upon the Attorney-General and Minister of Economy, Civil Service, Communications, Housing and Community Development to speak in reply.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is somewhat difficult, I would say, to make a summary of what needs to be said in terms of rounding off the debate given the very pedestrian contribution from Members of the Opposition in particular when they in fact challenge the fact whether we should have a budget or not, Sir.

As you very correctly highlighted, Sir, last year in July when we did present the Budget we said because of the pandemic and because of the number of variables that were still up in the air that we may need to actually do a mini-budget or a revised budget which precisely what we did. As honourable Selai highlighted we spent nearly over one-hour yesterday about simply the Opposition making those kinds of contributions.

Honourable Saukuru, for example, later on said, “Well the pandemic is gone” but the effects of the pandemic are still felt. When the last budget was delivered, Sir, we still had the borders closed. When the budget was passed, the borders were still closed. We still had social distancing, we had people wearing masks and schools were closed. The economy was in fact in a siege and then of course the borders opened on 1st December and yet they continuously since yesterday and whole of today have said that this is unnecessary, that there needs to be some kind of economic shock and by jove there is an enormous economic shock globally.

Trillions of dollars have been put into economies by the richer countries through quantitative easing. Countries have come to a standstill and they are somehow or the other think that Fiji is some kind of bubble that we have not been impacted upon by this global pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we were to go to the heart of it, there is not at a single line mentioned by any of the Members on this side unless they responded to it and indeed in the Budget statement last night, not once did we mention election yet the entire reaction from the other side was, “oh, it is election budget.”

Immediately, when we were announcing about the VAT reduction - our election. A few months ago they were talking about reduction they did not say election. When we make an announcement then say it is election. Not once did we mention election, Sir.

If you listen to the contribution by the Members and as the honourable Prime Minister highlighted, if you look at the contributions and under his leadership, the FijiFirst Government, Sir, has been critically involved and in fact is very much determined to make structural changes within the economy to unlock the Fijian potential. It is precisely what we are doing.

The *Drua* is one such example. If we had not invested the funds, they wanted a grant from us, if we had not done that, *Drua* would not be in a good footing now. It could have actually closed down the franchise. We, by law could not fund *Drua* if it is a private entity, so we came up with a solution and it is a creative solution. It is thinking outside the box and that is, we actually become a shareholder in the *Drua* franchise. That is to allow for a period of handholding, a period of injection

of capital into that organisation until such time, as we can see *Drua* performing really well, that it has the capacity to be able to attract other private investors and then the Government can then step aside and allow for that franchise to continue. That precisely, things like what the honourable Prime Minister mentioned, the changes through iTLTB in terms of ensuring that we are getting the leases done properly and getting professional valuers. What all of these does Sir, is increases the value of the *iTaukei* land.

They have pontificated, they have used ethnicity, they have used land and they have used GCC. All of the previous governments have done that, yet not a single shred of outside thinking box has taken place. Now, honourable Tuisawau is running down the *iTaukei* land development saying it is not enough. It was under this Prime Minister that we started the *iTaukei* land development.

Everyone went on about, “oh, we are asset rich but cash poor” this is a practical way of ensuring that they become cash rich also. No one did that. Even things like, for example, changes in the commission rate for real estate agents. In the GP system, it is unlocking the potential, it is bringing new partners into the economic structure.

If you look at the solutions they have provided, there is no unlocking of potential. There are no structural changes, they do not have the audacity to do that. You need to be able to have a particular level of vision and have that audacity to be able to change the structures. There is an enormous significant difference between what we represent on this side, what we represent under our leader and what they represent under their leaders, or I should say leaders. You have a party here that has got one person as Leader of the Opposition and the other one is the leader of the party.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- We know half of them will go to paapi.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Do not worry about us.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Half of them go to paapi, honourable Professor Prasad has already gone to paapi.

Sorry, it is not paapi, it is PAP. It is probably a Freudian slip because paapi actually means sinner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact of the matter is, that there has been no constructive input. Honourable Qereqeretabua, we had recommended VAT a few years ago, yes, but there was no VMS system. That is how people were fleecing the system. Since then we have been putting in place a VMS system so now we can actually monitor what items in the supermarket because as we know, the 21 items in the supermarket will be zero rated VAT. All the other items will be 9 per cent VAT. People can cook the books but when you have a VMS system then you get better accountability.

They talked about reducing the duty on fuel, you cannot just simply reduce the duty on fuel overnight without having another revenue source. It sucked out \$56 million from the revenue stream, so how will that \$56 million be made of? Where will they get it from?

The VAT on 21 items, \$163 million reduction in revenue, direct just like that off the book. How will that be made of? They did not suggest that we increase VAT on other items which we have done. It is what you call “responsible government”, they go on about responsibility and transparency. This is true responsibility and transparency because we are able to take a very robust and very

transparent manner in ensuring that we have the right amount of revenue and we also have an expenditure that has been able to be controlled.

On one hand they said, *dinau* because that is their narrative, *kharraza* that is their narrative. If we had not taken out the \$2 billion debt in COVID-19, we have a situation where the country suddenly overnight 50 per cent of their revenue is gone, absolutely gone. We still need to continue with the basic services. So, where will that come from? They say, we should not have borrowed - so, let us cut civil service pay, let us cut medical services, let us cut social welfare, let us cut Water Authority of Fiji and let us cut funding for FRA. Then they will say there is no water, there is poverty alleviation benefits have gone. Where would the money come from? You see they say, "Oh! There is too much *dinau*." Honourable Salote Radrodro was going on about it but she does not give an alternative. She will be the first one to complain. Honourable Bulanauca who has gone, he talked about the welfare going down but he does not know the reason for it. He could very easily find out. The intended number of recipients, in fact, were not there because a lot of them took the \$360 - \$500 million was injected into the economy to ensure people actually had food on the table, honourable Qereqeretabua talks about it. What was the alternative?

The entire world did that and here we are - Members of the Opposition are saying this should not have been done. There would have been socio-economic chaos, people would become despondent, destitution would have prevailed in Fiji; they do not talk about that. Then on the other hand they talked about debt then they said, "Oh, all the money from the General Account should be reimbursed into the General Account." Where would you get the \$250 million from? They do not offer the alternative. This is why they actually object to the amendment to the Financial Management Act because under the Financial Management Act now, politicians like them need to account for their election promises.

Just yesterday, we got another action taken against us by one of the political parties saying why was the Financial Management Act put in place, they have taken us to court now. We have got about three now on foot. These are signs of desperate politicians who do not want to be held accountable. The irony, of course is, they mentioned about accountability, they mentioned about transparency but they do not want to have it applied to themselves. That is the irony of it, Sir. So, if you have, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have since yesterday received enormous positive feedback on this Budget and as we mentioned, a lot of people are appreciative of the fact that many of the structural changes have been announced.

For example, the blanket rezoning. So many people are very positive about that, about the fact that iTLTB, Ministry of Lands, surveyors, Department of Town and Country Planning, Ministry of Economy will all get together to try and solve the survey backlog because people know, some landowners have called us up, they said, "This is really good because I can get now the premium paid to me." The tenants are happy because they said, "I can get my 99-year residential lease, I want to build a nice concrete home." The banks are willing to lend them the money.

Honourable Tuisawau said, "Oh, there should be equity in the amount allocated." That is such a silly proposition. This is a grant where you give \$10,000, what used to be one-third, two-thirds; give a \$10,000 grant for a basic home to be built. The other ones are people, for example, husband and wife, teachers. They want to build a bigger home. They can do that. They go to a bank, the bank approves the loan and then we give a \$30,000 grant, they are building their first home. It is the kind of a very simplistic approach to things. Not having a grasp of the commercial and financial realities. This is what we are dealing with, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were some other comments that were made which I would like to respond to and I firstly also thank all those people who had invited us for the consultations.

Honourable Selai mentioned, honourable Biman Prasad is on record on *Fijivillage*, his latest favourite media outlet said, “The ministers in this Government scurry all over the country like squeaking, hissing and chattering rats.” That is what he has called the Ministers.

We have been in this Parliament where they have said to us, “you do not know anything because you are in your offices, we know we are talking to the people” and when they see a few Ministers going around, honourable Seruiratu is going there, honourable Premila Kumar is going and consulting teachers and meeting up with them, they suddenly do not like that. They calling us rats as a result of that. This is the calibre of the political intellectual input we get from the Opposition, Sir. And this is why it is so difficult to be able to sometimes stand up here and respond to these kind of statements made by them because it would appear, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the ordinary Fijians on the street has far better grasp of what we are trying to say, do and implement than these people here.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point of the matter is this - they want to win office purely to acquire power, not to improve the lives of people, not to improve the systems, not to ensure long-term economic longevity and stability and confidence building; they do not want that. If you listen to every single thing they have said, that is what it leads to. They do not care. Honourable Tuisawau went on about Bill 17; there is no more Bill 17, there is Act 22 of 2021. He said no consultation teams went out. That was nonsense. That is not a consultative issue.

They actually went out to educate people as to what happened because they spread so much misinformation including the lady who you replaced. They went around spreading so much misinformation. Everyone knew that there were five things that the landowners have to agree to before leases can be given. So, 60 per cent of the landowners need to give consent. They have to agree for the type of lease that they will give, they have to agree for the term of lease that will be there, they have to agree to the premium and they have to agree to the yearly lease rental. These are the five things that the landowners must consent to before any lease can be issued either through iTLTB or the Ministry of Lands if they want to give it under Land Bank.

None of these rights, Sir, were affected by Act 22 of 2021, he knows that. It was only the administrative side of things where the Director for Lands in terms of State land had to consent for water, electricity and mortgage and so did the iTLTB CEO. That was removed, none of the rights of the landowners were affected. People in the grassroots understand that now, we were in Nadi where people talked about it and they said, “We have been misled and they are now willing to engage.” A lot more people are willing to engage the iTaukei land development. This is their narrative, they know that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank those people who attended in Nadi, Lautoka, people asked for ad hoc budget consultations in Nubu, Nasinu, Nausori, Kavanagasau, Kulukulu, Labasa, Savusavu, Olosara and Koronivia. We also had online sessions - in fact we had online sessions only for women on International Women’s Day. A lot of women sent questions, we responded to those questions, where is the lack of transparency?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I also would like to make because I think the honourable Members do not appreciate when people used to talk about basic food items, and they are not even basic food, it used to be flour, rice, tinned fish, cooking oil, tea, powdered milk and kerosene. Today, we have 21 items, they include essentials also like sanitary pads for women, toothpaste, toilet paper, soap, washing powder and all the other items, garlic, potato, onion, tinned fish, cooking oil; all of those things you can make a meal out of it, it forms the basis of a meal. If you have a veggie patch, you can get some *bele*, cassava, *dalo*, *bhindi*, *bhaji* and you can complete three meals. That is what this does.

As we have said Mr. Speaker, Sir, that it has been done because the freight cost in recent times has shot through the roof, because we now have a system that we can monitor so supermarkets are not going to rip off FRCS because that is what they used to do. There used to be doubled book-keeping; they do not mention that. They do not think about those fundamentals. They are only doing this for show. There is no real commitment to ensure there is integrity within our financial system.

The honourable Saukuru talked about liquidity means there are no costs, banks are not lending, what a lot of baloney. No one goes out to borrow during COVID-19 when there is a lockdown and the reason why we did that (it feels like I am teaching people Economics and Financial Systems) because we knew that the tourism brings \$2 billion year revenue to us. They bring foreign exchange, so we had to preposition ourselves to know that when the borders open up, when the economies open up, that we still have enough foreign currency to be able to continue with our imports.

Thus the equation was deliberately changed, so we can get more foreign currency in our system. We borrowed more from offshore and guess what, the interest rates we paid was 0.01 per cent, AIDA Funds was 0 per cent, only 0.75 per cent, they do not talk about that. That is why our debt have gone up to \$9 billion, yes, but what is the grant component of it? This is the lack of sophisticated analysis by the other side, lack of nuance approach to it and they want to run government.

The honourable Prime Minister when he went around talking about climate change, you all berated him. As a result of those words, today we are getting access to concessional financing. None of them mentioned climate change in their speech. I remembered in 1972 when I was seven years old, there was *Hurricane Bebe*. The next cyclone that came was 10 years later. Today, we get three cyclones in one season. As I mentioned the other day, Kabisi, Nawai, Semo roads are half the road is gone. At Kabisi, the entire road went, the highway built by the Australians in the 1970s. A huge saturation of the earth because of downpour, not even a cyclone, just heavy rain.

During *TC Yasa*, it rained in one day, the amount of rain we got in 24 hours is the same amount of rain that London received in one year. They do not talk about that, absolutely nothing. When they mentioned water, they just think it has come out of here and there is no such thing as cyclone, Lala land. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government think about the fundamentals and therefore when we talk about debt and when we talk about revenue, you need to have a sophisticated approach and you need to understand things.

And we know that they have a former Permanent Secretary advising them, hanging around the Parliament and that is the calibre of people they are actually liaising with. Mr. Speaker, Sir, they talked a lot about Civil service. I would like to highlight very quickly, Sir. Let us talk about the honourable Salote Radrodoro talking about nurses and saying that they are leaving because we do not look after them.

When the OMRS was introduced, there was also a salary evaluation done. A clinical sister, specialised nurse before the OMRS is implemented, NU06 used to get \$19,131. She/he had a 49.52 per cent salary increment up to \$28,605.45. For NU05 - \$21,175 went up by 35.09 per cent of \$28,605.35. For maternity, all departments nurse practitioner NU04 was \$24,566 before OMRS and afterwards, the salary went up to \$43,296.63 with an increase of 76.25 per cent overnight.

They do not talk about that, they would not mention them as it does not fit in with their narrative. They want to portray all these Ministers the civil service, the PSC, the Prime Minister as some kind of a tyrannical regime over the Civil service. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can go on about what

happened in the education sector, what salary bands went up. We have heads of schools that can get up to \$97,000. Some have stepped up at \$59,000 with the potential to move along. This is the reality underground. They do not mention that.

The honourable Gavoka thinks like the puppy outside. He said that we need to have security of tenure. He worked in the private sector, no one gave you job for life. The three year contract, five year contract. No Civil servant does not get their contract renewed if they are performing. If they perform, then they get can their contract renewed. The first time the job occupies three years, second time five years and continuation of that.

If they continue five years, comes up for the renewal, another five years. That is what is actually happening but they want to portray these narratives. And of course, if you do not perform, you need to be held accountable. You will be the first people to complain if a citizen goes and gets treated unfairly, inappropriately or discourteously by civil servant. Mr. Speaker, Sir, again this is the narrative that they are putting on to the floor of this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am going now in to the Bills itself, I heard honourable Naiwakula mentioned that the development of informal settlements Bill will somehow or the other undermines the arrangement that the landowners having *vakavanua* arrangement with those people who live on their land. This is complete nonsense. If you read the law and if you stop misleading the Parliament and I hope this is not a reflection of his calibre as a lawyer.

It says, the development lease means an agreement executed by TLTB with the lessee in respect to the iTaukei lands for the purpose of developing the iTaukei land and with the intensive grant in the lessee, a lease of the iTaukei land for a term not exceeding 99 years or executed by Director of lands with the lessee in respect to state lands for the person developing the state land with the intention of granting the lessee of lease of a state land for a term not exceeding 99 years. So, now we know what it means, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that it is an area with the state that has acquired the development lease.

The only way the iTaukei Land Trust Board can give a development lease to the state if at least 60 per cent of the landowners have confronted to it. So how can it in anyway be doing what honourable Nawaikula is saying? That is precisely what has happened. All these areas where people lived in *vakavanua* arrangement for 30 years to 50 years, landowners are not getting enough money, it is prime land in some of the places, what we are saying, “we start paying the development lease”. Landowners consent, at least, 60 per cent, yes okay, you can develop this, 60 per cent agree, we then start paying the development lease on a yearly basis.

The people who are squatting do not pay anything but the landowners get money from us and then we intend to develop that land. What this particular law does, Sir, is that if it is a State lease or a State has leased the land, then we should be able to ensure that those people who want their lands to be given 99-year leases that they need to move should the need be. As we all know squatters do not build houses in a straight row, they build all over the place. How can you develop the road if one gentleman decides not to move his house?

The honourable Minister for Education will tell you that in Caubati, four or five years is being stuck because three people do not want to move their houses, so the road cannot be built or there is little space between houses, roads cannot be built, how can we have proper development? The State is paying for it and everyone that lives in the squatter area will be assured of a title, whether it is a strata or land title. This is precisely what this law does.

They are objecting to the same, in other words the PCN, Lagilagi, those poor people who have paid over \$2.2 million should not be reimbursed the funds. They are saying we should not do that. That is precisely what they are doing by objecting to this particular Revised Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Saukuru said that the State should pay for all the freight costs. What is he saying? So when Vinod Patel is going to now import hardware to sell in their shop, we should pay Vinod Patel's freight; that is what he is saying. And they talk about giving money to private businesses so when Meghji wants to bring in his liquor, for the freight cost, we should pay – what an absolutely silly proposition. The Government does not buy those things, the Government does not go and buy wheat – the private companies that buy it.

We have Bus Operators Association today, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They issued the statement threatening Government, threatening Fiji to say that we have not done enough in this budget for the bus operators and that services may be affected. That is why they issued the statement today. They wanted some special conditions given to them, despite the fact that 20 cents had been removed, they wanted even further reduction for themselves. It used to happen before, Sir, but what used to happen then was that they would then go and fill up their trucks, cars and sell fuel and then claim it as fuel being used for buses; not all of them, some of them. Some of the companies are doing well. You know exactly how much fuel they use because they actually have fuel tanks in their garages. But they also do not tell the public that they can go through the Fijian Competition & Consumer Commission (FCCC). In fact, they have a meeting with FCCC next Tuesday, they have asked for fare rise and they will probably get it. It is an independent process.

So we as a Government are trying to ensure that new, transparent systems of Government operate. Not like previously, nudge, nudge, wink, wink, come and go and see someone, see the Prime Minister, see some Minister and then get their bus fare increase. The system does not work that way. When FCCC asked them for their accounts, “show us how much money you spent, how much money you spent to buy buses”, half of them do not have their accounts done. They do not want to reveal it. How can you run an economy and people do not want to reveal that? You have to be transparent in that. This is what the Government needs to do, Sir, this is what the Government needs to deal with.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Waqanika I think really needs to do some counselling sessions because she cannot let go of what happened I think 10 years ago. The cross-carriage licence was put in place subsequently. To allow ordinary Fijians to watch programmes that were of importance to them, because we had licences or sponsorship given by one TV company, other people watching other TVs or they did not have the right aerial could not watch that.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

I made no reference to the cross-carriage issue. I made reference to him mentioning governance to his speech at USP and the conduct that he did in 2014. He does not need to talk to me about cross-carriage, I know about cross-carriage. That is a non-issue.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sorry, Sir, it is an issue about cross carriage she mentioned it. The fact of the matter is, that now we have the *Walesi* platform, they all went on about *Walesi* previously. *Walesi* allows even a small TV station like My TV to be available to every Fijian, no matter where they are. A TV like My Television has very little upfront capital investment, yet, people in Vanua Levu can now watch My TV, people who can catch the *Walesi* platform in Southern Lau, they can watch My TV, it is to allow people arrange the television programme, they can watch the Hope Channel that is what cross carriage was trying to facilitate. But now with the *Walesi*

platform, Mr. Speaker, Sir, soon when time to come, it will be completely irrelevant. She needs to really move around over that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, USP is not the only institution that provide tertiary qualifications or education facilities in Fiji. There is FNU, the University of Fiji, the Corpus Christi, the Monfort Boys Town, the Sangam and various other institutions that Government also fund for this budget, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the way the honourable Member is trying to make out is because we suddenly will not have our people educated. The fact is that, they are trying to turn it into political issue. We have always stated, Sir, that if these allegations are investigated by independent organisation or entity and they come out with the result, we are quite happy to give the grant. They have talked about good governance in the same breath, we want good governance, we want proper accountability, the Fijian Government is a largest grant given to USP. Over \$30 million at one stage, the next grant giver was \$2 million; I think was Solomon Islands (\$32 million and \$2 million). Some of them gave a few hundred thousand dollars and also Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have the largest number of students there, all of whom are funded through TELS or Toppers or private funding. That is the fact of the matter. So, please do not try and turn this into political issues as they have done. Honourable Professor Prasad we all know as the honourable Prime Minister stated already he is conflicted, we all know that it is an open secret.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Saukuru mentioned about foreign reserves. It was a bad thing he said “oh, we have not earned the foreign reserves, it comes from overseas, yes, it is a strategic move, what is wrong with that you should be happy, we have got eight months’ worth of foreign reserves because it puts us in a good place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Nadi River Project. The question I wanted to ask was, what happened when the money was given by the JICA in the 1990s? The Leader of the Party was the Prime Minister. The money went and disappeared. We all know that. The reason why it has been delayed in COVID-19 was because we are getting engineers from overseas, they come from Japan, people could not travel that is why it was delayed.

Again, we have invited honourable Members of the Opposition, since *TC Winston* until to date we have said come to the situation room at Level 3 or Level 4 in Ro Lalabalavu House to see where we are building all the schools, what are all the projects? None of them have come, either they were too arrogant or whether they think they will be caught out. We do not know but we have invited them and none of them have turned up.

Mr, Speaker, Sir, you see he is saying it is not our job. It is your job to speak the facts with knowledge and that will help you acquire knowledge honourable Kuridrani which you are lack a lot off.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the same way, if you talk about the Nadi River Rehabilitation Programme, it is opened. We have had discussions recently with some landowning units, we did a presentation. In fact, the Budget consultation in Nadi Civic Centre, we had the entire session on the Nadi River Rehabilitation Project, Stage 1 will be completely grant funded by the Japanese, Stage 2 we are currently looking at the Australians and some other partners.

We need to do more dredging, getting the river deepen. One of the things as we have said we lament every time we go past the river. If people had started building a river walls many years ago, today we could have completed it all. Not a single river in Fiji has a river wall, you go to Europe, you go to Brisbane all the rivers have river walls but we do not have that. Of course, it will cost

billions of dollars to get all these river walls but what we can do in the meantime, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, is to be able to dredge to ensure that there is no flooding, to be able to get some commercial activities up these rivers too.

Honourable Qereqeretabua mentioned that people are still waiting. The people in Monasavu were still waiting for electricity when Monasavu got built. The Bainimarama-led Government gave them electricity. The people in Sigatoka Valley, the Salad Bowl of Fiji, I was taught in primary school, Sigatoka is the Salad Bowl of Fiji - when the salad used to come up the bumpy road all the way up from Nabila and all of those places, up to the highway, up to the market, 30 per cent of the tomatoes had already been damaged. The Bainimarama Government tarsealed it.

We talked about connectivity to Vanua Levu to Viti Levu, it took three hours to travel from Labasa to Nabouwalu, and today it is tarsealed. We have people coming from Vanua Levu on weekends with their cars, you go down to the sea wall, the families there eating McDonalds, and two to three days later they go back. It is creating local tourism. People from Viti Levu find it easier to go there. The Hibiscus Highway, Moto in Ba and they are saying they are waiting for water. Have they looked at the amount of kilometres of reticulated water system that have been put in the shortest period of time? Have they looked at the amount of kilometres of electrical overhead cables that had been laid in such a short period of time? This is the kind of narrative they are putting up. They are not recognising that.

Look at the amount of competition, you can travel between Vanua Levu and Viti Levu for 25 bucks today with Interlink and other companies. Why? Because the Government reduced the duty on ships. The number of buses - the bus operators will not tell you about that - zero rated duty when you buy a new bus, 5 per cent. We used to have 32 per cent, plus to protect one company. The company is still surviving today and we are getting buses in cheaper rates today. The same thing with the shipping industry. It is what you call unlocking the economic potential of the country by looking at structural issues. They do not look at structural issues and they do not understand structural issues. As much as honourable Gavoka may disagree, but it is a fact.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also wanted to highlight very quickly, in respect of the Bill itself because, of course the other Bills are part of this particular process in Parliament. The Tax Administration (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill essentially seeks to simplify the process in relation to the issuance of departure prohibition orders. The Bill consequently amends section 32G of the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Income Tax (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill, again extends the forgiveness provisions up to 31st December, 2023. Honourable Members, may remember that. Of course the Value Added Tax (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill, as we have mentioned, now we have sugar, flour, rice, canned fish, cooking oil, tea, powdered milk, liquid milk, baby milk, potatoes, onion, garlic, dhal, salt, sanitary pads, soap powder, soap, toilet paper, tooth paste, cooking gas and kerosene, none of them mentioned about cooking gas before. There is now account for these to give people relief, because we have seen in the past few months an exponential rise in the cost of these. This does not mean that the price of these things will not go up in the next one month, it will. The way things are trending, but at least people will be paying 9 per cent less - that is what we are saying.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, there are about 21 non-essential items where the duty will be increased to 15 per cent, because we have to ensure that we get revenue. We cannot just simply give it away. So things like air conditioners, dish washers, dryers, electric jugs, electric lawn mowers, electric stove and gas stove, hair dryers, microwaves, refrigerators, freezers, mobile phones, televisions, toasters, washing machine, passenger vehicles, heavy passenger vehicles that used to have ECAL, alcohol, tobacco, textile, clothing, footwear, perfume, jewellery, watches, electrical

machinery equipment, stereo system and sound system will go up by 15 per cent, including, of course, professional services like legal fees, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we have said to make it a lot more easier, there will not be ECAL that will be around anymore and it makes the taxation system a lot more simpler too.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other amendment was the Airport Departure Tax. We have seen a trend now. Honourable Waqanika and honourable Rasova maybe perhaps I can get your attention for this, on Fiji Airways, a lot of people now travel between the USA and Australia and like to stopover in Fiji for a few days. If they stop previously for more than 24 hours they have to pay departure tax. We then change it to three days.

In this particular amendment, Sir, we have changed it to four days so they do not have to pay departure tax because if there is a disincentives for them to stop over in Fiji. We want to also capture that market because Fiji Airways offers a good pricing. So, a lot of people may travel from Sydney to Nadi spend four days then go onwards to USA or alternatively from USA to Fiji spend four days and go on to Australia. So that is what we have actually amended, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Environment Climate Adaptation Levy, of course as we mentioned that has of course changed now. The ECAL on plastic bags have now been called the plastic bag fee, similarly with the yacht too.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the actual Act as we know, there is a climate adaptation fund and that fund still continues. That fund needs to specifically spend on an environment and climate adaptation measures. A certain percentage of the revenue that we get from VAT will go towards this fund I should say, and under the law has prescribed we have to also publish where all this monies have been spent because we have also donors, Sir, that contribute to this particular trust fund. So, we have 43 villagers that we need to move to higher ground, this actually funds that, it costs money. We actually fully fund these projects. We have already had six villages move to higher ground because of inundation of water or landslides, et cetera. We have got another 43 to do so and this will fund that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also highlighted that the Customs Revised Budget (Amendment) Bill has been amended to cater for the announcements that we have made in respect of the controllers approving persons that authorise economic operators. This is again for compliance purposes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Customs Tariff Revised Budget Amendment Bill again they all objected to this particular Revised Budget but we had to do this because if we are on a reduced duty from 40 cents to 20 cents for fuel we have to have this law and they objected to it.

We said we will reduce duty, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on lunchboxes, water bottles that are not manufactured locally, zip-locked bags, for example, one of the companies here that makes plastic actually have protection but they do not made zip-lock bags. Many families want zip-lock bags so the duty has been reduced from that. Meat patties whether it is pork, beef, chicken, nuggets - all of that, the duty is being brought down to 5 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Financial Management Revised Budget Amendment, Sir, this revision also takes into account that there are a lot of Trust Fund Accounts within Government that exist. In fact, some of them go back a long way but the people who supposed to be the beneficiaries no longer exist or no one is claiming the money. So this actually allows those monies to go into Government Consolidated Fund.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we have talked about the Employment Relations Bill which is again reducing the number of Paternity days to zero and also the Family Care Leave to zero too.

As also highlighted in the Budget Address yesterday, Sir, making a bit more difficult for people to acquire Fijian citizenship. They have to become a permanent resident in Fiji for at least 15 years before they will be entitled to Fijian citizenship. But we said at the same time, we will make it a bit more liberal for people to be able to get work permits and get permanent residency through investment levels that they have to put into Fiji before they can get various experience of permanent residency.

We need to ensure that the citizenship as you know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, prior to 2007 the Minister responsible with immigration could actually give somebody citizenship as he or she pleased. It was very subjective. We knew people for example that come to Fiji running away from the law from other countries and got citizenship - it led to corruption.

We will remove that discretionary power of the Minister and said five out of ten. We are now saying it is 15 out of 20 which we believe is a good position to be in because we need to ensure that the other countries know that nobody can willy-nilly get Fijian citizenship but at the same time make a lot more liberal in terms of their ability to work and trade in Fiji, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other amendment is the Surveys Revised Budget Amendment Bill. At the moment, the survey fees are actually prescribed which makes it very restrictive. So it says if you survey land this is the price that you can charge but some surveyors may actually want to charge less than that. We want more competition. So, sometimes you may survey a piece of land that is very small, it may only take one day to do it. So, why should a person pay \$3000? So, this will actually remove that, so we have a more free-market approach to it and of course anybody that does carteling they will be subject to FCCC laws.

Real Estate Agents again Mr. Speaker, Sir, the commission rates will be determined through a regulation but it makes an amendment to ensure that the Minister responsible for the Real Estate Agents Board who is the Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport will be able to put in a regulation that will be able to have a lower rate or stagnated rate depending on the price of the value of the property and of course this is not necessarily subject to commercial property but more so for residential properties because we want ordinary Fijians not to be forking out so much money for buying or selling of homes.

Town Planning: Mr. Speaker, Sir, again we talked about Town Planning and the scheme approval of the Scheme under the Act to give authority to the Permanent Secretary to declare modification or alteration of an approved scheme plan under various conditions.

Lagilagi Housing Development: we have already talked about that. There is a separate law for that to ensure there is a particular legal framework so we will be able to pay out money under this particular scheme. We already have Mr. Speaker, Sir, 3,367 complainants and deposited amount to about \$2.2 million. The law actually specifies what process they need to go through and there will be some regulations put in place to be able to show proof that they actually paid the money. We do not want people coming from all sorts of areas to say, I did paid but sorry I do not have a receipt. There needs to be a particular process in place because this is actually the taxpayers' funds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other provision is the Medical and Dental Practitioner. The Revised Budget Amendment Bill again to put in regulation just how a person can actually become a GP through the Medical and Dental Practitioner Revised Budget Amendment Bill.

Development of Informal Settlement Bill which I have already mentioned Sir, and the Land Transport which facilitates the open taxi rank system and also there was some anomalies regarding carrier operators. It require the carrier operators to operate only between two points but obviously if I am a carrier operator for example in Labasa, someone may come along and say, look can you take me to Siberia and then when I am in Siberia they might say, 'All right can you take me now to Nubu' and from Nubu I may go somewhere else.

So the carriers at their level of flexibility which we do not want to do for them too because they do have limited operational activities and similarly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there will be some policy and regulatory changes regarding carriers and also those people who have driving schools. So they do not have to get renewals every year.

So Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are the laws in fact that have been affected and as you can see Mr. Speaker, Sir, these amendments to these laws or the introduction of these laws are critical to be able to give the substance and facilitate the budget announcements that we make.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Members were a bit confused in respect of this particular Budget itself. This is what we call revised figures. For example, the honourable Bulanauca talked about Social Welfare, they now know exactly how many recipients they were. The reason why that number has been reduced because they are anticipating a larger group of people but in fact a lot of them went to the \$360. So we do not need to have an allocation of \$5.2 million.

You will see some readjustments that have been made in respect of the Peace Keeping Head and the RFMF and various other areas. So it is about the entire sum of money that will be sent in this financial year which is from 01 August till 31 July and the reason why we have this is because we have to revise these figures. So, for example Tourism Fiji, the borders have now opened up, we have allocated a bit more money for them because all the workers, all the staff at Tourism Fiji were on a four day week because of course they are almost tourism activities, so now we have to increase their budget so they can come back to work five days a week.

So, those are the adjustments that have actually been made and so these figures are the overall expenditure for the entire year through this revision.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it will be amiss of me as I wish to thank the team at the Ministry of Economy and FRCS. This is not an easy task, they do go around with us also during the consultations. People do not understand this because they think Elections is just around the corner. Elections can be held in January 2023. We have to deliver another Budget for the period beginning 01 August, we may need to go for another round of consultations in a couple of months' time.

The fact is Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have to do this and the fact is that these people in the Ministry of Economy, in FRCS and various other agencies actually work very hard and they work very long hours. And I would like to Mr. Speaker, Sir, take this occasion because they have had to deliver revised budgets and have one last year, they have another one now, and they have got another one that they are going to plan for now for July.

I would like to thank Mr. Speaker, Sir, the:

- Permanent Secretary for Economy, Shiri Gounder
- New CEO for FRCS, Mark Dixon, he has been a breath of fresh air.
- Savindra Nath, the Acting Director Corporate Services.
- Isoa Talemaibua - Head of Budget and Planning
- Nemias Dawai - the Head of Treasury

- Kamal Goundar - Manager Infrastructure Sector,
- Sundhia Ben – Acting Manager and, of course, we have the drafting team at the SG’s Office.
- Fiscal Policy And Research Analysis Division – Tui Sikivou, Kavita Ram, Asenaca Lewaravu, Elenoa Vueti, Vinay Singh, Coral Gavidi, Shafia Hassan, Shalen Kumar, Asmita Chand, Shamal Chand, Solavalu Bola, Samisoni Toko.
- Budget And Planning Division – Kelera Ravono, Kiman Mala, Mere Dakunitabua, Melvina Singh, Poonam Singh, Tevita Tuibau, Ankit Prasad, Sandeep Kumar, Anikay Singh, Freeda Fremlin, Laurie Singh, Miriama Ketedromo, Ashleen Singh, Ledua Vakaloloma, Shaneel Prasad, Alipate Kete, Pranita Raj, Tari Bebeya, Namrita Singh, Raziti Raj, Joti Prasad and Aporosa Tuiwalesi.
- Treasury Division which is headed by Nemia – Sisilia Nalaide, Asenaca Meya, David Fills Wiliko, Akeneta Temo.
- Revenue And Customs, Shalini Kumar, who heads the customs area, Momina Begg, Rahul Goundar, Anasa Matakece, Sherlyn Hassan, Tale Katonibau and these are the people Mr. Speaker, and Tima Rayawa, Faranisese Gavidi and from the climate change division, Nitesh Chand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these people are actually, if you look at the demographics of these people, most of them are actually below the age of 40 and that is one of the things that we are seeing in the civil service, in many of the ministries and departments. A lot more young people are coming through, better qualified, highly sought-after. We recently had two or three staff actually poached by UN agencies and various other multilateral agencies.

As announced in the Budget, Sir, we are also doing a review of the civil service pay structure vis-a-vis scarcity of skill sets and also the retention. There are certain skill sets that are very hard to retain. Once they get their foreign exposure, once they get the training, once they are within the system, a lot more people want to get them, so we need to be able to retain them within the civil service and so, Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are some of the things that are being done. We have also, as it has been said, recognised in the Budget, an allocation of over \$1 million for those teachers who have actually taken the initiative and got themselves qualified, they are now being paid higher salaries, so this has actually been reflected in the Budget, over \$1 million for that, so they get paid higher salaries.

We are also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, very much looking forward to the Productivity Commission. We need to increase productivity in our country to be able to ensure that people get commensurate salaries. Mr. Speaker, Sir, overall as we mentioned, we received very positive feedback. We would like to thank all the people who participated in that. We would also like to thank all the ordinary citizens who have shown a lot of tenacity during this particular period.

We have, as I mentioned yesterday, I did not highlight all the different areas of electrification. Honourable Gavoka highlighted one of those areas. They are getting there, the black wires are being done. One of things that used to happen previously was that EFL used to connect the poles, get the main wires and the Department of Energy did the black wiring, so if there is no connectivity, sometimes black wiring was done before the grid came along or sometimes the grid came along and the black wiring was not done. Since last year, we have actually changed it, so the entire contract is awarded to EFL, so they are responsible both for the grid and also the black wiring, so we will not see particular level of disconnectivity. These are the changes that are being brought about. I would also like to highlight Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we will be publishing online all the areas that will get connected from now until the end of July to the grid itself.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last but not least, of course honourable Qereqeretabua mentioned about corruption and we will come after you, she actually has forgotten that Fiji has ratified the UNCAC –

United Nations Convention Against Corruption. We have FICAC. Fiji is now part of the peer review programme, Sir, where other countries come and get Fiji to sit on a peer review team that reviews other countries in terms of their compliance with UNCAC. She forgets all this. She is making out as if there is so much corruption in Fiji as a result of this Government. But we can tell you stories, Sir, where previous governments refused to ratify UNCAC because they did not want to follow certain standards.

Last but not least, a lot of talk was about minimum wage and honourable Adimaitoga is absolutely correct, people were plucking out figures from the air, \$5, \$4, \$7 whatever it was. The fact that we had the unions not participating in this particular process with Dr. Partha, we now have,

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a game plan in respect of the implementation of the minimum wage but has been done progressively. The textile industry in Fiji has been very much opposed to the type of increases that we are proposing because they believe that their industry could be under threat because people could go and get their orders placed in Bangladesh or Vietnam et cetera. We will see in the Budget that we have allocated funding to the textile clothing footwear council to be able to ensure that they continue to secure those orders.

We have also for example given the 200 per cent tax deduction for maternity leave. Over 95 per cent of all the workers in the textile industry are females. The hotels also have a large number of females too. This gives a particular level of relief, comfort and an incentive for them to continue with their businesses. This is the time of hand holding that is strategically important.

As highlighted again earlier on, that we simply cannot increase the wages overnight. Many businesses will actually get rid of jobs, so this is the progressive approach to it. It ensures that everyone gets to the mark and gives us one year for us to get to \$4 and commensurately increase in the salaries of those who are in the next category of the Ten Wages Sector which is also going to be reviewed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank all the honourable Members who spoke in favour of the Budget. I think it is a win for the ordinary Fijians and I think a lot of them appreciate this and we look forward to more of their contribution. We look forward to more of their participations and consultations that have taken place in the next Budget Sessions that we will have and when we will deliver in the next budget in July of this year. I would like to thank all the honourable Members for their contribution and indeed for everyone that has participated in this particular scheme or programme in delivering this Mini-Budget Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Attorney-General and Minister of Economy for his Right of Reply.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[A Bill for an Act to amend the:

- (i) Revised 2021-2022 Appropriation Bill 2022;
- (ii) Tax Administration (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill 2022;
- (iii) Income Tax (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill 2022;
- (iv) Value Added Tax (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill 2022;
- (v) Airport Departure Tax (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill 2022;

- (vi) Environmental and Climate Change Adaptation Levy (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill 2022;
- (vii) Customs (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill 2022;
- (viii) Customs Tariff (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill 2022;
- (ix) Financial Management (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill 2022;
- (x) Employment Relations (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill 2022;
- (xi) Citizenship of Fiji (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill 2022;
- (xii) Surveyors (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill 2022;
- (xiii) Real Estate Agents (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill 2022;
- (xiv) Town Planning (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill 2022;
- (xv) Land Transport (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill 2022;
- (xvi) Lagilagi Housing Development Bill 2022;
- (xvii) Development of Informal Settlements Bill 2022; and
- (xviii) Medical and Dental Practitioners (Revised Budget Amendment) Bill 2022.

Bills reported without amendments, read a third time and passed. (Act Nos..... of 2022)

ADJOURNMENT

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

That Parliament adjourns until Monday, 4th April, 2022 at 9.30 a.m.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I beg to second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we have had a long day. I thank you all for your contributions to the debate on the Revised 2021-2022 Budget. I congratulate the Government for the passing of the revised budget but I also thank you all for your forbearance, goodwill and co-operation. Honourable Members, Parliament now stands adjourned *sine die* until Monday, 4th April, 2022 at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.19 p.m.