

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 29TH AUGUST, 2022

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 29TH AUGUST, 2022

The Parliament met at 9.33 a.m. pursuant to notice.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

Hon. Josai Voreqe Bainimarama, Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs,
Sugar Industry, Foreign Affairs and Forestry
Hon. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Attorney-General and Minister of Economy, Civil Service,
Communications and Housing and Community Development
Hon. Lt. Col. Inia Batikoto Seruiratu, Minister for Defence, National Security and
Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management
Hon. Parveen Kumar Bala, Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations
and Youth and Sports
Hon. Rosy Sofia Akbar, Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation
Hon. Dr. Mahendra Reddy, Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment
Hon. Jone Usamate, Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and
Mineral Resources
Hon. Dr. Ifereimi Waqainabete, Minister for Health and Medical Services
Hon. Premila Devi Kumar, Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts and Local
Government
Hon. Faiyaz Siddiq Koya, Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport
Hon. Veena Kumar Bhatnagar, Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty
Alleviation
Hon. Alipate Tuicolo Nagata, Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial
Relations, Youth and Sports
Hon. Alvick Avhikrit Maharaj, Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity,
Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports
Hon. Vijay Nath, Assistant Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Disaster Management
and Meteorological Services
Hon. Viam Pillay, Assistant Minister for Environment and Rural Development
Hon. Alexander David O'Connor, Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services
Hon. Selai Adimaitoga, Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs
Hon. Jale Sigarara, Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Maritime Development
Hon. George Vegnathan, Assistant Minister for Sugar Industry
Hon. Dr. Salik Ram Govind
Hon. Virendra Lal
Hon. Joseph Nitya Nand
Hon. Sanjay Salend Kirpal
Hon. Sachida Nand
Hon. Rohit Ritesh Sharma
Hon. Howard Robin Politini
Hon. Ratu Naiqama Tawake Lalabalavu
Hon. Viliame Rogoibulu Gavoka
Hon. Aseri Masivou Radrodoro
Hon. Mosese Drecala Bulitavu
Hon. Anare Jale
Hon. Mitieli Bulanauca
Hon. Mikaele Rokosova Leawere
Hon. Tanya Waqanika

Hon. Jese Saukuru
Hon. Ratu Tevita Navurelevu
Hon. Dr. Ratu Atonio Rabici Lalabalavu
Hon. Simione Rokomalo Rasova
Hon. Peceli Waqairatu Vosanibola
Hon. Ro Filipe Tuisawau
Hon. Inosi Kuridrani
Hon. Dr. Mere T. Naulumatua
Hon. Prof. Biman Chand Prasad
Hon. Lenora Salusalu Qereqeretabua
Hon. Lt. Col. Pio Tikoduadua

Absent

Hon. Cdr. S.T. Koroilavesau, Minister for Fisheries
Hon. Ro T.V. Kepa
Hon. S.V. Radrodro
Hon. Adi L. Qionibaravi

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 29th July, 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. I also welcome those joining us in the gallery and those watching the live broadcast of the proceedings. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

Professor Steven Hooper and Dr. Katrina Igglesden

In particular today, I would like to welcome Professor Steven Hooper and Dr. Katrina Igglesden both from England. Professor Hooper has been closely associated with Fiji and with the Museum and it is also the case with Dr. Katrina - one who is strongly connected to Lau and the other is strongly connected to Rewa. You are both welcome.

I welcome the other members who are here today. I do not have your names, I am sorry, I am unable to read that out, but you are most welcome.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS

The following Reports were tabled by the honourable Ministers responsible in accordance with Standing Order 38(1) and referred to the relevant Standing Committee for deliberation in accordance with Standing Order 38(2):

Standing Committee on Social Affairs

1. iTaukei Trust Fund Board – Annual Report 2020 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 13 of 2022*);
2. Fiji Airports – Annual Report 2020 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 14 of 2022*); Ministry of Local Government – Annual Report 2018-2019 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 109 of 2021*);
3. Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations – 01 August 2016 – 31 July 2017 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 167 of 2019*)
4. Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations – Annual Report 2017-2018 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 168 of 2019*)
5. Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation – Annual Report for the Period of 1st August 2018 to 31st July 2019 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 57 of 2022*)

Standing Committee on Natural Resources

1. Ministry of Waterways – 2017-2018 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 51 of 2021*)

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Review Report - Municipal Councils 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 Audit Reports

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker Sir, this Report provides the Committee's review findings on the Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji on the Municipal Councils for 2018-2019 and the 2019-2020 Audit Reports. The Office of the Auditor-General undertook an audit on the 11 Municipalities in the two Municipal Council Audit Reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the beauty of any country is a direct reflection on how beautiful, clean and well maintained its towns and cities are. Towns and cities are considered as the face of any country and facelift of them has a huge and positive impact on the tourism sector. Fiji being a tourist destination, we need to have very attractive and stunning towns and cities.

Turning to the Audit Report, it is important to note that few councils are covered in both audit reports and majority of these municipalities are in backlog. This is mainly due to the fact that newly appointed CEO's and their finance team are more focused on past years audit reports and financial statements and are not able to focus on the current year's thus the current years audit report gets delayed as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the delay in the audits is also due to the non-submission of draft financial statements to the Auditor-General for audit, as legislated by 31st May annually. There are various reasons fully understood by Public Accounts Committee, such as records not available, staff have moved on to other organisations and municipal councils still using the ancient way of record keeping in file. Now such situations are putting immense pressure on the current management to be dealing with audit queries and getting their annual and audit reports up to-date.

It would be more realistic for the Public Accounts Committee to be dealing with current issues rather than investing efforts in scrutinizing old audit reports. In this way, the municipalities' senior

management and Special Administrators can be held accountable by the Public Accounts Committee during their term in office.

With all efforts made by the Council, the Office of the Auditor-General and Public Accounts Committee, it is great to see that smaller Municipal Councils such as the Savusavu Town Council had submitted their accounts for audit with the Office of the Auditor-General for financial year ending 2021. This Council is led by a young woman with a very dynamic team who has turned Savusavu Town Council from a non-profitable organisation to a profitable one. It is good to see women setting example for other municipalities to follow.

In the 2018-2019 Audit Report on Municipal Councils, the Office of the Auditor-General had issued modified audit opinions on six financial statements that were audited while eight financial statements were issued with disclaimers of opinion. However, the 2019- 2020 Audit Report on Municipal Councils, the Office of the Auditor-General had issued one modified audit opinion and five disclaimers of opinion on the financial statements of six Municipal Councils that were audited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee notes that there are general audit issues in the 11 Municipal Councils that are as follows –

1. Substantial variances in cash have been found in all Municipal Councils.
2. Record keeping is very inadequate which results in discrepancies in financial statements.
3. Credibility of the contractors and engineers are not checked before projects are handed over to them. This result in delays in projects and in some instances major defects have also been identified. The Public Accounts Committee highly recommends that the CIU Unit of the Ministry of Economy and the Fiji Tender Board be consulted in future for guidance during capital projects. The Ministry of Local Government also needs to work closely with the Fiji Tender Board to develop appropriate policies, guidelines and procedures that must be followed by councils for tender processes.
4. More qualified, experienced and reliable personnel are to be employed to ensure accounts and statements are prepared in accordance to accounting rules and procedures.
5. Uniform software to be used by all municipalities which is compatible to the software that are developed under the Fiji Digital Programme.
6. Municipalities that do not have strategic plans must work towards developing one for the near future. It is very important to have those in line with the 5 Year and 20 Year National Development Plan.

In view of the above audit findings, the Committee noted that majority of the issues identified herewith have been taken into consideration with necessary implementation undertaken by municipalities and these are:

1. Municipalities are liaising with Ministry of Local Government to provide staff training in areas of bookkeeping, application of accounting software, receipting, rates recording and reconciliations so that variances in financial statements can be minimised;
2. A very thorough interview process is being conducted to select the best candidate who specialises and have knowledge in bookkeeping, application of accounting software,

receipting, rates recording and reconciliation as this will ensure efficiency and accuracy in accounts and reports. It is, therefore, desirable to adopt the Open Merit Recruitment and Selection (OMRS) system to ensure transparency and accountability; and

3. Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs) are being developed and will be readily available as it provides policies, processes and standards needed for the organization to succeed. It can benefit the municipalities in reducing errors, increasing efficiencies and profitability, creating a safer work environment thus producing guidelines for how to resolve issues and overcome obstacles.

Mr Speaker Sir, Suva City Council has been rated as one of the efficient municipalities. For instance, it is always seen that the Council –

1. is investing in parks, buildings and are more focused in generating revenues through rental as the Council had engaged in a lot of investment and not just relying on rate collection as revenue;
2. tree planting initiative that is being undertaken is climate and environment friendly;
3. supported Lami Town Council through capacity building which led to a favorable financial performance. The Council continues to provide a place for micro business which is striving within the city and creates a bustling centre; and
4. ability to maintain cleanliness through effective solid waste management system and sanitation control is welcoming which has seen the Council now managing solid waste for Nasinu Town Council as well.

Therefore, the work done by the Council is commended and other municipalities that are not performing up to par should use the performing council as a benchmark.

The Committee has seen that the Municipal Councils are adopting the OMRS and it can be seen in terms of improved service delivery. If councils are run like a corporate organisation and the right people are selected for the right job, the Committee believes that the Municipal Council can obtain substantial growth as there is a huge potential for growth for these councils.

I commend the work that is currently being carried out by the Ministry of Local Government with this Council. It was evident that after a few rounds of consultations with the Committee improvements can be seen with these Councils at the Ministry level. While the Committee realizes the Government's vision to give full autonomy to Councils and its Board on the day to day operations of the Council, the Ministry needs to continue to provide an oversight and monitor the function of the Council at least until such time the Council starts to operate independently.

The Committee will continue to encourage these Councils to update their audited accounts and to put forward strategic measures to address the pertinent issues that continue to appear in the audits. Overall, I thank the executives of these municipalities and the Ministry of Local Government for providing their written response to the audit issues and also for appearing before the Committee to clarify issues that were raised by the Members. Also acknowledge the steps taken and measures put in place by the Department of Local Government with the Councils to resolve anomalies and variances that were highlighted, and the staff of the Office of the Auditor-General for providing technical clarifications on those audit issues.

I also wish to extend my appreciation to all the Honourable Members of the Committee who were part of the successful compilation of this bipartisan Report namely honourable Joseph Nand (Deputy Chairperson), honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa, honourable Virendra Lal and honourable Aseri Radrodoro.

On behalf of the Committee I also extend my appreciation to the secretariat staff for their timely support in the compilation and preparation of this Report.

With those words, I now present the Public Accounts Committee Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

MR. SPEAKER.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion without notice that a debate on the content of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Review Report – Accident Compensation Commission Fiji 2018 Annual Report

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs is pleased to submit to Parliament the Review Report of Accident Compensation Commission Fiji (ACCF) 2018 Annual Report. The no-fault compensation scheme was introduced by the Fijian Government through the Accident Compensation Act 2017 to address the various challenges and delays that were formerly faced by individuals who were involved in motor vehicle accidents.

The Committee commended the Accident Compensation Commission Fiji for the services they provided, in particular the no-fault basis of the compensation paid to families of accident victims for the period under review. During the submission, the Chief Executive Officer stated that the benefit of the no-fault scheme was realised in the very first few payments of compensation. Some of the cases brought forward were such that the applicants would not have been entitled to compensation given the requirement of proving fault under the previous law.

The Committee was made aware that ACCF had collaborated with key organisations such as Ministry of Health, Ministry of Employment, Ministry of Education, Land Transport Authority, Fiji Police Force and Legal Aid Commission to deliver their services efficiently and commended such collaborations. Furthermore, it was noted during the submission that majority of the motor vehicle accidents were due to careless and dangerous driving. It is urged that all drivers use caution and be mindful of the various risks careless drivers pose not only to themselves but to other road users.

I would like to take this opportunity to extend our appreciation to the CEO of ACCF and his team members for taking time to present before the Committee.

Finally, I would like to thank our Committee Members who were part of the team that produced this report: honourable Veena Bhatnagar (Deputy Chairperson), honourable Sachida Nand, honourable Inosi Kuridrani and honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau. I also take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank the Parliamentary staff who have given us invaluable support. On behalf of

the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, I commend the Review Report of the Accident Compensation Commission Fiji 2018 Annual Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to Secretary-General to Parliament)

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion without notice that a debate of the content of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Review Report – Office of the Prime Minister and Department of Immigration
Annual Report 2018 – 2019

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a way of a brief background, the Office of the Prime Minister and the Department of Immigration Annual Report 2018-2019 was referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to be reviewed and the results of this, is to be reported back to Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Office of the Prime Minister is primarily responsible for providing sound policy advice and support to the honourable Prime Minister and Cabinet. The Department of Immigration is mandated in providing efficient and effective immigration service through the administration and enforcement of immigration related laws and international conventions. The Office of the Prime Minister and the Department of Immigration engages with international and regional development partners, Civil Society Organisations and the private sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in reviewing the Office of the Prime Minister and the Department of Immigration Annual Report, the Committee noted that a few of the key achievements were the facilitation of the COP 23 and supporting the honourable Prime Minister presiding as Chairman until December 2018. The Department of Immigration successfully embarked on the e-Passport Project in September 2018 to allow for a smooth transition to e-Passport use in future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now go into detail on some of the key highlights and issues that were identified from the review. Firstly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was identified that the Vatukoula Gold Mine Strike dispute has been a longstanding issue, over three decades old, but there were numerous attempts along the way to resolve the issue. A legal opinion on the cause of the issue had been sought from the Office of the Solicitor-General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was noted that the Gold Mine Company did not breach the contract agreement between them and the individuals that had been affected. The Government then stepped in to try to bring about an amicable solution and there is even an offer of an ex gratia payment to the affected person. These sort of payments are considered as rewards given and are not necessarily something that one is obliged to pay, but does so as a way of recognition and appreciation of the work done.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were individuals who felt that this was not enough and thus wanted the payment to be compensation for the 30 years of dispute and wanted a substantial amount

of money for this, \$2 million per person to be exact. This motion by these individuals is contrary to the legal opinion and it should be kept in mind that the Government and the Gold Mining Company had no obligation to offer compensation thus this issue remains unresolved.

Moving on, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of the \$9 million budget allocation to the Office of the Prime Minister for the Small Grant Scheme Programme, \$5.2 million was utilised with a total of 70 projects funded during the financial year in the education sector, village settlements and other integrated sectors.

For the Donor Aided Projects, only one project was undertaken and completed while 10 projects are still on feasibility study. The completed project was the renovation of a newly State House Squash Court with a cost of FJ\$2 million.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was noted that the Rotuma Subvention Fund was not utilised, funds were not released due to the non-submission of audited accounts of the Council of Rotuma. It was advised that these submissions are necessary in having transparent and accountable financial records and it was impressed upon the Council of Rotuma that following the relevant process will be the key to the release of funds from the Rotuma Subvention Fund. This has been the case when the release of funds recommenced in the 2021-2022 Financial Year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Immigration Department undertook a joint venture programme agreement with the Muehlbauer High Tech International for the introduction of the e-Passport system. The total cost of this investment is approximately \$7.8 million to \$8 million. This covered the cost of hardware, software, installation, et cetera. The e-Passport System is enclosed by a secured firewall and uses access control as part of its security measures. This, together with the Department's security regulations and SOPs safeguards the Integrated e-Passport Issuance System. The Fiji Immigration Department has also reviewed and developed numerous SOPs to boost efficiency of the services it provides such as faster turnaround time for application outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was also noted that there were weak internal controls, which led to irregularities in financial reporting of Immigration Department, thus it was commendable to know that the Department had put in place measures to address these irregularities, which are aimed at improving the revenue process and financial reporting for the Department.

However, Mr. Speaker, the Committee also undertook SDG scrutiny of the Annual Report and noted that there were certain activities supported by the Office of the Prime Minister and Fijian Immigration Department, which could be linked to the efforts towards achieving the National Development Plan and ultimately, the global agenda.

The Office of the Prime Minister's Development Co-operation and Facilitation Division is responsible for the Small Grants Scheme which is also provided to rural and outer island communities. It is worth noting that this Scheme is aimed at addressing the needs of these communities in terms of village/settlement improvements, education and climate-resilient projects.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, the Committee is guided by Fiji Parliamentary Standing Order 110(2) in regards to the scrutinisation of Parliamentary papers with consideration on the impact and benefit to both, men and women. It was noted that the Office of the Prime Minister's efforts towards gender equality was focused on its human resource, which is one of the vital parts of any institution.

The Office of the Prime Minister and the Fijian Immigration Department utilised the Open Merit Recruitment System for hiring and recruiting staff. It was also noted that both Offices have given much effort in empowering its female staff by encouraging attendance in trainings and development programmes. In the reported year for the Office of the Prime Minister, 37 percent male

and 62.8 percent female were provided and supported with capacity building and development programmes. For the Fijian Immigration Department, the gender mainstream ratio stood at 53 percent female to 47 percent male, whereby 68 trainings were conducted through overseas and local courses, and a total of 131 officers attended.

Given the commendable effort done by the Office of the Prime Minister and Fijian Immigration Department, the Committee feels that more support should be focused in strengthening the respective Units in terms of delivery by both Offices. The Committee also believes that for the purpose of continued improvements, it would be prudent to put forth a few recommendations for consideration to the Office of the Prime Minister and the Fijian Immigration Department.

Mr. Speaker, in regards to the Vatukoula Gold Mine issue, it was noted that this has been a long-standing issue, and the efforts put in by all parties involved is duly recognised. But for the purpose of resolving this issue, it is recommended that discussions be reinitiated as soon as possible whereby a settlement is reached that is agreed upon by all parties involved.

On the second recommendation, Mr. Speaker, in regards to the non-utilisation of the Rotuma Subvention Fund, the Committee supports the stance by the Office of the Prime Minister and recommends that adherence to necessary processes in place for the submission of financial reports for audit should be maintained and monitoring of this should be upheld so as not to affect the release of funds.

Mr. Speaker, at this juncture, I wish to acknowledge the honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights – honourable Rohit Sharma (Deputy Chairperson), honourable Dr. Salik Govind, honourable Mosese Bulitavu and honourable Mikaele Leawere for their deliberation and input; the Secretariat and the representatives of the Office of the Prime Minister and Fijian Department of Immigration for their cooperation, which assisted the Committee in its work.

I, on behalf of the Committee, commend the Committee's Report on the Office of the Prime Minister and Department of Immigration Annual Report 2018-2019 to Parliament and seek support of all its members to take note of the recommendations by the Committee.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion without notice that a debate on the content of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, I beg to second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

FIJI DEVELOPMENT BANK (AMENDMENT) BILL 2022

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

That the -

- (a) Fiji Development Bank (Amendment) Bill 2022 (Bill No. 47/2022) be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament; and
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 1st September, 2022 with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the honourable Attorney-General to speak on his motion.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we are all very familiar with the Fiji Development Bank which was established under the Fiji Development Act 1966. The Bank, of course, is an autonomous statutory body and provides financing that contributes to the development of Fiji and economy, leading to the enhancement of the quality of the life of all Fijians.

Without going into too much detail as we will be debating this later, the Act itself under sections 7, 17 and 39 of the Act makes reference to the terms “servants” and “servant”. The use of these terms are, of course, very archaic, a reflective of the colonial past that we have had and the influence on the laws which was passed in 1966. We wish to, Mr. Speaker, Sir, amend the word or replace the word “servant” and “servants” with “employee” and “employees”. That is all this amendment seeks to do. I do not think we need to go to a Committee for that. If you see this simple amendment to the Bill, which the Members already have, it replaces the word “servant” and “servants” with the words “employee” and “employees”.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. At the end of the debate, we will have the right of reply from the mover. Does any Member wish to take the floor?

As no Member wishes to take the floor, I will give the floor to the honourable Attorney-General if you have anything further.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have no further comments.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed.

FINANCIAL TRANSACTIONS REPORTING (AMENDMENT) BILL 2022

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

That the -

- (a) Financial Transactions Reporting (Amendment) Bill 2022 (Bill No. 48/2022) be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament; and
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 1st September, 2022 with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Financial Transactions Reporting Act 2004 amongst other things provides for the regulation and control of financial institutions in Fiji to prevent and detect money laundering, terrorist financing and other serious criminal activities. The Act establishes the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) as an intelligence agency of the government, responsible for the detection of money laundering, terrorist financing and other serious criminal activities.

In particular, Sir, Section 13 (1) which is the bulk of the subject matter of this amendment of the Act provides that a financial institution must report to the Financial Intelligence Unit any transaction that is deemed to be Cash Transaction Report of any amount exceeding \$10,000 in cash. The cash transaction reports are a key data source for FIU as they provide critical information that is used to form intelligence of possible money laundering, terrorist financing and other serious criminal activities which is then disseminated to law enforcement agencies.

Analysis, Sir, of banking statistics shows that a large number of transactions, in fact 75 percent, cash and non-cash undertaken by customers of financial institutions in Fiji are for transactions valued below \$10,000. So, they do not actually get reported. Currently, Fiji has a 99 percent reporting rate of cash transaction reports.

The threshold for cash transaction reports, Sir, is a requirement under the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) international standards on anti-money laundering, however, the threshold to be reported is at the discretion of each country. So obviously, the country has got a number of its transactions more way above \$10,000 then the threshold could apply. But, if in our case, if 75 percent of it is below \$10,000 then we are not capturing most of the transactions. In fact what we are finding, Sir, intelligence reports showed that many people are just simply plugging the figure just below \$10,000, so it does not get reported.

Therefore, Sir, the Financial Transactions Reporting Amendment Bill seeks to amend the Act to revise the threshold for cash transaction reports as follows -

- (a) to redefine cash to mean currency notes and coins only;
- (b) Reduce the threshold for cash transaction reports for all financial institutions from \$10,000 to \$5,000 or its equivalent in foreign currency;
- (c) Require the financial institutions such as commercial banks report all transactions, cash and non-cash transactions of \$5,000 and above or its equivalent in foreign currency to the FIU; and
- (d) Require the financial institution such as non-banks, report only cash transactions involving notes and coins of \$5,000 and above to FIU.

The revision of the threshold, Sir, for cash transaction reports will result in a wider data set for intelligence purposes and will strengthen the ability of the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS) and Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) to be more efficient in profiling and investigating tax evasion cases. This will result in an improvement in tax revenue collection and tax compliance. Moreover, Sir, other law enforcement agencies such as the Fiji Police Force and the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) will have access to more data on transactions which will be useful in financial investigations linked to money laundering, terrorist financing and other serious criminal activities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, very important to note that the revision of the threshold for cash transaction report will not affect customers of financial institutions and members of the public. It is all done at the backend. The reporting is done by the banks themselves, Sir. Widespread consultations have been held, indeed also with our international partners and that is the gist of the amendment being sought.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I kind of anticipated another Bill when the honourable Attorney-General presented the first one. Again, Mr. Speaker, I think this Bill before us and being pushed under Standing Order 51 has really not been thought out properly and there are a number of reasons for it. I mean the argument that the honourable Attorney-General is using, you have \$10,000 threshold at the moment, he wants to reduce it to \$5,000 threshold. His argument that 75 percent of the people now are sending transactions below \$10,000 really does not make sense in terms of addressing the overall concerns that he might have with respect to terrorist financing and others.

I am not sure whether this requirement or the reduction in the threshold because we are always worried about illicit transfers and financing for other purposes which are illegal, but it also means that these transactions are for businesses, for things that matter to people and so we need to have a little bit more discussion on this. Whether reducing the threshold is actually going to address that because people can still send \$4,900 below the \$5,000 threshold and send it ten times. So, it is not necessarily addressing the concerns that you might have.

I think this needs more discussion with a wider audience, with other agencies, the businesses communities and those who might be concerned with this and we have seen this in the past, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that even minor amendments to Bills have been rushed in this Parliament under Standing Order 51 and what we found out later on is that, it was not well-thought out, it had wider implications. People had not been consulted, people had not made their views known and this is precisely what is being done here.

So, I do not see a big logic of this Bill at this point in time without any further and serious discussion in terms of what kind of transactions are there. If it has been not reported, has there any study been done? Are the banks concerned about it? Who is concerned about it? Are the law enforcement agencies concerned about it? We do not know any of those information and that is why it is important to put this to a Committee, so that all these issues are aired out in public.

The other point that I want to make, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I have said this before, there are many laws that have passed through this Parliament hardly anyone knows about it. It is all done and has no serious implications, the people do not understand it, and one of the reasons why these things go to the Committee is that, there is a wider public consultations, there is a wider debate on the merits or demerits of a change in a law and it is useful.

In those Committees all these information will be shared, the law enforcement agencies can come there, the Financial Intelligence Unit can come there, the Reserve Bank of Fiji can come to the Committee, the banks can come to the Committee, the business community reps can come to the Committee and say whether it makes sense to reduce the threshold from \$10,000 to \$5,000. So, that is logic behind putting Bills to a Committee and not rushing it through Standing Order 51. So, I do not support this motion.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I echo the sentiments expressed by the honourable Professor Prasad, expressing my concern and the way the Bill has been brought to Parliament but I supposed, Sir, I am talking to a wall because this is the modus operandi for the Government of the day. We are here in Parliament for this last week and here we have this Bill has been brought in this

way, I did not mind the FDB Bill saying we amend “servants” to “employees”. I do not mind that, that is fine with me. But what were we doing all these years that we did not see that and then we bring it in on the last week of sitting in this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this one here, we have talked about the ease of doing business in this country and a Bill like this should be put to the community, in the Committee to have dialogue on this one. I wonder if the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, Honourable Vijay Nath recommended this in his report because they scrutinised the FIU Report every year. I do not think anything has been said about this. You can correct me, Honourable Vijay Nath.

Again, a Committee has been scrutinising the FIU Report all these years. I do not see anything like that coming through, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that would have come through consultation. Not in this manner and it is just sad that we continue to do this.

As I have said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji lacks behind in terms of ease of doing business. We have dropped significantly from where we used to be. This is another obstacle to do business in this country. Maybe it is needed to put it out to the Business Community to discuss it. Not in this manner but like I said, it is talking to a wall. I just wish the next Parliament to do better and I am sure it will be done better because leadership will be different next time, Mr. Speaker..

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, every time, I stand up to contribute, they are very excited about my presence. So, on this I support honourable Professor Prasad and honourable Gavoka in our concern regarding this being coming under Standing Order 51.

(Honourable Member interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- For example, if you look at the draft Bill which is being presented, when you read the Explanatory Note 1.7(a) to 1.7(d), they have serious implications. For example, redefining cash to mean currency notes and coins only. What is this based on? So, that needs to be clearly explained. Also, that threshold from \$5,000 to \$10,000 and see the requirement of financial institutions, this has implications on their processes and procedures internally - forms to fill, reconfiguring their software systems, et cetera. I mean, has this been taken into consideration?

The other issue here, Sir, is remittances is now a major income earner in the nation. Has anything been done to assess the implications of this on remittances - those who are sending remittances into the country? Those issues need to be clear. As I have said, this has serious implications. It should not be just rushed through under Standing Order 51 and there needs to be wider consultation with various stakeholders, as I have mentioned and for those reasons.

MR. SPEAKER.- Since no one else is wishing to take the floor, I now give the floor to the Honourable Attorney-General to speak in reply.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Members obviously did not hear the introduction. If they knew slightly a little bit of information about how the system works, they would not be making such obtuse comments.

Sir, this is about reporting by the banks, it does not affect businesses. Businesses will carry on their normal transaction, Honourable Professor Prasad, you should know this. They will carry on with their normal transactions.

Reporting, honourable Gavoka, you worked in a bank. It is a reporting by the banks to FIU, nothing to do with businesses. There is a financial taskforce in place. There is a constant consultation by FIU. They talked to accountants and lawyers because lawyers and accountants, for example, Sir, also have transactions. Honourable Prasad, you know this, when people buy a house or multiple houses, they actually go and put money into their trust account and the law firms actually have to report that. They all know that.

Honourable Gavoka, went on about ease of doing business. It has nothing to do with ease of business, it is all about the banks. The banks have all agreed to that because the banks want to adhere to international standards. Do not shake your head, you know nothing about it.

When the banks do international transfers, the corresponding banks overseas will talk to our banks and ask, what is the bulk of your transactions? If they say that the bulk of our transactions is below \$10,000 and we are not reporting it to the FIU, they will put a red flag. That is how their International Banking System works.

If you have 75 percent of transactions below \$10,000, obviously there must be a reporting mechanism. It has nothing to do with businesses. Hundred financial institutions that have been consulted including law firms, accounting firms, firms like Merchant Finance and everyone else; and they are all agreeable to that because they all want to adhere to international standards. It is very simple, members of the public do not get affected. Yes, if you are a member of the public and trying to bypass the system, trying to bring in money illegally and trying to do cash transactions, then you will be concerned. But still, it has no implication on you in terms of your daily transactions, your ability to transact.

Sir, FIU will just simply pick up and say, "This person is now transacting amounts over \$5,000 and look at that, there is a pattern." That is what they do. When honourable Professor Prasad went on very obtusely saying, "I can go and do \$4,900." Yes, if you continuously do \$4,900, they will pick up the pattern. The banks themselves without having a requirement to report everything over \$5,000 will go to FIU themselves and say, "Look, this person is doing \$4,900 all the time." They work in collaboration with FIU, they do not understand how the financial system works and so many times continuously. Honourable Tikoduadua, as former Permanent Secretary for Justice, he sat on that Money Laundering Committee, he knows that.

(Hon. Lt. Col. P. Tikoduadua interjects)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- You have now been polluted by the people sitting around you.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point is, if Fiji wants to maintain a credible financial system recognised by International Banking System and not being red flagged, we have to carry out these amendments. There is actually international collaboration. We actually get red flagged and honourable Gavoka and honourable Professor Prasad stood up here, pontificating about Standing Order 51, not realising the seriousness about this particular measure. It has absolutely nothing to do about businesses being affected. It has everything to do with the financial institutions agreeing to report simply transactions over \$5,000. That is all I have to say for the time being. Thank you, Sir.

Question put.

Votes cast:

Ayes	-	27
Nays	-	14
Not voted	-	8

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I would just like to acknowledge the other visitors to the House today: Nina Gage and Geoffrey Gage from Sydney, Australia, you are most welcome.

We will now take an adjournment for morning tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.38 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.18 a.m.

ELECTORAL (AMENDMENT) BILL 2022

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

That the –

- (a) Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2022 (Bill No. 49/2022) be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a standing committee or other committee of Parliament; and
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 1st September, 2022 with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2018 General Elections was held on 14th November, 2018. The final results of the Elections were announced on 18th November, 2018. Thereafter, the Electoral Commission and the Supervisor of Elections produced a Joint Report for Parliament (that is the Joint Report). The Multinational Observer Group (MOG) also presented its Report that was annexed to the Joint Report. The Joint Report and the MOG Report suggested various recommendations for Parliament, the Electoral Commission, the Fijian Elections Office (FEO) as well as the nation as a whole to consider going into the next Elections.

Although the MOG recommendations were considered and reflected in the Electoral (Amendment) Act 2021 which was enacted on 7th June, 2021 the FEO has also identified other aspects of the elections laws to be refined to support the delivery of Elections in line with international best practice. These amendments, Sir, are being proposed based on the experiences of the FEO in the build-up to the preparation for the General Elections so far.

The introduction of the amendments earlier in the cycle in relation to the campaign period and the implication of campaign laws has brought about requirements for the FEO to have the powers to obtain information necessary to determine issues in relation to campaign complaints prior to FEO determining whether or not a law has been breached, and exercising its powers pursuant to section 18 of the Act.

It is also an internationally-recognised best practice to review and reform laws, following the conduct of Elections. In terms of the electoral calendar, this is the ideal time to carry out electoral reforms before a general elections is in fact announced therefore, Sir, the Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2022 seeks to amend the Electoral Act 2014, to reflect these proposed amendments, to reflect better practical ways of implementing existing provisions of the Act. These amendments are also supported by the Electoral Commission for the conduct of free and fair Elections in accordance with the laws in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the General Elections, as we all know, will take place once Parliament is dissolved, and we do not know when Parliament will be dissolved therefore, it is necessary that such amendments are made expeditiously to avoid any potential procedural conflicts under the Act, viz-a-viz, the practical considerations on the ground, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to very quickly take honourable Members through this particular Bill, Clause 2 of the Bill amends section 2 of the Act by redefining the term “person”, to mean, and I quote:

“a natural or legal person and includes a company, association or body of persons, whether corporate or unincorporated, government department, non-governmental organisation, statutory authority or any other entity.”

There are various provisions of the Act that refer to person, however, it is also necessary to clarify that person, that it does not only mean a natural person but also means a legal person so as to extend the application of the provisions to incorporated and unincorporated, as well as other entities. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this definition will also be useful in determining any contravention of the Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Clause 3 of the Bill amends section 6 of the Act to provide for the powers of the Supervisor of Elections necessary to carry out his or her functions under the Act, including the power to direct a person by notice in writing to furnish any relevant information or document.

Without this specific power, the Supervisor of Elections is unable to make inquiries to obtain information necessary for the Supervisor of Elections to arrive at decisions, as required by the Act. Such powers are also extremely important to allow the Supervisor of Elections to conduct inquiries into allegations of breaches of campaign provisions.

Various sections of the Act such as sections 116(4)(c), 118, 141, 144 and 144A require the Supervisor of Elections to make certain inquiries in order to be satisfied as to whether or not a contravention under the Act has, in fact, occurred. Therefore, for this exercise, Sir, it is necessary that the Supervisor of Elections has powers to obtain relevant information or, indeed, documentation.

Mr. Speaker, Clause 4 of the Bill amends section 36 of the Act, to allow the numbers used in the election of members of Parliament to be used in any future election of members of parliament. So all of you who got elected had a number. What this Act does, Sir, essentially it allows for those numbers to be used again because as at 28th August, 2022, there are nine registered political parties in Fiji. The FEO is currently processing the application of another political party. If the registration is approved, Sir, the total number of political parties contesting the 2022 General Elections will be 10.

According to the Act, currently, each political party may nominate up to 55 candidates (being the total number of seats) as we have seen and therefore, the maximum number of candidates that can be nominated through political parties will be 550 candidates for the upcoming Elections. The Electoral Commission has already approved, through a publicly conducted draw that the first number on the ballot paper will be 173.

In applying the provisions of the Act, the FEO assigns the numbers in series from 173 until all the candidates have been assigned numbers. There is a likelihood, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the series will once again repeat the numbers from the 2018 General Elections. If such repetition occurs and section 36(7) of the Act is not removed which currently we are trying to remove, the validity of the entire Elections is at stake. One must consider that four years have passed since the last Elections and individuals will have likely forgotten the numbers from the last Elections so whatever number honourable Rasova had ...

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- 551.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- ... 551, does not mean that people still think that 551 is him, because if 551 goes to honourable Gavoka, it does not mean they will think that he is honourable Rasova (people would have forgotten the numbers). But we need to ensure that we have these numbers in place, otherwise we would be running into thousands if you want different numbers altogether, which would become very difficult for the general members of the public to follow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Clause 5 of the Bill amends section 100 of the Act to allow the Electoral Commission to approve the method of packing unused (I am talking about unused), used and spoiled ballot papers after the count of the ballot papers. As mentioned earlier, in the event that there are 550 candidates, the ballot paper size will be 420 millimetres by 528 millimetres. You are looking at a massive ballot paper. This will mean that not all the materials may fit into a ballot box after the count of the ballot papers.

Logistically, the weight of a ballot paper will exceed 12.5 kilogrammes, making it difficult to carry by hand. It is, therefore, necessary that the Electoral Commission be empowered to consider the practicality of the operations in order to approve the best means for a transparent, safe and variable mechanism to transport the ballot material from the polling stations after they are counted because currently, it is very restricted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Clause 6 of the Bill inserts section 110A to the Act to empower the Electoral Commission to adopt and publish guidelines on opinion polls, surveys and research related to Elections as it deems fit for the conduct of free and fair Elections. Therefore, to protect the integrity of the electoral process and the results of the General Elections, it is necessary that all public opinion polls in Fiji adhere to the international standards and guidelines which, under this amendment the Electoral Commission may adopt as part of its powers and functions under the Act. The Electoral Commission is thus empowered to adopt the latest guidelines and standards to apply to Fiji and the Supervisor of Elections is further tasked to vet compliance by any public opinion poll published in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, additionally, Clause 6 of the Bill provides that the Supervisor of Elections is required to verify compliance and take necessary action to ensure that the guidelines are fully complied with. Any appeal against the decision of the Supervisor of Elections under section 110A of the Act can indeed be made to the Electoral Commission.

Sir that is essentially the gist of what these amendments are all about. I am sure all the honourable Members agree that there is time imperative in respect of these amendments. There are some very practical issues. I think no one envisaged when the laws were drafted there will be 10 political parties, that there will be 55 seats, there will be 550 candidates potentially and then, therefore, we will also need to be able to, for example, reuse the numbers. Otherwise, if you do not want to use any of those numbers we have used so far, we will be going to thousands, so that is a very practical issue.

The other practical issue, of course, is about the size of the ballot paper, the weight impact it will have on the ballot boxes because the ballot boxes, once the votes are counted, they need to be on transport to a safe place. How to transport that? All of these need to be taken into account, given the size of the ballot papers and, of course, the public opinion polls are adopting international standard. So that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in summary the introduction of the provision of this Bill.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. At the end of the debate, we will have the right of reply from the mover.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, again, this is highly irresponsible, apart from the practical matters that he talked about, for the honourable Attorney-General, who is the Minister for Elections, to bring this Bill into Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, the history of the 2013 Constitution is well-known. The history of the draconian electoral laws is well-known in this country. We have talked about this before and we will continue to talk about it. This is a government which has continued to empower the Supervisor of Elections. The Supervisor of Elections is almost like a god now. So much powers have been given to the Supervisor of Elections and a lot of the decisions that the Supervisor of Elections makes cannot even be challenged in

the court of law. Where in the world, where in a democracy you are going to have that? We have got all these stupid campaign laws for example in place. We have got these stupid laws about manifestos. In any democracy, the political parties make their manifesto. It is not for the government to tell them, "You should cost this, you should do that." We have already had that.

It is stifling democracy to no end, Mr. Speaker, and apart from the practical matters, Clause 3 of the Bill again gives the Supervisor of Elections powers to harass not only candidates, supporters, agents but opposition political parties and we know why some of these laws have been made and that is why Mr. Speaker, it is highly irresponsible. This is complete dictatorship for the honourable Attorney-General to bring this Bill just before an elections is due. I mean, some of the practical matters that he is talking about shows how stupid those laws initially were - the system and there has been no attempt over the last seven-and-a-half years or eight years to change those.

This Bill, Mr. Speaker, should have been brought earlier so that we could have had a proper discussion, consultation. I mean, we already Mr. Speaker, have all kinds of conflict of interest in this country including the honourable Attorney-General, who is the General Secretary of the FijiFirst Party, he is the registered officer of the FijiFirst Party, he is the Minister responsible for Elections. The laws that are coming in, the laws that have been there, the Financial Management Act, requiring the political parties to engage in this stupid exercise which is highly and thoroughly impractical and it actually goes to the fundamental point about democracy.

Yes, political parties offer the moon sometimes but it is not for him or for the Government or the Supervisor of Elections or someone in the Electoral Commission to ask and tell them how they are going to do it. It is for the people whether they want to believe it or not. That is an example of a stupid law that this Government has put in place to punish the Opposition.

They want to continue with dictatorship in this country, Mr. Speaker, and that is why they are bringing all these stupid laws to gag the Opposition. They are pushing the people, the political parties to the wall, Sir. The onerous requirements of some of the laws - example and very evident of what of what he is trying to do. He puts a complaint to the Supervisor of Elections, there goes the Supervisor of Elections and there goes the Electoral Commission. We put a complaint against him nothing happens, because he is the Minister for Elections. He is responsible for the budget for the Elections Office. He does not talk about all that conflict of interest and yet he does not want a Bill, a law change to go to the Committee to have more discussion on it. These are things that, in a good democracy, a government will discuss with other political parties or at least the opposition.

That is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill should be withdrawn. In fact, it is the job of Parliament and I urge you, I know you will say this is the Government's job but this is not right. This is not strengthening democracy in this country. This is stifling democracy in this country and this is what this Government has done over the last seven years and I have seen the changes to the laws. They have not entered into any serious discussion with the Opposition Parties, the practicality of some of the laws that are there and so, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot support this motion. This Bill should be withdrawn. I want to tell the people of this country, which we have been saying to them.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- It is too late.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We want to tell the people and the people of this country are fed up, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the arrogance and dictatorship.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They are fed-up and they have their backs against the walls and they are waiting for the date of the Election when they will kick them out. That is what they will do.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Dream on!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They have been threatening and I know. I do not want to name the honourable Member but he was drunk somewhere in one of the hotels and he said to his friends, “Oh, we will win again like we won the last time because we rigged it. We are going to rig it again.” This is what a Government Member is telling his friends.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Making up stories.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is not a story.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Who!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I will name that man when we debate this Bill, do not worry.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- You do not have a name.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I have a name.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a very serious issue. They talk about stability, transparency, accountability and democracy and yet, they are making laws to entrench them in power. That is why I am saying that this Bill should not be entertained, it should be withdrawn. I urge the Government to reconsider this Bill. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I agree entirely with what has been expressed by my colleague, honourable Professor Prasad. Actually people were saying publicly that in this sitting of Parliament this week, some laws about the elections will be brought in by this Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I say this with concern because elections is going to be happening very soon and this is not the time to be changing the rules. This is not the time to be making new rules as articulated by my colleague; people are not sure any more about their democracy in this country. Democracy should be enjoyed by the people at least we celebrate it. We have been campaigning since 26th April but we cannot talk about our policies. We have close to 50 candidates now campaigning across Fiji (SODELPA), and when we get asked about our policies, we say “sorry we cannot share that with you right now because we have to meet certain stringent requirements by this government”.

Mr. Speaker, what kind of democracy is that - that our people cannot talk about policies because of some requirements that are quite (I like what you have said) stupid? Where in the world do you have to cost your manifesto in order to campaign? We do not know of any jurisdiction that does that.

Mr. Speaker, it is truly stifling. As Party Leader, one of my main concerns now is to keep our people motivated because really they do not have much to say, because of this silly requirement that whatever we put in our manifesto must have a cost to it; where are we going to get the money from; and how it affects the National Budget. Government has all the advantages because they have these figures with them. They have the Civil Service to provide these figures for them. For us political parties, the honourable Minister is saying there are nine political parties that have registered in this country.

Tell me, Mr. Speaker, I would like to know and I know SODELPA can do it. We are very close to finalising our manifesto and what about the other small parties. Can they live up to the stupid standards being set by this Government? Can they really be engaging themselves in democracy in the way we have settled all this? I am sorry but I never thought I would use the word 'stupid' in this Parliament but it is coming to that now, Mr. Speaker. I once used the word 'clowns' here and it is really mind boggling.

I would urge the Government to please take this back. The people today are expecting elections to happen very soon. I do not know why they are changing the electoral laws. We are out of words in trying to make sense of how this Government operates. You know it has been like that all these years - dictatorship at its worst is what we see in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, they should take this back so that we bring some sanity into our electoral system. We are ready for elections. Do not bring in anything new to make it more complicated. Like I said - I know I am talking to the deaf or having dialogue with the deaf, but let me register our concern and the SODELPA supporters will know this and punish FijiFirst accordingly.

HON. J. USAMATE.- It is incredible the kind of rubbish we are hearing in this Parliament. The people of this country must listen to the sentiments that are being expressed here. The group on this side is telling the people of this country that there is no accountability for what they will portray in the next election. If they are saying we are going to do this, there is no accountability for them to tell the people of this country how they will fund what they supposed to do. Are we supposed to treat the voters of this country like idiots? That is what you are saying. That is what the honourable Gavoka is talking about.

What is the big controversy with the kind of things that we are talking about here? This debate currently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is just about Head 51 - whether it goes to Head 51 or not. But the kind of sentiments that are expressed here look at the things that have been stated here by Clause 2. It is just a definition of 'person'. What is the big deal with that? The aim of that is to eliminate any controversial of that. What is the big deal with that?

HON. PROF B.C. PRASAD.- Clause 3.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Then there have been sentiments here to say that any party in this country can stand up and say we will do this and that, but they have no responsibility to show how they will fund that.

HON. PROF B.C. PRASAD.- It is up to the people.

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is what they are telling the people of this country that political parties should not be expected to show what is the rationale, how will they fund what they are supposed to do. Are you going to treat the citizens of this country like idiots? This side of the Parliament says no! The people in this country - before they vote for their party, they must know how those things will be funded. That is the expectation. You are trying to build up a lot of conspiracy. There is no conspiracy here - there is only one conspiracy; conspiracy on this side of Parliament is to make sure that the people of this country get the best government that treats people transparently.

Remember transparent action on this side of Parliament when people do something that is deemed as wrong according to the law, people on this side of Parliament resign. That is transparency, that is integrity and that is ethics. That is what the FijiFirst Party stands for. You stand up and you talk about it as if there is some kind of conspiracy, there is no conspiracy. The only conspiracy that we have is to do the best for the people of this country.

I want to tell the voters of Fiji, you have the right to expect when a political party comes to you

and says, we will do this and we will do that - they will show you how it will be funded because the people of this country have the right to expect that.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- I rise to contribute to the debate on the Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister who had previously spoke has just simplified the issue. He treats it lightly; it is not a light issue it is a serious issue because if you look at the 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5 it is more than what he is saying; the amendment of definitions. It involves quite substantial changes and the one I would like to comment on is 2.7 - to empower the Electoral Commission to adopt and publish guidelines on opinion polls.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this came about basically because the opinion poll is going against them. That is the main reason; that is the truth. The opinion poll in the *Fiji Sun* has been going against them and has been portraying them as maybe second or third. That is why they are asking for this to be reviewed for standards to be put in or other guidelines to restrict opinion polls. That is a hindrance on democracy - opinion polls are there for feedback not only for political parties but also for the voters and that is an issue where we do not agree that this be rushed through because that is another fundamental issue in terms of having a proper and practising democracy which we, up to today have seen Fiji is not, and that is why we emphasise that these kind of changes should have been brought in earlier, discussed properly and consultations made thoroughly.

That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is what I wanted to emphasise today. The whole thing boils down to the 2013 Constitution and the electoral methodology which is there and this methodology is imposed on this nation. That is why we have always emphasised with the honourable Prime Minister the need for bipartisanship in terms of disagreements on the Constitution, and the legal frameworks in this country. But unfortunately that has fallen on deaf ears and it is too late for them because the voters will have their say and soon they will not be sitting where they are but they will be outside the Parliament.

Finally, I would like to ask, when is the Election? Why are they dragging it? Are we going to have the Elections or not? People are beginning to doubt the whole process and people are being pushed against the wall so please make the decision and stop introducing laws which hinder democracy.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to add a few more. The Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2022, people are waiting for the Writ and they are ready to go to elections. One thing I found in the 2014 Elections, there were only about five Parties that contested for the 50 seats. Come 2018 Elections, there were probably another five Parties and it surprises me now that for 2022, 10 political parties have been approved.

It is amazing to know how these people got their 5,000 signatures. Did the Electoral Commission check the names of the signatures of these people? For parties to qualify in the 2014 Elections, there were only five parties and the rest could not because of the difficulty they had, and even for the 2018 Elections. Now in 2022, because of the opinion polls being against the Government, they have approved about 10 parties.

The Justice, Law and Human Rights Committee had submitted (I think) 18 recommendations for this elections. I take it that it is not in here that every name or every number will come with their party signs but that has not been mentioned here. I do not know whether the 18 recommendations have been taken into account by the Supervisor of Elections. Sir, maybe tomorrow they will change another Act, change the goal post towards the 2022 Elections. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope this is the last and we will debate it again on Thursday.

MR. SPEAKER.- Since, no one else wishes to take the floor, I give the floor to the honourable Attorney-General for his Right of Reply.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is always very interesting to see honourable Professor Prasad getting a fluster which obviously he was not in a fluster earlier on because generally his fluster situation stems from when knows he is not doing really well outside with members of the public, and he tries to come and vent it out here in this Parliament, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Talk about yourself!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wanted to highlight a couple of things in response to what the other side said. It would appear that honourable Professor Prasad's objection to this Bill is only on Section 3, in respect of the powers essentially being elucidated for the Supervisor of Elections to carry out his work. In that process, of course, he brought about everything else, his frustrations about how he essentially is not able to now hoodwink members of the public, with all sorts of gimmicks - that is what it is all about.

Mr. Speaker Sir, if you have a country that has the historical record where politicians have used ethnicity, where politicians have used false promises to try and win office, then laws have to be made to ensure that we provide a level playing field. Laws have to be put in place to ensure that, that level of hoodwinking does not take place. Honourable Professor Prasad said "let the public decide how it will be funded". When he goes out and talks to a group of farmers or people who may not be that well educated and says "I will give you X, Y and Z" they do not necessarily have all the information available to themselves or necessarily sometimes the education qualifications to be able to question that. This is why, Sir, we need these laws in place.

When you have true democracy being implemented in 2014 where we have one person, one vote, one value - it has never been done. They always grunt and moan about this, but it has never been done in this country. The British left us with an electoral system that was based on ethnicity. It was then perpetuated and ingrained in the 1990 Constitution - purely based on ethnicity, forget about open seats. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 1997 again we had that still ingrained. Here we have, and as a result of that we had to make a proviso to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. We had a proviso as a result of our electoral system.

Honourable Tuisawau talked about the electoral system that was imposed. Honourable Professor Prasad, honourable Tikoduadua and honourable Qereqeretabua actually do not acknowledge the fact, their Party got a piddly over 5 percent in 2014, yet they are in Parliament. They got a piddly 7 percent, yet they are in Parliament in 2018. They received 20 percent of the total votes cast in the previous elections, but did not get a single seat but this electoral system has allowed small parties like them to be represented in Parliament.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- They do not acknowledge that, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They do not acknowledge the fact that this electoral system has allowed all Members of Parliament to be accountable to every single Fijian, irrespective of where they live. They do not acknowledge the fact that this electoral system has allowed more women to be in Parliament than ever before and more young people to be in Parliament than ever before.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- That when we go to elections we do not stand along separate

lines, we all stand in one line as Fijians voting on policies and issues. They do not acknowledge that fact.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Honourable Gavoka joined this chorus of stupid, Mr. Speaker, Sir. There is no creative thinking. Stupid, because he loved the word, so he is now saying it. A bit more finesse would have been obtuse, perhaps.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point is this, what is wrong in saying what your policies are. Not all policies actually have a cost factor. You can announce those policies, but if you are going to say, "I am going to build a four-lane road", then you need to say how much will it cost. Honourable Gavoka said they do not have any statistics. By law, we have to publish the fiscal update before elections. It is all there, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is outdated.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- The Budget has also given the latest statistics. He is saying it is outdated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact is, they have all the figures available and the fact is, they do not want to be accountable to members of the public. They want to be able to go out and make false promises. Honourable Gavoka is already on record saying, "I'll make universities all free." Mr. Speaker, Sir, absolutely, but no figures. He does not know how much it will cost. He does not take into account the fact that 65 percent of the population is below the age of 35, therefore, we will be getting more children being born. Therefore, how will they be funded? What is the sustainability of it? Mr. Speaker, Sir, those are the kind of things. If it is done, then that is great. Present it! Stop whinging, stop whinging all of you.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- It'll be done.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- When?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- The whole issue is about creating a transparent level playing field, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I wanted to also make is that, we have had now people, for example, going around saying, "We will bring down the price of flour" or "We will bring down the price of fuel" or "We will bring down the price of cooking oil. This Government has put it up, we will bring it down." This is the level of obfuscation and lies that has been told to members of the public. They know who we are talking about. So here we have, one hand politicians saying that out in the field, yet they come to this Parliament and say that these laws are unfair. It is completely unfair to hoodwink the members of the Fijian electorate. Completely unfair!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Everyone knows that Government does not control the price of fuel. Everyone knows that we do not control the price of wheat globally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, yet, they are doing that and, yet, they come and complain about such laws.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Shameful!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, would it not be so stupid for a government that if we control the price of food, that we would put it up during election time? Is that not stupid? If

we had our own way, we would make it 5 cents a kilogramme, just to win the elections. So, logically, it does not follow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have talked about all sorts of things, yet todate, NFP nor SODELPA nor any other Party outside – PAP or whatever has produced an alternative budget. Not one of them has produced any alternative budget, nor have they made an effort to do so. They have been there for eight years alternative budget, nor have they made an effort to do so. They have been there for eight years. Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Professor Prasad is getting all in a fluster hogwash, we know he gets caught out.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- If you go to a matured democracy like Australia, you will find that the opposition party will always produce an alternative budget, they always will do that.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- That is Australia.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- He is saying that that is Australia and here they go, then they call us dictatorship. They use it so flippantly. Here we have a Professor saying this is a dictatorship. What does the word “dictator” mean? A ruler with total power over one country that is a dictator. A dictatorship means that that one person has complete control over one country.

Parliament makes laws, there is an independent judiciary, there is an independent executive and that is how the government functions, and they say, “Oh that is nonsense.” That is the most obtuse things you have said, this is and on the same hand, Sir, they said, “Oh, we must work together, we have bipartisanship.” You do not even agree on the fundamentals. This man, honourable Tuisawau said in the last session that people must be appointed on ethnicity in government positions, in statutory positions; you said that.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Point of Order!

MR. SPEAKER.- You have the Point of Order, honourable Member.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- That Point of Order, he is misleading Parliament because what I mentioned was based on the Household Income and Expenditure Survey, the percentage of *iTaukei* who are poor and Government should look at ways of uplifting because of their high percentage; 75 percent of *iTaukei* are in that category of poor, that is what I said. I did not say that they should be appointed on ethnicity.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- You said it, check the *Daily Hansard*.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- If I said it then bring it to this Parliament and prove it. I did not say that a person should be appointed because he is an *iTaukei* or any other race, I did not say that. Stop misleading Parliament and portraying the Oppositions as racist.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Stop doing that because you yourself is a racist and I can show it.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Sit down!

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Attorney-General you have the floor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, he did say it. It is in the same way he is getting in a fluster like honourable Professor Prasad. He is getting worried about a Warid comment. In the same way, the complete lack of impertinency of them, it took them three to four days to come back and make a comment on the comment made by this lady from People's Alliance Party (PAP). They are all going, "aww". That is actually what happened.

We made statements, the honourable Prime Minister made a statement on it, then they woke up from their coma or from being obsequious to his new leader, that is what it is all about. This is the type of governance that is the alternative. This is the alternative to Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if these people get into control or power.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not want to make any further comments, however, we have of course digressed in respect of this particular Bill. As I have highlighted, it seems like section 3 is what honourable Professor Prasad seems to be concerned about, there are some very practical issues in the Bill. We have a ballot paper that will be extremely large, we need to be able to have laws that will cater for that.

Honourable Rasova asked, "Did they check the signatures?" Of course they do. It actually gets published. Where have you been? Certainly not in Kadavu. Every signature gets verified. People from your Party actually have resigned and gone there, and they signed on to other political parties. They have to go through processes. One of them actually, two parties, applied for registration, some of the signatures were not back because of what they called "double dipping". They have gone back for registration. No one envisaged we will have 10 political parties, but they have registered, so there is a practical solution to it and there is a practical issue in terms of numbers. What is your problem with having numbers being put in place? It is for the betterment of the conduct of the elections. Opinion polls, people from SODELPA have complained to me about the opinion polls.

Honourable Tuisawau, you are obviously in a different political party from all the ranting and raving you have been doing in public press. There are people in SODELPA who have commented, other political party members have commented about how the polls have been published and there is no standard. What is wrong with the Electoral Commission adopting international standards?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- What is wrong with that? What is wrong in catering for the fact that the ballot papers will be large and will create a very heavy weight, people will not be able to carry it so let us have alternative ways. The law is limited in that sense. So these are practical issues, Sir. There is nothing sinister about it. The other thing that none of them actually picked up upon because they are so overridden by Standing Order 51, we have got set no time limit. Normally we say that the debate should be limited to one hour. For all the three Bills today, we have said there is no time limit. You can debate till morning come but let us debate it.

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

Question put.

Votes cast:

Ayes - 27

Nays - 16

Not voted - 6

Motion agreed to.

**REVIEW REPORT - FIJI HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION
AUGUST 2016-JULY 2017 ANNUAL REPORT**

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the review of Fiji Higher Education Commission August 2016 – July 2017 Annual Report which was tabled on 4th April, 2022.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Higher Education Commission (FHEC) oversees the development and the improvement of higher education in Fiji with the aim of ensuring that learners have the best possible opportunity to gain relevant qualifications required to support and sustain Fiji's economic and social prosperity.

The FHEC regulates the registration and operation of all higher education institutions, ensuring they meet quality standards and guidelines that reflect national and international imperatives. It is also responsible for establishing and maintaining the Fiji Qualifications Framework which enables Fiji's qualifications to be measured both, in Fiji and internationally.

The Commission was established as a statutory body in 2010 under the Fiji Higher Education Act 2008. During the scrutiny of the Commission's August 2016 to July 2017 Annual Report, some pertinent findings were made by the Committee.

Firstly, the FHEC was reviewed in 2017, to ensure that it remains on par with that of other international qualifications frameworks. Furthermore, progress was made on the creation of a Higher Education Commission System to enable access by Higher Education Institution to upload learner data and other necessary data for higher education. We note that this initiative will subsequently facilitate data integration onto the Fiji Education Management Information System. The review of the Commission's Human Resource systems and processes were also carried out in 2017 by KPMG. This review was undertaken to strengthen the Commission's Human Resources functions including its Performance Assessment System.

The goal of higher education in Fiji is to:

1. Enable all Fijians to realise their potential in contributing to a just, peaceful and sustainable nation.
2. Improving access to quality higher education in Fiji will contribute to both the economy and the society.
3. Equity will be progressed by special provision for disadvantage groups and communities, particularly in those areas of study and locations where the disparity is identified, especially amongst youth, early school leavers, the unemployed and the under-employed, people living with disabilities and rural communities.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members the floor is now open for debate on the motion.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Committee for the Report. As the Chairman has stated, the role of the Fiji Higher Education Commission is an important one. He talked

about the qualifications framework again that is an important task but Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me begin by saying that we are looking at 2016 - 2017 Report. As we had said before in this Parliament, it is quite disappointing that these institutions or bodies, and we have seen many government departments, many ministries annual reports are always late and sometimes we are looking at these reports issues three, four or five years after it is done. But let me reflect on some of the fundamental issues with respect to Higher Education Institutions and in particular those which were put in place in a way to support different types of qualifications.

We have had the Fiji Institute of Technology (now FNU) mainly concentrating on TVET, technical skills and unfortunately Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2010 and more so since 2013 or 2014, there has been a lot of changes within the education system let alone what has happened to higher education system. Today the lack of vision, the ability of the Government to look at what was happening and to assess the effectiveness of some of those reforms, we find ourselves today in a very, very deep hole not only in terms of the qualifications, the skills that are needed in this country but also in terms of the quality.

I heard the honourable Attorney-General yesterday talk about how the Government needs to invest in creating more skills. Mr. Speaker, Sir, his Government has been responsible for the state of decay that we have in terms of the skills. People have been migrating over so many years. There might be a lot more going now. A lot more demand in Australia and New Zealand but for so many years we had a system which was producing enough people. The tertiary institutions were producing enough people the Fiji Institute of Technology (FIT) then Fiji National University (FNU). I mean Honourable Usamate knows. He knows the value of what some of those systems were in terms of producing technical skills in this country. We know the story of the technical colleges. We spend millions of dollars and what happened; collapsed.

We had this very good system in schools where we had vocational training and there was this progression to the old Fiji National Training Centre (FNTC) in terms of gaining qualifications. The result today is a complete destruction of the ability of this country right now to produce technical skills. Those are issues that the Fiji Higher Education Commission and I am sure we are looking at the 2016/2017 Report but they would be looking at what should happen in the future.

Mr. Speaker, we have called for not only in terms of Higher Education Institution but we have called for the holistic review of the education system. We have been calling for an Education Commission in this country because it is important to look at what has happened in the last 15 years.

So, Mr. Speaker, I would urge the Higher Education Commission to look at the tertiary institutions and the failure of technical college and what is the alternative. I know they cut Tertiary Education loans Scheme (TELS) to TVET Programme at USP whether we are producing enough right now from FNU. What sort of skills are been produced? These are important questions that not only the Higher Education Commission would be concerned about the curriculum and the quality but as a country, we are concerned about and the biggest bottleneck, Mr. Speaker, you know going forward in the next four or five years will be the lack of technical skills in this country.

Mr. Speaker, I want to continue and refer to the Higher Education Commission Report and the Appendix. This is in relation to funding for Higher Education institutions. This is the question that was put to the Fiji Higher Education Commission, and it says;

“Fiji Higher Education Commission through its funding model plays an important role in advising the Government on funding allocation for eligible Higher Education Institutions. In recognition of the critical role they play as such what advice the Commission gave to the Government on the detrimental effects of withholding grant to the University of the South

Pacific (USP). In the Commission assessment how will this affect national development and what will be the mid-term, long term impact on the provision of quality tertiary education to students”.

Of course, the HEC says:

“The HEC anticipates the matters of interest are resolved in a timely manner between parties to minimise further deception to the quality of teaching and learning experience in this challenging environment”.

The Committee actually posed a good question, Mr. Speaker, to the HEC.

Let me put this issue of funding to USP perspective because we have heard so many lies, misinformation and deviousness you know in terms of what is the real issue. In here, Mr. Speaker, because it is important in this Parliament to let this out very clearly and I want to do that. It is very important for us to understand that because withholding of funding to the USP is having a very, very serious impact. Not only on the students from Fiji but students throughout the region and for us as a country as well.

Mr. Speaker, there was a statement which was put by the USP Staff Association and I thought they let it out very, very well and I want to refer to some of those issues. It says for example, that when the new Vice-Chancellor Professor Pal Ahluwalia was appointed, during his induction period, he put a report to the University Council of the financial mismanagement and other issues that took place. When that went to the Council, the first inquiry took place following the March 2019 report titled, “Issues, Concerns and Breaches of Past Management and Financial Decisions” by the new Vice-Chancellor and President Pal Ahluwalia to the Executive Committee of the University Council.

Regarding financial mismanagement and failure to comply with university regulations and procedures by the previous administration. This administration was overseen by the then Pro-Chancellor, Winston Thompson and led by former Vice-Chancellor Rajesh Chandra. The serious nature of the allegations and the evidence provided saw the Council agreeing to the appointment of an independent accounting firm to examine the issues raised by Professor Pal Ahluwalia. The company appointed was the Auckland BDO and the independent BDO inquiry concurred with nearly all the complaints made in that paper.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is pertinent, therefore, to note that BDO had accessed to emails and relevant communications at the direction of the Council Chair of the Audit Risk Committee and the then Deputy Pro-Chancellor and BDO. According to the Staff Association and the report that they produced found nothing with regards to Professor Ahluwalia’s management.

Independent Inquiry No. 2, the USP Special Council Meeting held in Nadi and the honourable Attorney-General was in that meeting. I know it was a three member person committee that was appointed from that Council meeting. This Committee intend that committee by the then Deputy Prime Minister of Samoa and now Prime Minister, honourable Attorney-General and the former Prime Minister of the Cook Islands. They appointed a three member Commission to work through the recommendations in the BDO report and to rumper the University’s governance structure and procedures to prevent maladministration and financial mismanagement in the future.

The Commission’s recommendations were accepted by the University Council and the University Administration has been systematically implementing those recommendations. The three member commission did not report any adverse finance relating to Professor Ahluwalia’s management.

Independent Inquiry No. 3, Mr. Speaker, Sir, since Professor Pal Ahluwalia's reporting of the breaches of management and finances in March, 2019, there have been continuous efforts to discredit him by the Pro-Chancellor Mr. Winston Thompson, who unsuccessfully sought to terminate his employment. The discrediting action took the form of 26 alleged allegation of mismanagement against Professor Ahluwalia.

Another 33 unsubstantiated allegations levelled by the Chair of the Audit Risk Committee shortly after. Professor Ahluwalia was suspended for 10 days in June, 2020 by the hastily convened executive committee. This decision was overturned by the Full Council and he was reinstated. Nevertheless for good governance purposes, the Council appointed a sub-committee chaired by Australian Professor Caroline McMillen who investigated the 33 allegations inclusive of the 26 and cleared Professor Ahluwalia for any mismanagement.

Independent Inquiry No. 4 called Project Dinero, KPMG still not satisfied with the USP Council decisions. The Pro-Chancellor Winston Thompson and Mr. Mahmood Khan, chair of the Audit Risk Committee instituted another investigation name Project Dinero investigation by KPMG. That project report was available in draft in early 2020 and published in August 2020. KPMG confirmed that no financial mismanagement had occurred under Professor Pal Ahluwalia. In fact, the University was in a stronger financial position.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Independent Inquiry No. 5, when all these failed on the part of those who wanted to get rid of him and following Professor Pal Ahluwalia's deportation and we all know that it was just a Gestapo style of deportation, there was a fundamental attack on academic freedom and human rights then the Chair of Audit and Risk Committee, Mr. Mahmood Khan and then Pro-Chancellor continued their claims by pointing another KPMG investigation in the alleged mismanagement by Professor Ahluwalia and his senior management colleagues. These allegations repeated the 16 page report by PC Thompson in Nadi in 2019 and the 26 and 33 allegations, as well as they are after the new unsubstantiated allegations. KPMG report titled "Projects Striker" had in terms of reference set by Mr. Khan and Mr. Thompson and included all the allegations that the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy made, you know calling for another investigation. In considering this striker report, the USP Council agreed that there was no material misconduct and again exonerated Professor Pal Ahluwalia and his senior management team.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all these inquires have clearly, cleared any allegations of mismanagement by the new Vice-Chancellor and the new senior management. When the honourable Attorney-General came to Parliament, you know, they have come to Parliament on a number of occasions and said "oh, we are withholding grant because we feel there is mismanagement". How many times you want to have an inquiry?

The Council, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which includes Ministers and Leaders of the Region which includes Australia and New Zealand, who have the skills, who have the knowledge in that Council, to determine whether those allegations had any substance or any material. And all those investigations and two initiated by those who were making those allegations, cleared the man, cleared the university management of any wrong doing. Now, the Higher Education Commission or the Standing Committee was right in asking that question, why is the Government so unconcerned about the damage that they are doing to the University of the South Pacific?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when you hold funding, you do not just give students TELS loans and send them to the university. When they go to the university, they need good lecturers, they need qualify lecturers, experience lecturers, they need the facilities, they need the classrooms, they need recreation facilities, they need libraries, they need books, they need computers, and they need labs. These are

facilities that universities have to provide to the students. When you hold grants to the university, you are damaging the quality of education that our students get.

The other thing that they do not understand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and this is where I think the Higher Education Commission, if it is an independent institution, it should tell the Government that what they are doing is destroying the quality of tertiary education in this country, especially for our students who go and study at the University of the South Pacific.

They have talked about the Fiji Government being the largest contributor, yes, in terms of grant we might be the largest contributor or the university's budget is closed to about \$130 million or \$140 million and Fiji Government contribution is around \$30 million to \$40 million a year. Of course, we provide scholarships, we provide TELS loan to our students because we have to pay the fees like other countries do.

The biggest beneficiary, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of funding allocation to the University of the South Pacific is Fiji's students, Fiji's parents and it also adds to the economy, the spending that people who work in the university, the students who go and study there, those who come from the region, what is holding this Government? They come and read an anonymous letter here in Parliament but here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a Council which has investigated all the allegations that they made and their people made.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one day when Mr. Thompson and Mr. Mahmood Khan ordered that investigation on their own, it was breached of the Council's policy. In fact, the Council sacked Mr. Mahmood Khan as the Chair of Audit and Risk Committee for being unethical and there was a warning letter sent to Mr. Thompson for being unethical. Yet, we see these two individuals are all over the place, Government thinks this is the Council that made the decision.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very clear that this Government have made this decision because they did not like one man. God knows why but in the action, they are destroying an international reputable regional institution by holding this grant. I hope, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that they will shed the ego and arrogance and forget about an individual. Look at the bigger picture, look at the institution, and look at Fiji's history in keeping the regional university as a premier tertiary institution in the region.

Let us look at the bigger picture, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Pal Ahluwalia is not going to be the Vice-Chancellor for all his life, no one is going to be there for all their life but the university has been there since 1968. Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is why and I think in some sense, it is criminal because some of the grants that were withheld were approved by Parliament, especially in 2017 and 2018 for the Government to hold the grant of the University of the South Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I speak on behalf of the parents, the students, the staff and everyone out there in the region, let us not penalise this institution because long after we are all gone, the university will still be there.

MR. SPEAKER.- On that note, honourable Members, we will take a break for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.32 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.32 p.m.

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity to talk on this motion that is before Parliament. First of all, I would like to say thank you to the Standing Committee that is responsible for going through the 2016 and 2017 Reports, as has been mentioned that the reports occurred a few years ago.

The comment that I would like to make is that, it is good to see the continuous growth of the Fiji Higher Education Commission. In the Reports that we are discussing today, looking at the Committee's observations, I totally endorse the observations that have been made by the Committee on page 7 of the Report, about the development of the quality standards of the Fiji Higher Education that has been strengthened and the efforts to register higher education institutes and quality assurance programmes that they offer. It has been good to see this development because over the past 12 years, the national qualification framework originally are part of that framework established just to look at TVET, but to see over the years the integration of technical and skills training together with academic type of education so that there can be similar movement between the two streams. So the development over the past few years has been something that has been very useful.

I notice also with a lot of appreciation, the reactivation of the Fiji Qualifications Council. I think one of the challenges that we have seen over the years is the importance of having portability of qualifications between different institutions in the country so that they can recognise what each other has done. I can remember a few years ago, we used to have people attending programmes at Montfort Boys Town which was renowned for being amongst the best in producing people in doing Fitting and Machinery, but later on when they wanted to move to the next stage of qualifications to go to the Fiji Institute of Technology, they had to redo what they had already done.

Under the system of the Fiji Qualifications Council where we have nationally established qualifications and everyone is trying to implement the same set of national qualification, it removes the duplication of people having to learn the same thing twice, because everything the people have learnt, counts towards the qualification they have. I am very glad to see that the Qualifications Council and its processes have been rejuvenated in the process of the Fiji Higher Education Commission. I have always believed that the Fiji Higher Education Commission has a very important role in this country.

One of the challenges that we had over decades, not only since the birth of the Fiji Higher Education Commission, but even before that, during the time of the Fiji National Training Council, during the time when we had the National Apprenticeship Board that used to be part of the Ministry of Labour, we have always had this issue of developing enough skilled workers in terms of TVET, people with skills, people who are able to fix cars, build houses, fix machines, et cetera.

Over the past few years, I have noticed also that one of the particular challenges that we have is that, when we integrate this into the world of academia, some of the things that we reward in academia might not necessarily assist us in developing skilled workers. What I mean, for instance, is in the world of academia, people get their progress in terms of their salaries according to their qualifications. If you have the Masters or PhD, then your salary increases. For the development of the skilled workers, what we really need is people who have the industrial ability to do the job, they are the ones who need to teach. So sometimes, there can be a bit of misfit between the world of the academia and what you need to reward for people who can develop skills training.

I think this is one of the areas that the Fiji Higher Education Commission as part of its overall progress towards developing skilled workers need to look at. For instance, if you want to develop

someone to be a skilled carpenter, you need to make sure that people who are teaching them are skilled carpenters on their own and not people who just have the paper qualifications to do this. So, obviously in the Fiji Higher Education Commission, they also need to be able to look at the systems they have to make sure that the right people are teaching. We have had a lot of experiences of people going into training programmes and finding out that those who are teaching do not have the ability. So I am glad to see that the Fiji Qualifications Council has been put in place.

I am just hoping that the Fiji Higher Education Commission and the Fiji National University and all of the relevant bodies put in measures to make sure they have the right people teaching so that people come out not just with the theoretical knowledge, but also with the practical knowledge to be able to deliver whatever it is that they are supposed to do.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I totally endorse the Report before Parliament this afternoon.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this opportunity to speak very briefly on the issues that are reflected in the report. I thank the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for a very good report.

An important finding, as alluded to by the Chairman, is on the review of the Fiji National Qualifications Framework in 2017, to ensure it remains in par with that of other international frameworks. It is an important finding by the Standing Committee as it is an indication, it has to be rectified in ensuring that the Fiji National Qualification Frameworks is in compliance with the proven international standards, more importantly, in recognition of its status. Not only that, its long term effects will be developed and strengthen its organisational capacity.

The other important issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, arising from the annual reports is in terms of the access by higher education institution to upload learner data and other necessary data for higher education. Informal data collection is an integral part as far as collaboration is concerned and human resources should be qualified to carry out this role. It is quite necessary that data is readily available and given that this report is from 2017, it is hoped that whatever findings that were identified, the Fiji Higher Education Commission should have taken steps in complying what has been reported in the report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also incumbent upon the Commission that monitoring and periodic assessment is conducted and the National Qualification Framework is strengthened especially its relationship with its overseas counterparts like the New Zealand agencies and the institutions that express an interest in developing Fiji's higher education sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, strengthening the Fiji Higher Education Commission is quite a big task especially its monitoring framework and mechanism to ensure compliance and this will require human resources to carry out these tasks. With the required staff and appropriate remuneration, it will result in a vibrant organisation. In one of the questions that was posed from the Committee, it says, if I may read: 'With the Government's pledge to leaving no one behind, how does Fiji Higher Education Commission collaborate with higher education institutions to ensure that students living with disabilities are given equal access to learning opportunities, have ease of physical access to higher education premises and are sufficiently equipped with tools to assist them in learning for example, assistive devices.

The higher education institutions, Mr. Speaker, Sir, ensure that the training facilities and premises are adequately resourced with disability accessibilities. Education staff are well trained to provide training and services for these special groups and appropriate strategies and support services are offered to enable them to attain their learning potential fully.

The Fiji Blind Society, Mr. Speaker, Sir, although it is mandated to protect its students and safeguard the welfare of its learning capabilities and special needs, the onus lies on Government to ensure that they are especially equipped in terms of braille. The schools need these machines and the support services that are urgently required by the Society.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on this motion. The Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts acknowledges the recommendations made by the Standing Committee on Social Affairs relating to the Fiji Higher Education Commission's Annual Report August 2016 to July 2017.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to update Parliament on the recent developments at the Commission. From the beginning of 2022, the Commission has appointed a new director of the Fiji Higher Education Commission who is well qualified with a longstanding academic and professional career having worked at both international and national higher education institutions.

The Commission has also appointed a new board that comprises experienced academic and professional experts under the very capable leadership of the Chair, Mr. Winston Thompson. The new board is made up of technical people who can critically assess quality and standards. Recently the Commission held a successful inaugural forum with the vision of transforming the higher education sector to align quality higher education qualifications with labour market needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Higher Education Commission regulates the registration and operation of all higher education institutes in Fiji to ensure they meet quality standards and guidelines that reflect national and international imperatives. The aim of the Commission is to make higher education responsive, relevant, resilient and sustainable for the economic wellbeing of individuals as well as for the nation's development. Sir, all those developments are aimed at improving the quality of higher education so that Fijians receive lifelong learning with internationally benchmarked higher education qualifications.

The Fiji National Qualification Framework was first developed and implemented in 2012. It was subsequently reviewed in 2017 after a period of five years to ensure that the Fiji National Qualification Framework is fit for purpose and that the Framework is internationally benchmarked for proper and accurate translation of Fijian qualifications globally. The next appraisal is due and the Commission is carrying out an intensive stakeholder consultation to review its qualification framework by considering new challenges and demands of a fast changing economy and the society. This work is expected to complete by the end of 2023.

Regarding collection and integration of data which honourable Leawere highlighted, the Commission will roll-out the Higher Education Commission System (HECS). By July 2023 that will contain learner data and other relevant higher education data for integration with Fiji Education Management Information System (FEMIS).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, HECS is an online system developed in-house without any additional cost. The HECS will be similar to how the New Zealand and Australian higher education regulatory authorities manage and sustain their operations. Once completed and implemented HECS will integrate into FEMIS for longitudinal reporting of learner data from early childhood education to tertiary education.

The HECS and FEMIS will be met to generate a comprehensive report on the employment trends of our graduates that is where they work after leaving higher education institutes. Access to the systems will be given to the graduates for them to update their employment status in the system allowing both the Commission, the Ministry and the Ministry for Employment to have an up-to-date data on learners. This will assist in developing policies for the higher education sector and also in workforce planning based on real-time information. It will also assist in identifying skills shortage and oversupply in the job market.

Such information will help the Commission to work with the higher education institutes to address the areas of skills shortage and areas of oversupply.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after completion of HECS project the Commission will ensure that all higher education institutions are trained to utilise the HECS effectively before it is implemented. On the third recommendation, the Commission engaged the services of KPMG in 2018 to review and strengthen the human resource skills required at the Fiji Higher Education Commission to deliver its services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, KPMG made 14 policy recommendations pertaining to the human resource processes and system which the Commission is now delivering. Continuous upskilling and reskilling of staff members is part of the Commission's annual business plan. The Commission regularly conducts Skills Needs Assessment to identify the skills gap to provide Professional Development Programmes to its staff and staff are also sponsored to upgrade their qualifications.

The issue raised in the report that the Commission has not carried out a survey since 2017 to determine if all operating higher education institutes are registered and paying the appropriate fees is now being addressed in this financial year. To date there are 42 higher education institutes registered with Fiji Higher Education Commission, eight are provisionally registered and 12 are with recognised only status. Fiji Higher Education Commission will carry out a nation-wide detailed survey to identify and register non-registered higher education institutes operating in Fiji to protect parents and consumers who access services from these institutions unknowingly.

The Commission will also embark on public awareness programme to highlight the Commission's role, registration process, other legislative requirements and penalties under the Higher Education Act 2008 and the Regulations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this morning we have heard honourable Professor Prasad as usual had only one agenda and that is to use the Fiji Higher Education Commission Annual Report to talk about USP and to cover up anomalies and open favouritism that is going on at USP. Unfortunately, NFP has turned this into a bigger issue each time when we meet in the Parliament and we know why. We acknowledge two SODELPA Members of Parliament who had asked USP to allow an independent investigation into the allegation of corruption at the University and this was mainly to investigate claims of mismanagement, breaches, anomalies and open favouritism to non-meritorious appointment and promotions and that is what we want. If there is nothing to hide, why do we not have the investigation so that we settle the matter? We agree with SODELPA Member that one person is not bigger than USP, nor bigger than a member country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ball is in their court. We have maintained our position that USP needs to be investigated independently and this was communicated through a letter dated 22nd September, 2020 on serious allegations raised by the Audit Committee. The USP Council appointed a special Executive Committee that stated that at least 14 of the 33 allegations by the Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee required independent investigation. The Council ignored this recommendation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is not aware of all four independent investigations which Honourable Professor Prasad spoke this morning. Any investigation internally cannot be termed as independent - it is ironical.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Exactly.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It is ironical that the first investigation conducted by BDO Auckland is treated as Inquiry 1 against Vice Chancellor Professor Pal Ahluwalia. The three member committee appointed by the Council to implement the findings of the BDO Report is treated as Investigation 2

against Vice Chancellor Professor Pal Ahluwalia. An unknown investigation carried out by a council member is also treated as independent inquiry against Vice Chancellor Professor Pal Ahluwalia.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- They do not know the meaning of independence.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- And KPMG Report which is not independent is also seen as 4th Independent inquiry. We all know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, KPMG are the auditors of USP. Sir, none of this is independent. Independent means an institution or a person not affiliated with USP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ball is in USP's court and students, staff as well as alumni should know this. Why is one man bigger and more important than the university? If Vice Chancellor Professor Pal Ahluwalia thinks he has not done anything wrong, then why is he worried about an independent investigation? Fiji's stand has been consistently made clear several times. We will resume grants once this investigation is undertaken. We do not recognise any other investigation that has been mentioned by honourable Professor Prasad.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Professor Prasad also spoke about the education sector as if the Ministry of Education has done nothing over the years and we are just sitting in the office and really not bothered to look at the education sector. We all know that the education sector needs to evolve over a period of time. What we did 10 years ago can change over a period of time and a good example is COVID-19. We need to consider the difficulties the sector faced during that time and how we can include that in our big education sector plan.

Just last Thursday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education launched the Education Sector Plan Development Programme and this Programme is going to analyse the education sector - where we are now and where we want to go rather than just talking about 'We asked for the Education Commission ...' as if the Education Commission is the only tool available. Let us move on. There are other methodologies through which we can assess the education sector and then we can develop the plan with the monitoring plan, funding, et cetera, and that is precisely what we would like to do through this development programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Leawere also talked about the people with disabilities and there are students at various higher education institute. I just want to emphasise that it is actually this Government that has been providing scholarship for people with disabilities. We recognise that and we are helping them not only at the higher education institutes but we have made a number of secondary schools inclusive where people with disabilities attend these schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Standing Committee for the Report which is very relevant and Fiji Higher Education Commission is working on the recommendations made by the Standing Committee.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we dissect and debate the Reports on the Higher Education Commission, we should bring the dialogue to what is relevant today and what is the way forward for the country. For SODELPA, we are talking about a shift, the shift is to provide free tertiary education for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all accept the critical and important role the tertiary education plays in Fiji. We should consider the valuable benefits the tertiary education can bring to the nation and individual citizens. The valuable benefits range from the economic, socio, political to academic and education. These significant benefits warrant an urgent shift in the attitude towards tertiary education. Well that is the right to free elemental education, the new heights pursued by SODELPA will bolster the Fijian economy with these new type of investments.

Such a policy has all the key pillars of social and economic development. SODELPA recognises that people especially the young people of Fiji, being one of the greatest resources of Fiji. This investment will cost a surge of increased civic responsibility of each person in this tourist country and is rippling across every local society, community, cutting across every divide bringing about a sense of responsibility of helping others along. The shift Mr. Speaker, Sir, will strengthen and empower university students who are citizens and as beneficiary of this policy they become an investment in the human capital of Fiji.

Additionally Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a world where competition is getting stiff, it must be recognised that every individual irrespective of race, gender, nationality, ethnic or social origin, religion or political preference, aged or disability is entitled to free academic tuition for tertiary education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the benefits are many, for the economic benefits nationally that is economic growth, poverty reduction, sustained economic growth, shift of knowledge-based economy, research and innovation systems, foreign direct investment, employee productivity, increased tax revenues, increased consumption, increased labour flexibility entrepreneurship individually, better jobs with higher salaries and benefits such as pensions, higher saving levels, better working conditions, improved job satisfaction, professional mobility, reduced reliance on financial support from government and increased career prospects.

Socio-political benefits, Mr. Speaker, Sir, nationally reduced crime, increased community engagement, improved civil society, social cohesion, increased open mindedness and tolerance, building and maintaining democratic values, improved ability for social change, building distinct national identity and globally connected identities, shift to a knowledge based society, informed criticisms debate and dialogue.

Individually Mr. Speaker, Sir, improved health and life expectancy, improved quality of life, enhanced opportunity for social mobility, better decision making, improved social status improves leisure time, development authentically of individual capabilities and potential, problem solving based on recent arguments and discourse.

On the academic and educational benefits nationally Mr. Speaker, Sir, more better qualified teachers for the education system, more avenues for research in the education system, more international in outlook, ability to survive the challenges of globalisation. Individually Mr. Speaker, Sir, building up the total person, opportunism of life learning and fulfilment overall and destiny in society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, SODELPA offers free academic tuition for tertiary studies to school leavers and other qualified Fiji citizens. While this policy is generally for Fiji citizens, a specific target group - our young Fijians school-leavers and other qualified citizens who have met the necessary requirements to be admitted into any Technical Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education Programme offered by any of these tertiary institutions, the:

- University of the South Pacific;
- University of Fiji;
- Fiji National University;
- Centre for Appropriate Technology and Development;
- Corpus Christi Teachers College;
- Fulton College;
- Montfort Technical Institute;
- Montfort Boys Town;
- Sangam Institute of Technology;
- Vivekananda Technical Centre;

- Technical College of Fiji;
- Service Pro International Tourism and Hospitality Institute; and
- Tagitagi Sangam Technical College.

The cost, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is \$200 million. We have the sums, we know where to get it from and as I have highlighted in my speech during the Budget Debate, I have highlighted a number of tax initiatives that have been neglected by the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our problem is that, tax cuts in this country are being funded by debts. We give tax cuts to the wealthy and what do we do, we go out, borrow and burden the *lewenivanua* of this country. The honourable Minister today spoke about costings of our budget and saying that it is normal in any democracy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for what we know, when a county demands that of its political parties, they would set up an agency to help the political parties cost the manifesto. We are doing it on our own, you are not helping us in costing our manifesto. If you want to do this, set up an agency so that it can be a fair go for everyone to have access to those resources. As it is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our team have come up with free tertiary at \$200 million and that is on top of what you already spent on education Mr. Speaker, Sir.

As I have said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have highlighted here the number of tax initiatives that you have neglected because you pander to the wealthy (the business people) and you are denying services to our people, the *lewe ni vanua* and how do you do it? Your tax cut is being funded by borrowing, Mr. Speaker, Sir,

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Stop dreaming! It won't happen.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I love this - you know what I have seen develop over the last couple of days - that the hit man now from FijiFirst is honourable Selai Adimaitoga.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- It is amazing that everyone else is mute, I just love the lady - she is now the front hit person from the other side of the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the courses benefiting from this policy are certificates at all levels - Preliminary courses, Foundation courses, Trade Diplomas, Diplomas and Bachelor Degree. These are included in the SODELPA Free Tertiary Initiative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, immediately from Government this will happen. We know that other countries do this, we know that Sri Lanka and Barbados do this and in Germany, all the State universities provide free tuition to their people and you know Germany is the power house of Europe the economy. Fiji will become the power house of the Pacific when SODELPA is in power and free tertiary education is available to everyone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on TELS, we will forgive the TELS debts and forgiveness of student debts would bring much needed relief to many, especially because many people may also be struggling with loss of income, food and housing, insecurity and a disruptive education due to the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession. Forgiveness of student debts would advance gender and racial equity since studies have shown that burden of student debt is not born equally. Forgiveness of student debt is good for the economy and cancelling student debt would also have a powerful stimulus effect on the economy, which will be critical as we look to build a sustainable economic recovery. Forgiveness of student debts

is targeted and would benefit those who need it the most and these are the *lewenivanua* (citizens) of this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we speak President Biden has introduced initiatives to forgive student loan in the United States. It is now into more than \$1trillion. He is getting a lot of flak from the US and from the Opposition but the general youth population in the US are welcoming this initiative by President Biden, and the youths of this country will know that SODELPA will forgive their debts. Today, the last we read is that the TELS loan is about \$571million - we should stop it now and that is why SODELPA wants to do this. You let it go, it can become like in the USA, which has exceeded \$1 trillion. The time to do it is now, the time for change is now and the time for change is coming through SODELPA.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I did not know that this was the time for manifesto reading.

I rise to speak on the motion by honourable Pillay. Firstly, I would like to commend the Fiji Higher Education Commission for providing this report to Parliament for review and discussion. This is a Government that invests and believes in education like none other.

As the authority on higher education in Fiji, the FHEC oversees the compliance, registration and curriculum review of all higher education institutions to ensure that they are properly accredited to offer study opportunities that are recognised and respected in Fiji and around the world. All higher education award conferring institutions are required by law to be registered with the Commission in order to legally operate and be an accredited higher education institution. Over 50 institutions fall under the present purview of the Commission including leading tertiary institutions such as FNU.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this report covers the period from 2016 to 2017, which saw the development of 18 national qualifications with five higher education institutions awarded recognition rights, four newly registered and three re-registered. We count on quality standards across our education system to provide the services that the public can rely on and that private sector employers can trust. Just to give one example, this month the Fiji Police Academy received its Certificate of Registration from the Commission, which upholds the quality assurance of the training and resulting services that graduating police officers can offer the country. High value industries such as those in the mining sector are also recognising the benefit of having suitable, qualified and skilled workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the assistance of the Commission, the Vatukoula Gold Mine is in the process of establishing the Vatukoula Gold Mine Technical Institution, which will give Fijians the opportunity to develop skills and receive technical education to make them more enjoyable in the industry. There are real grass root level ways that this Commission is making a daily difference for Fiji. We are also getting Nadave to be accredited.

Mr. Speaker, these are the types of initiatives that are being developed to synergise higher learning and the practical understanding of skills and knowledge, equally important is our ability to address the skills gap. This is the priority of my Government and it is demonstrated through the \$1.2 billion allocation directed to the TELS since the inception of the initiative. This year alone a total of 9,200 scholarships and loans will be awarded with a total allocation of \$162.6 million. The number of awards under the National Toppers Local Scheme will increase from 547 to 770 with 40 awards for MBBS, five for Bachelor of Dental Surgery and 40 for nursing. Teachers will also be able to apply for 165 scholarships for training in maths and physics, industrial arts, primary education and computer science while 20

scholarships are available for students with special needs, the National Toppers Overseas Scheme is reinstated with 40 awards on offer.

Mr. Speaker, my Government would not be able to offer such scholarships and educational assistance without a credible and quality standard Fijian higher education system at our backs. Our consistent and visionary investment in the sector has made that reality. Fiji's future is knowledge-based. Knowledge and expertise that will drive our economy forward while protecting the socioeconomic rights of Fijians. The role of the Commission helps ensure that we focus on high value learning and that our higher educational Fijian institutions are on par with the best in the world. Based on these remarks, Mr. Speaker, I support the motion before the House. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief. Unfortunately I am compelled to add further to what the honourable Minister for Education mentioned about USP because the honourable Professor Prasad has opened up the door on that particular subject matter which is actually frankly not directly related to what we are discussing today, which is on the motion by honourable Pillay.

Sir, just in respect of the HEC, it is not only about accrediting institutions, it is also about pedagogical methodologies. In other words, teaching methodologies to be up to time with how teaching methodologies change over a period of time, the type of teaching that takes place, and the people actually who do the teaching. Also, we need to have higher education institutions that need to be responsive to the labour market needs because as honourable Gavoka, who in his quest to get the votes of young Fijians, is offering to make university all free without any ring-fencing around it. In other words we could have a glut of people who may go off and study a particular subject, may all go off and become accountants or economists but at the end of it, there is no jobs for them. So, what is the point of the level of investment and for them to waste their time?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Come on!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- He is saying, "come on", but in fact that is what has happened in the market. We had at one point in time, Sir, a glut of people who did accounting and then they could not find jobs. Honourable Professor Prasad would know this, and there are many other areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you look at the Toppers and the way it is being awarded, it has been based essentially on the labour requirements, the needs that we have. We have a shortage for example of marine scientists, of foresters, at one point in time shortage of nurses - in fact now there is a shortage of nurses. The professional preference changes in countries like Australia and New Zealand. We have teachers for example who want to do, what we call the run-of-the-mill type of teaching but not many in maths and physics as the honourable Prime Minister highlighted.

We have got more scholarships for people who want to learn in those areas, who want to get qualifications because there is a shortage of people in those areas. I think Mr. Speaker, Sir, and again he said you know \$200 million - already this year we are allocating \$160 million with 9,000 awards, so \$200 million is way off the mark if he was going to make university completely free.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that we wanted to also make was the identification of the skills shortage areas and oversupply in the job market as I mentioned, but also there is a pivoting in respect of what people may call 'blue collar qualification' or what we call 'the micro qualifications'. Honourable Professor Prasad in that respect talked about USP Pacific Technical and Further Education or Pacific TAFE and I am going to brief on this, Sir.

In 2012, USP launched its strategic plan to have TVET Provisions in 2013 to 2018. During this Strategic Plan consultation and in the implementation, USP continuously assured member countries that

TVET offerings will be done purely on “self-funding” model and Dr. Reddy who was also Minister for Education can vouch for that, he was a member of the USP Council then and of course As I have said he can vouch for it. This means the TVET qualification through Pacific TAFE will be offered not by using member country funding or member state funded resources but operate on commercial basis by getting income from individual fee paying students. There are other self-funding sections that operate with this model within USP such as the Graduate School of Business.

When TSLS was established now the Tertiary Education Loan Scheme (TELS), TVET Programmes at USP were not given scholarships and student loans but were allowed later on. No other member country has extensively funded USP’s TVET Programmes through scholarships and student loans, or study loans. In the 2018-2019 Budget Mr. Speaker, Sir, the decision not to fund TVET Programmes at USP was made with two rationales. Firstly, programmes were not part of the TVET priority areas such as Carpentry, Joinery, Panel Beating, Welding and Fabrication, Mining, Surveying et cetera. USP TVET Programmes are in Business Administration, Human Resources, IT and other areas which can be best addressed through Degree Programmes. The Pacific TAFE has more professional certificates and diploma Programmes targeting working people who can pay themselves or development partners can support.

There was absolutely, Mr. Speaker, Sir, no clear pathway and articulation of USP TVET Programmes into the Degree Programme. For example if you had a Diploma in Human Resources at Pacific TAFE which consist of 13 courses or units there is no block credit transfer into the Degree Programme in Human Resources (Industrial Relation) in USP. That means you can do 13 Diploma courses and other 24 courses for Degree at the same university.

The USP needs to look across TVET pathway as considered by Australian universities and indeed that is precisely what FNU is doing. We have been working with the Ministry of Education where some of the schools still have those TVET based courses where you can have Modules 1, 2, 3 and Module 4 and you can actually roll all those modules and ultimately end up doing Diplomas, et cetera, and you get cross-credits. Pacific TAFE does not give you cross-credits, basically, that is why we stopped funding it. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is obviously the USP Management has hidden the rationalities in the New Student Association Executive as a messenger in this politics and nothing else.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I wanted to also make, the honourable Professor Prasad stood there and did this defence of Mr. Ahluwalia. We have on the floor of this Chamber on a number of occasions stated our position. I have got a two-three pages brief on this and I really do not want to read it and the fact is that the honourable Minister for Education has very clearly said that there has been no independent assessments carried out about the allegations regarding Mr. Ahluwalia and what is there to fear? Sir.

If there is an independent investigation being called for, what fear is there to have that carried out? And the Minister for Education is absolutely right - the BDO Report is no vindication of Mr. Ahluwalia, none of their reports are a vindication of Mr. Ahluwalia and they all know that. It is so unfortunate that honourable Professor Prasad has used the floor to go down this path again, when here we are talking about the Higher Education Commission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point is this and I really do not want to read this because it is quite boring actually. Honourable Gavoka talked about how we can arrive with these figures, we should setup an agency. Since 2014, we have invited every single year the Opposition to come to the budget consultation (presentation of draft budget). After 2014 they came only once, after that they all disappeared, this time around a few of them turned up, honourable Rasova, honourable Bulanauca, honourable Leawere, honourable Vosanibola and honourable Seniloli. They turned up, unfortunately their contribution was not that great even though they came to the Budget consultation.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have failed continuously to come and honourable Gavoka sits there belligerently shaking his head when we have opened our arms and opened the doors to say, “come and try and understand.” You will understand how we get revenue. How much money we get from corporate tax. How much money we get from PAYE. How much money we get from VAT, departure tax but they sit here not reading the material and just complaining about the fact they do not have access to information. The fiscal update has been presented on a number of occasions, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I also wanted to make is this flippant comment about we are pandering to the rich. Every time, Sir, on the floor of this Parliament when the honourable Prime Minister has launched various policies, when we have talked about giving targeted assistance, they call it freebies. We subsidised electricity for those households that earns less than \$30,000 a year. We subsidised water for those people who earn less than \$30,000 a year. This is the first Government that is giving free medicine. This is the first Government giving access to Private General Practitioners. This is the first Government giving scholarships, TELS the way it is giving. We have inflation mitigation, a dollar a day per child and they ridiculed it. They are collecting \$180 in fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are doing the pay-out for the After Care Fund and the Government Pensions on 31st August. Next week all Social Welfare Recipients are getting their \$180. We already have 91,000 parents who have applied for their children for their \$180 and they say we are pandering to the rich.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the level of amount of electricity and water connectivity to rural, poor areas, isolated areas, maritime areas, standalone systems, these are people on the margins of society yet they are saying we are pandering to the rich.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Very poor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- How can that be? This logically does not make sense.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Dr. Naulumatua will tell us when companies have to pay corporate tax rate at a rate that is applicable for everyone to digest, everyone will pay their corporate tax rate, they do not keep double books. She knows that. As a result of that, honourable Gavoka bothered to even read the material as opposed to just parroting what people put in front of him, he would know that corporate tax collection in this country has improved significantly. Today, when we are saying about the reporting of \$5,000 and above, they berate it. We are trying to stop the black economy yet they actually want to assist it.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Very poor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- It was very interesting and I will finish off, Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Professor Prasad used the word “stupid” a lot and honourable Gavoka sort of chimed in with him too. It kind of reminded me of one of my favourite British philosophers, Bertrand Russell who said, and I quote:

“A stupid man’s report of what a clever man says can never be accurate, because he unconsciously translates what he hears into something he can understand.”

MR. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak in reply.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have any further comments to make.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

REVIEW REPORT - FIJI PORTS CORPORATION LIMITED 2018 AND 2019 ANNUAL REPORT

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review of the Fiji Ports Corporation Limited 2018 and 2019 Annual Report which was tabled on 4th April, 2022.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Ports Corporation Limited (FPCL) is a commercial maritime port management company that operates the two main ports of entry in Fiji – King’s Wharf and Queen’s Wharf. In particular, FPCL is responsible for:

- Local wharves, as it owns and operates the two major ports of Suva and Lautoka and secondary ports of Levuka, Vuda, Malau, Wairiki and Rotuma;
- Property;
- Wharf infrastructure, development and maintenance;
- Marine services - tugs, line boats, pilot boats; and
- Land based services - warehousing, container yard planning and berthing.

As part of its plans to rehabilitate our ports and wharves, FPCL intends to develop the Lautoka and Levuka ports and review regulatory requirements and responsibilities for declared and non-declared ports and wharves in line with its 5-Year Strategic Plan (2019-2023).

We note that dividend totalling more than \$16 million was paid to FPCL shareholders for the 2019 financial year. This year also saw the launch of 2019-2020 Green Port Master plan and Sustainability Guideline Procurement together with FPCL’s 5-Year Strategic Plan (2019-2023).

Another major achievement of FPCL was the achievement of ISO 9001: 2015 Certificate in Quality Management System for Ports of Suva and Lautoka. This certificate focuses on reducing risk and enhancing opportunity within the organisation, enabling staff to make contribution towards continuous improvement and meeting stakeholders and customer expectations. The attainment of this certificate highlights FPCL’s full commitment for the improvement of their internal processes and activities. Generally, the Committee is satisfied with the operations of FPCL for the years 2018 to 2019.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the Fiji Ports Corporation Limited Annual Report before us. I note in the Committee Report the various recommendations particularly on the strategic plan, feasibility study and also there is one on Fiji Ships and Heavy Industries Limited regarding coordination. But I find it disappointing that there are some issues which have not been raised, for example, the issue about derelict ships which affects the *qoliqoli* around Suvavou and Navukavu and also pollution. Particularly there is nothing mentioned here on the landowners and the *qoliqoli* owners, so that is an issue I would like to raise in terms of Fiji Ports Corporation Limited.

I would like to share excerpts from a report by a surveyor land consultant which had been done some years back. This talks about, not only Suva but also applies to the *qoliqoli* areas of the Tui Vitogo regarding the Lautoka Port. Going back in terms of the creation of the statutory authority to control Suva Harbour, the Ports Authority was created under Ports Authority Act going back and its states, granting

the authority, the power to declare ports and ports approaches to be under their control anywhere in Fiji. The harbour of Suva is now under their (statutory power) control. The control of the Suva Harbour by the indigenous people of Suva as *tauvei ni baravi kei na toba kei Suva* has been taken out of their hands and placed upon the control of the statutory authority.

It is necessary and the Suva people have come to appreciate and understand the needs to transfer control of the harbour and its approach to the Ports Authority. Being an international port of the country and the most important national sea port of Fiji has to be strictly in control in order to achieve high level of efficiency and to prevent serious mishap in the harbour and the wharf. Tui Suva and his people have recognised the necessity to transfer such control of the harbour of Suva to the Ports Authority of Fiji.

It is also mentioned that whilst the indigenous people of Suva have recognised and appreciated the reason for the shift of control of the harbour and fully accepting it, there is a need to pay compensation by way of annuity by the Ports of Authority to Tui Suva and his three *yavusa*. The submission was made in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution and concept of fair play that indigenous people of Suva shall be paid a fair annual compensation by way of annuity, a sum of suggested equal to 10 percent of gross shipping levies of Suva Port and Harbour, equal to 3 percent of gross cargo levies of Suva Port and Harbour.

Since the reclamation of Suva Harbour and its construction in the 1960s, the indigenous people of Suva have never received any compensation for this reclamation and constructional work particularly the construction of the wharf area. The authorities, realising good revenue both from the ship and cargo levies and it is universally accepted that when a person is realising revenues from another's resources, it is only fair and proper that he pays certain sums such as rents, charges, annuities or compensation to that other person which is the owner of the resources. The proposed annuities, in our opinion, is fair and reasonable bearing in mind that Ports is enjoying total control of the harbour.

The other related issue is fishing rights. The people of Suva owns the fishing rights over the harbour of Suva between a straight line from the mouth of Lami River to a point in the middle of Suva Passage; another straight line from the mouth of Samabula River to the centre of Nukubuca Passage. It is bounded on the north by a coastal line from the South to the edge of the reef on the ocean side. It is clear that the fishing rights for the *vanua* of Suva is intact and the boundary clearly demarcated by the Native Land and Fisheries Commission.

On pollution, it is stated that we know from the technical report of the USP at that time that the Suva Harbour is polluted from organic waste, sewage pollution and other chemical pollutants which have extended to the reef and has killed off the coral. Primarily, the waste have been allowed to escape into Suva Harbour either from residential properties, commercial or industrial properties. The control of the waste disposal from the properties in the city into the drains, brooks, et cetera goes into the harbour. The Ports Authority, as indicated, will not tolerate deliberate pollution but this is ongoing.

Sir, these were some of the issues raised. In their conclusion, they have stated that in their opinion of the consultant, the Government and the Council is jointly responsible for the pollution of the fishing area of the indigenous people of Fiji. It would, therefore, be a policy decision whether to pay compensation to the indigenous people of Suva or not. The owners of the resources, the indigenous people must be properly compensated by individuals or authorities or the State.

These are some of the issues, I thought, I would raise in relation to this report which is not clearly mentioned but which is despite the age of this report is still relevant today. I am raising it

here so that it is pursued, it is noted by the Government of the day and whoever comes in as the Government of the day to please consider this issue as we deal, not only the Suva Port but also Lautoka, the *Qoliqoli* of the *Turaga Tui* Vitogo and other ports facilities as such around the country.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, very briefly, we ask the question sometime back to the honourable Minister for Fisheries as to the reason why fishing vessels are no longer coming to Suva as in the past. We were told by the honourable Minister that it was cheaper to go back to the home base to carry out repairs, replenishment and the like. We have stated that we will bring back all these fishing vessels to Suva because they contribute a lot to the economy of the city. We have been told from other sources that Suva is just costing itself out of contention. It is too costly to come to Suva, it is easier to go to Pago Pago and other ports in the Pacific. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we would hope that the Corporation relook at this and bring back those fishing vessels.

According to our people and some of them are ex-fisheries people, there used to be in excess of 300 fishing vessels per year visiting Suva, and if they stay for three days, they used to clean up Suva Market, according to those who worked in the fisheries department. So it is very important for Suva, and I am particularly thinking about our farmers that the produce they bring, for them one of the huge markets will be the fishing vessels.

So I would just urge the Corporation to try and relook at the situation and bring back those fishing vessels. Suva used to be very popular with those types of vessels and we would like to see them back. Certainly we will do it as a government to bring back those vessels but we need to relook at this very seriously. We notice that the Corporation is making a lot of money, paying a lot of bonuses, but Suva should not be pricing itself out of the region. I just wish that the Corporation would look into that.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just very quickly, since the divestment of shares in Fiji Ports Corporation Limited and the modernisation of it, I hope honourable Members are also aware that we have two companies that operate at the Port, one is Fiji Ports Corporation Limited and the other one is Fiji Ports Terminal Limited. Fiji Ports Terminal Limited is more the stevedoring side of things. We were there last week on Friday at the Fiji Ports Terminal function where the staff are actually paid under Performance Management System (PMS) a large amount of payout and a few weeks prior to that was Fiji Ports Corporation Limited. Again, the staff were given a large payout under PMS. Honourable Tuisawau, of course, does not care about things like that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Ports Corporation Limited only a few years ago, because of the inefficiencies at the Port, each shipping company used to charge per container a levy because they used to berth much longer, spend a lot more fuel in terms of burning fuel to get things loaded or offloaded. Today, of course, the levy is gone.

What is really interesting, Sir, last week we found out that the trans-shipment has increased by 29 percent at the Fijian ports at Suva and Lautoka. In other words, shipping companies are using Fiji now more for trans-shipment purposes also, and the only reason why international shipping companies would use a port for trans-shipment is because of the greater efficiencies. We have seen that growth and we hope to increase that even further.

Fiji Ports Terminal is investing in much more new technologies, they are spending about \$4 million to \$5 million. Fiji Ports Terminal have an amazing technology and I would urge Committee Members to get an opportunity to go and see the navigational aids they have, the amount of security they have, the high resolution technology they have to be able to monitor what is actually happening in the ports all the way down Lami with the high powerful cameras that they are using. It is really quite amazing in terms of what they have done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from Government's perspective, of course, we have been looking at expanding the Port or finding an alternative site. As highlighted in Parliament previously, we have been talking to the ADB now for a couple of years, to look at expanding the Port where we have a one-stop-shop. Some honourable Members may remember and I do not know if they can remember that far back but honourable Professor Prasad should know this because this happened when Rabuka was the Prime Minister under the SVT Government. There was this sort of flurry of activity to divest shares when they sold P & T and listed the company, got FNPF to pay large sums of money per share just so they could get more revenue and then immediately after the sale, the share price dropped significantly with huge losses to FNPF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, within that, they also sold off Fiji Ships and Heavy Industries Limited to a \$2 New Zealand company. That \$2 NZ company bought the share, they sold it to them and then, of course, they could not run it. Then government went back and bought Fiji Ships and Heavy Industries Limited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, you have the slipway, you have 300 tonnes, 500 tonnes and you have a thousand tonnes. If you go down to Walu Bay, you can actually see it. A couple of them are not fully operational but the point is that, we are looking for alternative sites where we can have all the cargo containers, we can have all the fishing vessels but we can also provide, Sir, in terms of ship repair work. You need to have the capacity to do that. Ship repair work and also ship building too and Fiji was quite good at that. Unfortunately, during the SVT Government days, we lost that edge. So, Sir, since we have been sort of trying to rejuvenate Fiji Ports Corporation Limited, Fiji Ship and Heavy Industries Ltd is now a part of that. It is a subsidiary of that. So, there is a lot of things that are being done.

We are talking to ADB to look at alternative sites and see where we can have the port facilities. If honourable Tuisawau sort of got his head out of what he is always stuck in, would know that part of the port cannot actually be used because it cannot carry very heavy loads. If you see the container ships, they will always be at the northern end of the port because of the fact that this part of the port, the southern part of the port needs enormous amounts, millions and millions of dollars of investment to be able to carry the loads that it should be able to. So, this is why we find cruise liners actually are up at the southern end of the port.

There are a number of challenges and notwithstanding that, Sir, and the archaic investment, the assets that were there, Fiji Ports Corporation Limited continues to make profit, continues to pay dividends to its shareholders which now includes of course, FNPF, the Fijian Government and Aitken Spence which has a shareholding of only about 20 percent. Mr. Speaker, Sir, from a Government's strategic perspective, we are looking at alternative sites, we are looking at PPP model as to how we can work with Fiji Ports Corporation Ltd to augment the areas in which we can grow the port facilities.

As a maritime nation, we should be able to then get better returns and of course, provide a lot more jobs for our citizens. Sir, I would like to thank the Committee for the report and also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take the opportunity to thank all the shareholders at Fiji Ports Corporation Limited and all those very hardworking staff at FPCL, who actually have really brought this organisation into the 21st Century.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have no further comments to make.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Members. Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

**REVIEW REPORT - FIJI NATIONAL SPORTS COMMISSION
AUGUST 2019-JULY 2020 ANNUAL REPORT**

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the review of Fiji National Sports Commission August 2019-July 2020 Annual Report which was tabled on 4th April, 2022.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the principal activity of the Fiji National Sports Commission (FNSC) is to guide and enhance the delivery of sports programmes in Fiji through a coordinated approach at all levels of participation by Government statutory bodies and the community to ensure the development of sports in Fiji.

The Sports Commission aims to enrich the lives and health of all Fijians through physical activities and sports at all levels. It was established under the Fiji National Sports Commission Act of 2013, no significant issues were observed in the Sports Commission operations during the 2019-2020 period as such, the Committee scrutiny focused primarily on the Sports Commission's response to the COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time and how it re-strategize operations to adapt to these changes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 restrictions led the Sports Commission to develop its safe sports Fiji guidelines, the national sporting organisations were advised of the necessity to have their respective sport certified under this guideline. The development of the guideline indicated that Fiji Sports people were working with their own sports framework and adhering to the necessary COVID-19 restrictions. There was also a committee established to formulate the guidelines with professional representative from the medical and the physiotherapy, legal, athletics and sporting sectors.

The guidelines enforced 50 percent attendance at stadiums, the practice of social distancing, contact tracing, hygiene practices such as handwashing and use of hand sanitizers. We noted that the first response to the certification requirement was substantial with 11 sporting associations out of 45 been certified with the first three weeks with rugby, football, rugby-league amongst the first to start playing again. This was one of the Sports Commission's most important achievement towards the second-half of the physical year working with the required restrictions but still finding a way to safely facilitate sports around the country.

The Committee noted that the Sports Commission responded well to the changes imposed by the pandemic by reviewing its 2019-2023 Strategic Plan with the Commission's four pillars, health and active nation, sporting nation, enabling environment and reaching nation, remaining unchanged. The Sports Commission Strategic Plan is aligned with the National Developing Plan and Sustainable Development Goals.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on this motion.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I begin this contribution to the Fiji National Sports Commission Annual Report for 2019-2020 with an acknowledgement of their work and contribution to sports development in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the leadership and management of the Fiji National Sports Commission was granted an unqualified audit report for 2019-2020 financial year. This was achieved during a very critical period where COVID disrupted not only sporting but economic activities in Fiji. I commend the

Fiji National Sports Commission for their ability to still able to deliver commendable results on the backdrop of a very challenging period, not only in Fiji but were also felt globally.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the first time, the process of reopening sports participation after a sustained period of lockdown due to the challenges brought about by COVID-19 was deliberate and through the efforts of all key stakeholders, especially our front-liners in the fight against the pandemic. The results of those efforts allowed Fiji to commence hosting international sports events with the Super Rugby Games and the participation of our teams in the Super Rugby competition being a prominent examples. This was only possible through and all of the government approach to the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the strong leadership of the FijiFirst Government enables to make quick decision and laid the foundation for the quick bounced back and now growth in all sectors. Sir, sports being an enabler plays a big part in economic development and growth in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government through the programmes of the Fiji National Sports Commission acknowledged the challenges of our remote and rural athlete and we will continue to assist growth and development in these areas and through our talent identification, we will provide special programmes for talented athletes who need to move to urban sports training environment.

Our up-skilling of training for sport leaders in both urban and rural communities means that sports people can continue to train wherever they are and everyone's talent in sports is accepted wherever they live. This includes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, continued use of platforms a lot more in our training and follow-ups in all communities and this has become one of the positive that came out of COVID.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, keeping track of both talent and athletes continues to also be a major challenge and the Fiji National Sports Commission is currently working on to keep track of our talent and is working with international organisation to establish a database and to set up an athlete tracking system.

Government in its five year and 20 year Development Plan, Mr. Speaker, Sir, recognises and acknowledges the needs to empower youths to be agents of change and promoting sports development.

The Fiji Sports Commission continues to play an important part in this development programme and this has reach sporting rewards including goal medals at the Olympic Games for our Sevens Rugby athlete and the bronze medal at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic of our Fijiana Women Sevens Team. This is in addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the elevation after Fijian Drua to the Super Rugby competition in 2020. The Fijiana Women headline the growth of women sports in the same competition by becoming champion of the competition in the inaugural year of participation. More recently, Mr. Speaker, the Fijian Men and Women Seven Teams achieved historic double silver medals at the 2022 Commonwealth Games.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the key stakeholder, we look forward to continue on a good governance and accountability in the organisation. The Fiji Government will continue to provide support for the Fiji Sports Commission to continue to be the key stakeholder in growing sports in Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now give the floor to the Chairperson on Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak in reply.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Sir, thank you very much for the opportunity. I do not have any further comments.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, for the purposes of complying with the Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the Leader of Government in Parliament to move a suspension motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

That under Standing Order 6 that so much of Standing Orders 23(1) is suspended, so as to allow the House to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items as listed in today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, very briefly under Schedule 2, we have an item remaining and, of course, under Schedule 3, the eight Oral Questions thus, the request to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note, we will now suspend proceedings for a break and Parliament will resume in half an hour's time.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.55 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.36 p.m.

**REVIEW REPORT - 2016–2017 FINANCIAL STATEMENTS OF GOVERNMENT AND
2016–2017 AGENCY FINANCIAL STATEMENTS OF THE MINISTRY OF ECONOMY**

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review of the 2016-2017 Financial Statements of Government and 2016–2017 Agency Financial Statements of the Ministry of Economy which was tabled on 5th April, 2022.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I, as the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, moved a motion and take this opportunity to speak on the motion on the Review of the 2016-2017 Financial Statements of Government and the 2016–2017 Agency Financial Statements of the Ministry of Economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Review focused on 2016–2017 Audit Report on the Financial Statements of Government and the 2016–2017 Agency Financial Statements of the Ministry of Economy. It is important to highlight that the severe devastation caused by *TC Winston* in February 2016, resulted in total damages and loss of estimated \$2.85 billion to the economy.

As a result, Government designed the financial year of 2016–2017 Budget to meet the cost relating to the rehabilitation of public infrastructure including schools, health facilities and housing. It was anticipated that the systematic programming of rehabilitation expenditure through the budgetary process will smoothen out the later years. The refocusing of expenditure was also anticipated to have a positive impact on medium to long term macro-economic fundamentals of the country.

The increase in expenditure will stimulate economic activity across the number of sectors and in turn support the employment creation, raise consumption level and provide further impetus to grow. This Report summarise the committee's analysis on the financial position, performance, sustainability and timeliness of quality and financial reporting for ministries and departments.

The Report also includes the results on the internal control reviews in respective agencies. Additional, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to note that the deficiency's detail in the audit report were identified during the time of the audit and it may have been subsequently resolved by the entity. This had been included in the audit report as they impacted on the overall system of control of the ministries and department, as at 31st July, 2017.

The Office of the Auditor-General had issued an audit opinion on the agency's financial statement of 33 Ministries and Departments. Out of 33, 64 percent representing 21 agencies were issued with unmodified opinion while remaining 36 percent, that would be 12 agencies, were issued modified opinion respectively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will briefly highlight some of the ministries that were issued with modified audit opinion and their responses on the qualification issues that were raised. These Ministries comprise the:

1. Ministry of Defence, National Security and Immigration

A modified opinion was issued to the Ministry of Defence, National Security and Immigration due to issues highlighted in the Auditor-General's Report, including a variance of \$3 million that existed between the Integrated Border Control Management System (IBMS) which records the Department of Immigration's operating revenue and the FMIS general ledger.

In view of our finding, the Department of Immigration has managed to identify a solution in working closely with the service provider. Information to factor both manual and system received with the provision to be created, the IBMS to cater for all payments, including Immigration-related revenues received from Foreign Missions effective from 1st August, 2019.

2. Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations was issued a modified opinion. The Committee noted that the Ministry received \$70,000 annual fees from the Ministry of Civil Service under the shared service agreement which was deposited into the OHS Consultancy Trust Fund Account. Consequently, an unreconciled variance of \$381,087 was also identified that existed between the OHS Consultancy Service Workmen Compensation and Wage Dispute Trust Fund, Cash at Bank, Balance and General Ledger. The Committee was informed that necessary implementations have been put in place in ensuring that the issues do not repeat in future. With that being said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has prepared an internal policy on the recording and utilisation of the shared service fee which has now been deposited in the consolidated fund account. The identified variance have been identified and sorted by the Ministry.

3. Judiciary

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Judiciary Department's reconciliation for Suitors, Sundries and Maintenance Trust Fund were only prepared up to January, 2015, January 2000 and December 1994 respectively as at 31st July, 2017. Due to the significant lapse in the years of reconciliation balance, audit was unable to ascertain the accuracy of closing balance for the year ended 31st July, 2017. Again, this backlog, the Department advised that once all reconciliations are updated then consideration would be given to open separate bank accounts. The Committee recommended that the Department should maintain separate bank accounts for all new trust accounts created and submitted separate statements accordingly.

4. Ministry of Justice

Mr. Speaker, Sir a modified opinion was issued to the Ministry of Justice noting that the Ministry did not maintain a detailed breakdown listing of companies under provisional liquidation and the individuals under the receivership. The Ministry in its response had confirmed that it has an updated statement of individual debtors and their respective files while the Ministry is currently preparing a consolidated list for all debtors by checking individual files. Further to this, the Ministry will transit to developing a software for recording and maintaining the Trust Fund Account.

5. Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Natural Disaster Management

It is worth noting that the Ministry had put in place a paperless system to address this gap. The Ministry had given assurance that strict timeliness will be set for District Officers to submit the carbon copies of the receipt and related source documents to the Headquarters on a timely basis and appropriate action be taken for any non-compliance.

6. Republic of Fiji Military Forces

Mr. Speaker, Sir, auditors have reported that Engineers Trust Fund Account Statement of Receipts and Payments does not provide receipts and payments for each project undertaken by the Force. The statement only includes closing cash balance for each project. As a result, audit was unable to determine whether any adjustment might have been necessary in respect of the Engineer's Trust Fund Account, cash at bank balance at year end and any corresponding adjustment to the elements making up the statement of income and expenditure.

However, the RFMF had indicated that the Engineer's Project Fund Account was operating as a private fund. This was an audit issue for the past three years. RFMF regularised this in July of 2016-2017 Financial Year with the approval of the Ministry of Economy. The account is operating under FMIS as a True Trust. The final balances of each project were reconciled and recorded into FMIS.

7. Ministry of Health and Medical Services

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services had an unreconciled variance of \$114,950 that existed between the bank reconciliation and cash at bank General Ledger balances. As a result, the audit was unable to substantiate the accuracy and completeness of the closing balance of \$338,925 reflected in the Trust Fund Account statement of receipts and payment.

The Committee was informed that the Ministry had established and implemented the SOP for procurement and this includes control in obtaining any valuation of quotation receiving goods; check list for procurement and payments; and payments of goods and services. Part of the reform was the review of the Ministry's Financial Manual in 2019.

8. Ministry of Agriculture

Mr. Speaker, Sir, included in the Land Water Resource Management Trust Fund account, balance is retention fund of \$329,148. The Committee was informed that the Land Water Resource Management Trust Fund had been reconciled and closed with the balance of fund transferred to the Ministry of Waterways. The Board of Survey team was appointed to look into the issue of expired drugs and this has been written off.

9. Ministry of Land and Mineral Resources

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the highlighted audit issues, the Committee was informed that the Ministry has strengthened its internal process through daily verification and reconciliation of revenue received together with cash analysis against the CNS revenue records. Concerning RFA, the Ministry had strictly adhered to appropriate procedures in issuance and clearance of accountable advance. The Committee noted with concern that this was an ongoing issue from previous report and would encourage the Ministry to explore more avenues practicable to allow for timely collection of arrears.

10. Ministry of Fisheries and Forests

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a modified opinion was also issued to the Ministry of Fisheries and Forests. It was noted that the Ministry had rectified the records in the statement of receipt and expenditure for the year ended 31st July, 2017 as follows:

- (a) SLG 84 account be reconciled and recorded accordingly;
- (b) The Ministry had requested the Ministry of Economy to write off the unreconciled accountable advances carried forward from the previous year;

- (c) The Ministry had reviewed their accountable advance implementation process as they had implemented advance checklist for all advance less than \$20,000. This must be approved by the Conservator of Forest and Director Corporate Services;
- (d) Advance over \$20,000 less than \$50,000 must be approved by the Permanent Secretary for Forestry;
- (e) True Trust Fund Account for one third subsidy scheme had been referred to the Ministry of Fisheries;
- (f) The Ministry had improved their revenue collection strategies on scaling fees for the native timber and miscellaneous revenues;
- (g) The timber revenue system data have been implemented at headquarters accounts section whereby data send from the Division is reconciled with FMIS General Ledger account;
- (h) The Ministry has improved on the internal control environment and risk management strategies to curb any anomalies;

11. Ministry of Local Government and Environment

The Committee was informed that the Ministry had undertaken stringent measures to improve in maintaining the reporting of financial record. As such, the Ministry has taken the following measures:

- (a) Maintain the general voucher to support adjustment recorded in the General Ledger;
- (b) Recruitment of more personnel to effectively and efficiently provide the financial support service to avoid anomalies in the future;
- (c) Implementation of in-house capacity building training, coaching and monitoring programmes to educate staff on procedure and process pertaining to accounting records;
- (d) Reconciliation exercise undertaken by the Ministry of Economy in 2018: This included the Drawing Account, Trust Fund Account, Operating Trust Account and RFA account.
- (e) The unsubstantiated variances arising from previous years' mis-posting had been submitted to the Ministry of Economy for book entry adjustment on 14th October, 2018.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee acknowledges the progress made by relevant Ministries and Departments in addressing the issues identified during the audit with the written responses provided to clarify their position in relation to the audit queries. Overall, the Committee commends the efforts of the Ministry of economy in taking the lead role in the stewardship of public funds. Most importantly, the Permanent Secretary should take serious consideration on all audit issues that were raised and take appropriate action and taking their cues from the Ministry of Economy so that the issues raised are addressed in a timely manner so that it is not reflected in the whole of government audited financial statement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with these words, as the Member moving the motion.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Sir, I thank the honourable Member and also the Members of the Committee for the Report. Mr. Speaker, in the review of the Audit Report and follow up of higher risk ministries and departments provided by the Audit Report on Social Services Sector 2017, there were 16 things that were highlighted within our Ministry, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. I am pleased to say that eight of them have been fully implemented and eight have been partially implemented and we are hoping that we will be able to complete it in this financial year. We have fully implemented the recommendations on finalisation of financial statements, internal control assessments, arrears of revenue, conflict of interest, procurement anomalies and variance in

pharmaceutical stock and purchases made without tender board approval and anomalies in the Sahyadri Trust Fund Account.

Mr. Speaker, the three above - procurement anomalies and variance in pharmaceutical stock and also purchases made without tender board approval – have been helped by the fact that as we speak, there are now 51 sites in our 220 facilities all over Fiji that are now connected to our m-supply logistics digital program by which they are able to identify the stock that they need, that are available in the warehouse and their warehouse also knows how much is available in their site and this has happened because also of our investment into it and support through DFAT.

Mr. Speaker, also as I speak at the moment, there are now 17 pharmacies all throughout Fiji specifically on Viti Levu at the moment that are now involved in the Free Medicine Programme. There are another nine pharmacies that are at the moment going through their period of assessment and we hope to have them also included.

Mr. Speaker, the areas that we have partially implemented, the absence of risk management policy, incomplete board of survey and non-clearance of balances involving fund account and the fixed assets register which we are updating as I speak.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services acknowledges this is a unique and challenging time for our Ministry. As you are aware that at the time of COVID-19, over the last two years, we have also involved our corporate sector in the work around COVID-19. For example, things such as the vaccination registration and supporting our technical staff. So now they are back to normal in terms of the work that they do.

Mr. Speaker, before I sit, the honourable Professor Prasad, who is not here, misled Parliament earlier today. Mr. Speaker, he said that there was a complaint against the Minister for Elections made to the Supervisor of Elections. He said we put a complaint against him and nothing happens because he is the Minister of Elections. There has been a press release on this just recently by the Supervisor of Elections and the Elections Commission and I want to read it because it is important that we do not mislead Parliament leading up to Elections.

Mr. Speaker, they have said that the Fiji Elections Office has not received any complaint against the Minister for Elections since the beginning of the campaign period until now.

Mr. Speaker, there was one complaint on the 21st of March, it lacked any legal basis and could not be actioned. The NFP was given a period to be able to look through it and appeal, they did not appeal the decision. So please, Honourable Members on the other side, do not mislead Parliament.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise as a Member of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) to contribute to the motion before Parliament today which is the review of the 2016-2017 Financial Statements of Government and 2016-2017 Agency Financial Statements of the Ministry of Economy.

Mr. Speaker, my contribution to this Report is that such reports on auditing of the Ministry of Economy needs to be submitted timely, in the sense to allow us to resolve burning issues that would have been prevailing at a time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the report reflects on the audit that was undertaken five years ago which highlighted some of the burning issues that may have been resolved or some may have worsened over time. We have taken note of the responses from the Ministry of Economy but we would like to also state for the record Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Committee conducted its work through virtual mode without

conducting face to face consultations with the Ministry of Economy officials because of the COVID-19 restrictions that were in place during the Committee meeting process and we requested responses to be in writing and those were the responses that have been read out by the Chairman.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recommendations that were given here are somewhat repetitive to the other four Office of the Auditor General's Report on the Whole of Government covering areas mainly the General Administration Services, Social Services, Economic Services and Infrastructure Services that have been previously discussed in this august Parliament. What should have happened Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that this should have been brought together with this Report because they support each other's findings and recommendations and do not need us to repeat the findings and recommendations within this Report over and over again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all know the Ministry of Economy is the leading Ministry that provides assurances and financial support to the whole of government mechanism and it is unacceptable that such delays in the submission of the Ministry of Economy Audit in Parliament is entertained. In fact Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister should take his officials to task over disorganised, disjointed and time wasting exercise as a result of delayed actions and I urge the Ministry officials never to allow themselves to come under unnecessary scrutiny. It is the responsibility of civil servants that are paid to provide timely reports and to do so without fear of reprisal.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I tend to think that a lot of delays are deliberate because civil servants often think that opening up this report for scrutiny will lead to the questions of their decisions and actions. If they did their jobs well, no matter how controversial their decisions are, they must be able to defend the decisions taken if it is based on the motivations behind such policies implemented, they are justified for the greater good.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the issues that were raised during this period may have continued to be raised in future audits and the current audits that we have been discussing in this Parliament especially in the judiciary system where the significant lapse in the years of reconciliation, audit was unable to ascertain the accuracy of the closing balances of \$31 million disclosed in the Judicial Trust Fund Account Statement of receipts and payments for the year ended 31 July 2017. This continues to be an ongoing audit issue that has been highlighted and we hope that the Ministry officials will continue to work on resolving these balances in the Trust Accounts.

Also in the Suitors Accounts, funds received on behalf of deceased person who do not have nominees at FNPF as required under Section 57 of the Fiji National Provident Fund Act 2011, the department does not maintain detailed breakdown listings of these funds received from FNPF. Funds paid out to beneficiaries and balance of funds to be refunded to FNPF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those that are entitled to these funds from FNPF who are not aware, have not accessed these funds, just imagine the status that they are in right now. Mr. Speaker, Sir, also on the Ministry of Lands, this also has been an ongoing issue regarding the unreconciled variance of \$673,811 in the Land and Property rent collected as recorded in the Crown Land Lease system of \$12,745,771, compared to what is recorded in the General Ledger of \$13,419,982. Consequently the audit could not confirm the accuracy and completeness of land and property rent of \$13.4 million.

The other issues that have been highlighted we have noted the explanations given by the Ministry of Economy officials and we hope, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that this will become a reality in terms of resolving this unreconciled balances. Some of the findings that were also identified during the audit was the absence of Risk Management Policies, delay in preparations of reconciliations,

anomalies in drawing accounts and main trust fund account, expenditure charged to incorrect allocation and anomalies in inventory.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one significant deficiency was highlighted in the security bonds of the Department of Immigration amounting to \$25 million. Hopefully these variances would also be resolved by now especially when it involves work permits and the likes, that are handled at the Department of Immigration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have alluded to, right now we can only hope that improvements have been made given the budgetary resources that have been provided every year along with the follow-up monitoring by the relevant authorities which would have compelled the Ministries to take necessary corrective measures. I believe the delays will not allow us as Members of Parliament to gauge the full impact of decisions taken as commented by the Ministry's official. And it is time that the Permanent Secretaries, as Chief Accounting Officers should perform their roles and responsibilities without fear so that there is improvement in terms of accountability on the Government financial expenditures.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to make a contribution to this debate. I thank the Committee and the Chairman for scrutinising the Report.

Firstly, I would like to speak on the ministries under my portfolio. I have looked at some of the issues raised on the Fijian Immigration Department, specifically the internal control measures of the Department. It is natural to continually identify, evaluate and remedy issues that hamper efficiency and we fully embrace that responsibility. I would like to ensure this august Parliament that internal control measures have been strengthened with stringent policies and strategies devised to address some shortfalls in procedures.

Mr. Speaker, the Department has since improved its adherence to the Finance Instructions of 2010 and the Financial Management Act 2004. The Fijian Immigration Department worked with the Ministry of Economy in 2019 to create separate revenue collection accounts in FMIS for the different types of revenue collections namely the passports, permits, citizenship, visa and search fees. Importantly, Mr. Speaker, the amendment of the Immigration Act of 2003 in 2020 ensured clarity of the fundamentals of the Immigration Regulations for its day to day administration with the Department now seeing improved service delivery.

A generic issue that was raised in the Consolidated Audit Report is the management of various trust fund accounts held in government ministries such as the Ministry of Fisheries and Forests, Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Local Government and Environment. While the Office of the Auditor-General highlighted measures to address Trust Fund Accounts through the audit of agencies financial statements, the Ministry of Economy has embarked on a dedicated view of all trust fund accounts to determine eligible trust accounts.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Economy has worked closely with the various ministries to ensure that they perform their reconciliations on a timely basis and to make certain that internal control mechanisms are in place. Also Mr. Speaker, Sir, appropriate training on financial management systems, information systems, trust accounts and procurement to name a few, were provided to agencies by the Ministry of Economy to build capacities and to reduce the prevalence of adverse audit findings on agencies financial statements.

It is encouraging to note Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the ministries have established a dedicated compliance review team to strengthen internal control environments and to drive business process within. Through the Open Merit Recruitment and Selection System (OMRS), ministries were able

to appoint highly qualified and competent individuals to positions of heads of finance and accounts officers. Timely submission of accurate and quality financial statements are prioritised to the Office of the Auditor-General to address audit queries.

In summary Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to reassure this august Parliament that many of the issues raised in the Report have been addressed. Various ministries have implemented risk management policies through the prudent Financial Management Act and embedded these improvements in the individual ministerial strategic policies and operational plans. The process of improving service delivery is never ending, the people we are here to serve, deserve no less.

Based on these remarks Mr. Speaker, Sir, I, therefore, support the motion.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Economy liaises with other government ministries and partners to ensure compliance with the reporting timelines or submissions of financial statements to the Office of the Auditor-General for audit.

The Ministry of Economy understands the importance of timely reporting and making the financial statements available to the users of the government financial statements. At the end of each financial year, the Ministry of Economy issues a closing of accounts circular to all respective permanent secretaries outlining the mandatory procedures and timelines that ministries and departments must follow to fully regularise all accounting transactions and close the financial year.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Economy constantly monitors compliance of the circular and provides guidance and advisory services to all ministries with matters relating to accounting and finance management issues. Significant improvements Sir, in the submission of financial statements to the Office of the Auditor-General have been noted from ministries and departments.

The Office of the Auditor-General is currently auditing the Financial Year 2019 – 2020 and 2020 – 2021 accounts to ensure the backlog is addressed. The Office of the Auditor-General has informed us that the audits for most of the ministries and departments for financial year 2019 – 2020 and financial year 2020 – 2021 have been completed. Most of these reports will be tabled in Parliament (maybe not be in this session) but later parliamentary sittings.

The Ministry of Economy will continue to work with the ministries and departments ensuring that the agencies financial statements are submitted to Office of the Auditor-General in timely manner. Both the Permanent Secretary for Economy and the Head of Treasury are discussing the same in the Permanent Secretaries and Accounting Heads Forum.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a majority of the issues raised in the Auditor General's Report to Parliament have been addressed and the Ministry of Economy will continue to work closely with ministries and departments to ensure proper internal controls are in place to prevent such issues from recurring in the future. Some issues however, are legacy issues and locating information and sourced documents has been a major challenge for ministries and departments, causing delays in resolving audit issues. As these issues are highlighted in every audit report, we also need solutions from the Office of the Auditor-General on the best way forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, regarding internal audit and good governance team, internal audits conducted by the Internal Audit and Good Governance team (IAGG) is essential to maintain operational efficiencies and financial reliability and provide assurance to the permanent secretaries

that organisation and risk management, governance and internal control processes are operating effectively. Not only the IAGG Team but other departments within the Ministry of Economy is effectively contributing and addressing internal control weaknesses.

Adequate training is provided to ministries and departments in order to improve the knowledge and skill sets of the employees. Reconciliations performed by the ministries and departments are reviewed in a timely manner and anomalies with corrective measures are communicated to the Accounting Heads and Permanent Secretaries. Ministries and departments have been encouraged to develop policies and procedures and have been advised to maintain adequate supporting documents for an audit trail. Furthermore, Sir, stringent monitoring and follow-ups are undertaken by the Treasury Department to ensure ministries and departments are in compliance with the requirements of the financial laws and of course the International Accounting Standards.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to thank all those honourable Members who have contributed positively towards the debate.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Absorption/Recruitment of Ba Mission Hospital Staff by Aspen (Question No. 138/2022)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communication, Housing and Community Development inform Parliament if all staff at the Ba Mission Hospital will be automatically recruited or absorbed as employees in the new Ba Hospital managed by Aspen?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the answer is no, they will not be.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a follow-up question to the honourable Minister; will there be an opportunity given to the staff who are not absorbed into the new hospital to perhaps move sideways within the Ministry in the Ba area?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, we have on a number of occasions on the floor of this Chamber answered this question. We have said from the beginning that this PPP is not only about Ba Hospital. The PPP is about Lautoka Hospital and also about Ba Hospital and we have said that the people who worked in these two hospitals have a choice. They can choose to stay with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services or they can join Aspen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are currently 917 staff including doctors in the two facilities. There is 122 in Ba Mission Hospital and 795 in Lautoka Hospital and out of these, 84 percent of the health

workers in the Lautoka Hospital and 79 percent of the health workers in Ba Hospital have chosen to join Health Care Fiji (HCF) which is actually going to be the employer, not Aspen. Thank you.

Expansion of Commercial Crop Agriculture – Strategies & Plans
(Question No. 139/2022)

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment update Parliament on the strategies and plans to expand commercial crop agriculture?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for asking that important question - important for the country, the economy, all the stakeholders, the farmers, the household, labourers and the landowners.

The Ministry of Agriculture's direction is guided by the 2019-2023 Strategic Development Plan, aligned to the 5-Year and 20-Year National Development Plan, with the overall objective of achieving the SDGs through a sustainable, competitive and resilient agriculture sector over this period. The Ministry's Strategic Development Plan is grounded on five key strategic priorities, which includes commercial agriculture expansion; the availability of financial services; increased agri-business participation and enhancing the ICT system into the agricultural sector - all towards improving and expanding commercial agriculture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the agriculture sector continues to reflect growth over the last decade. From 2018 to 2020, the value of non-sugar cane agriculture GDP grew at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 4.9 percent. This was an increase from FJ\$686 million in 2018 to FJ\$756 million in 2020. The growth was influenced by commodities like kava, *dalo*, ginger, turmeric and horticultural crops.

The return on investment in the last three financial years with an average budgetary allocation of \$62.9million where every dollar of Government investment in agriculture, meaning the Government's agriculture budgetary allocation, resulted in \$9 an output. That is the return on investment. So whenever we, the Ministry, talk about our allocation, we treat that as an investment rather than expenditure. Mr. Speaker, Sir, comparatively, this return on investment is from the higher side comparatively to other developing countries - 1:9.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is committed to further continuing to leverage the agriculture sector noting the strategic advantage we have regarding crop agriculture, noting the favourable weather conditions we have, and noting the vast amount of unutilised lands which has the potential to be brought under agriculture. At the end of 2021-2022 Financial Year, the Ministry recorded an additional 15,598 farmers in the database, which makes up the total number of farmers, adding onto the Census one, to 98,996. At the moment, we have in our books 98,993 farmers. So, a substantial increase from the Census period, which was 2020, which was 83,000, so from 2020 to this year, now we have got an additional 15,000 farmers moving to agriculture. It is a very positive sign noting that farmers and labourers in the urban areas have confidence in the agriculture sector to peg their future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to note this and to deliver onto our objective of expanding commercial crop agriculture, this year in this budget (unfortunately, our critics are not able to read the budget), \$29.2 million has been allocated to fast track the growth of the agriculture sector and provide direct assistance. So this \$29.2million is the direct assistance that we will provide to farmers, apart from the technical advice to our pathologies and entomologies that we are giving to farmers, apart from the subsidised medicines that we are providing to livestock farmers and apart from the other support

that we are providing through our Ministry, for example, support towards eradicating brucellosis and tuberculosis. So on top of all those, \$29.2 million has been allocated and advertised, Sir, so that every farmer out there who is interested to get a leverage through Government support will have an opportunity to apply and compete on equal footing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this \$29.2 million, top is \$7 million that has been allocated for the first time ever for farmers to hire machinery to bring new land under cultivation to cultivate existing land through land preparation, drainage works, using a bulldozer to better organise their farms or bring new land under cultivation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have got allocation to allow farmers to buy small machinery on a one-third, two-thirds basis. For example, they want to buy a rotavator, they want to buy a mini tractor, they want to buy a disc plough, et cetera. So, the Ministry will contribute a grant of up to \$5,000. Mr. Speaker, Sir, noting that our highest export earner is kava, we are now wanting to give these farmers a number of them, with the allocation of \$72,000 small gadgets, pounding machines, dryer et cetera. We have got assistance for rice farmers. The rice season last year up till two months ago, we had a bumper harvest in Vanua Levu; ten times more production than last year and we incentivised them through the provision of harvesters from the Ministry. Now we want them to own the harvesters where we will provide two-thirds contribution.

The honourable Prime Minister, about a month ago, handed over two harvesters to two co-operatives in Vanua Levu. This year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have got 10 harvesters, so that completely in Vanua Levu, the farmer cooperatives will own harvesters. This is a critical binding constraint in a rice farming community because they do not have people to harvest rice manually and the amount of confidence this has built when we announced that we will now be giving all those groups in Vanua Levu who are growing rice in groups, harvesters they have now started to bring in more land. Land is also being shifted from other crops as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also provided, assisting in this package of \$29.2 million, farmers whose farming land is far away from where they are staying. This is typical in Fiji, in the rural interior where we have got farmers living in villages but their farm is about two kilometres to three kilometres away. When they go to work on their farm, they do not return the same day, they return three days later, four days later et cetera, so they need a small farm house or farm shed. For that, the Ministry has got a package of material and we are looking at assisting close to 42 farmers to construct farm sheds on their farms with an allocation of \$170,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are assisting farmers to make major investments through a grant where the Ministry will provide 20 percent equity contribution as a grant to the loan that they will take from FDB. It is a new programme that we started last year, first-time ever, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is called "Commercial Farmers Equity Package". Farmers who would want to construct or do major investment, buy an excavator, bulldozer of their own, individually, Mr. Speaker, they can dip into and apply for this assistance. All these are open now, closing on Wednesday and we are extending it till next week Friday.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have got another allocation to assist the new young graduates out of Navuso Agriculture Technical Institute (NATI), out of FNU, who want to undertake commercial agriculture to assist them in preparing five acres of their land at one-tenth of the cost. We will pick up 90 percent of the cost of the land preparation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also wanting farmers to own their own tractors in groups. This year with a budget of \$1.16 million of which 25 tractors will be provided to farmer groups and five excavators will be provided to these farmers in Lomaivuna cluster where 90 percent of Fiji's ginger

originates from. The honourable Minister for Economy was there and they raised this issue about delay in getting a Government digger and we are quite fortunate to have this allocation that they will now own this excavator to undertake, as you know, for ginger cultivation. They need to bring in new land every year because the existing land where they grew ginger cannot be utilised for the next three years because of the nematode issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are simultaneously through the supply-chain sending signals to these farmers by organising the market for them and therefore leveraging the agro process with the exporters by having a separate allocation where they can do capital improvements on the side, where they will be able to access a grant of up to \$10,000 to upgrade their capital equipment. We are looking at supporting 15 agro-processors from this allocation through the \$10,000 grant while the agro-processors can also apply for the commercial farmers' equity where they can take a bigger loan package from the Fiji Development Bank while we will provide 20 percent equity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our women in the agriculture programme have a \$300,000 allocation, the largest allocation ever for women who are engaged in agriculture and they can apply for assistance of whatever they need. We have also got other support through planting material totally free to farmers whether it is *dalo* planting material, *yaqona*, cassava or horticultural crop.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this way we will see a bumper increase in production, at the same time we are working very closely with the Ministry of Industry and Trade to open up new markets not only in Australia and New Zealand but also totally new markets in the United States of America and other countries.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question. I just heard the honourable Minister for Agriculture mention that they are planning to reintroduce this assistance to new graduates from agricultural schools. Can the honourable Minister enlighten Parliament, this programme started in 2018, how many of those assisted are still planting today?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- What is your question?

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- It is related. How many are still in the programme?

MR. SPEAKER.- A supplementary question must be related to the original question, that is why I gave you the floor.

Illicit Drugs Trade – Non-Involvement of Police Officers
(Question No. 140/2022)

HON. RATU T. NAVURELEVU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management inform Parliament as to what measures are in place to ensure that Police Officers are not involved in illicit drugs trade, given the recent suspensions of Police Officers facing drugs-related charges?

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the honourable Member for the question. Let me clearly state from the very outset that this is a serious issue and is of concern and the Fiji Police Force does not take this lightly and ensures that those involved are dealt with appropriately within the laws that we have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the war on drugs in Fiji has been ongoing since the 1980s. Drugs are now

available and more readily accessible than ever before. The Fiji Police Force has been conducting Drug Operations consistently around the country and these operations may have the tendency to expose and lure police personnel to get involved in illegal drugs trade given the lucrative value of these drugs. This is something that has happened across the world and in major drugs and narcotics markets such as North America and, of course, the Australasian region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent suspension of Police Officers facing drug-related charges is testament to the fact that the Fiji Police Force does not take the war on drugs lightly whether it be nipping it in the bud in the communities or be it within the organisation. I, again, wish to make this clear, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that anyone, uniformed Police Officer or not, that is involved in illicit drugs trade commits a criminal offence under the Illicit Drugs Control Act of 2004 and, therefore, will be fully investigated and brought before the judicial system for appropriate actions. There is no two ways about this and I have been consistently briefed by the Commissioner of Police on this issue and I fully support the corrective actions and measures that the Fiji Police Force has instituted.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Police Force has a Drug Testing Policy and Procedure in place. This outlines the responsibilities of any member of the Force at recruitment level and during his or her term of employment to uphold the organisational Code of Ethics and Code of Conduct in daily duties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, any employee may be requested with informed consent to undergo a random drug test if there is suspicion of drug use or administration. As enforcers of law and order, members of the Fiji Police Force are held to a higher standard and rightfully so anyone found to be involved in any illegal drug transaction or may have tested positive during drug test will undergo internal disciplinary proceedings as well as criminal prosecution. Mr. Speaker, Sir, again the Fiji Police Force has a zero tolerance policy in this regard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I also mention that for Supervisors, Officer In Charge (OCs) and Managers, they have a duty of care and due diligence in ensuring that they familiarise themselves with the nature of work that they are assigned, together with the backgrounds of their subordinates and their family background in order to address any possible issues their staff may encounter at work or at the home front that could allow opportunities for employees to involve themselves in such illicit activities. The superiors are given this responsibility to monitor and know their subordinates very well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if someone is on a drinking pattern or may be doing a purchase of a property; these are the things that they monitor closely so that they can give them some indication that their officers are getting money from other sources other than their pay.

In closing, the Internal Affairs Unit conducts awareness on a regular basis within the Forces on such matters. Lastly as a disciplinary force, an organisation that embraces values, this is becoming very important now and with the recruits, this is something that is always of importance in the lectures to live within the values of the institution and of course set high examples as well.

I will be happy to answer any further questions, Sir.

HON. RATU T. NAVURELEVU.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Is the Drug Squad still in existence within the Force?

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, the Drug Squad is still there. We have seen some models, we are looking at the Singaporean model where, hopefully by 2027 we will (again subject to Cabinet endorsement and of course funding as well) have an independent Narcotics

Drugs Bill. That is the plan, but of course, yes, we still maintain the Drug Squad within the Fiji Police Force for now.

Moving towards that direction as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have to have all the enablers and the key capabilities in place. One is the laboratory that the Fiji Police Force now has in Nasese where previously all the drugs used to be tested in Koronivia. Now the police are doing their own testing so this is something that together with Forensic Unit we will look into.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the honourable Minister for his detailed explanation. He has been talking about the monitoring of the Intelligence Unit, that is, monitoring the offenders or maybe the Police Officers who doing the drug haul. Is there anyone monitoring the people who are monitoring, accounting intelligence?

MR. SPEAKER.- I think the Minister has already answered that.

Progress of School Rehabilitation – Northern Division
(Question No. 141/2022)

HON. A.T. NAGATA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts, and Local Government update Parliament on the progress of school rehabilitation in the North which is being funded by the Australian Government?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. We all know that *TC Yasa* caused substantial damage to schools in the North and actually around the country. As an immediate measure, the Ministry partnered with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and fixed 29 schools as quick fixes to allow schools to resume.

The Ministry and DFAT spent approximately \$600,000 to purchase materials for the quick fixes. These schools were repaired by the school management team, community members and Republic of Fiji Military Forces.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some schools were badly damaged and needed to be rehabilitated. As a long standing partner in education, the Australian Government committed AU\$12.5 million to rehabilitate nine schools in the North.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the nine schools are:

1. Maramarua District School;
2. Dreketi Primary School;
3. Lekutu Secondary School;
4. Lekutu District School;
5. Bua District School;
6. Dama District School;
7. Ratu Luke Memorial Primary School;
8. Wailevu West District School; and
9. Nukubolu Primary School.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the first six months of programme implementation, a suite of new designs for classrooms, teachers quarters, ablution blocks and dormitories were developed. This design represent international best practice. The Category 5 cyclone certified low technology,

environmentally sustainable and have a high focus on accessibility for students with disabilities and safety for girls. School classroom blocks have been designed with maximum flexibility with natural light cross ventilation including partition walls that allow for use as evacuation centres.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, leading up to the design of the buildings, a number of discussions were held with the Head of School, School Management Committee members and community to understand any sensitivities in the communities and to ensure that the design is accepted by the community and it serves their purpose.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the underlying philosophy that will be applied is to ensure that communities are involved in the rehabilitation work so that they can also provide labour support and earned from this project where possible. We see this project as a partnership between the Ministry, the Australian Government and the affected communities.

The construction works packages are now out of tender and it is anticipated that construction will commence in all nine schools by the end of this year. To enable effective, timely and highly quality delivery, the Australian Government agreed to manage the implementation of this project. A programme still in Committee comprising the Permanent Secretary of Economy and Permanent Secretary for Education plus the Development Counsellor from the Australian High Commission, they meet regularly to provide oversight and direction.

Learning and teaching at these schools are going on smoothly with the initial repairs done to ensure there is no disruption to teaching and learning. With the new infrastructure the communities will have better cyclone resistant infrastructure. I take this opportunity to thank the Australian Government for this timely assistance. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Recovery of the Tourism Industry - Tourism Fiji
(Question No. 142/2022)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport update Parliament on the activities of Tourism Fiji, given the progress in the recovery of the Tourism industry?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. We have already recovered over half which is about 56.4 percent of visitors Fiji received in 2019. Our national airline Fiji Airways is currently holding approximately 8 percent higher bookings from August and going forward about 12 months, 35 properties in July showed that there are actually operating at an average of about 85 percent occupancy. The average daily rate in July was 23 percent more than July 2019.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I previously mentioned in Parliament, we are actually going to make every marketing dollar count when this financial year Tourism Fiji like many other organizations who focus on season's new opportunities and there is a change in paradigm in the tourism industry and we need to hold heartedly and welcome this transformation.

With respect to our branding, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Tourism Fiji has a number of key activities that are planned for Fiji and our global markets and this starts with the brand evolution that re-energizes the iconic "Fiji – Where happiness finds you". The "Fiji - Where happiness finds you" brand has represented us for over a decade and it has done so wonderfully in terms of growth and visit numbers also. But a lot has changed which means we need to be future looking, we are actually

working with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and other relevant stakeholders to bring out more of what it is about Fiji that truly inspires people to visit. We will be essentially connecting people with Fijians more than we have did it before, Sir, without giving too much away, we can expect the campaign to roll out on 10th October, and I can tell you that we are very excited about this rebrand as it is sure to elevate Fiji's presence and help us stand out amongst our competitors. I cannot let the little bit go, I know we are happy to find the branding actually very popular amongst all Fijians, we will not want to be losing that, we just rejigging it, Sir.

With respect to its corporate plan, in May this year, Tourism Fiji launched its 2022-2024 Corporate Plan, a two year road map, sets out the clear path to drive our tourism recovery forward, and what is unique here is that, that actually looks beyond marketing and looks at the strategies to create meaningful jobs, stronger value chains, environmental stewardship in connecting visitors to more of our culture and delivers value to the custodians of the land and Fijians. With respect to new routes, we are also looking at new markets soon, as we all know Fiji Airways will start the direct flight to Vancouver and this is an opportunity for Tourism Fiji to increase feasibility in North America.

The tourism industry has a huge Fijian diaspora in our national airline and we all see this as good news and rightfully so, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because we are more connected with the world. I know honourable Gavoka has mentioned something along the lines of the economics of operating flights to Canada should drive Fiji, not its politics, I really do not know where that came from. May be, he should say that to every Fijian who are returning home and they are coming back in absolute draw and every tourist to get into Fiji a lot easier.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the more we connect, the more we benefit. Fiji Airways is flying directly also to Adelaide, has already shown as promising results when we received the highest number of Australians in July than in any given month in Fijian history. In terms of our niche products, through Tourism Fiji, we are also supporting our creative arts sector in building greater synergy with tourism. We are looking at promoting some of our Fijian talents as well as our local designers, et cetera. We know our capabilities in hosting top tier events including sports tourism and also the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences & Exhibitions (MICE) markets. With borders now open, we will continue to pose such events.

With respect to our website, Tourism Fiji's website has actually generated about 4 million page views with 1.5 million new users added. So over 1.7 million operated listings were actually viewed and 150,000 leads were sent from the site of tourism operators with the average time spent on the site of impressive two minutes. With respect to regional activities also, besides increasing our digital footprint, Tourism Fiji is actually participating in in-country events with most recent being the Connect Marketplace Event in Michigan to promote MICE to over 50 participants and the Treasures of the South Pacific Roadshow in Australia that head over a 100 trade partners. So, Tourism Fiji also continues to work with the group of travel industry and trade partners such as Luxury Escapes, Expedia and Master Cards, Sir.

In respect to other markets, we will, aside from the normal traditional markets, maintain the presents in the Asian markets such as China and India with Tourism Fiji ready to roll out those particular market re-entry plans. I hope that answers his question, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the honourable Minister for the reply. Just digressing a bit, he mentioned about services to Los Angeles, San Francisco and Vancouver. Los Angeles has problems meeting the capacity of passengers from all over the world and people suffer. I know the Government Ministers do not go through the normal process when they land in Los Angeles but it is a very difficult airport. It is almost inhumane.

My question is, there is also Houston and Chicago, just to take that pressure away from Los Angeles. I think the daily service there with all the pressure that we are getting, it is really unbearable. I used the term inhumane, I was just there two weeks or three weeks ago. We need to prevail upon the authorities there to improve the services or go to Houston or other ports in the United States.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all, I think that is probably a question for Fiji Airways for one but mostly, it has to be a commercial decision that is made. It is this very honourable Gavoka that was actually objecting to our A350 in the first place. So it has to be a commercial decision that is made with respect to where we go and it is a well thought-out, well-researched subject when we actually go to anywhere, whether it is Hong Kong, Los Angeles or San Francisco ...

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Offer something else please!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- So, you cannot just suddenly decide that you want to go to Chicago.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- It was in the press actually.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- As I have said, Sir, it is a very well-informed, well-calculated way in which Fiji Airways does the routing in conjunction with Tourism Fiji, they do all the necessary number crunching exercises. Right now, the best route for us is Vancouver and we have done so, Sir.

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR.- A supplementary question, Sir; can the honourable Minister update Parliament on how Fiji is tracking to achieve its visitor arrival targets?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. From January to July 2022, we received 284,167 visitors, which is 56.4 percent of the arrivals in the same period in 2019. In July 2022, Fiji received 78,638 visitors and that is an 81.6 percent recovery of July 2019 levels and, I think we need to really realise what we have actually done here.

This is actually unbelievable in terms of the short space of time that we have been able to get back on our feet, Sir. By the year end, we expect to recover 55 percent of the 2019 levels in terms of arrivals and that in money terms, would mean more than \$1.3 billion in tourism earnings and by 2024, we actually expect a fully recovery. It is safe to say that we expect to exceed our expectations, Sir.

Reimbursement for UN Peacekeeping Missions
(Question No. 143/2022)

HON. V. NATH asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management update Parliament on the UN reimbursement for our troops in UN peacekeeping missions?

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the honourable Member for the question raised. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has a long history of supporting UN

peacekeeping missions, stretching back to our first contribution in 1978 to the UN Interim Forces in Lebanon or UNIFIL.

Sir, the RFMF and the Fiji Police Force are still charged with providing forces for international peacekeeping operations, in line with government's foreign commitment on maintaining world peace. This is an ongoing commitment between the Fijian Government and the United Nations. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the missions, we still have forces now in the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) in Syria, UNIFIL in Lebanon, United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI). I have also included in my response the Multinational Forces and Observers (MFO), although it is a non-UN Mission and, of course, we have the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMIS) and United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) and of course, we have the mission in Yemen where we have one officer I believe, it is Major Ieli who is there, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will detail the reimbursements from 2015. In 2015, the reimbursement to the Government of Fiji was around \$12,846,973.81. Again, in 2016, it was \$12,147,018.26. In 2017, the reimbursement was \$19,638,315.52. In 2018, the reimbursement was \$10,328,111.98. In 2019, again, it was \$10,637,083.57. In 2020, an amount of \$6,444,326.65; in 2021, an amount of \$4,192,979.79; and in 2022, the reimbursement is a total of \$15,709,188.79. So, if we add those figures from 2015 to 2022, the total reimbursement to the Government of Fiji is around \$91,780,940.37.

Interestingly, there will be another meeting in New York in February next year, where we will have an opportunity to again discuss the rates, particularly when it comes to the equipment used. That will be in around February next year, Sir.

Rural Local Authority Activities in Kadavu
(Question No. 144/2022)

HON. M. BULANAUCA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts, and Local Government update Parliament on the mandate of the Suva City Council with respect to the rural local authority activities in Kadavu?

HON. P.D. KUMAR. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, the amendment of the Public Health Act 2018 allowed designated rural areas including the maritime islands to be brought under municipal authorities for basic services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as per the amalgamation, the Municipal Councils are required to administer the areas outside of the town boundaries by providing sanitary services and development permits management. Since then the Municipal Councils have been providing services in this extended boundaries which was previously serviced by Rural Local Authorities. Kadavu was assigned to Suva City Council to manage development permits and solid waste management.

In demarcated planning scheme areas such as public facilities, business house, government stations and special used area. With the inclusion of Kadavu, a budget of \$50,000 is given to Suva City Council to collect solid waste in Vunisea. This includes providing public bins and collection of waste in public areas within the proximity of the Vunisea Market. The Suva City Council (SCC) collects wastes from the market and within the Vunisea Village using hired open trucks as a current practice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to note that SCC has invested in 20 composed bins in 2021

for use at Government Stations in Kadavu. Apart from the sanitary services that they provide, SCC also manages development permits on the island of Kadavu, four applications were received for Kadavu in 2021 and 2022. The applications are for three school buildings and one commercial application for a retail shop.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition the Council is also responsible for the satellite market in Vunisea and discussions are underway with UN Women and Suva City Council to upgrade the Vunisea Market this financial year at a cost of \$70,000.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- I would like to thank the Honourable Minister for the update about Kadavu. When you are talking about Kadavu that is Vunisea, are you also intending to take on Kavala?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this stage - basic services in Vunisea.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Does the extent of development in Kadavu warrants declaring Kadavu as a rural local authority or do you need more development for tourist purposes, industrial, manufacturing, et cetera?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, to start off with, there is no such thing as rural local authority. It is an extended boundary that comes under Suva City Council and Kadavu is still developing. I mean, if you want to turn that into a small municipality or small town, I do not think Kadavu is ready yet because with that will come the rates and I wonder whether the people of Kadavu is ready to pay rates. But along with the rate also means that we have to provide the basic services like the roads, the other infrastructure and other services so at this stage I do not think so.

2022 Economic Forecast
(Question No. 145/2022)

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communication, Housing and Community Development update Parliament on the economic forecast for 2022?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I like to also thank the honourable Member for the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's domestic economy is on track for a strong rebound this year after consecutive years of decline which adversely affected jobs, public finances and socio-economic conditions. After minor decline of 0.6 percent in 2019 the economy recorded a severe contraction of 17.2 percent in 2020 followed by a further estimated decline of 4.1 percent in 2021.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, following the sooner than expected reopening of the international borders in December last year as a result of Government engaging in massive vaccination programme and the subsequent resurgence for the tourism sector the Fijian economy is now recovering strongly with double digit growth of 12.4 percent projected for 2022. If realised, Sir, this would mark Fiji's highest ever GDP growth on record.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2022 forecast which is an upward revision from the earlier projection of 11.3 percent is based on the earlier resumption of tourism given our strong vaccination progress and the rebound in other key sectors such as fisheries, manufacturing, construction and transport. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth is projected at 9.2 percent for 2023 and 5 percent for 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the upward revision is also consistent with the latest sentiments of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) which recently upgraded its 2022 growth projection for Fiji from 7.8 percent to 11.7 percent and the strong performances in tourism-related sectors and an expected rebound in tax collections particularly VAT as jobs are being restored.

It should also be noted Mr. Speaker, Sir, that Fiji's revised forecast is quite conservative compared to other GDP growth forecast for 2022 such as the warping 23.2 percent growth projected by ANZ and 12.9 percent projected by Westpac. Fiji's revised growth of 12.4 percent is predicated on the assumption that visitor arrivals will reach around 55 percent of pre-pandemic arrivals this year. The recovery of the tourism industry is critical for our recovery prospects given the dominance of the industry throughout the wider economy and it accounts for roughly 40 percent of our GDP both directly and indirectly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this revised forecast is upward biased meaning essentially the actual GDP growth for 2022 could be much higher than what is projected. That is because we are likely to surpass our visitor arrivals target for the year with the current trajectory of tourism inflows is maintained.

As highlighted by the honourable Minister for Tourism visitor arrivals in July 2022 stood at 78,638 which is 81.6 percent of July 2019 levels. Furthermore, total cumulative arrivals from January to July: 284,167 which is 56.4 percent of arrivals in the same period in 2019.

Notably Sir, Australia's visitor arrivals in July this year: 37,005 - already surpassed 2019 July levels which is 36,799 (100.6 percent higher). Similarly Sir, New Zealand arrivals are 90.3 percent of July 2019 levels while US arrivals are 93.6 percent of July 2019 levels.

Moreover, strong forward bookings with our national carrier; Fiji Airways hinted even better tourism numbers as we move beyond the traditional peak period of July to August. The economic recovery is also evident Sir, on the sectorial front. The positive spill of tourism rebound have fuelled stronger consumption and investment spending over the first half of the year. The uptake in consumption spending is reflected by higher Pay As You Earn (PAYE) or plus which is an increase of about 12.3 percent and net Value Added Tax (VAT) increase of about 61 percent.

These collections in the year to June, together with strong commercial bank new consumption lending which has increased by 58.4 percent and total vehicle registration which has actually increased by 44 percent.

In terms of construction and investment activities, domestic cement sales; a new lending for investment purposes rose over the first six months of the year when compared to 2021. Likewise in the March quarter of 2022, the number of building permits, completion certificates issued and value of work put in place all increased relative to the December quarter of 2021 as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, however rising labour and construction material cost, supply chain bottlenecks and the uncertainties surrounding current geo-political tensions could impede investment spending to some extent throughout the remainder of the year.

However, Sir, as highlighted previously, we have got three projects at the moment between the Nadi-Lautoka corridor totalling about \$200 million. One has already started, I think the other two will be ready in the next couple of months' time too.

Overall Mr. Speaker, Sir, and these (I should say) Fijian investors were taken advantage of the high levels of liquidity and investing in the future. Fiji's macro-economic fundamentals are

strong, the financial sector remains sound and foreign reserves are currently sitting at \$3.6 billion were equivalent to 8.4 months of retained import cover as at 29th July, 2022.

Moreover, liquidity levels in the financial system sits at \$2.6 billion as at 29th July, 2022 and these have helped to maintain the low interest rate environment which is actually being critical to the recovery momentum.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings an end to question time for today, there being no Written Questions. That also brings us to the end of the sitting for today. Dinner for all honourable Members will be ready soon, the caterers are on their way here so we adjourn Parliament until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.11 p.m.