

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 16TH FEBRUARY, 2023

[CORRECTED COPY]

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THURSDAY, 16TH FEBRUARY, 2023

The Parliament met at 9.40 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Leader of the Opposition.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 15th February, 2023, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

Question put.

MR. SPEAKER.- There being opposition, Parliament will now vote.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- A Point of Order, Sir, arising from the Minutes of yesterday, that is, the agenda of the Order Paper today. I think it would be most early for me to raise it now on a statement that was uttered on the floor. Before the Minutes is approved and before Parliament is given another seven days for the *Daily Hansard* to be edited as per Standing Orders on a statement that was made by the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament yesterday in response to honourable Premila Kumar in terms of referring to her statement that was trying to show some seeds of division in the past, referring to the ideologies from the other side always referring to the honourable Prime Minister on the 1987 *coup* in terms of the rape that was done to Indo-Fijian women.

Given that there is a blatant lie because even the head of the Women Crisis Centre is on record that there were complaints received in terms of those events that happened in the past. She cannot re-track and withdraw those statements because the Standing Orders does not allow that, only grammatical errors can be altered in the *Daily Hansard*. Just to put it on record, Sir, that it is incorrect. The *Daily Hansard* is to be marked red because of her statement that is unbecoming of the Leader of the Government in Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I have given leeway to honourable Bulitavu to make his objection and read it out to us as well. But, again, that is just a process on the Confirmation of Minutes. He is also asking that it be expunged and as such, the seven days is still very much in the process here of the Minutes.

Given that the seven days is still up when the corrected version are corrected, but as you have just mentioned also, honourable Bulitavu, that you just want this to be noted, we will take note, and we will move on.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATION FROM THE SPEAKER

Honourable Members, I welcome you all to today's sitting. I welcome those joining us from the gallery and those watching the proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for taking interest in our Parliament.

Honourable Members, I am allowing the motion for the sitting calendar to be moved later today, therefore, we will proceed with the debate to thank His Excellency for his most gracious Address.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON HIS EXCELLENCY'S ADDRESS

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I join the honourable Prime Minister and other honourable Members in congratulating you as the 12th Speaker of Fiji's Parliament since Independence in 1970.

Mr. Speaker, you have our full support towards the discharge of your responsibilities. Your success is the success of the people of Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is their freedoms and their rights that you ultimately are the steward of. Most importantly, Mr. Speaker, you are the guarantor of dignity and decorum of Parliament which is and shall always be a temple of democracy under your leadership.

Mr. Speaker, before I move on, let me say a few words in *Hindi* and it is quite historic under your leadership and I want to thank you most sincerely for allowing *Hindi* and *iTaukei* to be used in Parliament as a language. I want to say a few words in *Hindi* on the occasion of the World Hindi Conference that is currently being held in Fiji.

Speaker, *Mahoday*, *12th Vishva Hindi Sammelan* (Mr. Speaker, Sir, 12th World Hindi Conference)

MR. SPEAKER.- Could I just stop you for a minute, honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

Honourable Members, just for the benefit of all in tuning in to the translation, it can be heard by you on Channel 2 on the audio system that is in front of you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- *Mananiye Speaker Mahoday, 12th Vishva Hindi Sammelan filhal Nadi, Fiji mein ho rahi hai. Iska udghatan kal hamare desh ke rashtrapati ji ne ek bahut hi paramparik swagat dwara kiya gaya. Is sammelan mein lagbhag ek hazaaer se zyada log bhaag le rahe hai. Sabse zyada, Speaker Mahoday, Bharat aur anye desho mein jaha Hindi bola jata hai, Hindi ki padhai-likhai bhi hoti hai.*

[Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 12th World Hindi Conference is currently taking place in Nadi, Fiji. It was inaugurated yesterday by the President of our country with a very traditional reception. In this meeting, there are more and more people participating in the gathering. Most of all, Speaker Sir, where Hindi is spoken in India and other countries and where Hindi is also read and written.]

Speaker *Mahoday*, *Bharat se aur anye desho mein jaha Hindi boli jaati hai, Hindi ki padhai-likhai bhi hoti hai, Hindi ke jo vesheshagya hai, wo is sammelan mein bhaag le rahe hai. Bharat ke*

jo delegation hai uski netitra Bharat ke lokpriye videsh mantri, Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar ji kar rahe hai. Bhaiyo aur baheno

[Mr. Speaker Sir, In India and other countries where Hindi is spoken, Hindi is taught. The scholars of Hindi are all attending and participating in this conference. The delegation of India is headed by the popular Foreign Minister of India, Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. Brothers and sisters...]

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- We cannot hear you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I beg your indulgence. All I ask is a couple of minutes to be given to our IT officers.

(Inaudible interjections)

You may continue. Honorable Members, I am the Speaker, I make the directives here, not you.

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Hold your horse.

MR. SPEAKER.- Continue, honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Speaker *Mahoday*, *ye khushi ki baat hai ki 12th Vishwa Hindi Sammelan is baar Fiji mein ho raha hai. Kal sammelan ki vishesh udghaatan aur paaramparik swaagat ke dwara, Fiji ke rashtrapati ne kiya. Is sammelan mein lagbhag ek hazaar se zyada log bhaag le rahe hai. Sabse badi sankhya mein Bharat se log usme shamil hai. Kai aese Hindi scholar hai, Hindi ke visheshagya hai, Hindi sahitya aur Hindi bhasha ko padhaane waale, uski prachaar aur prasaar karne waale hai. Bharat sarkar ki taraf se jo unka delegation hai, unki netitra Bharat ke logpriye videsh mantri Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar ji. Fiji sarkar ki taraf se kal raat ko mananiye pradhaan mantri ji ne Vishwa Hindi Sammelan ka vishesh swaagat kiya hai aur usme hamare saathi, mananiye Attorney-General, Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka ji aur Deputy Prime Minister Manoa Kamikamica ji bhi upastit the.*

[Mr. Speaker Sir, it is a matter of pleasure that the 12th World Hindi Conference is being held in Fiji this time. The conference was inaugurated yesterday by the President of Fiji, with a special and traditional welcome. More than one thousand people are participating in this conference. The largest number of people from India are included in it.

There are many such Hindi scholars, experts in Hindi, those who teach Hindi literature and Hindi language, promote and spread it.

His delegation, on behalf of the Government of India, is headed by the beloved Foreign Minister of India, Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar.

On behalf of the Fiji Government, last night, the Prime Minister welcomed the World Hindi Conference and, in that ceremony, present were our colleagues, the Attorney-General, Deputy Prime Minister, Mr. Gavoka, and Deputy Prime Minister, Mr. Manoa Kamikamica.]

Speaker *Mahoday*, *yeh Vishwa Hindi Sammelan, Fiji ke liye ek itihaasik Vishay hai kyuki Fiji ek aesa matra desh hai jo Bharat se baahar, jaha par Hindi ko ek opcharik bhasha maana gaya hai. Aur is Sammelan ke tahet, Fiji aur Bharat ka jo sambandh hai, anye desh jaha par bhartiye log girmit*

prutah ke neeche gaye the, unka jo mel-milaap hai, wo is sammelan ke dwara badhega. Iske alawa, Hindi bhasha ka jo prachaar tatha prasaar hai, ko badhawa milega. Ek baar fir mai Bharat Sarkar aur hamaare Fiji Sarkar ke jitne bhi log is sammelan ki ayojana mein lage hue hai, unko vishesh dhanyevaad de raha hoon.

[Mr. Speaker, Sir, this World Hindi Conference is a historical event for Fiji because Fiji is the only country that is, apart from India, where Hindi has been treated as an official language. And in this Conference, the relation between Fiji and India and other countries where Indians went under the 'Girmit' will be able to enhance their bonding once again.

Apart from this, the process of promoting and spreading Hindi language will be enhanced, is used and spread, and it will be improved. Once again, I would like to thank the Government of India and our Government of Fiji, as many people as possible who are involved in organising this Conference.]

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the lead up to the 2022 General Election, we preached about an alternative to the bleak future facing Fiji and our citizens in the form of poverty, unemployment, state of decay of our public health and medical facilities, infrastructure, sugar industry struggling to survive, the agriculture sector in a state of neglect, record national debt levels, wastage, pilferage, mismanagement of public funds and above all a population gripped by fear because of lack of freedom.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the campaign, we were attacked both on social media mostly through fake and fictitious accounts by our political opponents and a party that had been in government for 16 years, both as a party and an unelected regime. We were accused of racial persecution, economic deprivation, sacking and reducing wages in the civil service and removing tuition free education to name a few, if we formed government. That was the fear spread by many of those sitting on the other side.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, such behaviour is symptomatic of those who do not want to give up power and I will say more on this later. But let me tell the people of Fiji - the People's Alliance, National Federation Party and the SODELPA Coalition Government is all about national interest, as the last 54 days of our governance has proven.

Right at the outset Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the immediate aftermath of the election of the honourable Prime Minister and the formation of the Coalition Government a day before Christmas, the euphoria of the people Mr. Speaker, Sir, was demonstrated through tooting of car horns, beating of tins as make-shift drums and explosion of firecrackers signified one sole fundamental element – Freedom!

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. S. TURAGA.- Yes

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Fiji became free of the FijiFirst Government.

HON. S. TURAGA.- Free at last

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Hear, hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Removal of the prohibited immigrant status on Doctor Padma Narsey Lal enabling her and the children to bring home Professor Brij Lal's ashes to his final resting

place in Tabia, in nine days' time it is highly symptomatic. I want to thank the honourable Prime Minister for making that issue a campaign issue and his commitment to correct that. It will put to an end Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 13 years of a tragic chapter heaped on a true son of Fiji and his wife, banished from their land of birth by a cruel and heartless regime and refused re-entry by the former FijiFirst Government, simply because these two people wanted restoration of democracy in Fiji.

The pre-eminent story on Giriti in Fiji and elsewhere, he was recognised and respected for his works, research and immeasurable knowledge. He was a man of impeccable integrity and was prevented from coming home because the order to ban him came from the Prime Minister's office and we all know who the Prime Minister was for the last 16 years.

HON. S. TURAGA.- Oh, yes!

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Name him.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the return of the University of the South Pacific Vice Chancellor, Professor Pal Ahluwalia to the USP campus a few days ago, buries the unlawful saga of him and his wife nabbed at midnight, deported from Fiji by the very same government that now preaches and I hear that, now preaches its own concocted version of the rule of law in this Parliament.

The declaration of a public holiday for Giriti Day to honour and pay tribute to our forefathers whose blood, sweat, tears is the fulfilment of a promised made by the leaders of the Coalition Government led by the honourable Prime Minister ...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Hear, hear!

HON. S. TURAGA.- Yes.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... to honour those who laid the foundation for a modern and progressive nation with their bare hands – poles apart from the outright rejection by the former Prime Minister on this very same floor of Parliament on my adjournment motion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you would remember that almost seven years ago in April 2016 when I asked their government to declare 11th November, 2016 as a public holiday, this was to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the last ship carrying the *Giritiyas* or indentured Indians. They did not, and they talked about racial unity. They talk about one Fiji, yet the former Prime Minister and now the honourable Leader of the Opposition obviously through his now sin-binned side kick has the propensity to make wild and baseless accusations under the privilege accorded in this Parliament.

The decision, Mr. Speaker, to mark the life and works of Fiji's first statesman, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, as a public holiday, is a slap on the face of the honourable Leader of the Opposition, whose regime abolished this holiday. Children who were 15 years old, now almost 30 years old, they probably do not know about this Statesman. To dishonour Fiji's first Statesman whose political tutelage shaped the ideologies of many great leaders like the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, Ratu Sir George Cakobau and others who have studied Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna about his contribution to Fiji and on the land issue, and many of us have benefitted from reading and understanding that great man's vision of what Fiji should be. Again Mr. Speaker, that was an assault on the values of embodiment and chiefly wisdom by a regime that not only believed in my way or the highway rule.

To decide to restore grants to the USP and release the first payment of \$10 million is not unconstitutional, Mr. Speaker, but the beginning of ensuring that the University staff and students are assured that they will have the best teaching and learning environment. The payment of \$200 each for every child from early childhood education to Year -13 from a family earning a combined income of less than \$50,000, as back to school relief was not palatable to FijiFirst. Why, Mr. Speaker? Why? It is because it provided huge and genuine relief to parents and guardians and made education genuinely free. It was better than a *saqamoli*, or a dollar-a-day, or a total of \$180 for six months that was pre-election gimmick by the now punch-drunk FijiFirst Party.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Punch-drunk!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- To undertake fiscal review, to hold an economic summit is part of the consultative process and inclusivity of this Coalition Government. This Coalition Government!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Tell them!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is vastly different from an Economy Minister, who was also the State's chief legal advisor, holding public forums around the country just for the sake of it where civil servants are told to attend to make up the numbers to pull wool over the eyes of the people.

In December 2021, Mr. Speaker, we were told by the then PM and now honourable Leader of the Opposition how USP students were studying in an environment of corruption. He tried vainly to justify his government's decision to withhold the grant because of some egoistic behaviour of his government and particularly of his then Attorney-General, who has excused himself out of Parliament. Of course, the former government stifled any reference or debate on the BDO Report findings that incriminated a lot of personalities, with all intents and purposes, who were sympathetic towards the FijiFirst Government. The rest is history, Mr. Speaker, and that sordid chapter of USP history is best buried with the deviousness of a political party under whose reign, financial extravagance at the expense of the taxpayers has been in top gear as revealed by recent findings.

Fiji, Mr. Speaker, had a government that could not even paint our hospitals. We produced pictures in this Parliament. I have produced pictures of health centres around the country. Instead, it allowed grass to grow on the walls of the hospitals.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Shame!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, the few anecdotes that I have outlined proves one fact. It proves one fact – that the Coalition Government and FijiFirst are like riverbanks; never to come together because of a gulf in principles of transparency, accountability, good governance and adherence to the rule of law. The Coalition Government, Mr. Speaker and I know the leaders as leaders of the three Parties, we know that the Coalition Government is here to stay and is the best alternative, Mr. Speaker.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Hear! Hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is the best alternative to put right the ills plaguing our nation for the past 16 years.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Yes, that is right.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, on 15th October, 2014 during my maiden speech in Parliament, I was very new at that time and you were around at that time as well. and I said this and I want to quote:

“... with clarity about our vision, certainty about the reforms needed to realise that, with some luck and the grace of God, a future of great possibilities lies within our grasp.”

The Coalition Government, Mr. Speaker, will reset the moral compass of Fiji. Central to these tasks is the restoration of all freedoms, democratisation of institutions like the Municipal Councils, Sugarcane Growers Council and as you know the Cabinet has already made the decision, the honourable Ministers are working on it. On Monday I heard honourable Praveen Bala said he would contest the municipal elections. Maybe he is thinking of leaving Parliament too.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes, yes he will.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He should be thankful, Mr. Speaker, to the Coalition Government that he will be able to fulfil his wish if he wanted to. I want to remind him. Immediately upon swearing in as Local Government Minister in September 2014 I remember he was sitting somewhere there; he promised that there would be Local Government Elections. That promise never materialised but what emerged was the \$12 million swimming pool scam.

Mr. Speaker, there will also be a review and reform of legislations imposed upon the people through decrees which automatically became Acts under the 2013 Constitution without any ratification on the floor. You also know that.

Economic growth and financial stability are dependent on accountability and transparency - the two vital features of good governance sorely lacking in the last 16 years. Mr. Speaker, the Coalition Government as you know will soon hold an International Economic Summit and outline its plans for the future. We are consulting our citizens, our business stakeholders and they are with us in this journey to build an inclusive and prosperous economy.

Mr. Speaker, we are not daunted by the \$10 billion debt because we assured the nation that we will fix it. During the last 16 years the regime and the FijiFirst Government put together, borrowed a whopping \$7 billion.

As the Coalition Government's Minister of Finance, I am discovering areas of how wastage was happening. Some even bordering on financial negligence and abuse of authority. This will be revealed in the near future. On the positive side, Mr. Speaker, there is a sense of optimism. There is a sense of exuberance. The Minister of Trade and Commerce and Investment, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and myself have been meeting businesses and investors - there is a sense of optimism, people like this Government.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Yes.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They want to invest now, Mr. Speaker.

HON. L. D. TABUYA.- Hear! Hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They are telling us and we are making that happen. Also, Mr. Speaker, with God's grace, we are seeing positive indicators everywhere. And that is why I want to say that over the next four years the Coalition Government will try and secure \$1 billion worth of investment in our tourism sector; grow the sugar and agriculture industry into a billion dollar industry

but these industries can and should become the backbone of our economy; target \$1 billion worth of investment into climate, resilient infrastructure and into our blue economy; secure a million dollar investment into manufacturing and food processing.

There is a sense of optimism, sense of confidence, people who were living overseas, the remittances have crossed a billion-dollar mark, Mr. Speaker. And above all, we want to reduce wasteful expenditure by a billion dollar in the next four years. We will grow our economy; we will share the prosperity and we will reduce the debt.

But most important element, Mr. Speaker, in this political philosophical agenda and economic agenda of the Coalition Government is to improve the governance because no matter what you do and how much you can juggle with economic policies, but if your governance is not right, you will not be able to secure that economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday, we had a lecture on secularism from honourable Ketan Lal, who made disparaging remarks against me and the NFP for turning a blind eye to destroy secularism. For all intentional purposes, he was accusing me of turning a blind eye and ignoring discrimination against Indo-Fijians.

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are not the Speaker!

The filth verbose from the honourable Member was not surprising, who probably did not realise what was scripted for him was not only derogatory but inciteful.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes, yes.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I mean, I know he has suddenly become a small parrot for the General Secretary of the FijiFirst Party...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Nothing new, nothing new.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- He's written his speech.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am told that he has got something on him.

And that, Mr. Speaker, came from someone sitting there, who kept his mouth shut. When Mr. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum attacked the Vishva Hindu Parishad organisation that he was part of, as a terrorist organisation, he kept quiet. Not long ago, he was campaigning for NFP in 2018.

HON. GOVT. MEMBERS.- Oh!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I do not know what happened suddenly, Mr. Speaker, and you can see the filth that is coming from him.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he was attacking me in Parliament when, I, together with honourable Agni Deo Singh, were in Denarau, Nadi, participating in the World Hindi Conference, that was, as I have said in Hindi, officially opened by His Excellency the President. We know, Sir, the high-level conference is being attended by India's Minister for External Affairs, His Excellency Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. I also said that last night, the honourable Prime Minister hosted a dinner

for all the participants in Denarau, and today we are going to have bilateral meetings with Dr. Jaishankar later in the day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact that the World Hindi Conference is being held in Fiji, the fact that the honourable Prime Minister himself with the leader of the SODELPA Party, Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica, and myself, decided that we are going to recognise Girmit as a national holiday shows that this Coalition Government is an inclusive serious Government understanding that this nation is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious nation...

HON. GOVT. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...just like India which is the largest secular State. Mr. Speaker, he probably does not understand the meaning of secularism and ethnonationalism. As a Johnny-come-lately, reading the script by someone who has propagated this racial hatred for the last eight years in this Parliament.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes, you're correct.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I remember whenever an honourable Member of SODELPA Party would stand up and talk about how iTaukei community in the outer islands is facing water problem, he or she would be accused of racism.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes!

HON. OPP. MEMBERS.- No!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government is trying to bring the people together. They did nothing in the last eight years in Parliament to bring people together. All they did was to campaign on racial line.

We have seen parties come and disappear, and I want to remind people like honourable Ketan Lal, that NFP is going to be 60 years old in July this year. We are the oldest party, Mr. Speaker, and you are aware of that, in the South Pacific and comments like that is not going to make a dent on our philosophy and our idea of what Fiji should be.

We have seen, Mr. Speaker, that in the last eight years and before that, Fiji has been governed by two men, treating this country like their own personal property. And they thought that they will be in power for eternity, in fact, the honourable Leader of the Opposition now, in one of his interviews said, "We want to rule in perpetuity", and they talk about democracy. So, the behaviour and utterances, Mr. Speaker, from the Opposition show that they are actually experiencing excruciating pain at the loss of their power.

It is shameful the kind of things they say because it lowers the dignity. You were attacked, Mr. Speaker, it lowest the dignity of Parliament and they are worried that the People's Coalition Government - the empathy, the compassion that we are showing to the people of this country, they know that they will be history, and their cabal that ran the country will be useless and insignificant and this is what we want to add, Mr. Speaker. This shameful episode has become a thing of the past. Better days, months and years await our people because finally, Mr. Speaker, Fiji is a government of the people.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I want to conclude, Mr. Speaker, by saying that the vision of the late Justice Jai Ram Reddy and the honourable Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, which they set out to achieve 23 years ago, Mr. Speaker, came to fruition.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You will remember, Mr. Speaker, in 1999, we had a three-Party Coalition. We had the SVT, GVP and the NFP. Today, Mr. Speaker, I am proud that with honourable Rabuka and with honourable Gavoka. we have achieved that vision, that the late Justice Jai Ram Reddy and honourable Sitiveni Rabuka had in 1999 and we have a solid Government of three Parties leading this nation.

HON. V.T.T. K. RAYALU.- Hear, hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I want to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address. May he continue to be an embodiment of chiefly authority, wisdom and symbol of unity for our beloved nation. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, may God bless Fiji.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, you may have noted that I have allowed more time for the Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Professor Biman Prasad, to continue with his speech, and if I may borrow a word and that is to do with the 'glitch' that happened with our IT here. So, that is the reason why I have allowed a lot more time to the Deputy Prime Minister.

At the same time, I was flexible in the past few days with people going over their time because most are making their maiden speech. Secondly, most are trying to score a punch or two, having been served in Parliament in the past. So, it is a fair game, honourable Members, and I hope you will bear with me. Thank you.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, my colleagues - honourable Members of Parliament; good morning and thank you for the opportunity to share my Maiden Speech with you all this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I congratulate you and the honourable Deputy Speaker for accepting the responsibility of this high office. I am aware of the steep learning and the deep responsibility that lies ahead of me. I am also equally aware that my voice as a responsible Member of this august Parliament needs to be heard as I have voters counting on me to be their consistent voice to contribute to meaningful debates, and to question and scrutinise legislation and to hold the new Coalition Government accountable. Already, those who have voted for me, have contributed to what I am bringing into this Chamber today, as I represent their concerns and needs for representation. It is my privilege to be with you all and I eagerly look forward to these responsibilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to begin, I would say a little about myself, the brief story of my beginning that sums up why I am here today and why I am eager to contribute to this Chamber and make a difference – my purpose.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 30 years ago as an eight-year-old, I left my village in Naselesele, Wainikeli, Taveuni, to stay with families in Suva, an opportunity my parents thought would help me attain a

more wholesome education with the guidance of the Marist Brothers. My parents meant well, but it was one of the most challenging times of my life. I had to adjust to living with relatives and learn to make do with whatever I was provided with, including getting used to living in a cramped one-bedroom flat at Toorak housing, or what some of you may know as Texas Town.

I lived a life of obligation, restriction and tolerance. Through education and sports, I quickly grasped self-discipline and perseverance. As I progressed through the workforce, I never looked back and I vowed to use my story to inspire others, especially the undervalued youth, not to be limited by challenging situations, and always strive to value God and excellence in what they do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 42 years on, I have given back to my country by serving in the Military for 31 years, then worked in the Fiji Corrections Service for four years, before a further three years in the Fiji Police Force. After serving the Disciplinary Services, I continued my service at the national level for five years as a Diplomat and as the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Since leaving public life, I transitioned to working in the community through being the President of the Basketball Fiji, a member of FASANOC, the Pacific Security College and by volunteering with several NGOs - all of which provided fresh perspectives and the importance of working together with the community. God has, indeed, given me many opportunities to serve my nation, and I am genuinely thankful for that. I am also certain that He has not finished with me yet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my oath before God, before His Excellency the President and before the nation, was a solemn and humbling occasion. It reaffirmed my commitment to my country, and that I was being given another chance to serve. I stand ready to serve the vulnerable, those who have been displaced, the unloved in our society and our youth - young men and women, who desire to grow up in a nation that can provide them with an opportunity and a future.

Over the years, what has developed and continues to live within me is the value of giving back. It is through bringing this value to action that I have learned not only to know myself more, but also better understand who we are as a people and as a nation.

In December 2023, the people of Fiji concluded voting and a new Coalition Government was appointed to carry on the excellent work and contribution of the FijiFirst Party over the past 16 years. Mr. Speaker, Sir, what was provided to this new Coalition Government was a firm base upon which Fiji was and can continue to move forward into the 21st Century, or as I prefer to say, into the twenty-first century.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to congratulate the honourable Prime Minister. I also express my congratulations to the new Coalition Government and echo the sentiment shared by His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, in his Address during the opening of Parliament earlier this month, and I quote: "You now have the responsibility of leading our nation for the next four years".

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- *Vinaka.*

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- To the honourable Members sitting opposite me in this Chamber, the challenges of bringing the words of His Excellency the President to action for the benefit of all Fijians is very real.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I remind the honourable Members of the Coalition Government that what confronts them is not a social media rating exercise, nor is it preparing for the next photo opportunity, but what remains is the real task of bringing their promises to policy and their intentions to implementation. As I observe their earlier attempts, I see real and concerning inconsistencies in

how this is being handled and managed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me also remind honourable Members of the new Government that FijiFirst set the important groundwork that clearly built the framework to secure our country towards a progressive future. What we see and experience now is the result of the many resourceful and productive policies and legislations implemented. The legacy of FijiFirst continues today.

Despite challenges along the way, the leadership of the former Prime Minister, retired Rear Admiral Voreqe Bainimarama, if I may commend him, had the best interests of our nation at heart. He governed astutely and steered our country successfully out of several disasters with *TC Winston* in 2016, *TC Yasa* in 2020 and let us not forget the COVID-19 global pandemic. Those disasters affected each one of us - it threatened our health system, economy and livelihoods, not forgetting the individuals who lost their lives to this pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the former Prime Minister and now Leader of the Opposition, uniquely shaped our country to be recognised globally in its role in climate change, trade, labour mobility negotiations, defence co-operation and peacekeeping, embracing information technology and empowering the young and the old through free education access.

Most recently, His Excellency the President of the United States of America wrote from the White House in a letter dated 4th January, 2023 which states, and I quote:

“I applaud your legacy in building Fiji’s democratic culture and institution, including welcoming all Fijians regardless of their background.”

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- These transformative advancements which international leaders now recognise have contributed to the building of a stable and unified Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FijiFirst has strategically positioned our country and set it apart by fast-tracking development and providing modern solutions to our current problems to meet the challenges of our future. The direction and focus of the previous FijiFirst Government were to connect the world to Fiji (I say again, connect the world to Fiji), making it not only a regional hub but a global hub. The world is attracted to Fiji because it is safe, secure and stable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members of the Coalition Government have challenging tasks ahead and big shoes to fill. I would like to make it clear that Fiji cannot and will not move forward by using yesterday’s solutions to tomorrow’s problems. Yet, even as I say this, I, and the rest of the country, see the dust being brushed off old stories and old playbooks in an attempt by the Coalition Government to demonstrate that they have answers and solutions for Fiji in the “twenty-first century.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our people are listening and watching, anticipating what fresh ideas this Government will bring to the table. We demand a government that upholds the values of national unity, and an Opposition that will hold the Government to account.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- We wait to see how the debate and decisions the Government brings to this Chamber will benefit the future generations of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members of the Coalition have said publicly about dismantling FijiFirst 16-year legacy. I see the cracks of dismantling happening within their own ranks and question how they will shoulder the responsibility of what it is to govern in the best interests of all Fijians. Of critical importance is that further steps are not taken to undermine the stability and security of the nation through dismantling or eroding the stabilising institutions and in here I mean, the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, the Fiji Police Force, the Judiciary and weakening our democratic norms.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Ask your leader!

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2013, Fiji adopted a new Constitution that provided a framework for the advancement of all Fijians. A Constitution that provides equality and opportunity is inclusive and secures equal representation for all. Yet, this key and governing document has been attacked by some of the honourable Members of this Chamber sitting opposite me.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the utterances from the honourable Members of this Chamber and from public leaders would seem to one to, again, divide us along lines of ethnicity and faith. Yet, every nation that stands will find its strongest foundations built on true morality - where our lives are not lived selflessly but in service, consideration, and devout duty towards the other.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, good governance requires serious attention to strategic, fiscal, social and bread and butter issues. Again, I return to the question of how serious-minded the honourable Members sitting opposite me are about the task of fulfilling their promises. I challenge honourable Coalition Members to fulfil those promises and get the job done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many listening to my Maiden Speech today will have heard me say, "find the heartbeat on the ground and connect your heartbeat to that heartbeat". It is critically important that the Coalition partners feel the correct heartbeat of the people. Only then will you be able to align your policies to be effective.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is our responsibility to both demonstrate good leadership and also invest in good leadership. Our modern Fiji requires good leaders who can serve without discrimination; true leaders who have the courage to unify and not stir up dissension and divide; and leaders whom our nation can trust, can be proud of and who inspire the next generation to follow in their footsteps.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to address this Chamber on an issue of personal passion, our young people. Across this nation, our young people need to be given the right opportunities to be able to be good leaders in their communities. I would also like, at this point, to acknowledge the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports and his speech to this Chamber yesterday where he shared his commitment to the youth of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the past years, I have been involved in a number of youth initiatives in the community - one of most recent and unique and innovative programmes is the Devo Babas based in Nadi. This is a Fijian-designed programme implemented to assist unemployed youth through sports. It has forged a vision of changing young people's lives through a programme that started during the upheaval and uncertainty of COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 22 unemployed men from Bua in Vanualevu started the Devo Babas journey to become better young men. Through a mutual commitment of the leaders and the participants, these young men were nurtured, housed, challenged, and motivated in a holistic environment. This unique approach changed unemployed village youth into skilled and employed young men through a process

of tremendous transformation, personal and spiritual growth, discipline and standards, and by instilling into them what it is to learn, earn and live a life. This example is a serious effort towards nation-building that I would commend to this Chamber and was achieved with the consolidated support from the community, private sector, church and the Fiji Police Force. These young men are today contributing in the following ways:

- two are playing rugby on contracts in China;
- one is serving as a Corrections Service Officer, having successfully passed through his basic recruit;
- 10 are now serving in the Fiji Police Force; and
- one is playing rugby in Australia.

The FijiFirst Government was committed to nation-building and dedicated its policies and enacted legislation to ensure no one was left behind. It created the opportunity for home-grown initiatives, such as Devo Babas, to join and align to a national effort and find success. Devo Babas is a Fiji-made product that in its early success is a model that not only has returned on its investment, but also exportable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our youth, through the FijiFirst Government leadership, have accessed free education through to their secondary studies, accessed Student Loan Schemes for tertiary and higher education, and were able to access their right to the landowning unit shares. Those opportunities were never made available through the past Governments.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Yes.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a key feature of any developing nation is to secure the future of its young people. Over the years the FijiFirst Government worked hard to secure this future by improving justice for all. Allow me to highlight three examples,

Mr. Speaker, Sir, native lease payments was restructured so that all landholders received what was their right to receive. The wealth of the land now rested in the hands of those to whom it was a right to have that wealth, allowing the individual and his or her dependents to come to human flourishing. This is a removal of past oppression and the gifting of justice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, education of our children became both, a right and free. No longer was it a decision of whom to educate because free education and bus travel ensured the right to education for all. The commitment to this decision has allowed for a whole new generation of human flourishing that will increase ability of young men and women to both, flourish and establish a good life. Sir, this is justice in action.

Mr. Speaker, the Yellow Ribbon initiative is close to my heart. This national restructuring and repurposing of our Corrections system shifted the focus from punitive justice to restorative justice. We boldly ask the Fijian people to welcome the offender and make room in their hearts and lives for the action of mercy. Building this as an act of justice for our nation took courage and today, we see the reward of that courage with recidivism rates low and rehabilitation outcomes high. Sir, this is justice in action.

We are a nation that lives within the tensions of honoured traditions, respected faiths with great potential and God willing, a bright future. Mr. Speaker, Sir, my ability to stand here in this Chamber today was the result of an incredible team effort of dedicated men and women who encouraged, supported, advised, and gave of themselves. My heart is humbled with deep gratitude at both, those who supported the effort known as Operation Tudei and those who voted for me.

I would like to acknowledge my beautiful wife, Kesa, and our sons and daughter, daughter-in-law, my best son-in-law, Josefa, from Gau, who lives in Nadi, and our grandchildren. I would like to thank my extended family and my very close family of my number one village in Sawani, Naitasiri. My sincere gratitude to Peter and Jill for their kindness and commitment. To Jack and Rachel, thank you sincerely for your generosity. I deeply value and appreciate the contribution of Team Central, Team Taveuni, Team Qamea, Team Rewa and Team West. I acknowledge those who have supported me financially, those who have supported me in prayer, the Churches and Church leaders who prayed and encouraged me - I am deeply humbled. *Vinaka saka vakalevu.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for having taken the Chair of this Parliament. I have confidence that you will keep Parliament in order and lead us in establishing good decorum and protocol. It goes without saying that the responsibility before you of keeping impartiality and ruling without fear or favour, is significant. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Parliament rests in the fear of God and in your capable hands.

I reiterate the importance of our purpose in this Chambers that is to serve according to good conscience and moral duty, whether you are a member of the new Government or an Opposition Member, our purpose here is clear - it is to serve each and every Fijian. I am reminded of a very simple yet significant leadership code that I want to share with everyone here today. Robin Sharma reminds us that "To Lead is to Serve" and if we all put this to heart in everything that we do, then I have no doubt we can all take the country forward to achieve great things and most importantly give our people a better Fiji for all.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Hear, hear!

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in concluding, I would like to say that our work as honourable Members of this august Parliament is about building the nation, labouring and making things better. I want to, therefore, close and leave with us the words of the Psalmist from Psalm 127:1-2, the Psalm that I have used as the beacon of my life, and it reads:

“Unless the Lord builds the House;
They labour in vain who build it;
Unless the Lord guards the city;
The watchman stays awake in vain.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may God bless you all and may God bless Fiji.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank honourable Ioane Naivalurua for his Maiden Speech. Honourable Members, we have now been informed as to who is the third member from the great province of Naitasiri in this Parliament – honourable Naivalurua.

(Laughter)

Before I adjourn Parliament for morning tea, I ask the Secretary-General if the IT people could be informed not to have a repeat of the glitch that we had, since the next speaker, the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar, has already given notice that he would like to speak in the Hindi language.

The Parliament was adjourned at 10.43 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.29 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, at this juncture before we proceed (and I hope you do not mind honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs), I wish to acknowledge the presence in the gallery of the honourable Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, the Minister for External Affairs of India and his delegation.

(Acclamation)

Welcome to Parliament, Sir, and we wish you have a great stay in Fiji. Thank you, honourable Members.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- *Dhanyevaad Speaker mahoday. Pradhaan mantri ji, hamare anye saathigan, minister jo baithe hue hai aur hamare Virodhi dal ken eta aur unke saathi dal. Aap sabhi ka mai abhinandan karta hoon ki aap sab sansad mei aaye, khaas karke ke India se aaye Foreign Affairs ke mantri ka. Yeh ittefaq ki baat hai ki jab hamare Deputy Prime Minister ne kaha tha ki Hindi ka jo conference chal raha hai, (it is a very good coincident). Aur mai garv ke saath kahena chahta hoon ki aaj hum Hindustani, hindi language mein is sansad me baate kar sakte hai.*

Mr. Speaker mahoday, adhyaksh mahoday, apni bhaashaa, apni pehchaan, aur apni sanskriti ka sammaan karte huye, aur saath hi, solah saal ke baad, yeh sadan mein bhaashaa ki swatantrata ka ek baar phir se laagoo hone par, mein apne pehle bhashan ka aarambh, apni maatra bhaashaa, Hindi mein karnaa chahungaa.

[Mr. Speaker, Sir, respecting my language, my identify, my culture, and also with the freedom of speaking in our language in the Parliament once again in force after 16 years. I would like commence my maiden speech in my mother tongue, Hindi]

Adhyaksh Mahoday, is owsar par un tamaam purvajon ko mein yaad karta hoon aur dhanyawaad karta hoon, jinhone Girmitt ke समय mein atyachar aur kashta sahete huye bhi, ani pehchaan ko, mitne naheen diya.

[Mr. Speaker, Sir, on this occasion, I would like to remember all the ancestors and thank them, who while suffering the atrocities and affliction o the Girmitt, retained their identity and did not allow it to die.]

Khaaskar ke mein dhanyawaad karta hoon, hamari mahila pruvajon ko, jo Shakti bankar khadi raheen, aur na kewal pariwaar aur sanskriti ko sambhala, balki kheton mein kaam karke, is desh ki arthavyavastha (economy) mein bhi bhaaree yogadaan diya.

[In particular, I would like to thank the women ancestors, who stood as Shakti – power incarnate, and not only did they nurture the family and culture, they, while working tirelessly on the plantations, contributed immensely to the economy of this country.]

Adhyaksh Mahoday, Mein apne pita ki or se doosri peedhi ka santaan hoon, aur meree mata ki or se chauthi peedhi ka Girmitiya-vanshi hoon. Mein kewal ek safal vyaapari hi nahin hoon, balki ek safal ganna ka kisaan bheee hoon.

[Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am a second generation descendant from my father's side. And from my mother's side, I am the fourth generation of the Girmitiya descendant. I am not only a successful businessman but also a successful sugarcane farmer – perhaps the only one in this Parliament. I say this not with any pride but with humility.]

Jis vyosaye ko banaane ke liye, hamare purvajon ko bandhuwa mazdoor banaakar Fiji mein laaya gaya tha, mein usi vyosaye ke mantri ke roop aaj aapke saamne khadaa. Aur yeh mera asshwasan hai, ki mein ess vyosaye ko, jeess se hajaaron logon ki jeevika judee hui hai, isko bachaane mein, aur behtar banaane mein, main koi kamee naheen rakhunga.

[The industry whose establishment saw our ancestors being brought to Fiji as bonded labourers, today, I am standing in front of you as a Minister for the same industry. This is my assurance, that I will leave no stone unturned in saving and improving this industry that provides livelihood to thousands of people.]

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I start by paying my deepest respects to all our people, our land and the many cultures that we share; the elders of our past, present and those emerging, who have laid or will lay the future foundations of Fiji. Without their pioneering sacrifices and efforts, none of us would have seen the prosperity and progress nor experienced the freedoms and the dignity that we now rightfully demand and deserve.

Sir, allow me to thank our President, His Excellency Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, for his most gracious address during the opening of this Parliament. His Excellency is like a brother to me, and I repeat that His Excellency is like a brother to me, given our strong Macuata links and my intimate associations with his late father Ratu Soso Katonivere. Ratu Soso Katonivere was a distinguished chief of extraordinary mana and stature and, of course, he was the NFP Senator and Member of Parliament, honourable Prasad reminded me on that.

Let me also put on record, the sense of widespread hurt, insult and anger felt by our people in all parts of Fiji, in the manner His Excellency the President was attacked by the honourable Leader of the Opposition. It was totally uncalled for and unjustified. It was deeply offensive, disrespectful, personal and even dangerously inciteful. People from all over the country have expressed their strong condemnation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, not only has he demeaned himself personally, but also called into question the integrity of our Head of State. His outburst should be unanimously condemned by this honourable Parliament. We should never condone such contemptuous denigration of our century's old traditions of parliamentary protocol, propriety and decency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me congratulate you and your Deputy on your election to these keys roles. Given our *vanua* connections of Cakaudrove, you are also my high chief. Let me assure you that your command shall always be my duty to fulfil, and my loyalty- your right to expect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, your sense of justice, dignity, humility, integrity, experience, knowledge and good judgement will no doubt usher in a fresh dose of fairness, tolerance, respect for each other and greater order of conduct of this august Parliament - something that has often been missing during many critical times in the last 16 years. The example of your power, and the power of your example, shall be a continuing source of inspiration to all of us. On a personal level, may I also point out that in you, I also have the privilege of a father. Like many others, I have complete faith and trust in your wisdom and rely on you as a source of good counsel, guidance and advice.

My late parents, Mr. and Mrs. Gurbachan Singh believed that it was the right and duty of every parent to discipline their children, as and when necessary. That right, I gladly and respectfully confer upon you. Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst I am a proud son of Fiji, I cannot hide my regional bias towards my island home - Vanua Levu. In that respect, I wish to most sincerely thank the voters of this Region who vested their confidence and trust in me and considered me worthy of their representation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 91 percent of my votes came from North. For that, I wish to thank you and I will always cherish the moment when you said at the rally of People's Alliance Party in Labasa - "Do not vote for me, vote for 245 - Charan Jeath Singh." And those words have landed me in Parliament – *vinaka*.

I also thank my *vanua*, my thousands of *iTaukei* brothers and sisters, the chiefs, villagers, *mataqali*, my legion of devoted campaigners and supporters. My victory belongs more to them than to me. I shall always endeavour to reciprocate their trust. Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency, our venerable President has very eloquently outlined the priorities and policies of our Coalition Government, of which I am a proud member. His Excellency the President has rightfully alluded to many challenges and headwinds that lie ahead of our Government and our people, and the absolute need for the unity and cooperation of everyone if we are to tackle them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the childish and petty refusal by the honourable Oppositions to accept the verdict of our people, the nation takes great comfort and strength from the reassurance and endorsement of His Excellency the President in a democratic process, I quote:

"I am grateful to note that the change in Government has taken place peacefully and swiftly and the new administration has commenced its work with the mandate of the people."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that mandate and popular support that His Excellency the President refers to, is the cornerstone of true democracy. Accordingly, there should be no doubt in the minds of anyone as to the legitimacy of our mandate.

Power sharing between our three Parties may be a novelty for our country, but it is perfectly legal and constitutional. Such a model of governance and power sharing is the most appropriate prescription for our diverse nation and has been successfully tested in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Italy, Israel and our island neighbours.

It promotes greater consultation, consensus, tolerance of other's needs, transparency, accountability, protection of the rights of the minority and ultimately, fosters greater cohesion and stronger pillars of our nationhood.

We are not here just to warm our seats, Mr. Speaker, Sir, or to collect our pay and advance our own personal agenda of self-enrichment, power and privileges. We are not here to scam the poor taxpayers through corruption, nepotism and promotion of sectoral policies that favour the minority at the expense of the poor.

High cost of living, unemployment, rampant corruption, low income and seriously collapsing health, housing, education, sanitation, water and road infrastructure, a near terminal sugar industry, all need our immediate attention.

We are starting just not from a zero base but from an abyss of unprecedented debts, years of chronic fiscal mismanagement and economic carnage of the last 16 years. Undoubtedly, the entire Government apparatus was rotten to the core which was worsened by the populist policies that were adopted primarily to gain political capital. Masking the true state of key sectors, such as the sugar industry, had become a norm. Without a shadow of doubt, we were reaching the edge of the tipping point.

However, let me assure our fellow citizens that we will be very forthright and work strenuously and decisively to rebuild and bolster our socio-economic pillars. Our approach is

bottoms up and people-centered, and not bottom-down of model imposition.

We are here to serve and not to be served. We are here to be directed by people and not to dictate to them. We are here to listen and learn, and not to lecture from the prism of arrogance and bigotry. We will make sure of that, *Adhyaksha Mahoday* (Mr. Speaker, Sir). We will make sure that what I say, we will do it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my conscious decision was to return to this Parliament after 23 years. Indeed, as I look around, I can say that I am the only Member of this Parliament who has previously been in Parliament with our current Prime Minister. Both of us were in Parliament together between 1994-1999, although on the different sides of the political aisle.

Together, with hundreds of thousands of our people of all ethnic communities - from the rural poor and urban areas, the struggling farmers, the workers, the middle class and those trapped in poverty, the unemployed and those lowly paid and those thousands suffering from lack of basic health, housing, education, water and sanitation facilities, I have seen the wholesale betrayal in the last 16 years.

In the face of their glaring incompetence, failures and reckless mismanagement of the country, none of us could afford to sit on the sidelines and contribute to its immediate recovery and turnaround. Our country and our people need to be rescued from this crisis and the carnage caused by that side of Parliament. The sheer magnitude and crippling nature of the challenge compels all of us to join hands and work in a unified, inclusive and forward-looking manner for the common good of our beloved nation.

Adhyaksha Mahoday (Mr. Speaker, Sir), I took as my foremost duty and moral responsibility. to offer my energy and resources to save this nation from drowning further in that fatal vortex of debts and distress inflicted by one man's ignorance and obsessive sense of self-importance. The pace at which our national debt was building up is certainly dreadful. The past Government's development model was an utter failure, as our borrowing was employed as thy main driver to fuel economic growth and fiscal stabilisation, which logically is not sustainable at all, burdening Fiji's population to the current and the yet-to-be-born with loads of debt.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am thankful to our honourable Prime Minister for the faith and trust he has placed in me as his Minister for Sugar and Multi-Ethnic Affairs. I may be the first Minister for Sugar who is an experienced cane farmer also, but I will not stop listening and learning from the 12,000 cane farmers representing the industry.

Just to give you the scale of degradation of this once glorious industry and our main economic lifeline, let me share some key statistics:

1. Our cane production has declined by half from 3.2 million tonnes in 2006 to about 1.7 million tonnes today.
2. For the last 14 years from 2006, the accumulated loss of FSC has been about half a billion.
3. The number of farmers has declined from 18,600 to about 12,000.
4. It has lost its prominent economic position down to about 4 percent of the GDP.
5. Under this sleeping Minister, it has been treated like an orphaned child and the exodus continues.

6. Under his watch, the key institutions of the industry, such as the Sugarcane Growers Council and Sugar Commission have been dismantled without any consultations with any party.
7. Our milling efficiencies, farming practices and incomes, employee welfare, transport infrastructures, mill machinery all have run to the ground with a Sugar Minister who said as I said was sleeping on the job and was unaware of his responsibilities.
8. His glaring incompetence and mismanagement has destroyed a once beacon of our economy for 150 years to a pathetic unrecognisable shadow of its past. The industry suffers from a massive loss of confidence, cloaked in a maze of lies and recklessness.
9. This man, it is very important to know that the honourable Leader of the Opposition, in 2009, had rejected the EU offer of \$300 million only because he would not commit to a perfectly achievable timetable for holding democratic elections. For him and his advisors, the continuation of his dictatorship was worth more than the large sum of money to help our farmers and the industry.
10. All this happened while the senior executives treated themselves with obscene salaries, benefits and corrupt conflict of interests. To all of them, the sleeping Minister had only one answer – ongoing investigations.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are determined to restore the industry in the fullness of time and with the cooperation and goodwill of the stakeholders.

Ab samay aa gaya hai, Adhyaksh Mahoday, ki hum sab milkar is desh ko Prashant ka swarg banayhein. (This time has come, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that together, we will make this country a paradise of the Pacific.)

In conclusion, *Adhyaksh Mahoday* (Mr. Speaker, Sir), I send my warm greetings and *shubh kamnayein* (best wishes) to all our people and assure them of our best efforts to govern in the interests of not just to serve a few, but all. May our country and our people continue to be blessed forever. *Vinaka Vakalevu* (Thank you).

(Acclamation)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and our fellow Fijians who are present here today and those who are actually watching the Parliamentary Session live; *bula vinaka* and a very good morning to everyone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to take a moment to thank the Almighty Lord for his guidance in allowing us to be here today to manage the affairs of our beloved Fiji. Also, I want to take this opportunity to congratulate you, Sir, on your appointment as Speaker of Parliament, and to the Deputy Speaker.

At this juncture also, I want to acknowledge my father, the late Siddiq Moidin Koya, whose values I treasure and whose teachings and principles are engrained in me, as I continue with his legacy.

Mr. Speaker, also paying homage to the honourable Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama for giving me this opportunity and having faith in me to be part of the FijiFirst Team.

A special acknowledgement also, Mr. Speaker, to our former Speaker and former President, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, for his years of dedicated service to Fiji and also as the outgoing Speaker. His service has been unwavering, and he is a shining example of impartiality and great service to our country as a true son of Fiji.

I am grateful also to the former Attorney-General, Mr. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, and other fellow colleagues of the FijiFirst Party for their continued confidence in me. Last, but not least, I just want to thank my friends and my family for their continuous encouragement, their love and support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over these last few days, much has been said about the state of Fiji and the FijiFirst Government, but for those who have stood up in this august Parliament, there is a little reminder to all of you. It is imperative, Sir, that we all speak the truth, as we have all taken an oath on our Holy books and our Constitution to serve our beloved country diligently.

To the honourable Prime Minister and the Coalition Government, it does not matter what you say and what you laugh at and what you may not laugh at, you actually ride on the success that was created at the last 16 years.

HON. OPP. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- And whilst you do that in the time given to you by chance, be truthful and acknowledge what has been done. Every Fijian is watching you and us. Every Fijian is watching and waiting, Mr. Speaker, on what you will do, and how you will deliver on the promises that you have made. You must remember, it will our job as Parliament on behalf of the Fijian people, to keep you accountable, in the very same way that you used to tell us when we sat on that side of Parliament. Be prepared because we will make you accountable.

It will take more than removing people, Mr. Speaker, removing initiatives of the FijiFirst Government, relabelling, designing logos, to erase what the FijiFirst has built and done for the Fijian people. So, as I stand before you today, Mr. Speaker, let me correct the record and speak about the tremendous success of the FijiFirst Government's economic policies. And let me just remind them - we had almost nine years of successive economic growth in this country.

HON. OPP. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- That is a feat that cannot be overlooked, Mr. Speaker. Just a few months ago, Fiji was rated as the third fastest growing economy in the world. That is not a small feat. That is not achieved willy-nilly and overnight.

Mr. Speaker, the Fijian of Fiji has undergone a remarkable transformation and we give credit to the visionary leadership of the FijiFirst Government. When FijiFirst came into power we inherited an economy that was struggling to recover from the impact of a corrupt system, one that was riddled with inequality that we have never let anything deter us from our vision of transforming Fiji into a diverse, modern and prosperous nation State, nor we will sit in on this side of the Parliament change that.

Most importantly, the FijiFirst Government has always put our people first and this is evident in how we have actually combatted the challenges. We faced and recovered as a nation - be it devastating cyclones, devastating global events and global financial crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

We set out an ambitious plan to boost economic growth and to create jobs and improve the standard of living of all Fijians, Mr. Speaker. We focussed on developing infrastructure and human capital, both of which are essential ingredients for a progressive developing country. You would have heard over the years that Fiji was punching way above its weight globally. All these should be testament to the good work that was done. We forget good stuff very easy, and we try and concentrate on the negative. We are a small country, Mr. Speaker.

One of the key policies that the FijiFirst Government implemented was the creation of a stable and predictable business environment. That has been achieved through a range of measures, including reducing corporate taxes and eliminating unnecessary regulations. These policies have actually attracted both, local and international and foreign investors, which led to a surge in business activity and job creation.

Another critical aspect of the FijiFirst Government's economic policy, Mr. Speaker, has been its focus on infrastructure development. It is fine to come into this Chamber and say, 'oh, you spent too much money', but it was not wasted. It has been put into our infrastructure.

We invested heavily on roads, bridges, ports, airports, in addition to creating jobs, Mr. Speaker. It opened up new markets and opportunities for business. We implemented policies that prioritised improving the quality of life for all Fijians by providing access to basic services, also such as water and electricity.

When FijiFirst was in Government, the commitment to education and training was also a crucial factor in the country's economic success. The fruits of which, we are now actually losing to countries like Australia, New Zealand and the rest of the world.

We invested in schools, vocational training, tertiary education to ensure that Fijians have the skills and knowledge that they need to compete in the global economy.

We focused on the development of the tourism sector. We implemented policies that became an example to our regional and our international countries in attracting tourists and changing the overall visitor experience.

I see now that honourable Gavoka has suddenly, yesterday in the press, pulled out some figure out of thin air about \$12 million that ought to have gone to a particular part of the community. I do not know where he gets those figures from. He should back them up with some statistics.

All of those, Mr. Speaker, Sir, resulted in significant increasing in tourists arrivals and revenue, providing a significant boost to the economy. I am not just saying this myself, Sir, this has been said by the two speakers before me - honourable Kamikamica and honourable Gavoka.

The FijiFirst Government's economic policies have been nothing short of transformational. Fiji's economy has grown rapidly and the standard of living for Fijians has improved significantly. When we sat on that side of Parliament, Mr. Speaker, we showed that with the right policies and leadership, an island nation can achieve great things. Honourable Members on the other side of Parliament, it is now your turn. Show us what you can do! Do not talk the talk, walk the talk. The people of Fiji

We want to know what you are actually going to do. We do not want to hear general statements and media grandstanding; we actually want to know about policies.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You have said that you want to diversify the economy, the question is, how will you do that? All that you are talking about in terms of diversification now, is that which was taken on board by us and started. That is fine, that is fine!

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Grow it, tell us how you are going to do it?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Where is the change?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You are actually making promises of all sorts, that is fine. But tell me, tell us all, tell the whole of Fiji - every single citizen anticipates your next move on delivering your promises through new policies, and not a delete and duplicate policy

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Aww!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Like what, give an example.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Open projects done by FijiFirst.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I will get to you later. You promise change.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Change is coming.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Now, all we see is that, you are still campaigning.

HON. GOVT. MEMBER.- Pipeline.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Is it campaigning to gain some kind of authenticity and validation by creating division? That, my friend, if you remember ...

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- What division?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- ...you start creating divisions and to coin a phrase to the other side of Parliament that this creating of division for you, that is the only way.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Example?.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- It is all your imagination.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Not my imagination, speak to the people. Honourable Members, let me tell you, you are the Government. You can stop campaigning now.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- You're campaigning!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Start governing!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- You're campaigning.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- *Areh*, don't campaign now?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You already and still are.

Let me give you an analogy, Mr. Speaker, and I know you will appreciate this, Sir. You are actually in the driver's seat, honourable Minister for Transport. As Opposition, we will hold you to account for many promises that were made. In 55 days out of the 100 - you only got 45 left, all you have managed to do is ask; where are the brakes, where is the fuel tank? When will you drive us forward?

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Because it is actually evident that you are in reverse.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Members, 'r' stands for 'reverse', not 'relax' and 'rejoice'. Do not be shy if you need to go back to driving school, come and ask us.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, I will repeat, you are actually riding on a whole lot of success that was created from this side of Parliament which is fine, it is alright. Governments change around the world all the time, there is a lot of continuity, but it is not happening from you.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Too much drama!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- What we want and what the people want are actual policies, the strong policies. We have not heard nothing, all we have heard is bashing that is going on, and I think honourable Kamikamica put it very correctly. He came into this Parliament thinking he would improve the quality of debate, but he was not looking at us, he was looking at honourable Professor Prasad.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- He was. He is not here but I wish he was, he was not looking at us.

We, Mr. Speaker, want a chance to critic what you have, to debate it, to discuss it just as you had the opportunity to throw us as much as you could from this side. That is fine, that is Parliament. You made a 100-day promise, you have actually passed the halfway mark. How much more time will you need to settle in - four years? What are your policies? Be specific! Specific policies and your philosophies.

Your grandstanding, investigating, prosecuting, persecuting, are all that we have seen so far. Show us the governing, show us what you can do, the people of Fiji want to see. You very proudly sit there, that is up to you, no problem, whichever way you got there. But show us what you can do? But so far, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the inspiration that is being sought by that part of Parliament is actually coming out of desperation. It is quite obvious, and remember, that ship never sails. Get to the job of governing. If you do not know how to, ask us, we will tell you. Already, we can see that there are lots of struggles going on.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Like what?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Their faces tell it all.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Example?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You can see. I look across this side of Parliament, Mr. Speaker, and I see three honourable Ministers sitting there, where all three of them was run by one Ministry before.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Remember, Mr. Speaker, literally one entire Ministry, there were four people running Civil Aviation and roughly just over 10, I think, it was for Tourism. And now that has been turned into eight Ministry on its own.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Because it is important.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It is not about importance, it is about the quality of work that you get to run successfully. Mind you, honourable Minister, that was grown into a \$2 billion industry with that many people.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- The civil aviation industry in Fiji is a champion of the Region.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- \$2 billion debt.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, we got the job done.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- We got the job done. Get the job done!

It would be amiss of me, Mr. Speaker, if I did not address some really serious issues, which are now coming to the floor - race-based divisive policies that now plaque us. But before I do that, I want to thank also, Mr. Speaker, and you are actually part of this, those who have sat before all of us in these chairs, those who actually gave us the Fiji of today for better or for worse. We must pay homage to those people who actually put us in this Parliament today, those who actually gave us eyes and greater sight into what to do and what not to do.

We do not want to be a fragile country anymore, Mr. Speaker. Today, we are sitting on a platform that was built under the guidance of one of the greatest sons of Fiji, and that platform of equality, and that person commands the respect of the majority of the voting population.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Josai Voreqe Bainimarama got 136,829 votes.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the equivalent to honourable Prime Minister, honourable Tabuya, honourable Professor Prasad and honourable Charan Jeath Singh, honourable Vosarogo, honourable Kamikamica, honourable Gavoka, honourable Qereqeretabua, honourable Tuiwailevu, honourable Vanawalu, honourable Turaga and honourable Dr. Ratu Lalabalavu, combined.

HON. OPP. MEMBERS.- Aww!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- So when he speaks, he carries

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- The rest of you 200 and 500.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Let me explain something to you, we do not operate like you do.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- We do not operate like you do, honourable Minister, we have a different philosophy.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROQO.- That is why we are here.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- We do not operate like you.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- We worked hard.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It was his vision of a better Fiji for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, lastly before I take my seat, I wanted to raise something that came up yesterday which I find quite astounding. Today, I am wearing a black tie, at the request of honourable Qereqeretabua yesterday. She asked us to honour those who have been abused, Thursday we should wear black, and I did.

However, yesterday, the honourable Minister for Women did something that hurt most of the women in Fiji. It is quite astounding that she could not, and she did not want to acknowledge the atrocities that were committed in 1987 against some of our women. It is on record, honourable Minister.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- A Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Not in a Maiden Speech.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes, I can in a Maiden Speech. Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- There is no Point of order in Minutes Arising. Mr. Speaker, you are the Speaker.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- It was a motion.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, the honourable Member is attempting to change what I said yesterday.

HON. J. USAMATE.- What is the Point of Order.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- The Point of Order is misrepresentation.....

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Hold on, let me speak to Mr. Speaker.

HON. GOVT. MEMBERS.- Listen!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Who is the Speaker? Listen to the Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Point of Order on misrepresentation as well as imputing improper motive by the honourable Member when the response yesterday was to what was raised by another Member which is incorrect in Parliament of Reports from 1987. There were Reports from 2000, yes, under their leader who was a Commander.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Yes.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- But 1987 the report so they are misrepresenting and attacking based on what I said yesterday which is only on what honourable Premila Kumar said was from 1987 and our leader. Specific timeframe - 1987. There were reports from 2000, yes, but not 1987 and he needs to be very clear about that before he proceeds because he is impugning that I was mentioning for all the situations that happened.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Member.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- That is what exactly what honourable Bulitavu raised earlier. There is a specific timeframe that was raised by honourable Premila Kumar which is 1987. That is what I am addressing.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you may continue.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, all the honourable Minister has to do this is referring to 1987 is go and speak to Shamima Ali. She has made it publicly known the knowledge that she has with respect to those that were abused in 1987 - our women - and the refusal by the honourable Minister of Women to acknowledge even that fact, is a shame.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- As a matter of fact, Mr. Speaker, if this was

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Point of Order. He is misrepresenting again. The reports were from 2000 coup from that women's groups and not 1987 he needs to be correct about that.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, please stick to the issue on the address of His Excellency the President and please continue.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Stick to the facts.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I think, Mr. Speaker, I have made my point.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes, move on.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- In many jurisdictions, with a mistake like that you would get asked to resign as Minister. You are talking about women who got abused. An example that was used was a 10-year-old girl being abused. That, Mr. Speaker, is what hurts. Honourable Members on the other side, to us Fijian means every Fijian irrespective of where they are from.

HON. J USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Now when we say Fijians we see them as God made us, not based on differences of race or religion. Mr. Speaker, the FijiFirst Government changed a lot of things and we changed all of that. Today we cannot go back to backward policies that have no place in today's modern Fiji. It will only hamper economic development and we will not be able to tap into the full potential of our people because we neglect them. We neglect to see them as God intended.

Mr. Speaker, there are a couple of things that this country needs to continue with, really think about it and put in the forefront of their mind. It is really just highlighting the obvious. It is essential to understand that equality, stability and security are crucial for any country's development regardless of its size or location. These three factors interrelated, play a significant role ensuring that every citizen has access to the same opportunities regardless of background or ethnicity. Stability refers to the political and social stability of a country.

Mr. Speaker, your Government must promote policies that are based on merit. We created a meritocracy. You must promote policies that are based on merit and not ethnicity and cronies, ensuring that every citizen has equal access to education and job opportunities. Government must work towards building a stable and securing environment which is essential for business to invest in Fiji.

We have seen a slowdown already in terms of the investment climate in Fiji. I keep an eye on it - I was the Minister responsible, so I do keep an eye on it. We must also realise that Fiji is in a different place in a different space. We are now part of a massive global community where Fiji has a front seat at the front table when it comes to climate change and when it comes to trade relations. Every international forum, we are now placed in a space that we have never been. Make use of that, take advantage of that please and nurture it. But that will only stay if there is continuity and stability where there is rule of law. Where there is a protection of human rights and the strengthening of security apparatus to protect our citizens from external and internal threats.

Honourable Members, equality, stability and security are the cornerstones of a thriving society. Fiji must work towards creating an environment where every citizen has equal opportunities and there is political and social stability. I am sure we all understand that, where citizens feel secure - that is slowly (in our opinion) being eroded.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope every member in this Parliament and every citizen in this country is listening and I reiterate that the voices of the 200,000 plus Fijian people who we stand here for, are going to be heard, but not only for them. We are going to be heard with respect to all Fijians as we

have always done; post-election – everyone is a citizen, everyone gets the same treatment. I, myself and every member of this side of the Parliament gladly, willingly embrace our duty to keep all of you in check.

I thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me extra time to deliver my response today. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

(Acclamation)

HON. A. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, the Members of Parliament, families and friends. *Vina na cola* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Holy Scriptures say, “In everything give thanks for this is the will of God” (I Thessalonians 5:18). I am thankful Sir, to the Lord and creator of the universe for the breath of life and for His provision in giving me this opportunity to serve Him and the citizens of this country in this way.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first I must genuinely congratulate the new Coalition Government for successfully and skilfully performed the tripartite marriage of convenience or the threefold union. I hate to think about the threefold union described in the Scripture in Revelation 13, that is the union made up of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. Please, do not ask me to identify which one is which - that mystique union magically ended the progressive golden age rule of the FijiFirst Government over these beautiful islands.

However, Sir, after the brief commendation, I must warn the current Government that it is not really a big deal because in normal marriage, there are only two parties. Three parties in the Coalition Government spells a wonderful recipe for disaster and doom and its disintegration is absolutely inevitable.

At this juncture Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this opportunity to publicly thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition and the FijiFirst leadership of the largest ever infrastructural development that this country has ever had. The people of Navosa have asked me to thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Voreqe Bainimarama for the accessibility of electricity to almost every village, settlement and even isolated farmhouses. The magnificent Navosa Subdivisional Hospital - it is not a wasted and useless spending of resources. To the honourable Professor Biman Prasad – Navosa is not a tiny place like Dreketi in Vanua Levu. It is much more sophisticated than you think.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. TUICOLO.- Your comment, honourable Member, shows a typical politician who is out of touch with reality and shows your frustration and inability. Your attitude shows your frustration and lack of experience in dealing with challenges in running a modern State. Lastly, Mr. Speaker, the recent yet to be opened two-lane super highway bridge at Namatewale are the highlights of FijiFirst period of infrastructural renaissance in which Navosa will be forever thankful.

Mr. Speaker, I also take this opportunity to thank all our voters who remain true and loyal to FijiFirst, - you are all appreciated. Not forgetting the hardworking youths and volunteers, my family and friends, lequ matavuwere from the Tikina of Noikoro of Navosa, the villages of Namarai and Malake in Ra, Burelevu in Ra, Nabukaluka in Naitasiri, the Banaban community and families in Savutalele, Suvavou Village, families in Labasa, Savusavu, Lautoka, Nadi and Sigatoka and not forgetting my uncle and Campaign Manager Mr. Ropate Labalabala, cousins Sera Raibe, Aporosa

Vucago, Nanise Makerebuka, *vinaka va'alevu taucoko na nomutou veitokoni.*

Mr. Speaker, after saying all that, let me get down to business and draw attention to His Excellency the President's Address by picking up and dwelling upon just two issues namely: the re-establishment of the Great Council of Chiefs and the rights of the first people of this nation. I ask you to bear with me as I deliberate on the above issues which I believe a foundational pillars of moving this country forward.

Mr. Speaker, the Great Council of Chiefs as we all know was set up by the British to assist them in indirectly ruling the *iTaukei*. In fact, it was not called the GCC when it was formed, it was called the Native Council. From the beginning it was part of a race base or the racist construct which the English had to help them govern the country in the divide and rule policy.

HON. RO F. Q. TUISAWAU.- Who wrote that?

HON. A. TUICOLO.- So when the ultra-nationalists carried out two *coups* in 1987 ...

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. TUICOLO.- ... the Chiefs in the GCC met their first test of national leadership of a multicultural country. Mr. Speaker, those chiefs failed the test very badly, so badly that it led to that body being abolished by subsequent revolution.

Mr. Speaker, instead of upholding the rule of law in 1987 under which all *iTaukei* clans owned land and fishing rights, the GCC rushed to support, aid and abet the two 1987 *coup* which shook the first and last blows against the oak tree of the rule of law in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, those chiefs in the GCC in 1987 could be seen by all Fijian to be jubilant, merry-making and carrying on in support of the 1987 *coups* which laid lasting damage to rule of law and governance of Fiji. You have to remember the first Governor of Fiji, Sir Arthur Gordon, at one point was going to dissolve the Native Council because of drunkenness. Some chiefs came to the meeting drunk.

Mr. Speaker, it is legitimate question to ask if the chiefs in the GCC trashed their own constitutional role under the 1970 and 1997 Constitution. In the overall scheme of things, the Native Council was not very important to the British. They themselves did not care for their foundations and existence, nor did they care for the welfare of Fijians, the national economy nor the *iTaukei* clans and what we owned under the rule of law.

Mr. Speaker, they directly attack on their own identity and national role again by setting up their own partisan political party the SVT. They then elected the leader of the 1987 *coup* to lead that party and in so doing the leadership election saw the defeat of a paramount chief Ro Lala Mara *Na Marama Na Roko Tui Dreketi*, who was the only other candidate for the role. Mr. Speaker, that left a bad split within the GCC that led to the rise of three *iTaukei* political parties in the People's Coalition - VLV (three seats from the East), PANU (four seats – Ba Province) and FAP with 11 seats with the rest of Viti Levu.

Mr. Speaker, the rules were changed so that the chiefs who did not support the SVT were not elected from the Provincial Councils to the GCC. The traditional head of Noikoro and titular head of Navosa, Adi Kuini Vuikaba Speed, was also barred from the GCC for some time...

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Very poor.

HON. A. TUICOLO.- ..due to this change in rules and the party politicisation of the GCC and the Provincial Councils.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, she later overcame those rules and before becoming Deputy Prime Minister in 1999, she drafted policies for the GCC as a member from the Burebasaga rep to a three member GCC sub-committee. Her policy recommendations were later adopted and implemented by her 2001 political opponent, the late Mr. Qarase.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now that the leader of the then SVT is back as the honourable Prime Minister and Leader of PAP, Fijians will be keen to see if he has changed in how he wants the GCC to run when it reconvenes, as they say, in May this year, or whether he will resume in ensuring the GCC kills itself again by having partisan party politics inside the GCC and in the Provincial Councils. Will this new leadership continue with its well guided secret agenda, the carefully cloaked ethnic politics to gain back *iTaukei* elitism, power and supremacy? Sir, will it be an independent body advising the Government on *iTaukei* issues with chiefs from various political colours, or will he stack it again to only endorse his political view?

Mr. Speaker, the 1999 Elections having defeated the SVT, the chiefs in support of the different point of view, were still in the minority in the stacked council with the majority showing their hands again after the 2000's attempted *coup*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, the body tasked with the sacred task of helping the central government ensure social, economic and political progress for all Fijians and Fiji as a whole, took the side of unlawfulness, violence and racism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for all Fijians who want to know how much the 1987 and 2000 *coups* cost the Fijian economy as a whole, please, read Professor Narsey on this topic. Fiji lost billions of dollars, one economist conservatively saying \$20 billion from 1987 and 2000.

Mr. Speaker, that would make the so called \$10 billion national debt, nothing. After all, Professor Firth of Australian National University once wrote that by 1970, Fiji's governance structures, the foundation of all economics, were far superior to the Asian tigers, which are Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and other countries in Asia, which are all well ahead of Fiji today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 1987 and 2000 made Fijians poorer and poorer and its effects are still with us today because the Government is still paying off the NBF debts from the SVT Government. Every government after the SVT Government had to find the funds for health, education, water, electricity, jobs, wages and other infrastructure because most of our resources is still paying off the effects of 1987 and 2000.

Mr. Speaker, that is not only legacy of the SVT, but very much a legacy of the GCC, which gave moral authority to the 1987 and 2000 *coups*, the political violence and racism.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for all those reasons which I have only summarised

here, I am one Fijian who is not looking forward to the return of the GCC under the same disastrous leadership and stewardship that killed it, and that which hacked the rule of law which protects all of our native lands and fisheries. I know many Western chiefs and people agree because the GCC was also heavy with the Eastern and Central chiefs, while it is the Western lands and fisheries that have powered the national economy for decades.

Mr. Speaker, I hope that the Coalition Government thinks long and hard about bringing back the GCC and in what format. I also hope that in the coming review and public consultations, many people will be more informed that the GCC has a very little use in the operation of the government of the day, but rather to be reserved for the *vanua*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, being extinct for almost two decades without any remorse from the *iTaukei* proves the fact that it is an unnecessary burden that will throw this country back to antiquity because what existed before it killed itself made us all poorer and took indigenous Fijians to the brink of losing land and fisheries through the breakdown of the rule of law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my second point is in regards to the rights of the people of this nation, and that we must continue to recognise the rights of the *iTaukei* and Rotumans for that matter, as guaranteed in international agreements like the International Labour Organization Convention No.169 on the Rights of Indigenous and Tribal People, as well as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of us are taking advantage of the UNDRIP for their own ambitious political gain. The indigenous experience in Fiji and that of other countries are very markedly different from other parts of the world, such as Australia, where the indigenous were not counted as human beings until the late 1960s.

Mr. Speaker, in 2008, the Australian Labour Party Government apologised to the indigenous Australians of the wrong past government committed. The focus of the apology is about the stolen generation where 100,000 children were taken from indigenous mothers under the assimilation policies throughout much of the 20th century. Others had their land taken away from them arbitrarily and their cultural practices banned. This was the deprived situation that the UNDRIP draws its genesis from, and not from the indigenous Fijian experience.

Mr. Speaker, the rights of indigenous people in Fiji who are mainstreamed, are not being infringed as the Constitution protects 91 percent of their land, their culture, custom and tradition, their access to the courts, their legal and political system (the very fact that the existence of the current Coalition Government testifies to this fact). Therefore, what we are saying is to use UNDRIP with care and not to politically trample on the right of others in this country.

Mr. Speaker, to compensate for the above over-emphasis and exaggeration of the *iTaukei* imaginary plight by local propagandists, let me dwell briefly on the plight of the indentured labourers from the Indian sub-continent because in my view, we cannot do justice to the plight of the *iTaukei* without considering the *Girmitiya*'s saga and the missed opportunity for the *iTaukei* had, although not totally in their making.

Mr. Speaker, influenced by the notorious divided and rule British Colonial Policy and the desire to protect natives in Fijian villages to continue their cultural communal way of living intact, a separate government within the Fijian government was set up to administer natives separately.

Mr. Speaker, the building of the Fijian economy was to be the work of the labourers from thousands of miles in the Indian subcontinent while the *iTaukei* were living in paradise, enjoying

themselves, while the imported labourers were suffering through sweat, blood and tears in the cane fields akin to the Biblical story of the Israelites in Egypt and the Afro-Americans in the cotton field of the American colonies. Mr. Speaker, their contribution must never be forgotten because without them, we might have waited a bit longer to attain nationhood. It was a blessing in disguise and an economic obstruction to those who were racially protected.

Mr. Speaker, the Indo-Fijians felt they were consigned to a second class citizen State. Constitutional changes later gave them equal status and so the election of the Fiji Labour Party leader, Mr. Mahendra Chaudhary, as a country's first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister in 1999. It is the 2013 Constitution that went the full distance and cemented that equal stature by calling every citizen 'Fijian' as a common name.

HON. OPP. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, on 14th May, 1879 the British Ship - *Leonidas*, landed in Levuka with the first batch of 463 indentured labourers. The journey lasted from 3rd March (Port of Calcutta) to 14th May, 1879. Sea sickness must have taken its toll and none of these people had seen an ocean in their homeland.

Mr. Speaker, the last ship, *S.S. Sutelej*, carrying 888 labourers arrived on 11th November, 1966. Some 42 ships made 87 voyages and carried 60,553 labourers destined to the colony of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, other painful saga of the *Girmitiyas* - distortion of the work agreement and the sinking of the ship, *Syria*, which left the Port of Calcutta on 13th March, 1884 with 497 labourers. While only four miles from the Fijian shore, it hit the Nasilai Reef and sank on 11th May, 1884, with the loss of 59 lives. This maritime disaster sent shockwaves everywhere.

Mr. Speaker, the painful cries of the dying labourers still haunt the minds of their relatives and friends. Thanks to the indigenous Fijians, who attempted to help and save some lives.

Mr. Speaker, there was huge protests in India regarding the inhumane cruelty being heaped on Indian labourers in Fiji. They were treated like animals - beaten, poorly housed with meagre pay and long hours of work, poor medical facilities and poor educational arrangement for their children and shortage of women amongst the labourers created huge social problems. Mr. Speaker, being confined like sardines on the ship led to the breaking of the caste system and the emergence of the Jahagi Bhai System. Looking at this daily drama unfolding before us, perhaps the positive discrimination policy may also be on its way back favouring iTaukei.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope that we will never forget the 'slaves' or the descendants of the initial builder of our economy, who are begging on our streets selling beans and peanuts, living in shanty houses and do not have things to fall back on to, and who are facing the risk of sickness and even premature death every minute of the day. This is Christianity at its best.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a saying that goes, "the point of the pen is mightier than the point of a gun". Every time the point of the gun is used, the iTaukei race has to admit failure. Stan Ritova and Eddie Dean so aptly titled their post-coup book "*Rabuka No Other Way*" to publicly admit to the whole wide world that the way the iTaukei policy for being favourably treated was not working. Perhaps, it is time to review and minimise the institution, and let them learn the art of hard work and discipline life.

Since the introduction of the gun culture in 1987, the iTaukei have suffered heavily. A few of their high-ranking chiefs have entered the Queen's Boarding House. The unthinkable has

happened where the chief hold the *mana* from heaven. Where is the war club? Where is the *moto bitu*? Where are the cannibals? Where are the *Kalou Vu* and their *mana*?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the answer is that, they have vanished into thin air when the reality show of a democratic process sets in. For too long, we have been hoodwinked and taken for a ride by our own leaders through traditionalism and what we call at Navosa, "*Na lawata ni Gauna*" - that we are a special breed of people, that we are one of the lost tribes of Israel, cult leaders springing from everywhere. This cultural propaganda is on the rise from unexpected spots around the country to divert the attention from the reality of the situation that requires hard work, dedication and discipline.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTaukei are given the impression that their economic survival depends largely on the removal of the migrant race from the nation's political and economic life - an ironic echo of the Nazi's demand for the expulsion of Jews from German life. If the Jews were gone, the German people would stop fighting each other and unite in a commonfolk community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTaukei are bewitched by a sense of return to a traditional community of the identical fame German mystic ideology of blood and soil - *Noqu Kalou Noqu Vanua*. For our progress and survival, this mentality must not be allowed to influence our public life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think we are struggling as an iTaukei race...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- You are!

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. TUICOLO.- ...not because of the migrant race but because we continue to cling to old ideas and myths. We want things to be the way they were. Old ideas are our biggest liability, and they are liabilities because we fail to realise that the ideas or ways of doing things were assets yesterday, but yesterday is gone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to think beyond ethnicity. Ethnic politics has no place in modern state for it creates division and economic chaos. If our mindset and attitude do not change, then let us prepare for the worse scenario and political humiliation in the years to come. If we are not serious about understanding and resolving the challenges and needs confronting us, the threat of a major structural erosion of one of the world's finest and most colourful cultures become a real possibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we just cannot pick up the pieces and move on. There must be also a paradigm shift which includes the qualities of our Parliamentary candidates and debates in the august Parliament. But, again, Sir, the usual groundwork and the required discipline must begin from our family upbringing. Thus, we are all included in a participatory programmer to prepare our children for the daunting task ahead of us.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the solution for the iTaukei plight cannot be addressed in this Parliament alone. I am a firm believer in quality and broad-based education that starts from our individual homes, our community and faith-based organisations and then our educational institutions from elementary to tertiary level - an education that is balanced physically, socially, intellectually and spiritually that will produce an expected outcome of men, strong and disciplined.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we were very young, our parents compelled us to memorise a gem from certain passage from the book of Education page 57, which I think would be

a fitting conclusion, and states: “The greatest want of the world is the want of man, man who will not be bought or sold, man who in their inmost soul are true and honest, man who do not fear to call sin by its right name, man whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, man who will stand for the right though the heaven’s fall”. That is the expected outcome we all desire for our children.

God bless Fiji, *vina valevu* and thank you very much.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now intend to adjourn Parliament for lunch and we will resume when the bell is sounded. The Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.40 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.47 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we must apologise for the couple of minutes delay in our resumption. At the same time, I would like to bring to your attention that certain speakers listed for this afternoon have been moved down simply because we have the Privileges Committee sitting and we hope the participation to the debate will continue with the rest of the speakers whilst honourable Pio Tikoduadua and honourable Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure will move right down towards the end. In the meantime, I now call on the honourable Vijay Nath to deliver his speech.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, my fellow Fijians that are joining us here today in the gallery and all of you that are connecting online, *bula vinaka, Ram Ram, Salaam 'alaykum* and good afternoon to you all.

I thank you Mr. Speaker for giving me this opportunity to contribute to the Address by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji. At the outset, I wish to thank all my voters who have believed in me, voted for me and voted FijiFirst back into Parliament. This has also enabled my presence in this august Parliament today and I wish to convey my sincere thanks to all FijiFirst supporters nationwide.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge and thank my mum - Latchmi Nath for being the pillar of strength for me. In fact, she kept track of me every night. My Campaign Manager Kumar Sami, supporters - Mr. Goundar, my brother Sonu Vinay Nath, Dharmen Singh, Farish, Muskesh Chand, Bhan, Sanjesh, Navin, my tamana Turaga ni Yavusa o Naboutini Ratu Timoci for his blessings. Terence Ram and family, brother Jonny and family, friends and families from Namaqumaqa, friends and families from Koroqaqa, supporters along Baulevu Road in Nausori, Nasi, Mainiwani, Sawani, Waituri, Vuci South, Vuci Road, Naselai, Vusuya and Koronivia. Ms. Ram Pati and family, Mohammed (Pop) of Momi and Mrs Singh family from Nasi. Ronald Kumar and team from Votualevu, Mr. Avinesh Pal and family from Caubati, my brothers from Australia and brother Kevin from Canada. I thank my wife and my daughter Kaashvi and son Krish for their support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I served under the FijiFirst Government as an Assistant Minister for the past eight years and it has been a great privilege to be given another opportunity to serve the people again. Serving the people, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has always been a passion for me when I joined politics. I was a social worker for more than 25 years before I joined politics and satisfying the needs of the people is something that I hold dear to my heart.

Mr Speaker, Sir I was brought up in the rural community of Koroqaqa at Bau Road in Naitasiri and government services is something that we are very much dependant on, such as rural development and assistances from Government. One is accessing Government services and the other being part of the rural development programme. This is the hallmark of FijiFirst Government which I can confidently say, has done so much for our rural communities than any other Government combined together - not the Alliance Government, not the Labour Government, not the SVT Government or the SDL Government but the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in responding to His Excellency the President's speech, I will focus on areas which I have served in as Assistant Minister such as infrastructure development, rural and maritime development, transport and disaster management. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has been very strong emphasis on these mentioned areas by His Excellency on the plans by the Coalition Government, however, I would like to remind us all of a saying that action speaks louder than words. I repeat it again - action speaks louder than words.

This also applies to those promises made during campaign time leading up to elections, yes, these promises are to be actioned and not only to be used for political mileage or vote buying and left as false promises. I firmly, believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that whatever statement is delivered within this Chamber should be converted into action. Putting word into action is something that the FijiFirst Government has always lived up to. This has been demonstrated through major infrastructure developments that has touched the lives of all Fijians.

Infrastructure development rolled out by the FijiFirst Government has benefitted all Fijians, like never before. This has improved the livelihood of the people and no one was treated as a second or third class citizen. Whether it was building a new access road to open up new economic and social opportunities for people; whether it was pulling electricity line on an isolated community to have access to reliable power supply; whether it was pulling submarine water pipes from the mainland through the ocean to connect people on an island to safe and clean drinking water like Galoa Island, Malake Island and Moturiki - the FijiFirst Government went out of its way to ensure that all Fijians no matter where they were, were covered by infrastructure development.

This was only possible through a visionary leader like the FijiFirst Leader, who put people first and self later. This was only possible through a government that thought strategically and acted in the interest of all people and not only in the interest of a particular province or community or oneself. This was only possible through a government that served the people equally and not based on ethnicity, religion, provincial or social status.

In doing so, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you are aware and I believe many in this august Parliament have seen for themselves that the major infrastructure development projects implemented by the FijiFirst Government both in rural and urban communities, like never before. These include the building of new roads, crossings, bridges, jetties and maintaining of old ones.

Through the FijiFirst Government, rural road network reached our isolated villages and communities. These villages and communities never thought that having access to roads will only be a lifetime dream or a myth. Not only rural road development, but also modernising of road network around our urban centres and main highways, for example, tarsealing of Nabouwalu to Dreketi Highway, Sigatoka Valley Road and Moto Bridge and tarsealing there.

The recent replacement of major crossing along Queens and Kings Highway has seen the completion of Bulu Bridge in Nadroga, Tavualevu Bridge, Korovou Bridge and those near completion like the Yaqara Bridge and the bridge in the highlands of Navosa. Of course, now, the Coalition Government is taking credit for these projects such as the bridge in Vanua Levu and Tavualevu, which was opened by the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Minister. Unfortunately, they have canned the four lane roads between Lautoka and Nadi and the building of new highway from Suva to Nadi between Viti Levu.

The move of the Coalition Government to bring back PWD is idiotic and shows lack of long term thinking. The Coalition Government is only doing this for ego purposes. The current set up by the FRA with works carried out by contractors was complemented by other key agencies such as the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development on community access roads; the Ministry of Agriculture for farm access roads; the Ministry of Sugar and Fiji Sugar Corporation on cane access roads; the Ministry of Forestry on logging roads, was a very good one with an effective and modern set up, which our development partners and multilateral development also backed up.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in fact, there was even an allocation for non-FRA roads in the current budget to ensure that all roads were attended to in terms of maintenance and upgrading. There is no need to bring back PWD. Having said that, I wish to remind those on the other side of Parliament, you must

work hard, work smarter, be strategic, always look to deliver services while using government funds wisely - think beyond your nose, think long term, please work smarter and do consider the most cost-effective way as a better way.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, much has been done as well by the FijiFirst Government in the improvement of water infrastructure nationwide. Factors such as increasing population through rural to urban drift, expansion of urban and industrial areas and increasing development such as housing, has put pressure to our water infrastructure.

Under Fiji National Development Plan, an ambitious target has been set and that is for Fijians to have access to safe and clean drinking water by 2030. This has seen the implementation of major projects such as modernising water and wastewater treatment plant and extension of water distribution lines to cater for the huge demand of water.

One of the major projects that will forever be the legacy of FijiFirst Government is the Rewa River water supply project located in Viria, Naitasiri. The completion of this project will end water woes in the Lami- Nausori corridor through the additional 40 million litres of water per day for the benefit of over 360,000 families and Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the implementation of such project is an indication of FijiFirst Government's strategic planning and its ability to secure funds through negotiations which resulted in assistance from development partners and implementing this massive project.

On the other hand, rural water project is equally critical as most of our rural communities are not connected through the meter scheme and they have the standalone rural water scheme, as alluded to by His Excellency the President, this is another area that will be taken up by Public Works which will be a duplication of work currently being carried out by the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF). Setting up of the rural water unit under the Public Works will be an expensive exercise as it does not only mean the need for resources but also the need to open Divisional and Sub-Divisional Offices in order to cover the whole of Fiji. This again in itself is a waste of government funds and resources as currently, WAF was doing a good job in carrying out rural water projects.

All in all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is an indication of the Coalition Government's disconnection and lack of understanding, and how the current government mechanism works. It is also not a well-thought-out move which is evident of being another debacle by this Government. Rural and maritime development programmes by the FijiFirst Government in the past years has transformed Fiji's rural economy and have raised the Fijian living standard. This is through assistance such as Self-Help Programmes (SHP), Non-Cane Access Roads (NCAR), Community Access Roads, Footpath and Foot Bridges (CARFF), Rural Housing Assistance Scheme (RHAS) and Emergency Water Supplies (EWS).

And yes, Advisory Councils do play critical roles in connecting people to the government and vice versa to ensure that all people get the real assistance needed by them. In this regard it is very important that the right people are appointed for the right position. People that can be a game changer and has the ability to serve the community as a whole.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is critical for an economy to have a robust transport system to enhance movement of goods and persons. Our maritime community faces challenges particularly those that reside in the non-economical routes. In addressing this, the FijiFirst Government has enhanced and modernised the Government Shipping Franchise Services. This not only addressed the transportation issue but also encourage inter-island trade.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency has emphasised the need to better coordinate for disaster preparedness, response, recovery operations and mitigations. Fiji's Meteorological and Hydrological Services has forecast that in the 2022-2023 cyclone season, we would expect at least two tropical cyclone activities within Fiji's area of responsibility. Disaster preparedness is important, and I can say that the FijiFirst Government has made enormous strategies in improving the capacity of the Fiji Meteorological Services in Nadi and in Laucala Bay to be disaster ready through the improvement of technology and internal processes.

Having been an Assistant Minister for Disaster Management for the past three years, coordination is very critical when it comes to disaster preparedness and response. The Coalition Government has recently failed to deliver the services in flooding areas and the public is still waiting for the government assistance in Labasa and the Western Division.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They have in six weeks

HON. V. NATH.- To conclude Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to remind the Coalition Government to treat all Fijians alike, follow the Constitution, follow the rule of law and ensure economic stability and sustainability. I thank you for this opportunity.

(Acclamation)

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity to deliver my maiden speech and I would like to congratulate all honourable Members who have delivered their maiden speeches before me and allowing me to know them better. May I join my honourable colleagues in congratulating you and your Deputy for your election to the speakership of this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I speak for the first time in this Parliament Chamber with a grateful heart to God for his calling and him be the glory and honour of this moment of my life.

HON. MEMBERS.- *Vinaka.*

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- I would like to thank my Party Leader in FijiFirst for accepting me as a candidate for the 2022 General Elections. I would like to also thank them for their commitment in the past eight years to serving the people of this nation and helping to continue the never-ending work of building a better Fiji for all.

Mr. Speaker, I would not be here if it is not for those who voted for me, plus the over 200,000 voters who voted for FijiFirst candidates. I thank them from the bottom of my heart, and I thank them for believing in the FijiFirst policies that had benefitted them and all Fijians for the past eight years. I quote Senator Reverend Raphael Warnock of the United States Senate who said on his re-election, "A vote is a kind of prayer for the future you want for yourself and your children. Voting is faith put into action". I can only assure that all who voted for FijiFirst, there is a future that you want for you and your children will be our fight from this side of the Chamber.

I must thank the current Government for seeing the light and continuing with those policies that had helped thousands of Fijians in the past eight years. The truth does really set us free. I want to especially thank –

- Mrs. 355, otherwise known as my wife, Lilian - I know she is watching;
- my children, grandchildren and my wider family from Vatoa and Mabula in Cicia;

- my grandnephew – Penisoni, my one-man campaign team (Mr. Speaker, I quickly found out the disadvantage of having your children in the military or in the Police that when you stand for politics, they run away from you because they are political); and
- My campaign team, my team at Delainabua and my golf team friends.

Thank you for your support during the campaign.

Mr. Speaker, I stand here humble and deeply honoured to be the first from my family to be elected to Parliament. Both my parents have passed on and six of my 11 siblings. I pay tribute to them, and to my five older brothers who are still around, for their guidance and support for their youngest in the family. I am so blessed as a 62-year-old youngest to still have five of my older siblings witness and celebrate this milestone day for our family with me, even though three of them are doing it from afar.

My brother - Penisoni Gauna must be known to you, Mr. Speaker, because his favourite song is '*Biu o Somosomo ni 'ida na mata'a'*', and I think his known to few other Members in this Parliament. He wrote a short piece on his *Facebook* Page a few days after our swearing in ceremony here in this Chamber, and I quote a piece of what he wrote that sums up very well our families' feelings today. He wrote, and I quote:

“Many of our friends and close acquaintances were sworn in as Member of Fiji's new Parliament from both sides of the aisle and we were overjoyed. But nothing brought more joy and happiness to us this Christmas than witnessing someone very close to us being sworn in as the first Member of Parliament from our faraway island of Vatoa.

Honourable Mr. Viliame Naupoto, I speak on all of families' behalf, we are humbled and proud of you, and we will defend you as long as we live. There are things that transcend politics, and family is one of them. You are our brother and we love you. PG.”

Thank you, my brother, I know that if it was any of my brothers standing here today instead of me, I would have written something very similar, but definitely not as eloquently put by my big brother.

I was born and raised on that small faraway island that my brother mentioned. Vatoa is close to Tonga than to Suva. That small island as a small place in Fiji's history, as it was discovered by Captain James Cook on 2nd July, 1774 and he named it, 'Turtle Island'. I think the landing of the *HMS Resolution*, his ship, and a few crew members the next day would be the first recorded landing of the Europeans in Fiji.

My father, Penisoni Naupoto, was a soldier towards the end of the II World War. He was the first *Turaga ni Koro* in Vatoa and served in that capacity until his passing. My late mother, Sofaia Matawalu, who is from Mabula in Cicia. She is the most loving and kind-hearted person that I know. She is small in stature but yes, she has a big heart. She, in addition to raising the 11 of us, also raised 10 other children whose parents passed or those who were born out of wedlock. At our home, we did not have the luxury of owning our own blanket. When it was time to sleep, we would lie in a line and our mother would cover us with the big mat. It was good fun.

My parents were very devout Christians. They raised us around Christian principles and values. My grandfather was the first to be a Methodist Minister from Vatoa in the early 1900s. We were taught to be kind to all and we were not to speak ill of anyone, regardless of the circumstances. You break any of those two rules and you can guarantee that something else will break on you. Those two rules sound simple enough but because of our human nature, it is so hard to follow to the latter.

So, yes, our *sasa* broom played a different role quite often and those two rules remain the two main rules of my life. Yes, at times more often than not, I still find myself breaking the rule, but now our *sasa* broom remains a broom but the guilt, when I realised that I have broken the rules, is more painful than the *sasa* broom changing role.

There are some who were friends with me on *Facebook*, but now find that I have blocked or unfriended them. It is because they had broken one or both of those two rules or tempting me to break them because of what they say or share. I apologise if I have hurt your feelings in the process.

I am a Christian, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord of all my life and I would like to thank Reverend Ilaitia Tuwere, who is now the *Talatala Qase* at the Vatukarasa Church Division, for his spiritual guidance and support to me and my family for the almost six years of my tenure as Commander RFMF, and helping me to grow spiritually.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I mentioned my faith because my faith centres my life. My faith, like my grandfather more than a century ago, are personal choices. The word, "Christian" was thrown around during the campaign, some promising it to include it in the Constitution and to replace the current Secular State with the Christian State. Secular State simply means, that the State is neutral when it comes to religion. Our Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and not freedom from religion.

My humble view is that Christian is not the label of a nation, but it is a label that is attached to a person who confesses to be a Christian and practises the value of Christianity. It is not labelling a nation Christian but living the Christian life that matters. After all, Jesus himself said in Mathew 5:16, "Let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your father in heaven".

There is a risk Mr. Speaker, that when we attach religion to our identity as a nation, it manifests into pride, and we look down upon those who may practise other religion or no religion at all. My faith tells me that we are all equal in the eyes of God. Discrimination of any form has no place in our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, I turn to an issue that has saved and dominated my thinking for the past seven years up until today and, that is, the security situation in our beloved nation. I hope that Government is doing their own security analysis and if anything, what I say next, they can match against their own analysis and refine their analysis and go forward from there, or they can even discard it, but I hope not before they listen to it first.

The current situation in Fiji, in my view, can be best described as the proverbial calm before the storm, and now the storm clouds are gathering. There are very clear indications now that the ingredients that came together and ignited into the chaos of 2000 are surfacing again, and social media like never before, has been widely used as the vehicle to propagate conspiracy theories and misinformation that, in turn, is fuelling a lot of hatred amongst the general population.

Mr. Speaker, social media is wreaking havoc amongst our people. It is not only happening here in Fiji, but around the world as well. The ingredients that came together in 2000 can be explained as a triangle that when the three sides come together, civil order erupts. It is like the fire triangle of fuel, oxygen and heat. When all three connect, fire occurs.

The three sides of what I termed as the civil disorder triangle are: ethnonationalism or in our case *iTaukei* nationalism, religious nationalism and, again, in our case Christian nationalism and that the third side is hatred.

Mr. Speaker, I hear the noble words and intention spoken in this Parliament from speakers before me, advocating that looking after *iTaukei* rights does not mean overlooking or demeaning others' rights. Those statements and sentiments I agree with wholeheartedly, and it should be the case here in Fiji. But the reality, Mr. Speaker, learning from our history from 1987 onwards is that, the voter base usually read it differently. They easily take it as an elevation of their status and it manifests into a push for supremacy.

I fear that the concentration of and the fast-paced changes of *iTaukei* institutions as announced by His Excellency and also by the Coalition Government and the rhetoric around *iTaukei* matters is creating that supremacy euphoria. That is the first side of the triangle.

Mr. Speaker, the second side - Christian nationalism, surfaced very quickly in the 2022 Elections, compared to the 2018 Elections when I was watching it as Commander of RFMF. Alarm bell started ringing in my head when very early in the counting process, the Methodist Church published a letter signed by the *Qase Levu* on the so-called "glitch", and it was very similar to the vein of the complaint from the heads of political parties other than the FijiFirst.

Christian nationalism can be broken down into two aspects; one the politicisation of religion and second, is the influence of religion on politics. In my view, both are happening. Their visitations to Christian denominations by the honourable Prime Minister and very early after swearing in of the current Government, there was an announcement made that Chaplains were going to be posted back to school. I do not say that as a criticism but just a matter of fact to point out what I am saying. This is the side of the triangle that usually legitimises the horrific acts committed in times of anarchy. "*Talatala* is here, I can whatever I can."

The third side is hatred and is the easiest to prove. A quick story - we were walking down the street with two of my honourable friends when a red car drove past and the *iTaukei* lad in front of us leaned out and shouted, '*Aah! vacava, vacava?*' - challenging and taunting us. But it is the social media that is fuelling hatred and here are some examples:

- 'Watch your mouth and pray that you will not be shipped away on the second Leonidas'
- 'It is simple, this is Fiji, you Indian.'
- This one is a swear word - 'Indians, you are a disgrace to the Fijian name, go back to India on Leonidas boat'
- This is in *iTaukei* and if you do not understand *iTaukei*, you might as well put on your headset for interpretation from the top. This one is saying, "*Na kena dina ga mera moku na Qirimiti, me ra vakamatei yadudua, mera kila tu na vanua era tu kina. Sa ra mai via kai Viti sara. Tamata sa* (swear word), *ra luve ni kaidia* (swear word).

It is happening on both sides (sorry), and I am just saying this to show that there is hatred down there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sure that given your long years of experience in Parliament, you will agree with me that the words we speak in this Chamber usually come back to haunt us and, yes, I am prepared to be haunted by the words that I have spoken here today. Today, my guest in the gallery was supposed to be Ms. Jane Dau, but she is not here as she has moved across to Nadi and is supposed to be home from school now.

Lady Jane, as I call her, is 11 years old, and I know that if she hears me, she will just shout out, "I will be 12 in August." This grandniece of mine from Cicia, her parents both related to me through my mum, is my most ardent and vocal supporter. Jane will go around her neighbourhood and give out my number to those whom she meets with her simple message, "Please, vote for my *tua*." Jane has no idea of the policies of the FijiFirst nor those of other parties but for her, the best

policy was for people to vote for me, because I am her grandfather. For Jane, with a very innocent mind of an 11-year-old, life is simple, 'Please, vote for my *tua*', because she knows and expects that her *tua* will do right for her.

The reason why I have said the words that I have said in here as my Maiden Speech is because I want to reciprocate and do right for Jane, and I need your help. And I know that if I do right for my Jane, I will also do right for your Jane or Joe, and the future generation who will take over this beloved nation from us. The end state of my doing right for Jane is leaving behind a Fiji as a nation of opportunities and the only thing that matters is hard work, not race, not ethnicity, not gender, not religion, not the colour of her skin, not the province where she comes from and not even who her grandfather is.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, building that Fiji starts here in this Chamber. We must keep those sides of the civil disorder triangle apart, and we do that by being very mindful of the impact and the messages that we send to our voters through the changes that we make, through the policies and laws that we create and simply, through the words that we speak.

We must put on hold changes that we know that will pull the sides of the triangle together. We must be brave and bold enough to reverse or cancel programmes and policies that divide us along ethnic lines. We must exercise and speak true love otherwise we just become noisy gongs or clanging symbols as the bible says. When we keep the sides of the triangle apart and slowly dismantle them, we maintain stability. Without which we as a nation will not prosper. Let us do right for the future generation of our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I sit, yesterday I held back and did not utter a word when the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation very loudly demanded that my honourable friend while delivering her speech shouting to provide evidence of rape that occurred in 1987. I was taken back because I thought that she would realise that in this Chamber everything is public - how dare she asked for evidence of rape in here when we take it to court, we try and keep it as private as possible.

It happened in 1987 and I remind her that it even happened in 2000 and its result of when the three sides of the triangle come together. It happened in 2000 and to tell you a quick story, this lady was brave enough to tell the story an indo-Fijian lady, a mother and wife, thugs walking to her home. They asked her to strip naked, asked her to cook curry for them while they sat, drank beer and taunted her. Now, if that makes you cringe then thousands of other people are cringing because they are watching this live on the television. That is why I cringed yesterday when there was a strong demand from the lady Minister to provide evidence of rape. Not in here, not in here definitely.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I said when the sides of the triangle come together there is civil disorder and usually, the women and children suffer most. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a new Member of Parliament, I look to you and to my senior colleagues for guidance and advice to quicken my learning of the rules and procedures of these Chambers and Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reaffirm my commitment to serve faithfully through my term as a Member of this Parliament. I thank you.

(Acclamation)

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the public in the gallery and those watching from the comforts of their homes or through internet and listening to the radio. A very good afternoon to you all and *Ni sa yadra*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, *na gone Turaga bale na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere for his most gracious speech at the opening and first sitting of Parliament after the 2022 General Elections and also to deliver my maiden speech.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before beginning my maiden speech, (politics aside), I on behalf of the *Vanua* of *Ra* would like to join my colleagues the honourable Saukuru and the honourable Kiran to express my sincere condolences to the *Vanua* of *Vitogo* for the death of its high chief - *Na i Taukei Sukanacagi na Turaga na Tui Vitogo*, Ratu Wiliame Ratudale Sovasova. A very distinguished, caring and loving high chief from the Western part of Fiji. *Qai la riki na vacegu na Momo na Tui Vitogo* (May you depart in peace, Sir, Tui Vitogo).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I begin my maiden speech today with my favourite *Bible* verse taken from the book of Jeremiah 29:11 which reads, and I quote:

“I know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for.”

It is this Biblical passage that propelled me on the political path I have chosen.

As a newly elected Member of this august Chamber allow me on this auspicious occasion to congratulate you and my ‘*marama auvu*’, the Deputy Speaker, honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua, on your respective election to superintend the affairs of this august Parliament. The responsibility placed on your shoulders is a heavy one.

First of all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the Lord God for His support, leadership and strength under the circumstances, guidance and spirit to compete in the General Elections 2022. My profound gratitude goes to the Fijian voters in particular from my province the *Vanua* of *Ra* which consists of 19 *Tikina* and 93 Villages, for giving me the opportunity to contribute in this august Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to acknowledge and thank the support from the *Vanua* (traditional State) of Bureivanua, Bureiwai, Kavula, Liwativale, Mataso, Nababa, Nailuva, Nakorotubu, Nakuailava, Nalaba, Nalawa, Naroko, Nasau, Navitilevu, Navolau, Rakiraki, Raviravi, Saivou and Tokaimalo.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to thank all the *Tui ni Vanua* in the Province of *Ra* for their support. I personally thank *na i tikotiko vakaturaga e Nakorotubu vua na Gone Turaga na Gonesau*, *Natauiya vua na Gone Turaga na Ratu ni Natauiya*, *Uluda na Gone Turaga na Tui Navitilevu* and *Nacobicibici vua na Gone Turaga na Vunivalu na Tui Nalawa*, and not forgetting the members of the *Bose Vanua o Ra*.

[I personally thank the chiefly Nakorotubu State and its Gonesau chief, the chiefly Natauiya State and its Ratu of Natauiya, the chiefly Uluda State and its Tui Navitilevu chief, the chiefly Nacobicibici State and its Tui Nalawa warlord, and not forgetting the members of the traditional custodians of the State of *Ra*.]

Certainly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, not forgetting to thank all my Indo-Fijian families and voters in Nanuku, Volivoli, Ellington, Nananu-i-Ra Island, Qalau, Madhuvani, Tova, Barotu, Korotale, Vunikavikaloa and Banisogosogo for your support. Thank you very much indeed.

May I request, Mr. Speaker, to speak in the vernacular to thank a few of my supporters in

the Vanua.

Vinaka vakalevu na vei'okoni vei koniu kece na kaiciqu na lewe ni vanua o Ra – Ako kai, Lavo kai, Goneisuka, Lo Dravo, Lo Dero, Lo Vara, Le Bua, Lo O, Lo Kuka, Lo Bua kei oniu na 'aukei ni maki'a. Au vakavinavinaka vua na Kalou ni sa rawa ni bau rua na noda ma'a ena Valeniboselawa. Sa rawa ni qai mai 'amani 'ale na suru ni 'oa o Turukawa mai Nakauvadra..

[Thank you very much for the support to all my kin and people of Ra – Ako kai, Lavo kai, Gone i suka, Lo Dravo, Lo Dero, Lo Vara, Lebu'a, Lobu'a, Lo Kuka and to the traditional makita tree totem owners. I thank God Who has enabled two children of Ra to stand in Parliament. The voice of Turukawa the legendary rooster of Nakauvadra shall resound once more.]

To all my voters and for those who have not voted for me, I am now your representative. I cherish the trust that you have placed in me, and I will do my very best to represent your concerns and work towards building a better future for all Fijians. I would like to thank some of my professional and very personal friends around Fiji and abroad (you know who you are) I will always be grateful for all their support and pray that they will always find favour in all that they do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have saved my last thanks to those most dear to me my family. I acknowledge with much appreciation the continuous support of my late mother, Ilisapeci Savua Niudamu. She had always been a pillar of strength to me and for that I will be forever grateful. I would also like to thank my father, Ratu Epeli Niudamu who is in the village watching television, and all my relatives at Matawailevu Village, Nalawa in Ra. Also, a special thanks goes to the *Turaga na Ratu ni Bure*, Ratu Ilitomasi Busa, and villagers of Burenitu for their support for our Party.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to say this to those who have put me in Parliament. Friends, my journey has just begun, and I can assure you that I have a responsibility to ensure that your voice is heard and I am and will always be interested in what you have to say about things concerning you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now wish to respond in part to His Excellency the President's Address delivered in this august Parliament on Friday, 3rd February, 2023. I congratulate the honourable Prime Minister, Major-General Sitiveni Rabuka, and the Coalition Government Members, together with all the honourable Members of Parliament, and I look forward to working with them in the betterment of our beloved nation and its people. In doing so, we will be responding positively to the call by the Head of State, His Excellency the President, as he sees it and I wholeheartedly agree that the greatest challenge before us is working together to move our nation forward.

Honourable Members, we have no other choice, but to learn and re-learn on how to work and live together in and outside Parliament. The first step towards this end, in my view, is forgiveness. Unforgiveness is cancerous both, to the person and to the society as a whole.

Given each of our faith background, honourable Members, we know that this is essential and is a basic tenet of all our faith. Once forgiveness is sought and given, only then will real and genuine restoration and a process of working together could be carried out. If we choose otherwise this bondage of unforgiveness will surely be a barrier to our work in Parliament. I pray that God will grant us the wisdom and strength to forgive people who have wronged us.

I would ask, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that both parties of this august Parliament put their differences aside and provide a platform that will provide policies which are conducive to infrastructural and human resources development and continue from the development that has been carried out by the

previous Government. In His Excellency's Address, the President has emphasised that we must continue to improve on our infrastructure to meet the demands of a modern Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I feel that in our quest for modernisation and globalisation, we should also strive to uphold time-tested values and principles that have not only made life in Fiji meaningful and desirable, but also set us apart from life experiences of bigger and modern countries. Over time and against all odds, to some degree, we have maintained our sense of family.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe that both, individually and corporately, and at all levels of society including us, honourable Members, we will need to work together in the maze of this vision, if you allow. Fortunately, we are not starting anew, all that we need to do is to build on the work of the past years towards this end. After all, four years is not long, and in no time, it will be election time once again.

The intent of the reforms is to continue to improve the lives of ordinary Fijians and better equip our young people for satisfying roles and responsibilities in a vibrant, growing and thriving economy. Honourable Members, this is our time, this is our season, and we all need to rise above all our differences and barriers to move the nation forward and establish our mark in this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Ra was one of the neglected province in Fiji where not much attention was given. However, being a *kai colo* from the interior of Ra, we are thankful to the previous Bainimarama-led Government for the immense development done in my home province, particularly with the improved road access and electricity. Sir, this is one of the reasons I was inspired to join the FijiFirst Movement for the sterling work they have contributed to nation building for the past years.

On this note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to bring to the attention of the current Government some of the ongoing infrastructural developments which was initiated by the former Government, which they have now inherited which I request to be looked at immediately, and are as follows:

1. The township of Waimicia in Nalawa has a very serious water problem which has hindered development in that area. Waimicia is where the Nalawa Police Station is located, together with the Waimaro Health Centre, the shopping centres, together with four schools. This should not be the case, as we have a good water source at Nasavusavu which can meet the needs of the villages between Navesau Adventist High School to Madhuvani Settlement along the King's Road. I understand that this had already been surveyed by the previous Government and ready for implementation once the funds are available, but this is a problem and should be given top priority.
2. In the coastal side of Nakorotubu and interior of Ra, the people are very grateful for the installation of powerlines and meter boxes at their very doorstep. They are just waiting for the wiring of their homes so that they can have access to EFL power.
3. The construction of the new Nalawa Police Station which the previous Government had already budgeted for. We are still waiting for that be done by the new Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now, the Coalition Government is running the nation and it is understandable that you cannot do everything at once, you have to plan for it, budget for it and then implement it, as we the *kai Ra* usually say, "Rome was not built in one day".

FijiFirst has commenced with the infrastructural development, and we ask the current Government to build on it. While we may be called “the Opposition” for historical reasons, we stand here not necessarily to oppose, but to work with parliamentary colleagues, along and across the aisle, to refine existing policies and propose new approaches to the challenges we face as a nation. Fiji’s economic, social and security challenges have grown more complex over the years. Policy responses must rise to the challenge and to do so, we need earnest and robust discussions on substantive policy matters both, in and out of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I understand that the Government is looking at the possibility of setting up cane juice extraction facility at the old Penang Mill site in Rakiraki. I also urge the Government under the Ministry of Sugar, together with FSC and iTaukei Land Trust Board and other stakeholders, in encouraging and assisting many farmers in Ra in doing cane farming, particularly our *iTaukei* families. The Government has to provide many incentives and subsidies to encourage cane planting, just like what the FijiFirst has done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I end by once again re-affirming my pledge to serve our beloved nation, Fiji, and all its people to the best of my ability. I, therefore, look forward to making meaningful contributions in this august Parliament in the next four years. It is my hope and prayer that God will continue to bless our beloved Fiji and all of its citizens now and forever more.

Thank you for your indulgence, Mr. Speaker.

(Acclamation)

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians who are present here today and those who are connecting via livestream; I am deeply honoured and privileged to stand in this august Parliament and to deliver my Maiden Speech.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to also make a few contributions on His Excellency the President’s gracious Address. I join my colleagues in congratulating you on your appointment as Speaker of this august Parliament, as well as the Deputy Speaker, the honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua. Furthermore, Sir, I would like to personally thank you for your foresight in encouraging me to stand in the 2022 General Elections, when we used to have *yaqona* at your house in Lami. I wish you well in your tenure as Speaker of this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the honourable Prime Minister for trusting me to become a Member of Parliament under the People’s Alliance Party, as well as an important responsibility of being an Assistant Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office. I also congratulate the honourable Members on both sides of Parliament for winning their seats at the 14th December, 2022 Elections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious and well-articulated Address. His message was clear and assured us that we must remain united for the sake of our beloved nation. His Excellency the President’s Address also clearly outline the People’s Coalition Government’s mission and vision, key policies and programmes and initiatives of Government and its legislative agenda.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to make a few observations on the proceedings of this august Parliament on Monday, 13th February, 2023, especially, the antics of the honourable Opposition and a vile and revisionist speech of their Leader.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend you for your patience and wisdom in allowing the proceedings,

despite the toxic and poisonous reply by the honourable Leader of the Opposition to His excellency the President's Address. As a fledging Member of Parliament and still awaiting to give my Maiden Speech, my expectation then was the summoning of the Chair by the Sergeant-at-Arms to eject the transgressor of Parliament rules and orders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Leader of the Opposition was allowed to carry on and duly proceeded to reveal himself to this august Parliament, to the nation, to the world, and the rest as they say is history.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I saw two heroes emerge from this whole episode. The first is your good-self, Sir, for allowing the honourable Leader of Opposition to complete his misguided contribution to the current debate. As we learnt from the honourable Leader of the Opposition, the other hero emerging was His Excellency the President himself, *the Turaga Tui Macuata* and *Taukei Bilatagane*, a paramount chief of the highest class and quality, steadfast and resilient in the face of political pressure and adversity, a national leader who, in his final analysis, chose to stand for Fiji and the greater good of the country and all Fijians. Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for your indulgence, let me tell my story.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I joined politics at the request of my chief in my village, *Turaga na Tui Suva*, Sanaila Mudunavosa, and my supporters in the Melanesian communities around Fiji. I was a bit hesitant at first, but then I made up my mind to stand if I have the support of the *vanua*. To be honest, my decision to join politics came with some sacrifice for me and my family. However, the thought of my children, grandchildren and descendants, having to bear the consequences of our decisions, fuelled my zeal to contribute to building a better Fiji for them.

Being a novice politician, my campaign was not an easy one. I faced an uphill battle to destabilise the juggernaut power and money of the FijiFirst Government. To change the mindset of our people was difficult. They were used to the FijiFirst propaganda, and it was an uphill battle. In the fight, it was a mismatch, it was David against Goliath.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this did not dampen my resolve to continue and encourage our people to press on, regardless. I was reminded by the words of the former Fiji Rugby Coach, Brad Johnston, when asked after Fiji losing the Fiji-England World Cup Rugby match of how he compared Fiji to England. He said, "It was like comparing Mercedes to roller skates."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were, indeed, on roller skates. We were outmuscled by the ferocity of the FijiFirst tsunami campaign. The money that was poured around by the FijiFirst Government to buy the votes was unbelievable. Someone called on Tuesday, 13th December, 2022, and said that a Government vehicle was still delivering pots to ladies groups in the Central Division, when Elections were being held the next day.

(Laughter)

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- What were they trying to prove?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr Speaker, Sir, this is the fact. Even though I am registered in the *Vola ni Kawa Bula* from Suvavou Village, I am also part Solomon. My grandmother is a Solomon Islander. My father was brought up by the Solomon Islanders at Wailoku when his dad passed away even before when he was born. I grew up in Wailoku and attended the St. John Anglican Primary School.

HON. P.K. BALA.- When is the public reunion?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- I am currently the manager of St. Johns Anglican Primary School and also the President of the St. Johns Anglican Old Scholars Association. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as mentioned by honourable Bia yesterday the Solomon Islanders and Melanesian communities faced formidable constraints in their socio-economic development, I certainly agree with him.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the adoption of the 2013 Constitution, these communities had been totally forgotten. This had led to destitute and increase in poverty with the lack of opportunities for employment. Some houses in these communities do not have proper toilets - this is totally unacceptable. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not agree with honourable Bia's comments that providing everyone with the same equal rights will benefit the Melanesian communities, this is far from the truth. An equal playing field for everyone has drastically eroded the social, as well as the economic rights that was previously enjoyed by the Melanesian communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I was campaigning around the Navua area, Melanesians residing in these areas informed me that the system is not serving any purpose. They said, the assistance from the then government would only reach the *iTaukei* neighbours as they watched from the sidelines. As government assistance mostly targeted *iTaukei* communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the People's Coalition Government will pave the way for the Melanesian community. Gone are the days when our Melanesian communities would watch from the sidelines. To all my Melanesian brothers and sisters, I confidentially say to you this Government sees you, this Government hears you and this Government is here for you. The People's Coalition Government is committed to enhancing the social and economic conditions of Melanesian descendants, reintroducing the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs to be responsible for the development of Melanesian communities as well as other minority communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the answer to addressing the plight of Melanesians in Fiji is simply to recognise their true identity as Melanesian the descendants of Solomon Islanders whether they are from Papua New Guinea or Vanuatu. We have to treat them differently as they are the most poverty-stricken communities in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me thank some of my supporters who contributed significantly to my campaign. I would like to thank the people of Wailoku for their unwavering support. I would like to thank the villages of Koio, Marata, Bali, Wai and Korolailai. I wish to thank Kevueli Bogi, Potter, Alipate Kaka, Sani Dauni, Akuila Talemaitoga, Jone Baleikadavu, Jone Logabou, Jo Makaunia, Saimoni Iroi, Jone Kiko and a few others who I have failed to mention. I am so grateful indeed for your support. I also wish to thank the people of Matata Settlement for their trust and belief in me especially Mr. Jone Peni and Are Maori for always supporting me in my campaign and their role in influencing the community. *Vinaka Vakalevu.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me also to thank the other Melanesian community around Fiji for putting their trust in me by voting me in the last general election. This included New Town, Caubati, Kalekana, Muanikoso, Laqere, Naviavia, Naganivatu, Nabunikadamu, Nadawa in Ovalau and Wailailai. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also raise my hands to be the voice of my people in the greater Lami area. I will make sure their plight and cries are heard and actions taken to address their issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would be remiss of me not to mention the person who really influenced my life. He is my dad, Mr. Sakiusa Tubuna (Senior), who grew up amongst the Solomon Islanders in Wailoku. Growing up from a poor family and over 30 years served as a primary and secondary school teacher, he later served as Director of Fiji Centre at University of the South Pacific (USP).

My Dad is an avid gardener and at 81 years old, he still plants his own cassava. My mum, Karaliani Tubuna, hails from Namuana Village in Tavuki, Kadavu, and served as a nurse for over 30 years in hospitals around Fiji. I am glad that they are in good health and are able to join us at the public gallery this afternoon.

(Acclamation)

There are two people that I also wish to mention who have had an impact on my life. They were my maternal uncle, the late Mr. Solomon Momoivalu, the former Minister in the Alliance Government and my late father-in-law, Mr. Militoni Leweniqila. They were seasoned politicians who influenced my thinking and developed my interest in politics. I am also indebted to the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara who, in his foresight initiated the Fijian Affairs Scholarship. This allowed me to pursue a Bachelor of Agricultural Economics Degree at the Australian University of New England in the mid-1980s after leaving Ratu Kadavulevu School.

Government debt was a major issue and this was an issue that was raised with us when we were campaigning. Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the campaign I shared with those that I visited of how I always admired the calibre of great leaders such as Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and former Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. From Ratu Kamisese Mara's time to Mr. Qarase's time there were significant developments made in Fiji namely the Seaqaqa Sugar Cane Project, Monasavu Hydro, Fiji Pine Scheme and the Suva-Nadi Highway amongst many others. Most of these projects were loans from international financing institutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from 2006 after the takeover of the Qarase Government, Fiji's external debt grew significantly to \$10 billion. People were asking where this \$10 billion was. We have not seen any new highway, no new major agriculture development projects and no new hydro facility. Where has all the money gone to? This showed the gross incompetence and mismanagement of public funds by the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am proud to be here this afternoon as the first person from my village in Suvavou, the traditional owners of the Suva Peninsula to be elected a Member of Parliament. I am forever grateful to the Turaga na Tui Suva, Mr. Sanaila Mudunavosa, head of the three Yavusa of Nauluvatu, Nayavumata and Vatuwaqa and the 11 *Mataqali* for having their faith in me.

I wish to especially thank my team in the village - Nau Tuni, tavale Semesa, tavale Jo Navara and Nau Veresa. I promised you that I will do my best to serve you in four years in Parliament. I wish to thank my wife and children, Sainiana, Isireli and Sakiusa. They have been my tower of strength and have continued to inspire me to reach this far. I also remember my eldest daughter who was tragically killed in a road accident three years ago. Her name is Kara and she would have been very proud if she was here today. May she rest in peace.

I must acknowledge my campaign team for doing a tremendous job. My campaign manager Master. Maleli Siata toiled hard day and night to ensure that we achieved our weekly targets. Vinaka Vakalevu Mr. Male. I would like to thank other members of the team namely; Esita, Iraia, Mereseini Mocelutu, Josua Karavaki, Kinisimere Raiba, Elizabeth Tuicaucou and Moape Malumui.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must also thank the following communities for their support, Kauvula/Kaudamu Road at Delainavesi, Motusa Church Community, Sogowaluvu, Tauluga, Veisari, Delainavesi, Qaia and Lami. A special mention of Mr. Viliame Rauca, Alivia Boto and Joji from Delainavesi.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the members of my Church, St. Gabriel Anglican Church at Laqere, for their prayers and continuing support. I wish to thank our padre Fr. Peniasi Lomayasi for his spiritual guidance. I wish to also acknowledge my siblings; Jone, Marama and Sale for their financial and moral support. Since forming the People's Coalition Government, I have accompanied the honourable Prime Minister on his tours to some of the rural areas particularly in Vanua Levu. Most of the villages that I visited had not witnessed any development and had not progressed to the standard that is expected. Some still lack reliable water supply, have no access to electricity and lack basic infrastructure such as community halls.

In my view, the living standards of our rural people have fallen to basic level, a legacy of the past 16 years of mismanagement of public funds and the unequal of Government resources to rural and maritime areas. Even Government agencies such as FRA has totally neglected the constructed and upgrading of roads in the rural areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the biggest victim of the 16 years in power of the FijiFirst Government are the Fijians registered in the *Vola ni Kawa Bula*. They are the third-class citizens of this country. This morning we heard the honourable Faiyaz Koya boasting about the economic performance of the FijiFirst Government. The FijiFirst Government in 2016 formulated a 20-year National Development Plan (NDP). Yesterday, I was just looking at some of the targets set by the Government and there are two examples that I wish to highlight. The annual average growth rate target of 4.5 percent from 2016-2021, where -1.8 percent was achieved. The government debt to reduce it to 35 percent, the actual Government debt now is more than 85 percent. His figures again revealed the poor economic management of the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my role as Assistant Minister, I would like to see if there is a greater resource mobilisation of environmental funds provided by donor agencies such as Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the Green Climate Fund (GCF) to specific areas to ensure its sustainability. There are a lot of projects in the past which are often disintegrated and not properly coordinated to achieve any positive environmental and economic return.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President in his speech, refers to our resilience as a return when we are tested with the advent of global pandemic and natural disasters. Our resilience as a community is based around our village community settings. In my 30 years of working in rural and agricultural developments in both Fiji and with the United Nations, I firmly believe any hope of rejuvenating the economy has to start from the village and local community. We desperately need to enhance the governance of our local village institutions so that they are able to actively plan the community development efforts to ensure better social cohesion. Thus, this will be supplemented by identifying livelihood opportunities for people in the villages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers, honourable Members of this Parliament, I thank you. Based on these remarks, I commend the motion to the Parliament. *Vinaka saka vakalevu.*

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now intend to adjourn the Parliament for tea before we resume with the debates.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.04 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.46 p.m.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests and fellow Fijians; it is a great privilege to stand before you today as a Member of the Opposition, representing the voices and concerns of our people. First and foremost, please, allow me to acknowledge and recall our fellow Fijians, joining us today via television and livestream on Parliament website, *bula, Ram Ram, Namaskaram, Salaam 'alaykum*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to each and every one of you who have supported me throughout this Election journey. Your unwavering belief in the vision FijiFirst stood for has been a source of inspiration and motivation, and I am truly humbled by your trust and confidence in me.

Also, I want to extend my gratitude to all my campaign teams, who have worked tirelessly to ensure that the FijiFirst message was heard by as many people as possible. Your dedication, hard work and passion have been invaluable, and we could not have done this without you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the following people and families from Ba:

- Mr. Avesh Chand and family, Mr. Atil Chand and family, Mr. Vishwar Nand and family of Nadrau, Ba and the Nadrau community.
- The late Babu Ram and family from Vatusui, Ba, Mr. Prem Chand and Mr. Singh and the whole community of Vatusui.
- Mr. Uma Nand, Mr. Kunal, Vijendra and Bimal of Naruku and the Naruku community.
- Mr. Suresh Chand, Mr. Ashok and Mr. Rajinesh Chand of Moto and the Moto community.
- Mr. Bale, Mr. Ali and Mr. Azam Khan from Marinitawa and Liwanasasa Settlements, and the whole community of Liwanasasa Settlement and Matanitawa.
- Mr. Rishi Prasad, Mr. Jagdish Chand and Mr. Kishore of Nacaci and the community of Nacaci and Toge.
- The Turaga Na Tui Naloto, the villagers of Toge, Balevuto, Settlement of Vacawai, Mr. Sandeep and his family and Mr. Kishore from the Balevuto community.
- Mr. Tabua, the Turaga Ni Yavusa of Tabataba and Mr. Prem Krishna, villagers of Tabataba, Settlement of Qerelali and the villagers of Rara and Cirisobu.
- Mr. Kuran from Kumkum, Ba and from Chenakuti.
- Mr. Satish, Raju, Amit, Mr Kirtesh, Mr. Rajnesh Dayal, Mr. Sundesran Goundar, Mr. Ranjit Singh, Mr. Anand Sharma, Mr. Manor Nair, Roneel, Praveen, Mr. Hardeo Sharma from Nukuloa, the family of the late Kamlesh Kumar from Nukuloa and Nukuloa Backroad.
- Pillay family from Raviravi and the community of Raviravi.
- Mr. Saten from Vatulaulau, Ba and the community of Vatulaulau and Tarivo and Mr. Binesh Gosai and family from Ba Market, Mr. Ashneel and his family, Sanjay and family from Namosau and Mr. Salim Buksh and Mr. Anand of Field 28.
- The *Turaga ni Yavusa Nasolo* and Mr. Kali from Naitamusu Settlement and the people of Nailaga Village, Nasolo Village and the settlement of Keteni.
- The *Turaga na Tui Ba* for his support and the people of Ba.
- My family, my wife Premila Devi, my daughters Ekta Anjali Pillay, Bimakshli Anjali Pillay and Deepanjali Pillay and son in-law- Kamal Naicker for their unconditional love and support throughout this journey. Your sacrifice and unwavering belief in me and the FijiFirst have been a source of strength and inspiration, and I am forever grateful to have you in my life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Elections are a testament to the strength of our democracy, and I am honoured to have had the opportunity to be a part of this historic moment. Indeed, the Election process is a challenging and often drooling one but is also a testament to the resilience and determination of our people, who are committed to building a better future for ourselves and for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am honoured to be one of the 26 FijiFirst MPs in Parliament. FijiFirst has the biggest number of Members in this Parliament after having won 26 seats out of the 55 seats in the 2022 General Election. FijiFirst received 200,246 votes, which is 42.55 percent of the total votes casted.

I am grateful to have had the chance to meet so many of our fellow Fijians, to hear their stories and to understand their concerns. Their input has been invaluable in shaping our platform, and we will continue to listen to their needs and concerns as we take on the responsibilities of public office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a democratic society, the Opposition plays a crucial role in holding the Government accountable and ensuring that the interest of all citizens are represented in the decisions made by those in power. I am honoured to be part of this vital function and we are committed to using our voice to fight for a better future for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you all know, I come from the sugarcane belt area in Ba. I have lived mostly among the sugarcane farming community, and I know the sweat, struggles and the challenges farmers and their families go through. I am a farmer myself, and thanks to the FijiFirst Leader, honourable Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama for his leadership and vision. He has uplifted the sugar industry with initiatives that farmers benefitted from. There were challenges in the sugar industry, however, the FijiFirst tried to minimise the damage it could have caused.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji sugar industry supports the livelihood of thousands of Fijians - the benefits of cane growing standards beyond the fields and crushing mills. The industry drives rural development such as upgraded rural roads, giving farmers access to agriculture inputs and machinery for their farms, and access to markets, urban centres, schools and health services.

The FijiFirst Government was doing all it can to make sure cane farming provided an adequate living to everyone within the industry. Given the pressure of international prices and the need to make the industry more efficient, the FijiFirst Government allocated public funds to support programmes, aimed at increasing cane production and guaranteed cane prices to grow. Some farmers even diversified into growing other agricultural produce and holding livestock.

However, the impact of climate change and COVID-19 had placed new burdens on the cane industry and the Fijians who relied on it. From 2016 to 2022, Category 5 storms inflicted damages nearly US\$100 million on the industry and damaged some 600,000 tonnes of cane. The pandemic also made it extremely difficult for the industry to hire technical experts from overseas to operate machinery and take on other work in the cane industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the leadership of honourable Bainimarama, we were able to strive for more sustainable and more resilient cane growing, even though the industry confronted new challenges from prolonged ratooning by farming, high soil acidity and poor soil health, hilly topography and waterlogging and seawater intrusion into cane farms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government had adopted new innovations to mechanise the industry as to assist farmers in reducing the cost of production and improving their viability,

including undertaking measures to ensure that all stand-over cane was harvested, transported and proceed at the mills and income was generated for both, the farmers and FSC sugar sales.

The Fiji Sugar Corporation had received new trucks that were distributed to all sectors. This was to ease cane transportation issues. Harvesters were also brought into operation so that cane could be harvested mechanically.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, the industry which is a major source of employment, earn income for many people in Fiji is at question. The new honourable Minister for Sugar, out of the blue, decides to make changes without proper consultation with the farmers and assessment. These changes now affect every employee and family that relies on the sugar industry...

HON. C.J. SINGH.- I do not have to consult with you.

HON. V. PILLAY.- The Minister had gone ahead issuing directives that tractors, harvesters and trucks to be sold off as to save cost. Has it been through his mind how his decision will impact the lives of farmers and families within the sugarcane communities around Fiji? The question to him is. how will the cane be transported back to the mills?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. PILLAY.- Who will harvest the cane? Well, labour today is hard to find, especially in a labour-incentive industry.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- We grow up as farmers.

HON. V. PILLAY.- I am a farmer, honourable Member. Who will plough the land when tractors are being sold off?

Mr. Speaker, the sale of FSC machinery will affect the productivity and the efficiency of the sugar industry. Modern machinery is essential in the sugar production process and selling them can lead to a decrease in the quality of sugar produced. This can result in lower prices for sugar in the international market, affecting the revenue of the sugar industry and the economy as a whole. The sale of these machineries will also affect production in farms that need harvesters to harvest cane and trucks to transport to the mill, causing farmers to lose their source of income and employment.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Aww!

HON. V. PILLAY.- With the selling of the trucks and machinery, farmers will need and will have to pay more. There is no balancing effect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what about their promise on the price of sugar?

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Oh!

HON. V. PILLAY.- To be set at \$110 a tonne

HON. P.K. BALA.- *khalas*....

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, what the FijiFirst Government has done for our sugarcane price was that we assured the farmers that we will give \$85 a tonne, never mind whether the price is \$50 or \$40, farmers get \$85 so that it is what Government was paying for farmers. This

is a guaranteed price which the FijiFirst Government was giving, and that is how it happened.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- They will give \$110.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Next budget, \$150.

(Laughter)

HON. V. PILLAY.- However, for this new Coalition Government we really do not know what trick and lies they have up their sleeve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must remind Members that the FijiFirst Government had pumped in more than \$400 million into the sugar industry in the last 10 years, and that the revenue from sugar sales for that period was \$2 billion. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope the Coalition Government gets to the real people that needs assistance. Rather than having a show around the country to keep them relevant, it is about time they conclude garlanding ceremonies and do the real work.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Aww!

HON. V. PILLAY.- But maybe this is why they are pushing.

HON. S. KIRPAL.- Salusalu Minister.

HON. V. PILLAY.- With those words Sir, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank you and also congratulate you on your appointment. *Vinaka*.

(Acclamation)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians; I thank the honourable Speaker for giving me this opportunity to contribute to the Address by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere.

First, I wish to acknowledge His Excellency the President for his gracious speech addressing some of the most important issues that will be actioned by the Coalition Government. I also thank His Excellency for his motivating address and for setting the course for Coalition Government to set its way.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Address by His Excellency addressed the most relevant issues that will be addressed by the Government of Fiji. Issues such as the importance of the Civil Service and improving its service delivery to the people of Fiji, transparency, accountability of Government to the nation economic growth, collaborative approach between Government, private sector and all stakeholders, rural and maritime development connectivity coordination for disaster preparedness, introduction of Public Works Department (PWD) to focus on infrastructure improvement to meet the demands of modern Fiji with specific focus on rural development, climate change, environment and also related legislative changes. This and more are pertinent issues to address, and the responsibility lies with the Government particularly the Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport.

At this juncture I sincerely thank my predecessors, honourable Jone Usamate for his contributions as Minister in the last government and the update by honourable Vijay Nath former Assistant Minister of Infrastructure. No doubt a lot of work has been done but this is a new

Government, new beginning with new opportunities. No government is perfect and we, as a Government, are here to assess and correct the mistakes and weaknesses of the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in taking up the role of Minister it is a very critical Ministry - Public Works, Meteorological and Transport. The efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery of Civil Servants in the Ministry has always been my emphasis and our Government emphasis.

The Ministry alone has a human resource capacity of more than 600 staff providing the much-needed services in all Divisions around Fiji focussing on infrastructure, water, energy, roads, MET services ensuring our state of preparedness during natural disasters and connecting people and cargo from our main urban centres to the maritime islands. It is a challenge involving Water Authority of Fiji (WAF), Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), Land Transport Authority (LTA) and Maritime Authority of Fiji.

In terms of institutional strengthening and revival, the PWD has already mentioned that it will focus initially on primarily on rural development and connectivity. Each responsibility also includes maintenance and upgrade of rural roads and river crossings where FRA may have current challenges. Mr. Speaker, Sir, apart from this it is also envisaged where envisions that PWD will also be responsible for Rural Water Electrification and Sanitation Services in a complimentary manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, essentially the PWD will be sharing responsibilities with FRA on the maintenance and management of infrastructure particularly the 6,375 kilometres network to ensure resilience roads, bridges and jetties. The Coalition Government has identified that there are roads that have not been maintain well by FRA such as agriculture and forestry access tourism related, rural access roads for social obligations as well as other sector access roads with the total length of 1,300 kilometres located within the two main islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu.

This is one of the reasons we need to reintroduce PWD. The call for re-establishing PWD is also because of lack of FRA presence in the depots where the public already has access to Government Services and the deteriorated conditions on some of these rural roads including the non-FRA roads.

There is an ongoing issue of non-maintenance of rural roads as mentioned by some honourable Members that greatly affects their basic needs to essential services such as health, education and economic opportunity. It will be a phased approach which will be undertaken to ensure smooth transition. The first step is to look at institutional strengthening and resource capability - there is a huge potential for PWD as a complement a competitive service provider including as a leading apprenticeship provider for our youths who are now crying out for opportunities.

This is an exciting prospect which will come in soon. There is also a need to reassess the management of government assets and properties. We have seen the deuterated state of Government properties including hospitals, staff quarters and schools and we will be looking at the management of that in terms of property management with proper asset databases and of course a programme of maintenance and budgeting.

We will also be working in partnership with other ministries, departments and communities, stakeholders to lift the standards on infrastructure as mentioned. Only with uplifting of conditions in the rural and maritime, can we hope to reduce the issues of rural to urban drift stresses on urban infrastructure like electricity, water and housing.

To improve some of our most rural areas, the Ministry has begun piloting a Government community partnership programme to cut four access roads to villages that they have never any road

access. This include Nawaisomo to Nakini, Nawaisomo to Wairuarua and pilot cut of 3.3 kilometres including Dreketi Village, Nakorovou, Tubarua and a pilot cut of 9.2 kilometres including Nakorokoroyawa, Mataiwailevu, Nasava and Nasauvere Villages in the Naitasiri area.

In terms of access to proper water and sanitation facilities, Water Authority will continue to build new schemes and improve existing schemes, programmes such as rainwater harvesting which includes the delivery of water tanks will continue. In addition to that, water carting to rural communities will be improved particularly the monitoring of areas which have experience long periods of water cuts.

In terms of access to energy, the Coalition Government will continue to deploy alternative energy sources including solar, micro-hydro to replace the use of expensive diesel generators, communities and village operators are trained to effectively and sustainably operate and manage these projects. The re-establishment of Public Works Department will improve service delivery through the provision of reliable and sustainable work power supplies including minimum turnaround time for maintenance and repair, especially in renewable energy and we are also currently reviewing the regulatory and institutional frameworks governing independent power providers.

In the first few weeks, land transport accessibility in rural areas have been an issue with bus and carrier services and we have had meetings with the various stakeholders including Fiji Bus Operators Association not only to hear the issues but also discuss how can we provide services to reach areas that currently have no provision of services. The Government has left a legacy of two standards of taxi services in Fiji, and this will be looked into and addressed, so as not to leave a lot of confusion.

In terms of maritime access Sir, we will continue to improve particularly in improving facilities on water vessels. The Ministry currently provides up to 10 uneconomic routes to our maritime islands with about 15 trips provided on a monthly basis. About 13 economical routes have been identified that will require proper scheduling and better services to be provided with the primary focus of efficiency of services. These will be a priority of this Government to ensure accessibility of transport.

In terms of coordination of disaster preparedness, the Ministry has a strong working relationship with the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development. In terms of Natural Disasters, through the Fiji Meteorological and Hydrological Services and it has forecasted that in the 2022-2023 cyclone seasons, we would have at least two tropical cyclone activities in the areas of operation. We would expect above-average rainfall leading to floods which we are now experiencing. February and March are peak cyclone seasons, therefore, it is very important for all of us to remain vigilant and be prepared.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are only six specialised MET centres in the world, and Nadi is one of them. This MET Hydrological events are to be expected in our small island states. In September 2021, the World MET Organisation and the UN office of Disaster Risk Deduction reported that climate change and increasingly extreme weather patterns have cause a surge in natural disasters over the past 50 years, disproportionately impacting poorer countries.

Moving on to climate change, Sir, we cannot work alone in our efforts to mitigate and we will need to work with our neighbouring Pacific Islands and our honourable Prime Minister has led us in that area in terms of regional cooperation and repairing relations. Whether it be at IRENA or the World MET organisation, we must emphasise at the international dialogues that we are a collective voice - not only are we fighting for our existence but also the needs of our member States.

In the shipping sector, Sir, Fiji is committed to reducing Green House Gas Emissions from domestic shipping by 40 percent in 2033 and decarbonisation by 2050. These are very ambitious targets but one that the Coalition must re-see through to 2050 and again, we do acknowledge the role of the past Governments in trying to achieve this goal.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government is closely working with our partners to ensure that Fiji is pushing in the international arena that we are also domestically transitioning to achieve our targets. All of the above are work in progress and we need to continue as we are participating in COP28. In terms of policy and legislation, Sir, we will continue to upgrade, existing plans including national development plan relating to waste water infrastructure and water and align ourselves with the Environmental Management Act 2005 for the protection of Fiji's flora and fauna. Sir, WAF will also increase its wastewater treatment capacity to treat wastewater to compliant levels.

The Ministry has established a joint taskforce with ADB and among key ministries agency to review Fiji's Building Code, the review and encompasses how we load capacity and earthquake resilience to Category 5.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the Energy sector there will be impetus to accelerate our renewable energy target and our transition to low carbon energy. I have mentioned blockages which are currently there and there will need to be consultation with various stakeholders, ministries particularly regarding the regulatory frameworks in place as related into the independent power producers.

Transport, again, is a key driver and we are working in close collaboration with LTA and MSAF in terms of the various provisions in the legislation to be amended. This amendment should not only to assist its customers but also provide flexibility in implementation. Some current regulations and related processes are cumbersome and subject to abuse.

In terms of resilience infrastructure, the new Rewa River Water Supply Projects Scheme which is designed to alleviate the current water problems in the Nausori, Suva to Lami corridor is in positive progress and that is a key infrastructure project as mentioned by honourable Vijay Nath which was initiated under the last Government.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Say the name.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The last Government – the FijiFirst Government.

(Laughter)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, sure, in addition there is also an investment of \$13.8 million towards installation of pipelines from Sawani and the related areas from Viria. We envisage this project to be completed in June-July.

Sir, in terms of transport connectivity, again this is important as I mentioned in terms of the deliveries of LTA, technological enhancement is very important and the upgrading of its IT systems, is an ongoing project and that is currently being reviewed to enhance our customer services. There is a nationwide consultation to seek the views and opinions of customers so that LTA can better its services.

The Ministry is working to discuss the outcomes of national consultation especially in provision of PSV permits. As the outgoing Government knows this is a critical area of continuous problem and complaints from our customers and the processes are cumbersome and we are currently

reviewing those. Definitely, there will be no lottery like the last time that we will need to go through more rational process than a lottery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, MSAF continues to provide regulatory services that also includes training, boat license across the nation and it is an area in which we have seen a lot of engagement with youths. As I have mentioned, the revived PWD does not emphasised on apprenticeship and also with MSAF in terms of boat master licences. There is also high potential in that and there are positive discussions with various investors in terms of investment in those areas.

We will rely on the private sector on much needed services to our maritime islands and we also have our Government fleet, Sir. However, most of them are aged, so there is an assessment for our fleets and assets and there needs to be a programme of asset replacement in terms of our Government Shipping Services, because that is a key area in terms of our maritime connections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to adopt approaches that recognises the unique characteristics our settlements and communities and that is why, we, as a Ministry, are taking a phased-based approach in terms of our Ministry infrastructure reform and not in a rushed way, and we have initiated various plans and initiatives within the Ministry to ensure that is undertaken successfully.

There is also a need for a national infrastructure strategic plan and there is ongoing discussions with our development partners to have that in place, especially the scoping and initial stages. This is currently lacking and we will assist a lot of in terms of future guidelines - whatever comes in, including the budgeting element.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I end, I would like to also mention a few issues which have been raised by the Opposition. Let me just point out those issues. They have raised issues of ethno-nationalism, Christian nationalism and *iTaukei* nationalism.

Sir, I believe that the raising of these issues is an exaggeration of the current situation. The Government has come in with its programme to address a lot of the issues which need to be addressed. A lot of that is to address historical injustices and some of the issues which have not been addressed in the past. I feel that the Oppositions is creating a picture of instability by raising issues that we have raised and terming it as racists and ethno-nationalism, which is totally the opposite.

There have been issues about the 2013 Constitution. The fact of the matter is that the 2013 Constitution was born out of a military *coup* in 2006 and that cannot be denied, and that is an issue that we need to address as a Parliament. If we go back into history which they have done, we did that when we produced the 1997 Constitution through consultations. And we need to do that too with the 2013 Constitution in order to address the situation created by 2006.

I do support, of course, the calls for consensus building between the Opposition and the Government to address that because a lot of the issues in the 2013 Constitution which we are facing today in terms of the removal of the 1997 Constitution are ongoing and we need to address that and not leave it to our children or grandchildren. It is our responsibility to come together to look at it in a manner which is conducive, not only to good governance, but also peace and stability in our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have mentioned nepotism, corruption and victimisation. A due process is in place and there have been complaints about some who have been stopped at the airport. That has been done through clear legal processes through FICAC. There are ongoing investigations, lodged formally in terms of complaints to the police.

Sir, when we raise *iTaukei* issues, let me remind Parliament, that we are not racists, it is just to address pertaining to that community. For example, if we look at it in a rational manner, the Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2019-2020 indicated that 74.8 percent of *iTaukei* make up those in absolute poverty. So, that kind of statistics make us think as leaders on how we address that, and it is not racist. It is just the statistics that we need to raise and address. As I have mentioned in the 2013 Constitution, there are issues within that which have been imposed and that need to be addressed and consented or discussed and consensus reached.

There are also various laws and decrees, and I can give 37 to the Opposition which affect the *iTaukei* but they have not been consented to. Some of them have raised the issue of UNDRIP and ILO169, which does not apply to Fiji. My point is that, it applies, and they are saying the reason is that because the indigenous are the majority in Fiji. I believe that reasoning is weak because in here, the State has imposed this without the consent of the indigenous. So, those provisions do apply because the State has imposed that.

Those are some of the issues, Sir, that I would like to raise because I am very concerned about the narrative we are hearing that whatever we raise in terms of indigenous issues is termed as racist or ethno-nationalistic and it is discriminatory. It is not, it is just raising issues which have not been consented to or to address historical injustices.

With those, Sir, I commend His Excellency the President's Address to Parliament. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

(Acclamation)

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU.- The famous actor, Wendell Pierce, said, and I quote:

“The role of culture is that it's the form through which we, as a society, reflect on who we are, where we've been and where we hope to be.”

The Book of Acts Chapter 10: 34-35, Peter said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right, is acceptable to him.”

In Hinduism, the philosophy revolves around love and respect for others. The Quran says, “O mankind, indeed we have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament; *miau sa bula re beha.* It is, indeed, an honour and the privilege to be part of this august Parliament of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to congratulate you on your appointment and I wish you the very best of health for this journey. *Me boi yawa iho a Tagimaucia ni Uluiqalau.* I also offer my congratulations to the Deputy Speaker, honorable Lenora Qereqeretabua.

The past few weeks have been both, challenging and unforgettable. I must thank His Excellency the President for his words of wisdom during the Opening Session of Parliament. His Excellency urged us to boldly face the ongoing and emerging challenges and to be resilient and have the resolve of our people at all times. As a representative of the people, I will ensure that I will do my very best for the betterment of the people.

Mr. Speaker Sir, as is tradition for maiden speeches, we do thank those who have made impact in our lives, our families, education, workplace and especially, in the service of the citizens of this beautiful country.

I am from the village of Dama, Tikina o Dama, yasana vakaturaga o Bua, commonly referred to as Bua. This afternoon, I salute my parents, my father the late Ratu Nemani Kasala, and beloved mother, Vitalina Vuinadi from the village of Driti, Dama in Bua.

I acknowledge the support of my families within the Valelevu o Cakaunitabua, Uluilagi, Navatuvatu families in Dama, Bua. At this point, I pay homage to my kinship, the former members of this Parliament who had inspired me to follow in their footsteps, the -

- Late Senator Ratu Kavaia Tagivetaua;
- Late Senator Radovibua Rabatinamo;
- Late Senator Ratu Kinijioji Ramasima;
- former Minister for Education and Senator, Ratu Filimoni Ralogaivau; and
- former Member of the Opposition, the late Ratu Viliame Tagivetaua.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge the Turaga Bale na Tui Bua - Ro Makutu Nagagavoka and the *Vanua o Cakaunitabua*, thank you for having the confidence in me to stand and be successful in the December Elections. *Vinaka vakalevu omiau vei'okoni re! Me qaqa io a vanua vaka 'uraga ko Cakauni'abua.*

To my beloved wife, Litia, you have been a pillar of strength. Thank you for your unwavering love and support and for always be by my side.

I acknowledge and give my gratitude to my cousin – Ratu Qativi, the Managing Director for Kookai & Lyndhurst Group of Companies, the CEO, Mr. Rokoseru Nabalarua, and the Executive Management and staff of Kookai & Lyndhurst Group of Companies. *Vinaka vakalevu and dhanyaavad.*

Twenty years of my working life was spent as a soldier with the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF). Serious character building happened there, so I am honoured that the three former Commanders are here - the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of Opposition and honourable Viliame Naupoto. I would also like to mention honourable Iowane Naivalurua, the Land Force Commander during my time at the Queen Elizabeth Barracks (QEB). Also, honourable Ifereimi Vasu was the Officer Commanding in Engineer Regiment and honourable Pio Tikoduadua, honourable Naisa Tuinaceva, honourable Sakeasi Ditoka, honourable Semi Koroilavesau and honourable Inia Seruiratu, who I have served with in RAMSI Mission in Honiara in the Solomon Islands in 2003.

It would be remiss of me not to mention my heartfelt gratitude to some people who made this journey possible - Ratu Josaia Tuinaosara, Timoci Wainiqolo, Mr. Seci Loaloa, Meli Naumea, Atonio Colanima and not forgetting all polling agents in Bua and Suva, including those I have not mentioned here. I give my big *vinaka vakalevu* to you all.

I thank the people of Dama, Bua, and all the related *vanua* including my families of Kabariki, Nabukelevu, Kadavu, for their support.

On the same, *shukran* to Mohammed Taiyab and *dhanyaavad* to Mr. Raman Lal, Principal of Bua College, for their thoughtful gesture during my campaign. May God Bless You and your families.

To the 3,061 good citizens who voted for me, I am standing here because you believed in me, thank you.

Mr. Speaker Sir, culture is the lifeline of a community. It provides us with the core values that help steer our daily lives both, as a person and more importantly as a society.

Fiji is rich in cultural diversity which was build up through the period of our history, making us uniquely Fijian - strength in diversity as they say. Promoting culture and valuing diversity for Fiji is important. It goes without saying that culture is the ultimate renewable resource of humankind and societies.

As such value in diversity and promoting cultures and assets for society is important. For more than a decade, this has been done from different umbrella of Government. Now, for the lapse of 16 years, the culture family is whole again under the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts portfolio now includes the Department of Culture, Heritage and Arts, the Fiji Arts Council, the Fiji Museum and the National Trust of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, protection and promotion of culture is only possible through legislation, policy and framework. Being party to the United General Assembly, Fiji has ratified the 2003 UNESCO Convention Intangible Culture Heritage and the 1972 World Heritage Convention. Apart from this, the culture sector is also governed by the National Trust of Fiji (Amendment) Act 1998, National Heritage Strategy 1996, Fiji Museum (Amendment) Act 1994, Preservation of Object and Archaeological and Palaeontological Act 1940.

Due to the evolving nature of culture, the team is working towards finally submitting to Cabinet the Traditional Knowledge and Expression of Culture Bill; a legislation and will safeguard the intellectual property of traditional communities. Fiji Heritage Bill demarcates to process for nomination of heritage sites consideration at national level to comply with the World Heritage Convention. The National Culture Policy Action Plan to regulate, protect, encourage and financially or otherwise support activities related to culture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, culture is no longer seen as a barrier to development. Today, it is widely viewed as a cross cutting pillar of sustainable development. It is central and integral of social cohesion, economic development and environment protection but most importantly develop a resilient community. A cultural audit has been done to the 14 provinces including Rotuma, Rabi and Kioa. Verification of collected data has been done and this vital information will be issued for the betterment of decision making and service delivery to our people.

The 12th World Hindi Conference which is currently underway in Nadi is a testament of our diversity. The weeklong event is in collaboration with the Government of India on the theme "Hindi Traditional Knowledge to Artificial Knowledge". There will be upcoming programs to uplift culture and our vehicle for national identity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, culture is also a vehicle for civic pride, some well-known areas come to mind and these include:

- Waisali Forest Reserve in Savusavu;
- Yaduataba Crested Iguana Sanctuary, Bua;
- Nakanacagi Bat Sanctuary, Dreketi, Macuata; and
- Sigatoka Sandunes.

These are examples and definitely, not an exhaustive list.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Parliament would agree with me that culture is also a vehicle for change. The Ministry will ensure cultural awareness activities in schools, youth groups, villages and communities to strengthen identity development, spiritual, physical, intellectual and emotional condition of our young generation. The multi-cultural centre in Labasa, Ba and Nausori have produced a lot of success stories in skilled musicians, dolak, harmonium, tabla, guitar and keyboard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also mention the important role played by the Viti Association as Visual Artists, the Fiji Islands Dance Association and other cultural association. The cultural industry is an untapped potential for years, the Government is aware of this fact. However, more work needs to be done. Of course, some targets have to be achieved. For this, plans and strategies are currently being developed. As an Assistant Minister for the cultural sector, it has been assigned under my office and together with the able staff, we will do our utmost best to have the plan realised.

Honourable Members, we have a unique opportunity in the next four years as a Member of this august Parliament to lead by example and be truly great, the visionary leaders to our people and our nation. Let us unleash the treasure trove in Fiji's cultural heritage. I ask you all to rise to this challenge with me and make Fiji truly the paradise it can be.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for your patience and I support and commend the Address by His Excellency, the President of Fiji. May God bless Fiji and her beautiful people, thank you, *Dhanyabad, Sa re beha vakalevu.*

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before I offer the floor to Honourable Rinesh Sharma there are three more speakers that we have listed and are still remaining. If it goes to 6 p.m. and I think it is best that we adjourn for dinner, dinner will be provided and before we resume again. So that is the only change that we have.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and my fellow Fijians. *Ni sa bula, Namaste, Salaam 'alaykum* and a very good evening to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly I would like to congratulate you on your appointment as the Speaker and also congratulate the Deputy Speaker for her appointment as well. To begin with, I would like to journey of how from my childhood, to how I overcome multiple challenges, to get into this very pristine and prestigious Parliament at the national level, to be a national leader at this very age.

I am 29 years of age. I was born and brought up in Lautoka City. Mr Speaker Sir, I come from a simple small family of four where my parents worked their normal eight to five job. I was raised by such parents who had Fiji at heart. My parents had instilled in me a strong sense of fairness, love for people, morals and virtues since childhood. Childhood was going well for us until life took a turn and our family lost everything when I was in Class 5.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when you realise that your parents' monthly income is less than the monthly expenses, that little boy became an adult. At a very early age Mr. Speaker, Sir, I realised the challenges that was ahead of me, and we needed to overcome as a family. We did not have much then but all we had was each other, and indeed family is the biggest pillar of strength - family is everything.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I finished my primary education at Lautoka Chinese School, secondary education at Natabua High and after high school I was not fortunate to get into university rather I did

door to door sales, I worked at a carwash company, I painted houses, I used to be a Bartender at Port Marina and I worked eight months at McDonalds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, I reflect back on those days of rejection, hardships and struggles and pain and I smile. Back then it was part of life, and it was about survival. Right after that I got a scholarship to study in India through the Indian High Commission. I am a software engineer by Degree and I specialise in automation. Automation is the basics of software, electronic and electrical engineering, and in particular, I specialise in climate control farming systems and aquaculture systems. I believe, when I was in India, I saw Fiji as a land of opportunity, but today it is not just a land of opportunity, it is an ocean of opportunity. The other very reason I wanted to return to Fiji is where home is where the heart is and heart is where my mum and dad are and I wanted to spend all these years and their face of life with them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had the vision to return to Fiji and contribute to our agriculture and fisheries sector to build more climate resilient and sustainable systems to create value added food and supply chains, promote food security and work towards carbon sequestration projects with a goal to build more resilient and robust ecosystems, in particular, our food system for the Fijians, by the Fijians. As a youth of this country, I was well aware of the resources available and the skills our people have. This is the vision I returned with in 2018.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a farmer and entrepreneur, I realised that we can have the best technology, yet the real issue is that Fiji needs more farmers in the process of winning awards and accolades. I shared my success, I empowered and engaged with various communities, children and the special need with the ideology of leaving no Fijian behind. In the pursuit to find profits as an entrepreneur, I found a purpose, the purpose was to impact as many lives as possible. As a farmer and entrepreneur, I have proudly represented my nation on various Regional and international platforms and I have realised that if I could do this little bit on my own, I can only imagine what I can achieve at a national level with a national team.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I manifested this in 2018, with sheer hard work and good intentions is the very reason I am standing here before you deliver the speech. That is the power of manifestations and hard work and truly when you believe in God, your visions become a reality. A message to all the farmers of Fiji, farming is a job of prestige honour and dignity. From cultivating land to cultivating hope of leadership through modern agriculture, it has been a roller coaster of a journey from the farms of Fiji to the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, still being in my twenties. I deeply humbled with this new responsibility. In this journey, I have learnt that our success is shaped from our challenges and our failing points are our learning curves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I came into this with no campaign experience and no connections. I stood in line and I applied because I wanted to do something for my country, and I feel very humbled to be here. I have looked up to Parliament sessions and to all the leaders, and I have taken as much inspirations as possible. I would like to thank God, my parents, friends and families in Fiji, in the Region and globally.

I would like to thank our Leader, honourable Bainimarama, our General Secretary, Mr. Sayed-Khaiyum for believing in me and trusting me with the whole process. I would like to thank the entire FijiFirst family and most importantly, my voters. If it had not been for you, I would not have been here. I would like to congratulate my colleagues on this side of Parliament as we represent the single largest Party, and my sincere and profound gratitude to every Fijian for their unwavering support for FijiFirst.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe that the outcome of any election is not about a Party winning, I

believe that the outcome of any election should be about the people of this country winning. If we want to build the economy, we must inbuild and invest in our people and the economy will build itself. Election is not a spectator sport, rather it is a participatory event and I urge all Fijians who did not vote, please, do vote in the next election because that is your right.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government, at the end of the day, should be about bringing changes of growth, prosperity and peace, and this is the way the people of a country will win. I stood for election as a FijiFirst candidate to offer genuine, community-phasing and cohesive way of contributing to the betterment and well-being for my Fijian people. I am a software engineer entrepreneur, a farmer and today, a Member of Parliament or rather like how I say it, I am a public servant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will strongly and faithfully expand my efforts and energy that is needed to protect and enhance, to engage and collaborate, and to negotiate outcomes that will build more cohesive, prosperous and an empowered Fiji. Sir, that is my commitment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to sincerely congratulate our new Prime Minister, new Ministers and Assistant Ministers on their new appointments of roles of leadership and responsibilities to take us Fijians forward. A lot has been said during the campaigns, a lot of promises were made and, yes, if these promises are fulfilled it is for the betterment of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today we witnessed a very big Government of 29 Ministers and three Deputy Prime Ministers, and the number of portfolios held by some of the Ministers. This is, indeed, not just about track records, this is a new global record for such a big government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen the continuous breach of policies and procedures as the Coalition Government has been successful with advertising Board positions yet had appointed members before the deadline. It is evident.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what made me happy yesterday was that when honourable Gavoka praised Fiji Airways, he had failed to show any appreciation for the FijiFirst Government that took the strategic decisions and policies, even in times of COVID-19 that the resilient leadership shown by FijiFirst to keep the airline afloat.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe as a young leader that the art of appreciation goes a long way. If we fail to appreciate the small things in life, how will we be blessed with the bigger ones?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that brings my attention to the honourable Minister of Finance. Honourable Professor Prasad, Sir, people are waiting to hear from you as to when the minimum wage will be \$5?

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Aww!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Yet, we hear in the news that minimum wage is \$4 and that it will be reviewed.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That was promised in 2018.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Oh!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also awaiting when social welfare assistance will be increased from \$100 to \$200. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been getting messages of when the prices of lamb chops will be reduced.

(Laughter)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish I had the number for the honourable Minister of Finance so that I can pass it on to them and they can talk directly.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I know who is writing your speech.

(Laughter)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I am glad you know.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we witnessed a big Government, yet a budget is necessary. With today's delivery speech by honourable Professor Prasad, I was expecting to hear something about the budget, but no.

Obviously, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last eight years, he has not provided a single alternative budget, so I think it is going to take a while.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We know who is writing your speech. We know it, boy!

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Tell us about the minimum wage.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Honourable Members, no running commentary, please.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, you and I, in fact, everyone would agree that great things take time, but the FBC logo did not.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another pressing matter is the future of this country. The youth are the future of this nation. My selection in the Election as a Member of Parliament is a clear message to the people that the young people of this country have the abilities, capabilities and potential to dream and make those dreams a reality. You do not need to migrate abroad to make your dreams come to reality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a message to the young people of this country, again, Fiji is not just a land of opportunities, but it is an ocean of opportunities. You are never too small or young to make a difference. In fact, we mature and attain wisdom not by age but by experiences of life.

The youth of this nation are the future. They are the ones who will be taking over jobs and businesses in the near future, thus it is imperative to have a well-educated generation of young people. Young people need to be empowered, educated about their rights and responsibilities and given opportunities for leadership roles in order to make an impact on society at large. Some examples of

youth leadership include youth entrepreneurs, activists, youth influences and youth change makers. In particular, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this side of Parliament has two young selected candidates and elected Members of Parliament and this is a beginning of a new era. This is evident, Sir, that young people are not kept away from this Chambers and they have a role to play at a national level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to enlighten how this Coalition Government is empowering and supporting the youth of this country. When it comes to TELS and Toppers Scheme, there is a huge amount of uncertainty, nor directives and confusions from the students. The students are asking me because I do not have the number for our honourable Minister of Finance or the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs or the honourable Minister for Education, so they can directly speak to them. The TELS students are confused, worried and frustrated if their TELS would continue. The student loans would be forgiven or not is a question they ask.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another pressing matter is about the job opportunities for those who have graduated as retirement age has gone out to 60 as this is a clear indication by the Coalition Government that they do not believe in the capabilities and potential of the young people who have graduated to enter the workforce. Where is the support for the students to study? Where is the support and job creation for the young people to enter the employment sector?

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Ask honourable Bala.

Hon. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is because of the votes of these students that they promised and the 2013 Constitution is that, why is this Government today?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, why I stand with FijiFirst is because one of the most profound reasons and that reason is equality. My leader, honourable Bainimarama, the most beautiful thing he ever said during a campaign which I witnessed was, you all are Fijians. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when there is no equality that is the beginning of racial division and segregation. Their speeches talk about unity and inclusion, but their actions are otherwise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, where there is no equality, there is no democracy, there is no freedom, there is no acceptance, there is no sense of belonging, there is no confidence within the people. To my understanding, we altogether make up the economy of this country, yet if you want the economy to improve people need to feel accepted. They need to feel confident, only then people will perform at their best.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe the leadership is not about being the best, but it is about bringing out the best in your people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the people on social media, we as citizens of this nation have a responsibility of what we like, comment and share. Hatred, negativity, threats and abuse will do us no good at an individual and national level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude I have a message for the younger generations of this nation. You are the result of your choices you make. Your challenges and failures will shape your success and, yes, you are all leaders in your domains.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, we have a generation who is multi-talented and who are multi-tasking on a daily basis. A message to them is, if I can make something out of life from cultivating land, I can only imagine what this young generation will do and the heights they will reach and the opportunities they will unlock for the betterment of this nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I envision to see more youth participate in elections and actually be Members of Parliament. After my teenage days, all I wanted to do was to be a great son to my parents, that is all. But this journey has led on where now, this son commits to serve his motherland, a place I call home. This is my home, the paradise of Fiji Islands and I am a very proud Fijian.

Once again, I congratulate all Members of Parliament. On our shoulders rest the hope and well-being of our nation, and to the young people of this nation, we are the future and together, we can take this country forward. God bless us all and God bless our Fiji.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament for dinner. But before doing so, just a bit more of housekeeping. When we resume at 7.00 p.m., honourable Penioni Ravunawa will start off the batting, followed by honourable Pio Tikoduadua and then rounded off by honourable Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure.

Honourable Members, we may now adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 5.57 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 7.05 p.m.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Thank you and good evening Mr. Speaker, Sir. It has indeed been a long day for you and for the Members of Parliament. Mr. Speaker, Sir, to God alone be the glory, the honour and praises for the great things he has done and for the many more amazing things he will continue to do in our lives. I address this Parliament with gratitude for what has come as a sense of duty, for what we must do in responding to the motion before Parliament. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I would like to join my fellow Members in Parliament to extend my warmest congratulation to you, Sir, as the new elected Speaker in this august Parliament and the same sentiment to the Madam Deputy Speaker. The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Cabinet. Mr. Speaker, Sir, please allow me to acknowledge and greet all our people, our friends joining us this afternoon in the gallery and also our friends joining us this evening via television, livestreaming on the Parliament website and *Facebook* page or the *Walesi* apps or radio, it is indeed a privilege and a great pleasure for me to take this time to say *bula vinaka* to every one of you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this time to thank His Excellency the President for his gracious speech on the 3rd February, 2023 while opening this year's Parliament. Before I do that let me pay my sincere gratitude and respect to those individuals that took time to exercise their constitutional right during the 2022 General Election. I thank all the registered voters especially those they have placed their trust in FijiFirst and in return we owe their best effort and their selfless judgement.

I personally thank the Vanua o Naduku vua na Gone Turaga, Na Tui Naduku, Naceruku vua na Gone Turaga Na Turaga Dreketi, Vanua Na Veirourou vua na Gone Turaga na Tui Vuci, Nacokoni na Turaga na Roko Tunimataidreketi kei na Gone Marama Bale Na Roko Tui Matai, Vanua na Vatulevu, Turaga Na Vunivalu for your support. To the Party Leader, honourable Bainimarama, the General Secretary and management thank you for placing your trust in me. To my late parents, I pay tribute for their upbringing, nurturing and for showing me what it is like to live a life of service. To my Campaign Team, the Team Leader - Mr. Felix Colatanavanua, his wife Alanieta Colatanavanua, *vugona* Lorima Naigunugunu, Joe, *naita* Atunaisa of Navutulevu, my elder brother Eroni Raseru (Tamai Mili), cousins Neumi (Tamai Lusiana,) Joeli Kavilo (Tamai Sereima), also those who supported me from Vagadra (Talatala Qase Apimeleki Nasiga and Aminisitai Tolevu) in Nawaicoba (Talatala Qase Emitai Lotawa and Talatala Joe, Navua (Talatala Qase Temo Valentine *kei na nomuni vuvale*).

To the FijiFirst volunteers who bled blue during our campaign trail, thank you so much for the dedication, sacrifice and support. To those who voted 404 - you are my party, my supporter, my friend and today, you are my family. I would not be here without you. I hope to properly thank you in person in a not too distant future. To those great teachers who taught me at Burebasaga District School, Vunimono High School, Pundit Shreedhar Maharaj College, thank you for providing me guidance in my primary and secondary educational journey before joining the Fiji School of Medicine, University of the South Pacific and University of Fiji respectively for my academic achievement and advancement.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I pay tribute to the late Mr. Sakiusa Rabuka and Mr. Jioji Kotabalavu for their impartation of wisdom and inspiration during my Postgraduate studies. My sincere gratitude to the late reverend Doctor Poate Uculoa Mata, my spiritual dad, the founder and past President of the Apostles Fellowship International (AFI). You took me in as a kid and turned me into a leader to become his predecessor in the AFI movement today. To the entire AFI family both local and abroad, the National Advisory Board, thank you most sincerely for your prayers, for laying hands on me and for your continuous support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must also thank my team at the Daily Care Dental Clinic, Dr. Maher Angus, Taraivina Marama, Ceva Bulabalavu, and Mohit Mani - your continued support before, during and post-election of 2022 - thank you most sincerely for continuing our service to our patients. To my wife, Makereta Sotutu over 25 years, I have never met anyone so captivating, thank you for being my best partner in life and in my every step up to this point - I love you. To our children, Akuila, Adi Mere and Usaia, thank you for bearing with me. The title I cherish most is that I am your dad - the greatest joy and blessing is knowing that you love me more.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, both my parents have worked hard, dad had his own small fishing business and was also repairing engines without any formal qualification or education, and also a subsistence farmer. My mum was the best housewife, who loved me so dearly as her youngest on our family of five siblings. My parents encouraged us to work hard and serve people with dignity and humility. Over two thirds of elected Members of this Parliament have already spoken, I believe by now the message is very clear and is honing home. I have taken some time since the formation of the grand Coalition Government and reflect on their actions lately, and against His Excellency the President's Speech.

I would like to take this time granted to me to highlight a few points. His Excellency the President, while acknowledging the contribution and achievement of the FijiFirst Government in steering the nation in the past 16 years, was to me, incorrect. Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the record, FijiFirst only served eight years, completing two terms in the Fijian Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President in his opening remarks, expresses the announcement of policies, intentions and some of the proposed legislations of the Coalition Government. My advice to the Coalition Government is not to change what is working well - if it is not broken, do not fix it. Through one vote by the king maker, a new grand Coalition Government has been formed, and I wish you the very best. In this term of Parliament, I had to remind myself that every single Member of this Parliament is the elected representative of the people of Fiji, and I am blessed to be one of the 55, although coming in late, to be given this parliamentary privilege.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent general election has seen a great shift in how information is shared on social media heavily influences the votes. The power of social media has become the primary source for information in this day and age for almost everything. I was saddened to see large amounts of misinformation been posted and shared on various social media platforms and how even the truth was grossly warped to suit the desired outcome.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are now the honourable Member of this Parliament. I urge all Members from both sides of the Parliament, let us work together to be responsible in our engagement in all social media platforms. Let us leave a legacy that we can do this together. The cyber space Mr. Speaker, Sir, if not handled responsibly will definitely invade our privacy, divide our families and destroy our sovereignty as a nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a Member of the Opposition we will keep the Coalition Government in check at all times. As you will note Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are continually reminding them on their 100 days promises to the people of Fiji. I would see myself coming from a diverse background. I am a proud Christian as many of my colleagues in the august Parliament. I am the leader now in my church, holding the position the President of the Apostles Fellowship International taking over the mantle from its founder the late Reverend Dr. Poate Uculoa Mata. My faith is the cornerstone of my life and my family.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my life experience has moulded me to be a person I am today. I have waded across rivers, walked barefoot, worked little jobs here and there to help pay my education. Most of

the children today do not know these difficulties for that I am grateful to the vision of the FijiFirst Government by creating and establishing Free Education Grant for our children from Early Childhood Education right up to Year 13. I am grateful that this will not be taken away as alluded to by the honourable Radrodro the Minister for Education. And on that Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can all agree in the Parliament that education is a need and education is the key and that it is the very foundational fabric of a knowledge based Fiji. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been asked many times about my views in Fiji if Fiji were to be declared a Christian State.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I feel that one of our great strengths is the fact that we are multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation whose diversity is well known for. We have the making of a great and powerful little nation in the blue continent because of our diversity. To understand my view we must read, learn and understand the great commandment from Mathew 22:36-40 (NIV translation) and I quote: "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus replied love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and with all your mind". This is the first and the greatest commandment and the second is like it, "love your neighbour as yourself". It goes on to say that, "...all the laws and the prophet hand on these two commandments."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this moment to focus on something that is deeply pressing on my heart and also advocated by the Coalition Government and that is love. The great commandments speak of love. People outside this august Parliament need to be loved and we, as Cabinet, must have genuine love for all Fijians who brought us here.

This is one of the key elements of His Excellency's Speech. What this past few weeks has shown me is that Fiji has lost its way. Love is no longer the core value of our nation anymore. Hate has taken over and we need to work together to restore this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Pope John Paul II during his visit to Fiji in 1986 said, and I quote: "Fiji the Way the World Should Be". There was once a time, Sir, that Fiji was famous for our love and hospitality, but it has been slowly eroding away. It is the humble plea of the Opposition to remind the other side of Parliament to uphold the 2013 Constitution as it embraces love, multiracial harmony, respect for each other's culture, language and tradition. I see how much hate has been thrown around, Mr. Speaker, in the last few weeks. It is beyond me. Families are split. They will not talk to each other. Friends are now strangers, and this is not the Fiji I know and love.

We hear the talk of turning Fiji into a Christian State but if the core value of Christianity which is love is not there, why must we force it to people when we ourselves cannot love and care for one another. If love is the great commandment, then logically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, hate would be the ultimate sin. I, myself, am humbled of the fact that anyone can practice their faith the way they choose, but we must remember that our faith in God is between us as an individual and not as a group.

It all starts inside each and every one of us. God wants that personal relationship. He wants the love that he has so freely given to each one of us so that everyone of us can share. Mr. Speaker, we must never forget that God is love.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is our job as elected Members of this august Parliament to think of every Fijian and do right to all of them. In the words of Robert Heinlein, I quote:

"It is a bad sign when people of a country stop identifying themselves with the country and start identifying with a group, a racial group or a religion or a language. Anything, as long as it is not the whole population."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to be united. We need to pray and work together, removing all hatred. The wellbeing of our beloved nation is relying on the 55 Members of this august Parliament to do the right thing - refrain from the hurt that is trying to rule our heart.

My hope and prayer, Mr. Speaker, is that we can put aside our ideological differences and think of our beloved nation first and foremost. We are all Fijians. We must rebuke all forms of divisional politics.

Mr. Speaker, if I may, before I establish myself in the private sector I have toiled in the public health sector for almost 30 years. I also taught in the Dental School and serve as a Board member in the Fiji Medical and Dental Council. I was one of the many who worked tirelessly to bring the COVID-19 pandemic under control.

I agree that there are many areas in the Public Health Sector that needed improvement. It does not mean that FijiFirst was turning a blind eye to have an efficient and effective delivery of healthcare services. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji already has an advanced, equitable and accessible healthcare system put in place by FijiFirst for all Fijians. The general public can access services from General Practitioners (GPs), Dental Practitioners (DPs), Pharmacists, laboratory services, x-ray, even get a heart surgery done locally now for free under the Government Medical and Dental Health Care Scheme. This is amazing and must be commendable, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as one of the many Ministry of Health staff that worked long hours to help contain COVID-19, I would like to share my personal experience. I saw how thousands of families lost their loved ones. Almost every one of them could not pay their proper respect to their loved ones. Forty-foot containers and trucks were converted to temporary morgue to accommodate the spillover from our normal mortuary.

Most healthcare workers, the Military and the Police stayed away from their families for over eight to ten weeks in order to maintain their bubbles. Thanks to FijiFirst for their decisive leadership and thanks to FijiFirst for the effective mitigation strategies, including the “No Jab No Job” policy needed at that time, and that saw us out of the woods while strong nations, like Australia and New Zealand are still searching for the right footing in managing that pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Dr. Lalabalavu has highlighted some of the reviews of the legislations under the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. *Vuniwai* (Doctor), may I add to the list the following:

- The Review of the Medical and Dental Act 2011;
- Confirmation of the Appointment of the National Advisor Oral Health;
- Establish the Remuneration for those dentists that have already completed their speciality training but they are still put together as normal dentists;
- General review of the Dental Public Health Policy and Guideline;
- Proper implementation of the M-supply programme that you have mentioned in your Maiden Speech. I wish to seek that this is properly resourced, establishment and remuneration.
- Accredited training for our Biomedical Technicians and Engineers. This will decrease the breakdown in all our sophisticated medical and dental equipment that are installed in our hospitals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I end my speech today with a simple plea, may the love of God fill all our hearts and may the action of Government be a reflection of God's love and his genuine love for all Fijians. *Vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker, Sir. May God bless Fiji.

(Acclamation)

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to join my colleagues on this side of the People's Coalition Government to wholeheartedly support the Motion before Parliament as presented by the honourable Prime Minister and offer my thanks and respectful commendation to His Excellency the President's most gracious Address.

I also want to congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, on your ascend to steer ship of this august Parliament and the honourable Qereqeretabua as Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's wise counsel to us all, urging us to be united as one nation and strengthen our resolve to work together to meet our collective challenges and to continue to look after each other, especially those less fortunate and the most vulnerable members of our society, must be the guiding principles for which we dispense our role in this august Parliament for our people who have sent us here and who pay us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, permit me at this juncture to acknowledge and honour God and some key individuals who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to send me to Parliament to serve the nation. To all my supporters and voters who stood by me here in Fiji and abroad, *vinaka vakalevu saka*.

I acknowledge especially my voters in Tailevu North from the different *tikina* of Tailevu North and the different villages.

I greatly acknowledge my loving wife, Sereana, and my children who bore the brunt of the long campaign nights and gruelling schedules. Thank you for patiently being the base for me at home.

I also remember with deep fondness and love my late mother, who passed away shortly after my maiden speech in Parliament in 2014. She was a single mother, Mr. Speaker, who fought hard to give me the best and is the strongest woman next to my wife, and I.

I also acknowledge my late grandfather, the late Mosese Radokana, who was the only father figure I knew and the mentor on how to behave like gentleman with humility.

I offer my sincere gratitude and thanks to my National Federation Party colleagues and its machinery, and its continuous support, especially to Mr. Kamal Iyer, who is my constant reminder, second to my wife, about my medication.

I am very indebted to my tireless campaign team and I would like to thank them most sincerely – *Momo Tamai Kini* from Dakuivuna, Sitino, *Tamai Kele* and Sili from Delasui, and all my hardworking polling agents from Tailevu North and throughout Fiji. Also, I want to acknowledge NFP team in Sydney and Canberra, especially to Mr. Herbert Pickering, Sunil, George, James Mataitini and the Fijian community in Sydney for their support.

I want to acknowledge and pay my respects to my Nasinu and Nausori Campaign Team – John Lutua and *Naita Karalo* from Nausori and the Tupua family of Wainibuku.

I send my heartfelt congratulation, Sir, to my mentor, Father Alan Finn, Congregation of the Mission of the Saint Vincent De Paul Society from Natovi, who turns 90 years old in a few weeks from today.

I am eternally grateful to the Society of the Marist Brothers in Oceania, who were at St. Johns

College in Cawaci for over 200 years, building the Catholic character in education for the people of Fiji. They, Mr. Speaker, have departed Cawaci for good during the last few weeks.

Mr. Speaker, I am a proud product of Cawaci, standing tall like Mount Tomuna, towering to blue, with others who have passed through its gates over the centuries, and I will be forever indebted to them.

I also pay humble tribute to Father Kevin Barr for his work for liberty and sheer pain and who was assisting in the sharing of his deepest thoughts on these issues with me.

I also want to acknowledge my prayer power base, Mr. Speaker, and they are the *Bubu* or the retired Nuns of the Sisters of our Lady of Nazareth who are in Wailoku. I would like to thank them for their prayers and this has kept me going.

Mr. Speaker, collaboration with the people of Fiji is essential to the People's Coalition Government's philosophy of national leadership. For 16 years, the people have been told what to do, how to think and how to act by FijiFirst. We are different, we lead not simply in coalition with each other, but in coalition with the people of Fiji the most.

Already, we are seeing an unprecedented willingness of people to speak out and highlight the menacing abuse of office that was right under the leadership of Frank Bainimarama and Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum.

I often wonder when we talk amongst ourselves as Government Members about what we are slowly discovering, how the Opposition side, where their hidden minions are likely pulling strings right now from their Chambers upstairs, sleep at night. The slow grind towards rolling back all their dark and nefarious tentacles of money flows, insulated by laws is simply staggering, Mr. Speaker. And we are ever thankful to the voters and taxpayers for their patience, as we do what we need to do lawfully.

If there is one key difference in leadership styles, it is the Prime Minister who ensures that we actually talk to each other in Cabinet and take decisions together, unlike the former Cabinet and the former Government. Our honourable Prime Minister then faces up to the public to tell them that Cabinet has decided in their name and freely fills question from the media, unlike the grumpy one way *khaas khabre* communication that we all know of.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please allow me to digress for a moment. On Monday, we endured listening to the callosal disaster, that was the Leader of the Opposition's speech. As I told the media, this is a Member of Parliament who still cannot stomach that he lost the election, and that the people have rejected him and his Party. Their creative scheme about election numbers does not change the fact of the matter, that his Party only received 42.5 percent of the total vote ...

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Point of order. The matter being referred to by the honourable Minister is before the Privileges Committee. I think he ought not to be speaking about it. Just that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, please continue with your speech but can we confine it to the very core of what you want to deliver, instead of going back ...

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, talking about the decline of their popularity, there was a woeful decline in their popularity rates which plummeted from the 59.2 percent of the total votes cast in the 2014 General Elections. So, no matter how hard he cries and despite his side

telling us about the personal votes he got, what does not change is that, he sits that side of Parliament and we sit on this side of Parliament. This is after all the electoral system of their own making that the Leader of the Opposition and his side ...legalised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now turn to update this august Parliament of my policy intentions as the Minister for Home Affairs. The fundamental focus of the Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration is to keep the people of Fiji safe. Our national border, as we know, witnessed many cross-border movements of illicit products, of humans, of investments, of trade and cargo, of fisheries and marine species, of natural disasters, of remote sensing and satellite capability, of hard drugs, of money flows, of global pandemic diseases, of proprietary scientific exploration intelligence and of carbon emissions among many others. Fiji's line border protection through Immigration must be hardened up dynamically to pre-empt and withstand all these daily direct security risks and challenges to the people of Fiji, which are then absorbed by our national security and law and order arms, if not guarded against.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is the complementarity and the synergy of immigration with the national security and law and order arms of Government, that I foresee as the lens with which to work. The People's Coalition Government is committed to a defence review as announced by His Excellency the President. I have had discussions with both the honourable Prime Minister and the Commander of the RFMF and they are supportive of this idea. Unlike the previous Government that wasted money by commissioning a defence review only to then collect dust somewhere just because one individual may have felt it was his personal fiefdom to rule at will, we are committed and we have a shared understanding about the mammoth task required to enhance the safety of the people of Fiji.

The defence review will be headed by civilian and an independent panel of experts, with the extensive experience in national and international security and defence matters. The panel will be drawn from members of academia, civil society and the security and defence industry and service providers. One of the aims of the Defence Review will be to define in very precise terms, Fiji's national interests and objectives in the complex and ever-changing global landscape we find ourselves in today. Once this is defined, it will help shape our Foreign and Security policy.

Mr. Speaker, the Defence Review will also recommend a national security framework for Fiji. This framework is envisaged to serve as a foundation for the continued professionalization of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces. Mr Speaker, it is only reasonable to expect that the people of Fiji want the RFMF to regain a strategic fit for Fiji's society. By that I mean, that there is an expectation for the RFMF to reposition itself in society as a loyal servant of the State, and not the master of it - contrary to the delusion that the previous Government promoted.

Within the proposed national security framework, we want to use the civilian supremacy model of civil-military relations. It is long past time to turn the 16-year mess under FijiFirst on this front, right side up. If you ask the people of Fiji, they will tell you that they expect the RFMF (and the Police too for that matter) to be subject to civilian control and that they be governed by procedures, normally used in a parliamentary democracy.

In other words, it has to be subjected to checks and balances like any other arm of government. This includes parliamentary scrutiny of budgetary issues and the like - and that Mr. Speaker, Sir, in very simple terms is what democratic oversight is all about.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just add that the principle of civilian supremacy over the military is used by many western governments around the world. The USA, France, Australia. New Zealand, Canada and other western nations respect this principle. Even our wantoks in PNG use this principle

in the management of their defence forces.

As you all know, the civilian supremacy model has its roots in the English Bill of Rights of 1689 which established the concept of parliamentary sovereignty and civil liberties as being above the prerogatives of the ruling monarch. In other words, it established the supremacy of Parliament and the recognition of free speech, human rights, civil liberties etc. Indeed, modern representative government is based on the consent of the people.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I want to emphasise that sovereignty in Fiji should lie in parliament where the voice of the people is heard through its elected representatives. To transfer sovereignty elsewhere, as Section 131(2) of the 2013 Constitution does, is repugnant to democratic norms. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are constrained by the very provisions of the Constitution that provides the constitutional conditions to allow review of it. There is a binding constraint on us which means that we must follow the Constitution.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am of the view that there is a need to redefine the constitutional role of the RFMF to allow it to focus on its core roles of defending a sovereignty as well as participate in nation building tasks. To be peace ambassadors to the world from Fiji in peace support operations with the most professional of officers and men.

The point I am making is that the role of the RFMF must be clearly defined in our Constitution. Doing so is the first step to modernizing the military. As it stands, Section 131(2) leaves the door open for unwelcome military intervention in politics. Democracy demands that the door remains closed. If this Parliament is truly representative of the people, then it must reflect the will of the people.

For the sake of Fiji's future, I appeal to both sides of Parliament to support the democratisation of our institutions. We must consolidate democracy at all levels and society. Democracy should be the only game in town. There should be no autocracy. We have just had 16 years of authoritarian rule and the people have spoken. They do not want any more of it.

On that note, I would like to thank the officers and men from the RFMF for providing Fiji with a secure and firm base for the smooth transfer of power after the 2022 General Elections where the people of Fiji resoundingly echoed their voices - renouncing autocracy and endorsing a change to genuine democracy. I also thank the officers, men and women of the RFMF for their courage and fortitude in upholding and respecting the will of the Fijian people at the polls, and for the rule of law for which I am most grateful, and the people of Fiji are most grateful to you.

Mr. Speaker, the review we propose is still in its conceptual stage at the moment, but we are working through it. I will be announcing more details as we firm up on several issues before us. Once completed I intend to have the published Defence Review presented to Parliament as a Parliamentary Paper before the end of the year.

Mr. Speaker, there is still deep-seated fear of the Fiji Police. Many of our people see the Fiji Police Force as an agent of repression. Rogue and ill-disciplined elements within the Fiji Police have tarnished their collective reputation. We need to overcome that and that is why I have reiterated that we need to keep the Fiji Police Force blue, and true blue at that. We want the Fiji Police Force to live by their motto "Salus Populi" - in the service of the people.

The FPF should report to the law and to the law alone, Mr. Speaker. We can do this through improved discipline, training and leadership. The leadership of the Force has changed for the better. We expect the new leadership to improve on the training and the discipline of the police force. The

people of Fiji demand that they do so and we expect no less.

Mr. Speaker, I am 56 year old today and 37 of these years I have faithfully served Fiji and the Fijian people. In 1985 I started my service to Fiji as an apprentice in the then Ministry of Fijian Affairs and later in the Judicial Department. I joined the RFMF in 1988 until 2007 when I joined the Public Service. In 2014 I was elected to Parliament and to date I remain. Throughout this time I have witnessed our political calamities and how Fiji has continued to go backward because politicians have continuously exploited the RFMF for their political mileage and benefit.

Mr. Speaker, I was at QBE in 2000 and was shot at, like many others during their attempted mutiny of 2nd November. It was a terrible and evil event. People died and more were injured. I went through that. I want to share with you also, Mr. Speaker, another event that occurred in my life and set the way I value human lives.

In 1996, I was serving in the 1st Battalion on the Fiji Infantry Regiment in South Lebanon. During this time, I was the Adjutant and side Commander for the Fiji Battalion Head Quarters in Qana. Whilst there on 8th April, 1996, I made a drastic decision during a state of war in *Operation Grapes of Wrath* to provide refuge to over 500 men, women and children who were displaced from their homes because of the war between Israel and Lebanon. In my effort to protect these men, women and children, I failed badly, Mr. Speaker.

The IDF, whilst retaliating to armed elements that were firing Katyusha rockets into Israel, lifted and traversed the artillery fire and bombarded our location where the refugees were protected. More than 300 men, women and children died as a result. Hundreds more were seriously wounded, including four officers and men and under my care. All under my watch, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I have witnessed death and war and I do not like it to happen here, nor for my children or in our home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have lived through *coups* after *coups* in Fiji, and I want to tell this Parliament and our Fijian people, no more *coups*.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Hear, hear!

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I will stand to answer to history and to God for the loss of lives from the misuse of military power in Fiji and abroad at the time when I was in a position of influence and of leadership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I oppose this strongly because parents die and children become orphaned. No more pleas, Mr. Speaker, no more. We must free our children and this stranglehold, and help them to build their future in Fiji, a nation of peaceful people where the rule of law is upheld, where all our human rights are protected and all Fijians are equal, and democracy is our way of life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for your indulgence and I thank, once again, the people of Fiji for their patience. Once again, may I reaffirm my support and thanks His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address. I thank you.

(Acclamation)

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen at the gallery and those tuning in today via television or *Facebook*; *ni sa bula vina 'a* and a very good evening to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to first thank the Lord Almighty for the gift of life, his blessings, mercy and everlasting love for this great opportunity to be present in this august Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to congratulate you on your appointment as the Speaker of this august Parliament and also congratulate honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua as your Deputy.

Mr. Speaker, I hold myself fortunate and blessed to be standing in this august Parliament. Sir, this would not be possible without the help of so many, which I wish to thank.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to my beloved parents - Ratu Gilbert Vakalalabure and Karolina Vakalalabure, I love you both and appreciate your undying love, care and support in bringing me up to be a better person. Thank God for giving me two beautiful and supportive parents, who stood by me since day one.

To my siblings - Ulamila, Lelea, Losalini, Strickland, Josefa and Vai'ne, thank you for your unwavering love and tremendous support rendered throughout my life.

Mr. Speaker, I also wish to acknowledge my extended family members -

- my namesake, Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure (Senior) and Aunty Marianne – *vina 'a va 'alevu 'a veito 'oni;*
- Nana Adi and family in Christchurch - *vina 'a va 'alevu 'a veito 'oni;*
- Ratu Lailai Kimo and Aunty La – *vina 'a va 'alevu 'a veito 'oni;* to my cousins in the Cook Islands - Tubale, Soroinoino, Di Iva, Tugeti - *vina 'a va 'alevu 'a veito 'oni;*,
- to my family in the USA – Lavenia, Yaca and Mereoni, Makereta, Uncle Reuben – *vina 'a va 'alevu 'a veito 'oni;*
- Yaca and family in Delainivesi;
- Ratu Lailai Te and family in Kinoya;
- Uncle Net and family, Uncle Sai and my cousins in Lautoka;
- *Na Momo Levu na Tui Nadi and Radini Tui Nadi, Nau Di Bolavucu - vina 'a va 'alevu 'a veito 'oni..*

Mr. Speaker, I also wish to acknowledge my late grandparents, Ratu Tevita Vakalalabure who was a former Senator and also a former Member of this august Parliament, and my late grandmother Nooroa Strickland, whom I spent most of childhood days through their guidance which has shaped the person that I have become today.

Mr. Speaker, I also wish to pay tribute to my maternal grandparents - Kuku and Nau. *Vina 'a va 'alevu a veisusu ena veitaba gauna sa oji.*

I also wish pay tribute to my Uncle, Mr. Niko Nawaikula, for encouraging me to take up politics and for always supporting me. I also pay tribute to my late Uncle, Ratu Osea Vakalalabure (may he rest in peace), a former Member of this august Parliament for the support in my younger days.

Sir, it is only right that I also extend my gratitude to my campaign team who mapped out a strategic work to get me to Parliament and I would like to thank them – Turaga Sauvou - Ratu Pita Naroba, Mr. Luke Maiyaroi, Mr. Isoa Delamisi, Mr. Viliame Mainanukuloa and *Turaga Na Maivunisi*eci, Mr. Samuela Waituruturu, thank you very much for the campaign and for getting me into this Parliament. *Vina 'a va 'alevu* to you all.

Mr. Speaker, I would also want to make a special mention to two of my lovely aunties, who have always been beside me throughout my days since the first day of campaign. To my Aunty Baba in Lautoka and Nana Ine, thank you. To you both, *vinaka valevu*, for the undying love and never-ending support to me throughout my life and in my political career. To you both, I say, “*vina ‘a va ‘alevu.*”

In addition, Mr. Speaker, I would also like to thank Mr. Peni Vono and his family and the *Vanua o Nautosolo* for the support rendered towards me and my campaign team, providing continuous assistance and hospitality during my campaign operation. *Vina ‘a va ‘alevu* Nautosolo.

I also wish to thank, Sir, the *Tikina o Tawake, Tikina o Tunuloa, Tikina o Saqani, Tikina o Navatu, veivanua kece ena loma ni toba o Natewa, vina ‘a va ‘alevu ‘a veito ‘oni.*

Lastly, Sir, to my voters who voted me in here, in Fiji and abroad, thank you very much for your support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now as I turn to my reply to the Address from His Excellency the President, I thank and support His Excellency the President's most gracious Address on the Opening of the 2023-2024 Parliament.

I would like to reiterate the acknowledgement rendered by the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration to the Republic of Fiji Military Forces and the Fiji Police Force in working together to maintain the safety, stability, security, defence and well-being of Fiji and all Fijians, not forgetting those serving in peacekeeping duties around the world, thank you to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded by the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration, allow me to speak on behalf of the work of the Fiji Immigration Department, which is now part of the Ministry of Home Affairs and my aligned portfolio.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all are aware, Government is responsible for the managing and protecting of Fiji's borders and ensuring the legal and orderly flow of people in and out of the country. In my first few weeks in Government, I have had the opportunity to visit Immigration Offices in Fiji's Central and Western Divisions, and I thank the Management Team and staff for their continuous effort in protecting the integrity and security of our borders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also noted with great concern the tremendous resource constraints faced by our frontline teams and the Department as a whole. I am humbled that Officials have expressed their sincere appreciation that a Minister, even though Assistant Minister, can now hear their concerns directly. This has been an opportunity that these Officials have not been afforded in quite a while.

Let me assure the people of Fiji and likewise, the Director of Immigration, Senior Management of Immigration and Officials of the Fiji Immigration Department that I will fight for you and your concerns. I want to reassure the teams on the ground that the issues and concerns raised have been consolidated by my team and I have prioritised them accordingly and will begin the process of addressing them one by one where possible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of my very first priorities as Assistant Minister responsible for Immigration, is to commence work on the relocation of the Fiji Immigration Department Headquarters, which is in a very poor condition. For far too long, the Department Headquarters has been operating from a building that does not meet the safety requirements of the Health and Safety

Work Act. It is anticipated that this new site will address the compliance work safety standard to accommodate our public at large.

Mr. Speaker, in this Parliamentary term, Government will look to progress the work of reviewing the following legislations, the:

1. Immigration Act 2003;
2. Immigration Regulation 2007;
3. Registration of Skilled Professionals Act 2016; and
4. Citizenship Act 2009.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the People's Coalition Government intends to undertake extensive public consultation to solicit the views of the people of Fiji before any such Bill is tabled in this august Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government will prioritise capability development improvements for our Immigration Officials, and this includes the:

1. Establishment of the Migration international Data Analyst System (MIDAS);
2. Establishment of Border Immigration Fusion Centre; and
3. Installation of additional closed-circuit television cameras at strategic spots to enable the Department to improve its monitoring and surveillance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this has been an initiative in which financial assistance had been made available to the previous administration by the United Nations Development Programme, but it is unfortunate that the lack of political will placed on our national border security has delayed the progression of this project.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department will also progress with the digitisation initiatives. This will be rolled out through a dedicated online application lodgment platform for permit and visa lodgments. Moreover, due to the lack of redundancy available for immigration records and files, we anticipate moving towards electronic storage of files and documents.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to by the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration, enhancing and upgrading Fiji's border will be a priority. The global COVID-19 pandemic shocked the world and no other country was prepared to manage health issues at its ports of entry. As such, the Government will walk the talk and work towards positioning our borders to a state of pandemic readiness.

A more streamlined and coordinated border management approach will drive this vision. I believe that we can greatly support Fiji's largest economic sector - tourism, by ensuring safe and secure borders. To that end, border security upgrade plans are already underway for the efficient facilitation of passengers and to ensure seamless travel for those visiting our shores.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji as the connectivity hub for the region has enjoyed significant benefits. However, this has also come with negative impacts as it has meant that we have to also become a source, destination and more importantly the transit point for transnational border activities. For this reason, technological advancement and digitization of services enhances Fiji's capability for early detection work at the borders.

Essentially, a coordinated approach by all our border agencies including the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, Fiji Police force, Fiji Revenue and Custom Services, Biosecurity Authority of Fiji,

Air and Seaport Terminal operators and Ministry of Health and Medical Services will be established to support this seamless facilitation vision and security at our main ports of entry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these plans for upgrading and enhancement are made possible by our development partners which cushion the financial impact to government coffers, and I would like to acknowledge the assistance and continued support of our existing bilateral development partners. However, we look forward to engaging with new development partners for the continued upgrade and enhancement of our border management and security. The Fiji Immigration Department will certainly make progressive changes and modernise Fiji's border through the timely assistance of our partners. Let me say at this juncture that exciting times lie ahead of us as Fiji and visitors can look forward to modernised, effective and efficient immigration services at our borders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of our international obligations, Fiji has ratified the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the UN Convention on statelessness and the UN Convention on the Protection of rights of all migrant workers and members of their families. These Conventions guide how we respond to large-scale movements and displacements such as refugees and asylum seekers.

To map our responses, we need to understand the evolving migration trends to determine the quality of data and develop an informative analysis. This year with the assistance of the International Organisations of Migration (IOM) the framework for a migration policy and strategy for Fiji will be formulated in consultation with our key stakeholders from the Government and other sectors at large. A migration policy for Fiji will be prioritised as we recognise that managing migration will become a complex issue which would require a truly whole of government approach and multi-sectoral efforts towards facilitating safe, orderly and regular migration.

In conclusion Mr. Speaker, Sir, last week I had the opportunity to meet with officials from Amnesty International where we discussed a number of concerns that the organisation had published in its 2022 Global Report. Amnesty International raised a number of issues at the consultation which falls within the ambit of the Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration concerning the Gestapo-style use of the Public Order Act, Immigration Act 2003 and other laws to target and silence government critics. This included the expulsion from Fiji of USP Vice Chancellor Mr. Pal Alluwahlia.

I was glad Mr. Speaker, Sir, to reassure the team from Amnesty International that the winds of change are here and that government will act swiftly to reverse the discriminatory and undemocratic decisions taken by the previous administrations. In the past week, we have seen the joyous celebration in Nadi Airport welcoming the USP Vice Chancellor and likewise freedom fighters who have had to resettle overseas in fear of being persecuted in Fiji are already returning to their homeland.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in closing I wish to reiterate to this august Parliament and the people of Fiji my commitment that during my tenure as the Assistant Minister responsible for Immigration, I will do my utmost best to ensure that immigration policies and regulations are implemented with due consideration to the rights of individuals under the 2013 Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure the security of our borders is maintained and enhanced, I invite member of the other side of the Parliament along with the relevant stakeholders to work together to ensure the safety and security of Fiji, all Fijians and visitors to our beloved nation. I am currently working with my team to promote the essence of unity and to collaborate across border security stakeholders and international counterparts to maintain fairness and justice within the national security jurisdiction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my leave, I wish to join the honourable Minister of Youth and the honourable Sashi Kiran in paying tribute to the late *Namomo Turaga na Tui Vitogo*. To my Nei, Adi Litiana and to all my tavales, my well wishes to you and I pray to the Almighty to restore piece, comfort, courage and love to you during this trying time.

I thank His Excellency the President again for His most gracious opening address of Parliament and thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to respond. Vinaka Vakalevu, Floreat Viti.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that is the last on the Batting Order for this evening.

2023 CALENDAR OF PARLIAMENT SITTINGS

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

That Parliament adopts the Sitting Calendar for the year 2023.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- As all honourable Members are aware, Standing Order 22(1) stipulates that, and I quote:

“The Business Committee must recommend to Parliament a programme of sitting periods for each session of Parliament or each 12-month sitting period of Parliament, whichever is the shorter.”

It further provides in Standing Order 22(2), and I quote:

“The recommended programme must be presented to Parliament no later than the third sitting day of the session...”

In that respect, Mr. Speaker, the Business Committee convened and undertook discussions on a proposed sitting calendar for the year 2023.

Mr. Speaker, I can confirm that the Business Committee agreed and approved the sitting calendar for the year 2023 which was circulated to all honourable Members this morning.

Mr. Speaker, we are also mindful of unforeseen circumstances and, therefore, should there be any imminent need to readjust some of the sittings, that this would be subsequently tabled in Parliament. Sir, this is to primarily allow some flexibility and as most honourable Members may be aware, this has been the accepted practice in the last two terms.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, I wish to put on record that there were healthy discussions during the Business Committee meeting on this matter, but I can confirm that the matter was resolved. I, therefore, plead with all honourable Members to support and approve the proposed sitting calendar.

For the benefit of all honourable Members, as well as the general public at large, the endorsed sitting calendar outlines the following sitting periods:

2023 PARLIAMENT SITTINGS		
MONTH	DATES	COMMENTS
February	Friday 3 rd	His Excellency the President's Address
	Monday, 13 th	Debate on His Excellency's Address
	Tuesday, 14 th	Cabinet Meeting
	Wednesday 15 th - Friday 17 th	Debate on His Excellency's Address
March	Monday 27 th	Parliament Sitting
	Tuesday 28 th	Cabinet Meeting
	Wednesday 29 th - Friday 31 st	Parliament Sitting
April	Monday 3 rd - Thursday 6 th	Parliament Sitting
June	Monday 12 th - Friday 16 th	Parliament Sitting
July	Friday 7 th	2024 Budget Address
	Monday 17 th – Friday 21 st	2024 Budget Debate
	Monday 24 th – Friday 28 th	
September	Monday 11 th – Friday 15 th	Parliament Sitting
	Monday 18 th – Friday 22 nd	
November-December	Monday 20 th – Friday 24 th	Parliament Sitting
	Monday 27 th – Friday 1 st	

Mr. Speaker, this sitting calendar will allow all the six Standing Committees to continue with their work on the Annual Reports that are currently pending with the Committees and Bills that may be moved in this Parliament for consideration. It is for this reason also that all honourable Members must support this proposed sitting calendar. With the proposed straight two weeks sitting, unlike the previous two terms in Parliament, it is envisaged that there will be more time for debate on matters before Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also pertinent to note that the Committees are our essential mechanisms through which Parliament is able to reach out to members of the public. They are essential mechanisms in terms of accountability and scrutiny, therefore, it is viable to allow them time to undertake their work, which this proposed sitting calendar allows.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the new Government and positive changes have been proposed to ensure that services to the people are improved. With this proposed sitting calendar, both the Government and the Opposition will be able to execute and implement its plans, policies and programmes, and the Standing Committees undertake and discharge their functions mandated in the Standing Orders.

It is in this respect, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the proposed sitting calendar before Parliament be supported by all honourable Members, as it is one that will greatly ensure that the Fijian Parliament will continue to undertake its legislative, representative and oversight functions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend this motion to Parliament, and I hereby seek support from all honourable Members to approve the proposed sitting calendar for the year 2023.

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

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Opposition has no issues with the 2023 sitting calendar, I would like to bring to the attention of this august Parliament on what transpired in the Business Committee, especially with regards to the date, 28th March.

Sir, you were the Chairman, it was discussed, and I believe the honourable Prime Minister was also there, that 28th March is going to be a sitting day. Cabinet was supposed to be held after the Parliament sitting. But as we see in the calendar and as confirmed by the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, that 28th is going to be a Cabinet sitting.

We would like to emphasise to this Parliament that Members are sitting in Cabinet because they are in Parliament, so Parliament should take precedence over Cabinet meetings. That was what we emphasised, there was a healthy discussion and the Business Committee agreed that it was going to be a full week sitting.

When the decision was changed, we were not aware of it. We were not informed that on 28th March, we are not going to have a sitting. Government is talking about bipartisan, Government is approaching Opposition to work together but this unilateral approach and changing the decision of the Business Committee is not on. While I say that we do agree with the calendar, however I request Government to adhere what was discussed and approved in the Business Committee.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Member. My reply to that since I Chaired the meeting, after some lengthy discussions, honourable Members, the Government agreed that the full week will be taken up, but since Cabinet sits on the Tuesday, the Committees will continue in their respective committees.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief. I think you are absolutely right; my recollection is the same. We had agreed that Tuesday, if there is a Cabinet meeting, we will have a Cabinet meeting and that day will be devoted to parliamentary Committees.

One other point I want to make, Mr. Speaker, in case honourable Members on the other side, especially honourable Maharaj forgets, for eight years, we have never had two weeks' sitting. Essentially, we had one week per month, so if you look at the calendar, you are actually having more parliamentary sitting days than when you were in Government...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- So, what we are offering, Mr. Speaker, is more parliamentary sitting days.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- You're overloading the Standing Committees.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is not overloading - unlike the previous Government, they would bring Bills in the morning and debate it in the afternoon and pass the Bill.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- That is not the point we are discussing.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The point I am making - you are not listening, this is your

trouble.

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The point we are making is, there is more sitting days at a time in a month. So, even if we do not have a sitting on a Tuesday, we still have more days in a month, Mr. Speaker, that is precisely the point we are making. There will be more sitting days than what it was there. So, I support the decision that we took at the Business Committee, Mr. Speaker.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a brief contribution to the discussion. I am glad that finally the honourable Leader of the National Federation Party has deemed it proper that he should attend the Business Committee, so congratulation, Sir, for finally making it to the Business Committee.

We come here in this Parliament to serve the people, we serve in the Committees for the benefit of the people of this country. When we are called, we go to those Committees, we do our duty to this Parliament and to the people that elected us to be here.

Nevertheless, my understanding of the number of weeks that we have had in the past years of Parliament and this one is exactly the same, only in this case we are doubling up on some months and leaving the others without a week, so the total number of weeks would still be the same. So, I thought I would just add that clarification. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Maharaj, has supported the calendar but the only question he had was on the Tuesday, so that has been sorted out, honourable Members.

If there is no other honourable Member who intends to speak on the motion, then I shall call on the Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak in reply.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, I just want to add the comments in the Right of Reply....

MR. SPEAKER.- He did not catch my notice when he was trying to raise his hand. So, please, honourable Members, try and catch my attention. If I am not looking your way, could you, kind-of, give us a gesture that you need to speak.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I need more white hair, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think so.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, just a clarification, it is not contentious, we just needed to get some clarity on the issue of whether Parliament takes precedent or Cabinet takes precedent, that is all. It is just a clarification from you, which takes precedence?

MR. SPEAKER.- The clarification from me, honourable Koya and honourable Members is that, we had agreed that on the Tuesday, Committees will continue and Cabinet sits on that Tuesday. The following days, it goes back to Parliamentary sitting. That is how the calendar has been marked out. So, I hope that clarifies the issues raised. I do not have any other comment to make on that.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may, that is understood. Everyone just really wanted to know whether this is a one-off or is it always going to be a case of Cabinet taking

precedence over on a Tuesday because we had been informed rightfully that there are two Cabinet sittings per month, if I am correct. Therefore, we just wanted some clarity; is this just a singular precedent, or this is going to be followed always - that Cabinet will be taking precedence over Parliament on Tuesdays?

MR. SPEAKER.- For the time being, honourable Koya, that is how it stands, so we will just take it from there.

Honourable Bulitavu, I think I have just allowed honourable Koya to say his bit when I have already asked the Leader of the Government in Parliament to make her reply.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a clarification on that because....

MR. SPEAKER.- How many more clarifications do you need?

(Laughter)

Are we are speaking in what? Let us continue, let us move on.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the motion before Parliament.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

GOVERNMENT GUARANTEE - FIJI DEVELOPMENT BANK

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the purposes of Section 145(1) of the Constitution and pursuant to Standing Order 131, I move:

That Parliament approves -

- (a) that the Government guarantee for the Fiji Development Bank borrowings for the 12-month period from 1st March, 2023 to 28th February, 2024, through the issuance of short and long-term Bonds, promissory notes, any Reserve Bank of Fiji financing facility and other short-term borrowings;
- (b) that the Government guarantee for a sum of FJ\$150 million for the guarantee period; and
- (c) that the Bank pay a guarantee fee of 0.075 percent on the cumulative utilised guarantee credit.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to make an introductory remark, we informed the Business Committee very clearly that there will be a motion on Government guarantee, unlike in the past where we were just told that there will be a motion, and we did not know until we came into Parliament. This motion was well publicised, so I am hoping that honourable Members on both sides of Parliament would have had enough time to understand what is happening.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just by way of background, the Fiji Development Bank (FDB) was established under the Fiji Development Bank Act 1966 and opened for business on 1st July, 1967. Pursuant to section 5 of the Fiji Development Bank Act 1966, the function of the Bank is to facilitate and stimulate the promotion and development of natural resources, transportation and other

industries and enterprises in Fiji, and in the discharge of its functions, the Bank shall give special consideration and priority to the economic development of the rural and agricultural sectors of the economy. That is a very, very important statement out of the Act, Mr. Speaker. The Bank, later on, came under the supervision of the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) and that was since 21st November, 2019, and as agreed, it provides a six-monthly report to the Minister of Finance.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the discharge of its functions, the Bank, in accordance with section 16(1) of the Fiji Development Bank Act 1966, provides, and I quote:

“The Bank may from time to time, with the consent of the Minister responsible for finance, borrow such sums as are required by it to meet any of its obligations, discharge any of its functions provide necessary working capital, and the Bank may with the like consent -

- (a) issue and sell bonds and debentures; and
- (b) issue promissory notes, certificates of deposits and other instruments, acknowledging or evidencing a borrowing or the terms of borrowing.”

Furthermore, Section 16(3) of the Fiji Development Bank Act 1966 states that the repayment of any sums borrowed under the provisions of this section and the payment of interest thereon may be guaranteed by the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members who had been here before would understand this but for the benefit of those who are new, I need to state that as required under section 62(1) of the Financial Management Act 2004, it states, and I quote:

“Subject to any other Act, the Government may guarantee the financial liability of an entity in respect of a loan or otherwise, but only if the giving of the guarantee is approved by Parliament.”

So, Mr. Speaker, the 2023 Guarantee request from the Bank will:

1. enable continued facilitation of Government’s policy by lending to essential sectors of the economy and as have I pointed out, mainly resource-based sectors, including agriculture, mining and quarrying, manufacturing, transport, communications, et cetera.
2. ensure that the Bank lends to the resource-based sector that will assist in the development of the agricultural sector and assist in the development of the Fijian economy in the long run.
3. ensure that the Bank’s borrowings are guaranteed by the Government, therefore, reducing perceived risks associated with such borrowings. This will make the Bank’s instruments more attractive to investors and should reduce the cost of borrowing for the Bank.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Bank’s lending portfolio, the Bank’s audited financial statement as at 30th June, 2022 recorded a cumulative total loan portfolio of \$629.04 million, which represents about 7,340 accounts of \$340.60 million in the focussed sector and 1,186 accounts of \$288.44 million in the non-focussed sector, compared to \$618.8 million in 2021 financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the difference between the focussed and the non-focussed sector is important. Perhaps, when some of us were sitting on the other side and when we had bank guarantees, we had concerns about the balance between the focussed sector and the non-focussed sector. So, while we are looking at the actual account numbers in the focussed sector which shows that the number is quite big but the actual value of the loan is \$340.60 million and \$288.44 million in the

non-focussed sector, in terms of the number of accounts, that number of loans for the non-focussed sector is 14 percent to 16 percent, so the actual amount that is loaned is almost about 45 percent. So, that is an important consideration for discussion by the Bank and perhaps, the new Board when it is looking at the balance between the focussed sector and the non-focussed sector.

On the Bank's financial position, Mr. Speaker, at the end of the 2022 financial year, the Bank recorded a consolidated profit of \$1.79 million. It showed an increase by 78 percent when compared to the same period last year which was \$1 million, attributed to the decline in the interest on expenses and allowances for interest and fees. The total asset base stood at \$626 million in 2022 - an increase by 3.1 percent when compared to \$607.5 million in 2021, while total liabilities also increased to \$449.9 million an increase by 3.9 percent when compared to \$433 million in 2021. So, with the increase in total assets, Mr. Speaker, total shareholders' equity also increased by 1 percent to \$176.4 million.

Mr. Speaker, the Bank's borrowing forecast is also important to provide that information. The Bank's total forecasted outlay from 1st March, 2023 to 28th February, 2024, which includes the proposed 2023 guarantee period, amounts to \$211.3 million as opposed to \$252.3 million from 1st March, 2022 to 28th February, 2023. Again, that is the 2022 guarantee period. So, given that the Bank's forecasted inflow is only \$61.3 million during the proposed guarantee period, the Bank requires an additional \$150 million to finance its total outlay of \$211.3 million. That is the reason why the additional \$115 million is proposed to be raised through the issuance of bonds, promissory notes, short-term borrowings and any RBF financing facility and term deposits.

Mr. Speaker, that is the basis for the guarantee that we are requesting. We also have to provide, while moving guarantee motions, situation with respect to the total Government guarantee debt and contingent liability. So, as at 31st December, 2022, the total Government guarantee debt stood at \$1.1 billion or 9.5 percent of GDP.

Accessing the \$150 million guarantee by the Bank will increase the total Government guarantee exposure to \$1.3 billion or 10.7 percent of GDP. What that means, Mr. Speaker, is in the event of the default by the Bank, the Government will be liable for the utilised guarantee borrowing of the Bank. In the past years, we all know and honourable Members on the other side will also know, that the Bank has never called on the Government to honour its guarantee. However, the Bank continues to pay the guarantee promptly upon the utilisation of the guarantees.

One important point, Mr. Speaker, is that we are always asking, and I think a more strategic focus of the new Board and the new Government will be to work with FDB to strengthen its reach in the Agriculture Sector because we still feel that the original intention of setting up the Bank can be enhanced more. That is an important consideration for the new Board and I think as Government, we would like the Bank to focus more on the focussed sector. I think the CEO and the new Board of the Bank understand that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with respect to the Non-Performing Loans (NPLs) which are loans in which the borrower is at default and has not made any scheduled payments of either interest or principal, for some time, they categorise NPLs by banks. Normally, international standard varies from country to country. The rate for NPLs is between 5 percent to 7 percent, but with respect to the FDB, the NPL for the Bank stood at \$152.31 million as at the end of 2022. In 2021, it was \$162.98 million which is equivalent to 24.2 percent and 36.34 percent in 2021. There was an improvement from 26 percent to 24 percent in 2022.

We could explain the high NPL in 2020 to 2022 but even in 2017 to 2019, the NPLs were still high. For example, in 2017, it was 21.6 percent; in 2018, it was 17 percent; and 2019 it was 16.5

percent. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can see improvements being made and as I have said, the Bank understands these things very well and I do not see any problem in going forward. I know that the Bank has put in strategies to ensure that these NPLs will see a reduction over the next few years.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, I commend the motion to Parliament. Let me also say that when we were sitting on the other side, we raised a number of questions every time there was an FDB government guarantee motion but from my recollection, we never opposed the FDB guarantee.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- See the *Daily Hansard*.

HON. L.D TABUYA.- But we supported it.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, I commend the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have two Members from the Opposition and two Members as well from Government.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for this opportunity to speak on the motion before Parliament. Let me say that we support the motion because it is important for the country and for the good of all those who benefit from the services provided by the Fiji Development Bank (FDB). I am glad that the honourable Minister is learning and perhaps, he needs to realise the fact that he is now in Government and he is in control. Stop referring to the practices of the past because, Mr. Speaker, the very words that he uttered here in the past is haunting him.

(Laughter)

But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note, let me just remind Government (as I have stated they are now in control) that we know some of the issues are concerning the conduct of some of the executives and on that as well, perhaps some of the elites and those who are aligned to politicians and political parties we cannot deny that. We all know the history that the FDB went through and, therefore, we, on this side of Parliament, would like to urge Government to be vigilant on that. Let us make sure that the highest level of standards and professionalism is given.

As I have stated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, words do haunt us. I remembered the last time when we had the debate here about this guarantee, there was a lot of noise coming from this side of the Chamber on the appointment of the CEO. Sir, in organisations as such, we need the best people - the right people to do the job so that services can be delivered and, of course, we must see the benefits, particularly in institutions as such. That is why it is important because our partners are watching, the clients that do benefit from the services are watching, so we as responsible Members of this august Parliament, when it comes to national issues and important issues as such, we need to be very careful with the words that we use so that it brings confidence to the stakeholders and particularly, to our development partners.

Again, I wish to state the fact that as Government, you now have the responsibility. Let us make sure that we, through the Board, the CEO and the Senior Management, make sure that they conduct their business to the best, the highest level and standards so that we do not go through some of the problems that we faced in the past, Mr. Speaker.

On NPLs, let us leave it to the experts. However, we know what we went through particularly from 2019 and even when we are still in the recovery process, but I look forward to what the honourable Minister had stated about more investments in the agriculture sector. We know the risks involving the agriculture sector, particularly with the new resource-based sector. That is why I am sure it is not only the FDB but other lending institutions because of the risks involved - they always take the necessary. But I think as a Government, it is about creating the right environment so that it brings confidence to all the stakeholders, particularly for this.

I know that in the past, I have had a lot of discussions with the Reserve Bank of Fiji about creating the environment so that more lending can go to the critical sectors so that we can grow and diversify our economy, and we support that honourable Minister. We look forward to hear more on the plans and we will be happy to work with you on that, so be assured of our support, honourable Minister. Thank you.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make a contribution and support the motion by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics - the honourable Professor Prasad.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FDB has played a pivotal role in Fiji in providing access to finance, especially to Micro, Small, Medium Enterprises and Co-operatives. As mentioned by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, Professor Prasad, it was established by statute and the key objectives were to improve the socio-economic status of people by making the right development investments and financing and staying financially and economically sustainable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all agree, one of the most influential sectors potentially in our country will be agriculture, so the assistance of the guarantee that is being provided today, we are certain that the bulk of it will certainly be targeted at agriculture to ensure that the space continues to grow. Just looking at the current portfolio, 37 percent of the clientele is in agriculture and the bulk of it is actually MSMEs. We hope that as a proportion of the total debt that is provided from this \$150 million guarantee, that the bulk of it is targeted at commercial agriculture, particularly, to the MSME sector and to the women and youths of this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are some interesting facts and supporting the FDB motion, they have interestingly been providing special facilities in this space, the SME sustainability package and FDB loans for women entrepreneurs was a good initiative. They have also introduced online applications on their portal and in fact, I have been told that they have received about 16,000 applications for various loans on their portal. For the Government, which is focusing on the ease of doing business, this is an initiative that we applaud and actually encourage.

Another thing that happened recently is that we have met with the management of the FDB and they are partnering with visa to introduce financial literacy online and it is free of charge to all their clientele. As we know financial literacy is an important element of any business to be successful and using digital means, means that the Bank can reach out to a wide array of customers and people.

Apart from this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think we all agree that FDB is and will continue to be a natural partner of Government, particularly, because of its risk appetite and when it comes to supporting MSMEs, Co-operatives and rural communities. Within the Ministry, they are currently collaborating on the Northern Development Programme, the integrated human resource development programme, which forms public private partnership. Through NDP the Ministry is providing equity funding to successful MSMEs so they can access loans from commercial banks which includes FDB.

Based on that, I would like to commend and support the motion which will ensure that we continue to strengthen the agricultural sector. I look forward to more support in terms of MSMEs and Cooperatives to ensure that we expand that sector.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief on a lighter note. Just a reminder to some other Members in Government who were sitting on this side, please remember ‘n’ means ‘no’ and ‘y’ means ‘yes’, so when you press do not press ‘n’.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we support the motion before the Parliament and just quickly a couple of things to add on to what honourable Seruiratu mentioned and also what the honourable Kamikamica said. Unlike before where we used to get objection on these motions that we brought this Parliament, I think it was not too long ago that there was one particular guarantee motion that was being objected to by the Opposition, but we were actually agreeing to it.

A quick question to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, with regards to the NPL if he could respond maybe figure out a portion of that, would that be attributable to COVID-19? The considerable portion attributable to COVID-19 is going to be some other way of dealing with that because I most definitely know that a large part of the SMEs that we encouraged to Fiji Development Bank would be there. Are they part of that particular basket?

And I know there is an encouragement on the part of the Ministry responsible for Co-operatives and Trade, et cetera to get into some more diversification which we had introduced when we were there in government, and it is an important issue for us to do with respect to diversification. We cannot rely on tourism as we did for many, many years. Diversification is actually needed, SME sector needs to get back on track, it needs to grow. We also need to ensure that our co-operatives and I understand that there is a lot of work going on.

It was actually labelled previously when we were looking after the SMEs as I think the word used was “*dinau*” and also “vote buying” is another but it is a different case when you are sitting on the other side. So, it is important and I am hearing that, that is actually being looked at and Fiji Development Bank is our institution and we must not let it go back to what it used to be before. We have got it on a firm footing at the moment. This Guarantee is actually important and the sectors that are being looked at are actually very important and as I said one of the other things that we must realise is that the FDB is also a large contributor to our sugar industry.

We had made sure that FDB also opened branches out in Nabouwalu, Taveuni - places where it has never been. So, it is actually a very important tool in our economy and supporting this particular guarantee is very, very important. So, we wholeheartedly support the motion before the Parliament. Thank you very much.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Before you proceed honourable Deputy Prime Minister, Gavoka, honourable Deputy Prime Minister Finance, in your response, would you be able to address the issues raised by...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- When I respond in my Right of Reply. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you honourable Speaker, Sir, yes they made a lot of noise from the other side at that time. It is true but it was healthy for the institution at that time.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Oh no!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- We were in the Committee on Economic Affairs, honourable Vijay Nath was our Chair and we used to scrutinise the books every year. This is one of the best organisations in terms of the production of the Annual Reports and a lot of those recommendations were implemented by the organisation. So, it is very healthy to make those noises Mr. Speaker, Sir. It resulted in some changes for the organisation.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- You want us to oppose it first.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- We always supported it but we made observations and those observations became very useful in the running of the organisation. When I look across the room Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can only see two there who were in Committee, the honourable Maharaj so to the new Members you will enjoy the Committees. You can make a lot of noise there, you can make a lot of recommendations. You looked a little despondent over the last couple of days - freshen up. You will be seeing a lot of good things when you scrutinise the Annual Reports like this and come and contribute as we debate. Shout as much as you can but it is good for the organisation. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset I want to say that we will not be the spanner in the works, as we used to see the other side of Parliament when they were sitting this side.

Whenever we had a FDB Guarantee discussion it used to take almost two hours, initially objection, objection but this is the new Opposition. We will not come in the way of any policies or laws that you are going to bring to this Parliament that will benefit the people. Of course, we will ask for clarity as we are doing now. We will ask for accountability and transparency. Those three things will be there.

But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason why I support FDB is because it is the only development bank in Fiji that supports the farmers, fishing sector, agriculture sector and above all women entrepreneurs. Recently FDB had forked out around \$1.5 million to support Small Micro Businesses. So, we can see the benefits and a Government guarantee is very important from the borrowers perspective because that gives them the assurance that risk that they normally think about a FDB is no longer there.

We have also come across situations where credit institutions like all other big banks, do not give loans for agricultural activities unless and until you have 99 years lease, or you have a freehold land. So, FDB is the only option that the grass roots have. If they want to go into small agriculture activity or fishing small businesses so for that reason, we support the motion before Parliament.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I fully support the motion before the House. I do have one slightly irritating concern that I have. Having listened to the words from the honourable Deputy Prime Minister No.2 or 3 I am not sure about the improvements that have been made to FDB - that has been gratifying to see. I think the reasons for FDB's importance in this country are apparent, so we need not talk too much about it.

I have one niggling concern. In any organisation especially when you are guaranteeing it is the importance of good governance. I think this is something we all understand. Good governance, fit for purpose directors; fit for purpose management. My slight concern has been, and I am not sure whether this affects FDB but I am urging Government to constantly make sure that this is the most important criteria that you put to the governance of these bodies - fit for purpose directors.

My slight concern is because I am not too sure what is happening in some other Boards, but I have heard some things and I have seen some things and I am not too sure that you are focussing in putting in place fit for purpose people on some of these boards. I hear some people have just been put into boards, some people have been saying it is the failed candidates and so forth. I hope that sort of things does not happen. One thing that I urge fit for a purpose directors and fit for purpose managers.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I thank all the honourable Members for their support. Just some quick points. Honourable Seruiratu and honourable Usamate talked about Boards and I think your point is well taken - we need fit for purpose and in fact, if I can just inform Parliament the boards that have seen changes, at least those which come directly under my responsibility - like the Reserve Bank. They have a process where they do a fit for purpose check and I do not think there is a set rule honourable Usamate that if you are a failed candidate, you do not necessarily fit the purpose. There would be people who would fit the purpose (of course there are always political considerations there) and we have seen failed candidates appointed in the past in a number of positions, but I take your point about fit for purpose. The honourable Koya, I think that is a very good question, in fact the top 10 Non-Performing Debt (NPDs) (I have got the list of all NPDs)and that comes to about \$100 million and they are all pre-COVID-19.

If you look at the NPLs prior to 2020, the ratio was pretty high. The CEO and the management of the bank understand that, in fact, I have seen some new innovations, there is digitalisation of platforms where customers can easily get access to information, they can apply for loans online and many other initiatives that I think the bank is trying to undertake will mean better focus, more improvement in terms of the service delivery. But I do take the point that honourable Seruiratu and honourable Kamikamica made with respect to the focus.

This is one of the things that we always talked about, whenever we had the FDB Guarantee. We were saying let us go back to the original focus of the bank, why the bank was created, what was the objective, where is the priority? I think with the new Board and the CEO understands it in my discussion with him and the management, there is an appreciation of re-looking at the focus of the bank especially for the resource-based sectors.

Those issues will be taken into account. Just one last point to respond to honourable Kumar, if you look at the record of the previous Opposition, you will see in the eight years (Mr. Speaker, Sir, you would remember some of them) I understand the role of the Opposition and we always said...

MR. SPEAKER.- I am trying to be very diplomatic here because I was part of that group at that time.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... that is fine, that the Opposition have guaranteed figure. I have always said this from the other side and I want to say it from this side; the Opposition is as important as the government. We understand this better than perhaps they did when they were in government.

HON. V. NATH.- Now you know, not before.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We know Mr. Speaker, Sir, and let me just make one point before I finish. There are questions about fit for purpose for the board. We can go to town on this, we can talk about cronies, we can talk about cabals that existed and they still exist and through the credit of this Government, we have not just come willy-nilly, we have not gone there to just change for someone said earlier today, if something is working we have said this very clearly. I have said it many times that we are not going to make changes just for the sake of making changes. We, as a

Government, we are going to look at and if there are people that need to go or be removed from boards, we will do that, but we will not just go and do that for the sake of changing people. I want to let the Opposition know that we are not going to behave like what they probably did in the past.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank the previous Government as well.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I want to take this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, to thank the Board of the FDB, the CEO and the Management. So far since we have come into Government, we have had total corporation from the Management and we understand the priorities that the new Government has. I think the Bank understands that.

I want to thank all honourable Members for their contribution and I commend the motion to Parliament. Thank you.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting today. Thank you for bearing with the long hours of sitting which you just started. We look forward to another new day tomorrow and I wish to adjourn Parliament until tomorrow at 9.30 am.

The Parliament adjourned at 9.12 p.m.