

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

WEDNESDAY, 15TH FEBRUARY, 2023

[CORRECTED COPY]

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WEDNESDAY, 15TH FEBRUARY, 2023

The Parliament met at 9.36 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics; the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry; the honourable Leader of the Opposition; and honourable A.A. Maharaj.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Monday, 13th 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.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATION FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

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

Business Committee Decision

Honourable Members, at this juncture, I will reiterate my communication on Friday, 3rd February, 2023, whereby I had informed on the decision of the Business Committee.

The Business Committee had resolved and agreed through vote that Standing Order 28, to some extent, Standing Order 29 and Standing Order 30 be waived. The waiver allows, to some extent, Standing Orders 29 and 30, the use of the vernacular languages, the provision of the vernacular translation in the *Daily Hansard*, and lastly, for the Speaker to pray the way he wishes to pray and will not be offended if someone else comes and prays the way they pray.

As most of you may be well aware, precedence has been set in the last two terms of Parliament where at the Business Committee level, matters were raised, discussed and determined by the Business Committee and following that, the Speaker formalises the decision on the floor of Parliament, which is also exactly what I had done on Friday, 3rd February, 2023.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition (and I note he is not present) is a Member of the Business Committee and he was present at that meeting where he had also participated in the

deliberations. Therefore, his obvious disregard of the Business Committee decision, as well as the communication on Friday, 3rd February, 2023, comes as a surprise because he was present at that meeting. The Business Committee had resolved and agreed through vote.

Honourable Members, I reiterate that the Business Committee had agreed to those issues through vote and, therefore, that will be the end of the matter.

Matter of Privilege

On another matter, honourable Members, I have received a notification on Monday afternoon from the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration, raising a matter of privilege pursuant to Standing Order 134. The matter of privilege is against the response to His Excellency's Address by the honourable Leader of the Opposition on Monday, 13th February, 2023.

In accordance with Standing Order 134(2), the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration has, in his notification, outlined the facts and the resulting grounds on which he believes that there has been a breach of privilege. The facts and the grounds notified by the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration are as follows:

“That on the morning of 13th February, 2023, during the debate on the motion to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address, the honourable Josaia Bainimarama uttered words that are denigrating and humiliating to the Head of State, His Excellency the President and also as Commander-in-Chief, whilst appealing “to the rank and file” in the RFMF which, in view of the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration, are highly seditious and disrespectful while dishonouring the dignity and bringing Parliament into disrepute, which are in contravention of Standing Order 62(3) and (4).

Honourable Members, I have now had the opportunity to review the uncorrected *Daily Hansard* for Monday, 13th February, 2023, and I have considered the matter raised by the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration and have decided as follows:

Privilege is accorded to everyone in this august Parliament as a matter of right, and Standing Order 133 states that:

“Every Member, and any other person speaking in Parliament has -

(a) freedom of speech and debate in Parliament, subject to these Standing Orders.”

Therefore, any Member can say whatever they want in Parliament but, honourable Members, what you say in Parliament is subject to the Standing Orders. The dignity and respect of Parliament must, at all times, be upheld.

In this respect, Standing Order 62 states, and I quote:

“(3) The conduct of members, the President, Chief Justice (performing the functions of the Office of the President under Section 88 of the Constitution), members of the judiciary, or other persons acting in a judicial capacity must not be raised, except on a motion with notice introduced with the Speaker's permission. In any other situation, reference to the conduct of any of these individuals is out of order.

(4) It is out of order for a member, when speaking, to use -

- (a) offensive words against Parliament or another member;
- (b) treasonable words;
- (c) seditious words; or
- (d) words that are likely to promote or provoke feelings of ill-will or hostility between communities or ethnic groups within Fiji.”

The words used by the honourable Leader of the Opposition are matters which are out of order in this Parliament and constitute a *prima facie* breach of privilege.

Given the above and pursuant to Standing Order 134(2)(a) and Standing Order 127(2)(c), I have decided there is a *prima facie* breach of privilege and I hereby refer the matter to the Privileges Committee for its consideration.

The Privileges Committee is directed to meet from lunch time today - Wednesday, 15th February, 2023, and provide its report for tabling in Parliament on Friday, 17th February, 2023, and Parliament shall consider the Report of the Privileges Committee.

Deferment of Motion – Adoption of Sitting Calendar

Lastly, on the deferment of motion to Thursday's Order Paper, honourable Members, please, kindly take note that I have allowed the motion listed as Item No. 4 on today's Orders Paper to be deferred until tomorrow. The motion is on the adoption of the sitting calendar and the Secretariat will circulate the amended Order Paper on Thursday, 16th February, 2023, or probably soon.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON HIS EXCELLENCY'S ADDRESS

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of this august Parliament, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen; *ni sa bula vinaka* and good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to add my acknowledgements to His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, for his most gracious and inspiring Address a few days ago.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to begin by warmly congratulating you on your appointment to the seat of Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, and honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua on her appointment to the seat of Deputy Speaker of this august Parliament. We pray that the Lord will bless you both and give you wisdom and strength for these important roles for Parliament and for Fiji.

His Excellency reminded us of how we have forged ahead as a resilient nation with committed efforts to address the global pandemic, natural disasters and a period of uncertainty, distress and loss that gripped our nation. His Excellency also called on this august Parliament to embody the collective spirit of resilience and resolve of our people, bringing the hope of a promising future for the citizens of our beloved nation, which we all call home. And this must be facilitated through, “a clear focus on the rule of law and democratic processes, including transparency, accountability, respect for human rights and freedom, and listening to the views of the people through genuine consultation.”

His Excellency has also pointed to the herculean economic challenge before us, inherited by the People's Coalition Government, which we must now work with to deliver Government's service to the people of Fiji. With a restrictive national debt level, we must, nonetheless, forge ahead

cautiously and thoughtfully to meet the expectation of our people in the services we are expected to deliver.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Minister responsible for Health and Medical Services, I salute all 7000 health workers serving around Fiji and thank them for their commitment and effort in seeing our nation through one of its most turbulent times – fighting the COVID-19 pandemic in the last three years and keeping it at bay, which we still continue to do today.

We acknowledge all our development partners, health partners and donors who stood by us and supported our effort in dealing with the outbreak in Fiji. We also acknowledge our Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and various organisations, such as Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises (FRIENDS), the Fiji Nursing Association, the friends of Tavarua group, families, social and community groups, and individuals who we did not hear about, yet whose efforts were critical to the overall success of our response.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the health sector, His Excellency the President revealed that the People's Coalition Government is drafting plans for the revival of the health and medical services in our hospitals by improving and maintaining facilities, services, skills training and patientcare.

In my first three weeks as Minister, we have managed to visit over 50 healthcare facilities so far in the Northern, Western, and Central Divisions, and conversed with many hundreds of healthcare workers across Fiji. This has informed my view that there are two key elements essential to our vision for excellence in healthcare. These are:

1. A dramatically improved and maintained health infrastructure from the Divisional Hospitals such as the Colonial War Memorial Hospital (CWMH) and all the way to the most remote nursing station.
2. A well supported, appropriately remunerated and capable healthcare professionals. You can have the best health infrastructure, however, without the capable, caring and professional staff, we would not have a healthcare system. From nurses to doctors to cleaners to community health workers - all need to feel appreciated and be adequately supported.

Those are big issues to address, and it will take time, but we will embrace this challenge.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my previous contributions in this august Parliament as an Opposition Member, I highlighted the Opposition's concern on the reduction in budgetary allocations for infrastructural works for the Ministry of Health. Our recent visits have confirmed what we feared would be the outcome. Except for a few healthcare facilities that are in a good shape, majority are in a poor state with damaged infrastructure, an insufficient program for maintenance and upkeep and with poor water, hygiene and sanitation facilities.

The Ministry of Health and Medical Services will prioritize improving and maintaining our 220 health facilities and associated infrastructures. In doing so, we can improve the environment in which healthcare is delivered to our people and improve the working environment for our valued medical staff who are sent to these facilities to live, work and serve the people of Fiji. We will place greater emphasis on providing these facilities with better access to water, sanitation and hygiene, power, and internet connectivity wherever possible, in a sustainable and environmentally friendly manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has come under the spotlight lately and has been scrutinised by the media and members of the public on social media. Their focus is on the state of some of our

hospitals and medical infrastructure around the country, and I agree with them, Sir, because after visiting medical facilities around the country, majority of the infrastructure is in need of repair, renovation or a total makeover. There has been significant neglect for the past 16 years.

As many will now be aware, the honourable Prime Minister has instigated improved freedom of the media. One element of this was to facilitate a media visit to Colonial War Memorial Hospital (CWMH) last week. This is a crucial step in showcasing the challenges we face and how the Ministry with the support of our bilateral and multi-lateral development partners, civil society, the private sector, communities and like-minded individuals, all have an important role to work in partnership to deliver and improve health infrastructure.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry welcomes the proposed re-introduction of the Public Works Department (PWD) as the maintenance and upgrading of rural roads and river crossings and the maintenance of government buildings will be their priority. Having access to roads is a social determinant of health, as it ensures that all Fijians living in remote areas will be able to reach their nearest health facility and have access to healthcare. We look forward to working with PWD in repairing, renovating or rebuilding some of our medical facilities.

On human resource, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we come to the issue of our health workforce. I wish to acknowledge and share with you the appreciation of the staff of the Ministry (and I am sure for other civil servants) who were very relieved when the Government amended the retirement age from 55 years to 60 years. It is a very significant change in Government's workforce strategy and ensures that:

1. Our human resource base is immediately widened, providing a better platform to address workforce attrition and staff shortage.
2. A return on investment for Government and the country's effort in building up the experience and skills of our workforce through years of development and honing, which is delivered here at home for the benefit of the people of Fiji.
3. Immediate access to a more knowledgeable and highly-skilled and experienced health practitioners and administrators workforce, who would have been lost immediately upon attainment of the retirement age of 55 years old. Prior to this change, other countries in the region and around the world have been the recipient and benefactor of our well trained, experienced and very capable health workforce and civil servants.
4. Talk to any international expert in Human Resource for Health, and they will inform you that retiring employees early is not the strategy for staff shortage in health. In fact, the opposite is true, you keep them longer while you build up the new intakes' capabilities and skills. I am afraid that the previous Government's strategy has been incorrect through all these years and as a result, we have no capacity to be able to cater effectively for any surges in staff attrition rates, like we have been experiencing in the last 24 months.

We need well supported, appropriately remunerated and capable healthcare professionals who are compassionate and caring. As an example, we have 3,056 nursing positions across Fiji and the nursing workforce is crucial in all aspects of health services. They are a major part of our professional and caring health system delivery. However, last year alone, 807 nurses (approximately 26.4 percent) have resigned from the Ministry. The issue has been noted in the media in the last few years but finding a quick solution is going to be a challenge. It is an issue that we cannot shy away from and requires a multifactorial and a multisectoral approach.

As Minister, we will work together with the wider Ministry and Health Facility Leadership teams and with the Government to look for solutions to these issues. Our solutions will be approached in an inclusive and consultative manner. While nursing has been highlighted in the attrition rate, other cadres of healthcare workers are also affected. As a Ministry, we will find solutions to these concerns through consultation and dialogue with each cadre because health service delivery is not only about doctors and nurses, but many other important cadre of healthcare professionals and support service teams that make the healthcare system function.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is my 53rd day as the Minister for Health and Medical Services and the old saying by English playwright John Heywood that 'Rome was not built in a day, but they were laying bricks every hour', is a reminder of the fact that it requires time and patience to create something significant and majestic. This rings true to my ears as I try to grasp the challenges ahead in rebuilding these medical facilities and the staff that deliver the services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services will focus its attention over the next four years on critical legislations that facilitate the delivery of health services in Fiji. We intend to address the delay in the revision of the Public Health Act 1935 which has taken more than 10 years now and is still not completed.

A review of the Radiation Health Act 2009 is needed with the development of health services and the increasing use of radiation sources by other industries and Government agencies.

The Ministry will look into the complete review of the Tobacco Control Act 2010 and the Tobacco Control Regulations 2012 to update the legislation to meet upcoming needs and expectations in these areas of operation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, other health-related legislations that need updating, given the development and advancement of health technology and standards of health practice to facilitate the effective and efficient delivery of health services to the people will be assessed, reviewed and updated as necessary.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lesson of the COVID-19 pandemic is that, we ignore infectious diseases at our own peril. The Ministry will endeavour to further improve our surveillance, prevention, response and protection programmes for infectious diseases that are endemic to Fiji, as well as those that we can import from abroad.

We must be ambitious to challenge our current approach and way of thinking and explore opportunities to pursue interventions that can lead to a marked reduction in disease burden and the possible elimination of tropical diseases that have plagued us for many decades, such as leptospirosis, typhoid, dengue fever, scabies, tuberculosis and leprosy, to name a few. We must also be ready with a comprehensive response plan when disease outbreak such as the COVID-19 pandemic hits us in the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on HIV/AIDS infections, it is alarming to see that Fiji has increased its estimated new HIV/AIDS infections by 129 percent over the last decade from 2010 to 2021, putting Fiji in a pool of 38 countries with an alarmingly rising infection rate, according to the UNAIDS Global Report. The Global AIDS Monitoring 2022 Report for Fiji showed a 173 percent increase in AIDS-related deaths between 2010 to 2021. According to the Global AIDS Monitoring Report, Fiji is amongst the top five countries of rising new HIV infections in the Asia Pacific among 15 year to 24 year old age group with an approximate rate of 50 percent increase in cases since 2010.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2021, nine of the 151 new infections diagnosed were cases of mother to child transmission. Fiji has now recorded a total of 1,417 cumulative cases of HIV since 1989. The Ministry

will intensify its efforts and work collaboratively with our partners to strengthen our capacities for prevention, access to diagnosis and treatment, and the governance of our HIV/AIDS response programme. As a community, we must also work hard to root out the culture of stigmatisation and discrimination against people living with HIV, so that they can gain equitable access to health services and the care they need.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another lesson of the pandemic was that the high-risk population which included those with chronic Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), suffered the most. His Excellency the President rightly pointed to the heavy burden that NCDs place in our community and our economy, and 80 percent of annual deaths in Fiji are attributed to NCDs and 65 percent of our people are overweight or obese. The 2018 Economic Burden Report noted that each year, Fiji loses \$406 million due to major NCDs.

Our people are sadly dying early due to NCDs, and it is also costing Fiji a lot. Fiji's food balance sheets over the years have shown that the composition of dietary intake is shifting away from the traditional rootcrop-based diet to cereal-based. Now, starchy staples provide 22 percent of total energy intake with cereal-based foods increasing to about 38 percent of total energy. This impacts on the health of the nation through increased NCDs and obesity, but also through food imports which are recorded as relatively high at 7 percent of the GDP - approximately \$793.2 million. As a result, NCDs and its complications are reaching crisis levels with a high number of health diseases such as stroke, blindness and amputations in our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one thing is certain, that there is a lot to be done and we, as a Ministry, cannot do it alone. As an example, because of constrained staff and resources, Twomey Tamavua Hospital, our only specialist rehabilitation hospital in Fiji, is able to fit some 100 prostheses for amputees each year, although the demand is much higher. However, in partnership with development partners, they were able to fit some 500 life-changing prostheses in just 50 days. That shows what can be achieved with the right resources, coordination and will.

In addition to that, the Ministry has, again, in partnership with a core development partner, agreed on a planned project to build a new rehabilitation hospital with improved facilities to deliver a wider scope of advanced rehabilitation services. The work for this begins this year and once completed, will significantly enhance our ability to deliver rehabilitation services to the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Digital Health Strategy, the enhancement of the communication and digital platforms within the Ministry is important, as this will facilitate better disease surveillance, patient referral, supply chain and inventory management, resource planning and mobilization, and governance of its daily operations. Our Divisional and Sub-Divisional Command Centre operations will function much more effectively with access to a better digital and communications platform. In this regard, the Ministry is pursuing the establishment of a 5-Year Digital Health Strategy and Implementation Plan with the associated package of digital support to address governance, operational system, and human resources in line with the Government's overall digital plan.

We are mindful of the state of the economy, as highlighted by His Excellency the President, and we will do our part in reducing wastage and improving efficiency. One example of this is working with a development partner to roll out an improved supply chain management system called mSUPPLY, across Fiji. We have so far covered close to a third of all health facilities (or 58 health facilities) that are now using the improved software to monitor and order medicines and medical supplies.

So far, our analysis indicates that this system has reduced average processing time of orders from an average of six days to just over a day-and-a-half. It has also improved inventory listings so that health facilities can readily know their stock status at any point in time. This national level ambition has shown

how improvements can be made at scale. The supply chain reform is planned to be completed nationwide by the end of 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, overall, in the health sector, we recognize that the demand is great but the resources are scarce. We will need to work smarter and more efficiently in trying to improve healthcare service delivery conditions. There have been some obstacles in the past in our ability to access funding in a timely manner, which have contributed to unused budgetary allocation each year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry acknowledges that in the last five financial years from 2017-2018 to 2021-2022, the Ministry had underspent its annual budgetary allocations by an average of 13.6 percent (ranges from 4 percent to 22 percent) each year. Below are some of the major reasons for the underutilization of our budget:

1. Medical items ordered through indents under the Fiji Pharmaceutical & Biomedical Services (FPBS)'s allocation for overseas procurement of goods and services were delayed from overseas suppliers, hence payments spilt over into the next financial year.
2. Special expenditures of funds provided as cash grants from development partners were held under Requisition ('R') and were not released on time to facilitate operational activities on the ground.
3. Allocations for Capital Construction were not fully utilized in each financial year as the budget allocated was for the total project, but funds were paid out on completed phases. Delays were noted in the processes relating to tendering for purchasing of medical items or infrastructural works, contracting suppliers and settlement of approved payments.
4. The unfavourable weather and disruptions to the global supply chain for medicine and equipment in the last 36 months caused by the global pandemic were factors beyond our control that contributed towards the delay in the timely completion of projects and purchases. Those factors also impacted most of the major projects that were administered through the Construction Implementation Unit (CIU) and not within the control of the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is an area we wish to improve over the next four years. To overcome those obstacles, we will work more closely with the central agencies to better plan, strategise and utilise resources allocated to the Ministry for its operations. The Ministry will also pursue partnership and collaboration with development partners to facilitate the delivery of quality healthcare service to our people.

In that regard, I extend my heartfelt thanks to all our development partners for their assistance pre-COVID-19 and especially during COVID-19, and look forward to strengthening and deepening our relationship in the near future. I call on our wider development partners, individuals, members of the community, the private sector, civil society and bilateral and multi-lateral partners to come on board and assist us in partnership to deliver a strong health service for everyone – the poor or rich, rural or urban dwellers, women, men and children. All Fijians alike deserve good health which, in turn, impacts on a more prosperous economy.

In concluding, Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President stated that now more than ever, we must be united as one nation and strengthen our resolve to work together to meet our collective challenges. On that note, I wish to extend my most sincere gratitude to the honourable Prime Minister for his wisdom and foresight and most importantly, his efforts to re-establish the linkage between the Government, the People and the Church, or metaphorically speaking, the three-legged stool. I believe that without the

support of the people, *vanua* and the church (*Lotu*), Government (*Matanitu*) will not function as it should as this is a Government chosen by the people and it is a Government that will stand for the people.

The support of this three-legged stool is needed as we grapple with ongoing and emerging challenges and in his Address, His Excellency the President urged that this august Parliament embody the collective spirit of resilience and resolve of our people, as this will bring hope of a promising future for the citizens of our beloved nation which we all call home.

Before I take my seat, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all my supporters within the island of Taveuni, Qamea, Yanuca, Yacata, Naitauba and the *vanua o Cakaudrove* in Mabuco, Korocau and Tunuloa, for their support in trusting and believing in me through their votes.

I also wish to thank you, Sir, for my upbringing and to my loving mother for her daily words of encouragement and support; to my beautiful wife - Kalisiana; and my three sons - Tuikilakila, Raivalita and William, for their never-ending support and love as they travelled near and far with me during the campaign trail.

I humbly stand tall here today as the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services because of all the support you rendered, and I will endeavour to carry out my duty to the best of my ability in serving the people of this nation - Fiji. *Floreat Fiji!*

(Acclamation)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honorable Members of Parliament; greetings and a very good morning to you all present here today, at home and those visiting via other mediums.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is my honour to speak at the opening session of this august Parliament for 2023-2024. I am so honoured to be elected again for a second term and I thank the Almighty God for giving me the strength and wisdom, and for the people of this nation for having trust and confidence in me and voted me in. I am indebted to the voters of Nadi, Votualevu, Sabeto, Tunalia, Korovuto, Marasa and Nabitu in Sigatoka; I pledge to visit each of these areas and hopefully I will be able to meet you all in person.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current political system allows Members of Parliament to represent voters, be their voice in Parliament and directly and indirectly help them realize their aspirations. I pledge to do my best to serve them.

Mr. Speaker, before I go further, I would like to thank my wife Mrs Saleszni Kiran Kirpal for her understanding, support and care during my campaign. She flew in from the United States of American. I also wish to thank my two daughters Shreya Kirpal and Siya Kirpal, my team in Nadi - Ashwin Chand, Michael Naidu, Shynal, Babu Sweets, Mr and Mrs Ranjeet, Mr and Mrs Navin Chand, Ronil Kumar, Rajeev Deo, Anal Ram, Korovuto Nari Group, Nikita Reddy, Duruga Reddy and my hardworking staff of Professional Valuations Pte Limited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, each one of us in this Parliament have taken oath to uphold this Constitution. However, not long after taking the oath, I note that a few Members in Government, notably the honourable Prime Minister and honourable Attorney-General arguing to amend the Constitution. Mr. Speaker, it baffles me. Instead of outlining their agenda and plan to address development needs of this country, they are talking about the Constitution.

Instead of talking about how the work the remote and rural population can continue be lifted out of poverty they are talking about amending the Constitution. Instead of talking about how our vulnerable coastal population will be protected, they are talking about changing the Constitution. Instead of talking about how our squatter households (the work which FijiFirst started) will be given a secure title so that they can construct decent homes, they are talking about amending the Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have lost direction of their boat right from the day 'go'. The entire country is waiting to hear how they will be protected, supported and assisted, and how their aspirations and dreams will be realised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the Government to start governing this country and deal with the above, rather than meddling with the Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also note the honourable Prime Minister's intention to remove the secular State provision in the Constitution. Every Fijian has the right to practice their own religion under the secular State, but I do not understand the reason behind this Government in getting it removed from the Constitution. Secular State simply means that the State or Government cannot push and propagate one religion or denomination.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when you are elected into government, you are the leader of all communities. It is your legal and moral duty to protect, look after and support every community immaterial of their ethnicity or religion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is my humble plea to the Government to rise above communal politics and start behaving as Government and look after every citizen in this country.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Very soon, very soon.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me now turn my attention to finance and budget. I note the appointment of honourable Prasad as Minister of Finance. He had joined the chorus last in the last Budget in July to oppose it. Now, when he has an opportunity to deliver his own budget, he is saying that the budget is alright. Within six months, he has changed his tune. That is nothing but hypocrisy at its best.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Very poor.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Honourable Prasad, be brave to deliver the mini-budget, like the honourable Prime Minister said, and also create transparency. Please, get moving now as we are watching closely and if the Budget is not of standard, we will dissect it Head by Head, line by line. You may take this as an advice or caution, or an early shock - it is up to you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me now turn to promises made by the trio - PAP, SODELPA and NFP. Sir, SODELPA made promises during the Election campaign to remove TELS and replace it with full scholarship. University studies has started but no sign of scholarship at all.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Because you overspent!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the TELS programme gave a sigh of relief to poor parents, as most of the students who were unable to qualify for scholarships has opted for TELS and were able to fulfil their dreams. But God knows what will happen to them now since the Coalition Government wants to cease that programme. It will be very difficult to cater for all the students under the scholarship programme.

The late Mahatma Gandhi said, and I quote: "If we want to reach real peace in this world, we should start educating children". The FijiFirst Government has been instrumental in the education of every child so that we have a literate society.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- The NFP promised \$100 per tonne price for sugarcane but no announcement till now.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Very poor.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, some sugarcane farmers in Nadi have come to me asking if the price of sugarcane has been increased to \$100 per tonne as promised by NFP.

HON. MEMBER.- Very soon, very soon.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- I gave the NFP leader's number but they told me that there is no response.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Aww!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Can the honourable Minister for Sugar give us some confirmation on the price increase during his speech, which I think, is on Thursday, as farmers are looking forward to some good news.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hail from Marasa, Nadi, a remote area and I know how my father and mother toiled hard to give us a better education and put food on our table among three siblings. I know the hardship of the farmers in rural areas and have always been the victim of political promises.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijians are waiting for the slash on 15 basic food items and \$5 per hour as promised during the Election. It is almost more than 50 days but nothing is coming, honourable Minister of Finance.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- You had 16 years.

(Laughter)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- But the promise was made by NFP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture can help reduce poverty, raise income and improve food security. Our FijiFirst Government made major inroads in improving the livelihood of our rural population...

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- ...and I do hope this Government will continue the good work left behind by us. We are watching and we will not hesitate to raise our voices if we see any diversion of resources from this sector.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Most welcome, most welcome!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I list all the promises, it will take the whole day. I now wish to ask them if they are really serious about delivering their promises or was it a mere vote-buying exercise?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now wish to state some specific issues of the Coalition Government witnessed over the last six weeks, which I term as their 'honeymoon' period. Sir, it is ridiculous for the new Chairman of FBC Board to get rid of a modern FBC corporate logo which took nearly six months of hard work to develop and replace it with a Micky Mouse logo and it seems that it will be changed again as announced by the Chairman on Sunday.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Very poor.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, anyone running a professional corporation would know that branding can take decades to consolidate, and logos are not pulled out of a hat or from some free websites.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- What about the bonus?

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is good to see that honourable Gavoka praised Fiji Airways, as previously, he used to criticise our airline and was praising Qantas...

HON. P.K. BALA.- Aww, yes. Momo!

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- At least, now as honourable Minister for Civil Aviation, has realised how important it is to keep our national carrier which is the critical link for our tourism industry. It is not only generating revenue directly, but also indirectly via visitor spending. He should thank the FijiFirst Party for protecting the airline during the pandemic.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- He was critical of the A350s, now he is singing its mantra.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- He is making it out as if the two A350s are his doing, it is not. It is from the former AG's doing. You should know him better. But from your actions, it appears you do not like him.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to commend honourable Bainimarama for his wholehearted effort in maintaining the most deadly disease (COVID-19) by taking early precautions, while some bigger countries were waiting. His decisive leadership made this possible by getting the COVID-19 vaccine for all Fijians and keeping our borders closed to save our nation from this disastrous pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also I commend the doctors, nurses, Fiji Police, Fiji Military Force and all other organisations and individuals who had helped in one way or the other, in keeping our people safe and secure during the height of COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all have a collective responsibility to our beloved nation. It is my hope that we can work together for the common good of the current and future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to guide us, we must be united with a vision that portrays a strong, secure, peaceful and prosperous Fiji, whose people are educated and healthy, and who manage their resources in an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable way.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our aim should be to decrease poverty, promote equal opportunity, promote prosperity and enhance peace and stability to help Fiji achieve its long-term development vision.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we continue our journey, we must always stop to give thanks for the many blessings that God has bestowed on us. Be humble to those whom you meet on your way up, as you may meet the same people on your way down.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Oh, yes!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- We must show gratitude for what we have. Despite our challenges, we are abundantly blessed. Never take anything for granted. Give thanks for each breath of life, each sunrise and each sunset, for we are able to smile, sing and laugh and not be persecuted for our religious beliefs, political beliefs, our opinions and our ability to associate with whichever Fijian we want to.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe that together, we as Fijians can take our nation to new heights. We will be united and we will be a nation that will continue to prosper. May God bless this nation and all of us.

(Acclamation)

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the public who are here today and those joining us through livestream, ladies and gentlemen; *ni bula vinaka saka* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to express my heartfelt thanks to His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Fiji, for his most gracious Address on the occasion of the Official Opening of Parliament session.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am honoured this morning to make my maiden speech. I would like to convey my sincere gratitude, first and foremost, to the Lord God Almighty for the opportunity we all have together today, especially in my first opportunity as Minister for Housing and Local Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to congratulate you on your election as Speaker. It is, indeed, a tribute to your long service to this nation. Sir, you can be rest assured of my full and wavering support and I am sure we have a lot to learn in your guidance and wisdom.

Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a blessed place with abundance of resources, goodness of its people, richness in its diversity and the promise that our people have shown by opting to vote for a change. We have had constitutional crisis, *coups*, reconciliations, disasters and development, but our spirit of

resilience has enabled us to survive and prevail against all of it, including the last 16 years of dictatorship and acclaimed change. It spells out hope for a better Fiji.

Sir, we may have politicians and political parties come here and boast about their electoral strength as a whole or as a coalition in terms of votes and seats but let me remind them, politics is a game of numbers. Until yesterday, the turf was yours, today it is ours.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Tomorrow it will be ours.

(Laughter)

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- We will use it to define and deliver.

On that note, let me congratulate the honourable Prime Minister and all my Cabinet colleagues upon appointment as a Government of Fiji. We are fully aware of the great responsibility we have undertaken, including the promises we have made, our capacity to deliver the same, and the expectations it has raised in our people, including those on the Opposition benches, who have forgotten theirs and are talking about us. Welcome to the change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to congratulate honourable Members of this Parliament upon their election and let me wish each and every one of them a fruitful tenure of office. The Parliament is the highest court in the land, it is a place of dignity and decorum, and let us respect and recognise the high standards set out by our elder statesmen and work towards enhancing the same. It is an institution not to legislate only, but a place of advocacy of public interest, and that equates to the maxim.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very humbled to have a seat in this Parliament and be the voice of the people who have chosen me to be here. Therefore, I want to give credit to whom credit is due.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand proudly in this august Parliament today as a result of the endorsement of the *Bose Vanua ko Nabukebuke* and the blessings of the *Turaga Bale na Vunivalu na Tui Namosi*. Hence, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all my loyal supporters in the province of Namosi and most important of all my high chief, *na Turaga Bale na Vunivalu na Tui Namosi*.

Sa ma nakwa vakalevu vei kemunu na Tako kei na Lavon a veitokoni nkawa. Vei kumunu na noda veikorokoro kece e 26, na koro vagalala kece kei na lima na tikina ena nodatou yasana. Nakwa vakalevu na nanume tiko na vanua kei na Vunivalu na Tui Namosi.

[A heartfelt gratitude to all my *tako* and *lavo* kin for your wonderful support. And to the 26 villages and settlements, and the five districts in my province, immense gratitude for your loyalty to the *vanua* and the Tui Namosi warlord.]

Vei kemudou na noqu vuvale, Mataqali Nadakuni, Koro ko Nakavu, Koro ni Vasu e Namelimeli – Nei Teinaki, Nei Tavinisa, Tu ne, Jolame, Nei Pole kei Nei Ema.

[Acknowledging my family also from the Nadakuni sub-clan in Nakavu village, and my maternal kin in Namelimeli village - Uterine Aunts Teinaki, Tavinisa, Tu Ne, Jolame, Aunt Pole and Aunt Ema.]

Vei kemudou na wekaqu mai vavalagi, nakwa vakalevu na veitokoni levu. Na Vanua o Korolevu, nakwa na veitokoni. Vei noqu vuvale mai Amerika – Vava kei Nene levu, Tukana, Nita,

Vilisi kei Tamai Vilisi mai Igiladi, kei kemudou kece na lewe ni vuvale kece mai vavalagi, nakwa vakalevu na veitokoni.

[Gratitude also to my kin abroad for their immense support. To the Korolevu tribe, much gratitude for your support. To my family in America, senior dad and mum, Tukana, Nita, Vilisi and Vilisi's dad in England, and all my relatives abroad, wholehearted gratitude for the great support.]

Ve i kemudou na noqu matavuvale, rau na noqu yaca mai Nasele, Naitasiri – nakwa vakalevu na veitokoni.

[To my extended kin, my namesake from Nasele in Naitasiri, thank you very much for the loyal support.]

I also salute and thank my campaign team who have supported me and worked tirelessly and enabled me to win a seat in Parliament - *Taitai Vatemo, Lavo Tuiverata, Lavo Leone, Lavo Ro Mocelutu, Qase Mika, Tako Ratu Simione, Tako Kalisito* and *Buinigone nei Vunivalu – Ana Maria*, and not forgetting *Lavo Manumanunitoga* and friend *Tevita Boseiwaqa*.

I also thank all my polling and counting agents for all your support.

I would like to convey my appreciation to all my supporters who lived up to their civic duty and casted their ballots either through postal or polling stations in their respective divisions - thank you for your support.

To all my loyal supporters overseas that supported me financially during my campaign for election, *nakwa saka vakalevu na veitokoni* (thank you very much for your support). I would also like to thank the supporters of our Coalition partners within the Serua/Namosi constituencies, namely *Bimal* from Navua and other silent hardworking supporters, *nakwa saka vakalevu* (thank you very much).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my story is one of many thousands. I have had all facets of life since my upbringing. I was born and raised as a simple village boy and began my primary education at Nakavu Village School before completing it at Deuba District School. I continue my secondary education at Queen Victoria School in Tailevu. After completing my secondary education, I pursued my tertiary studies at the University of the South Pacific and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Accounting and Economics and Masters in Business Administration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir upon completion of my studies, I joined the workforce as a secondary school teacher and later worked for the Fiji Development Bank before my last employment at Housing Authority. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the struggles and challenges I went through and the overwhelming support I have received has made me more prepared to serve the people of our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's Address was visionary that outlined the key mandates of this Coalition Government to work and achieve what is in the best interests of our people. I would like to express my support to His Excellency's sentiments on the re-establishment of the Great Council of Chiefs. This is the true leadership that we have chosen to move forward with the people, then to be in solitude.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I had alluded earlier, I hail from a province where agriculture is the main source of livelihood. I am grateful and fully support the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) Bill that will be finalised to serve the local and export trade. This direction gives hope to

the people who toil the land every day, and what better way to reward their hard work.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the scars of the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters still evident in our societies, it is imperative that we work in unity, building our nation to be resilient and have the ability to recover more efficiently and continue to progress, despite the many challenges we may come across.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the line Minister for Local Government, I stand by the commitment to serve every individual with 13 Municipalities around Fiji, we take pride in this vision and the very reason of our existence. Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the main policy directions that was highlighted by His Excellency was the municipal council elections. The preparation is already underway following Cabinet's endorsement on 31st January, 2023. Let me remind this august Parliament that the last municipal election was held in 2005, almost two decades ago. Where is the democracy that the FijiFirst Government so highly speak about?

In September 2014, honourable Bala promised the nation, council election when he took office and this was his statement to the media, and I quote from the Fiji Village article on 25th September, 2014:

“The new Local Government, Housing and Environment Minister, Praveen Bala said, his immediate task is to see that municipal council elections take place around the country, he said he has been involved in the Local Government ministry for the last 20 years and should not have any problems in carrying out his duties.”

The last Government gave empty promises, whilst the People's Coalition Government takes action. Within three months, I want the Opposition to listen carefully – we will have a clear plan for our Council elections.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- We will not give excuses...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Are you going to deliver?

HON. K.K. LAL.- TELS...

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- We will not give excuses to our people, but we will deliver what we have promised.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- For you only one person decides.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to underscore that there is a critical need to have a separation between the National Government and the Local Government and at the same time, the Local Government's vision, mission and objectives must mirror that of the National Government. The Local Government at their level are the implementation arm of national policies.

We have seen that over the years, there is an increased dependence of the Local Government on National Government for funding and decision-making. Prior to 2014, there were some capital projects funded by the national budget for some municipal councils but in 2014, what used to be a few hundred-thousand-dollars of funding through national budget reached millions of dollars. It was

also noted that the municipal councils became complacent and little effort was made to focus on municipal development plans.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Wastage, wastage!

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the outstanding rates collection is concerning. As at January 2023, Councils have yet to collect 31 percent of this financial year's rates, which is approximately \$10.8 million, but arrears from previous years are very low in collection. The Councils collectively have to collect \$63.9 million.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Go and collect it.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Hence, revenue streams need to be strengthened. In entirety, through the process of preparing for the elections, the Ministry will provide all the Councils with standardised policies, operating procedures, guidelines and manuals. This is very important, especially with councillors being established after almost two decades.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this financial year, the Ministry intends to provide rates amnesty that will provide some relief to the ratepayers who are facing difficulty in paying hefty amounts of interest. In addition, the Council will have the opportunity to tidy their books and records that will allow them to collect the principal amounts owed by the defaulting ratepayers. The Ministry realises that the ratepayers need some incentive for paying their rates and as such, the Councils have been prompted to provide the necessary discounts to the ratepayers as deemed just and reasonable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry and the Municipal Councils will continue to work towards development in the respective Municipalities in accordance with the budgetary allocations and the set policies for the implementation of infrastructure. We cannot just leave the councils to fend for themselves all of a sudden. There are some small councils that may need support to get back on their feet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, consultations have been the cornerstone of the People's Coalition Government's agenda. We believe that with consultation and discussion, we will be able to fund better solutions. Hence, as part of the election's preparation process, we want the ratepayers, the citizens of each municipality to have a say in the process.

We will also ensure that the Councils are engaged with the ratepayers and relevant stakeholders on the need for capital developments in the distinct communities. We remain focused on building Municipal Markets for the benefit of all market vendors and consumers alike.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the formulation of a Strategic Spatial Master Plan of Viti Levu is in progress with a Conceptual Master Plan of the greater Suva, Nadi and Lautoka areas. In finalising these master plans, we will involve the people of Fiji and our key stakeholders to have their say and their voices heard, as their input will be critical in our stance of better serving our towns and cities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also would like to commend the National Fire Authority (NFA) for its services in the last 100 years since its establishment in 1922. The Fire Service has come a long way since then. In light of this milestone achievement of the fire service, a centennial celebration is being planned to celebrate this achievement and to remember the many who have contributed towards the growth of the fire service in Fiji since its beginning 100 years ago.

Mr. Speaker, Sir the National Fire Authority has, indeed, made an impact since its humble beginnings. This Government will continue to support the work of the NFA in providing security for our

property and our lives. We acknowledge the work of the people in the fire service, and we thank them for their continuous service to this country.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Coalition Government is here, not by default, but by a defined mandate of the people - 58 percent who voted for a change, vote of confidence demonstrated by the election of the honourable Prime Minister on the floor of this Parliament and decisions taken democratically by our respected Coalition partners.

The Opposition are at liberty to live in denial of this fact and wander in the wilderness. We are least bothered. The Coalition Government has a duty to serve the people and we will move on to fulfil what we have promised to the people. Already 52 days of happiness and freedom is far greater an achievement to the 16 years of confinement in the guided dictatorship.

That being so, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our style of governance, leadership, policies, programmes and mode of operation will be in part with the ideals and principles of democratic accountability. We are the Government of the people, by the people and for the people. We have grown smarter and greater by the experiences of the past. We have the mandate of the present and share a vision compatible to the future. This is the era of the Coalition where one must learn to renounce and denounce the politics of connivance and convenience and accept and embrace politics of dialogue and consensus building.

Sir, the days and nights of the long knives of fear of oppression are gone. We live in a truly new Fiji today where the guiding dictum of our governance is aptly defined by the immemorial words of the late President Ronald Reagan, and I quote: "The duty of the Government is to serve the people, not to regulate their lives."

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before Parliament. May God bless us all and God bless Fiji.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament for morning tea and when we resume and the bell is sounded, we will invite honourable Semi Koroilavesau to take the floor. The Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.41 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.16 a.m.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, may I join other honourable Members who have congratulated you as being elevated to the position of Speaker of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity to speak in reply to His Excellency's Address at the opening of the 2023-2024 session of Parliament. Before I comment further on His Excellency's Address, please, allow me to thank the people of Fiji that have come out to vote and special thanks to those who voted for FijiFirst making it possible for us to receive the highest vote well above the People's Alliance-NFP coalition. In fact, without SODELPA's support, the situation will be much more different in this Parliament. Our leader, honourable Josia Voreqe Bainimarama, received the highest vote for all candidates that stood for the General Election in 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank my wife - Joanna, my children and their families, for their unwavering support during the preparation for general election. I also wish to thank my relatives and friends from all over Fiji who voted for FijiFirst and for me.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must admit that I did not campaign but worked all right through except for a few days that I took leave to visit Savusavu for the 100 years birthday celebration of Mrs. Brown, wife of Captain Stan Brown; the founder of today's Fiji Navy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have alluded to, I did not campaign but supported those that worked around Fiji correcting misinformation and lies that have been spread around the country. With social media access, these conspiracy theories spread like wildfire and supporters of theories continue today and will remain to be a challenge for Fiji in years to come. I must thank the people of the "*Veivakararamataki*" team; Timoci Gaunavinaka, Lino Nawai and many youths for their tireless work.

The promises and lies made by politicians supported by political parties during this campaign will be a subject that Fiji and Fijians will need to grapple with in years to come. I wish to thank my families, relatives and friends in Nadi, Yasawa, Kadavu and Fiji wide for their trust and support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency in his opening statement had stated and highlighted the difficulties faced in the last three years and I quote:

"Mr. Speaker and honourable Members of Parliament, since November 2021 when I last addressed this Parliament our nation was at the tail-end of efforts to address the global pandemic, natural disasters and a period of uncertainty, distress and loss that gripped our nation".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these challenges were during our FijiFirst Government. We had recovered and the fact that our growth rate was one of the highest in the last quarter of last year in 2022 is tantamount to this fact. The People's Alliance Party Coalition Government in 2023 cannot continue to use the excuse of previous years as that has been dealt with as I have alluded to. Additionally, His Excellency stated that:

"The past three years have been indeed a challenge for us all. As always, we have risen to the challenges and demonstrated our resilience as a nation and one people."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I totally agree with His Excellency but wish to add that it was because of the FijiFirst Government, and its leadership that we were able to successfully steer and navigate our way through the COVID-19 obstacles. This challenge now is for the PAP Coalition Government to recover

as the worst has gone and dusted, having being dealt with by the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency emphasised the need to work together and he stated that as we grapple with ongoing and emerging challenges, this august Parliament should embody the collective spirit of resilience and resolve for our beloved nation, which we call home. I take note of the statement, that the Government needs to concentrate on the job at hand and stop harassing FijiFirst and our supporters. I must also inform this Parliament about the Special Branch of the Fiji Police that has been following our supporters especially our youth members.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Aww!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Who have been visiting other counterparts in and around Fiji.

HON. MEMBER.- I wonder why! Very poor!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- The Minister of Home Affairs should stop using the Fiji Police to advance his political ambition.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Oh, oh!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- His Excellency again reiterated and stated:

“No more than ever, we must be united as one nation and strengthen our resolve to work together to meet our collective challenges. We must continue to look after each other especially those less fortunate and the most vulnerable in our society”.

The PAP Coalition Government must practice good governance. Do not say “thank you” - you wait.

(Laughter)

And make good the promises it made to the people of Fiji during campaigns in the last General Election. His Excellency stated that he was grateful to note that the change in Government took place peacefully and swiftly and the new administration has commenced its work with the mandate of the people. He also acknowledged the contribution and achievement of previous Governments in steering this nation in the last 16 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji are well aware of that performance. The contribution and achievements - that is the reason why FijiFirst received the highest vote by a single political party.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- ...and our leader received the highest vote ...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Too much vote buying.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- ..by any candidate during the General Election.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- In fact, almost double of that of the Prime Minister. His Excellency then went on to announce the policies and intentions of the PAP Coalition Government.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Too much vote buying.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Honourable Minister, I just want to remind you that in the normal Westminster system you have to give your first maiden speech before you can shout across the floor, that is the normal tradition.

The Government should not use His Excellency to be a messenger of excuses. As a Government, the PAP Coalition should take the bull by its horn and manage it.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Oh, yes.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- No amount of excuses will resolve the work that you need to do. Honourable Attorney-General and honourable Minister for Home Affairs must be reminded to stop running around like headless chicken and using the Fiji Police Force and RFMF for their political purposes.

His Excellency the President had touched on social cohesion and unity, and emphasised that the Government's mission is to build unity through social cohesion. There must be a clear focus on upholding the Constitution and the rule of law, the democratic processes including transparency and accountability. You are not doing it. The actions carried out by the PAP Coalition Government over the last few weeks is far-far from democratic processes, transparency and accountability. The Coalition Government is basically giving jobs to their supporters and failed candidates who did not make it to Parliament. You know, do not ask me.

The PAP Coalition Government supporters continue to harass our Members of Parliament and supporters. It is being discussed in every gathering and meetings that we attend. What the Coalition Government has done over the last four weeks, had greatly affected and totally destroyed the very core of the separation of powers. Why did the Government terminate the contracts of senior civil servants, like Permanent Secretaries, Boards, CEOs of Government companies and entities, and put in their supporters, party officials and candidates, who failed to secure....

(Hon. M.S.N. Kamikamica interjected)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- So you are admitting it? They did SO without any due processes and procedures.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, economic and investment confidence is at its lowest level ever. If the Government continues to harass and undermine the rule of law, do not follow proper procedures, deny natural justice and give rise to corruption, people and business and investors will simply fly away. Those who were planning to invest here, will think twice before coming here.

(Chorus of interjections)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President also touched on the revival of rural and outer island development programmes which will boost socio-economic development in our rural settings. The programmes would be directed at income generating projects, improve infrastructure and better services including affordable cyclone resistant housing, power and water supply, sanitation system and sustainable livelihoods. Before I resume my seat, please allow me to highlight to PAP Coalition Government's honourable Ministers and honourable Assistant Ministers that we members of the FijiFirst, have to go through as Members of the Opposition Party.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we the Opposition Members of this side, with our supporters, are continuously harassed by *iTaukei*. I feel for our Indo-Fijian parliamentarians and supporters. So if we come into this Parliament and vent our frustrations, you should try and understand. I am not saying that all the Members of the Government are encouraging and condoning this.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Go to the police, do not come here.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Why not? This is people's Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Go to the police.

HON. P.K. BALA.- This is the people's Parliament.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Coward!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, our parliamentarians and supporters have been verbally and physically abused in public places and on the streets. If our Indo-Fijian brothers and sisters chose to live as Members of Parliament to work for a quiet and peaceful life, who am I to question them. It is their right and freedom. Many Fijians, irrespective of ethnicity are migrating to look for greener fields in other countries, which is their gain. Our MPs have been reported to be picked up by police from home at odd hours to be questioned and released with their interviews suspended - until they raised the question again.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You are lying.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I know it, honourable Kamikamica, because I was there.

Our supporters, especially our youth, have gone to the police to report the Attorney-General and the honourable Prime Minister in doing exactly the same thing that our Secretary-General and our Prime Minister have done and they were told by police that they would be called. Two weeks later no telephone calls.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Bias.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, last week honourable Bulitavu was taken from his home at 5am. I decided to visit him and provided him with breakfast and lunch. The police officers were very kind to me as they recognised me. The discussion I had with them is that the order to arrest was from the top.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Oh!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Which means it is from the political masters.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- We have had our supporters reported being harassed especially our indo-Fijian by *iTaukei* members of the Opposition. It is very embarrassing to people like me as an *iTaukei* and a Christian. The sad fact is that in one hand you hold the Bible and on the other hand you are holding the stone, cursing, throwing defamatory words and intimidating them and their families. It all comes back to a Christian value that you vocally lobby about, starting from Jerusalem.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Tell them.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes.

(Laughter)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me inform this Parliament, the intimidation that I have experienced. In my case, my property has been vandalised, it is alright - materials things.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Why are you complaining?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I did not want to report it as I know that nothing would be done...

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

(Laughter)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Two weeks ago, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had to take my wife for a medical review in Canberra, Australia, as she has been diagnosed with cancer. While at the airport, I was followed around by officials and to avoid my wife being harassed, I took her and served her dinner before I approached the officials.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- The first question I asked them, am I a flight risk?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- They asked what passport I was using. I said, I am using my private passport because I am not entitled to a diplomatic passport. She then called her boss and told the boss that my diplomatic passport was not with me. Anyway, I came back and I burnt the passport.

Let me remind the Government of this simple sentence - since the coming into power of the Coalition Government, there has been an air of uncertainty...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- ...that lingers and the general euphoria of a new government, new changes, very quickly turned into a concerted effort and dismantling of constitutionally established institutions.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Like?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, also very evident now is the abuse of political power to exact political vengeance. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this statement is especially for the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Attorney-General who are Methodist lay preachers, and for the honourable Minister for Home Affairs, a staunch Catholic brought up by the Brothers and Sisters at Natovi Catholic School.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Listen, listen!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I wish I could stand on this floor of Parliament, look up to heaven and say, "God forgive these people, for they not know what they are doing"

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I cannot utter these words as I will be lying to God. It is better for them to say it then me saying it.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I say it everyday.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no doubt in my mind that there are huge challenges ahead and the most urgent ones are the national economy and rule of law. Promising Fijians the world is easy, the challenge is to deliver those promises. I thank you for your indulgence and greatly appreciate this opportunity.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before I call on the honourable Joseph Nand to deliver his speech, I just want to caution us honourable Members that for those who are delivering their speeches, especially their maiden speeches, what has been indicated by honourable Koroilavesau is quite true because we have to allow without any interruption or heckling for the speeches to be delivered smoothly and as such, I seek your indulgence here that we observe that, honourable Members.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and the honourable Members of Parliament; it is a great honour for me to deliver my maiden speech for being elected to yet another term and congratulate our leader, the former Prime Minister, honourable Bainimarama, for leading FijiFirst in securing the greatest number of seats in this Parliament.

Sir, at this juncture, I wish to thank the former Speaker, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, who served in this Parliament with utmost sincere dedication and great responsibility. It is rather unfortunate that he lost out but accepted his defeat with grace which demonstrates the supremacy of our parliamentary process under the 2013 Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am also sure that every re-elected Member of this Parliament will agree with me and say that our last term in Parliament was unforgettable. I wish to thank those Parliamentarians who did not make it for another term and at the same time, congratulate those who have made it for the first time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I move on, allow me to thank my wife, Binita Nand, and my two children - Justin Nand and Chetan Nand, who have been the pillar of strength and a source of inspiration in my political career.

Special thanks and appreciation go to our team in Sigatoka and throughout Fiji for their tremendous support in our campaign. My hearty thanks go to my Campaign Manager, Mr. Abhinesh Raj; members of our team - Mr. Sanjeev, Vishal Jeet, Nalini Devi, Manikam Pillay, Pradeep Singh, Bechu Lal, Jocelyn Singh, Praveen Padyachi, Mohammed Ali of Naidiri Seafood Supplies, Mr. and Mrs. Narend Kumar, Mr. Nandan, Nilesh Kumar, Sanjay Kant, Sonny, Dinesh Singh, Saijadul Jaan Ali, Muni Ratnam, Mohammed Shameem Rehaan, Sanjay Krishna and Rahul Sharma of Lomawai Kava Supplies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am indebted to the unwavering support of numerous communities in Sigatoka, namely - Kabisi, Tuva, Maro, Ciri, Batiri, Semo, Naikeli, Waqali, Lomawai, Namata, Ciriwai, Koromani, Savusavu, Cuvu Top, Tagitagi, Naidiri, Muka, Natadola, China Town, Bangladesh, Uluisila, Malaqere, Waibogi, Kulukulu, Olosara, Navuevu, Bilalevu, Nabaka, Similaya, Nadralla, Samusamu and Maro areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly thank His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, for his acknowledgement of achievements of the previous government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bainimarama-led Government and FijiFirst achievements are unmatched till today, namely through:

- Building a resilient nation through economic growth protected at 8.3 percent in 2023. At the same time, keeping the Fijian economy and businesses afloat during the pandemic.
- Bringing economic empowerment to rural Fijians.
- Expanding access to private doctors for medical services in all districts throughout Fiji.
- Providing a reliable social protection scheme for more than thousands of families, aiding impoverished and vulnerable children and providing monthly cash assistance and food vouchers.
- Establishing sign language interpreters, unique for the Parliamentary session to recognise the rights of differently abled persons.
- Supporting the unemployed and keeping Civil Service pay intact.
- Embracing compassionate and care for Fijian elderly people over the age of 60 for 50 percent concession on bus fares, thus assisting more than 37,000 individuals.
- During COVID crisis, supplied the needy families of this nation with food vouchers. Over 60,000 food ration packs were delivered to the families.
- Improving transportation measures for Yasawa villagers, thus supporting their daily livelihoods.
- Lending a hand that needed the most via the distribution of \$500 million in unemployment support - \$430 million in unemployment support and the rest of \$70 million in other relief measures.

- Launching the Open Rank Taxi System, creating better opportunities through competition and improvement of better taxi service for all Fijians.
- Social Welfare Scheme support to more than 137,000 Fijians to a tune of \$145 million.
- Introduction of Electricity Subsidy Plan for domestic customers who have a combined income of \$30,000 or less.
- Investment of \$1 billion in free education and Tertiary Education Loans Scheme (TELS) and Toppers.
- Regardless of socio-economic background, supported over 53,000 students under TELS since its launch in 2014 with a budgetary allocation of \$1.2 billion.
- Reaching a foreign reserve level of \$3.1 billion as of February 2022.
- building a comprehensive solution to address climate change through the Climate Change Act.
- Despite school shutdown for more than eight months, continue to pay teachers their pay.
- Empowering rice farming communities by giving portable rice mill for their local consumption.
- Topping e-transport cards to students that qualified under free transport assistance scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the list is endless and we all know that, so I would like to, once again, thank the able leadership of our leader, honourable Bainimarama and the former Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Mr. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, who had the vision to build Fiji into a modern nation so that all Fijians can enjoy peace, progress, equality, tranquillity and above all, a reassured security so that all could live without any form of fear or intimidation regardless of where one lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first 20-Year Development Plan provides, and I quote: “The forward-looking vision for ‘Transforming Fiji’ towards an even more progressive, vibrant and inclusive society. It outlines a framework that encompasses strategic policy manoeuvres, new approaches to development and aspirations of all Fijians.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our achievements have been driven by the establishment of a modern and inclusive Fijian Constitution that states in Chapter 1, and I quote:

“The Republic of Fiji is a sovereign democratic State founded on the values of -

- (a) common and equal citizenry and national unity;
- (b) respect for human rights, freedom and the rule of law;
- (c) an independent, impartial, competent and accessible system of justice;
- (d) equality for all and care for the less fortunate based on the values inherent in this section and in the Bill of Rights contained in Chapter 2;
- (e) human dignity, respect for the individual, personal integrity and responsibility, civic involvement and mutual support;
- (f) good governance, including the limitation and separation of powers;
- (g) transparency and accountability; and
- (h) a prudent, efficient and sustainable relationship with nature.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it boggles my mind that this Coalition Government as reported in the media, is thinking of changing our Constitution. Wherever you go, there is a powerful sentiment of ethno-nationalism being engineered and smeared into our mainstream media. The hidden agenda behind this is the zeal and lust to divide, and no credible desire to unite, contrary to the FijiFirst Government has done - uniting all Fijians under one banner and giving all its citizens the common name, ‘Fijian’.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this fourth or fifth generation Indo-Fijian will, in the near future, have to fill a piece of paper to say that they are Indian. It is a sad day for all the Fijians in this nation, especially those

who had toiled hard and broke every brick of racism to ensure that we are all called Fijians. Remember the Indo-Fijians have no other place they call or can call 'home', Fiji is their home, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government side did not fight this election purely on the interests of all Fijians, but to denounce and discredit the good work done by the FijiFirst Government. They gave false hope to the people and kept on repeating until people believed and it became truth for them, and they got the votes. Such was the level of manipulation, Sir. We have yet to see those promises being fulfilled. All we see is welcoming ceremonies and garlands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President, in his concluding remarks, said and I quote: "The change in our Government gives rise to the opportunity to bring our nation together and start afresh". The manner in which the Coalition Government, over the past months, have conducted their business and undermined the rule of law, violating policies and procedures, uttered statements without due consideration to the existing laws, reform and SOPs that are in place, reminds me of a poem by WB Yeats – The Second Coming and which says, and I quote:

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre;
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosened upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to sum it up, let me pay my tribute to our former Attorney-General in his words when he spoke during his presentation of the Voluntary National Review on Thursday, 18th July, 2019 in New York. He said, and I quote:

"At the very core of everything we do is an unshakeable commitment to leaving our communities, our country, and the world, better than what we inherited. We are resolutely committed to equality and inclusivity for all of our citizens, creating a golden era of opportunity for young Fijian girls and boys to take advantage of.

In 2013, we forever enshrined these values in our Constitution, shedding a long history where Fiji was mired with inequality, preferentialism and exclusion. We've put a special focus on bringing in those previously marginalised members of society - particularly our women, our young people, and those living with disabilities - ensuring that the Fijian future would be one not of oppression and missed opportunities, but one of empowerment and inclusion."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what a thought and what a vision.

The respectable former Attorney-General said, and I quote:

"Your vision may not be fully realised or even given enough coverage but deep down in everyone's heart, we all know that we have left a legacy that perhaps will be very hard for anyone to match."

Thank you very much, Sir, for your contribution, and this Parliament will always have a longing to welcome you back in the near future should you wish.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having said that, let me thank all our voters who stood for FijiFirst, locally and

abroad, and some who are in eternal abode. We will continue and commit to champion the causes of our former Prime Minister and our leader laid before this nation.

Best wishes to all the Members of Parliament and as I sojourn, Sir, I leave you with a quote by our Leader and the former Prime Minister, honourable Bainimarama, at the USP Open Day on Friday, 27th July, 2018, and I quote:

“They can also tell you some of the ugliest parts of our nation’s history. Those traumatic periods we endured before any of you were born. You didn’t experience the political upheavals that ripped apart the fabric of our nation in 1987, and the years of backwards divisive leadership that followed. You didn’t know the many thousands of Fijians who fled the country, those who lost faith that they could ever be accepted or be successful here in Fiji. You never knew the suffering of that time, and I assure you, so long as we remain united and keep Fiji on the path of progress, you never will. Because that is not the Fiji of today. Today, we are a united country, all of you - no matter who you are, no matter where you come from – are Fijians. We all share the same destiny. We all share the same love for our country or one another, and we all share the same care and concern for the future direction of our nation.

But make no mistake, the voices of hatred and division that once did such untold damage to our nation are not gone. We’ve pushed them to the fringes of society, but they still persist. I’m sure you may have seen that kind of divisive and damaging thinking on social media, with people attacking those of different ethnicities and those of different religious. Unfortunately, we are even seeing those kinds of attacks being made by political leaders today in this country. It’s completely unacceptable - it’s not something we can ever tolerate as a society. And as young Fijians, as the next generation, it is you who must finally shut the door for good on any and all attempts to divide our society along ethnic, religious or communal lines.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us wish and pray for the spirit of tolerance never to fade away and we shall forever remain a united nation, stronger and bigger than ever before.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you very much for giving me this opportunity. God bless all Fijians.

(Acclamation)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the motion in the name of the honourable Prime Minister, that we thank his Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, for his most gracious Address.

Mr. Speaker, I also join the honourable Members of Parliament in congratulating you on your appointment and wish you a successful tenure and good health, Sir.

I also congratulate all honourable Members of Parliament who have been re-elected, albeit, for a different side, and my best wishes to all the new Members of Parliament. It is my honour and privilege to serve the people of Fiji once again during this term of Parliament, in particular, as your Deputy, Sir. I do regret, however, looking around the room, Mr. Speaker, that the number of Women Members of Parliament in this Parliament has dropped to only five from 11 in 2020.

According to the Parliament of Fiji website, Mr. Speaker, women representation in Parliaments globally has more than doubled in the last 25 years, reaching 24.9 percent in 2020, up from 11.3 percent in 1995. However, women’s parliamentary representation in the Pacific region has been historically low.

Quoting the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) publication, “Women in Parliament – 1995-2020 –

25 years in review”, a number of barriers were highlighted in the report as contributing factors to the low representation of Pacific women in Parliament, and I quote:

“The region’s dispersed geography makes it all the more difficult for women to campaign, as they often cannot afford extensive travel and also because they bear most family and care-giving responsibilities. The Pacific, unfortunately, also has one of the highest levels of gender-based violence against women, which further hampers their full participation in all areas of life.”

I am confident, however, Mr. Speaker, that Local Government elections will act as a catalyst to increasing women’s participation in political life. I am confident that we will see more women and young people put their hands up to serve Fiji through their municipalities. I am confident of seeing many women especially, as town and city councillors and mayors. Participation in Local Government has often been seen as a steppingstone into national politics.

Mr. Speaker, please, allow me a few minutes to make some acknowledgements and say some ‘thank yous’ during this, my first speech as a Government Member of Parliament.

Firstly, to my small nuclear family; my pretty amazing parents - Eta and Radike Qereqeretabua who are 81 years and 85 years old respectively and who, to this day, continue to be my biggest cheerleaders; my husband and my earthly covering – Poasa; daughter Ana-Lisa and her husband, Jonathan Hill; and my brother - Sakiusa and his bride - Emily in Auckland. I could not have gone on this journey without your support from day one.

Vinaka saka vakalevu to my family from the *Yavusa o Natusara*; my own family of Dravuni, the *Turaga na Ramalo*, na *Vuvale Matamata*, and in Buliya, the *Turaga Na Tui Buliya* and the *Vuvale Natibitibi*, in the Tikina of Ono in Kadavu.

Maleka saka vakalevu ki na Vanua o Rara, Na i Vakatalewai, Naitasiri, my family in Navoka, Nabaitavo and Nataveya, and in Sector 6 in Lomaivuna; my *Tavales* - Tamai Oveti and Tamai Meme at Lomaivuna, and Tamai Sala at Navoka and also Raivaqu Tinai Jo. *Maleka saka vakalevu*.

Mr. Speaker, I want to mention and thank Mr. Dinesh Kumar and our friends of Narere Stage 1, at Omkar Road, Narere, and in Penang, and the members of every community and village I was blessed to have visited; from Nadroga to Kadavu, from Navava in Savusavu to Nananu and Burerua in Tailevu, from Nadovu in Naitasiri to Barara in Sabeto, from the Mamanucas to Ovalau and everywhere in between, *vinaka saka vakalevu*.

I am, of course, grateful to all NFP supporters in the Central, Eastern, Western and Northern Divisions, and abroad, and pay tribute to all our candidates. I have nothing but gratitude for the NFP engine room, whose tonnes of knowledge continue to be invaluable. To the amazing team of men and women who were my polling agents, I am so grateful for your support, camaraderie and keen interest in the process. We all learnt a lot.

I also want to acknowledge my Fiji Sign Language classmates, and my friends at Suva standup paddlers and the Suva Harbour Foundation. Then there are those who kept me in their prayers from within my New Way International Fellowship church family - thank you for your prayerful support. I am very grateful to you all - Talatala Josaia Tokea, Talatala Jope Tamani, Talatala Jo Lauvanua, your wives and the wider church family in the Central, Eastern, Northern and the Western Divisions.

None of this, Mr. Speaker, would have been possible without the mercy and grace of my Lord

and Saviour to whom I return all honour, glory and praise, who has sustained me, lifted my head and gave me strength and provision during this journey.

Mr. Speaker, if you allow me, I would like to turn my attention to Housing. Shelter, as we all know, is a fundamental human need so naturally, housing affordability and accessibility is a felt issue. In the last three months as our nation transitioned to a new Government after the 2022 General Election, the Ministry of Housing continued its mandated role of providing housing assistance to our low and middle income earning families, from first time home owners, housing assistance for fire victims and people living with disabilities, and the upgrading of informal settlements.

Mr. Speaker, it is no surprise that the housing sector continues to face challenges that impact our roles as service providers. As I took up office this year, I listened, observed and realised that there is much to do. The demand for housing is increasing, however, supply has not been enough to meet it.

But I have to say that I am inspired and impressed by the commitment and enthusiasm of the men and women, who work in the respective housing sectors; the Ministry of Housing; the institutions – the Housing Authority, Public Rental Board, HART and Koroipita, and I wish to convey my sincere appreciation to them. *Vinaka vakalevu* for your continued hard work and dedication. I also wish pay tribute to the former Minister, honourable Premila Kumar, for her leadership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as stated by His Excellency the President, the ultimate goal here is improving the lives of all the people in Fiji, and this Government aims to increase access to affordable and quality housing to our low and middle income families and those living in informal settlements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will be carrying out thorough reviews and re-aligning our strategies to address the challenges the housing sector faces. We will work to strengthen collaboration with private and public sectors to improve the standard of housing and its affordability for the people of Fiji.

In addition, the upgrades of informal settlements will continue for 12 settlements - four in the Central division, seven in the Western Division and one in the Northern Division. Mr. Speaker, three informal settlements that have had upgrades completed, and this Government will make it our priority to ensure that the issuance of the 99-year leases will be done this year for the 451 households who have been living in the hope of land tenure and security for a long time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency told us that the Government would continue its efforts to end violence against women and girls and to that end, Sir, I humbly ask all honourable Members here and everyone watching to, please, wear black tomorrow and every Thursday, if possible, to show your support for and solidarity with survivors of gender-based violence, to remember those who did not survive, and as a peaceful protest against violence in all its forms.

Thursdays in black is what I am talking, Mr. Speaker. It was started by the World Council of Churches in the 1980s as a form of protest against rape and violence. That has now become a practice for many women's groups and human rights defenders to stand in solidarity against domestic violence and rape, a global campaign against violence and abuse in its many forms and in Fiji, of course, we know that this has been led by the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre and the Fiji Women's Rights Movement.

There is no doubt that there is a lot of work to do, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we are ready. It is my hope that both sides of Parliament will work together for the good of our beloved Fiji.

(Acclamation)

HON. S. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests seated in the gallery, members of media organisations, all those joining us through televised programme from around the world via Parliament *Facebook* live, dear Fijians, families, friends and well wishes from Fiji and abroad; my sincere greetings, *ram ram, namaste, ni sa bula vinaka* and *as-salaam alaikum* to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to glorify FijiFirst victory to the Almighty God. Thank you, honourable Leader of the Opposition, for blessing this nation with your sincere strong leadership and your complete commitment to contribute to the entire nation through best leadership qualities that is unmatched by any other leader. This is evident from the past 16 years, as one can see how much the country and its people have benefitted under your leadership.

I thank the Party General-Secretary, Mr. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, for the vision of trust envisaged in me to be a candidate of such a strong political party. On the same note, I congratulate my fellow Members of Parliament, who have been appointed for another term and to all who are appointed for the first term along with me.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me personally acknowledge and thank the people and organisations that were behind FijiFirst and my success as a candidate. I have been blessed by the Almighty and am humbled as I pay tribute and respect to my late great grandmother, who was dubbed by unscrupulous recruiters with my grandfather who was five years old and ended up in Fiji. Little did she know that 100 years later, her great grandson would contribute to this great nation's wellbeing by being elected as a Member of Parliament. Her decision and the decision of her fellow *jahaji* brothers and sisters brought great labour force to an inland unknown to them to which we call home today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, any united family becomes an asset to the nation. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the unwavering support of my dear wife - Radha Romika Kumar, who fully supported and respected my decision to join politics in my early forties; my son - Reyansh Soham Kumar, who is too young to understand my new profession, for his love and affection that makes me strong each day to serve my beloved country.

Today, I thank God and remember my late parents – Mr. and Mrs. Ram Deo who, despite all odds, brought me up in the dairy farming community of Viria in Naitasiri. They must be smiling from the heavens fort and unfolding blessings in many ways as I stand here today in this prestigious chamber of the nation.

At this juncture, I would also like thank my nephew - Azhar Tanvir Ali, who has always been there beside me in this journey and Mr. and Mrs. Arfaz Ali for their continued support towards me and my family.

I thank my in-laws – Mr. and Mrs. Hansraj Harakh, who have nurtured my beautiful wife and happily married her to me 18 years ago, despite I hailed from a rural setup with only basic facilities.

My sincere thanks to my two brothers, my sister-in-laws, a sister and brother-in-law, who have always stood by my side and to all my nephews and nieces for their continued love and obedience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my heartfelt appreciation goes to my teachers who have taught me at Viria Public School, Bhawani Dayal Arya College, Vedic Training Centre, University of the South Pacific,

University of Fiji, Fiji College of Advanced Education and Australia Pacific Training Coalition. The efforts of my teachers in shaping my character and personality are shining today as I embrace politics. They have become successful in instilling discipline in me from back in time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before deciding to enter politics, I have been a secondary school teacher, a social and religious worker, Justice of Peace (JP), marriage celebrant and a counsellor. It took me 18 years to fully understand and train myself to prepare for the bigger responsibility. Yes, Sir, I believe in achieving excellence through patience and today as I look back, I am proud that I have come up the ladder.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I sincerely acknowledge the tremendous support and faith of the fellow teachers, ex-students, parents and community of following schools that I have been privileged to be a teacher - DAV College in Nabua, Rishikul Sanatan College, Jasper Williams High School, Basden Anglican College, Bhawani Dayal Arya College, Pt. Shreedhar Maharaj College, Vunimono High School and Dilkusha Methodist High School in Nausori.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the following organisations who have played a pivotal role in nurturing me into an aspiring politician. They have provided me with various platforms and nurtured me to this honourable title:

1. Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji for providing necessary training and providing me with my first employment.
2. Shree Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji and Sanatan Rewa Branch for having faith in me to lead the Youth Council and serve as Branch General Secretary.
3. Methodist Church in Fiji Indian Division - Dilkusha Circuit for instilling strong values in me through the word of God.
4. Ministry of Education for being my employer and providing me with necessary skills, training and exposure to serve at different positions.
5. Ministry of Justice for allowing me to serve in different capacities mentioned earlier on.
6. Fijian Broadcasting Corporation Limited and Fiji Television Limited for providing me an opportunity to reach out to the nation and the rest of the world through broadcast programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with my vast experience in educational, religious and social organisations, I urge this august Parliament to leave behind old politics on race and religious lines and join hands to embrace the changes needed to develop our nation into an era of development which is inclusive and which benefits every member of our nation. Sir, that is the challenge that the FijiFirst manifesto is providing for all Members of Parliament present in this Chamber to embrace.

Joining politics is not an overnight decision. It requires deep thought, perseverance, sacrifice and commitment. My interest in joining politics grew in 2018 but as alluded earlier, it is all God's will and His plans. I have always admired the leaders of this nation and got encouraged by many of you seated here. To serve the nation, one must serve God and his people first. It is the people who put us here and I will totally fail in my duty if I do not acknowledge the support of my people from all over Fiji.

I acknowledge the 'vanua' and chief of Viria Village, Naqali Village, Savu Village, Nawaqabena Village, Vatulili Village, Korovou Village, Waisasavu Village, Waisa Village, Nasama Village, Naterumai Village, Savarua Village, Serea Village, Navolau Village, Nataveaira Village, Navutu Village, Lomai Village, Vanuakula Village, Nauluvatu Village, Nabukaluka Village, Naiborebore and Waitolu Village.

I also acknowledge the support and vote towards my success from the following settlements, my immediate family living along me at Naduri Settlement, Wainikia and Viria Settlement for their tremendous support, people and families of Lomaivuna, Vunidawa, Muaniweni, Nasi, Sawani, Tauli and Nakadi, Waila, Navuso, Dilkusha, Vuci, Waituri, Vuci South, Vusuya, Raralevu, Korociriciri, Naselai, Wainibokasi, Visama, Manoca, Lakena, Nakasi, Davuilevu, Narere, Caubati, Cunningham, settlements from Navua, Korotogo, Malolo, Moala Road in Nadi, Lautoka, Ba, Tavua, Waimari, Madhuvani, Barotu and Vunikavikaloa in Rakiraki, Labasa, Savusavu, Levuka and Taveuni.

I thank the people of Fiji for their belief in me and my party. I thank all my campaign managers and all those who accompanied me to nationwide campaign. Finally, I would like to thank the Supervisor of Elections, Mr. Mohammed Saneem for his excellent execution of the 2022 General Election.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, being a Member of Parliament, I shall not only serve my province of Naitasiri but I am duty bound to serve the entire nation. I request members of the public to approach me freely for any matters that I can be of use to anyone, irrespective of their political affiliations. I know your languages and want to understand you better to try and solve the problem that you are faced with. Mr. Speaker, Sir, many of the FijiFirst supporters did not vote during this election out of fear of victimisation, but I urge the voters to exercise their rights freely and vote with confidence, for their vote decides the future of this beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am thrilled to take note of the initiative of the FijiFirst Government towards strengthening National Marketing Authority and future export market for root crops, vegetables and fruits growing locally in the world market with better pricing so that farmers who are involved in farming enjoy measurable return.

On the same note, the FijiFirst Government's assistance towards the dairy industry is very much appreciated. This includes transportation, subsidies, dairy and cow feed subsidies, well-trained agricultural staff, livestock loss replacement programmes and negotiations for fair farm gate pricing to milk suppliers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will directly benefit the farmers in rural areas, who will assist in developing our agro-industry further. While thanking the past and future milestone successes of the Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the current Government to pay greater attention to dairy and vegetable farmers of this nation, for they work hard to put fresh produce on our tables.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President of Fiji, in his most gracious speech spoke so much about the indigenous rights that he failed to acknowledge that the Indo-Fijians also exist in the nation and whose contribution go as far as 143 years back. He failed to acknowledge that we are all Fijians. My plea to the Government is to consider everyone as equal citizens and protect the common citizenry and identity as enshrined in the 2013 Constitution. For anywhere in the world I will go, I will be addressed as a Fijian national and not an Indian national.

While giving a common national identity does not mean that I will share the indigenous rights or royalties but in return, it will give me a sense of belonging since Fiji is home to the children of *Girmitiyas* and this is where we belong. Then only the Girit Day (public holiday) will sound more

appropriate and meaningful. Girmit should not remind us that we the descendants do not belong here but should be acknowledged as the immense contribution of our foreparents in building this nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Girmit Day will sound more meaningful if the Government of the day continues to protect the rights of the *Girmitias* children through promoting the languages, culture and heritage of Indian diasporas. The contribution of the *Girmitias* and their children in nation building is immense and it pains to hear from His Excellency that my people are classed as minorities.

Finally, to the people of Fiji, I thank you. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I will work every day for you, I will walk a mile in your shoes, I will be courageous, I will be worthy of the trust you have placed in me and I will not let you down. I believe that our greatest strength lies in our diversity. We must celebrate and embrace the differences that make our nation great and work to promote unity and understanding.

(Acclamation)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge His Excellency's Address at the opening of Parliament.

Let me congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on your appointment to the high office, and your Deputy – honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua. I wish you all the best in keeping the honourable Members of this Parliament in check.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also congratulate the honourable Prime Minister and his Coalition partners for forming the Government by only one vote, however, a win is a win. But I also want to remind Parliament to, please, stop saying, "that the people appointed this Government". We all know that it is SODELPA that appointed this Government, not the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is to be noted that all 29 Government Members in Parliament are either Ministers or Assistant Ministers, and if you think that, that is unusual, then look at the appointment of three Deputy Prime Ministers, in a country with less than a million people. So, congratulations for setting a world record.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before the Election, there was much hype on reducing the cost of Ministerial salaries. In reality, the cost has increased after 10 percent reduction in salary. Are they noy fooling the public? Is this how the Coalition Government will fulfil its Election promises?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our leader, honourable Bainimarama, and the former Attorney-General, Mr. Sayed-Khaiyum, were accused of holding too many portfolios. People are now questioning why honourable Rabuka is holding so many portfolios, despite having three Deputy Prime Ministers and each Member of Parliament in the Coalition Government are holding a ministerial post.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Aww!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- They blamed FijiFirst for this but how different are you? Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has gone back in time with ministerial portfolios that are no longer applicable in the 21st Century but they will do it come what may, because it is all about themselves individually not about the country, even if their actions will cause social disruption. For example, in their quest to get PWD come what may, they have already caused hundreds of job losses for those working for Fijian and foreign companies. Is this the change people wanted - to be jobless?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I applaud all women who made it to Parliament. However, women representation in Parliament has taken a nosedive, as we have heard from honourable Qereqetabua, 14 percent in 2014, 22 percent in 2018 and 9 percent in 2022. It is not that women do not stand for election. In 2022 55 women fought the election and only six succeeded and we now only have five, after one resignation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in total, all 55 women candidates received a meagre 37,159 votes, which is 16 percent of the total votes cast. This is a very poor result for a country where women make up 50 percent of the population. A considerable amount of work on the ground needs to be undertaken to ensure more women are in Parliament and participating at the highest level of decision making. In this regard, it is important that women support women and not just give lip service.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I recall the Maiden Speech made by the honourable Prime Minister in 2018, where he said, that during his time as Prime Minister, only two women were Members of Parliament: one of them became his Deputy Prime Minister; and the second was a Cabinet Minister. Today, we have four women in his Government with only one given a Cabinet Minister post. She, as Deputy Leader of PAP, could have been a Deputy Prime Minister to give some sort of gender balance. I hope women are watching this and I appeal to all women to see for themselves, that it is really a job for the boys.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I congratulate my colleagues on this side of Parliament, as we represent the single largest Party in Parliament. I sincerely express my appreciation and profound gratitude to every Fijian for their unwavering support for FijiFirst. It is a great privilege once again to be a Member of Parliament, and I owe this privilege to our leader and the people of Fiji who chose me to represent them in this august Parliament for the second time. As an effective Opposition we are here to support policies that are good for the nation, and probe for clarity, transparency and accountability in the governance of this nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the tourism and airline sectors which were worst hit during the COVID -19 pandemic, has seen the fastest growth under the FijiFirst Government and we heard from honourable Bainivalu and honourable Gavoka on how well our airline and the tourism sector is performing. Not once did they give credit to the FijiFirst Government for its rock-solid policies and strong leadership during COVID-19 that saved our airline from going belly-up at a time when other airlines folded up for good. Honourable Gavoka is on record for expressing his concern that Qantas was not playing an active role in the affairs of Fiji Airways, knowing very well that Qantas is in competition with our national carrier. Now my question to honourable Gavoka is, we want to know when will honourable Gavoka bring Qantas, to save Fiji Airways and to increase Fiji Airways profitability? And I ask him to read Hansard 25th May, 2020.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some Members of Parliament, then in Opposition, had objected to everything that the Government was doing. They even demanded the return of the aircrafts...

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- *Tik Tok*.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- ... and even circulated *Tik Tok* eating aeroplanes...

(Laughter)

They suggested printing of money, and reduction of civil servants pay. Thank God, we did not listen to them, not to a single one of them. Imagine if we did return the planes or printed more money, the scenario would be very different today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fijians are watching and they are curious to know how this Government will manage the economy and when will they reduce the cost of living, which was the key agenda during their campaign. Coalition Parties had a lot of pre-election promises. People are now asking as to –

- when the honourable Prasad will remove the 20 percent fuel subsidy to make fuel affordable;
- when will the Government restore individual FNPF member funds withdrawn during COVID-19 for self-help;
- when will they increase the minimum wage to \$5 an hour;
- when will they increase the social welfare payment from \$100 to \$200 which is on record, as said by honourable Tabuya; and
- now that we have the honourable Agni Deo Singh in the Government, how will this Government fulfil the call he made for a 20 percent across the board salary increase for teachers?

The people of Fiji were waiting for the mini budget to hear the good news, but then the Minister of Finance is not in agreement with his Prime Minister.

HON. J. NAND.- Give it to honourable Radrodro.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, leadership is about making a difference in people's lives and we heard that from the honourable Prime Minister. Our leader demonstrated not only during COVID-19 pandemic but throughout his journey as the Prime Minister of Fiji. His Excellency has also mentioned in his speech that the last three years have been full of challenges and acknowledged that we have risen to the challenges and demonstrated our resilience as a nation and as one people.

I pay tribute to our leader, honourable Bainimarama, for everything Fiji has accomplished under his leadership. We owe him a great deal of gratitude for the social, economic, and political stability that we enjoyed and often took it for granted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FijiFirst Government's contribution and achievements was also acknowledged by His Excellency in his Address. The achievements of the FijiFirst Government are well known but there are many who conveniently turn a blind eye.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Free Education, School Grants, Free Bus Fares, Dignity Packs for our girls and Toppers and TELS were the greatest achievements of the FijiFirst Government, not forgetting the infrastructure development. Now TELS and Toppers are in jeopardy. How will Scholarships be given? Is it to everyone who qualifies for tertiary education or just to those based on merit or ethnicity? What happens to others? Are they left on their own to fend for themselves and deplete their parents' FNPF or get loans at high interest rate from the financial institutions or abandon tertiary education completely?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, the government has continued TELS for first semester of 2023, but it is not clear what will happen from the second semester? I have been advised that some students have not enrolled because of lack of information on what will happen to TELS and if TELS goes out of the window, how will it be replaced by scholarships and then who will qualify?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the enormity of promising a piece of moon just to win an election is now starring in the eyes of government because they went ahead and made election promises without realising that its easier said than done. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I agree that we had to borrow during our time, but these borrowings were for capital works, and these were very well managed. FijiFirst time,

Government had never defaulted a single repayment.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- And none of us sitting in this Parliament have built our empire without borrowing. Government debt should not become an excuse for the Coalition Government to borrow further, borrowing depends on how good your economic and social policies are. How robust your financial and economic governance are. Something that lenders and development partners had confidence in FijiFirst Government which enabled us to borrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency stated that 'there must be a clear focus on the rule of law and democratic processes including transparency, accountability, respect for human rights and freedoms, and listening to the views of the people through genuine consultation. Is this being practised?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have already witnessed the high-handed nature of the Coalition Government since they came into power. Let me remind them, it happened in 1987, yes it happened in 1986. This is 2023, 21st Century, please, stop doing that now. You are the elected government - we recognise that...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- And you have lost it, we had it.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- What happened in 2006?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen and experienced the revengeful mood of the Coalition partners. We see that there is virtually a takeover of institutions that are independent. We see people being fired or forced to resign. We see failed politicians and cronies being put in high positions in the civil service and on the Boards. I can give you an example of Mr. Leawere, who was a SODELPA failed politician who is now firing the shots at the Ministry of Education.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- He is qualified.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- They have been quick to appoint those who lost the election or are Party supporters and some of them were appointed before the application for board membership closed, and a good example is the FBC Board. We have seen how incompetent the chair is. They have blamed FijiFirst for this. You have blamed FijiFirst for this but my question to you is how different are you?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Very different.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, we have seen the difference in just a few weeks. And is this the change they advocated? Please wake up. You have won the election -run the Government appropriately.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are many people pleasing initiatives or self-pleasing actions that have been put in place by the Coalition Government, without understanding the economic consequences or public sentiments. His Excellency has asked the Government to put in place necessary measures so that there is a level playing field certainty and consistency of policies that will boost confidence across the board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, where is this level playing field certainty and consistency of politics? For example, in the Ministry of Education, let me share a recent *Facebook* message. The failed PAP

candidate is still claiming to be the General Secretary of Fijian Teachers Association, Mr. Paula Manumanunitoga, on his *Facebook* page addressed teachers Fiji wide. What caught my attention was this paragraph, and I quote:

“I wish to mention that now as I sit as FTA Rep in the MOE Staff Board, I shall be promoting only the interests of those faithful FTA members who stuck with us and showed true unionism qualities in solidarity and standing for our rights.”

He ends his statement by guaranteeing job security and promotion assistance. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is worrying.

HON. MEMBER.- That is the change!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Why should unions be involved in the appointment and promotion of teachers? Are unions involved in the private sector? I would like to ask honourable Kamikamica, statutory bodies and other Government entities when it comes to appointments and promotion? They are not. They are not involved.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You wanted to destroy the unions.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I had raised this practice of the past before which was denied by honourable Agni Deo Singh when he was the General Secretary of FTU. Now it is out in the open. Now it is all about who you know and not what you know. Mr. Speaker merit-based appointments created level playing field giving equal opportunities to all Fijians, regardless of province, race, religion, cast or creed. Unfortunately, we are going backwards. I appeal to the teachers to wake up and see what is happening. There is no level playing field at all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am deeply concerned that His Excellency had nothing to say about the development of informal settlements and housing needs. I read his speech again and again thinking he must have mentioned it somewhere. We heard from honourable Tabuya and honourable Qereqeretabua consistently in the Parliament that the FijiFirst Government had no plans to address the housing needs and I hope that honourable Qereqeretabua, now that she is the Assistant Minister for Housing, you may have seen what all we have done and thank you for acknowledging that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- *Vinaka.*

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- But where is the Coalition Governments Plan on such an important issue? Is this issue so insignificant that it could not make it to the President's Speech?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also want to comment on the declaration of extra public holidays for Girit Day and Ratu Sukuna Day. It is up to the Government of the day to determine the number of holidays. By not having these two holidays, it did not mean that FijiFirst Government did not recognise the significance behind this. FijiFirst Government recognised that both are an important part of history.

However, my issue and people have also pointed out that while 14th May marks the day when our forefathers first landed in Fiji, unfortunately this day also marks one of the darkest day in Fijian history the coup of 1987 carried out by none other than the current Prime Minister, honourable Sitiveni Rabuka.

HON. MEMBER.- What are you talking about?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- We are talking about Girit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst Girit holidays are welcomed, 14th May will not be appropriate as this day will not be solely dedicated to *Girmitiyas* but they will see 14th May as the day many descendants were raped, tortured, made homeless and relegated to second class citizen. Any other date before that could be a good option.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2018 when I entered the Parliament for the first time, I acknowledged the people who have made an impact in my life, also those who had motivated and inspired me to enter politics. Today, I acknowledge them once again for putting their trust in me.

To my parents - the late Mr. Ram Karan and late Mrs. Ram Kuar, I am sure you are here with me in spirit. Thank you for moulding me into what I am today. To my husband Jayendra for your unwavering love and support that helped me to pursue my dream whether as a professional or in politics. To my children; Shaman, Yamal and Ashmi for being my rock, to my 2023 campaign team members for their commitment, advice and hard work in organising campaign meetings. To my standard Bureta Street family for your staunch support, to my brother Sunil Karan, his wife Sangeeta, and his friends. Thank you for always being there whenever I needed you. To my in-laws from the Western, Central and Northern Division; thank you very much, *bahut dhanyavad*.

A very special acknowledgement to Ms. Gayatri for her unwavering support throughout my campaign trail - thank you for everything and I do cherish your friendship. Last but not the least, a big thank you to my supporters from Nausori to Navua, Western and Eastern Division, Labasa, Savusavu, Levuka, Taveuni for their votes.

(Acclamation)

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to His Excellency's most gracious speech delivered in this august Parliament to mark the opening of the new Parliament under the People's Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, I wish to acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit in this august Parliament in guiding me through my campaign trail. I also congratulate your appointment as Speaker of this august Parliament and congratulate honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua for her appointment as Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the honourable Prime Minister for his confidence and trust placed on me to be part of his candidate listing and to be on the line-up of Ministerial portfolios. I am deeply honoured, honourable Prime Minister, Sir.

I wish to thank all my supporters nationwide, who have voted me here and I wish to ensure you all that I will be your voice in this august Parliament. *Vinaka saka vakalevu na nomuni veitokoni, vinaka saka vakalevu na nomuni digidigi kei na nomuni veivakabauti* (Thank you all so much for your support, thank you for your votes and for your trust).

Last but not the least, I would like to acknowledge and extend my sincerest appreciation to my immediate family. I thank my wife - Elenoa Ravu, and my children for their never-ending support during my campaign trail. I also thank all my extended families nationwide for their confidence and trust.

I share the sentiments of His Excellency the President that the outbreak of COVID-19 has disturbed the global political, social, economic, religious and financial structures. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the nation regroups to take a grip of this crisis, the People's Coalition Government is determined to elevate Fiji to greater heights with proactive planning and smart partnerships. The Government is

is of the people, by the people and for the people. We, therefore, must be united as one nation.

Mr. Speaker, the national debt has widened and putting all eggs in one basket is not the solution. The potential of natural resource-based sectors like fisheries, forestry and others cannot be further undermined. The Ministry is working hard to shift its strategy to ensure a balance between protection and production, equitable benefits and community empowerment through relevant capacity building and training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the scope of such resources is wholesome and integrated - from the ridges of our mountains to the trenches of our oceans. I hold a portfolio that is most dear to the people of Fiji. The Coalition Government's ambition is to build on the efforts of those who have served before me, so that I may play my part in creating something even greater for those who have yet to arrive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, fisheries and forestry are two natural resource-based and economic service sectors that can assist Fiji on its road to national economic recovery. The Ministry was one of the few that developed an economy recovery plan to help cushion the impacts of the crisis. In addition to the economic contribution, the Ministry also strives to make a social and environment impact as well.

The Ministry recognises the need to strengthen its laws and policies. This will support the vision of the Coalition Government in providing a capable environment that will allow the sector to advance to greater heights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's '30 Million Trees in 15 Years' initiative was very encouraging as we were able to engage with communities - women, youth, et cetera, to set up nurseries and sell seedlings that were used for planting efforts across Fiji. Now with your Coalition Government we will not only plant but ensure the survival rate is successful.

During my maiden tour to the Central, Eastern and Northern Divisions, I had the opportunity to present cheque payments for seedlings in Tailevu, Ovalau, Taveuni and Vanua Levu. Your Government, thanks all Fijians for their commitment to this national initiative, and encourages them to continue to plant trees as your efforts not only helps in the fight against climate change but also contributes to Fiji's climate commitments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, forestry research seeks to develop new technologies that can be used to assist in economic development programmes designed to improve human well-being, while protecting the natural resource base and the environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will inject more resources and efforts towards the research of non-wood forest products namely, sandalwood, bamboo, *sikeci* and *dilo*. This will ease the pressure on native forests, provide opportunities for diversification and will benefit communities directly through engagement, training, seedling sales and products from mature trees. As a result of the above, reliance on timber and chips for economic growth will be reduced.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the same note of industry assistance and development, we have our forestry sector boasting the largest mature mahogany plantation in the world. The Ministry is keen to work with the mahogany industry to facilitate the needs and boost the sector to greater economic contribution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the ways to achieve this is through forest certification. The Ministry, in consultation with Fiji Hardwood Corporation Limited (FHCL), will complete work on this process under the Forest Stewardship Council. This preparation of FHCL to target entry into the Certification

Scheme is vital for the premium market positioning of Fiji's mahogany products.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the forestry sector aims to reposition its current objectives in the pine industry. The Ministry will strengthen partnerships with all stakeholders and primarily the landowning units at the heart of every decision-making process. Pine forests currently leased already have a certification in place as a requirement from their timber and chip markets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the health of Fiji fisheries is a matter of national importance because of three reasons:

1. fish provides an important food source for Fiji's population;
2. it mitigates the effects of natural disasters, including the effects of climate change; and
3. the inter-connectivity of fishing, aquaculture and tourism is an economic driver that generates revenue for Fiji's economy.

That being said, and as clearly articulated in His Excellency's Address, the diversification of our resource-based sectors to strengthen the growth of our economy and increase the "size of our pie" that will furthermore increase our potential to trade, is a change that this Government will give rise to, as we start afresh. For that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot and must not remain complacent in the face of more challenges ahead of us, we must continue to seize every opportunity we have to grow our economy.

At this point, I would like to speak briefly on areas that the Ministry of Fisheries will focus on and strengthen, to grow our resource-based sectors. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the context of regional fisheries, our tuna resources are key drivers of our small island economies and have always provided a solid revenue and economic base for Pacific Island Countries.

The development and implementation of international and regional fisheries management framework have ensured that we, as Pacific Island Countries, manage and use our tuna resources sustainably and also ensure that our fish stocks remain healthy and viable. Your Coalition Government values its development partners and stakeholders in driving targeted investments within the domestic fishing industry. This includes upgrading the fishing vessels to fish in high seas, invest in satellite technology to monitor our EEZ and reposition our investment and loan policy capacity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the value of coastal fisheries to our nation is understated. Production from fisheries offers extensive benefits to our communities, including employment and nutrition, as well as social and recreational value.

The well-being of all Fijians is the ultimate priority of the Coalition Government. The Ministry is working to provide alternatives for an ever-increasing population. It will review current capital projects and engagement with other Government agencies to empower communities to benefit economically and socially.

The Ministry will continue to collaborate with development partners to strengthen investment in the culture of high valued commodities to boost the fisheries sector. The Ministry of Fisheries will focus its current objectives of developing seaweed, edible oysters, pearl oysters, Mabe pearls and giant clams to ensure these commodities reach their optimum levels of production to meet consumers' demand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry, in partnership with the private sector will work on mass production of selected species in communities and work to identify high-end markets for these commodities.

As stated in His Excellency the President's most gracious Address, the new efforts that will be directed to revitalising the co-operative movement is welcomed. This is aligned to the Ministry's work in establishing Fishermen Co-operatives to foster greater participation by resource owners and to empower them in elevating and expanding their fishing business. Your People's Coalition Government will be steadfast in its efforts to ensure Fijians are food secure and have their needs provided for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will review the scope of assistance to food security and commercial aquaculture development programmes to focus on large scale communal co-operative assistance. We will aggressively work with farmers to assess their production as this will be a critical time for aquaculture in Fiji. As a result, this strategy will produce and supply the maximum number of tilapia fries and shrimp post-larvae to encourage large scale intensive farming, as well as support small-scale aquaculture farmers.

The intensifying impact of climate change on our oceans, for instance, is compelling us to review our approaches of managing our oceans and fisheries resources. Mr. Speaker, Sir, manpower and financial support have always played an important role in sustainable fisheries and forestry management. If we are to ensure progress, we must invest in our workforce and identify appropriate funding to support their work. Your Coalition Government, through internal and external partners, will address these needs immediately.

We all share the benefits of our fisheries and forestry resources. We are honoured to have inherited these blessings from our forefathers who have protected these resources for us. It is our time now to do the same. We must change the narrative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is my prayer that we will exercise wisdom in every front of our deliberation in this august Parliament, to guarantee progress of the present and future generations. I would like to end with a line from the poem, *Invictus*, and I quote: "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul." We all have a part to play in steering this ship of change.

May God bless you, may God bless Fiji.

(Acclamation)

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

The Parliament adjourned at 12.45 p.m.

The Parliaments resumed at 2.35 p.m.

(Madam Deputy Speaker took the Chair)

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I have to say that it is nice to see the smiles. I hope you had a good lunch time. We will resume the Replies to His Excellency's most gracious Address and I now call on the Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation to have the floor.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members; *bula vinaka*, *namaste* and *faiaksia* to everyone watching at home and around Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I congratulate you on your election as Deputy Speaker of Parliament. I also congratulate Mr. Speaker for his election in this Parliament.

I would like to, first of all, thank my Lord and Saviour for granting us the victory we fought so hard for to free our beloved nation.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Yes!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- What a wonderful journey this has been. We have overcome.

Madam Deputy Speaker, today 15th February, marks the Child Cancer Day. The gold ribbon I wear and some of my colleagues are wearing, signifies this important fight. I acknowledge with much gratitude WOWS Kids Fiji which is Walk on Walk Strong, the only group that dedicates its work to supporting children living with cancer in Fiji. To all our children and families living with this dreadful disease, I say to you - Walk on Walk Strong.

Today, I stand before you, Madam Deputy Speaker, humbled and grateful, as your newly elected Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. I am honoured by the trust and faith that is being placed in me to serve our people, and I promise to do my best to live up to your expectations. I acknowledge both my predecessors - Ms. Rosy Akbar and Ms. Mereseini Rakuita, for their hard work and leadership in the Ministry, and who both saw the light and resigned from FijiFirst.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to reply to His Excellency the President's Opening Address and thank him for clearly outlining our vision. The honourable Leader of the Opposition is right when he said, and I quote: "This is not the Fiji of 55 days ago, this is not a Parliament of 55 days ago." Indeed, it is not - this is a Fiji that is finally free from 15 years of fear, intimidation, victimisation and unjust control.

HON. MEMBER.- Go and talk to the people on the ground.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It absolutely baffles me, Madam Deputy Speaker, that my colleagues on the other side have absolutely zero self-reflection skills with all the baseless accusations. Honourable Premila Kumar stated the rape of Indo-Fijian women and children in 1987. Give us facts, where are the police complaints?

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- You talk nonsense.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Your entire campaign (FijiFirst) ran on sowing seeds of fear and hatred against our leader.

Honourable Koroilavesau, you stated that Indo-Fijians were being victimised by *iTaukei*, where is the proof?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Absolutely!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Give us the facts.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Come here and I will give you the facts.

(Laughter)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- The air condition, Madam Deputy Speaker, in this room is not enough to deal with the amount of hot air coming from the other side.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- I want to say to them, Madam Deputy Speaker; “*Sa rauta mada!* Listen *mada!* Learn *mada!*” It does not matter how much you boast about your leader having the highest votes, or that you have the most number of seats, you are in the Opposition. Accept it! *Ciqoma, tiloma!* Look around, Madam Deputy Speaker, this is the new Fiji right here.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- This is the freedom that has come in the shape of a grand coalition, representing the majority of Fijians who have cried out in one voice that enough is enough.

HON. P.K. BALA.- We were on our own.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- To all indo-Fijians who voted, believing that lies and racism was spread by FijiFirst candidates, I say to you, you are safe, this is the Government for you. Honourable Rabuka is the Prime Minister for you.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Honourable Premila Kumar asked, how different are we? You want to know how different we are?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- We have seen it.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Our honourable Prime Minister was waiting for 60 days for your Leader to move out of the official residence.

(Laughter)

The tints on our Government vehicles were removed so that the people can see us riding in it.

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

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Our honourable Prime Minister was received with open arms by Kiribati because he did not do things 'my way', he did it the Pacific Way. Introduction of the Gimit day ...

HON. P.K. BALA.- You were promised Deputy Prime Minister position.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- ... is a real commitment to social cohesion, not just calling us all Fijians. A Cabinet that speaks to the media with transparency after their meetings, instead of barricading itself in Level 9, hiding from the people.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we are slowly trying to peel away the layers of corruption built on a foundation of fear. For 16 years, this intricate network of the Bainimarama Government has strangled local product by implementing systems, some overpriced fly-by-night expatriate had dreamed of.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the majority of Fijians have put their trust on this side of Parliament, to change things from the way they were. The key word is 'trust'.

To carry out a full audit, the Coalition Government has had to appoint people in acting positions that we trust who will carry out the work. Our Government is well within our power to appoint these acting positions so, please, stop berating the Government about that, as we await the application and tender processes for those positions and do the job the public expects from them.

As Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, I am finally ready to do the job, Madam Deputy Speaker, the public has entrusted me with. The Ministry is one of the most critical Government institutions as it addresses the needs of those who are marginalised in our society. Our mandate is to care for children, support families in need, empower women and promote gender equality and provide services for older persons and persons with disabilities.

Together with over 200 registered women's groups and organisations, the Ministry serves over 90,000 clients through the various social protection programmes which includes the Poverty Benefit Scheme, Social Pension Scheme, Care and Protection Programme, Bus Fare Scheme and Rural Pregnant Mothers Scheme.

My passion for this Ministry is the reason, Madam Deputy Speaker, I requested it, and not the request for the Deputy Prime Minister. And it stems from my deep commitment to promote women's leadership and empowering women and girls to live safe and violence free lives. I am also a firm advocate for children and I am determined to raise their visibility, and ensure that they are given the opportunities they deserve.

As I embark on this new journey, I am honoured to be co-ministering with honourable Sashi Kiran, who will be leading our efforts towards poverty alleviation. I view her not as an assistant but as a partner who brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to the table. And after seeing the condition the previous Government has left us in, I could certainly do with all the help.

Madam Deputy Speaker, our children are the very foundation of our future and their protection is of the utmost importance. As a nation, we must remain steadfast in our commitment to ensure that every child is safe, nurtured and empowered to reach their full potential.

To achieve this, our Ministry plans to establish a specialised Department of Children, hopefully in the next budget, that is fully equipped and prepared to uphold the commitments outlined in our laws and regulations.

Through rigorous training and education, we must ensure that parents, caregivers and leaders are fully aware of their responsibilities and obligations to protect and support our children. Of course, we cannot do this alone. It is imperative that we work in partnership with Government Ministries and civil society, to ensure we raise the visibility of children and keep up with our obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Fiji is in crisis. Our women and girls are living in fear everyday, facing violence and discrimination in both, public and private spaces. This is not just a statistic; it is a heart-breaking reality. Two out of three women have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. Four out of five children in Fiji face some form of violence. Women with disabilities and diverse sexual orientations and gender identities suffer even more.

Tradition or beliefs that women are limited to unpaid care work and keep them out of the workforce are holding us back as a society. Fijian women spend up to 80 hours a week on unpaid care work and only 46 percent are in the labour force. The women who are employed often face insecure, low paying jobs and no social protections. Our girls and women are also disproportionately affected by climate-related disasters and have limited access to emerging digital and technical fields.

And to make matters worse, Madam Deputy Speaker, reproductive cancers, such as breast and cervical cancer are the leading causes of death for Fijian women, particularly iTaukei women. In fact, Fiji has the second highest breast cancer mortality rate in the world. This is simply unacceptable.

We must prioritise the launch and effective implementation of the Fiji National Action Plan to prevent violence against all women and girls. This whole of Government plan will focus on stopping violence before it starts and will address violence against women and girls holistically in all aspects of public and private life.

We will also develop Fiji's first-ever Women Economic Empowerment National Action Plan which will focus on unpaid care, the informal economy, property and assets, digital and financial inclusion, education and future jobs, entrepreneurship, and more.

But to create effective policies, Madam Deputy Speaker, we need adequate data and gender statistics. That is why I prioritised the review and finalisation of the Fiji Country Gender Assessment which is the only one of its kind in the Pacific with relevant ethnicity desegregated data - something that was not available or made available by the previous Government sitting on the other side.

The issues need interest and contributions of our women and girls in all diversity must be counted. We must also invest in institutional capacity development and establish effective coordination and accountability mechanisms to advance gender equality across all Government Ministries and all decision-makers. Madam Deputy Speaker, we cannot continue to turn a blind eye to these issues. It is time for action now.

Now, the Opposition likes to taunt us on how we have addressed those problems in the very short time we have been in office. I was particularly amused, Madam Deputy Speaker, by the honourable Bilitavu stating that we were in Government by default, which I really found amusing because of his own position as a permanent default Opposition Member. I look forward to seeing what kind of mayhem he will cause in his new Party. Look out for it FijiFirst Party!

(Laughter)

Madam Deputy Speaker, in the spirit of transparency to the public, let me share with you on

some of the work we have done in the Ministry.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- How many parties?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- That is why I am on this side, Madam Deputy Speaker.

HON. P.K. BALA.- You destroyed all the parties.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, in the spirit of transparency to the public, let me share with you on some of the work we have done at the Ministry in this first 55 days, sifting through the mess, wastage and overspending that the previous Government has left us with. One of the first changes I made when we came into the Ministry

HON. P.K. BALA.- We, we. Listen to your Assistant Minister!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It is really amazing that that they have discovered the word "we", Madam Deputy Speaker. That is progress.

(Laughter)

We discovered that the families of unvaccinated deceased persons could not access their \$1,000 funeral benefit. However, Madam Deputy Speaker, within three weeks, we renegotiated with Fiji Care Insurance requirements and removed this requirement and backdated it to 1st January, 2023.

The next challenge we faced was discovering that the staff had not been paid overtime. Upon further investigation, we found that a lot of the overtime had been accumulated in the months of November and December. I wonder, why? It must have been election time. Whether or not these overtime hours were due to campaigning, what was frustrating is that, the money that was being assigned by the previous Government when they have a shortfall of overtime have come from the programmes themselves. They have reallocated in the previous Government, to move monies from rural pregnant mothers to pay for operational costs. That, we have put a stop to, Madam Deputy Speaker.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- So?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- That's what you people did.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- How can they move money from a Social Programme to cover for operational costs and wastage. We have put a stop to this. Have you heard that? We have put a stop to it.

(Laughter)

We have appealed to the honourable Minister of Finance to give us overtime money and he has kindly refused, and we will just have to work with what we have.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Oh, he refused?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- That is how a Government is supposed to work.

HON. P.K. BALA.- *Paisa nahi hai.*

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the Social Pension Scheme had a shortfall of \$3 million. These shortfalls carried on into Bus Fare Programmes which the short-sighted FijiFirst Government had rushed to implement before the Elections without realising the disastrous impact that automatic top-ups would have on the budget. Yes, the budget we have inherited. For that reason, we will change the system to a user-pay system and not accumulation-based.

One of the biggest changes in our Ministry that we plan to do, Madam Deputy Speaker, is to convert the \$50 food voucher to cash. Why? Because it has been monopolised by one supermarket – Max Value Supermarket.

Max Value Supermarket have since 2021, received nearly \$14 million, Madam Deputy Speaker, from the Government for this Food Voucher Scheme. It has forced majority of our recipients to go to Max Value Supermarket and not able to shop anywhere else. This is meant exactly that, that they can no longer be able to go to the market and buy fruits and vegetable. That \$50 voucher can only be redeemed at Max Value Supermarket. This will no longer be the case, they should have the freedom to choose where they shop and spend their money at other places.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the focus this year will be on developing our welfare graduation programme, which has really been defunct. There have literally been hardly any social welfare recipients moved from the programme into something that is meaningful for them. So, we are committed to this. We would like to move our social welfare recipients who are able-bodied, who have been on the programme for unemployment or other reasons, into a more self-sufficient way of life.

Madam Deputy Speaker, by the end of our term, we vow to move our country away from the hand-out mentality that has been created by FijiFirst, into a hands-on commitment to our shared future. We must all work together to create a better, safer and more equal Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, at this point, I wish to thank those who have been there all along to support me during the campaign -

- My husband - Rob Semaan, my children - Mercy, Talei, Zion, Vienna, Ameera and Justice - thank you;
- My sister, Ane Tabuya, my *tavale* Lupe, who often would play mum as I was away from home during the campaign;
- *Na Vanua o Vunimatolu vua na Tunidau ni Tiliva;*
- *Na Vanua o Udu, vua na Turaga Na Tui Udu,*
- Na Yavusa Toga of Sawana;
- *Na Mataqali Jafau e Delaimakotu vua na Turaga Na Ramasi;*
- My Nasinu campaign team - Kaulotu, Meme, Peau, Miniroti, Tuitoga, Asinate, Ana and John Moi;
- Our overseas supporters, especially Shailendra Raju, Vimal Kumar, Mark Chand, Shaneel Sudhakar, Delana, Sai Lealea and families in New Zealand;
- Ratu Isireli Vesikula, Elenoa Waqabaca, Tuburu Naivalurua and team in the USA;
- Jiuta Lewanituva, Mere Hudson, La Ditoka, Tarai Masuwale and the team in Australia; and
- Koresi and Kesa Raivoce in the United Kingdom.

Madam, Deputy Speaker, last but not least, to all the people of Fiji, whether you have voted for this Government or not, we are here to serve you.

(Acclamation)

HON. K.K. LAL.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Members, ladies and gentlemen; *bula vinaka, namaste, salaam walekum.*

Madam Deputy Speaker, this is a very special moment for me to stand here in this Parliament Chamber as the youngest Member of Parliament, where our collective future of all our people and, indeed, our country is decided upon.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as I took oath on 24th December last year, I pledged to serve my people and my country and protect the Constitution to the best of my ability as a Member of Parliament and as a FijiFirst representative under the stewardship of honourable Bainimarama, the leader who single-handedly got more than 130,000 votes in the recent Election - the single most popular candidate by far.

Madam Deputy Speaker, at this juncture, I would like to take this opportunity to thank my parents, my family in Savusavu, Bua and Labasa and abroad for their support; my campaign team members in Vanua Levu and Viti Levu for their commitment towards the entire Election campaign; my friends and well-wishers and not forgetting our youth and voters who supported the FijiFirst Party during the 2022 General Elections.

Madam, Deputy Speaker, I also wish to extend a special thank you to the FijiFirst General Secretary and former Attorney-General, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, who has been my inspiration, who had confidence in me and who has encouraged me to be very strong in my passion for politics and serve all Fijians. Without the guidance and encouragement of the former Prime Minister and former Attorney-General, I would not be standing here today.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would not have had this remarkable opportunity had it not been for the revolution led by the former Prime Minister over the course of the last 15 years. During one of the nation's darkest periods, the former Prime Minister emerged with the vision as well as the strength and determination to steer Fiji towards genuine democracy, prosperity, stability and certainty with nine years of straight economic growth; with more Fijians of every background educated at primary, secondary and tertiary levels than ever before in our history; and with unity, equity and equality for all our people.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it seems that the Coalition Government have made the decision amongst themselves to put all their focus on being petty and targeting FijiFirst policies rather than being a responsible Government themselves. Many of their actions so far have been self-serving, irresponsible, unconstitutional and illegal.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in many countries when there is a change of government, the new government embraces the civil servants and its constitutional officers and works with them, uniting all people under the banner of patriotism, national growth and socio-economic development. Instead of doing that, the honourable Prime Minister and his team have decided to threaten and force many civil servants to resign and have discontinued their contracts wherever they could.

Madam Deputy Speaker, these are professional people who have years and years of experience, such as Mr. Pene Baleinabuli, who has served as a loyal and highly efficient civil servant since 2006 and was the Permanent Secretary for Fisheries and Forests before his removal. Mr. Baleinabuli, in a statement, said that the discontinuation of his contract was based entirely on the Government's preference and not on performance. This is both, sad and sickening.

This is just one example of many of our citizens across the country being victimised simply because they were appointed through a transparent process when a different government was in place. Madam Deputy Speaker, I wonder what honourable Prasad and NFP have to say about this witchhunt which are being conducted in the manner of the 1987 days and many against our Fijian people.

The former Supervisor of Elections was illegally stopped from leaving for overseas for a short break, Madam Deputy Speaker. He was stopped from flying to see his own family. We have all seen the statement by the former Supervisor of Elections as to how he was illegally and unconstitutionally detained. This stop departure was allegedly ordered by our honourable Attorney-General, honourable Turaga.

Madam Deputy Speaker, these people are so petty that they even illegally victimised the person who conducted an election from which they formed the government. This is the same honourable Turaga who had to be corrected by his own Prime Minister when he made comments about changing the Constitution which were incorrect.

The honourable Prime Minister has talked a lot about reviewing Fiji being a secular State, I wonder, Madam Deputy Speaker, if honourable Professor Biman Prasad, honourable Charan Jeeth Singh, honourable Agni Deo Singh and honourable Sashi Kiran understand what their overlords at People's Alliance are saying. Yet, honourable Professor Biman Prasad and his NFP continue to say nothing, essentially selling out the small number of Fijians who voted for them and, indeed, selling out Hindus all over the world. It is no surprise, and I repeat, it is no surprise that Mr. Narendra Modi gave him a goose step in India and did not even meet him.

No guts, Madam Deputy Speaker, that is the legacy of the National Federation Party and no doubt the brave founders of the Party are turning in their graves right now. But who knows, perhaps honourable Professor Biman Prasad believes that society is becoming immoral because people of all faiths are allowed to participate in free religious practice. Maybe that is why his Party is silent while their own voters suffer with the rest of Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Sir, this attack on secularism is uncalled for. A secular State means that the government is neutral and all faiths can be practised freely without any discrimination, yet the same 1987 tactics used to divide our people are once again being used.

Madam Deputy Speaker, no one, and I repeat, no one is a threat to Christianity or any other religion. It is the honourable Prime Minister's coalition creating these thoughts and this narrative that is causing division and fear, but this is no surprise because the past speaks for itself in today's Fiji.

Meanwhile, the international community is silent, Madam Deputy Speaker. Meanwhile Heike Alefsen, Regional representative for the Pacific, UN Human Rights Office is silent; Mr. Sanaka, Resident Coordinator for the United Nations is silent; the Australian, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States and Indian Embassies are silent; our media who, for years, falsely cried about media restriction is silent. Why would they not be silent? Why would they not? Half of them are public relations experts for PAP and NFP, while the other half are afraid, like Mr. Mohammed Saneem and Mr. Pene Baleinabuli who will be illegally victimised. A real climate of fear has descended on Fiji.

Please, listen to this, Madam Deputy Speaker, an outspoken feminist and well-known human rights defender was picked up by CID twice and interviewed for hours for allegedly spreading misinformation about the assault of a person brought into a police station. What a ludicrous thing to do for such a petty reason. Again, this is done under one of honourable Professor Prasad's Party

members, honourable Tikoduadua, who like our honourable Leader pointed out correctly, appears to be like the *de facto* Police Commissioner.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Do not say appears.

HON. K.K. LAL.- It does not matter to NFP now, Madam Deputy Speaker, though because they have their black cars with red lights. Power is all they ever wanted, it seems. As highlighted by honourable Bala on Monday, this Government has failed to deliver what they have promised. Let us shed some light on their promise to remove all TELS loans that students had.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I tried to find another way to say this but there is no other way. Honourable Rabuka, honourable Gavoka and honourable Professor Biman Prasad lied to the Fijian students and youth. There is no other way to put it. They promised that TELS debt will be removed, they have not done it. They lied, they are not going to remove TELS and they know it, and those who were tricked by the Coalition Government are devastated.

Madam Deputy Speaker, time is running out for the Coalition Government to make good on their first 100-day promises. It seems that PAP is trying to get as many of their promises across the table while NFP and SODELPA sit back subserviently and have become mere spectators. In some places of the world, that would be called cowardice.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would also like to highlight that the honourable Prime Minister proudly announced that Ajay Amrit is his friend. Then after advertising for people to apply for Board positions, he appointed his friend to the FBC Board without even waiting for the end date of the advertisement period - blatant cronyism. They do not even care. Well, in his first act, the honourable Prime Minister's friend held an expensive cocktail party where he unveiled the worst logo, perhaps ever in the history of logos. I repeat, the worst logo ever in the history of logos.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. K.K. LAL.- What made it worse, Madam Deputy Speaker? The logo was a free picture licensed icon, slightly changed and inverted. Our young, technologically savvy and educated youth picked up FBC's deceit almost immediately and FBC quickly became the butt of all jokes across the country. The new FBC Board just days into their reign have proven that they are incompetent. On social media even the Coalition's most ardent supporters made fun of Amrit's new FBC. The new FBC, by the way, is giving almost zero coverage to our statements - so much for media freedom.

Again, I ask honourable Professor Biman Prasad, are you alright with all these? Are you alright with our national broadcaster becoming a circus - a laughing stock? The first action for PAP's new Board Chairman, Ajay Amrit, was to make the organisation look incompetent and amateur, but what is most telling, Madam Deputy Speaker, is that many of the staff could tell that it was a really bad choice but due to the culture of fear they could not speak out. That is just one example of incompetence and culture of fear that we can expect to increase in future.

Madam Deputy Speaker, all I have to say to the people of Fiji is to stay tuned. The aspiration of our people is embodied in the Fijian 2013 Constitution. It is the very physical object and metaphysical symbol that makes all of us as Members of Parliament the custodians of Fiji's future, a future where all Fijians are treated equally, a future where the rule of law is adhered to, a future where every Fijian regardless of gender, race, religion or age has the opportunity to pursue their true potential. This is the future of Fiji that the 2013 Constitution aspires to and sets the stage for us to achieve. The Government must respect its significance and not pursue short-term agenda

accomplishments by circumventing it and worse - long-term damage to this nation by trying to change the contents of the Constitution.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I implore the Coalition which is made up of three smaller parties not to be petty and try to change our beloved Constitution which is the legacy of the Republic of the Fiji Military Forces and the FijiFirst Government. We all swore an oath to protect the Constitution during our swearing in ceremonies. Please, do not become oath breakers - a terrible sin in every religion.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am honoured to be standing here today as we work together to shape the future of our beloved nation. We want to move forward but we cannot because the Coalition Government continues to breach the Constitution and disregard the rule of law. Some people on the ground are now calling them the illegal Coalition or the backward Government. I would like to remind my colleagues in this august Parliament that our ultimate goal must be the well-being of the people of Fiji. Every decision we make must be guided by this principle and we must be accountable to our people in all that we do.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am proud to be a member of FijiFirst - a Party that has a proven track record of delivering on its promises for years and here on the other side, we have a Coalition Government that cannot achieve even their first 100-days promises. Our Leader, honourable Bainimarama has worked tirelessly over the years to bring about real change in the lives of ordinary Fijians and I believe with his continued leadership, we can achieve great things.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I am deeply committed to serving the people of Fiji and protecting the Constitution that has always protected us and I will do everything in my power to ensure that their voices are heard in this Parliament. No matter how this Coalition Government likes to spin it, the truth of their incompetence and infighting just like the downfall of the FBC brand in just a few days, will be shown to the people of Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I fully expect it and if we are truly people who value our country, who are truly patriotic and who want Fiji to grow and for our people to prosper, we will do what we must to create a better future. And to the people of Fiji, I say to them, we have done so many complicated things without an issue and this new Government on the other side is showing that they cannot even do easy things, how will they build our future? I strongly believe we are moving backwards under this Government, but now, we on this side will never, I repeat Madam Deputy Speaker, never rest until we forge the future that we believe is the best for all our Fijians. May God bless all Fijians.

(Acclamation)

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, Members of Parliament, invited guests and those that are tuning in to the live broadcast; I rise to offer my support for the motion before Parliament, that this Parliament thanks His Excellency the President, for his most gracious Address.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I also take this opportunity to congratulate you and the *Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau* for your appointments as Speaker and Deputy Speaker respectively. I trust that these appointments have been made considering your capabilities to discharge your responsibilities diligently.

Madam Deputy Speaker, please allow me to acknowledge and thank the Almighty God, the creator of the universe for his divine calling upon me into the annals of Fijian leadership history. I am grateful to His Excellency for his assurance of the Government mission to build unity through social cohesion that will further improve and strengthen our economy through sustainable growth with the ultimate objective of improving the lives of all the people of Fiji. I am also grateful to His Excellency for his further assurance that there must be a clear focus on the rule of law and democratic processes which includes transparency, accountability, respect for human rights and freedoms, and listening to the views of the people through general consultations.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am deeply humbled with my appointment by the People's Coalition Government as the Minister for Agriculture and Waterways. Thank you, honourable Prime Minister, Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka, for your trust in me.

Madam Deputy Speaker, let me turn to my task as Minister for Agriculture and Waterways. At this juncture, let me acknowledge my predecessors in the FijiFirst Government; the honourable Inia Seruiratu and my good friend, Dr. Mahendra Reddy for their contribution to agriculture development over the last 16 years. The Ministry has the mandate to ensure that all Fijian citizens have access to safe and nutritious food while farmers enjoy guaranteed incomes from local produce and export market sales.

The Ministry, Madam Deputy Speaker, also spearheads the efforts of the various stakeholders in the agriculture sector in their fight to increase contribution to Fiji's economic growth. In addition to this, the Ministry also has the national mandate to look after our waterways by way of rivers, streams, coastline and the major drainage and creeks in Fiji. To guide this mandate, the Ministry of Agriculture has in place a 5-year Strategic Development Plan 2019-2023, envisioning a competitive, sustainable and resilient agriculture sector. This SDP is intricately linked to the 5-year National Development Plan that inculcates the need to have food and nutrition security through increased and improved production methods.

Madam Deputy Speaker, to this end, the Ministry has in place agriculture development programmes budgeted for in the public sector investment programme that addresses specific areas to enhance crop and livestock production. These areas include mechanisation for large scale crop and livestock production, provision of planting materials, improvement of livestock breeds and infrastructural support, to name a few.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency the President in his Address stated the importance of inclusive agricultural policies for young people and women to be strengthened along with development of specific commodities. In addressing the above, the Ministry has developed an agenda in the Agriculture Policy 2022-2027 that ensures equality of access to economic resources required for productive and resilient agricultural markets. The Ministry has also developed a Youth in Agriculture Policy with the view to empower and incentivise young people to actively participate in all aspects of the agri-food system.

Madam Deputy Speaker, there is a need to encourage local farmers to work in clusters or better still, form registered co-operatives to address inconsistency in supply to the markets and strengthen their bargaining power. This has been rightly stated by His Excellency the President as a way to facilitate access to markets, finance training and technology to promote regional economic growth, enhance competitive strength through advanced specialisation of agriculture production and increase each cluster member's income. The long-term vision is to value-add commodities, both crop and livestock as part of product diversification in the agriculture sector.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as Minister responsible also for Waterways, it is disheartening to hear the cries of our people regarding clogged drains and blocked waterways, that often leads to flooding after a heavy downpour. This is the end result of 16 years of plain talk and neglect with no action by the other side of Parliament. To this end, the Department of Waterways already has its job cut out.

As Minister, I also have the intention of reintroducing the drainage board schemes. There have been calls from within the farming, housing and rural communities for this reintroduction to resolve the constant flooding occurrences. The Department will continue to focus at the national level on drainage schemes, dredging works and construction of nature-based solution seawalls so as to safeguard food systems, housing, rural economy and ecosystems.

Madam Deputy Speaker, let me now turn to my maiden speech and with your permission to deliver my opening statement in the vernacular.

Vakaturaga saka kina matanitu vanua e tolu – Kubuna, vua na Turaga Bale Na Tui Kaba, Na Vunivalu, Burebasaga vua Na Gone Marama Bale Na Roko Tui Dreketi, Turaga Na Vunivalu kei na Matanitu veiwekani na Tovata. Na noqu vakavinavinaka levu ki vei kemudou a masi ni vanua ko Lau - Turaga Roko Sau, Turaga Tui Matuku, Turaga Tui Moala, Turaga Sau mai Mualevu, Turaga Na Tui Cicia – Tui Tarukua, Tui Mabula, Turaga Na Tui Vulaga mai Vanua Seu, Turaga na Rasau, Turaga Na Tui Kabara, Turaga Ramasi, Turaga Na Tui Ono, Turaga Taukei Bukatatanoa.

[Respectfully to the three confederacies – Kubuna to the Tui Kaba Warlord, Burebasaga to the Rokotui Dreketi and its Warlord, and the mutually aligned Tovata confederacy. My immense gratitude to the chieftains of Lau – the Roko Sau, the Tui Matuku, the Tui Moala, the Sau of Mualevu, the Tui Cicia, Tui Tarukua, Tui Mabulā, Tui Fulaga of Vanuaseu, the Rasau, the Tui Kabara and the Ramasi, the Tui Ono and the lord of Bukatatanoa]

Noqu vakavinavinaka levu talega kivei kemunu a turaga kei na marama Vuanirewa kei na matavuvale vaka Matakicicia, Mataqali Katubalevu, Tubou Lakeba, Lau.

[My deep gratitude also to the nobility of Vuanirewa and the house of the Matakicicia, the Katubalevu clan of Tubou village, Lakeba, Lau.]

Na noqu vakavinavinaka levu talega ki vei kemunu kece a veiyavusa kei na veitikina kece ena loma ni wetatou yasana kei kemunu a weka nu tu vakacacakaka ena vuku ni veitokoni levu ka soli vei au ena veidigidigi sa mai vakanadakui.

[My express appreciation also to all the clans and districts in our province and the working relatives for the generous support shown to me in the recent election.]

Sa mai rawa a qaqa ena vuku ni nomuni yalovata kei na cakacaka vata. Au sa yalatakina niu na solia na noqui gu ena omunu qaravi na lewe ni weta yasana ena kena vakatoroicaketaki a weta yau bula kei na veivakatorocaketaki raraba me rawa ni ra rawata kina a bula sautu ko ira a weta. Sa malo a vakadrakai.

[Victory has been attained mostly through your goodwill and collaboration. It is my solemn promise that I will do my utmost best to serve our province and develop our resources thus enabling prosperity for us. Thank you indeed for your sacrifice.]

Madam Deputy Speaker, it would be remiss of me if I fail to acknowledge the many people who contributed to my upbringing on this political journey, in particular, my late father, Mr. Viliame

Cavubati of Vanuavatu, Totoya, Lau who passed away two days after my swearing-in as a Member of Parliament and as a Member of Cabinet in the People's Coalition Government. My father, Madam Deputy Speaker, served as an Assistant Minister in the earlier Rabuka-led Government.

I would also like to pay tribute to my late mother, Vila Rayalu Kaunitawake and of my late maternal grandfather the late honourable Tomasi Rayalu Vakatora, who served both as a Cabinet Minister in both the Lower and Upper Houses of during the leadership of *Na Turaga Bale Na Tui Nayau*, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara.

I would also like to acknowledge my immediate family - my lovely wife Vasiti Tiko Rayalu and our children and my siblings. I pay tribute to my late younger brother Big Jone Cavubati (JC) who passed away last year. Thank you for being there at the start of this journey. To Big Bill Cavubati (Jnr), Atama Cavubati, Kitione Vesikula and Tevita Cavubati (my younger brothers and your families) *malo a veitokoni*. To my extended Tau Ethan, many thanks for your moral support and prayers, *vinaka vakalevu* to one and all for your most valuable support.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to particularly thank the people of Raiwai and Raiwaqa where I was brought up for the most part of my life for their support during the elections. To the young people, the youth of Raiwai and Raiwaqa, I say "stay focussed on your dreams". If I can make it, you can also do it. I would also like to thank my relatives of the *Yavusa o Waimaro*, Vanuavatu of Nasavu Village, Rara, Naitasiri and my relatives of Natokalau Village, Narocake, *Tikina o Nasinu*, Ovalau, for your support during the Elections. You will always remain in my heart.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would also like to sincerely thank all my supporters from wherever you voted for me, throughout Fiji. I would like to acknowledge the previous government for their 16 years of ruling our beloved country, however, I would not be doing any justice to the people of Fiji if I fail to mention the various injustices that our people went through from their draconian leadership styles.

The FijiFirst Government was riddled with nepotism, favouritism, racism, bullying, not following the rule of law, muzzling the media, micro-managing and unconstitutional practices. To that end, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am surprised that the other side of Parliament, beginning with their leader can have the audacity to even speak and point to the just past 50 day old People's Coalition Government on these things without first looking at themselves in the mirror. This is typical of their arrogant and ignorant character that we witnessed for 16 years. Everyone else is wrong and they are always right but they will quickly find a scapegoat to blame when something goes wrong.

Madam Deputy Speaker, honourable Members from the other side of Parliament have been accusing the People's Coalition Government of confusion and the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing. It seems that they either have a very short memory or through their ignorance have a selective memory. Let me refresh the memory of members of the other side on their own state of confusion.

Most recently the people of Fiji witnessed the biggest confusion of all when the leader and the *de facto* leader of the FijiFirst Party failed to interpret the 2013 Constitution in the appointment of the Constitutional Offices Commission (COC) resulting in their *de facto* leader automatically losing his seat in Parliament. If that was not confusing enough, the statement by their leader that the *de facto* leader was now going lead the charge from outside Parliament, was even more confusing. What kind of leader leads from outside? Leadership is either in the front, from the middle but never from the outside. If you are on the outside, then you are nothing - short of just being a cheering squad.

Madam Deputy Speaker, even if that was a deliberate act, it has now left more than 22,000 voters in limbo and in a state of more confusion. To date we have not heard a single explanation from the FijiFirst Party to their voters on the resignation of their other Members of Parliament, that is confusion for you. To the other side of the Parliament, I say to you, pride comes before a fall. The people of our beloved country have spoken at the polls and have rejected your leadership because they have had enough of 16 years of your unscrupulous dictatorial nonsense.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I commend His Excellency once again for his most eloquent and gracious address to this august Parliament and support the motion before Parliament. Floreat Viti, thank you and may God bless you all and may God bless Fiji. *Vinaka*.

(Acclamation)

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER.- I know honourable Aliko Bia is ready to present his speech but I think we are going to take a break before I ask him to take the podium. So, honourable Members, afternoon tea is served in the usual place and, please, listen out for the bell.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.29 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.00 p.m.

HON. A. BIA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of the Opposition, also greetings to those in the gallery and to the thousands watching via television and various social media platforms in Fiji and around the globe; first of all, allow me to congratulate you on your appointment as Deputy Speaker of this august Parliament and also to the honourable Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu on his appointment as Speaker of Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I count myself fortunate, blessed and through the power of the living God, I am able to stand in Parliament and deliver my maiden speech as one of the youngest and new Members of Parliament. Before I kick start my term as an Opposition Member of Parliament, I feel that it is important for people to know who I am and what is my background.

I am proud to say that I am a *kai* Solomoni in Fiji, a direct descendant of the Melanesian labourers who were forcefully brought to Fiji to work as labourers in the late 1800s. My dad, Josua Sade Rabonu was a fourth generation of those Melanesian labourers. My mother, Mereti Tabuavula Rabonu hails from Burerua, Sawakasa, Tailevu and I am proud to be called a *vasu* of Daviko where they used to say in the iTaukei dialect, *keitou kakana na vatu katakata, neitou salusalu na mate* (we feast on hot rocks, and death is but a garland to us).

At the outset, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would not be standing here today without the votes of people who trusted me to be their voice and a servant to the people of Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, who would have thought a wheelbarrow boy in the city of Suva will stand in Parliament 22 years later to deliver his maiden speech.

(Acclamation)

As a Member of Parliament, it is only through the power of God that will take a miracle like this to happen.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- *Emeni!*

HON. A. BIA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to mention people who have helped and encouraged me to take the leap of faith and swim in a small river full huge of sharks, I may say.

To my NTK 200 campaign crew - Jayson, Poni, Reponi Bete, Meli, Moape, Jeffrey, Ta Seyasi, Ta Jone, Amaraki, Tome, Jimilai, Samisoni, Pita, Ulai, Iloa, Ta Samu, Jay Koi, Pat, Talevu Matai, my father-in-law Jimi Vauqaci (Snr) and my namesake Aliko Bia (Senior), thank you for all your endless support and love.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it has been a journey that has brought tears and at times drained us out emotionally and physically but I thank my loving wife, Masilina Ligatabua, and my three children - Bia Junior, Lusiana and Maika for standing by me not matter what.

Madam Deputy Speaker, spending more than 10 years in the media industry has shaped me to be the person I am today. I would like to thank all media leaders who have helped me along the way. To all the various news heads, thank you for allowing me to learn along the way, I will always be forever grateful and indebted to all of you.

Madam Deputy Speaker, one of the biggest impacts in my life was my spiritual upbringing.

I would like to thank the Anglican Church, the Diocese of Polynesia, the Parish of St. Mark in Nasinu and St. Philip in Nadawa, Bishop-elect, Rev. Sione Uluilakepa, Rev. Eseta Mateiviti Tulavu and her family - thank you for the spiritual guidance and the words of encouragement. To the many advice of Pastor Manasa Kolivuso of CMF Vuniivivi, Nausori and to the New Methodist Church family for their never-ending support.

Madam Deputy Speaker, despite being a staunch Anglican, the New Methodist Church Fellowship of Pastor Atunaisa Vulaono and Radini Qase Levu Raijeli Vulaono taught me values and character of living life in a godly way. What amazes me is they never saw religion, race or gender as a barrier to show the love of God to anyone.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank the school that started it all. Our very own school in Newtown, Nasinu - Bishop Kempthorne Primary School where I started my educational journey. Thanks to the current hard working head teacher, Joyce Tiko Prasad for doing a tremendous job school at the school and not forgetting all the hardworking teachers, staff and management.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the institution that provided the cutting edge and groomed me for any situation in life is the school that I hold dear and close to my heart. It is none other than Queen Victoria School. For five years, I toiled the life of a Victorian, feeling the breeze of Nukuvuto, walking the paradise of the promised land.

Madam Deputy Speaker, my utmost gratitude and thanks to the FijiFirst Party and its leader, honourable Josia Voreqe Bainimarama for opening the door of opportunity and having faith in people like me to contest the 2022 General Election.

Madam Deputy Speaker, having said that, this week's Parliament sitting marks a new chapter for the history of the *Solomoni* and Vanuatu in Fiji that ever since their arrival and the history of this Parliament, I am the first ever direct descendant to ever confirm a seat in this august Parliament and a voice to raise our long-standing issues and our cry for help.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we are proud of our heritage and we thank the FijiFirst Government for delivering a Constitution that called everyone "Fijian" and ensured a levelled playing field despite colour, race or gender. Our fore parents came and built roads, worked in farms and other areas of development and currently we have close to 30 *Solomoni* and Vanuatu settlements around Fiji. To name are few - Newtown, Namara, Caubati, Veiraisi, Tamavua-i-wai, Muanikoso, Tacirua, Matata, Kalekana, Wailoku, Navutu, Nadrala, Maniyava (thanks to the *vanua* of Tokaimalo), Wainaloka, Wailailai, Baba, Waitovu, Nabunikadamu, Naviavia and Caqiri. None of these communities have secured land ownership or confirmation of where they reside.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as noted by His Excellency's Address and I quote:

"An announcement will make soon on two new public holidays. This includes a public holiday to commemorate the arrival of the Giritiyas to Fiji in 1879, whose descendants are an integral part of our nation."

With all due respect to my brothers and sisters of the Giritiyas who are in Parliament, Madam Deputy Speaker, the question we ask, what about us Melanesians in Fiji?

We are descendants of blackbirders, our forefathers were forcefully brought to Fiji. They did not have any choice. They were basically tricked into ships and weeks later, they found themselves almost as slaves here in Fiji, but they toiled hard day and night. Despite their circumstances, hoping that years down the line, many of their generations will call Fiji their home. In the process of their

hard labour in farms, building roads and buildings, some of them even lost their lives in the process of trying to give Fiji a better future.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we sometimes shed tears remembering what they have done and it hurts even more that we do celebrate their achievements silently because nationally, there is no day approved to commemorate their hard work.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we share traditional ties to the people of Lovoni, Moturiki, Namara, Tailevu and Ra, some of the *mana* of their traditional ties still exist today. At times the famous song of the late Jale Mareau lingers within our memory and I quote: “*Viti ko sa tiko vinaka. O qai nanuma mo biliga lesu tale noqu waqa.*” (“Now that you are well off Fiji, you now think of casting our boat adrift”).

Madam Deputy Speaker, the songs signifies our everyday fear of being one of the landless people in Fiji. We live day by day with insecurity of not knowing what tomorrow may bring. If we are to bring change, we need to be mindful and at the same time be cautious of the transformation we make. We need to have the ability to assess our own progress and ensure thorough review of the process and procedures that are in place.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to remind all honourable Members of this august Parliament, if it was not for the people, we will not be sitting in Parliament. If we get hundreds of votes or thousands of votes, we are all here to provide service to the nation and to the people of Fiji and we will have to do it no matter what it takes, most importantly we do it with dignity and honour. The greatest asset of a Government is not wealth but the people. Without the people there will be no wealth and that is why it is vital to look at policies and initiatives that will ensure no one is left behind.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Fiji is now a multi-ethnic country, in my view introducing ethnic-based policies and ideas will continue to segregate people along ethnic lines. Love has no barrier, love does not differentiate anyone, love ensures equality irrespective of colour, race or gender.

Given my background, someone asked me how I will square off and debate with other politicians who have vast experience and knowledge. I did make my stand and intentions clear. I will not in any way use my authority or power as a Member of Parliament to degrade or speak low of anyone in Parliament, but I will use everything and all avenues that I can do to debate on policies and what I believe is best for the people of Fiji. I will ensure that whatever is promised to the people of Fiji must be delivered and there is fairness and equality in the services provided to all Fijians. To all Fijians we may differ in our political views and you are free to express your opinion in any way you can.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is not about politics but policies that will matter to the people from all walks of life. We need to be reminded that we cannot make everyone happy but we can allow ourselves to be a vessel of democracy and be the voice of people in Parliament. As a new politician, I saw there is no need for politicians and Members of Parliament to bombard each other personally on social media platforms. However, we need to engage in positive *talanoa* of ideas and policies that will move the nation forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we need to remove self-interest because it was never about us. We come into this Parliament not because we are academically decorated or well outspoken but because of the people who voted us in and whatever we do, we need to put the people of Fiji before us and do everything in our power to ensure the people are well taken care of. So, in the spirit of *talanoa*, let us move Fiji forward. May God bless us in this august Parliament and God bless our nation - *Floreat Viti*.

(Acclamation)

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; *bula vinaka* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Madam Deputy Speaker, before I contribute to the motion before Parliament, kindly allow me to pay tribute to my late chief, *na Momo Levu na Tui Vitogo*, who passed away on 7th February and will be laid to rest at the chiefly *Sau Tabu* this Saturday 17th February. Ratu Wiliame Ratudale Sovasova was the Chairman of the *Bose ni Momo* Yasana Ba, the council of chiefs of the Ba Province. He was unanimously elected as the first chairman because of his strong leadership. We, the *vanua of Vitogo* remember the late Ratu Wiliame.

Madam, Deputy Speaker, in his letter to all the heads of department on 23rd January, 2013, the former Commissioner Western, Mr. Joeli Cawaki wrote and I quote:

“Please be informed that a directive has been issued by the Prime Minister that all development plans earmarked for the village of Vitogo and Naviyago is to be suspended herewith.”

The suspension was made because of Ratu Wiliame's submission to the Constitution Review Commission and when asked to retract his statement, Ratu Wiliame refused. In response to the suspension, Ratu Wiliame told the messenger and I quote:

“Tukuna vua na Turaga na Paraiminisita, ena veisau na matanitu. Keimami na tiko ga na kai Vitogo. Raici keimami – keimamu bula volekata ga na veidogo baleta ni tiko kina na keimami.”

Ratu Wiliame lived to see the change of Government on 24th December, 2022. To my chief, I say, farewell.

I wish to add my congratulations to His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji on his outstanding address at the opening of the new session of Parliament. I also wish to express my appreciation again to the Coalition Government led by the honourable Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Ministers and Members of Cabinet for your faith in me in taking up the Minister for Youth and Sports portfolio.

Madam, Deputy Speaker, in His Excellency the President's opening address, he reminded us that policies for the ongoing development of young people and sports are central to the overall well-being of the nation. The Coalition Government is committed to ensuring that youths have access to knowledge, skills and training so that they can effectively participate and contribute to nation building. There is no doubt that the low turnout of youth voters during the 2022 General Elections, was due to lack of interest towards politics. These young people were disengaged from politics that did not represent them. Their silence never felt so loud that there is no doubt that the voices of youth will be heard and will continue to be heard, as I visited the outlying areas of Fiji to hear what the youths are saying.

After being sworn in as the Minister for Youth and Sports and having taken up this important portfolio, we are pushing hard to strengthen the Ministry's approach by refocusing our efforts on effectively delivering our services and programmes to youth and sporting organisations. We are pushing to create educated youths - youths who can become advocates on youth related issues and youths who are resourceful. We have made it our priority to listen to our youths about their training

needs before introducing our services, soft skills and empowerment training programmes for their ongoing development.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we will ensure that our young people are receiving the most effective, suitable and relevant training so that our youth can start their own income generating projects to contribute to our economic development, and help their families, communities and of course of Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, programmes such as Seeds of Success, multi-skills, mobile skills and youth empowerment training have sown the right positive mentality for young leaders as they make their way along life's long and bumpy road. As indicated, the ministry has also been actively engaged in programmes to empower youth to create better livelihoods for themselves. This we do through our youth grant programmes providing assistance to individual youths and also youth groups operating income generating projects.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Fiji and fellow Pacific Island nations are among the most vulnerable to our changing climate, with many already experiencing higher temperatures, shifts in rainfall patterns, rising sea levels and changes in the frequency and intensity of extreme climate events. Further changes on top of an existing, naturally variable climate are expected long into the future because of global warming.

While there is credible scientific information available about climate change in the Pacific, applying the information to inform risk management, adaptation planning and associated decision-making for sectors including health, infrastructure, water, energy, tourism, food (fisheries and agriculture) and natural resources (forestry, biodiversity) is not straightforward.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the government realises and acknowledges the need to ensure that our youths are at the forefront of any climate change activity initiatives. Their passion is precisely what Fiji and the world needs and their activism and ideas will be what finds solutions to the problems that those that have gone before us created.

Madam Deputy Speaker, at this juncture, I wish to mention that the National Youth Policy is currently being revalidated and reviewed. The purpose of the National Youth Policy is to create conditions for learning, opportunity and experience which will enable youths to develop knowledge, skills and competencies. This allows young people to be actors of democracy, integrate into society and in particular, play an active role in both civil society and the labour market.

The Ministry in the review process is consulting with all key stakeholders including youths before we finalise the draft policy for Cabinet to consider and we are looking to complete this process before the end of 2023. As an island nation, Fiji has tremendous potential that is yet to be fully realised. With improving institutions and infrastructure, increased international positioning and recognition and a large number of young people, the Fijian Government is committed to developing conducive policies that provides tactical support systems and programmes focused at meeting the socio-economic needs of Fiji's youth and strengthening social inclusion.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the government duly recognises sports as an industry as we move into this era of sports professionalism with the need to invest in developing our elite athletes, increasing our levels of participation in sport and physical activity supported by coaches, technical officials and other specialists.

With Government's inclusive approach, we are also currently reviewing our National Sports Policy to promote the participation of women and disabled persons in physical activities and

encourage the participation of all Fijians irrespective of ethnicity, gender or physical and mental ability. Recognising the influence and importance of sports across our Fijian society, the National Sports Policy sets out our vision for Fijian Sports for 2023 and beyond and defines the actions we will undertake to achieve our ambitious goals.

Evidence around the contribution of sport and physical activity, Madam Deputy Speaker, to health and wellbeing is particularly strong. A comprehensive review by the United States' Department of Health and Human Services concluded that regularly active individuals had lower mortality rates than the least active and health benefits of being habitually physically active applied to people regardless of age, sex, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status and whether or not they had a disability. Echoing this, Madam Deputy Speaker, research by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) estimated that regular participation in sport is equivalent in health terms to being 14 years younger.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Anti-Doping Policy will also be reviewed with the target to protect the athlete's right to participate in doping-free sport and thus promote health, fairness and equality for athletes worldwide. It will also ensure harmonized, co-ordinated and effective anti-doping programmes at the national and international levels to detect and prevent doping.

This policy will also establish the Fiji Anti-Doping Agency as an independent body charged with the implementation of World Anti-Doping Code and its international standards in Fiji. We have all seen the integrity of sport being questioned by recent events taking place in one of the world's sports powerhouses. This has potentially corrupted the foundation of sports in the minds of spectators and athletes alike and we cannot afford to let that happen in Fiji. We continue to tackle corruption with our zero-tolerance approach and this is now being extended to the sports field.

We need to aim high, continue to punch above our weight and look for other opportunities including bidding to host the Pacific Games again as our contribution to the region and host other events. Our Ministry will work with the Fiji National Sports Commission, Fiji Sports Council and other stakeholders to develop this aspirational strategy in this financial year.

Activities relating to sports and physical education, Madam Deputy Speaker are essential components of human resource development, helping to promote good health, comradeship and a spirit of friendly competition which in turn has positive impact on the overall development of personality of all Fijians. Excellence in sports enhances the sense of achievement, national pride and patriotism. Sports also provides beneficial recreation, improves productivity and fosters social harmony and discipline.

The Ministry is currently reviewing the existing sporting infrastructure status with key stakeholders prior to recommending to Cabinet key investment priority areas to ensure that Fiji is able to offer world class facilities for our local athletes across our four Divisions, and importantly attract more international sports gatherings and tournaments into our shores with a long term view of establishing Fiji as the sporting hub of the Pacific.

However, Madam Deputy Speaker, in light of the above, there is still room for improvement and I will challenge the Ministry to problem solve, namely we will be putting greater efforts into making our programmes as inclusive as possible so that all of our young people can learn leadership skills and realise the immense benefits of physical activity.

Madam Deputy Speaker, young people wherever they are, are in one way or another effectively changing our society for the better, contributing to development agenda of their respective communities and surroundings and making a difference. I say this with confidence as I have seen

first-hand so many examples of these.

To conclude, I wish to once again thank His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Fiji, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere for his challenging opening Address. I again, reaffirm my unwavering commitment to supporting all our young people to realise their full potential for the benefit of our country and its future, both on and off the sports field. May God continue to bless our beloved Fiji.

(Acclamation)

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Colleagues, honourable Members of Parliament and all online and TV viewers; *bula vinaka* and good afternoon to you all.

Let me begin by acknowledging the Giver of life, Jesus Christ, our most esteemed King of Kings and Lord of Lords, whom without, we would not be here today. And I thank and honour Him, above all else, for His grace on my life and for His words in Jeremiah 1:5 that states, and I quote:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart and appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

As a Christian believer, I know I have been placed in this season for a reason and I pledge to honour God and our people to be the best I must be, for our nation, and for all who call Fiji home.

Before I thank His Excellency the President of Fiji for his most gracious Address, may I extend my appreciation to Mr. Speaker and your good self, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak at this point in time, given I was officiating earlier this morning at the opening of the 12th World Hindi Conference currently underway at the Sheraton Resort in Nadi. On that note, may I wish all participants an enjoyable conference and trust that all bilateral talks with Fiji will be successful and mutually beneficial.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency delivered a great reminder at the opening of this new Parliamentary term where he reminded us all on the importance of being united as one nation, and being resolute to work together to bring about a peaceful, prosperous Fiji for all of our people, and I thank him for setting the tone for our journey in the next four years.

I must now pay tribute to the role you will both have now assumed as the newly appointed Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the Fijian Parliament - a role I am positive you both will impart with dignity and impartiality.

I am comforted that having journeyed with you both politically in the last four and eight years since 2014, you both will have amassed a great deal of insight and wisdom in the political affairs of our nation and understand perfectly, the importance of encouraging healing and reconciliation to build a nation that is sustainable and that honours that genuine spirit of democracy.

Madam Deputy Speaker, no man is an island. I did not get to assume this Ministerial position by my own might or influence. I, therefore, wish to acknowledge a few important people and officials who have made my journey into this august Parliament possible.

I acknowledge the SODELPA Party, its founders, officials, supporters, and prayer warriors for being resolute in our efforts to bring democracy to Fiji.

I also thank sincerely my campaign team who have been with me since 2014. It is well acknowledged that my team - *Tamai* Ratu Peni, Ratu Tevita Tuisese, *Tamai* Noa, *Tamai* Susana, *Tamai* Temesia, Paula, Ratu Filimoni and Ana Soqeta, *Turaga Na i Taukei Waimaro* and the late Roko Tui Waimaro have been my backbone, toiling day and night with me, travelling the breadth of Fiji and assisting me deliver to the electorate, and as a result, enabling me to return to this august Parliament successfully - three Elections in a row. *Manakwa vakalevu na veitokoni vinaka* (Thank you very much for the wonderful support).

To my wife Sainiana, the saying that behind a successful man is a hard-working woman is an understatement. I will add to that, behind a leader like me, is a loyal believer and worker - that has been you. I thank God for your life, and I thank God for women like you, who contribute so much to national development from behind the scene.

Ki na noqu vuvale e Mataso kei na kena veiwekani raraba ena Tikina o Soloira, na yasana vakaturaga o Naitasiri, vata kei kemuni kece ena veiyasa i Viti o ni a digitaki au ka dau masulaki au, manakwa vakalevu na veitokoni nakwa. Au doka vakalevu sara na loloma, ka'u na dau saga me'u na veiqaravi ena kena vinaka taucoko, me sotavi kina na nomuni veivakabauti.

[Acknowledging my kin at Mataso and the entire relatives from Soloira District in the Province of Naitasiri, and all the kin around Fiji, for electing me and for your prayers. Thank you very much for your kind support. I humbly acknowledge your devotion and it is my promise to serve to the best of my ability to do justice for your faith in me.]

Madam Deputy Speaker, back in 2014, putting my hand up to represent the voices of the marginalised was an effort I knew I wanted to dedicate my life to because I believed and still believe that democracy must be represented by the choices and will of people, and not by usurping power. As we can imagine, 2014 set the platform for the return to full democracy that we can claim to have finally achieved, even if it remains in a fragile state.

I pay tribute to all who journeyed with us in all those early years of political loneliness and hardship, we soldiered on and here we are nine years later, very much bruised and in tatters, but still standing. Today, I acknowledge you all proudly, but I ask us to be patient in our fragile journey in this new democracy.

We must not be like our prosecutors. We must be better. We must promote healing and reconciliation. We must harness rebuilding and regaining our faith.

I am most humbled and honoured to address you all in my capacity as the new Minister for Education. Madam Deputy Speaker, 2023 is going to be a very challenging year, but one that now brings a lot of hope and optimism that as a nation, we can bury the ghosts of fear and disunity, and embrace real dialogue and a shared vision of togetherness to ensure that no vulnerable community is left behind.

So much has happened that needs our redressing. We have a new Government saddled with remnants of COVID-19 pandemic and many other challenges for the Coalition Government to address, but the good news is, they are doable. Like the slogan of the famous brand name Adidas, "Impossible is Nothing".

For our education sector, it has only been a few weeks, however, I can see that we will need a major overhaul in our systems, our management structures and even our curriculum, to a large extent.

Currently, students are not being given the proper priority they deserve because of the mess that has been created when the structure of the Ministry of Education was changed from three Deputy Secretaries to one Head of National Education and Service Delivery to provide support to the Permanent Secretary. This led to the uneven distribution of the various Sections to these Heads. For instance, the Head of National Education and Service Delivery had to oversee seven Sections in the Ministry out of the 12. Just imagine the load this position had to carry overseeing around 12,000 teachers and growing, plus an average of 400 non-teaching staff.

Unresolved issues have become synonymous with the Ministry of Education and as a result, disgruntled teachers have sought better opportunities offshore, leaving behind a shortage of skilled and experienced staff. Madam Deputy Speaker, at the end of the day, our students suffer when committed and passionate teachers become scarce.

On that note, the former honourable Minister for Education has raised a lot of criticisms against the Ministry of Education. Perhaps, it needs to be pointed out to her that she brought teachers from schools to work in the Ministry of Education Headquarters without following due processes, so she is the last one to talk.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I am not listening to that.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- On that note, honourable Member, Mr. Leawere is also sending his regards.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank His Excellency the President for highlighting the Coalition Government's intentions to establish an Education Commission that is intended to review the entire education system in Fiji in order to improve quality teaching and leadership of schools.

In a similar fashion, a National Education Summit is being planned for the Ministry of Education and all its stakeholders, as His Excellency the President highlighted, to open up dialogue and harness proper planning and restructuring of the education sector.

The challenge, Madam, Deputy Speaker, is not to reflect on the wrongs of the past, but to focus on how things can now be improved now and into the future.

Madam Deputy Speaker, early childhood and primary education lay the foundation for the emotional, social and cognitive development of our children. It is at these stages that services must reflect quality assurances.

There is a total of 865 Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres and 736 primary schools around the country and as such, there is teacher shortage at the primary school level. Right now, we have 335 secondary school teachers who are teaching in primary schools, and this should not be happening as primary education is a specialised field in itself.

Government policies must be practical. Whilst the shortage of primary school teachers was being experienced nationwide, primary school teachers were being retired at 55 years when, in fact, they should have been retained.

Madam Deputy Speaker, another concern is the lack of specialists in the field of Special and Inclusive Education. All children have the right to an adequate education within an enabling learning environment and to fully participate in all school and community activities and for this reason, the Ministry recognises the need to provide teachers with this specialised skillset to address this shortfall.

Consultations will be carried out with the Teacher Training Institutions, relevant Non-Government Organisations and donor partners to devise strategies to better support and strengthen pre-service and in-service teacher education to meet the needs in these areas.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in recent days, we have had to review teaching personnel who have spent more than the recommended number of years in a school. It is imperative that students and schools are injected with new fresh teachers every five to six years or so.

Anyone with longer years in a school must move to new schools to be in line with the Ministry of Education policies. It is not only good for students, but for teachers and the overall academic performance and quality of learning. The saying that a new broom sweeps better is a lesson worth noting.

We have found that teachers have become so complacent, they complain when they are expected to be transferred, promoted, or demoted. Teachers must realise that the Ministry of Education is the employer and they must respond to policy direction. Otherwise, as has been noted, many are building their own castles and power bases in schools, and this has resulted in deteriorating results and the learning environment being compromised.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we currently have 175 secondary schools, 11 of which are Government schools. While student numbers continue to grow over the years, our education sector continues to lose our teachers through resignations and migration to schools overseas. Mathematics, Computer, Physics, PEMAC, Industrial Arts and Office Technology are some of the subject areas that are in need of teachers. The limited human resource capacity has adversely affected the quality of education in our country.

Further to that, the fundamental setback for vocational training offered in our secondary schools is that, certificates obtained by the students at the end of their training are not accredited by the Fiji Higher Education Commission. The institution of the Technical Colleges in Fiji in 2015 was thought to be a solution but rather it became a disastrous failure. These are lessons to be noted and not to be repeated.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it would seem that the fate of Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) rested in the hands of the various Ministers who had served during the past 16 years. In 2015, the then Minister for Education introduced Technical Colleges, providing many students hope to pursue their education in TVET. However, in 2019, another Minister transferred the ownership of Technical Colleges to Fiji National University (FNU) and finally, the fate of the colleges was sealed in their closure in 2021.

The changes not only affected the many students who had joined these Colleges with the hope and dream of building a successful career path, but it also affected more than 100 instructors and trainers who lost their employment statuses.

Early warning signs of market failure can be found in Fijian industries that now import labour from countries such as India, the Philippines and Bangladesh. Today, we have foreign bus drivers and builders.

Madam Deputy Speaker, despite several strategies made by the former Government, TVET still does not seem to be a popular choice among secondary school students when choosing their tertiary education pathway. These challenges will be a focus during the National Education Summit, and we will resolve on how to change that.

The University of the South Pacific (USP) as a regional institution has made significant contributions towards the Fiji labour market. One of the main priorities of our Coalition Government is to draw up a repayment plan in consultation with the relevant authorities, and gradually reinstate Fiji's grant contribution to USP.

The Coalition Government, through the Ministry of Education and Fiji Higher Education Commission, will continue to support not only USP, but the other tertiary institutions, like the FNU, in their educational programmes.

Reports have been received that some Universities are offering academic programmes that suddenly get shelved, leaving students unsure of how to complete their programme of studies. The Ministry of Education is looking into these issues.

Whilst the Coalition Government is still considering the future programme for education support, we pledge not to leave any student behind. Concerns being raised on students not meeting the cut-off marks to obtain education assistance is one of our priorities to resolve.

The Fiji Higher Education Commission (FHEC) is guided by the Fiji Higher Education Act 2008 and the Ministry of Education is reviewing the functions of FHEC, to ensure they promote the development of Fiji as a knowledge-based society. As part of the review, the Ministry of Education is also looking into the management of the FHEC.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the successful economic, social and political development of a nation rests on the level of investment it gives to its human resources. This should begin by making sure that we have dynamic, passionate and quality teachers in our schools.

The removal of the contract system by the Coalition Government has brought relief to civil servants through job security and is expected to boost their confidence and performance.

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

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the extension of retirement age to 60 years for our staff has openly been welcomed. This policy will assist retain skills and knowledge and will address teacher shortages. The Ministry has already received interests from teachers over 55 years, who are willing to continue providing their services.

When it comes to our teachers, as their employer, the Ministry must also ensure justice and fairness in terms of promotions. We, as a Ministry, must ensure that our teachers get promoted because they have proven themselves in the field of teaching, and do away with assessing people through a job test, sat over a few hours and which do not take into account the number of years of experience one has.

Experience is a catalyst of leadership opportunities. Unfortunately, the high number of disciplinary cases by Heads of Schools indicates that many who have been promoted were ill-equipped and lacked the practical experience needed. This is a flaw in the OMRS system.

Additionally, there are cases where promotion of senior officers with years of leadership have been denied under the OMRS Guideline. In fact, they have been replaced by those with much less or no experience in leadership positions.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while qualifications is integral, moving forward, the Ministry, together with relevant stakeholders, including the line Ministries, will review the matrix used for

OMRS, in particular the selection criteria for Heads of Schools and post holders.

The Coalition Government, through the Ministry of Education, will continue to provide Transport Assistance, Free Textbooks and Free Education Grant to our ECE, primary and secondary schools.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I have, no doubt, that the Back to School \$200 financial support has been instrumental in adding to the enthusiasm of parents, guardians and the students for the academic Year 2023. This enthusiasm has been further increased with the repealing of the zoning policy, which has enabled the students to get enrolled into the schools of their choice, ensuring that students' interests are given due consideration.

Madam Deputy Speaker, reverting of the three-term academic year for schools was a decision taken by the Coalition Government to ensure that schools operate smoothly with a system they are accustomed to, and this has also assisted reduce the financial burden for many. During my discussions with the Suva Retailers Association, the Association members admitted being one of the contributors towards the idea of a four-term model which would have, no doubt, benefitted their retail business. Whilst we acknowledge the financial benefits to our economy, this cannot be the main incentive to having the four-term school calendar as was proposed earlier.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in recognising the importance of having consultations with the wider community, I, along with the honourable Assistant Minister and Senior Education Officials have had the first round of consultations with some faith-based organisations, such as the Methodist Church in Fiji, Fiji Muslim League, and management of two schools under the Shree Sanatan Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji. Similarly, we have engaged with the Teachers Unions as we recognise the role they play in the welfare of our teachers.

Other schools from around the Central and Western Divisions were visited since I took office as the Minister for Education. I also had the opportunity to meet with the School Management Association of Fiji, and we will continue to meet with all stakeholders. So far, the feedback to these consultations was positive as stakeholders, as they appreciated being provided with the platform to voice their concerns and be part of the decision-making process.

Madam Deputy Speaker, before I take my seat in support of His Excellency's most gracious Address, I wish to end by saying that our Ministry serves one of our most important clients - our children, who are our future. Education is one of the most powerful catalysts of social change and control. The human mind can be illuminated through education, which can also bring new ideas, new light and new directions for growth and progress.

I urge honourable Members of this august Parliament not to mix politics with policies designed to help uplift the quality of life of our future generation. With God's discernment, let us support each other in ensuring that we, as responsible politicians, help in securing the future of all our children through education.

(Acclamation)

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note we will continue the replies to His Excellency's most gracious Address tomorrow and that brings to an end the sitting today. Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m. *Vinaka* and have a good afternoon.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.54 p.m.