

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

FRIDAY, 17TH FEBRUARY, 2023

[CORRECTED COPY]

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FRIDAY, 17TH FEBRUARY, 2023

The Parliament met at 9.41 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

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

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Thursday, 16th 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 you all honourable Members to today's sitting, especially those joining us in the gallery. It will be remiss of me if I do not mention few well-known faces who are there in the gallery - the former Assistant Minister, Mr. Rajesh – *bula vinaka*; former Member of Parliament from Raiwaqa; Ms. McGoon and Ms. Nagatalevu, I apologise I did not mention your name the last time you were sitting in the gallery and all the members of the public who are joining us today in gallery. Thank you for taking an interest in your Parliament.

Privileges Committee Meeting

Honourable Members, I have been advised that the Privileges Committee will continue with its deliberation this morning and, therefore, I will await further information from the Chairperson.

Delay in Circulation of *Daily Hansard*

Honourable Members, please be advised that the *Daily Hansard* for yesterday's sitting will be circulated later this morning, once the Secretariat finalises the content.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS

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

Standing Committee on Social Affairs

1. Fiji National Provident Fund – Annual Report 2022 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 71 of 2022*);
2. Fiji National Sports Commission – Annual Report for August 2020 to July 2021 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 76 of 2022*).
3. National Fire Authority - Annual Report for the 7 Months Period Ended 31 July, 2016 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 86 of 2022*);
4. Levuka Town Council – Annual Report 2014 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 100 of 2022*);
and
5. Levuka Town Council – Annual Report 2015 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 101 of 2022*).

Standing Committee on Natural Resources

1. Ministry of Fisheries – Annual Report 2019-2020 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 89 of 2022*);
2. Ministry of Fisheries – Annual Report 2020-2021 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 90 of 2022*);
and
3. Ministry of Forestry – 2020-2021 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 73 of 2022*).

Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights

1. Fiji Corrections Service 2018-2019 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 187 of 2022*); and
2. Fiji Corrections Service 2019-2020 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 99 of 2022*).

Honourable Members, please, note that the following Reports are for information only and will not be referred to any Standing Committee:

1. Fourth Quarter Appropriation Statement - Actual Expenditure from 1st May 2022 - 31 July 2022;
2. First Quarter Appropriation Statement – Actual Expenditure from 1st August, 2022 – 31st October, 2022; and
3. Medium Term Fiscal Strategy – 2024-2026 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 7 of 2023*)

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON HIS EXCELLENCY'S ADDRESS

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the Responses to His Excellency's Address and I now call on the Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, honourable Tomasi Tunabuna, who I might add is just like in the previous Parliament, a lone ranger sitting on this side. You have the floor, Sir.

(Laughter)

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, my fellow Fijians present here today and those who are watching the Parliament session live from wherever you are; *miau sa bula re* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first and foremost, I thank the Lord Almighty for His blessings, guidance and strength that has enabled me to be where I am today. I will be presenting to you later a recollection of journey through life and my career. I will do so to help you all to understand that I

am here this morning to testify His glory and to answer to His calling. Sir, Daniel 2:21 from the *Holy Bible*, says and I quote:

“He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am deeply honoured and privileged this morning to be here and to deliver my Maiden Speech as a new Member of this august Parliament, and also as Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Waterways.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to join the previous speakers in congratulating you on your appointment as Speaker of this august Parliament, and I also congratulate honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua on her appointment as Deputy Speaker.

I send my sincere appreciation to His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji for his most gracious, inspirational and moving Address on 3rd February, 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to spare a few lines in my maiden speech to express my deepest sympathies and condolences to the people of Turkey, Syria, the Northern Part of New Zealand and also parts of Fiji for the devastating losses to their properties and loved ones. We pray for God's blessings and fulfilment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was successfully voted into Parliament in the 2022 General Election under our People's Alliance Party (PAP) banner and now, as a Member of the Coalition Government with the National Federation Party and SODELPA. Sir, I pay my respect to the honourable Prime Minister for giving me this opportunity and having faith in me to be part of PAP. I am now serving alongside remarkable leaders - leaders with vision, leaders with principles, leaders with good governance and leaders of the people.

I humbly accepted the request from the representative of the *Vanua o Bua* to be a candidate for PAP. At this juncture, I wish to extend my deepest respect and appreciation to my supporters from the *yasana vakaturaga o Bua*.

Miau sa bula re beha a lewe ni yasana vahauraga o Cahau ni abua. Sa iho a Gone uraga a Ui Bua, miau sa iho beha a vei uraga bale, a marama hei hemiau a oda I na odaou vanua vahauraga I Cahau-ni-Abua, au sa cavua a vahavinavinaha levu hina veinuiahi hea a veivahabau i mai vahayacori vei au na gauna ni veidigidigi. Sa mai rawa a qaqa, sa mai cabe i i uu i Vale ni Bose Lawa, sana mai rogo a domoda. Vinaha sara vahalevu a veiohoni.

[Respectful greetings to the honorific Cakaunitabua chiefdom and the people of the province of Bua. Respectful greetings to high chief the Tui Bua, and all the chiefs and nobles of our traditional Cakaunitabua chiefdom. My utmost gratitude for the immense support and loyalty shown to me during the recent Elections. Victory is finally ours in our having a representative into Parliament where our voice can now be heard. Thank you so much for your loyal support.]

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I grew up under the care of my late mother in her village in Saolo, Wainunu, Bua. My dad was a seaman and was always at sea. I salute and acknowledge them both, and I only wish they were here.

I attended Ratu Luke Memorial School in Wainunu and gained entry into Ratu Kadavulevu School where I passed all my external exams, including the City and Guilds of London Institute's Agriculture Engineering Course.

I had wanted to become a Livestock Officer and was enrolled at the Fiji College of Agriculture in Koronivia and on my final year, I was one of the 10 students who were studying to graduate as a Livestock Officer.

I wish to thank Ms. Marieta Rigamoto, the former Principal of Fiji College of Agriculture and later became the Assistant Minister for Agriculture. She was a powerful and hardworking icon. I thank her sincerely for her motherly role in my life.

From a very early age, I was exposed to the world that required me to meet challenges, make tough decisions, gain experiences and develop myself. I was led to believe that opportunities ahead of me could be made possible through focussed vision, hard work, perseverance, determination and sacrifice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I joined the Ministry of Agriculture as a young Locality Officer in the remote and highlands of Naitasiri. I transitioned through the career ladder to the position of Director Animal Health and Production and later acted Permanent Secretary for Agriculture on a number of occasions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank those who have been part of my upbringing as a junior officer in the Ministry of Agriculture - Dr. Ken Cokanasiga, Dr. Robin Yarrow, Dr. Tabunakawai, Mr. Turagacati, Peter Manueli, Shiu Chand and the late, Philip Alifereti, to name a few. Life then as a civil servant was simple and we found security and care in our workplace. There were well defined systems and processes in place. We were treated with respect and kindness. It was the way the world should be.

I wish to thank Mr. Ratuvuki, Mr. Ucuboi, Mr. Mason and also Mr. Ligairi, Mr. Tamani, Mr. Baya, Dr. Anand Deo, Mr. Bolawaqatabu, Mr. Mudaliar, Mr. and Mrs. Waibuta, Ms. Taylor, Mrs. Nawaikula, Mrs. Toganivalu and Ms. Rakuita, the late Navukiboro, Mr. Ilaitia Boa and Mr. Rakalou, who helped me manoeuvred my way through and assisted me when the loads were heavy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even though work could have been challenging at times, we could find time to discuss and realign our path to eliminate losses and keep damages to the minimum. We invested in our organisation, appropriately designed staff structure, developed succession plans and prioritised capacity building in line with sound recruitment procedures.

Fiji was able to manage, mitigate and transfer risks from natural disasters. The introduction of exotic diseases was negligible. Flood was not very frequent, and recovery was always fast. The impact from animal and plant diseases were kept below economic injury level and responses were appropriately designed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was one of those senior officers that was unceremoniously removed from my office while I was performing the duties of Director Animal Health and Production at the Ministry of Agriculture. Even though it was a bitter experience but for me and my family, it helped us grow stronger. I had to make tough choices and accepted challenges as a result of that situation. My 32 years of service ended abruptly without any due recognition.

I returned home to Sawani in the province of Bua and settled down in the community. This was when I came to finally face the difficulties and hardships rural communities are confronted with

if they do not appreciate the untapped potential that exists in rural communities. I began to influence people to treat agriculture as a business and as a source of livelihood.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was appointed to be a *Mata ni Tikina o Nadi* (Nadi District Representative) in Bua and, again, I was unceremoniously removed from my position upon instruction from the Provincial Administrator Bua from higher authorities. I was worried, however, from that point onwards, I was very confident that if I was going to contest the Election, I will definitely sit in the seat of Parliament. It was just a matter of time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that experience was the driving force to joining politics. I had to answer to the call from the *vanua o Bua* (Province of Bua) to represent them in this august Parliament. It will be an upward battle and I am fully confident that my knowledge and experience will help me make the difference in this sector. I had envisioned the plans and proper measures to achieve the desired outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me now focus on agriculture and waterways. I must thank the staff of the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways for their endurance and resilience as the last 16 years was far too long. I thank the staff for their warm welcome ceremonies accorded to us whenever we visit them. This is an indication of the huge relief and massive support to the change in Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to acknowledge His Excellency the President of Fiji for highlighting the need to ensure that all citizens have access to safe and nutritious food. The Ministry of Agriculture's activities are earmarked to realise food and income security. Agricultural growth and expansion will stimulate economic activities.

The Ministry is currently reviewing the existing Ministry's Strategic Development Plan which underpins five key strategic priorities, as follows:

1. Improve Food and Nutrition Security.
2. Increase Farm Household Income.
3. Climate Smart Agriculture.
4. Commercial Agriculture.
5. Improve Public Sector Performance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji was able to grab the opportunity to expand production of primary produce, reduce our imports and increase exports to premium markets to bring in the much-needed foreign exchange. This has enabled the Ministry to remain committed to support agricultural development that will continue to accelerate the process of transitioning smallholder farmers to commercial level.

Mr. Speaker Sir, in Fiji, agricultural initiatives are being undertaken to address the most important issues affecting our rural population. Production of local food, particularly indigenous and traditional food that can withstand climate change and often nutritious meals for our local population. As a result, agricultural support must be distributed holistically, and farmers are provided with support packages needed to actively pursue commercial agriculture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to support His Excellency's statement for farmers to have guaranteed income from both, local and export market. Farmers will be encouraged to work in clusters to facilitate access to market, finance, training and technology.

The Ministry will develop the framework that addresses domestic and international issues, including food and nutritional security, climate change, feedstock for renewable energy, and the use

of land and water resources for production to meet domestic and export market demands. In addition, the Ministry will continue to improve infrastructure that will reduce flooding in lower catchment areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in view of His Excellency's statement of growing the economy by increasing the size of the pie through diversifying our resources, the Ministry is aware of the unregulated and unsustainable land use practices which has caused an increase in soil erosion and sedimentation into our waterways, thus increasing flooding. The Ministry is committed to establish a national dredging plan of action to address the problem.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has been promoting nature-based solution seawall construction to reduce communities' exposure to coastal erosion and high-way action during storms surges. Sea level rise has long been a threat to coastal communities with rippled effects of coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion and coastal flooding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry also extends support during periods of prolonged drought to many farmers who are unable to properly irrigate their farmlands and assist them with irrigation kits and install multiple gravity-fed irrigation systems.

The Ministry will continue to engage and build strong lasting partnerships with all relevant international stakeholders, potential investors, donor partners, agencies and communities, as they continue to progress towards our vision to grow beyond. The Government would like to thank its partners, such as Food and Agriculture Organisation, United Nations, European Union, South Pacific Community, the World Food Programme and many other stakeholders whom we are very grateful to be engaged with, and we look forward to their continued support towards the development of the agriculture sector.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government acknowledges the strong engagement with our partners in development through our consolidated Coastal Protection Programme, and I wish to make mention of the contribution of the Asian Development Bank, International Union for Conservation Nature (IUCN) and the Kiwa Initiative and Adaptation Fund. We are also grateful for the support we get from our bilateral partners and we wish to continue our collaboration in the coming years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is committed to capacity building and human resource development. It is obvious that there is room for improvement, for it was overlooked and mismanaged by the previous Government. This had resulted in huge demands for skilled and experienced human resources. There will be thorough consultations with academic institutions as to the courses offered so that these will meet industry demands. Having said that, it is important that proper planning is required to address the constraints faced in the development of the agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to extend my deepest appreciation to my family - my beautiful wife, Seruwaia Susu Tunabuna, my children, my in-laws, grandchildren and my brothers and sisters. I also pay tribute to my twin sister and brother, Bano.

I thank the support from the *Mataqali Muanaicake, na lewenikoro o Sawani Nasawana, Saolo, Nasolo kei Nasavu, na Tikina vakaturaga o Kubulau, Wainunu, Nadi, Solevu kei Vuya. Au sa cavuta talega na vakavinavinaka ki na vo ni Tikina ena yasana vakaturaga o Bua.*

[I thank the support from the Muanaicake Clan, the villagers of Sawani, Nasawana, Saolo, Nasolo and Nasavu, the District of Kubulau, Wainunu, Nadi, Solevu and Vuya. I express my sincere gratitude also to the remaining Districts in the chiefly Bua Province.]

Vinaka sara vakalevu na veitokoni mai Labasa, Seaqaqa kei Savusavu - na matavuvale nei Momo Inia, matavuvale nei Sema kei Siti Roko, matavuvale nei Marawa, Julie, Kasaya, Mule, Kalo, Teresa, matavuvale nei Adriu, matavuvale nei Momo Pei, matavuvale nei Kusitino, matavuvale nei Iliesa, matavuvale nei Vakaboro, matavuvale nei Tarisi kei na soqosoqo ni vuli oti mai na Ratu Kadavulevu mai Labsasa.

Vei kemudou saka na lewe ni matavuvale mai Sabeto kei Natalau, vina du valevu.

[Much gratitude also for the support shown from Labasa, Seaqaqa and Savusavu - Uncle Inia's family, Sema's family, Siti Roko's family, Marawa's family, Julie, Kasaya, Mule, Kalo, Teresa, Adriu's and Momo Pei's families, Kusitino's family, Iliesa's family, Vakaboro family, Tarisi's family, Ratu Kadavulevu old scholars in Labasa.

And to the families at Sabeto and Natalau, thank you sincerely.]

I also wish to extend my appreciation to my campaign team, Sakeo, who is seated here in the gallery and his family; Ratu Isoa and his family; Akuila and his team; Sakea and his team; *Na Gone Turaga Na Tui Nadi ena tikina vakaturaga o Kubulau , vaka saka talega kina na Tui Kubulau, Mata ni Tikina o Kubulau, vakatalega kina na Mata ni Tikina o Solevu* and Ratu Jo Tuinaosara. [the Tui Nadi in the chiefly District of Kubulau, also to the Tui Kubulau, the District Representative of Kubulau, as well as the District Representative of Solevu, and Ratu Jo Tuinaosara.]

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to also extend my gratitude to my sister Rasavere and her team in Tonga, Alesi and her team in Cook Islands, Momo Tui and the Tunabuna family wherever you are; Semisi in the US, Apete and Emosi in New Zealand; Wati in Australia and Ravusamana in Congo and not forgetting Mereoni in Iraq.

Masiasa kei na Mataqali o Navucivuci ena koro vakaturaga saka o Saolo kei na lewe ni matavuvale mai Naruwai, vinaka kece sara ga vakalevu na veitokoni, vinaka saka vakalevu.

I thank the Talatala ni Tabacakacaka o Nadi kei na Turaga Na i Talatala ni New Way mai Nasolo kei na Gone Turaga Na Tui Vuya, vinaka saka vakalevu na veimasulaki.

[To Masiasa and the Navucivuci Clan in the chiefly Saolo Village and extended family of Naruwai and all loyal supporters, thank you very much indeed.

I thank the Pastor of the Nadi circuit and the Pastor of the New Way at Nasolo and also for the Tui Vuya, thank you very much for your prayers.]

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to also thank the many that have been very silently braving the situation in the Government, in the private sector, urban and the rural communities, wherever you are in Fiji and abroad , thank you very much. To the hundreds who were unceremoniously removed from their workplace, be rest assured that those days are over.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide my response to His Excellency's most gracious Address.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I offer you the floor, Sir, welcome back to Parliament.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for welcoming me back to Parliament and I will allude to that a little later.

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, my fellow Fijians present here today and those witnessing through other means outside this Parliament; it is, indeed, a great pleasure to join my parliamentary colleagues and the people of Fiji to welcome the beginning of the third term of Parliament since 2014.

I join my fellow colleagues to congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for your successful election to the high office. This august Parliament will surely be guided by your exemplary leadership and profound vision. I also wish to congratulate honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua for her appointment as the Deputy Speaker. Let me also congratulate all our Members of Parliament for their successful election to Parliament and let us work together for a better Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before us and I thank His Excellency the President for his wise counsel and leadership. His Excellency's tenure as President marks another highlight, furthering his sterling career as a leader of the people which he carries out with humility, grace and charm. His messages of peace, unity and harmony have formed the cornerstone of his public pronouncements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to first thank my wife, Mrs. Sadhana Singh, a retired teacher; our son and daughter in-law; our daughter and son in-law; and our four grandchildren for their unconditional love and unwavering support at all times. I also wish to extend my sincere gratitude to my extended family, relatives, friends, volunteers, Party workers and the voters nationwide and abroad for the support that they rendered during the Election.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Trades Union Congress (FTUC) and all the affiliates and workers of Fiji, who inspired me to return to Parliament are also thanked from the bottom of my heart.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I come from a small coastal village, Niurua, which is about 20 kilometres on the coast down from the chiefly village of Naduri. I am from Macuata by the way. My late parents and my late elder brothers were the ones that taught me the values that I strongly nurtured. Sir, my late father stood for justice, fairness, humanity, and my late elder brothers were also those who always made sure that the weak were not bullied.

Mr. Speaker Sir, out of the 12 siblings, I am number 10 and when my eldest brother got married, I was merely a year old. I am blessed to have a very large extended family. I was a teacher for 26 years and my training was at Corpus Christi Teachers College and my further education from the University of the South Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I express my deep gratitude to the stalwarts of the National Federation Party and the Coalition Government colleagues and supporters for their hard work and commitment to ensure we achieve our set goals and objectives. Our deep sense of unity and solidarity will enable us to collectively overcome the challenges that lie ahead. These counsels of humility and grace, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are virtues that form the foundation of our diversity. Its principles are embedded in the message of His Excellency the President that he imparted, not only to all of us, but to the people of Fiji.

His Excellency addressed the need for national unity. This is vital to meeting our growing challenges and looking after the less fortunate and marginalised in our society. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as

a leader committed to genuine democracy, our honourable Prime Minister is a towering figure of vision, genuine commitment and firm focus for a united Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government will adhere to the virtues of truth and justice to achieve genuine democracy, compassion and care for all. And herein, I will talk about something that is very dear and near to my heart.

I am grateful to the honourable Prime Minister for his display of trust and confidence in me. The workers of Fiji have this Coalition Government's assurance that we will not abandon them. Personally, Mr. Speaker, I have fought for workers' rights for the past 23 years. My ministerial appointment will not change this fact. As stated earlier, a unified approach through dialogue, consensus and mutual agreement is the most ideal way forward for workers, employers and government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, tripartism, that is, workers, employers and government trying to collectively resolve issues will be the new order of industrial relations. Sir, the values and vision upon which my Ministry was established after the independence of our nation will remain the cornerstone in everything that we do. It will help us navigate the multiple crisis facing the employment sector and act as the basis of policies. It will help us to fairly quickly assess the profound and rapid changes in the global arena.

For this reason, the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations remains deeply committed to advancing social justice as a condition for lasting peace through sustained and inclusive economic growth that fosters decent work and a sustainable working environment for all. Given the impact of current challenges on employment and labour markets, my Ministry stands ready to support workers, employers and all our stakeholders to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all based on unique, normative mandate and tripartite structure.

Mr. Speaker, as highlighted by His Excellency's the President, the People's Coalition Government has re-established the diminished Tripartite Forum on equal appointment of representatives from government, employers and trade unions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to inform Parliament that the first Employment Relations Advisory Board Meeting (ERAB) for 2023 was held on 8th February with its membership consisting of equal representation of workers, employers and government in line with ILO Convention 144 on Tripartite Consultation which Fiji ratified in May 1998.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was surprised by the utterances of honourable Bala during his contribution to the debate on Monday, 13th February on the ERAB. Let me just remind honourable Bala that under his leadership as the then Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations, there was no equal representation in ERAB.

HON. P.K. BALA.- That is what you say.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- The uneven representation of tripartite members resulted in unfair and unjust

HON. P.K. BALA.- I had to hold Felix's hand and bring him to the meeting. Keep that in mind before you say anything.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- ... decisions were made by the board with no genuine consultation. The Fiji Trades Union Congress (FTUC) refused to be part of that ERAB because it was not constituted according to the ILO Guideline.

Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have equal representation of five members each from employers, workers and the Government. This means that the decisions made by ERAB will be fair and all tripartite members will be able to fully express their opinion and have consensus on matters brought for discussion in ERAB.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I never expected this from you.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, when you do wrong you have to be corrected.

HON. P.K. BALA.- What is wrong?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- The wrongs have to be pointed out when they are corrected...

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Aww!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Here comes a political party.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the right to organise collective bargaining was curtailed under the FijiFirst Government and freedom of assembly and freedom of speech was something that they never allowed.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Increase the minimum wage rate.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Under their leadership, individual contracts imposed on the Civil Service were deliberately intended to diminish the rights of workers.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Aww!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Collective bargaining became a thing of the past, union busting was the name of the game. As the General Secretary of the Fiji Teachers Union (FTU) at the that time until recently, Sir, the numerous letters that we wrote to the Ministry of Education, the numerous e-mails that we would send to the senior staff including the Minister, there was no response or acknowledgement, let alone a substantive reply.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Aww, shameful!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, with my close association with the FTUC, we noted that our application to conduct a peaceful march was denied eight times without any valid reason - a one sentence. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Secretary of FTUC, Mr. Felix Anthony, was arrested in May 2019 at the Ministry's Conference Room on level four, right in the presence of the Director International Labour Organization (ILO), the then Minister, honourable Bala....

HON. P.K. BALA.- I was not there. Mr. Speaker, Sir, he is lying.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Aww!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- ... and other executives from the workers' organisations, who had gathered there for a good faith meeting.

HON. P.K. BALA.- You are misleading Parliament.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- After Felix Anthony was arrested, honourable Bala said, "Sorry, it is out of my hands".

HON. P.K. BALA.- All lies, speak the truth!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Tripartite Agreement that was signed in 2016 by the three social partners (the Government, the employers and the unions) to review the labour laws to bring it in conformity with the ILO Convention ratified by Fiji...

HON. P.K. BALA.- It was already ratified .

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Listen, listen!

HON. P.K. BALA.- It is my right.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- ...was not honoured by honourable Bala and his Ministry. The Coalition Government will ensure that this is done, and we will reclaim our international standing in relation to compliance with ILO Conventions and various recommendations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was also totally surprised when honourable Bala talked about the \$4 minimum wage.

(Laughter)

Sir, it took the FijiFirst Government 16 years to give the people of Fiji the national minimum wage of \$4. The FTUC had been fighting for that way back then in 2014.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Again, it is a lie!

(Hon. C.J. Singh interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- I'm not talking to you, this is not your supermarket.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order! No running commentary, please, honourable Members.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the minimum wage was implemented without full participation of the Tripartite partners and without the endorsement of the Tripartite Wages Councils, which has been dysfunctional for the past 10 years. The Coalition Government will ensure that all the machinery of the Tripartite Forum are brought back to ensure that we give workers, employers and Government equal representation in decision-making for the betterment of all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the review of the labour legislation which, again, is pending from 2015 when the Tripartite Agreement was signed in Geneva and the second one signed in 2016, which was pending since then (commitment not honoured), now the review has been discussed by ERAB and members of the Board are tirelessly working to ensure we meet our goals and objectives urgently.

The Essential National Industries List which is in breach of the ILO Guideline, is also now going to be addressed. My Ministry also acknowledges His Excellency the President for reiterating the importance of our Vuvale Partnership with the Australian Government in not only improving opportunities under the Labour Mobility Programme, but also ensuring the welfare of our workers is protected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, braindrain and lots of skilled labour remains a crucial issue for Fiji. While labour mobility raised international issues which cannot be solved overnight, we need to start thinking of other mechanisms to upskill our people to remain in the country. We will work closely with other stakeholders to put in place the necessary skills training, skills building, technical vocational training, competency, efficiency and apprenticeship schemes to accomplish that. Again, you cannot change history.

Some 29 Technical Colleges were opened less than a decade ago - about eight to nine years ago and these Colleges were opened for about four to five years. About \$40 million, I believe, had been invested and all those Colleges were closed after that short period. Now, they are all white elephants.

When they opened those Technical Colleges, they closed all the technical vocational training centres that were attached to secondary schools all over Fiji. Subsequently, closing those Technical Colleges meant there were no more technical vocational basic training - gone. Very smartly, the Technical Colleges were passed onto FNU without the necessary funding, and because the national University was not provided with funding, it was compelled to close and that was exactly what the Director Human Resources of Technical Colleges shared with me because we had 200 members who were laid off straight after that.

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

HON. A.D. SINGH.- We are now exploring means of opening some of those Technical Colleges to see that we are able to resume technical vocational training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 16 years of uncertainty over the right to freedom of association, freedom of speech, right of assembly, right to strike or picket when negotiations with employers fall through, will come to an end when unions, employers and Government come together to discuss and reach solutions amicably. The harassment and intimidation and arrest of Trade Union leaders, especially when they conduct union activities and highlight grievances facing workers, will now become a thing of the past. I want to share this as well with this Parliament.

The President of the FTU was offered a promotion in return for relinquishing his position as the President of the Union.

HON. P.K. BALA.- When?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- When he refused, he was demoted and transferred to another district.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Yes. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we took that matter to court and that letter still remains ...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- When the then Minister knew that they were going to lose that case in the court, he ...

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- He did not act on his own, it was a network!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- ... invited the President of the Union to his office and assured him a promotion and that commitment was given in writing by the then Permanent Secretary and that letter is still with my President.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Table it in Parliament!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- I will show it to you, honourable Bala.

The Coalition Government will work very closely with the Tripartite partners through effective social dialogue and genuine consultation. The re-establishment of 10 Wages Councils will see that workers, employers and Government are able to come together and determine a decent minimum wage for the different sectors.

HON. P.K. BALA.- When, when?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- You will see soon. Come to my office and I will tell you. Come to your old office.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- This is the place where you have to circulate....

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current strategic priorities are as follows:

- Enhanced labour leadership and good governance to build capacity to improve efficiency and accountability;
- Improve labour market policies and standards to ensure best practices and fair compliance process;
- Promote and facilitate sustainable employment to ensure effective and efficient management employment opportunities; and
- Strengthen workplace productivity through collaboration, innovation and ICT capabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will continue to effectively administer and enforce the provisions of the Employment Relations Act 2007, Health and Safety Work Act 1966, National Employment Centre

Act 2009, Industrial Associations Act 1941 and all relevant subsidiary legislations for the welfare and prosperity of all Fijians.

There are profound changes occurring in our communities, which I have experienced firsthand, and we need to better understand in order to respond to them effectively. We need to stop for a moment, we need to listen and then we need to move forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members would fully agree that our communities are wary of bickering, bullying and grubby tactics. Those unholy trades have too often been demonstrated in the political landscape across Fiji and continuously made headlines that pollute our society. It is time to set a better example for our communities, especially for our younger generation that bullying and aggression are not tools for negotiation. If we are to become progressive, inclusive and innovative in a fair society, as we say we are, it is now time for us to say ‘no’ to poor conduct, time-wasting in the political realm and that sometimes is also seen in this august Parliament.

Let us nurture the possibilities of progress instead of being fearful of change and retreating to the safety of our comfort zone. Let us be innovative and efficient in our processes and culture of work as we ask of our businesses and our communities.

We need to live by examples. Most communities understand that there are lots of things a local MP cannot do alone. They also understand that a concerted effort from them and their communities with the support of Members of Parliament and Government can make real headway to achieving their goals. In order for this new culture of leadership in politics to succeed, we must rise above the corrosive force of working in silos and being territorial. We should work beyond that. The last thing our beloved Fiji needs is for our elected representatives to build and camouflage themselves in silos.

Lack of political morality results in conflict, wasted effort and stagnation. We no longer have time on our side, nor endless resources to spend energy in these senseless actions. Our focus should be to drive forward a united and interconnected community and a State that looks beyond just one issue of political ideology that seeks knowledge, promotes creative thoughts and works to demonstrate what can be done instead of harping about what cannot - that looks beyond which Government is in power and comes together in this Parliament to create the outcomes sought by the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent Election results determine that we can and must uplift the lives of ordinary citizens. This is what drives us as Members of our Coalition Government. Politics is a call to duty and leadership. More importantly, politics must be a call to service and dedication to bettering the lives of all Fijians through deeds, as the new Government is doing, and not mere words.

On that note, I must commend the honourable Prime Minister for his fair and firm leadership and his concept of ‘let love shine.’ This Government will ensure that we work together and strive forward for a common purpose, and that purpose is the best of all things in a prosperous and united Fiji for all Fijians. As a trade unionist would like to say, Mr. Speaker, united we stand.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now intend to adjourn Parliament for tea and when we return, I shall be calling upon the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Justice to take the floor. Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned 10.40 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.21 a.m.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Daniel 2:20-23 states, and I quote:

“Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and the seasons; He removes kings and sets up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; He reveals deep and hidden things; He knows what is in the darkness; and light dwells with Him.

To you, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and might, and have now made known to me what we asked of you, truly you are the Lord of Lord, the revealer of mysteries.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and invited guests joining us today in Parliament, as well as those watching and listening to the live broadcast on the radio and television; it is, indeed, a privilege and a great pleasure for me to stand before you in this august Parliament today to deliver my maiden speech.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, I warmly congratulate you on your appointment as Speaker of Parliament. I join others in wishing you, Sir, the very best in your role as Speaker. The people of Lomaiviti are united, particularly the people from Gau Island and Somosomo City, and you have our support and look forward to working with you to lift our beloved Fiji to a higher destiny, to a new plateau of compassion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my journey started at Assemblies of God Primary School and Intermediate School before I moved to Central Fijian School in 1982 (now Sila Central High School). I would like to acknowledge and pay tribute to Mr. Peni Vunisau Hunt Sila, also known as Misiada Sila, for his foresight and the sole founder of the school back in 1958 to serve the educational needs of the students from Tailevu, Naitasiri and Rewa.

He was particularly involved with the banana plantation business at that time when he heard parents, particularly *iTaukei*, complaining about the problem of not finding any school for their children since established schools like Queen Victoria School (QVS), Ratu Kadavulevu School (RKS), Adi Cakobau School (ACS), Lelean Memorial School (LMS) and others were full. He decided to use his personal savings from his business to start a new school to accommodate the students who had no school available for them at that time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he used his office in Nausori Town to be his new school and named it Central Fijian School. He later requested the Komai Nausori to offer him a piece of land to lease, which enabled the school to be relocated to its present location. In August 1990, the administration and management of the institution were officially handed over to the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the initial school motto reflected the dedication and hard work of its founder, *Turaga Naita* from Toga, Rewa - “*Visibility Through Excellence*” than “*Labour Conquers Everything*”, to bring into focus that everything is possible through perseverance, dedication, personal drive and self-determination. The theme was changed in 1991 to “*Striving For Excellence*”, building a culture of excellence and aim at lifting the mediocre and casual attitude in staff to make the school more competitive in whatsoever it undertakes.

I vividly recall in 1982 when I enrolled in Form 3. We were assembled near the library and the Principal shouted in a loud voice, “those of you who want to be doctors, engineers, technicians

form a line to my right. Come to my left those of you who want to be teachers, civil servants, lawyers and politicians.” I wanted to be a lawyer so I went to the left. Little did I know that it would turn into a reality when I was admitted to the bar in 1999, sworn in as a Resident Magistrate in 2012 and Attorney-General and Minister for Justice on 24th December, 2022. I wish to pay tribute to my former principals - Mr. J. Roqica, Mr. Eroni Sauvakacolo, Master Sefa Finau and, of course, all the past teachers of Central Fijian School.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank God for giving me the strength, wisdom, knowledge and understanding. Who would have thought that a son of a Methodist Pastor from Tovulailai, Nairai, Lomaiviti, would be here today to deliver his Maiden Speech in this august Parliament. My hope as a Christian is not fundamentally rooted in men’s goodwill and rationality, but in God alone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank my immediate family - my beautiful wife sitting in the gallery, Mrs. Pamela Elder Turaga; my children - Josevani Bola, Sereima Radinikoroi Turaga and Pamela Turaga, for their unceasing prayers and support. I also acknowledge my Tata Levu Tamai Lili and Tinai Lili, thank you for your prayers.

To my eldest brother - Tata Levu Waisake Qoli; Tamai Navi in Sydney, Australia; my only sister - Avisaki Bau; Tinai Audrey of Melbourne, Australia; Tamai Johnny - Ilesia Celua and his family in Nakasi; Tamai Maciu in Nepani and my late younger brother who is in heaven, Siveni Bainiua Turaga. My younger brother was laid to rest the day I was sworn in as honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Justice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I seek your indulgence to speak in my mother tongue.

Taumada au cavuta na noqu vakavinavinaka cecekia ki na noqu vanua e Kubuna e Wai, na Gone Turaga na Tui Nairai; na noqu koro lomani o Tovulailai; Gone Ratu na Roko Tui Bau; na Turaga Matapule; Na Qali Levu na Tui Vutuna; kei Qalisau na Komai Lawaki - vinaka vakalevu na veimasulaki kei na veitokoni ka mai rawa kina na cabeti na i tutu ni veiliutaki e na noda matanitu lomani. Au sega talega ni guilecavi kemudou na noqu lewe ni vuvale e na Yavusa Kaci e Lasakau e na koro ko Vione kei Qarani mai Gau, kei na kena i sema vakadra i Viti kei vavalagi ko ni veitokoni vei au ena noqu vakavakarau ki na Veidigidigi ka yacova tiko mai na siga e daidai.

Au semata na noqu vakavinavinaka ki na i soqosoqo ni Lomaiviti e Nadi, Lautoka, Ba kei Rakiraki. Kivei kemudou na noqu PAP Team mai Ositerelia, Amerika, Cook Islands, sa mai rawa na qaqa e na nomudou duavata, yalovata e na i tavi bibi me laveti kina na drotini ni Yasana o Lomaiviti e na kena cicivaki na Matanitu oqo ni Coalition ni veiliutaki kina na qaqa mai Navatu, Brigadier Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka.

Au cavuta talega noqu vakamolimoli kei na noqu vakavinavinaka kivei kemudou talega na wekaqu mai na Yatu Yasawa - dou cola vinaka na wekaqu. Vinaka vakalevu na veitokoni e na yavu ni veiwekani makawa o Kubuna e Wai kei na Yatu Yasawa. Nuitaki ni veisemati oqo e na vakabulabulataka tale mai na bula ni veiwekani kei na veisemati e na veigauna vinaka sa tu e matada.

Au vakatulou, na Gone Turaga na Takala-i-Gau, Daviqeleqele vua na Turaga na Ratu, Turaga na Lewena na Turaga Tui Vanuaso, Turaga na Toronibau ena vanua vakaturaga o Batiki, Turaga na Ratu na Tui Moturiki, Nabukebuke, Turaga na Tui Levuka, Nakorovatu na Turaga na Rokotakala, Wailevu vua na Turaga na Tui Wailevu, Bureta vua na Turaga na Ratu, ena yanuyanu turaga o Koro, i Mudu vua Turaga na Mata ni Mudu, Cawa vua na Turaga na Tui Naigani.

[First and foremost, I express utmost appreciation towards my Kubuna e Wai Clan, its Tui Nairai chieftain, my beloved village of Tovulailai, the Ratu and Rokotuibau chieftain, the Matapule and Qalilevu chieftain of Tui Vutuna and the Qalisau chief of the Komai Lawaki chieftain - thank you, indeed, for the prayers and support which enabled the achievement of this esteemed position in Government. Also acknowledged is my extended families respectfully from the Kaci clan and Lasakau Clans from the village of Vione and Qarani in Gau in Fiji and abroad for the Election preparation and support which thus, enabled me to be where I am today

Gratitude is extended also to the Lomaiviti Province Associations at Nadi, Lautoka, Ba and Rakiraki. To my PAP Team in Australia, America and the Cook Islands, victory has been attained through your unity and solidarity in unfurling the banner of the Lomaiviti Province in the execution of State duties by the Coalition led by the notable Navatu warrior, Brigadier Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka.

My esteemed gratitude also to my kin from the Yasawa Islands – warm greetings to you my kin. Thank you very much for the support based on the ancient traditional relationship between Kubuna e Wai and the Yasawa Islands. It is sincerely hoped that this traditional relationship is sustained and further strengthened for posterity.

With utmost respect to the Takalai Gau Chief, the Ratu chieftain of Naiviqeleqele, the Tui Vanuaso of Turagalewena, and the Toranibau of Batiki, the Ratu of Tui Moturiki, the Tui Levuka of Nabukebuke, the Rokotakala of Nakorovatu, the Tui Wailevu of Wailevu, the Ratu of Bureta, on Koro Islands the envoy of Mudu from Mudu, and Tui Naigani of Cawa.]

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my congregation - Naisonisoni Methodist Church in Waqadra and the Namaka Circuit within the Nadi Division. Special thanks to the *Turaga na i Vakatawa*, Manasa Ratumuri and Jiko Usumaki and their Radini and the Church elders. A special mention of my spiritual mentor, Mr. Taione Koroisavou, and his lovely wife. I wish to also acknowledge our Church's former Minister at Namaka Methodist Church, Reverend Tomasi Daunakamakama, and his family and my current Minister, Reverend Tevita Rokomokosoi Kete. I also wish to express my gratitude to the present support of the Divisional Church Minister, Reverend Tevita Vuniwaqa. Last but not least, my Church members of Nasareci Methodist Church and the members of the community at Nepani, Nasinu, for their support and commitment, endless prayers which have given me the strength and determination.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to the community leaders who first settled at Nepani Housing Estate in 1975 and the current leaders, who have one way or another have positively influenced my life throughout the years until today, who have moulded the life skill that I have embraced in my life.

Special thanks to the following people who have been part of the Turaga Team in Lomaiviti - my campaign manager, Manasa Kikau; my PAP Team (Koro), including Eleni Luvunitoga, Koli Daulakeba, Walesio of Nacamaki, Naivaka of Nasau and Tavale Vilimoni of Nasau, Koro. To my media officer, Ratu Mosese Mataika, who is seated at the gallery, I am forever grateful for your dedication and support.

I would also like to acknowledge the moral support from the St. John extended families throughout Fiji and abroad, Nairai, Kadavu, Qauia and Lautoka. I also wish to acknowledge my family from Daku, Vunikavika, Diwana family and from Buca Bay, Tunuloa, Waivure Estate - the Elder family.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am fortified by the words of Joshua 1:9 which states, and I quote: “Be strong and courageous, do not be frightened, do not be dismayed for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

II Timothy 1:7 states, and I quote: “For God gave us the spirit not of fear, but of power, love and self-control.”

Deuteronomy 31:6 states, and I quote: “Be strong and courageous, do not fear or be dared of them, for He is the Lord your God who goes with you, He will not leave you or forsake you.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend His Excellency the President for his Address to Parliament, stressing on the urgency of the need to embody a collective spirit of resilience and dissolve and respect for every single person in Fiji, as well as the rights of communities in Fiji. Those are the foundation and pillars of which a strong and prosperous nation is built upon.

Martin Luther King Jr. told us something that we need to hear. He said, and I quote:

“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now, in the s unfolding conundrum of life and history.”

Similarly, Senator Robert F. Kennedy said, and I quote:

“Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring those ripples builds a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from villages, *tikina* (Districts), the 14 provinces of Fiji, including Rabi and Kioa and Rotuma, from our towns and cities, our people have caused ripples of change and together, we have swept down the walls of oppression that existed for the past 16 years.

In my role as Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, I am committed to seeing that the dreams of our people realised through the observance and adherence to the rule of law and the chains and shackles of oppression are once and for all broken. This is a new chapter for Fiji and prioritising the needs of our country is of paramount importance. It is, therefore, our collective duty to seize every opportunity to progress our nation in the best way possible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Justice William Robert Marshall, QCSC, former Resident Justice of Appeal of Fiji, petitioned the former Prime Minister, our current Leader of the Opposition, to address, and I quote:

“... progressive inroads into the independence of the judiciary which process has culminated since mid-April 2012, in a judiciary which at all levels now does what it perceives is required of it by the Executive.”

And he persuaded the former Prime Minister to change the Executive policy immediately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, unfortunately, this was not done, nor was the advice accorded to him heeded.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to highlight two instances that were reported in the Fiji 2020 Human Rights Report that were of particular importance to the rule of law by the United States of America. Firstly, is in relation to my ruling on 15th April, 2020 at the Nadi Magistrates Court which subsequently led to the non-renewal of my contract. The matter went on appeal the next day to be

called before Justice Perera.

What was shocking here was that, my predecessor conveyed a press conference in the morning before the review of my decision was called at around 2.30 p.m., criticising my ruling which, in my opinion, is a clear breach of the separation of powers, the *subjudice* principle and what appeared to be a *prima facie* case of contempt of court.

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

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- The second incident, Mr. Speaker, is the 19th May, 2020 High Court Ruling made by Justice Temo that dismissed the conviction of civilians caught violating the national curfew which was overturned, and Magistrates were directed not to follow Justice Temo's Ruling.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, fast forward to 2023, Justice Temo is now the current Acting Chief Justice. The Resident Magistrate who lost his job on 10th May, 2020, is standing before you as the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice. Today is the day of restoration. It starts today, it will flow throughout this year because God is with us.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- *Vinaka*.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Who will be against us? Let justice flow like a river. The people of this nation have been praying for the last 16 years - praying for freedom, pray for mercy. *Tukuna dua noqu Nana mai Somosomo, vakawati i Nawaikama, Gau, "Sa rauta mada na veivakalolomataki, sa rauta, keimami vinakata na veisereki. Sa rauta na veivakaukauwataki, keimami vinakata na galala"*.

[In the words of a maternal aunt from Somosomo and married into Nawaikama Village in Gau, "Enough with the exploitations, we want freedom! Enough with the enslavement, we want liberty!"]

That is what, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fijians are enjoying today.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- *Vinaka*.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I received a message an email from an unknown person from Canada of Indian descent, I do not know this person (not an iota) and this is what he said "It is a day of hope, what the Coalition Government has done." That is the word on the street, go out and see for yourselves. I have been stopped here and there with people hugging me - thank you I do not even know them. There is finally a new freedom – a freedom that this Coalition Government gave to them, that they can now work from 55 to 60 years - work is not limited and your contract is extended until the age of 60.

It is a commitment of this Government to ensure that locals who are best positioned to understand our laws and culture, are trained and recruited into the Judiciary. This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the policy of localisation. It is a global practice, and it is not unique to Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Constitutional Offices Commission under the Government has, for the first time, provided a transparent report of its proceedings, and this is something that we will maintain. Prior to this unfortunately, the Commission operated on a cloud of secrecy, unknown to the people of Fiji. The same can also be said for the operation of the Prerogative of the Mercy Commission. This is a clear sign of democracy truly alive in Fiji.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I add, it is the very first meeting of the COC that resulted in the expulsion of my predecessor who used to stand here, out of this Parliament, because he did not know the law that was actually drafted. That is untold, unknown for an Attorney-General not to know the law they have drafted. What happens when you draft laws without consultation?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I impress upon the Members of this Parliament to maintain decorum in the way we conduct ourselves in addressing issues in this Parliament. May I plead to my fellow honourable Members, we must avoid disgraceful and contemptible conduct, including what we say and above all, we must accord the high level of dignity and respect to another or integrity as Members of this Parliament must never be questioned or compromised.

In this respect, I salute the steadfastness of the level of integrity that committed to the rule of law by His Excellency the President, Office of Public Prosecution, Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Force, prior to and after election. It is a cardinal role of my portfolio as Attorney-General and Minister for Justice to provide the best legal advice to His excellency the President to maintain and uphold the rule of law, and that is exactly what I did in my first official meeting with His Excellency the President in January this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what will I say, the rule of law is simply that no one is above the law and it must be applied across all arms of Government and the people. During my official visit with Fiji Corrections service last Friday, 10th February, I impressed upon the management staff of the need to accord respect and dignity amongst the officers and in the treatment of inmates. This is not only demanded by the Constitution, but its moral obligation towards another fellow human being.

The removal of discriminatory policy against women employees at the Fiji Corrections Service who were terminated on the grounds of their pregnancies is one of the latest positive changes made. I am appalled that at this time and age such a policy even existed. To that end, I will ensure that no policy of that nature will continue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Media Industry Development Act 2010 is a highly controversial law and many have questioned how this law came about. I was informed at a workshop held last Thursday, 9th February, 2023, that my predecessor summoned journalists and other representatives from media organisations at Holiday Inn and was surprisingly told to submit their comments to the draft Media Industry Development within two hours. That was the only consultation framework undertaken by the FijiFirst Government, where a new law with far reaching impact on the media industry, was promulgated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is totally unacceptable. To the media industry, be rest assured, this Government has begun the work to review the Media Industry Development Act 2010, with the commissioning of a team of media personnel and experts. This is to ensure that any form of regulations and reflective consultations respect the rights of people, removes any punitive promises against journalists and media personnel.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Elections Office (FEO) will also be conducting an internal audit of the Results Management Information System which governed the results process of the 2022 General Election. This is to identify the issues surrounding the glitch situation that occurred on Election day last year.

The confidence of our people in FEO must be restored, as the FEO is also tasked with the conduct of elections for some 36 registered trade unions for this year as well as the conduct of elections for Local Government. The respective laws governing this must enable a transparent and accountable process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight the progress made within the Ministry of Justice. With the digitalisation of records which has been progressed and includes the records of the Office of the Administrator General, Births, Deaths and Marriages, Official Receivers, Registrar of Companies and Registrar of Titles, once this entire process is completed, online service will be expanded across all registries and offices to provide efficient service delivery, and I am committed to see this process through.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, it is my prerogative to see that all laws are up-to-date, improved or repealed, if need be. This includes the Review of the Legal Practitioner Act 2009 to improve the standard of legal practitioners in the country, and to remove the onerous requirement that does not serve any practical purpose - to include the Fiji Law Society, an apex of legal profession in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also the importance of government is the review of the laws that affect the *iTaukei* and particularly the amendments that were brought about by Act No. 22 of 2021, otherwise commonly known as Bill No. 17. The Office of the Attorney-General will work closely with Government Ministers to have this progressed and to ensure that the necessary consultations with key stakeholders are carried out. At this juncture Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to quote the words of Edmund Burke and British political figure in the 18th Century who said, and I quote:

“The great difference between the real leader and the pretender is that the one sees into the future, while the other regards only the present; the one lives by the day and acts upon expediency; the other acts on enduring principles and for the immortality.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am no pretender. I am deeply humbled and honoured and remain a servant of the people of Fiji. You my brothers and sisters were called to be free but do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh rather serve one another humbly in love (Galatians 5:13).

Before I conclude Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 2nd April 1991, I was fortunate to be employed in the Public Service Commission in a department that was headed by the honourable Prime Minister then, Sitiveni Rabuka. Today, I stand before this august Parliament as his Attorney-General (31 years later), I give glory to the Lord. I thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir, may God bless this august Parliament and may God bless Fiji.

(Acclamation)

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable colleagues; may I begin by congratulating you on your appointment, and I congratulate all Members of these august Chambers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before entering politics, I was and am a trained surgeon in Fiji and New Zealand and worked as a consultant and Associate Professor. I have been humbled to lead Pacific Surgeons and I am a member of the International Society of Surgery. I currently engaged in global surgery which is advocating for access to safe and affordable surgery worldwide.

The Ministry of Health and Medical Services which I used to lead was called the Ministry of Health and Medical Services with emphasis on services and as part of civil service reforms, our staff were encouraged to focus on customer service experience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have achieved some of the targets of the 2022-2030 Sustainable Development Goals. We achieved it at the end of 2022, and I want to share a few with us:

1. By 2030 to reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births. At the moment in Fiji, it is 34 deaths per 100,000 live births, half even before we have not reached 2030.
2. Another target is by 2030 - prevent deaths of newborn and children under five years of age. With all countries aiming to reduce neo-natal mortality to as low as 12 per 1,000 live births and under five mortality to as low as 25 per 1000 live births.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last year, UNICEF in October, published an article that Fiji has achieved the Sustainable Development Goal 2030 target of reaching below 12 deaths per 1,000 live births for neonatal mortality rate and 25 deaths per 1,000 live births for under-five mortality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how was this achieved? It was achieved because we strengthened maternal child access. We have more specialised Obstetricians and Paediatricians trained locally with Masters. The honourable Minister for Health now has gone through that training.

On increasing workforce and positions, importantly, the current Permanent Secretary when he was an Obstetrician, together with his colleagues advocated to stop deliveries in nursing stations and health centres because there was no expertise for high-end Obstetrics where access may be limited for emergencies.

This meant there were higher volumes at Labasa, Lautoka and CWM Hospital, thus the establishment of the Makoi Maternity Hospital and the need for another 200-bed maternity hospital at CWM Hospital for which the first phase is complete.

As alluded to by my successor, there are more than 7,000 staff in the Ministry of Health and Medical Services with nearly 1,000 doctors.

In pursuing Universal Health Coverage, the FijiFirst Government have had some of the nursing stations reclassified and changed into health centres with Doctors and Nurse Practitioners in charge such as Dawasamu, Namara, Nabobuco, Nawaicoba and Tau in Nadroga, to name a few.

In addition, we outsource the General Practitioners Subsidy Scheme, Private Dentist Subsidy and Free Medicine Programme, utilising participating retail pharmacies. These were initiated by the Fiji Government. Thus, Fijians do not have to congregate in health centres but utilise these healthcare providers in the private sector, increasing accessibility for all Fijians.

There are, however, certain interventions that not all private health providers will offer. One is birthing facilities and the provision of emergency caesarean sections for the care of the sick newborn and the very ill child needing intensive care.

Ba Hospital, under ASPEN, and Savusavu Hospital are being used by specialists, including the fact that Savusavu Hospital for more than a year has been doing emergency operations in the past year.

Specialists have been travelling throughout the breadth of the country performing clinics, and outreach teams using the FEMAT umbrella. We were the ninth country in the world - the first Small Island Developing State to be EMT certified by WHO.

Mr. Speaker, our nation, for the past three years, has been fighting a 1 in 100 pandemic. Under the FijiFirst Government, we were decisive, timely and courageous. We vaccinated and contained the pandemic, despite also addressing the other health priorities.

Mr. Speaker, every health system has faced its challenges over the last three years. I met an African Minister of Health in a WHO meeting and he said, "My brother, in Africa we have COVID, Malaria, Ebola, HIV and NCDs." We only have to look at some of the news articles to see the challenges the other first world countries have. Challenges such as spending more than 24 hours in the Emergency Department, or large numbers waiting on the elective waiting list, or the National Health System up in Britain where our health system is actually mirrored around has its own significant challenges.

Mr. Speaker post *TC Winston* in the last four years has seen the completion of extensive repairs of several and new hospitals:

- Rakiraki and Ra Sub-Division has seen \$2 million invested into it;
- \$2 million to Tavua and Tavua Sub-Division;
- \$2.5 million to Nadi Hospital;
- \$2.5 million to Nabouwalu Hospital;
- the new \$1 million Nasau Health Centre in Ra;
- the holding beds at Nausori Health Centre and Valelevu Health Centre;
- the completion of the new Nakasi Hospital;
- \$2 million for the CWM Emergency Department, as well as roadway, parking and continuing minor works that happen within the hospital;
- the new \$50 million Ba Hospital now run by ASPEN Medical;
- the first phase on the new CWM Maternity;
- the new CWM Administration at Toorak which has now made available the third floor of the Paediatric Hospital to be for children with adolescence care;
- the new \$30 million Navosa Hospital - concrete to what honourable Professor Prasad had said, this hospital is important because our people in the rural areas need access;
- the new Sawakasa Health Centre;
- \$9 million Rotuma Hospital;
- \$2 million upgrade to OT and X-ray Lautoka Hospital and the minor maintenances.

These things have happened, despite healthcare facilities being the epicentre and places for super spreader events, the isolations, lockdowns and containments.

We have been lauded for our decisiveness and effectiveness, and I have alluded to that before, in legislative and incentivising measures for our COVID vaccination strategy. So, we quickly reached 80 percent fully vaccinated, opening our borders ensuring economic recovery.

The FijiFirst Government has set aside large sums of financial resources to fight the virus, vaccinate and provide social protection. In actual fact, upwards of \$500 million. These included also paying for repatriation, isolation facilities for repatriation and positive patients, and also our staff who were contained and isolated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no doubt that under the leadership of the honourable Bainimarama, the FijiFirst Government saved lives and saved livelihoods. That was a whole of government approach and necessary budget appropriations were approved which included reducing capital works to safeguard the salaries of civil servants. That also included the deferment of the second phase of the CWM 200-bed new maternity hospital.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, health workers attrition was at its greatest before the FijiFirst Government. In fact, the late Dr. Salimoni Tuqa, reviewed and prepared a paper in 2000 which said that between 1987 to 1999, 75 percent of doctors left the Civil Service. There was very significant attrition then in

in other healthcare workers and nurses.

Under the honourable Bainimarama's leadership, these measures have been put in place:

- Increase in salaries for all civil servants. Salaries for technical staff (some of the technical staff in Ministry of Health begin at \$28,000 and some of the higher specialists earned more than \$140,000 a year.
- Support to encourage more training, resulting in greater access through FNU, University of Fiji and TISI Sangam up in Vanua Levu. We have two medical and nursing schools and upward recruitment of 100 doctors and 200 nurses per year. In the current budget, there are places for 300 nurses through Toppers.
- There has been support internally through Government scholarship and via multilateral partners for post-graduate training. We have doctors trained here like I, with the Masters, and going across overseas. We have nurses also pursuing Masters in Australia. We have oral surgeons train locally here at FNU and since the establishment of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, we now have more than 700, and the establishment within the Ministry of Health and Medical Services is now more than 7,000 staff.

Sir, COVID-19 stretched healthcare workers to the limit, we acknowledge that, and with the existing challenges, some of them had burnt out and experienced mental challenges. There has been an estimated shortfall of 10 million healthcare workers worldwide by 2030, predominantly in low and middle-income countries.

It is no secret that despite our best intentions, attritions will continue. The 2020 State of the World's Nursing Report found that we would need 6 million more nurses by 2030 to reach global health targets. Shortages of healthcare workers are felt most acutely in low and middle income countries.

New Zealand has even made it more conducive for migrant healthcare workers and despite our Civil Service salary bill, at the moment, been \$1.1billion, the Fiji Government must build on the work already done by the FijiFirst Government, not only to retain but more importantly recruit new staff. I have heard some parents of healthcare workers said that posting and recruitment is facing hiccups because of the sudden policy changes.

I urge the new Fijian Government to take a cue from the FijiFirst Government's initiative to improve the working conditions, salaries and benefits of Ministry of Health and Medical Service workers. Under the FijiFirst Government leadership, our civil servants have had increases in salaries and whilst under the health and economic downturn by COVID-19 and contrary to what politicians (some of them on the other side Parliament) have recommended, honourable Bainimarama as Prime Minister did not allow any pay cut to any civil servant.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Your Government's mission, as His Excellency had said, is to build unity through social cohesion and further improve and strengthen our economy through sustainable growth with the ultimate objective of improving the lives of all the people of Fiji.

Sir, the fast economic recovery post COVID-19 is now facing a subdued velocity. The differences in policies that we see with honourable Ministers is sowing mistrust and uncertainty in our economy. The vendetta and deviation from the Constitution is something that our multilateral

partners will watch with interest. We will all have to follow the law and that begins with following the Constitution. As leaders, as Ministers and Assistant Ministers, you must initiate confidence in Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency also said that the Government must continue to adhere to the constitutional doctrine of the separation of powers as a cornerstone of our democracy, and the necessity for public servants to perform their duties independently.

Sir, we have also seen over the last 50 days the appointment of failed candidates of the Coalition without due diligence. Application for Board memberships closed on 31st January, but appointments were made prior to that.

The new Fijian Government has not followed Section 123 of the Constitution in this Civil Service and civil servant appointments, promotions and removal. This is a direct breach of the Constitution. We feel for the career civil servants that we have been working with over the last few years, that may be also limited in advancing their careers.

I urge the Coalition Government to adhere to the constitutional requirements for appointments in the Civil Service and reassure our civil servants that their hard work and competency will be recognised.

We have also been informed by civil servants, in particular some senior ones that they are being watched, their phones are being tapped and they are being monitored. This is not how to run a modern-day Government, Sir. This Government should get on with the governing of the country, as supposed to feeling insecure and watching over their shoulders. please, be confident with your policies.

Sir, His Excellency also said that on the pressuring issues facing the nation, particularly on the economy, Government must recognise that the private sector is a critical driver of economic growth. They need freedom and flexibility to pursue their aims, but they must operate within the law and respect the environment.

Mr. Speaker, we have also seen over the last 50 days how the Fiji Government has interfered with the private sector. By asking to keep employees when the company is becoming insolvent, to taking back employees when the Judiciary has already made a judgment or otherwise.

We have also seen how the Director Environment was under siege by a private company. Sir, the private sector is not limited to big multinational companies but more importantly, to the small and medium enterprise, which is a large employer and a major drive of our economy. They all must be protected but must know that every business will be treated equally under the rule of law. They must be stimulated, but under the rule of law. They can operate but must operate under the rule of law. They can operate, but not damage our environment under the rule of law.

Mr. Speaker, I raise my concerns and reservations to the establishment of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC). I know that my honourable colleague also raised it when he spoke yesterday, and I must admit and was wondering whether it is because he is from Navosa and my mother is from Navosa but I think that is nothing to do with that. The rights and privileges of the *iTaukei*, Sir, is vested in the 2013 Constitution. Never before has our land as *iTaukei* have been more secure than with the 2013 Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, even without the GCC, your position and role as our high chief in Tovata has remained and may I also say, even more solidified. The institutions – the Ministry of *iTaukei*, the

Provincial Offices; the Provincial, *Tikina* and Village meetings; the Native Lands Commission; the iTaukei Affairs Board, to name a few, provide the many platforms to champion our course. In my many discussions, our common grassroots people's priority is work, education, health services, jobs and the enhancement of our *iTaukei* values. These are being met by the current reforms.

Mr. Speaker, this Chamber holds people who are chosen and voted by the people to represent them. Even in the United Kingdom, they have had modernisation in their House of Lords. No longer only filled with Hereditary Peers, but now have appointed Lords, people who are reputable, learned and representative of them as a modern nation, its people, and its diversity.

Sir, honourable Aliki Bia and honourable Rinesh Sharma's emotional speech yesterday reminds us that Fiji is truly a multicultural and multi-ethnic country where some can easily be pushed to the margins and forgotten even when they cannot claim to be a Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, our roles whether in Government or in Opposition is to encourage your youth to be better than all of us. We need to continue the inclusiveness and we must embrace and respect the different ethnicities, religion, and beliefs that our visionary former Prime Minister and visionary leader of FijiFirst begun. Our children must be taught not to discriminate. We, therefore, must continue to cultivate this inclusiveness so that our modern Fiji is really the way we should be.

Honourable Bainimarama as Prime Minister last year, I invited him as then Co-Chair of the Early Childhood Development of the Pacific to open and declare our website open. Sir, racial rhetoric and vitriol cannot go unchallenged. It seems that a vendetta rather than a true desire to govern has been the focus. We must show our children that we are true leaders. Every child as our successor should never feel alienated. Fiji is for all its citizens and its citizens under the 2013 Constitution are called Fijians.

As a Christian, I would like to comment also on the debate and the desire of the Coalition Government to remove secular State from our Constitution. Mr. Speaker, Sir, many are non-Christians in this country, and I know you and I, on a few workshops when you were a Member of the Opposition, we have had discussions on this. Many showed compassion, love, respect and other Christian values more than we Christians. Just like you, Sir, I would love to have them join my faith, but this should not be forced down their throats. If any, let our actions be the greatest witness.

Matthew 5:16 states and I quote: "Your light must shine before people in such a way that they will see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to at this juncture thank my family, my beautiful wife, Miriama, my brother Vili, Rokoseni, Adi Maibole and Paula, Jaoji and my children, Roko Tukana and Marica, Talei and Sukani, Rajieli, Bainivalu, Cherriane who is at home with us and my granddaughter, Miriama. I also would like to thank my supporters in Moala, Navosa, Tailevu, where my mother's heritage also comes from, my in-laws of Naitasiri and also my fitness group, we play touch rugby with every lunch hour, I would like to name a few, Pete, Biss, Dels - I would like to thank them for their support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I conclude this morning and as an *iTaukei* hailing from Lau and my mother from Viti Levu, so I qualify to be able to talk as an *iTaukei*, and as a Christian, I urge all of us to embrace the 2013 Constitution that names us all as Fijians. I also urge all of us to....

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- 2013.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- 2013 Constitution – thank you honourable Tikoduadua.

You must embrace it, I know you are embracing it. The 2013 Constitution, that names us all as Fijians. I also urge all of us to respect everyone's wish to practice their faith and not impose our Christianity but let our light shine.

(Acclamation)

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet colleagues, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and those joining us via livestream; *mia'u bula re*, good day to you all.

First and foremost, I humbly thank the Almighty God for His spiritual guidance enabling me to stand here today. I wish to join my colleagues in congratulating our Speaker, honourable Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu on his appointment. Congratulation is also extended to Madam Deputy Speaker, honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua.

I also wish to express my gratitude to His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere for his opening speech earlier this month in which he emphasised the need of maintaining a spirit of unity as a nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a new Member of this august Parliament, please, allow me to introduce myself. I proudly bear the name of my late father's best friend, Iliesa Sovui Vanawalu. I am grateful to be registered in the *i Vola ni Kawa Bula* for two *yavusa* – Yavusa Tubulevu, Koro Valenisausau and Yavusa Tuarewa, koro o Laucala in the *Tikina* of Wailevu, in the province of Cakaudrove.

I spent my primary school years in Wailevu West and Wailevu East District School and high school years at Niusawa Methodist High School in Taveuni. I graduated from The University of the South Pacific (USP) with a diploma and then later a Degree in Commerce. I continued my education with USP, earning a Postgraduate Certificate in Human Resources, a Postgraduate Diploma in General Management and ultimately, a Masters Degree in Business Administration.

I was raised by Ta Timoci Tamaibece and Na Ema Vakadranisau (may their souls rest in peace). I am married to Unaisi Vakacowaqa Vanawalu from the Tokatoka Drona, Tikotiko Turaga mai Nauaua, Turaga na Roko Tui Kama, Muanisolo, Naceva in Kadavu. We are blessed with three children - Lesia Baledrokaroka Vanawalu, Lilieta Vanawalu Wainiqolo and Siteri Vanawalu Masirewa. They all graduated from USP and have their own families. I am a proud grandfather to seven grandchildren - Lorana, Iliesa (Jnr), Saiasi, Buna, Semisi (Jnr), Timoci and Tutu Levi.

I started my career with the Forestry Department in 1982 before joining the Republic of Fiji Military Forces in 1983, where I had the opportunity to be part of the United Nations Peacekeeping in Lebanon and the Multinational Force and Observers Force in the Sinai Desert.

In 1987, I decided to venture out into other fields of telecommunication. I joined the Department of Post and Telecommunication as a Postal Assistant and rose up the rank to be the General Manager of Postal Services throughout Fiji. It was late last year when I resigned from formal employment to represent the *Tikina* of Wailevu under the banner of the People's Alliance Party.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can declare with humility and pride that after 52 long years my *Tikina* of Wailevu, the biggest *tikina* in Fiji is now represented in this august Parliament for the first time.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- *Vinaka*.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- I wish to acknowledge my hardworking campaign team, who had sacrificed so much and worked behind the scene. My firm and hardworking family who had been my spine from day one until to-date, for their full trust in upholding our family values and understanding my passion for politics.

The *vanua o* Wailevu in Suva and Nausori, under the leadership of the former Director of Police Mobile Unit, Sikeli Vaniqi, and his hardworking team who had persevered throughout the campaign period so that Wailevu gets to be represented in this august Parliament.

The *vanua o* Wailevu in the Western Division under the leadership of Anasa, Ratu Jone and Kameli for their hardworking campaign during our stay in the Western Division.

The *vanua o* Wailevu in the Northern Division under the leadership of Ratu Jone Maivalili and his team clearly indicated the importance of why Wailevu is supposed to be in Parliament and today I am standing here to represent the Tikina of *Wailevu*.

The 27 *Yavusa* in the 28 registered villages for all their marvellous support, from *Yavusa Soloveuneune* to *Yavusa Yanawai*, not forgetting the *Turaga Masi Tubulevu*, *Yavusa Natovatu*, *Yavusa Tuarewa*, *Yavusa Naulaca*, *Yavusa Buca*, *Yavusa Drekeniwai*, *Yavusa Muanivatu* and those whom I may missed out.

The *vanua* Wailevu West Campaign Team - Salacieli Lomaiviti and Peni Siga for a job well done during the trying time. The Wailevu East Campaign Team - Isireli and Pularua, your commitment and determination speaks louder than the statement I am making here today.

The *Wasewase* Wailevu Methodist Superintendent - Reverend Tomasi Mawi and the *Talatala* of each *tabacakaka*.

The *vanua vakaturaga o* Seaqaqa, Saivou, Lomaloma, Nacereyaga, Naravuka, Narailagi, Batiri and the interior of Drawa Village.

I thank the kind and hospitality of the following Villages, families and friends who had committed so much during our campaign period:

- *Na vanua vakaturaga o Nasavusavu, Turaga na Tui Nsavusavu.*
- My *tavale* in Savudrodoro, thank you very much for allowing me to represent the People's Alliance Party in your village.
- Yaroi Village for hosting most of our People's Alliance Party events.
- Nacekoro for your usual commitment and fatherly advice.
- Nukubalavu for your caring protocol during the campaign period.
- Naidi Village, you are always ready to receive us and host the People's Alliance Party when the need arise.
- Vivili, thank you for your passion and diligent support throughout our campaign in your village.
- Village of Waivuniya, for the gift of name that is standing here today.
- Nacavanadi and Nagigi for keeping us in touch all along during our campaign period.
- *Vanua* of my *vasu*, the village of Wainika *vua na Gone Turaga na Tui Cuku*.
- *Tikina* of Tawake for their Christian support.
- Not forgetting my family in Australia - the Ravuduadua family, Rosi family and Naiqama family.
- The support team from the United Kingdom, the Cromptons and Saula families for giving

us your valuable time and monetary gain to make the campaign a success here in Fiji.

- From the United States of America and the Momoss and their family in Tonga, who were well versed when the campaign started three months ago.
- The Wainivula Methodist Church, Reverend Josaia Masicola and its congregation for the spiritual guidance, endurance for the long journey of survival in that hectic place during the campaign.
- The *Vanua o Nauwauwa*, *Turaga na Roko Tui Kama*, Muanisolo and the *vanua vakaturaga o Natawalevu*, *na vanua o Dravuwalu*, Kadavu, thank you very much for its due diligence support all along during my campaign in your two villages.

I wish to extend my sincere gratitude to anyone I have not explicitly thanked for helping me represent you in this august Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a great honour for me to address you all as the Assistant Minister for Education. I wish to concur with the honourable Minister of Education when he said that this year is going to be a challenging one but one which will bring about change for better and with no vulnerable community left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in embracing change, we strive to bring forward the things that worked well for all sectors, particularly our education system. At this point, I thank the past administration for their contributions in reaching out to our families providing them with needed assistance to ensure more of our children have access to education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to enable our students to grow as responsible patriotic citizens with a strong civic sense and loaded system of belief, a meaningful change in our education centre is called for. This change requires new structures, new tools, as well as new knowledge. But more than anything, there is a major culture change and transformation that our education system must go through.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the heart of any transformation in the education system, there are our children. Efforts must be enhanced to ensure that the interests and welfare of our future leaders will take priority at all times. It is also important that they are supported in developing and reaching their full potential.

This brings us to the overall performance of our students who sat for their external examinations in 2022. The performance of our students is commended, given the condensed learning and teaching span in the year, due to the 2021 learning programme being accommodated in 2022. We had 7,751 students sitting for Fiji Year 13 Certificate Examination and recorded a pass rate of 88 percent in comparison to 70 percent for 2021. The 13,281 students sat for Fiji Year 12 Certificate Examination in 2022 and recorded a pass rate of 64 percent in comparison to the 66 percent for 2021, two years after COVID-19 - 17,366 Year 8 students sat for their Year 8 External Examination and recorded a pass rate of 62 percent.

As stated by our honourable Minister for Education, efforts will be made to continue to uplift student performance in external examinations. At the end of this first week of school, about 90 percent of students enrolled for the Year 2023 had returned to primary schools while the secondary school percentage stood at 89 percent. Our ECE attendance stood at 86 percent and I am positive that the number has increased further, since then.

Mr. Speaker Sir, we cannot underestimate the significant role our teachers play for our Ministry and in our economy as a whole. Teaching is the mother of all professions and teachers play multiple roles – educationists, counselors, parents and nurses as well - as such, this needs to be acknowledged. While the Ministry designs policies, it is the teachers who ensure the successful

implementation of this in their schools. Had it not been for the teachers' support and willingness to take up the challenge of adapting to the many changes implemented at the ministerial level, our education system would have been crippled a long time ago.

In the short time since we have taken office, both the honourable Minister and I have come to realise the value of our teachers as the greatest human resource in our Ministry. The current review process will ensure that the welfare of our teachers is given due consideration. Our Ministry will work closely with the two teacher unions to safeguard the teachers' welfare and interests.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the curriculum in our schools has seen some changes in recent years. One of the changes was the introduction of Life Mathematics in secondary schools in addition to pure Maths. While the integration of morale and civic education in the school curriculum under the previous administration is commended, the growing number of indiscipline cases involving our students in recent times, calls for an urgent need for spiritual guidance in both the homes and in schools. This will be further strengthened by the re-engagement of Chaplains and religious teachers in schools.

Mr. Speaker Sir, better monitoring of strategies to determine the success rate of the changes we implement in our curriculum, is imperative. There is an urgent need to thoroughly review the curriculum to enhance quality education, to ensure that we are actually working towards meeting the targets under Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Mr. Speaker Sir, while policies, curriculum and staffing are important, the aspect of service delivery in schools, infrastructure cannot be overlooked. Infrastructure is paramount when it comes to creating a conducive environment for teaching and learning. Also, due consideration must be given to the overall safety of those we serve. It is also our aim to provide timely assistance to schools affected by natural disasters.

On 26th January, the Ministry, in partnership with UNICEF, had conducted an Education in Emergency (EIE) Disaster Preparedness Training for 155 participants mainly ECE, Primary and Secondary school teachers. This training is going to be instrumental in handling emergencies in our education settings, ensuring that schools are better prepared to provide timely feedback to the relevant authorities so that timely assistance can be provided to the affected schools.

Mr. Speaker Sir, for any organisation to function effectively, its infrastructure must be of quality. This is of utmost importance when it comes to serving the future leaders of our nation. It is saddening to note during our visits to the Government schools, the deteriorating status of the infrastructure, particularly the teachers' quarters and the classrooms. In large boarding schools like ACS, issues with water supply are a frequent occurrence and it is happening until date.

The problem can be largely attributed to the absence of a Board of Governors as a governing body. The Board of Governors that had been abolished by the previous Government, was responsible for supporting the Heads of Schools in the operation of the schools and its property. They provided effective oversight into the management and governance of Government schools.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Ministry will continue to work closely with schools, school management and the donor partners to improve the school infrastructure so that our students have an environment that supports their learning. I echo the words of our honourable Minister for Education that we will continue with the provision of the Free Education Grant, free textbook assistance and the Transport Assistance Scheme for our children. This year, the Coalition Government initiated the Back to School Support of \$200 for all families with a combined household income of \$50,000. This was a timely assistance that has helped thousands of families.

The schools are commended for working closely with the Ministry of Finance. The Ministry of Education is ensuring that families receive the support to help prepare their children for the new academic year. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the combined household income threshold for the eligibility criteria to qualify for the transport assistance stands at \$16,000. To date, we have received 90,650 applications for this assistance. This assistance is not limited to Government Schools, but is provided for all schools in Fiji, including management-based schools and faith-based schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since taking office, the honourable Minister for Education and I had the opportunity to visit 15 schools in the Central Division and three schools in the Western Division. The Ministry of Education acknowledges the immense contribution and support by the faith-based schools and management schools towards education and the future of Fiji.

Plans are underway to reinstate the Board of Governors in 13 schools, which include two primary schools. Wider consultation with respective stakeholders is paramount and the Ministry of Education will continue to consult with all relevant stakeholders prior to making any further changes, whether it is in regards with the curriculum, policy making or any other decision that may impact to change the direction of our education cycle.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I would like to state that education is essential for the advancement of any nation to prosper and I believe that all the honourable Members of this august Parliament will agree with me. Therefore, a concerted effort is required to advance the aim and the objective of progressing the education system in Fiji. This can only be achieved when all concerned can learn to work together for the betterment of our children. As stated by honourable Bia “as responsible leaders, we need to put aside self-interest, let us not make this about us, let us be the vessel of change, the change for a better Fiji.” May God bless each one of us, may God bless Fiji.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- I call on the honourable Tuinaceva to deliver his maiden speech. He used to be a very popular figure at one time on television. He hails from Matuku.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, *vinaka saka vakalevu*. I rise with joy to deliver my maiden speech. I take this opportunity to congratulate you on being elected as Speaker - the same sentiment goes to your Deputy, the honourable Qereqeretabua.

The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians tuning live to the Parliament livestream and those who are seated here in the gallery, *ni sa bula vinaka saka*. I return the glory to my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who has sustained me and lifted me up my head. He is a pillar of strength, and I know, without Him, I am nothing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am here to honour the vote - the vote that carries the hope, dreams, cries, burdens, and the needs of those who voted for me. To qualify as a leader, I must first serve. I only lay claim to leadership if I first serve. Serving the people, giving them a voice, fighting for justice and protection of their constitutional rights, and working with them to find the solutions to their problems. To serve is to lead, therein lies the honour of being a parliamentarian serving the best interests of all Fijians must be the heart of all that we are doing here.

I emphasise serving the best interest of all Fijians irrespective of race, colour or creed especially serving the isolated, the forgotten or the marginalised, those left behind who are in need of basic necessities or suffering from what they believe to be a result of some kind of unfair

treatment. In doing this, we honour them and we also bring honour to this Parliament and our role as leaders. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am here to honour the vote.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I want to acknowledge the Minister for Health, honourable Dr. Ratu Lalabalavu on his maiden speech on Wednesday, 15th February, 2023. He spoke a few lines on the issue of Non-Communicable Disease and the measures the Ministry is taking to tackle this huge problem.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to explain the reason I decided to touch on this subject and bring it to the early part of my speech. The NCD subject brings painful memories to me, I lost many members of my family and friends because of NCD. As I stand here this morning, I have voters who are listening and watching who are very sick and those dying because of NCD. To them there is nothing else important to them at this very minute, but they want their lives and health back. I assured them that I will try and get help.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as an engineer, I have learnt that when something is broken, we fix it straightaway. Failing that can be catastrophic, it is common sense really. Our people are falling, taken by NCDs at a horrifying rate, young men and women falling and the rate of our orphan children growing. It is a problem of monstrous proportion, just about 20 years ago, NCD cases occupied less than 50 percent of the hospital beds, now it is well passed that.

To say we are witnessing a rise is putting this issue mildly. We are seeing an explosion of NCDs and we need to give this monstrous problem the attention and response it deserves. Our response should be reactive, we should be out there stopping it. Experts say our highly processed food junk diet is to be blamed. What has been done about ensuring there is a greater local food access?

Even then, the late NCD National Director, Dr. Isimeli Tukana said, “Fijians are faced with the option of the devil and the deep blue sea.” Both options (processed food and local food) are harmful as further alluded to by the late Dr. Tukana and I quote, “We encourage Fijians to cut down on sugar, fat and salt and eat more fruits and vegetables” but even the supposedly healthier options, the vegetables are full of harmful chemicals and pesticides like glyphosate widely used across Fiji for spraying even home compounds.

In 2015, the International Cancer Research Agency put out a global alert about glyphosate as a probable carcinogen. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know as I am a farmer, I know what we put into the soil, so what are we going to do about this? Do we have options and alternatives? Are we going to be brave enough to tackle this problem and prioritise Fijian health and wellbeing or are we going to continue killing our population? All lives matter (every woman, man and child) but we only serve the best interest of the Fijians when we make this statement true and do not let another Fijian fall to an NCD.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is our country without its productive generation? What hope is there? If our population is sick and dying, as member of this august Parliament, I am willing and stand ready to help.

Many years ago, a young Lauan maiden from the Yavusa Waitui in the village of Daliconi on the island of Vanuabalavu gave birth to a son. She gazed at him and whispered loving words to her baby, she wondered whom he would grow up into. She did not have much money but her love was there. Her son grew up to become a parliamentarian, that son addresses to you today.

(Acclamation)

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Standing here, I honour my late mother, Kelera Vakatalai Soqe - a wonderful single mum, a woman who was my first source of knowledge and to value honour and hard work; a woman who taught me to love, care for others and forgive; a woman who taught me how to demonstrate tolerance to those who hurt me no matter how painful it is to have patience, respect and humility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to acknowledge the role every mother, every woman, every parent plays in our homes today, nurturing our children for the next generation of Fijians. My big *vinaka vakalevu* to my wife and children, who have stood by me through it all. Thank you my brothers and sisters, cousins, nieces and nephews and my two beautiful granddaughters, Bethy and Cathy, and extended family.

Kemudou na noqu Nana, Momo, Momo Salesi mai Vanuabalavu kei Nei Seru, Nana Ani – malo a veitokoni. Vinaka vakalevu to my campaign team from vanua vakaturaga o Cakaudrove - Niu, Ramesh, Sade, Bai, Wani, Joeli, Tuisuva, Dinesh, Joseph, Jordan, Jitendra, Munesh, Soke and Josifini. I pay homage to the Tikina na Savusavu, Tikina o Wailevu, Tikina Naweni, Tikina Koroalau and Tikina Vakaturaga Navatu. The settlements and communities around Savusavu namely Buca, Nakama, Rava, Wina, Korovesi, Beledogo and Tuvarara.

Vinaka saka vakalevu na vanua vakaturaga o Bua, kemudou na wekaqu na turaga, marama Tovata e na tikina o Wainunu kei Kubulau and all settlements from Bativurewai, Wainivesi to Nakabuta.

Vinaka vakalevu na veitokoni noqu matavuvale veiwekani mai Uluisavudua in Sawani, Nausori, Narere, Nadera, Raiwai, Nabua from Suva, Sigatoka, Nadi, Lautoka and Ba. From Lomati in Matuku and Daliconi in Vanuabalavu and many others who worked day and night to take me through this General Election process. Indeed I arrived on the backs and the strength of others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, importantly a big *vinaka vakalevu* to the leadership of the FijiFirst Party for giving me this opportunity to serve, for this I am grateful. I believe in the value the party stands - equality, harmony, unity and modality. During its term in Government, FijiFirst put in place policies and created opportunities for the young and old ensuring rights for women, minorities and the disabled and protecting the vulnerable in our society. It is a party that is committed to improving the lives of all Fijians. It pushed and continue to strive for oneness. His Excellency the President, Ratu Viliame Katonivere, emphasised oneness that we need as a nation to respond to multitude of challenges.

The COVID crisis has taught us many lessons, perhaps, one that we overlooked is that death is non-divisive, that we are equal in death and so should we be equal in life. Perhaps, if we adopt this cue from nature, we will find the harmony that we seek, we will find justice in our diversity as a people, that no race, no group is greater than another. That is when equality truly manifests and we become one people, one nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the democratic system that enables this oneness –

- a democratic system founded on the sacred value of equality for all regardless of race, colour or creed and that we must protect;
- a system that values all young Fijians and all young boys and girls to grow up and have the opportunity to lead their country;
- a system that allows us parliamentarians to represent and speak the desires of the people and fight to bring them into being;
- a democracy that hears the people, protects them and gives them the right to build and live

their dreams, find belonging and carve peace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, peace is worth that - peace is an active pursuit of agreement, tolerance and understanding within our diversity. As a nation, it is not about denying our different ethnic identities but rather embracing our rich uniqueness as Fijians - a people of many races and colours. None is greater or smaller than the other and we are all the same even as we are different. This tolerance, this peace is our feeling of belongingness with one another. Our oneness in our troubles and in joy, a peace I seek to promote as a Member of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, but our oneness is often sacrificed on the altar of divisive race politics. One look at the social media and we see the outpouring of rage and racial hate. It mirrors our behaviour as leaders, our people look up to us and follow us, but this year, we have the opportunity to create a different reflection - a reflection of oneness.

We must not create perceptions that we are unequal, that one group is more deserving of attention than the other. In the spirit of oneness expressed by His Excellency the President and I quote: "I urge you to deliberate with full intention, advocate with thoughtfulness and inclusivity, and debate with respect and finesse."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for if our intentions are pure, I feel the winds of change coming – a wind that brings prosperity, peace and progress that will sustain and be around for many years to come, irrespective of which political party runs the Government.

Our journey ahead is challenging. Poverty, climate change, ecological crisis, growing rates of mental health problems, transnational crimes, geopolitical uncertainties and illicit drugs that even our children are now exposed to, to name a few, each with its impact that undermines us. As much as this requires us to be one and act together, it also demands of us as leaders to be critical thinkers.

Critical thinking requires a deep understanding of issues to help us make decisions best for the people. Critical thinking is an attribute we must promote in our education system. As a nation, we must have a culture of critical thinkers as a form of resilience. We live in an age of digital explosion, social media and the weaponization of information. Critical thinking enables everyone to protect themselves and make informed decisions, not a population that rise and falls on the whims of others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has had four Constitutions in 40 years. It is a worrying trend that shows our uncertainty as a society in the democracy that we decide. It also shows the worrying state of our leadership, our inability to construct something that sustains. Talks of another Constitution Review ignites the question of when this ends. People are tired that every government change may mean a constitutional change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I challenge us all leaders here today, let us think critically. Let us focus only on what is necessary for the best interest of all. With a host of challenges that besiege our country and the dream to shape a better tomorrow for our people, it is time to think critically. We must work together and make better decisions. Admittedly, we will make mistakes, we will be tested but our children will not turn around and accuse us of not trying.

Mr. Speaker, in serving, we have the duty to go back to our communities, to hear their voice. A long-standing joke about politicians is that, we only show up around election time and disappear until the next election. We uphold our democracy - when we go back, hear them and enable their voice to be heard in this Parliament, voicing what is really happening and not what we assume is.

Mr. Speaker, after being sworn in on 24th December, 2022, I have been going back to the communities, settlements and villages. It was a joy to talk and listen to their requests. Their *talanoa*, some of which I would like to highlight but before doing that I want to say that I do clearly understand the Government process and machinery on any authority, and observing and engaging in any development project, does not happen overnight.

Mt. Speaker, Sir, from the *Tikina o Wailevu*, the villages of Natuwa, Vunidamu and Natuvu and nearby settlements are waiting to be connected to the grid - that is already running past the respective villages and terminating at Uluivalili College. Further down the Wailevu West Coast Road from Valeni, Laucala and Naiqaqi Villages are humbly requesting the grid to extend from Uluivalili to their villages. They are even requesting if it is costly, they will accept whatever form of energy provision that can be provided and that includes solar.

The same request is coming from the *Tikina Navatu* - the villages of Nasinu, Korolevu, Drano and Navakaka and the *Tikina Naweni*. As for the villages of Naviavia, Keka, Navunibuabua Settlement, Kilaka, Nakorovou, Nadivakarua and Raviravi in the Bua Province, the villages are appealing for a source of power and a good communication network to connect them to the rest of Fiji and the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at Uluisavudua Settlement in Sawani, Naitasiri, it is just about 8 kilometres from Nausori Town and there is no running water supply and electricity. Uluisavudua is mainly a farming community with huge potential and there is a need to upgrade the road on that particular locality.

Mr. Speaker, as I have said, some part of the work has already started but I am here to ask and appeal to the Government, on behalf of the people, to look into that and find a way to see if these projects can be completed. I am looking forward to work with the respective Ministers. I also give a bit of support from the community to get this work done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have also attended a number of *talanoa* session where people have brought up issues for discussion, and some of the concerns they highlighted relate to security, stability, health and equality. On issues of security, some fear hatred and anger, and attack on social media because of the political party they support. Many just want political and economic stability to quietly raise their children with the confidence of an economic future. Others spoke of the importance of equality to be treated equally and for equality to be the stabiliser of our democracy.

Mr. Speaker, as we serve let us take time to truly hear what the people say, so that we honour their vote, honour our dreams as a nation and honour the dignity of this Parliament. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am here to honour the vote, I am here to serve. May God bless us all, *vinaka saka vakalevu*.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament for a lunch break and following that when we resumed, we will continue with honourable Ifereimi Vanu, Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts. We have five other speakers before the honourable Prime Minister is invited to give his Right of Reply.

Once the report from the Privileges Committee is at hand, hopefully we will deal with it when we complete the Reply to His Excellency's Address which is part of the motion as well. Honourable Members, now we adjourn for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.55 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.36 p.m.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, *na i tikotiko vakaturaga i Lalagavesi, na Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau* (respectfully to Lalagavesi and its paramount chief, the *Tui Cakau*), the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, fellow honourable Minister and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the public present here in the gallery and those tuning in to the parliamentary session; *mu sa bula vinaka* (warm greetings).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I congratulate you on your appointment as Speaker of this august Parliament. In the same vein, I would also like to congratulate honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua on her appointment as the Deputy Speaker.

I would like to express my deep appreciation to His Excellency the President for his gracious, uplifting and excellent Address in opening the 2023-2024 Session of Parliament. It certainly ushers in a new dawn in Fiji's effort for greater transparency and accountability in the governance of democracy process. From the standpoint of the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, the various pointers highlighted with respect to the review of the *iTaukei* statutes and institutions, are very long overdue. They truly reflect the hopes and dreams of *iTaukei*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the outset, I wish to acknowledge the great work of our Saviour Jesus Christ in my life, whose leadership and guidance have landed me in your midst today. allow me to speak in my mother tongue in thanking my supporters.

Au taura na gauna vinaka oqo meu cavuta na noqu vakavinavinaka levu veikemuni kece sara ko ni veivuke ka cau mai kina noqu mai cabeta nai tutu dokai oqo. Vakavinavinaka vakalevu ki na teveli ni veiliutaki ni soqosoqo na SODELPA - Turaga na Peresitedi, taukei Mataiwelagi, taukei Waimaro, marama na Roko Tui Dreketi, matabose e cake ni soqosoqo, vakaillesilesi ni vale ni volavola, kemudou na 53 na mata vakaturi kei ira na nomudou dauniveitokoni, nai tabagone kei na dauniveiqaravi bole ni soqosoqo. Veikemuni kece sara na digitaka na SODELPA ena veidigidigi sa oti - vinaka vakalevu sara. Na vei mata lotu kece sara ena nomuni veimasulaki, vinaka vakalevu.

Au vakavinavinaka ki na –

- *Vanua o Kadavu, Nacolase vua na Turaga na Tui Tavuki; Koroisoso vua na Turaga na Tui Naceva; Valesasa vua na Turaga na Tui Nabukelevu; Nabala vua na Turaga na Tui Nakasa; Vanua o Namanusa vua na Turaga na Tui Ravitaki; Vanua o Nawaimalua vua na Turaga na Tui Drue; Vanua o Naivibati vua na Turaga na Tui Yale; Koroivabea vua na Marama na Tui Ono; kei na noqu Vanua o Valedaiga vua na Turaga na Tui Yawe. Vinaka vakalevu sara na veiciqomi ena lakovi yani na Kadavu Balabalavu ena gauna ni veidigidigi.*
- *Noqu timi ni vunau vakapolitiki - Ratu Vilimoni Soqeta kei na nona matavuvale; Vanua o Ulunikoro - Petero kei na nomuni timi ena muana-i-cake kei Kadavu; valenivolavola e Suva - Peniasi Kunatuba kei na nona matavuvale, Jope, Fine kei Wame; Vanua o Raurote Tuinamuana; Jone kei Tamani kei na nomudrau matavuvale.*
- *Vei kemudou na nodatou mata timi ena Muana-i-ra kei Kadavu - Buka, Rupeni, Inoke, Osea, Veta, Kaminieli, Ifereimi, Tomu, Lorima, Cula kei Jo, Simi Rasova kei na nomu matavuvale.*
- *Na Vanua o Burenitu kei Nakuruvakarua - Josua, Rabisi, Jone, Ili, Honda, Apenisa kei Jo, Semesa kei Watisoni kei na nodra matavuvale.*
- *Dauteitei e Viti raraba kei na dau volivolitaki ena makete levu e Suva.*
- *Na Qeramailagi Farm kei na liga ni kena veiqaravi.*

- *Vanua o Nauluvatu kei na kena vasu kei na kena veiwekani.*
- *Koro o Tawava e Viti kei vuravura raraba.*
- *Nodatou Koro ena tikina o Yawe - Natokalau, Korovou, Nalotu, Yakita kei Naqalotu, vinaka vakalevu.*
- *Veikoro ena Toba - Dagai, Talaulia, Lomaji, Nabukelevu-i-ra, Qalira, Tabuya, Nasegai, Cevai, Galoa, Solovola, Wai, Namalata, Namara, Mataso, Muanisolo, Naivakarauniniu, Vunisei.*
- *Na veikoro veiwekani - Nabukelevu, Serua, Votua - Nadroga, Mau e Namosi.*
- *Na veiwekani mai Ositerelia, Niusiladi, Amerika kei Peritania.*
- *Na i Vakatawa e Nabukelevu-i-ra, Kadavu, na vakavinavinaka levu ena veiqaravi levu kina vuvale vakaivakatawa, dina ga ni sa mai kacivi na marama na Radini Vakatawa.*
- *Noqu goneyalewa Maraia Vasu kei Koro mai Malevani.*
- *Kemudou na cauravou ena i tikotiko mai Kinoya.*

Au taura na gauna vinaka ogo me'u cavuta na vakavinavinaka vua na noqu lewenivale, Merewai Vasu. Au vakavinavinakataka vakalevu na nomuni veitokoni e na vuku ni noqu sasaga me baleti Viti. Na nomu qarava tu na cakacaka me baleta na vuvale, bisinisi kei na veika tale eso e mai rawa kina vei au meu lakova na cakacaka ni veidigidigi. Au vakavinavinakataka na Kalou e na vuku ni nomuni bula.

[I take this moment to thank all my supporters and their assistance, that allowed me to have a seat at this august Parliament – the management of the SODELPA Party - the President, the lord of Mataiwelagi; the Lord of Waimaro; the Paramount Chief the Roko Tui Dreketi; the Senior Management and the working staff; the 53 Election candidates and your supporters; the Youth wing and our volunteers; to all our supporters that voted for SODELPA at the last election - thank you; and to all the religious organisations. thank you for your prayers.

I would like to thank the –

- Vanua of Nacolase to the Tui Tavuki; the Vanua of Koroisoso – the Tui Naceva; the Vanua Valesasa – the Tui Nabukelevu; the Vanua of Nabala – the Tui Nakasa; the Vanua of Namanusa – the Tui Ravitaki; the Vanua of Nawaimalua – the Tui Drue; the Vanua of Naivibati – the Tui Yale; the Vanua Koroivabea – the Tui Ono; my Chieftom of Valedaidaiga – the Tui Yawe.
- My Campaign team - Ratu Vilimoni Soqeta and your family; the Vanua of Ulunikoro – Petero and your team; at our office - Peniasi Kunatuba and your family; Jope Koroisavou, Fine and Wame; the Vanua of Raurote the Tui Namuna; Jone and Tamani and your family.
- To the campaign team from Muana-i-ra in Kadavu – Buka, Rupeni, Inoke, Osea, Veta, Kaminieli, Ifereimi, Tomu, Lorima, Cula and Jo, Simi Rasova and your family.
- The Vanua o Burenitu and Nakuruvarua - Josua, Rabisi, Jone, Ili, Honda, Apenisa and Jo, Semesa and Watisoni and your family.
- The farmers all over Fiji and the market vendors at the Suva Market.
- The Qeremalagi Farm and its workers.
- The Vanua of Nauluvatu, all its maternal links and relatives.
- The village of Tawava in Fiji and around the world.
- Our Villages in the District of Yawe - Natokalau, Korovou, Nalotu, Yakita, Naqalotu, thank you.
- The Villages of Dagai, Talaulia, Lomaji, Nabukelevu-i-ra, Qalira, Tabuya, Nasegai, Cevai, Galoa, Solovola, Wai, Namalata, Namara, Mataso, Muanisolo, Naivakarauniniu, Vunisei.
- The Villages of Nabukelevu, Serua, Votua – Nadroga, Mau – Namosi.
- The families in Australia, New Zealand, America and Great Britain.

- The Catechist in Nabukelevu-i-Ra in Kadavu, sincere gratitude to the family of the Catechists and my sincere condolence to the passing of the Catechist's wife.
- My daughter, Maraia Vasu and Koroi from Melbourne.
- The young men of Kinoya.

I take this opportunity to thank my beautiful wife, Merewai Vasu. My sincere appreciation of your endless support on my journey to serve Fiji. Your sacrifice to look after the house, the family business and other obligations has enabled me to be out on my campaign trail. I thank God for your life.]

(Acclamation)

To Jason, Matthew, Alfred and our Fijian Chinese friends and families, thank you for your support.

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency's Address is a new dawn for the iTaukei. There will be concerted effort by the Coalition Government to mobilise resources to empower the iTaukei. This is part of the mitigation strategy to address the widely publicised 2019-2020 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), that showed that the iTaukei were the most vulnerable and at the lowest end of the absolute poverty scale. This is a stark contrast to the much-publicised slogan of "Leaving No One Behind", and this is the reality of the matter.

Mr. Speaker, the Preamble of the 2013 Constitution opens with the line and I quote:

"WE, THE PEOPLE OF FIJI

RECOGNISING the indigenous people or the iTaukei, their ownership of iTaukei lands, their unique culture, customs, traditions and language."

In His Excellency's Address, he referred to ILO 169 Convention and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Those two Instruments were labelled by the Opposition as irrelevant to Fiji because the indigenous Fijians were well protected, a narrative they religiously advanced for the past 16 years.

Based on that, they executed a systematic erosion and weakening the iTaukei institutions and rights. They promulgated 37 legislations which directly marginalised the iTaukei, contrary to ILO Convention 169 and UNDRIP. More importantly, they contradicted the Preamble of their own Constitution - a direct assault on the iTaukei people, its institutions and culture.

The iTaukei have emerged from the last 16 years, battered and bruised. But let me re-assure this august Parliament and those who are listening, we shall, and we will overcome. The voice of our chiefs who wanted our country to be on the better side of history on 10th October, 1874, continues to whisper through the ages. Today, we reaffirm that enduring spirit. For those who think they can continue to bulldoze their way through and suppress our voice - today is your answer. Mr. Speaker, the journey to right the wrong has already started.

As His Excellency announced, the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) will be re-established. Cabinet has approved the framework to bring it back. Fijians will be consulted on what way they think should be the best option for the GCC. We will follow the process for its re-establishment but with wide consultation.

From 2007, the previous Government gradually weakened the GCC until it was de-established in 2012, without consultation. The absence of GCC gave the Minister for iTaukei Affairs absolute discretion to make decisions and allowed for the introduction of 37 legislations.

To enable their motive, the previous Government chose to ignore UNDRIP and ILO Convention 169 as the principle of free, prior and informed consent is deeply embedded in both Conventions. It is the very principle that they removed from section 12 of the iTaukei Land Trust Act through Bill No. 17, which later became Act 22 of 2021. This removed the requirement for any lessee to obtain iTLTB consent for any mortgage, charge, pledges and caveat. Again, there was no consultation.

In contrast, the Coalition Government has been consistently doing consultations from day one. Cabinet has agreed to review the iTaukei Land Trust Act and to remove the amendment made by Bill No. 17 or Act 22 of 2021.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is working towards endorsing UNDRIP. Of the 37 legislations that marginalised the iTaukei, 19 falls under our Ministry, 11 will be addressed through the two Cabinet decisions I have just mentioned. We have just breathed some life into the valley of 37 dry bones. Be assured that the remaining 26 will be restored. Never before has any Government faced a massive challenge like this, but it is a challenge that will be met. We will persevere, we will overcome, we will succeed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency mentioned that the principal iTaukei laws will be reviewed. These will be underpinned by strategic reviews of iTaukei institutions, to improve their efficiency to better serve the iTaukei and other stakeholders.

Next month, we will organise a forum for natural resource owners and users. We want them to tell us how we can better utilise our natural resources to improve our livelihood. This will shape and inform our contribution to some of Government's broader initiatives, such as the National Economic Summit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an important issue for the iTaukei is Traditional Knowledge and Expression of our Culture. The iTaukei Traditional Knowledge is a body of knowledge that is developed, sustained and passed on from generation to generation with the iTaukei communities. It forms part of our culture and spiritual identity.

This is not protected by Fiji's current intellectual property system. Expression of culture result from the creativity of individuals, groups and societies that have cultural contents, for example, *meke* and traditional songs. There is a draft Traditional Knowledge and Expression of Culture legislation which will again go through the consultation process before it is brought to this august Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, for the past few weeks, I had visited Provincial Council Offices of Rewa, Tailevu, Naitasiri, Namosi and Serua. I was overwhelmed by the warm welcome I received from the *vanua*. There is a rising tide of approval that this Government is on the right track. We want our provinces and their commercial arms to succeed. To do that, we must improve their governance and empower their people. It is about governance and empowering our people.

I want to acknowledge the leadership of the iTaukei institutions and their commercial arms - Fijian Holdings and Fijian Trust Fund for totalling supporting the Coalition Government's vision. They have already taken concrete steps within their current mandate and legislation to deliver this. In two to three years, we will see real changes, not superficial or *ad hoc*.

Mr. Speaker, on the other topical issues of traditional or *vanua* governance, there are 6,219 chiefly or customary titles in Fiji. Of these, 2,892 or 47 percent have been confirmed by the iTaukei Lands Commission. The remaining 53 percent are still vacant. This demonstrates a challenge for us but we will overcome that. We will look at ways to encourage unconfirmed title holders to be confirmed.

The *vanua* system will have to be formalised under the enabling instrument which is also part of the Coalition Government's Manifesto on the co-existence of the provincial and the *vanua* system. The current practice is to encourage their confirmation, but we really have nothing to empower them. The lease distribution formula that used to support them was forcefully removed, again without consultation. The impact is now obvious.

Mr. Speaker, through the Traditional Leadership Training at CATD in Nadave, we will continue to empower them for better management of their roles and resources. Further the *turaga ni koro* (village headmen) and *mata ni tikina* (tikina representatives) will be empowered to effectively implement planned programmes for the *vanua*, with emphasis on good and proper governance.

To this end, we would like to acknowledge the tremendous support rendered by the various NGOs, assisting in the running of different training programmes at the centre. We look forward to a closer working arrangement with them as we progress with the development of our youths. Likewise, the iTaukei institutions - Fijian Holdings and iTaukei Trust Fund are currently exploring mechanisms that will trickle down their portfolio to the 1,173 villages and 250 registered informal settlements.

Mr. Speaker, the iTaukei community has been neglected in the past. We appear to have continued the protection mode from the Colonial era with institutional changes in 2018 being operationalised without proper resourcing. To the other communities, we request that you bear with us. As we restructure and empower our indigenous people to cope with the realities of today's challenges, we will be calling for your participation and support in these processes. We believe that improving the well-being of the iTaukei will have its ripple effect on the other communities.

Mr. Speaker, we are very mindful of the sentiments express by the late honourable Jai Ram Reddy while addressing the then GCC as expressed in His Excellency's Address. Indeed, we want all communities that call Fiji their home to thrive and be at peace. This can only come about if the well-being of the iTaukei are properly addressed in tandem with their implications on the other communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition has bombarded us with discrimination this week. They have supported with the biblical line that we are all equal in God's eyes. We do not dispute that, but they failed to mention the principle of positive discrimination.

The Qarase Government had put in place the Social Justice Act to improve the economic positions of the *iTaukei*. It was part of the 50/50 by 20/20 vision. If that vision was given a chance to succeed, Fiji would have been in a different place by now. But we all know, the rest is history.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in closing, I would like to thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition and the FijiFirst Government for the last 16 years of service in Fiji. It allowed them to amass a pool of skill-sets in various disciplines. It is my hope that these areas of development expertise within the Opposition can be readily made available when called on for the development of our nation. We may be on a different side of this august Parliament, but I believe, we all have the same goal for our people and the nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me conclude by reaffirming my strong commitment to implement His Excellency the President's plan for the *iTaukei* as outlined in his speech.

Kivei keda kece na lewe i Viti raraba, au kerea saka tiko yani na noda veilomani ena kena maroroi na noda i tovo kei na noda vanua. Meda maroroya talega na noda yaubula ka yadrava vaka yalomatua na kedra vakayagataki me vurevure ni noda bula. Me yaco ko Viti me dua na vanua veilomani ka sautu.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker and may God bless Fiji.

(Acclamation)

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Jeremiah 17:7-8 says, and I quote:

“Blessed are those who trust in the Lord for they are like trees planted along the river banks, with roots that reach deep down into the water, such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they go on delivering delicious fruits.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, *mia'u sa bula sia*.

I rise today in this august Parliament to lend my full support to His Excellency the President, *Turaga Bale na Tui Macuata*, for his most gracious and inspiring Address at the inauguration of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I would like to begin by first congratulating you on your election as the Speaker of this august Parliament. Being no stranger to Parliament and as the longest serving parliamentarian, honourable Members of this august Chamber have full confidence in your leadership qualities and ability to guide Fiji's democratic process within the next four years. This is also a proud moment for me and the people of my province in Cakaudrove to witness our paramount chief being elected to this prestigious position.

I also wish to congratulate honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua for being elected to this esteemed office as the Deputy Speaker of the Fiji Parliament. Your elevation to this prestigious position in your second term in Parliament, is an inspiration to all the women and young girls in Fiji and the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the last few years in Parliament, the credibility and dignity of this august Parliament has at most times been tarnished by acts of political and personal vilifications, vengeance, verbal abuses and unprofessional acts and disrespectful conduct on both sides of Parliament. Since being elected to Parliament in December 2022, it is my sincere desire and hope that this august Parliament will embody the collective spirit of inclusiveness, collaboration and respect for one another.

We must strive to trust and have hope in each other. Together, we can find solutions if only we put our political differences aside and work together for the betterment of our nation, in cooperation and unity. We must lead by examples and let the people of our beloved Fiji see our renewed spirit of love and compassion, our collaborative approach while debating for a better solution to our problems. This will bring a new dawn of hope, of a promising and a brighter future for Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the experience and knowledge of the Opposition in running the Government for the last 16 years can be relied upon and I acknowledge that there will be many opportunities to learn from them. I reiterate the sentiments raised by the honourable Prime Minister's inaugural address to the nation in which he highlighted Government's stand to develop a positive relationship with the Opposition, as part of a broader initiative to enhance national unity. Government will always be prepared to consider the ideas from the Opposition carefully to ensure inclusiveness and foster greater ownership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this opportunity to convey my deepest appreciation to all the voters for their confidence and trust in my ability to be able to effectively represent them and to raise their concerns in this honourable Parliament. At this juncture, I wish to acknowledge the hard work of my campaign team from Vatuova - Ropate Matakibau, Gabiriele Sisa and Ananaiasa Koro. First and foremost, to the *Turaga na Tui Vatuova, Valelevu i Na'ase* and the *Bose Vanua o Vatuova* - this is the power-base of my journey in my political life.

I would also like to extend my esteemed gratitude to the other four Yavusa in the *Vanua o Vatuova* - *Yavusa o Vusaratu, Yavusa o Wacawaca, Yavusa Lekutulevu*, last but not the least *Yavusa o Ravunivatu. Vina'a va'alevu Vatuova na veiva'menemenei*.

Equally important, I would also like to convey my sincere gratitude to the support rendered to me from the people of Vatuova living in Australia, especially to Sosiceni Towa, Reverend Waisea Kania who is my mentor, and my two cousin brothers - Anare and Semiti Vocea, and my sister Rayape Posselt, and also others whom I have not mentioned their names.

I also acknowledge the support from the United Kingdom, especially to Nau Lo and Pita Dovibua from the United States. I would also like to convey my most sincere gratitude for the support and kind words of encouragement I received from the *Turaga na Tui Koroalau* and the Villages of Vuinadi, Vunidogoloa, Nabua, Nataoa, Bucalevu, Nakawaga and Nukubolu, not forgetting the *vanua* of Nacuqu in Korosi, the villages of Nagigi, Nacavanadi, Waivunia, Vivili, Naidi, Nukubalavu, Nacekoro and Yaroi.

The overwhelming support from the *Turaga na Tui Vunidawa* and the people of Koronatoga and Tabia have been encouraging. I would also like to take my hat off to my former school teacher - Mr Setareki Koroilagilagi for giving me the chance to replace him in the *Vanua o Wairiki*. The overwhelming support that was rendered to me from the Wairiki people will never be forgotten.

I also pay tribute to the support I received from the village of Nadrala in Nadroga. I acknowledge the support from the Methodist Church congregation from the *Tabacakacaka Nasea* in Labasa and *Wasewaselevu o Macuata*, especially from members of my church in Kaleli, Vatunibale. Thank you once again for your kind support.

Also I have been receiving kind words of encouragement from Reverent Tevita Mau in Dreketi in Macuata. Equally the same, the brilliant support from my neighbours at Kauvula/Kaudamu Road in Delainavesi, together with those staying at the settlement in Lovonilase. I am indebted and honoured with the support of the residents of Tamavua-i-Wai. You stood beside me and voted for me amongst the many political opponents that flooded the corridors of your settlement.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the strongest pillar of my support is none other than that of my own family. I would like to pay special tribute to my beautiful wife, Miriama Vocea, and my son - Ken, daughter-in-law - Bella, granddaughter - Anaseini Rosi, and my niece - Anaseini Galo, who have always stood by me and are my source of inspiration. I would like to convey my deepest appreciation to my home

village in Ravita and Domokavu in Vaturova, as well as those working and residing in Labasa, Suva, and other parts of Fiji.

Standing in this dignified Parliament today brings me back memories of my humble beginning and upbringing in my village of Ravita in Vaturova. Mr. Speaker Sir, you will all understand the challenges of having to be brought up in a family of four children by my late mother, Mere Waqavuka, singlehandedly. She was an iron lady. Everyday was a struggle, not only for me and for my elder siblings, but moreso for that courageous woman who was my only beacon of hope. And for the audacity of that very special woman, I pay tribute to all the single mothers in Fiji today.

(Acclamation)

Mr. Speaker Sir, the hardships we faced as a family and having to witness my mother going out of her way to ensure that I was accorded the same privilege that children who came from other families enjoyed, will continue to be my source of motivation to do well in life but perhaps, to serve the underprivileged families and communities in Fiji.

My late mother was well-versed with the techniques of cutting copra and I often accompanied her to carry out such heavy tasks in order to send us to school and for the survival of our family. I paid tribute to my late mother and my late siblings, Inoke and Losalini, while Rayape, my only surviving sibling now resides in Sydney. I only wish they were still around to witness this grand occasion from humble beginnings to where I am today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from my primary education at Vunisalusalu Primary School in Vaturova, I continued my secondary school at Ratu Kadavulevu School in Tailevu. This is where my leadership qualities were recognised and nurtured.

After completing my University Entrance, my mother was not in a position to send me further for tertiary education, so I opted to join the then Public Works Department (PWD) as a casual labourer during the construction of the Natewa Bay West Coast Road from Tabia right up to Nayaroyaro in Dogotuki, Macuata. After six months as a labourer, I was promoted to Clerk, and then moved on to be the Chief Clerk in the establishment of the PWD Depot in Saqani which is still there today.

After serving eight years in PWD, I then moved on to work for the Auditor-General's Office for a term of three years. My sheer determination and motivation to succeed in life led to my promotion to the Ministry of Employment and Industrial Relations which I served for three years before progressing to the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management. That was where I spent more of my Civil Service career, spanning 24 years culminating in my ascending to the position of Divisional Commissioner Northern from 2015 to 2019.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, prior to my appointment as the Divisional Commissioner Northern, I was fortunate to be given a diplomatic posting to the Fiji Embassy in Tokyo as a Principal Foreign Service Officer from 2012 to 2015.

Whilst working in Government, I was given two opportunities to pursue further studies. From 1994 to 1997, I completed by Bachelor of Arts (majors in Management and Sociology) at the University of the South Pacific. In 2007, I was offered a New Zealand Aid Scholarship to pursue my Master in Public Management and Public Policy where I graduated in December 2008.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during my tenure as a civil servant in Government, I also worked on part-time basis as a sports reporter and commentator with the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation. One of the

many highlights in this field is providing live commentaries of the Wellington 7s and Los Angeles 7s respectively in 2004, and to co-commentate during the Fiji National 15s Test matches with Japan during my tenure at the Fiji Embassy in Tokyo. I also did live commentaries of the South Pacific Games that was held here in Fiji in 2003.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I still have those skills with me and ready to utilise, if you so wish to organise any sports tournament in future for honourable Members of this august Parliament.

(Laughter)

Given that background, I am deeply honoured to the honourable Prime Minister, who has found me worthy to be appointed as the Assistant Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management. More than 30 years of experience in the Civil Service will boost my capacity to deliver to the best of my ability in the rural development field, which I always am passionate about.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's Address is one of the remarkable clarities, visionary and optimistic with Government's priorities laid out in the next four years. His Excellency's call for unity is timely and sets the direction to this august Parliament to lead the way for Fiji. I wish to reiterate the sentiment raised by His Excellency, and I quote from Pages 12 to 13 of His Excellency the President's Address on Friday, 3rd December, 2023:

“Now 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 members of our society.”

Our citizens anticipate honourable Members of this august Parliament to demonstrate unity in our diversity. We must not let the people of Fiji down.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a decision to transfer the Rural Housing Unit and the Rural Outer Island Programme back to the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development, as was disclosed by His Excellency the President during his Address, is fully supported. The Ministry, through its rural development machinery at the divisional, provincial and district level, in collaboration with other line Ministries and stakeholders, will assist in the coordination and implementation of this programme.

On the Rural Outer Island Programme (ROI), the revival of this programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will continue to empower rural farmers, coupled with market-driven approaches to enhance the livelihood of our rural dwellers. The Ministry has recognised the importance of agriculture as a critical enabler to support rural development and will be working closely with the Ministry of Agriculture on this front.

In addition, the Ministry is currently engaged in consultation with other line agencies in terms of discussing other non-agriculture sectors that can be considered in the revamped ROI development programme, particularly on those development issues that were raised in the last 14 Provincial Council meetings. Development issues such as rural roads, rural water supply, solar power supply, communication networks and seawall were some of the common requests that were noted from the last 14 Provincial Council meetings.

Given our rich natural resources, coupled with development issues mentioned above, the integrated approach amongst agencies and development stakeholders can tailor-made some development initiatives through this programme to maximize returns for our rural communities.

On this same approach, the Ministry is pushing to invest more on economic empowerment development programmes in our rural communities. This will ensure that economic proceeds from those projects will fund the future development priorities of the community. As evident in the development issues raised from the last 14 Provincial Council meetings, only 7 percent of those development issues were economically related, which may indicate the level of economic activities that exists in our rural communities. This statistic is alarming and it needs to be addressed with urgency, Mr. Speaker Sir.

Once that is realised, Government can then focus on large capital investment for funding, and communities can fund its own development aspirations without fully dependent on Government. It is about time now that we teach our rural communities how to fish rather than give them fish all the time.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the culture of dependency on Government has been in existence and thriving for so long, and this new Coalition Government is on its way to ensure it is minimised. On the same token, our rural communities must be empowered to be independent but with adequate capacity building and support from Government to utilise their rich natural resources to support their development aspirations.

On the revitalising of cooperative business model, Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency has enlightened this august Parliament on the new efforts by Government to revitalise the cooperatives movement which includes the reform of the Cooperative Act and updated for better organisation and outcomes.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the cooperative movement in Fiji was introduced in 1947 which focused predominantly towards the development of grassroot communities and the increasing number of consumer cooperatives that are located mostly in rural and maritime areas. Cooperative is founded based on the values of "*solesolevaki*" and aligned to people's communal way of living in the rural areas. It has been identified to have the potential to address socio-economic issues, such as unemployment and poverty, which are prevalent in our rural community today.

Mr. Speaker Sir, Lovia Cooperative located in Gusuisavu Village in Naitasiri, in its 10 years of existence, has achieved great milestones. From a consumer store to transportation and bakery services, the business has been able to employ 18 villagers and in 2019 alone, earned a total revenue of approximately \$595,000.

Moreover, the Nukusolevu Cooperative in Nasarowaqa in Bua has generated income through utilising idle land to adopt integrated agricultural farming approach. With the assistance of the Fiji Sugar Corporation, the cooperative has successfully developed 103 hectares of vacant land in cultivating sugarcane and other crops. Since its registration in 2019, the cooperative has harvested about 2,087 tonnes of cane, generating an income of \$177,450.

The Nayarabale Youth Farm of Cakaudrove which was formed in 2008, is among the best proofs that success is achievable for our indigenous people when they are given the necessary opportunity and support, as well as discipline and skills. Built on the principle of *solesolevaki* and utilising social capital, indigenous values and ethos for the benefit of society as a whole, the farm has developed from having zero capital to generating over \$100,000 in revenue annually. This accomplishment, among others, is a testament worth noting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Rural Housing Assistance Programme, this Scheme was established with the main objective of helping rural population to improve living conditions and reduce vulnerability to natural disasters. The Ministry is currently finalising this programme, including the

potential partnership with the Ministry of Forestry in terms of scaling up this housing assistance programme for our rural communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on National Disaster Management, Government will prioritise the mainstreaming of disaster risk management initiatives through the National Disaster Management Office. This will be implemented through the continued partnership with Government agencies, civil societies, business communities, academia and development partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the devastating impacts of tropical cyclones has increased in recent years with increasing intensities and frequencies. For the last three Tropical Cyclones namely, Category 4 *TC Harold*, *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana* that made landfall in Fiji within eight months, a total of 9,300 houses were partially damaged and 3,300 houses were fully damaged.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, other consequences of extreme weather events is the displacement of communities as in the case of Coqea and Nabavatu Villages in Vanua Levu, where a total of 124 households were affected after *TC Ana* in January 2021. Similarly, the village of Dreketi on Qamea Island was affected by a massive landslide in 2016.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it saddens me to inform this august Parliament that little to no progress has been made in relocating the aforementioned communities. It is inhumane to expect the villagers of these communities to remain in their current deplorable status where community members continue to live in tents since their displacement in January 2021. This is a case of travesty to the highest order as I, for one, fail to fully comprehend the stress on their mental and physical well-being. Moving on, Sir, the Coalition Government will work with stakeholders to resolve the root causes hindering the relocation of the aforementioned communities.

Just before I conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to correct one statement, if you may allow me, that was said in this Parliament on Monday by honourable Bilitavu where he mentioned that Mr. Joji Senitabua Leweniqila was campaigning for People's Alliance Party and later came to vote in the SODELPA Management Board Meeting. That is not true, Sir. Mr. Joji Leweniqila has a twin brother called Kolinio Nadavo.

In fact, Kolinio Nadavo was actively campaigning for People's Alliance Party. They are very identical twins and very hard to differentiate between those two. So, during the campaigning period, Mr. Joji Leweniqila was in Suva working for a law firm and not in Vanua Levu, as alleged by honourable Bilitavu. So, to state that this Coalition Government is in power by default, is a false accusation. I think it is only proper for honourable Bilitavu to apologise to this august Parliament, as well as to Mr. Joji Leweniqila, for what has transpired.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you, once again, for your patience, indulgence, and I commend and support the Address by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji in this august Parliament.

(Acclamation)

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, I thank the Arms of Providence for guiding me here to this Chamber of representatives this morning. I acknowledge the God Almighty for His plans and His design, and I also acknowledge the advice that I get from those who advise me spiritually in my imminent space.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity to address this august Parliament and to support the motion of the honourable Prime Minister in thanking His Excellency the President of

Fiji, *na i Taukei Bolatagane, Turaga na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, for his gracious Address and opening of Fiji's Parliament.

Allow me first to congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on your appointment as Speaker of Fiji's Parliament. Along with your Deputy, the honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua, Fiji and her people will look to you with expectation to deliver to them a Parliament that will be filled with decorum, respect and mutuality. Perhaps, in times of heated debate, they would look to you, Sir, as a guide to steer the lively and constructive deliberations for the interest of our great nation.

Parliament, after all, is the ultimate seat of democracy in our land and you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, sit at the topmost. I have, no doubt, it is a role that you will be able to discharge with a sense of dignity and passion, and these are traits that the people of Fiji have seen in your long service as a parliamentarian in this august Parliament in the past.

I would also like to welcome those in Fiji and around the world who are listening from the comfort of their homes, offices and those who are in transit, or relaxing and through their gadgets are able to hear me today via livestream, making my maiden speech in this Parliament.

The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen who are seated in the public gallery; I ask of your indulgence to say a few acknowledgements:

First, to my wife Sera, a woman who stood by me even in my imperfections, the strength without which I am incomplete, my ultimate partner in life, the mother of my children, happy belated birthday. Mr. Speaker, I was not able to take her out for dinner last night and in my defence, I said that I was here until after 9.00 p.m. So, to Sera, I got paid this week and the dinner bill is on me tonight. To eternity! Thank you and I love you!

To my children - the boys, Elijah, TuSeru (the QVS Dux of last year), Masi, and my little bosses - Diviti, Didabe and Dilo; you all know that you always have my heart and I will always have you under my covering.

To our boys – Meki and Ben in the United States and to Mary in Wellington, I love you all and I thank you for your support and your prayers.

To Sera, Teta, Semiti and Israel, you have made my life richer since you came to join us, and I will do my utmost to be the father I can be in your life.

To my grandchildren - Puggy and Telly, you are listening in from Labasa - I know you are taking away Pu Sera from me soon and that decision I do not like, but enjoy your short stay with your dad and your mum in the United States of America for a short while, but if you so decide to stay there in the USA, that is fine, just send your grandmother back to me.

To the People's Alliance Party (PAP) Suva Branch Constituency Executives, youth volunteers, supporters and voters from Cunningham, Vunivau, Samabula, Raiwai, Saioni, Jittu, Vatuwaqa and all the supporters of Candidate 248 from Saumakia Village in Naitasiri, the entire island of Kabara, Tukavesi, Loa Village, Navonu, Malaka, Vanua Balavu and my *koro ni vasu* - Sinuvaca in Koro Island, *Vuvale* Vunimokosoi and Delaikoro, my mother's extended family, the Daulakeba from Levuka, Lakeba in Lau and the 4,408 voters who placed their faith in me, thank you for your vote and because of what you did on 14th of December, change has happened to Fiji.

To my biological mother - my Nau, Fane Vuniwaqa Vosarogo, my number one prayer warrior, thank you for being my spiritual warrior in my busy life, the silent worker behind the scene of my success.

To my church community of Advanced Breakthrough Centre, my Senior Elder Sunia Lakokilakeba and Aunty Mili, the eldership and the people's group of our community, thank you for the support and your prayers and your covering throughout the seasons.

To my global family of the Congress WBN, the President – Dr. Noel Woodroffe and his GCL, the grace that builds is sufficient.

To the Team 248 or they say, 'Fili Campaign Team', my young team of youthful believers who rallied at our base in MacGregor, day in and night out, pinning the maps and focussing on the exact spots for our campaign, marching into the nights to campaign venues after your classes at the University. This speech is for you - Gabby, Aisake, Junior, Takalaivuna, Josefa, Sowane, Vani, Tusoki, Wise, Sereseini, Sera Nukuoga, Jane Daveta, Ilaijah, Antonio, Deborah Evens, Kevin Ho, Atunaisa Druavesi, Aisake, Malupo, Thomas, Zack, Sairusi, Jone Tukana, Alfred, Manoa, Aisake and Usaia Tukana.

To my Friday Team, the team that considers almost everyday as Friday, you gave me encouragement and gave me the reasons why I cannot turn back from that political journey we all worked on in August of 2020. To you, I am eternally grateful - Bubs, Vani, Alisi, Jayiga and Epeli, thank you very much. You will remain forever in my heart.

To the FIBA group, I am proud of being associated with you and to benefit from your advice over the years and to you, I cherish your camaraderie.

To the Vosarogo Lawyers staff – Sera, Mereani, Etonia, Sai, Atunaisa, Alfred and Joji who now handles the firm - thank you for your support.

My older siblings - *Turaga mai Nakabuta* - Ratu Seru Tubuna Vosarogo; my sisters - Una, Sera, Baba and Tumo – *Vina 'a va 'alevu vei 'emudou na tua 'aqu*.

To the QVS PGFA Executives, the QVS family, the QVS fraternity - thank you for your support and for your trust. I also want to say thank you to all the teachers that I have met in my life journey at Queen Victoria School.

My Vulinitu 1993 school mates, a strong body of influence since 1988, some for bad and mostly for good, and our counterparts from Lodonu who had also supported my campaign - Simi Kauvesi, Suka, Juta and Luke, thank you very much for your support.

As you would know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am the first in the Yavusa of Korocau to be its parliamentarian and to my Loa family and my Yavusa of Korocau, first worldwide and in Fiji, Jimmy in Australia, thank you for your support.

My second village in Malaka, Vanua Balavu and maybe the second village in Moce Island, *sa malo valevu a vakadrakai*.

To my two sisters - Margaret and Vasiti, I love you both and I am sure you know that. You two and me will always be a 'little gang'. Although we have lost our exclusiveness over the years, thank you for your support. Love to Aidan, Tunavi and Miriam and to our mum, Bulou Elenoa Nagonewai, a lady who embodied strength through and through, love like no other, a lady who found

no fault in my young life even when there were many and she would have been my number one cheer leader until she passed away five years ago this month. I know she looks down today from heaven, proud of the only son that she had raised and what I have made out of her valuable and strong teachings. To her 'how about', Fidelis and her husband, Hans, thank you!

To the Moments Cafe staff - Sia, they make the best coffee in town, thank you very much.

To my business friends and clients - Rohit, Raju, Faiz, Imtiaz, Peni and Maria Moi, Shalen, Johnny, Ashneil, Jason, Ma, Reggie and Temo, Jack, Dhiren and many more, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

To my class – second year Criminal Law - LW205 and LW206 from 2020 – 2022 at the University of the South Pacific, thank you for giving me an opportunity to have taught you and I pray that in your learning, you will strive to become better lawyers than we are today.

Mr. Speaker, I have graduated to this Parliament from the other side of these hallowed halls of the Government Buildings where I have practised as a lawyer for the past 23 years. My earlier life as a lawyer was spent at the DPP's Office as a Prosecutor, then I joined the Land Transport Authority as its Manager Legal Services. In 2006, I became Fiji's third Director of the Legal Aid Commission. In 2009, I opened my law firm that is now known as, Vosarogo Lawyers, to this day.

Mr. Speaker, I have traversed the contours of Fiji's legal system in my 23 years of practice as a lawyer in this country, Tuvalu in 2016 defending their Prime Minister, the late honourable Apisai Ielemia and in Vanuatu in 2020, in defence of their Prime Minister, honourable Chalot Salwai Tabimasmas in his criminal trial. You will also be aware, Mr. Speaker, of my defence of our honourable Prime Minister in 2018 that enabled him to stand in that Election, two days away from the polling day.

Mr. Speaker, from the Magistrates Court to the Supreme Court of this country, I know only too well the cost that befalls us all when rights of people are violated, when freedoms are curtailed, when fairness of trials is compromised by appearance of bias and when those in power feel entitled, as was the case in the past 16 years of national life.

When cost of living rises to unprecedented level, unemployment is rife like never before, when moral decay seep through the social fabric of our society, when sexual offences against women, children and the vulnerable reminds us of how horrible our society has become and the almost unpayable national debt, a disastrous burden on our children's future – a partisan Government like the FijiFirst Government of the past can no longer be the answer to the future generation of Fiji.

The Fiji First Government was offered the hand of bipartisanship in the past two sessions of Parliament. Mr. Speaker, what did they do with that? They behaved as if they have been gifted with exclusive wisdom to govern, even with impunity.

We all know, Mr. Speaker, of the relationship of the rule of law and confidence of business and more importantly, the confidence of genuine investment. In case, honourable Members on the other side had missed it – I said, "rule of law" and not "rule by law", and I emphasise that because there is a difference.

The FijiFirst Government is known for its countless mischiefs of ruling by law and not subjecting themselves to the rule of law in the 16 years of its partisan Government. Since 1970, never has there been a history or period of lawmaking where the Government has protected itself in provisions of 'ouster clauses' in laws, making their actions unappealable and unreviewable by the

Courts, even if there is public outrage of the law and the executive actions that they took. There is unrestrained power of the Minister for Immigration to declare a person as a prohibited immigrant, as was the case of Professor Pal Aluwhalia, without the supervisory or appellate function of the Court to keep a check on the executive exercise of power.

There is unrestrained power in the Supervisor of Elections and Electoral Commission given to them just as recent as August 2022 (last year), powers to require from anyone information, even if its privileged, confidential or secret with ridiculous fines of between \$50,000 to \$500,000, or imprisonment of five years, or both.

In an era, when the rest of the world is moving towards transparency, accountability and more importantly, taking responsibility, Mr. Speaker, the FijiFirst Government of the past moved towards secrecy. They moved towards hiding their footprints – footprints which are now surfacing. The people of Fiji have now begun to know - exorbitant pays, ridiculous bonuses and extravagant overseas spending on taxpayer dollar.

So, we ask ourselves, Mr Speaker, does the FijiFirst Government in the past realise that it was not their money to spend as they wish? It belongs to hardworking Fijians. I am reminded, Mr. Speaker, by the words of the 16th President of the United States of America - Abraham Lincoln when he said, “Nearly all man can withstand adversity but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.”

Well, Mr. Speaker, we have all seen the effect of power badly handled by the former Government in the past 16 years. Their ‘non-consultative approach’, ‘we are better than you approach’, has truly cost them the 2022 General Election, and they would do well (my suggestion, Mr. Speaker) is to consider the young guns in their ranks, the charismatic honourable Bia and the bipartisan honourable Niudamu to be their new leaders quickly before the next sitting of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, change takes a long time, but it happens. The words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. rings true, and in this hallowed Chamber, even more: “The arc of the moral universe is long but it always turns toward justice”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, who of us would have forgotten the treatment and termination without recourse to law of the many Chief Executives Officers, Permanent Secretaries, Board members and many more since 2007, at the orders of none other than the present honourable Leader of the Opposition, the very same right honourable gentlemen, who complained of the mistreatment of senior civil servants without proof and without essence in this Chamber on Monday.

Mr. Speaker, the fear that people felt was tangible through the past 16 years has now come to an end. The rule by two in the government of many has come to an end. The business embargoes on those who do not support FijiFirst has now come to an end; the regional bully that Fiji had for the past 16 years has now come to an end; the travel restrictions on those who do not agree with their ideologies has now come to an end; and to the wife of the late Dr. Brij Lal of Tabia, Labasa, Madam Padma Lal, I say to you, welcome home!

(Acclamation)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the Fiji this Coalition Government is going to deliver - holding true to the lyrics that once rang proudly through our island home, the envy of the Pacific as the land of freedom, hope and glory for all races and all faiths. I can only hear clearly now the lyrics of the song

that once described us in our quest for real democracy: “ Together hand in hand, we can prosper in this land - several races, one nation, one destiny, several races, one nation and free!”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government will deliver that Fiji to her people, a Fiji of equity, not just of a common name - a nation of possibilities for our children, where everyone gets a fair shot and everyone gets a fair share.

Mr. Speaker, what baffles me is that that FijiFirst Government of the past feels accomplished with the overseas employment scheme to Australia. When a government cannot generate employment opportunities to its citizens here at home, that government has surely run out of ideas, they have run out of innovation of job creation, and thank God, the people of Fiji by their vote, enabled us to run them out of their government seats in December.

The Coalition Government looks to create employment opportunities for our young people in the ICT sector, working in a highly conducive and trusted PPP environment to host back-office operations, hosting for international firms and companies, providing hundreds, possibly thousands of jobs for our young people in the coming decade.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there will be a real focus on agriculture, food processing that will be able to increase our export base on multiple products for overseas market and lessening reliance on food imports that we can grow here at home locally. We know that this will require a lot of effort, but we must be prepared as a country to work so we can lift the burden of inflation on our people and make life affordable for all.

We have seen brands of Grace Roads come to Fiji and make their money. They give everyone in the industry a fair go, and it is good for competition. But why could not we have our own companies modelled, encouraged, funded, monitored and facilitated for future growth in our own land, in our own country and in their own backyard? Why was there no incubation of such businesses in the past 16 years?

We must start believing in ourselves, Mr. Speaker, and as a Government, that is precisely what we intend to do - identify our resource, pull in the expertise, find the funding model, bring in the money, monitor, and provide facilitation advice to get projects off the ground to become profitable and competitive.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to respond to His Excellency the President's Address whilst opening the session of Parliament. Sir, State leases is an important revenue earner for the Government. We want to ensure that Government is positioned to collect all that is owed through such services as State leases. This will help us plan better and do more for our people.

In a press release earlier this week, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I called on State lessees, whose rental arrears on State Land to pay up their rental arrears owed to Government which currently sits at \$23.8million, almost 60.3 percent of the State lease revenue Government potentially can receive in 2023. The Ministry is one of Government's top revenue earners with over \$89.5million collected between 2017 to 2022, and we will ensure to tighten up our processes and to improve our collection rate.

On the other hand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President talked about disaster preparedness. The Mineral Resources Department, Sir, has the Seismology Section that monitors earthquakes and tsunamis in Fiji on a 24/7 basis. For the Seismology Section to effectively perform its functions, the Fiji Seismological Network comprises six outer remote stations that send in datasets to our Observatory here in Nabua.

We are also grateful to the Pacific Community's (SPC) for their support that enables us to improve our working relationship with the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre that is based out of Hawaii to improve tsunami detection for the Southwest Pacific region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to strengthen our coordination and collaboration with our stakeholders, and we work closely with them, the:

- Oceania Regional Seismic Network (ORSNET);
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO);
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP);
- United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR);
- Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA); and
- United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have left, perhaps, the best for the last. I was born the youngest to a doctor father and a budding nursing student mother. My dad was one of the top science students in his time at Queen Victoria School and graduated with a gold medal at Medical College. He served his life as a dedicated civil servant right up to his last breath at Tukavesi Health Centre where he was asked to serve, after retiring as the Divisional Medical Officer Northern Division.

He worked hard, Mr. Speaker, and moved from hospitals to Health Centres, as the Government required him, taking me to five primary schools in six years of my primary school life - Delana Methodist Primary School in Levuka, Naroï District School in Moala, Kama District School in Tukavesi, Vuya District School in Nabouwalu and Holy Family Primary School in Labasa.

Perhaps, with a lot of caution of possibly four or five more secondary schools, he decided to send me to boarding school, that I had no choice about. So, for the next seven years. Mr. Speaker, Sir, like 10 other honourable Members of this august Parliament, I spent at Matavatuou, Queen Victoria School in Tailevu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my last year at Emalus Campus in Port Vila, I visited my dad in Tukavesi Health Centre during a semester and found him frail, a fraction of the image of the handsome dashing young doctor he was. On an evening of a small mix, I told him, "Ratu, I think you should retire now and spend your golden years in peace and tranquillity in the village", which is only two villages away. He said to me in the vernacular, smiling, "*Fili, 'qo na ka au sa vosa bubului kina, ke au na mate kina, au sa qarava na noqu i tavi*" (Fili, this is what I took an oath for and if it requires of me, I am prepared to lay my life for it).

He was a healer. He died in the same hospital he served after two hours of admitting himself to a bed straight after his afternoon ward rounds.

I stand here knowing that without his broad shoulders, I have stood on all this time since his passing in 1999, I would not be visible, and I would not be where I am today. A man of few words and taught by his own actions. A man who loved his backyard farm, a doctor who smoked a lot and absolutely loved his grog. He remains an idol to this day. I acknowledge you here, the late Ratu Dr. Jone Vuatalevu Vosarogo, in this Parliament.

(Acclamation)

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, it is his life service to heal that I hope to emulate in this Parliament, not as a doctor, but as a bridge of divides, a lifter for the downtrodden, a source of hope for the young, an instrument of peace and stability for all, and an agent of bipartisanship in

Government and a contributor to national healing. And if these, Mr. Speaker, were to require of me the balance of my life, I would gladly offer it willingly to Fiji and her people.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you for your indulgence and I support the motion of the honourable Prime Minister for His Excellency's most gracious Address.

Thank you for your indulgence, Mr. Speaker. To me you are not just Speaker of Parliament, you are also my high Chief and I am your warrior, and you can be assured of my participation with honour and dignity in parliamentary contributions that would help us deliver a Fiji that is more prosperous, more peaceful and more just. May God Bless Fiji, God Bless this august Parliament, Floreat Fiji.

(Acclamation)

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

The Parliament adjourned at 4.03 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 5.00 p.m.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my apologies for taking a bit of time to get here, but I thank you for giving me the time to make my speech this afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Sitiveni Rabuka, the Leader of the Opposition, honourable Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, Members of Parliament, people of Fiji; thank you for giving me the floor to speak on the motion before this Parliament.

First of all, I would wish to congratulate you on your appointment. As the Speaker, you come to this role with long years of experience as a parliamentarian, as a minister and as a Member of Parliament and we look forward to your leadership as you lead us over the next four years for the betterment of our work in this Parliament to serve the people of this country.

I also congratulate the honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua on her appointment as the Deputy Speaker and congratulations to all for being appointed as Members of Parliament especially those that are coming into Parliament for the first time - I think most of you have already delivered your maiden speeches. Congratulations for making it here.

I congratulate the honourable Prime Minister for his appointment as Leader of Government and congratulations to the three Deputy Prime Ministers, the Ministers and the Assistant Ministers for their appointment and to all the other Members on the Government side. My apology, I forgot that there is no one else apart from the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Ministers, the Ministers and the Assistant Ministers.

I wish to also congratulate the honourable Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama for getting the most number of votes amongst all of us who stood for this past election. Getting more votes than the combined votes for the Prime Minister, honourable Sitiveni Rabuka, the three deputy Prime Ministers and the Leader of Government combined - congratulations honourable Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama.

I start my speech this afternoon by, first of all, thanking God for my life and for my being here in Parliament by the grace of God, delivering this speech serving the people of this country, and I thank the FijiFirst Party and our leader for allowing me to be a candidate for this election. It is an honour and a privilege to join Parliament as a Member of the first ever FijiFirst Opposition.

I want to thank my wife Cagi, our five daughters and our seven living grandchildren for their support, love and encouragement.

A big *vinaka vakalevu* (thank you) to my extended Kadavu family - the Usamate, Bilivalu and Tavura family; my extended family from my Nasaqalau, Lakeba side - Maciu Dau family, thank you to all who voted for me and to those who voted for FijiFirst because together, you helped me get here.

Thank you for those who helped me in my campaign in the Lami to Nausori and Naitasiri area with Va, Apo, James, Jolame, Ilimo, Filipe; my strong support team that includes my tavale - Vini, Margie, Va, Una and Dimere, and my extended family members. I will be forever indebted to you. *Vinaka vakalevu* (Thank you) to the team that campaigned in Koro led by Te (Senior), assisted by Apo – *vinaka vakalevu na wekaqu mai* Mudu (thank you to my relatives from Mudu) for your assistance.

Now to the team from Kadavu – Jonani and tavale Peni assisted once again by the evergreen Apo and my Dravuwalu, Naceva, Kadavu family – thank you to the *Vanua* of Natawalevu, *vua Na*

Turaga Na Tui Dravuwalu kei Vunisa Na Gone Turaga Na Tui Naceva.

Thank you also to Mocolutu Matainiti for the work in Lakeba, *vinaka vakalevu* to the Vanua of Nasevou *vua na Gone Turaga Na Tui Nasaqalau*. I thank all my supporters in Lakeba and the other islands in the Lau Group and also to my Wakanisila, Kalabu area supporters – *maleka vakalevu na veitokoni*.

In his speech on Monday, the honourable Leader of the Opposition told Parliament that the Fiji of this week is not the Fiji of early December last year; the Fiji of today is not the Fiji of two months ago. Yes, a significant change has taken place. There is now a new Government in place, and we all know that and we, on this side, understand that. We know that our role for the next four years will be on this side of Parliament.

The new Government has done its very best in these past 50 days of rubbishing everything that FijiFirst has done. I note that they have been taking a lot of photos of things that need improvement. I think in the interest of fair representation, perhaps they should have taken the press that they have taken a round to the Navosa Hospital, the new Nakasi Health Centre, the Makoi Maternity Unit and the new Matewale Bridge up in Navosa that is about to be opened. That would have given a well-rounded picture of what the FijiFirst Government has been able to achieve and provide for the people of this country.

Fiji is now a much better place than prior to the time that the Bainimarama Government and the subsequent FijiFirst Government came into being - a much better place. I just want to highlight a few of these changes - changes that we should not forget.

Firstly, in terms of ethnic division, the Bainimarama and the FijiFirst Government addressed the issue that has always been Fiji's major stumbling block. Our racial politics that has always led to political strife and economic despair for our people, affecting their livelihoods for years on end and decades in some cases.

We live in a country where everyone feels they are victims - *iTaukei* feel that they are victims, Indo-Fijian brothers and sisters feel they are victims and all such groups have grounds for feeling that way. There is history behind it, things that have happened. These feelings are built in our communities, our homes, around our churches and temples. It permeates our society. These sentiments, however, are very easily fanned into flames that lead to people saying things that, in turn, lead to more strife very, very easily. This is the big challenge that any Government in Fiji will always have, to be able to address this issue.

Ethnicization has been our downfall, again and again and again. When we build our politics on rhetoric ethnic issues, we bring to the fore these feelings that lead to disaster. During the height to the political campaign, it was disgusting and it still is. We, on this side, worked to build a common identity that brings together everyone in this country as a Fijian.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- And I will say today for the people of Fiji that this was a very huge, enormous and gigantic first step - it was a huge step.

People have talked about it over the decades, different leaders have stood up in this Parliament and talked about it. No one had the gall to be able to do it. The Bainimarama-led Government, as espoused in the 2013 Constitution, came and gave us a common national identity - to address that very issue of ethnic divide that exists in this country.

We brought about the one person, one vote of equal value - a godly concept and a super phenomenal change for this country, never ever achieved before. People have stood in this Parliament, talked and dreamt of that day that, that would happen. They have dreamt for that day. The FijiFirst Government and its leader who is not here with us, made it happen - one man, one vote, equal vote, equal value.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- No consultation.

HON. J. USAMATE.- This always seem like a giant mountain to climb but the Bainimarama-led Government did that in 2013, it finally happened.

We also turned Fiji into one constituency to drive home the importance of unity because one of the things that happens in our country, we always start with racial divide, then it breaks down into provincial divide, and then it breaks up into all sorts of divide. We need unity, we need to build that unity into the way we conduct our elections and into the way we call ourselves. When we do that, we build a stronger united country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other thing that I think that this side of Parliament has done is the economic development of this country. If you look at the way the GDP growth has taken place from 1970 to the year 2006, the speed at which it grew, and you compare that from 2007 to maybe up to 2020 or 2021, it has increased very rapidly.

There has been a lot of changes that have been taking place in terms of the nine years of consecutive growth. I know that honourable Professor Prasad always tries to belittle that, but it is not an easy thing to have nine years of consecutive growth. In this country, we have always had ups and downs. When you have a consecutive economic growth, it shows that fundamentals in your economy have been working well and are being managed well through strong policies and through systems and processes that make it work because the world is a turbulent world.

Today, right now, the world is going to global recession in some parts of the world, over the next part of this year. But through the efforts of this FijiFirst Government, we have been able to do that - nine years of consecutive growth had been a great achievement in this country.

The third issue that I would like to talk about is iTaukei security and development. We have strengthened considerably the security of every iTaukei. We made sure that their land really became inalienable, that no one would ever be able to alienate any piece of iTaukei land ever again - that was done under our watch.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- That was done by a government that was said to be never doing anything for the iTaukei. Done in our watch!

We reduced the iTLTB poundage, forever forcing iTLTB to become more efficient. We commenced the payment of the 80 percent royalty for mineral resources to landowners, bringing in millions of dollars into their pockets that they could use for development and look after their people. By the way, when this was introduced in Parliament, I seem to recall that honourable Members of the Opposition at that time, some of whom are still sitting in this Parliament, some are still in the old Party, others migrated to the other party, they actually opposed this motion of giving royalties to landowners. Chew on that!

We created the landbank as a way of assisting landowners to get some land that they were not

using and get some revenue out of it.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Tell them!

HON. J. USAMATE.- They opposed it! I find that unfathomable. How can you oppose something like that?

We developed land development packages for the iTaukei landowners, assisting them to develop their own land so that they could get the kind of benefits that previously only third party developers could get. On the outskirts of Sigatoka, you go up to Yadua, with the Grace Road Bowser there, you see that piece of land - Government funded that. We wanted to overturn that thinking that the iTaukei are asset rich but cash poor. We are doing it all over, it is growing and growing. That was done by this particular FijiFirst Government.

Changes were made to the Freehold Land Buy Back Scheme, not started by this Government, started by others to make it easier for repayments to be done. Obstacles were removed and the Ministry of Lands even went to the extent of subdividing the land, renting it out, collecting the rentals and once the amount that the landowner owed had been collected in rentals, then giving the land to the landowner. That is how far we went.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- How many in the Central Division?

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is how far we went.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- None.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Listen and learn!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Fourth is the socio-economic rights in the Constitution. This FijiFirst Government has put into the Constitution that puts all of us here into this Parliament the socio-economic rights.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- By doing that, we have made it a requirement that for any government to deliver, you are now required to deliver on socio-economic rights because we put it into the Constitution.

Infrastructure development, vast new developments were made in infrastructure - water, roads, jetties and bridges.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Waila.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Waila is not us, private sector.

(Laughter)

More coming. The four-lane highways, water going under the sea to get to the islands of Moturiki, water going under the sea to get to Galoa in Bua and Malake in Ra. Massive improvement in roading infrastructure to cater for the massive explosion of the number of vehicles on Fiji roads, the sizes of vehicles have been increasing and the huge expansion in the road network. I always appreciate the former Prime Minister and current Leader of the Opposition in telling us how he got

a Naitasiri boy, the former Minister - Timoci Natuva, to see that under his Government that the road up to Naitasiri was tarsealed and a lot of that is taking place.

Electrification at a greater level with the removal of impediments for rural dwellers, such as the 10 percent deposit that used to be there. Now, we have solar home systems, more than 13,000 all across the country. Power came from Monasavu, it lit up Suva, all these corridors but the villages around there were dark and all that area up in Naitasiri were all dark. This FijiFirst Government made a change to that. Today, you go up the road in Namosi, you will see electricity poles. As you leave Nakorosule going up, the road is there, electricity is there – this Government did that.

Last year, I was driving around Nadarivatu and as I was driving around, I see all the villages lit up with electricity. We have been moving direct government operations out of government and into the realm of statutory bodies to reduce the size of government, to keep the regulatory function and the policy functions in government and move the operational arm out hitherto the development of Water Authority of Fiji, Fiji Roads Authority, Energy Fiji Limited, et cetera. There is still a lot to be done on this modality, I think this Government is looking to change it a bit but that is the proven modality all around the world.

In terms of free education, another huge mountain. I will never forget the day sitting in the Bainimarama Cabinet...

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- It all started before you.

HON. J. USAMATE.- ... when the late honourable Filipe Bole who was the Minister then and the day that it was announced, he was very emotional because for a long time, this has been one thing that has held people back. People who born with on their shoulders, who had lots of money, always had their education but others sometimes their education was blocked because they did not have enough money to fund out, so the Government stepped in. Tuition, bus fares, textbooks, ECE, the higher education system, the national qualification framework, the establishment of our Fiji National University continuing to provide assistance for everyone.

A lot has been achieved, significant steps have been made to move towards the evermoving target of a better Fiji. Is it perfect? No, it is not. It is not perfect because this is always a journey. This is part of the legacy that now rests in the hands of the current Government. It is for you to build upon that, take note of what was done well and to continue to improve it - continue the work to improve areas that need improvements.

As I ponder on that legacy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a number of things come to my mind to watch out for:

1. Democracy and the rule of law. In His Address, His Excellency the President had referred to the importance of democracy. It pains me, therefore, to reflect back on what transpired at the end stages of the Election process. The current Prime Minister wrote to the President about his concern about vote counting glitch and copied this letter to the Military and the Police to step in and do something about what he thought was going wrong with the counting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was nothing wrong. I do not know what he was asking His Excellency to do, to stop the counting, or was he trying to overturn the normal Election procedures?

2. Votes in this country have always been counted manually. This past Election was counted manually, the one before that, before that, before that all counted manually, always manually.

The shocking thing for me, Sir, was when the President of the Methodist Church of which I am a member, did the same thing without any evidence, without knowing that anything untoward had happened, did the same thing totally untoward.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Three Elections, three glitches - that is why.

HON. J. USAMATE.- The FijiFirst and its leader stood by those results.

We stood by those results. We did not try to change those results. So, when push comes to shove, who stood by to make sure that the manner in which democratic governments are appointed was preserved? Who was it? At the final turn, who was it? It was the Leader of the Opposition, the leader of FijiFirst. It was him who stood by that principle of adhering to the way in which governments change. He did not try to tamper with that particular process.

My request to the Government is this, when push comes to shove, stay the high road, stay the course. You have decided to bring back the Great Council of Chiefs which is your prerogative, which is your right. You interpret this as a way of bringing back iTaukei issues, even though as I have pointed out that under the Bainimarama and FijiFirst Government we did a lot of things than of all of those other governments that said that they were pro-iTaukei did not do. They did not make it, such that land could not be alienated - we did that. We did all of those things.

You have said that you are going to bring it back to raise the iTaukei issues. As I pointed out, under the Bainimarama and FijiFirst Government, so much was done to better the lot of us (iTaukei and indigenous people). There is always great glory in the GCC, but there also have been episodes of shame. There were actions that was taken in 1987 maybe by individual members.

This is my request to the Government, the plans that you make for what you see as a good course can be highjacked by those who use such institutions for their own agenda. You have your own intent to your plan, they can be hijacked - that has happened in the past.

That is my concern about some of the issues that I have raised earlier on in my speech. If you are going to bring back the GCC, please, remove all party politics from it because that is not what happened in the past.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- That is part of the review.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Free it from party politics. Do not take us down that route again.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- We are moving forward.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Make sure that it serves its primary purpose.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Sure, no problem!

HON. J. USAMATE.- My fellow Members of Parliament, we have made it here at last. All of us have come from different backgrounds. People have spoken about their different backgrounds. For me, Jone Usamate, I am the son of a housegirl, a single mother, who used to be a housegirl in Imthurn. So, I think one of the advantages of Imthurn because I was with all these European people around me, at least, it gave me slightly good English so that helped me a lot. So, even when things go wrong, it helped me out.

I have been brought up there. My mother was actually the housegirl for Hugh S. Robinson –

the gentleman who set up Fiji National Provident Fund many, many years ago. I have lived there, I visited schools, eventually my mother got married and I was brought up by my stepfather and her in the village of Wakanisila.

Honourable Tabuya, we are sitting opposite each other, we are both from Wakanisila. I have been brought up in Kinoya, Cunningham, Nakasi, in the church going to various schools, working my way through initially with a degree in economics and administration and later on a masters in management. I worked slightly at the Reserve Bank of Fiji on a part-time basis while a student at USP. I taught in Lomary Secondary. I started work at the Fiji National Training Council and worked my way up for 10 years to become the Director General.

For 10 years, I served as the Director General, I worked a bit at the Fiji National University for two years as Director for Quality Assurance in TVET and from 2012, I have been here as a Minister, initially for the Bainimarama Government and then for the FijiFirst Government for two terms. Finally, I am still here as a Member of Parliament on the Opposition side, but still with the critical role of plying myself for the benefit of the people in this country.

This morning as my daughter was driving me here, I was thinking of the importance of our role, the importance of your role and the roles of all us on this side. It really is a great honour and a privilege for all of us to be in Parliament. It is not just a privilege, it is an honour to be here as legislators - to make rules and laws and to set a direction for our country to build a better Fiji. It is a role we must not take lightly, and we must never lose sight of that – that we serve all, we serve all.

Like me, a lot of people are going to come to you and say we come from the same province, please, help me out. I voted for you, I voted for your party. Sometimes this can be very difficult or “please, my son is here, give him a job”. It is important for us, at all times, all of us to remember that we serve all equally. We give favours to none. We treat everyone equally.

His Excellency as the President has referred to us on this side of Parliament as the loyal Opposition. Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are the loyal opposition, we will be the loyal opposition. We will be loyal to this country and not play politics just for its sake. We will keep the Government accountable in the best interests of the people of this country.

(Acclamation)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, colleague honourable Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians, ladies and gentlemen; *ni bula vinaka saka, namaste* and warm greetings to you all from me and my family as we, again, come together in this august Parliament for yet another term in a new year and a new season.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me this opportunity to respond to His Excellency the President’s most gracious Address, delivered in this august Parliament on Friday, 3rd February, 2023 to mark the official opening of the 2023-2024 Session of Parliament.

May I first offer my congratulations to you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on your recent appointment to the esteemed role as Speaker of this august Parliament. Your long years of service, experience, chiefly wisdom and sense of humour will, undoubtedly, be of immense value in the discharge of your duties in this privileged Chamber. I also convey the same to the Deputy Chairperson, the honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to begin by acknowledging God the most highest for the good gifts and blessings that he has showered over my life, my family and our beloved nation, not only recently but over the so many past years. Our past journey together as a country of one people, one nation and with a common purpose and destiny has not been easy, but together we survived.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the future is uncertain and full of challenges and opportunities, the key learnings from the past can help us manoeuvre safely through the uncharted waters that the future presents and arrive safely together at what I prefer to call “our preferred destination”, and that preferred destination is a better Fiji for all Fijians - a Fiji where we respect, appreciate and celebrate the diversity and aspirations of our people.

Mr. Speaker, I am here, again, today because of the grace and favour of God and I honour his calling on my life to continue serving the people of this country as a Member of Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, to Him be all the Glory. This is my third consecutive term as a Member of the Fijian Parliament and I am most grateful to be given this opportunity to, again, serve the people of our beloved nation.

I am humbled to be given this noble privilege and wish to thank all Fijians who put their trust in me and voted me in as part of the FijiFirst Party under the leadership of its leader, honourable Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama. I stand here proudly on behalf of all our committed and loyal voters and supporters both, locally and abroad, knowing the fact that FijiFirst is still the largest single Party in this Parliament on our own. I, therefore, wish to acknowledge those who voted us in and I give them and every other Fijian our utmost assurance that we will continue to serve them and their interest to the best of our ability and ensure that their voices are heard through our representation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I need to acknowledge all those who supported me in the 2022 Election campaign. From the Party leadership and most particularly, for the campaign teams on the ground. I wish to thank particularly the Party Leader and the Party General Secretary for their able leadership, guidance and support. I also acknowledge all the party candidates who fought the elections with us.

To all our candidates who fought the elections. It is unfortunate that we cannot all be in this Parliament together, but we were such a great team and we who are fortunate to be here, are able to do so not on our own but through our collective effort and teamwork. I salute you all and say, ‘thank you again most sincerely’. I convey my best wishes to you in your future endeavours and to your families and loved ones too.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to acknowledge and convey my heartfelt gratitude to my campaign teams in Tailevu and, of course, Vanua Levu.

(Laughter)

To Team Central - Ms. Sala Rabuku Vuibau, Pita Rokobiau, Sailasa Rokotunidau and, of course, my cousin Vilimone Vosaruataki, fellow candidate Mr. Taito Rokomatu - *au sa vakadewataka tiko yani na noqu vakavinavinaka cecehia ena vuku ni veitokoni kei na cakacaka vata*. The same goes to the Northern Teams in Labasa and Savusavu - Sai Vuki, Mataiasi Taka, Mataiasi Uluinakubou and Team Savusavu comprising of Isei Nainoca, Mika, Maikeli Vosayaco, Bryce and of my good friend from Rabi, Mr. Takosi - to you all, no words can fully express my appreciation and gratitude for such a great effort and unwavering support to me and FijiFirst in the recent Elections.

I also wish to acknowledge the support team from our Brown Street Office – Mrs. Ela Sayed-Khaiyum, Una Moceisuva, Ben Qionibaravi, Taina Lewai, Taina Marama, Deborah, Kaushalya and, of course, Ben. My special thanks as well to the Samabula-based enlightenment team.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank my family who have been with me always from day one - my dear wife, Litea, and our children - Kamini, Joyce and Christina, thank you for your never-ending support, love and sacrifice which will be forever cherished.

Very quickly for those who probably do not know me, I am Inia Seruiratu from Kumi, Verata, Tailevu. Unfortunately, I lost my father when I was three years old, but thankful to my late mother, Mrs. Vika Ravasakula, for my upbringing, of course, with the assistance of my elder siblings, uncles, aunties and all the relatives, so I am the youngest of six siblings.

I attended Vunibokoi District School in Verata, as already alluded to by the honourable Minister for Rural Development, perhaps the best school in Fiji because we were in the same class from that school, before attending Ratu Kadavulevu School for my secondary education. I started work with the Native Land Development Corporation before I joined the Army in 1987 and served for about 21 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my service in Government includes being Commissioner Northern from 2007 to 2011 and then posted to Suva as the Permanent Secretary for Rural Development for a year. From 2011 to 2012 and in late December, 2012, I was appointed Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. But when *TC Evans* hit Fiji that same year, I was given the extra portfolio as the Minister for Rural Development and Disaster Management. Again, after the 2014 General Election, and from the period 2014 to 2018, I was the Minister for Agriculture, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management and Meteorological Services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, very briefly, I also wish to perhaps, highlight something that I consider a highlight of my service as well. I was appointed the Global Climate Champion and served in that capacity for two years from 2016 to 2018. Climate change is perhaps, the biggest existing time shield threat that we are facing and I was honoured to serve in that capacity after the meeting in Marrakesh, Morocco, in 2016. I have attended four COPs during that period while serving as the Climate Champion. Initially in 2015, COP 21, COP 22 in Marrakesh and COP 23 in Bonn Germany where Fiji was the President and in Katowice, Poland for COP 24.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have served in various Ministries, as I have highlighted, and I can assure you that together with the loyal and dedicated staff of those respective Ministries, we were able to make some positive developments and progress in certain areas where Government had placed high priorities as a matter of policy, as well as those arising out of the changing circumstances. However, not all can be progressed and achieved at once, and it is my hope that the current leadership, under the new Government, can continue, improve and complete some of the unfinished works.

I wish to acknowledge the efforts of the dedicated, professional and hardworking staff of those respective Ministries, ably led by the Permanent Secretaries and the Senior Management. I salute them all for their professionalism, sound advice, unwavering commitment and dedication to duty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now wish to focus my contribution on His Excellency the President's Address. To begin with, His Excellency the President stated that he was grateful to note that following the conduct of the 2022 General Elections, the change in Government has taken place peacefully and swiftly, and the new administration has commenced its work with the mandate of the people. It must be noted that this peaceful and swift transition clearly demonstrated that we, as a

Party, accept and respect the outcome of the 2022 General Elections based on the following - we won the election, no doubt, whatsoever but unfortunately, that we could not form government.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- So, you lost.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- FijiFirst is still the largest single political party in this Parliament and for that, we remain proud.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We have contributed significantly to the development of our country during our term in government; and we have confidence in the democratic process and system of governance as enshrined in the 2013 Constitution. It is in that spirit, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we as a party with all sincerity, faith and goodwill fully embrace the change that took place though to our favour. Not only that but because of national interest, respect the rule of law and embracing the foundation for a sustainable democracy and with Fiji at heart.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our satisfaction comes from knowing that despite the results, democracy is well and truly alive in our country that is the democracy handed over to the Coalition Government. On the other hand, it is common knowledge that the post-election Coalition Government was formed not as a direct result of its outcome, but through the end swing negotiations and the single vote majority casted in the SODELPA management board meeting.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- SODELPA did not want you.

(Laughter)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- What worries me is this, it was during those negotiations that I had a glimpse of the culture we are to expect in the government that would be sworn in a few days later. First, the offer was made to the member or maybe members of the management board before the eventual voting took place and, again, immediately after the swearing in took place, it was to my astonishment that every single member of the Government is a Minister or Assistant Minister, apart from the three Deputy Prime Ministers. Allow me to simply explain my concerns, Mr. Speaker, Sir..

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Too much mess going on there.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- It would appear that buying loyalty or bribing one to obtain loyalty is going to be the new norm.

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

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- My observation is that the Coalition Government is hanging on a very fine thread and the honourable Prime Minister, in order to maintain it must keep pleasing its Members at any cost.

We have an unstable Coalition, given that the SODELPA General Secretary had publicly announced that the SODELPA Management Board had not been consulted on many Coalition appointments. I have just seen that the Fijian Teachers Association as SODELPA's landlord has locked them out due to outstanding rent arrears. This could perhaps cause constitutional crisis, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

But government has been formed and I, therefore, wish to congratulate the Coalition

Government for taking over the helm of leadership and governance for the country under the Prime Minister, honourable Rabuka, and as stated by His Excellency, “you are now the government and have the responsibility of leading our nation for the next four years”.

I wish to quickly highlight how the new administration has commenced its work with the mandate of the people as stated by His Excellency. As I did state yesterday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is interesting to note the sudden change in the perception and words of some of the former Opposition Members now appointed Ministers, as they come to realise the reality of running a government - learning is a never-ending process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, most would not realise how irresponsible or probably sometimes dishonourable they were in the past as Opposition Members, distorting the truth, spreading false information, questioning the authenticity of reports, devising conspiracy theories, discrediting Government incentives and programmes, et cetera.

However, the same professional, hardworking and committed staff who were with us when we were in Government are still the same ones, perhaps a few changes because changes are happening everyday and we hope that they are constitutional, they are still with them now. There are a lot of *matanigasau* going on, but I would recommend to some of these honourable Ministers, it would be good if they also present the *matanigasau* to some of these officials to improve their working relationship.

More worrying, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the promises they made during the Election campaign. People’s Alliance Party made its own promises, NFP does the same and so as SODELPA. Whose promise will take precedence over the others? I will not go into the promises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency then stated, and I quote: “I must acknowledge the contribution and achievements of the previous government in steering the nation in the past 16 years.” I sincerely thank His Excellency for doing so because we need to give credit where it is due. I wish to put it this way, Sir, the Coalition Government is inheriting a far better Fiji from where it was, whether eight or 16 years ago.

We are handing over to you, not a perfect but a better Fiji than the one we inherited. That is our legacy which we are, indeed, proud of and the expectation is for the new Government to continue and make it even better. What qualifies me to say a better Fiji? I will just limit it to three key issues.

2013 Constitution - the 2013 Constitution was a product out of the consultation process for the People’s Charter for Change, Peace and Progress undertaken during the period from January to December 2008.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- No consultations.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Listen!

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- You were in Papua New Guinea.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The overarching objective of the People's Charter is to build Fiji...

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Not the People's Charter.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- ... into a non-racial, culturally vibrant and united, well-governed and truly democratic nation - a nation that seeks progress and prosperity through merit-based equality of opportunity and peace.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, no running commentary, please. Let us listen.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The honourable Tikoduadua is making a lot of noises. I remember during the Charter consultation process, he came as Permanent Secretary for the Prime Minister's Office.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- That is true, honourable Seruiratu.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The 2013 Constitution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, recognises and protects the indigenous people of this country, iTaukei and Rotumans. It recognises their uniqueness and protect their land and the ownership of their land. It absolutely stops the permanent alienation of indigenous land, unlike the 1990 and 1997 Constitutions which allowed for iTaukei land to be converted to freehold under the SVT and SDL Governments respectively. Sir, to me, I prefer to label the 2013 Constitution the firm base that the honourable Naivalurua referred to in his earlier speech - institutions, systems and processes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the public sector has established service standards, effective work systems, effective leadership, transparency, accountability and high productivity. This is of particular importance too when you want to create an enabling environment where the State supports the economic activity. We will come to that.

I wish to refer here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to inclusive economic institutions that allow and encourage participation by the great mass of people in the economic activities that make best use of their talents and skills and that enables individuals to make the choices they wish. To be inclusive, Sir, economic institutions must feature, secure private property and unbiased system of law and a provision of public services that provides a level playing field in which people can exchange and contract and it also must permit the entry of new businesses and allow people to choose their careers.

I wish to emphasise here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that inclusive economic institutions require secure property rights so that those with such rights will be willing to invest and increase productivity and at the same time economic opportunities is not just for the elite, but for a broad cross section of society. We are listening to all your presentations, and this is why we are recommending to ensure that we have institutions, systems and processes in place. I talked about creating the environment yesterday and this will be critical for the Government in the next four years if most of that dreams and intentions are to be realised.

To function well, society also needs other public services; roads and transport, networks so that goods can be transported, public infrastructure so that economic activity can flourish and some type of basic regulation to prevent fraud and maleficence. This is what we are leaving behind and this is what we are conveying to the Government.

Lastly, a strong economy - it is always good to talk money as you talk strategy. You know it well. While the Coalition Government is contemplating on growing and strengthening the economy, I wish to remind them on the facts of the Fijian economy under the FijiFirst Government. Fiji recorded its strongest periods of post-Independence economic growth in the decade leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The Fijian economy registered its nine years of consecutive economic growth from 2010 to 2018, underpinned by rising productivity, increased public sector investment and infrastructure development, growing private sector activity supported by high business confidence and overall political and economic stability provided under the decisive leadership of the Bainimarama and FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was one of the longest periods of sustained economic growth in Fiji which led to major improvements in job creations, infrastructure development, improved access to better public services, more income generating opportunities, increased asset and wealth accumulation by Fijians and significant advancement in the overall living standards. Majority of the Fijian population became better off, compared to years ago. During this period, our GDP doubled from \$6 billion to almost \$12 billion at the end of 2019. Sir, GDP per capita or income per person on average increase from around \$6,600 to over \$13,000 per person.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our foreign reserves increased to over \$3.6 billion, equivalent to 8.3 months of imports, compared to just \$500 million in 2006 which was equivalent to 1.9 months of import. This is the highest level of reserves in our history and reflects the strong balance of payment position.

Liquidity levels in the financial sector increased to over \$2.5 billion. Why am I saying this? Because that will be the challenge for the new Government. At the same time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not denying the fact that following this spirit of economic boom, Fiji recently has had three years of consecutive economic decline induced by the devastating COVID-19 pandemic and, of course, other global activities...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Except you had negative growth in 2019.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- ... but the FijiFirst Government stood firm to keep the economy afloat during the pandemic and laid the foundation for a fast and strong economic rebound.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now wish to quickly make a few observations and remarks on the Coalition Government's policies and intentions as outlined by His Excellency the President in his opening Address. My colleagues from this side of Parliament who had spoken earlier have covered most of the issues of significance and in the interest of time, I need not make repetitions. Let me say this, Sir, there is a ray of hope in the policies and intentions of the Coalition Government. As outlined by His Excellency, I have some deep concerns about their ability to deliver them, not that I am a pessimist, Sir, but I say this out of my own observation and some analysis based on the statement itself. Allow me to clarify that, Sir.

Out of the same breath where their policy intentions are outlined, cunningly concealed within is the contingency plan. The excuse that they will use when promises cannot be fulfilled, when they cannot deliver and I will read it out, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I quote:

“The debt level severely limits the Coalition Government's capacity to borrow further for critical capital expenditure. On infrastructure such as roads, ports, hospitals,

water and sewerage, our national debt also restricts the Government's ability to direct spending into areas such as education, health and social welfare payments."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have a plan, but they also have in place a contingency plan which I also term it will be the excuse for them to use when they cannot deliver. To the people of Fiji, we in the Opposition hope that you have not been deceived or to use some of their terms, some of the other honourable Members are hoodwinked vote buying.

The different parties in the Coalition Government ...

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Vote buying.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- ... before the elections were well informed of Government's debt level but yet, continue to promise almost everything to you in order to gain your votes.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We were heavily criticised and ridiculed because of the debt level, yet they boldly made those promises. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was one of their trump cards in their campaign rallies. Now, when they are in Government, they realised how irresponsible they were in making those promises but to make them look good, they are passing the blame to the FijiFirst Government.

HON. J. USAMATE.- False promises!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- To the Coalition Government, it is simple. To borrow more and be able to do more, just grow the economy. I will say it again, to borrow more and be able to do more, just grow the economy, like we did. Stop making excuses already. It portrays a bad impression on you. I repeat, it portrays a bad impression on you.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Have faith in your own ability, please. It seems that you are already defeated, even before the battle begins.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You are running away.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Look at yourself.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Everyone is running away.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- You are all Ministers, Assistant Ministers, three Deputy Prime Ministers and, of course, with an experienced leader, the honourable Prime Minister.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Three resigned.

(Laughter)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- *Areh*, we are still 26.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- This is for you, Deputy Prime Minister. Enough of the heat of the moment rebuttals, please. I told you yesterday that I will come to you.

(Laughter)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Through you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because he is a warrior from Naivitoni, I want to test him. I say to you, again, enough of the heat of the moment rebuttals. Please, honourable Kamikamica get real, toughen up and get on with the job.

(Laughter)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- He is starting to run away. Very soon there will not be anyone there.

(Laughter)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I will conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, I wish to refer to what I have stated from the very beginning of my statement, that we are now into a new season. The baton has been passed on to the Coalition Government. The transition has been smooth and swift because it is our firm belief that we have laid the foundation for a better tomorrow.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what the new season will bring is the lingering question that we all have as citizens of this beloved country. The season brings mixed feelings, hope or despair, good or bad, lack, sufficiency or abundance, challenges, obstacles or opportunities for better or for the worse. This is the reality and is inevitable, Sir.

Sir, we on this side of Parliament have made our responses and have genuinely stated our views, observations and some analysis on the itinerary of Government in the coming years. We are constructively criticising the intentions of Government in the best interest of our nation, and we and the people that we are called to serve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are mindful of the state of the economy, the external threats and challenges, our internal security situation, the geopolitics and other pressing issues. If it so pleases the honourable Prime Minister and his Cabinet, we offer our assistance, if and where needed, given our knowledge and past experience. But, at the same time we will hold you accountable and never deviate from our core values and principles which underpins our mission and vision in the FijiFirst Government.

I, therefore, plead on behalf of all Fijians to the honourable Prime Minister, through you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and his Coalition Government, serve proudly and lead wisely. We will all finish one day, but how will we be remembered? What is the legacy that we will leave behind? I hope and pray that we will all serve with humility, commitment, loyalty and patriotism. Let us all build a better Fiji together.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to conclude with these words from Colossian 3:12-14, and I quote:

“God loves you and has chosen you as His own special people. So be gentle, kind, humble, meek and patient. Put up with each other, and forgive anyone who does you wrong, just as Christ has forgiven you. Love is more important than anything else. It is what ties everything completely together.”

Au wilika saka ga na kena vaka Viti.

“Sa i kemuni na nona tamata na Kalou, o koya sa dau lomani kemuni. O koya oqo moni vakaisulu kina ena dauloloma, ena yalovinaka, ena yalo malumalumu, ena

yalo malua kei na vosota vakadede. Moni dau veiciqomi, ka dau veivosoti kevaka e dua sa vakararawataka e dua vei kemuni me vaka sa dau vosoti kemuni na Karisito, moni veivosoti talega vaka kina. Mo ni qai ubia nai valavala vinaka kece ogo ena loloma ni sa vauci ira vata vakavinaka sara na loloma."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to me personally, this is the foundation of our journey forward. I thank you for your indulgence, may God bless our beloved Fiji.

(Acclamation)

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise as the mover of this motion to give my Right of Reply and I thank all honourable Members who have contributed to the debate to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address.

I would like to thank some honourable Members who had played a part in my own role as a citizen, as a man of the country. I thank you, Sir, for being a gracious paramount chief for your people of Cakaudrove and I thank you that you have been elected to continue to serve Fiji, as well as Cakaudrove in accepting the nomination and being elected to be Speaker of this august Chamber.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Members who had served with me in the Military Forces of our country. I thank the honourable Naivalurua who is here with us - the third honourable Member for Naitasiri as he admitted the other day. He was a very loyal young Officer and he missed out on a great military award for bravery because of the quota system in the realm - the British Empire, British Commonwealth and the realm at that time. He served loyally with me in Lebanon, and I had to ask him to go on a few dangerous Missions and, fortunately, he came back alive and he is here with us, but I thank him for those years of service.

Smiling now, I thank the honourable Member who just joined Parliament with FijiFirst, the honourable Tuinaceva. Thank you very much for the bus you provided for us, for my Party and for us when you were working with my brother, Kamlesh....

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- I hope you have paid, Sir!

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- We paid and he did not give us a discount and I am glad he did not because we would have had to say how we managed to pay such a higher rate for the buses that Vishnu Holdings provided for us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Naupoto who is also smiling very brightly across the floor of this august Parliament. I remind him that honourable Marape is expecting him on Wednesday in Denarau to play golf with him for the *Ratu Mara Somare Cup*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank my own nephew, the honourable Bulitavu, who kept me tap dancing while I was out in the wilderness, casting arrows and shooting me as I was trying to dance my way back into this august Parliament. Welcome back *na gone*.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on this side of Parliament, I thank my honourable colleagues who came along when I was cast adrift by three of them but now they have come on board with me and we hope that we can satisfy the expectations, as very lucidly pointed out by honourable Seruiratu, challenging us to build on what they have built in the last eight years of their leadership as FijiFirst Government of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reiterate our collective gratitude to His Excellency the President for his most gracious address in opening this historic session of Parliament. His reminder and admonition to the Parliament and the nation, to get us to unite. Now, I remember I have not thanked the honourable Bala, who hosted me many times in Ba and I thank him very much.

(Laughter)

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- You betrayed yourself, you were smiling.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Bala and I had to dedicate the millennium globe in Ba when he was Mayor. And I asked him the other day when we are going to go out and campaign to run for the Municipal Election. He said to me, “Do not tell my boss.”

(Laughter)

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this has been a very eventful week. Captain, I will come to you. I thank you most sincerely for the way you have conducted the business of Parliament. I am sure that all honourable Members will agree with me that there is already a change in the atmosphere in this august Parliament, and we thank you.

This has been a very eventful week. Fiji has been hosting the World Hindi Conference in Denarau, Nadi. More than 1,000 delegates from all over the world have come together for this Hindi Language Conference. Almost one billion people in the world speak the language, yet they believe it is important that they come to have a conference on the Hindi language because they respect and accept that our language is a very important component of our identity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for allowing us to speak in Hindi and the *Vosa Vakaviti* in this Parliament. Unlike some doubts expressed, it was a decision of the Business Committee and I thank you for being brave enough to introduce that subject to the Business Committee, Sir.

This week has also been notable with the fact that the USP Vice-Chancellor, Professor Pal Ahluwalia and his wife have returned. Also, unlike some thinking that I would go and apologise to him - I did not. The students and the Board at USP did that.

We also thank Parliament for the extension of the guarantee for the Fiji Development Bank borrowing which we did yesterday. There have been some criticisms about the changes in some Boards and I mentioned that when I gave my opening address moving the motion that we had to do that for Reserve Bank and FBC because there had been an exodus of former Board members. I thank the honourable Members for supporting that guarantee motion.

The other noteworthy but sad event in Parliament this week has been the referral to the Privileges Committee of the conduct of the former Prime Minister and the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Bainimarama. I will only say because it is something that is before the Privileges Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a veteran parliamentarian, you are no stranger to the culture of robust debates in Parliament. There are also some words that are unbecoming. We have heard some honourable Members using these words and one honourable Member was calling out, “you are lying, you are lying” this morning. That used to be unparliamentary language, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

If you have been reading about the history of the British Parliament, you would probably have read somewhere that Sir Winston Churchill was calling out “you are lying” and there was a Point of

Order by a member on the other side of Parliament who said that the honourable Member was using unparliamentary language. Sir Winston Churchill very quickly stood up and apologised to the Speaker and said, "Mr. Speaker, Sir, I withdraw 'lying'; I was just stating that the honourable Member was stating a terminological inexactitude" and the Speaker said it was alright. So he sat down and the other Member was happy until he went back and looked it up the dictionary and found out that 'terminological inexactitude' exactly meant lying.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the tenor of the debate and the contributions, I am very hopeful. I think with the break that we are going to have after this one week of sitting, we will come back and those ghosts, obstacles, and those dangerous things we see, will now disappear. This is the opening, this is the beginning of across-the-floor co-operation for the people of Fiji and as I mentioned in my first address, we may differ but we have one common mission and that is to govern in the best interests of all the people of Fiji; all Fijians.

I call on honourable Members on both sides of Parliament to cooperate. There will be time when we will come across to you to find out why did you do this when you were minister for this. And discussions outside the ministerial offices, outside Parliament will lead us to find out why we are doing this when they did it that way before. How should we do it in the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question of climate change and I congratulate the honourable Seruiratu for his role as our climate change champion a few years ago. I remember sending one of my ministers in the SVT/GVP Government to attend the first World Conference in Rio. Two years after that, they called together the Conference of Parties for COP1 for their first meeting. We have been having those conferences of parties until the present day. We have all been talking about what we should be doing, what we can be cooperating with other countries on to try and limit the damages and destruction caused by, sadly, human greed, human hurry. Where are we hurrying to? Why are we trying to do all these things?

We still have not found the answer, but we are beginning to slow down the destruction of the environment and hopefully we will get to a time when we will have a sustainable rate of development. I go back to the United Nations putting out all these Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that we had all tried to abide by and comply with in our own government development plans.

One of those goals and conventions put out by the United Nations Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous People (UNDRIP). I know there are different interpretations, some like my own nephew, the honourable Bulitavu believed it should only be applied where the indigenous people form a minority in the population of that country.

I would like to differ and I would like to refer him to the original document and how they arrived at the declaration. It is up to countries to find out whether we can use that objectively without sidelining any of our ethnicity in our own homeland. Now that we all call Fiji our homeland and we are all Fijians, I hope that all Fijians will take heed of the cry of the indigenous people of this land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are many common subjects that we can talk about as I mentioned on Monday, 13th February, 2023 - protecting our children, eliminating violence against women, improving services in our towns and cities, providing better opportunities, inspiring our sports men and women and alleviating poverty to create a happier and more prosperous Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I started my Dinner Address at the Sheraton, I spoke to them in *Gorkhali*, the language of the Nepalese soldiers who served in the British Army. It was a requirement for all

those British Officers and I was classified as a British Officer then joining the *Gurkas* to learn their language. I spoke to them in *Gorkhali* and they all clapped, whether they followed everything I said or not - I am not sure.

But the fact that someone tried to communicate with them and the Conference on Hindi Language is a conference on how to communicate using the Hindi language as a medium. When you try to communicate with someone even if it is just being “*bula*”, the chap would stand still and ask, “you from Fiji?” The response is, “yes.” And then, “you speak Fijian?” Response is “no.” Alright, and then you converse in English. But the fact that you reach out to them in your language and they understand that language breaks the ice, breaks down the barriers and you have something in common, you both recognise that one word, “*bula*”.

Once again, I reiterate my thanks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing *vosa vaka-Viti* to be used in this august Parliament. I switch very quickly to the channel, and I must congratulate our simultaneous Interpreters for the work that they are doing.

(Acclamation)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank our colleagues from the National Federation Party and SODELPA, a party I had once belonged to, looked after me and promoted me to be the Leader of the Opposition, I thank them for the four years of working together. Now that we are together again, we are very happy.

Perhaps, to dispel any worries that honourable Seruiratu had mentioned here in Parliament that we have an unworkable or unstable Coalition, I would like to say, “it is not an unworkable or unstable”, *se cava Vasu?*

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I call on my Coalition colleagues, we have been given a challenge, we have been challenged by the honourable Members of the loyal Opposition of the Republic of Fiji, they want us to perform, we can show them, “yes, we will build on what you have built and we shall perform.”

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- We are subject to the laws of the land and you can do what we have now done, to some who may have overstepped the law, you can do that to us when you get to be on this side, if you ever get back to this side.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you very much for allowing me to table this address so that you can look at what you can attack me on and come back the next time you come back to Parliament.

A group will be joining me on a trip to present our *reguregu* to the *Gone Turaga na Tui Vitogo, Taukei Sukanacagi*. His Excellency the President has asked that we also take his condolences, he has also contributed to what we are taking.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I once again thank all the honourable Members who have contributed to this debate. I am sorry, I have not been able to address each of your concerns individually. You will notice that when you read the Address, when it gets to you, I have tried to address every concern you

have raised. I think they are important, you have raised them objectively and I have objectively responded to them and I commend this written version when you get it through the Secretary-General of Parliament.

Thank you all very much, I wish you all a pleasant weekend and a happy break before we come back together again. I commend this motion to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote on the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I understand the Privileges Committee has just finished its deliberations and I would like to suggest, at this juncture, that we take another break so as to allow them to complete the process of them submitting the report by way of a motion amongst them. I now adjourn the meeting for half-an-hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.27 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 7.35 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, as communicated from the Chair on Wednesday, 15th February, 2023, I have now received notification that the Privileges Committee has concluded its proceedings and is now ready to report back to Parliament.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a matter of privilege was raised with you as Speaker of Parliament pursuant to Standing Order 134(1) on the afternoon of Monday, 13th February, 2023. You, Sir, as honourable Speaker, after reviewing the complaint as well as the *Daily Hansard* for Monday, 13th February, 2023, believed there was cause to refer the matter to the Privileges Committee for consideration on Wednesday, 15th February, 2023.

The Privileges Committee was given a timeline to report back to Parliament today, Friday 17th February, 2023. The Privileges Committee agreed with the Committee's terms of reference and this is attached as Appendix 1.

The Committee, by resolution, decided to conduct the inquiry into the said matter by calling the responsible parties, the honourable Pio Tikoduadua being the complainant and the Leader of the Opposition, the honourable Josaia Bainimarama, the respondent. The Committee noted that during the debate on His Excellency the President's Address, the honourable Leader of the Opposition made certain comments that honourable Pio Tikoduadua deemed denigrating and humiliating to the Head of State, His Excellency the President and also as Commander in Chief, while appealing to the rank and file in the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) which he communicated to the honourable Speaker, as he felt were highly seditious and disrespectful while dishonouring the dignity and bringing Parliament into disrepute.

Parliament is an independent arm of the State which is fully entitled to take such measures it deems fit to maintain its integrity and decorum. The Constitution and the Standing Orders of Parliament are very clear in that the control and the administration of the parliamentary precincts is vested with the Speaker. The honourable Speaker has the authority to maintain order and decorum to secure and maintain the honour and dignity of Parliament and to act for any breach of privilege or contempt of Parliament.

Having considered the complaint raised as well as reviewed the Uncorrected *Daily Hansard* for Monday, 13th February, 2023, the honourable Speaker, yourself, Sir, under Standing Order 134(2)(a) referred the alleged matter of breach of privilege by the honourable Leader of the Opposition for words allegedly uttered during his speech on Monday, 13th February, 2023. This Report differs from those of Standing Committees in that the proceedings were held in-camera, Minutes and most of the other written documentations generated remained confidential and, therefore, do not form part of this Report.

I thank all honourable Members of the Committee for their hard work and determination shown and respectfully submit and commend this Report to Parliament. Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those words and on behalf of the Privileges Committee, I now commend this Report to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Please, hand the report to the Secretary-General.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General to Parliament)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, pursuant to the Communications from the

Chair on Wednesday, 15th February, 2023, and pursuant to Standing Order 127(2)(d), I hereby move a motion:

That the debate on the content of the Report and the recommended sanctions is initiated today.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Honourable Members, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament just a while ago, I now call on the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move her motion.

BREACH OF PRIVILEGE - HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, having received the Report of the Privileges Committee, I move:

That –

- (a) honourable Josaia Bainimarama be suspended from Parliament for three years effective immediately to be served until 17th February, 2026;
- (b) honourable Josaia Bainimarama issue a written apology to His Excellency the President within 14 days from today - 17th February, 2023;
- (c) honourable Josaia Bainimarama issue an apology to the public within 48 hours from today, 17th February, 2023;
- (d) during the period of suspension, honourable Josaia Bainimarama is not allowed to enter the Parliamentary precincts; and
- (e) if honourable Josaia Bainimarama fails to comply necessary enforcement measures must be imposed to ensure compliance.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, I second the motion.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Having received the Report of the Privileges Committee, Mr. Speaker, I stand here as a member of the Privileges Committee to support the Report tabled by the Chairperson, the honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua the matter of privilege that was referred by your good self, Mr. Speaker, for the consideration of the Committee.

Mr. Speaker, the ruling you made to refer this matter to the Privileges Committee is commendable as it shows to the world that democracy is alive and well in this country. It is the embodiment of integrity and decorum in Parliament, and this is why the Parliamentary democracy works to enable the mechanism of Parliament to work in respect of the people of Fiji.

I wish to inform honourable Members that both, honourable Tikoduadua and the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Josaia Bainimarama, attended the hearings of the Privileges Committee when they were summoned, and were fully cooperative.

Mr. Speaker and honourable Members, at this juncture I wish to advise that the Members of the Committee completed their deliberations, after which honourable Members who had dissenting

views gave their opinions. Then we took a vote, and it was agreed that we will present this Report to Parliament with the recommendations of the three honourable Members who were in agreement, and two against.

Honourable Members agreed by vote that there was a breach and a need to staunchly protect the sanctity and decorum of Parliament, being the representative body of all Fijians. There is a need to strengthen the instrument of Parliament and take serious measures to protect the dignity and supremacy of the legislature. When pursuant to Standing Order 62(3), His Excellency has been denigrated (which should not happen) as he is the embodiment of the State and under Standing Order 62(4)(c), seditious words were uttered that breached the Standing Orders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, matters of offensive conduct towards Parliament must be taken seriously. It is even more important that Members of Parliament uphold the required standard of behaviour in Parliament. In particular, the prohibition against speaking words that are disrespectful to our Head of State as well as seditious words that breach the Standing Orders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the above, the Privileges Committee has recommended actions to be taken, we request honourable Members to consider the recommendations as put forward. I commend the Motion to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and honourable Members may speak for up to 20 minutes. At the end of the debate, I will then ask the mover of the motion to provide her Right of Reply. The floor is open for debate.

Honourable Maharaj, I am addressing you honourable Member. Do you want to speak, you stood up and you sat down.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- A Point of Order being that we have just received this Report and from the Opposition side, we would like to go on a break so that we can deliberate on the Report and come back to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Member for your Point of Order. I have since decided that we can just sit and go along, and you read it in your good time. The Report is not that big, it is not that thick and we all understand the content, so we will move on.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the motion this afternoon. At the forefront, I would like to mention that while parliamentary privilege is the sum of certain rights enjoyed by Members of the Parliament, it is necessary to allow Members of Parliament to discharge their duties to be the voice of the people in the legislature. The privilege of Parliament granted in regard to public service must not be used for the detriment of our national interest or for the advancement of personal interest and agendas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2015 there have been four instances where Members of Parliament have been referred to the Privilege Committee for breaches of parliamentary privilege. I will now briefly speak on these matters that were referred to the Privileges Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first case was against you whilst you were a Member of SODELPA in 2015. The then Government referred yourself (when you were a Member of Opposition) to the

Privileges Committee for references uttered outside Parliament directed to the honourable Speaker. It was noted by the Privileges Committee that a reflection on the Speaker is a question of privilege, and such instances amount to contempt which must be dealt with by Parliament. Further, it was regarded as a well-established parliamentary principle that reflections on the Speaker inside or outside Parliament are *inter alia* and regarded as contempt of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Privileges Committee also noted that the Office of the Speaker of Parliament is an independent or highly esteemed office under Section 77 of the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji which states amongst other things, that the Speaker serves to secure the honour and dignity of the Parliament hence an attack against the Speaker is an attack against the institution of Parliament as a whole. As a result of the findings and recommendations of the Privileges Committee as you would recall, a period of suspension of two years was imposed.

The second case was against the former honourable Tupou Draunidalo. In 2016, the former honourable Tupou Draunidalo was referred to the Privileges Committee for making reference to the words, “fool”, “dumb natives” and “you idiot” in Parliament. The Privileges Committee deliberated on the facts pursuant to Standing Order 62(4)(a)(b)(c) and (d).

At the preliminary meeting of the Committee on 2nd June, 2016, there was a discussion within the Committee as an composition of its membership. Following discussions, the honourable Opposition Members refrained from attending the Committee deliberations, leaving the Committee to only comprise the Government side. This Committee invited former honourable Draunidalo to present her views, but she chose to exercise her right of silence saying that she believed she would not receive a fair hearing.

The Committee recommended that the former honourable Draunidalo be suspended for the rest of the term of Parliament with immediate effect from 6th June, 2016 and during the period of suspension she was not allowed to enter parliamentary precincts or the Opposition Office. This would be in excess of two years since her Parliamentary term ended in September 2018.

The third case was against the former honourable Ratu Isoa Tikoca who was elected to Parliament in September 2014 and was an Opposition Member for SODELPA. On 5th July, 2016, the then honourable Tikoca made certain statements in Parliament which selectively targeted Fijians of Muslim faith. He also named some Arab countries in reference to the use of the name of Ministry of Economy and also named some Muslim officials serving in the State offices and used words such “your kind” and “this elite group” during his speech.

He was referred to the Privileges Committee for investigation. Following investigation and hearing of the matter (majority Members of the Committee which comprised honourable Government Members of Parliament) for a serious breach of privileges as well as contempt of Parliament. They recommended that the then honourable Ratu Tikoca be suspended for the rest of the term of Parliament.

This Committee went further in saying that “the Members freedom of speech had been affected by its decision”. The words of the former honourable Ratu Tikoca, although touching on sensitive societal matters fall within the rights of freedom of expression. Following his suspension, Ratu Tikoca instituted judicial review proceedings in the High Court.

After leave was given, the Attorney-General’s Chambers filed a summons seeking to strike out the proceedings. The trial judge was Justice Senaratne said that he was bound by the Court of Appeal decision of *Madhavan v Falvey & Others*. He decided to follow suit and ruled that the Court will not interfere with the internal proceedings of Parliament. He summed up by saying, and I quote:

“If the Court starts interfering with the internal affairs of the Parliament it will open floodgates for Members to challenge any resolution passed by the Parliament in court which will lead to a situation, where the Judiciary will, virtually, be controlling the internal affairs of the Parliament and the entire system of administration for the country can collapse in no time.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the trial judge struck off the application on the ground that the Court lacked jurisdiction to determine the case. I will staunchly defend the values which the Office of the President embodies to our people. They do not need to be defended. They speak for themselves. These values have given our people confidence and strength. They have gone to the spirit of our people more than can be appreciated in this august Parliament.

I am here to denounce two evils which is a malice to our society, to this nation and must not be allowed in this august Parliament. These are hatred and ignorance. These are the forces behind the honourable Leader of the Opposition’s speech in Parliament on Monday, 13th February, 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Monday, 13th February, 2023, the honourable Leader of the Opposition accused His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji of failing to protect the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji and the rule of law. On any measure, these are shocking claims. They should never have been made.

The allegations are totally without any merit, and I condemn them in the strongest possible terms. Coming from a former Prime Minister, they are both disgraceful and contemptable and unworthy of a Member of Parliament - unworthy of someone who has led this country in the past and now as honourable Leader of the Opposition.

He shows a complete lack of respect for the person and the Office of the President. The attack on His Excellency the President’s integrity is unprecedented and despicable. They amount to an allegation that His Excellency the President has forgone and violated his Oath of Office to obey, observe, uphold and maintain the Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since assuming office, His Excellency the President, despite his past political allegiance, has carried out his constitutional duties with complete probity and impartiality. The Constitution makes it clear that His Excellency the President acts only on the advice of Cabinet or a Minister. His Excellency the President has been faithfully discharging his constitutional obligations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Leader of the Opposition has impinged on the conduct of His Excellency the President and calling to question his fitness to occupy that high Office as Head of State. To impugn on the President’s character, knowing that he had no right of reply, is an act of cowardice or an act of a bully. If the honourable Leader of the Opposition were to repeat his comments outside Parliament, he would be inviting an action for the affirmation against himself.

Standing Order 62(3) states, and I quote:

“The conduct of members, the President, the Chief Justice (performing the functions of the office of 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...”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in honourable Draunidalo’s matter for uttering words “dumb natives” and “idiot” in Parliament, she was suspended for the rest of her term as a Member of Parliament. In your

case, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for making derogatory statements against the then Speaker of Parliament, you were suspended from Parliament for two years.

In light of this, having regard for the gravity of the Leader of the Opposition's conduct, this has been the second instance where he is found to have breached parliamentary privilege. As the deterrence and denouncement of his behaviour, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, a higher sanction is thus recommended.

In the words of the former Attorney-General on 21st May, 2015, in support of the motion to debate on the report of the Privileges Committee regarding the breach of privilege by honourable Lalabalavu, and I quote:

“If you want to attack a judge, irrespective of whether they like the ruling of the judge or not, you will be held in contempt of Court.”

Furthermore, the former Attorney-General himself said, and I quote:

“No Member, however, is allowed to attack the Speaker because the Speaker represents the third of one of the three arms of the State, which is the legislature.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the same way, you do not make an attack on His Excellency the President. What Parliament witnessed on Monday, 13th February, 2023, strongly indicates that the honourable Leader of the Opposition has breached Standing Orders and I, therefore, support the recommendations made by Privilege Committee.

MR. SPEAKER.- I have been given a list by Government that they have another two Members, that is, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka and honourable Deputy Prime Minister Professor Prasad.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the Report and recommendations by the Privileges Committee. I was saddened by the speech of the honourable Leader of the Opposition in Parliament on Monday, 13th February, 2023, where he accused His Excellency the President for failing to protect the Constitution and the rule of law.

While the President is not immune from criticism, when such criticism is based on obvious distortion of gross misstatement, it becomes an insult against the President. Such ignorant insults can destroy public confidence in the Office of the President.

Honourable Members of this august Parliament must have regard to the constitutionality of the President's critical role. His Excellency is the Head of State and in whom the Constitution vests the State's executive authority. I am mindful, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I stand here today that the people of Caumatalevu throughout Fiji and all over, their prayers and thoughts are with His Excellency the President being a paramount chief.

The Office of the President has been dragged to the lowest point of discredit. What is graver is that His Excellency does not have the right to respond to these unmeritorious and offensive words uttered against him and the Office of the President in Parliament.

However, the situation presents an opportunity for honourable Members of this august Parliament to create history by making a stand against ignorance. Therefore, I call upon honourable Members of this Parliament to defend the values which the Office of the President embodies, and to further denounce the ignorance that the honourable Leader of the Opposition has spurred in his

speech in Parliament.

The President is sworn to maintain and preserve the Constitution and the laws of Fiji. The President is sworn to protect and promote the rights of all Fijians. The President, therefore, holds the ultimate trust of the people. This is the oath His Excellency has taken since assuming Office and it is not just a formality but a fundamental value in a State where the rule of law is observed. These values have given our people confidence and strength. They have done more to our people's spirit that can be appreciated in this august Parliament.

The protection of the integrity of the Office of the President and the President is reflected in the rules of this august Parliament. Standing Order 62(2) prohibits the President's name from being introduced to influence Parliament or any Committee. In furtherance of the recognition, Standing Order 62(3) requires that the conduct of the President must not be raised, except on a motion with notice introduced with the Speaker's permission.

In essence, the President is the most important among public servants. His Excellency should be supported to the degree warranted by his good conduct and efficiency. The President should be able to perform his constitutional duties without being distracted by these unprecedented and despicable attacks. You bear the responsibility for your stand before history, I am taking mine, and I must remind honourable Members of this august Parliament that our people will never forget what stand you take.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you already had four precedents in this Parliament that have decided that a breach of privilege committed inside or outside of Parliament warrants suspension from Parliament. In this case, where a former Prime Minister of this country and Leader of the Opposition, who has breached parliamentary privilege, there is much expected from him.

We strongly recommend that we follow the precedence that had been set. If we do not, what example are we setting for our young and emerging generation? Our children and youth should not be exposed to this type of denigration and to see that we, as representatives of the people, are accepting this as a norm.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also this big lie that the people of Fiji live in fear and are unhappy which is told over and over again. This big lie can get credence. We see the Military been fed this big lie. We know the master of the big lie. His name was Joseph Gobles, Hitler's propaganda minister and we know what he did to the German people. We must stop the big lie. It is emanating from the honourable Leader of the Opposition in a manner that is seditious.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must not condone such utterances and behaviour, especially from a senior Member of this Parliament, someone of such public status. We must set the example that is right for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I, therefore, support a suspension from this Parliament of the honourable Voreqe Bainimarama in line with the recommendation of the Privileges Committee.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I did not know that he was on zoom.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a very serious matter before Parliament. We have the honourable Members of the Privileges Committee deliberate on the matter of privilege brought up by an honourable Member and honourable Minister of the House. We have the recommendations from the Privileges Committee.

Mr. Speaker, as a matter of logic, I would say that the honourable Leader of the Opposition does not have or will not get benefit if he apologises to His Excellency the President, or if he issues a public apology within 48 hours so he could rightly say whether I apologised or not, I am still going to be suspended for three years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Attorney-General has highlighted the number of cases we have had in the past and the various awards given to those offending Members over time. We have heard that the honourable Leader of the Opposition has openly stated that he does not value *matanigasau* or apologies. So, if he was forced to do a *matanigasau*, he could satisfy this but then for him, there is no benefit, Sir. Apologise *se sega, tuba ga*. Apologise to the public or not, *tuba ga*.

I wish the Committee had put a proviso that if he elects to apologise, then there would be a reduction in the severity of the award. I am not a lawyer, Sir, but I think there are certain things that can be taken in mitigation before the Judge awards his sentence.

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister has highlighted the importance of dignity and decorum of Parliament and I contribute to that view. We must maintain the dignity and decorum of this august Parliament and the language we use must be in-keeping with the status we project to the people who voted us as leaders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I farewelled a former officer on his way back to New York and I told him about the discussion we had outside the Washington Hilton Hotel after a prayer breakfast, where I had promised those who were there - 4,000 to 5000 Kings, Presidents, Prime Ministers and leaders from all over world. They congregated to pray with the President of the United States where two colleagues from Kosovo had given their testimony about coming together after trying to kill each other in the same sector in the civil war.

With United Nations coming in and brokering a street fire and then supervising general elections, each went to opposite parties and won their seats and sat on opposite sides of Parliament. When they saw each other, one would come and would see the one already in the dining hall during parliamentary session – praying. They got around to asking him, “I saw you praying”. One of them was a Muslim and one was a Christian. He said, “Yes, I pray. Who do you pray to?” “I pray to Allah, and you?” “I pray to God through Jesus.” They started talking and they decided to agree to just fellowship together in the name of Jesus whom they both knew. They both understood, they both studied the character, so they became very good friends.

They came and that night at the final dinner, they gave their testimony and the person who was supposed to close the dinner did not turn up, so the organisers asked me to close the dinner. I had not prepared an address but I picked up from where they had left off about coming together in the name of Jesus. They became great friends and walked across the floor of Parliament to facilitate some of the major decisions that Kosovo had to arrive at to ensure a stable future for the country.

I told the gathering that night that I was going to come back. When I heard them using the name “Kosovo”, pronouncing it as Kosovah, I told the gathering that night that we have a Fijian word “kosova”, which means cross over. And I promised them that night that I was going to cross over from my side. All of them knew that I had conducted the *coup* in 1987, and I promised them that I would cross over from my side as the aggressor of *coup* to the aggrieved. Some saw me as a victor in the *coup* and I promised them that I would cross over from my side as a victor to the other side of the victims.

When we met the following morning Phillip told me, “Sir, I hope you can go and do that”. I

came back and did that when Ratu Nailatikau was the President. I took back to him the *tabua* that was presented to me by the Senior Officers in the Army to install me in Ratu Nailatikau's position. I went down to Home Affairs where Ratu Epeli Ganilau was the Minister for Home Affairs, I took one big *tabua* to him too and apologised. The *Turaga Bale Na Tui Cakau* had passed on then and Adi Kainona had also died, so I asked Ratu Epeli Ganilau to, please, pass that to his siblings.

That afternoon, I went across to Viseisei in Vuda as the late Ratu Iloilo had gone back to the village and was there as Tui Vuda, I also presented to him one *kamunaga* as my apology, *matanigasau* or *soro* to the *Vanua* of Vunisei, Viseisei, Vuda, particularly to the family of the late Dr. Timoci Bavadra, *Taukei kei Werekakaca*. I came back feeling very good and, in the meantime, I went around apologising to people even after people told me stop apologising. Apologising does not mean much to some people, they think we are wasting our time when we apologise.

Sir, His Excellency the President is the *Turaga Bale Na Tui Macuata*, you are the *Turaga Bale Na Tui Cakau* and we have heard today the efforts of the Coalition Government to bring back the Bose Levu Vakaturaga (BLV). It was the BLV that accepted our actions in 1987 and forgave us. That forgiveness became the provisions for immunity in the 1990, then the 1997 Constitution. It came from the hearts and the soul of the BLV. It was the motion moved by the late *Marama Bale Na Roko Tui Dreketi*, Adi Lady Lala Mara, for them to forgive me and my soldiers - some of whom are here in this Parliament - for what we had done in 1987.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for me personally, apologies and *veivakaturagataki* are very important. Just as I spoke about the language this morning, the importance of one's own language whether it is Hindi or *Vosa Vaka Viti*, they demonstrate they are the heart, they are the essence of the character of a person and a people. But there is no provision for leniency, for a more lenient award if the honourable Leader of the Opposition complies with Sections 71(2) or 71(3) of the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji. For him if he really believes there is no point of apologising, we will confirm to him there is no point in apologising - you apologise or not, you will be suspended anyway.

I do not know about procedures at this time whether we can insert or make an amendment to this, or we do not have that power, I do not know, Mr. Speaker, Sir. But I believe that an apology, *veivakaturagataki* that you have and the *Turaga Bale na Tui Macuata*, you can be the great chief that you are and exercise that inherent mercy, not required of you by any law. I am probably a lone voice on this side of Parliament, but I can afford to say that because I have been forgiven many times. The most serious offence that can be committed in a country is treason, and I was forgiven.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me begin by saying that I fully support the motion before us.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition is a repeat offender for many grievous parliamentary assaults in this august Parliament, and many of the honourable Members are aware of that. What is worse is that in the past, he was kind of cocooned into cotton wool and protected by many State agencies that allowed him to unilaterally crush his opponents, sometimes either lawfully or while skimming around the outer edges of the law. He was allowed to carry on under a delusion sometimes that he was fully entitled to treat Fiji as if it was his own personal kingdom.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are at a juncture today, that is not going to be like that. For me, personally, it comes as no surprise that right now at the beginning of our substantive parliamentary term, where we are the Coalition Government, and where he has been thrown into the Opposition side by the voters - that is the fact. It does not matter how many votes he single-handedly received. It does not matter how the Coalition Government with what numbers was formed.

The fact is that we are the Coalition Government, but he wilfully and intentionally signalled in his deplorable speech and I consider that as an abuse of parliamentary privilege of immunity to cause destabilisation, and destroy the sanctity of Parliament to ferment sedition, and appeal for others to actually undermine His Excellency the President, who is an embodiment of unity and peace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, such cowardly behaviour in weaponising ones' immunity-laden privileged words, inciting others to do his bidding, is not acceptable. It is utterly pathetic and a sign of a weak leader. His words, sullyng us in these Chambers attempted to inflame acts that lean towards criminality, and I think he does that while he sits here like a puppet-master egged on by puppeteers inside his side of Parliament. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just underscores the deviousness, ruthlessness and selfish leadership.

We just heard the honourable Prime Minister's Right of Reply, in return our honourable Prime Minister who ably leads the Coalition Government genuinely from the heart and I have experienced that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the campaign not only just recently, I campaigned with him in 1999. He has shown the honourable Leader of Opposition nothing but respect, kindness and outstretched hands - just now we heard that. That is the kind of compassion that our honourable Prime Minister is trying to show, and he is genuine about it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, everyone around him feels his genuineness about compassion, unity and inclusiveness. In return, the honourable Leader of the Opposition continuously and maliciously rebuts these gracious overtures with high-ended arrogance. When I recall our time sitting on the Opposition side and now observe our honourable Prime Minister's kindness, Sir, it actually moves me because his manner of empathetic compassion is what I had long pleaded the Opposition Leader to do or show as then Prime Minister and to extend to us, in order to move the country forward.

Some of the honourable Members sitting there and Mr. Speaker, Sir, you would know on many occasions, I called for bipartisanship, I called for compassion, it never happened and now look where we are today in this Parliament. I have heard over the last four or five days he and his minions started it across the floor and even today, viciously attack the honourable Prime Minister who, in my view, is a far more honourable and noble Statesman than the honourable Leader of the Opposition ever was, evidenced by our Coalition's win and within 100 days, his mastery of bringing the region together, bringing Kiribatis, USP and the continent of India, back into Fiji's embrace.

He spitefully maligns you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his speech on Monday, 13th February, 2023, lying to this august Parliament that our collective desire as the Coalition Government to debate in our mother tongue and pray as we choose to pray was unilaterally decided upon by yourself when we all know, Sir, that it was resolved by vote in the Business Committee, where he himself was present. He said in his speech, and I quote:

“We have a Parliament where the Speaker without following the Standing Orders, without debate, has decided that parliamentarians can speak in languages other than English and say a Christian prayer excluding those of other faiths - a complete defiance of the Standing Orders and the spirit of the Constitution.”

Sir, if you know your Standing Orders as we all should, Standing Order 70 states that the powers of the Speaker is to maintain order and decorum in Parliament. The honourable Leader of the Opposition's seditious and treasonous narration undermining His Excellency the President in his Address can only be put down to *viavalevu* and *veibeci*, or in English, contempt and scorn.

Mr. Speaker, there is no room for that in this august Parliament. There is no room for this anarchy and chaos to reverberate across Fiji and the globe, treacherously exploiting the entitlement

we have as Members of Parliament to speak as legislators.

I have heard Members of Parliament taking their cue from the honourable Leader of the Opposition and for the whole week, Mr. Speaker, they did not even have the decency to give us that fact that we are only less than two months old Government. Within the 100 days, we have done a number of things that no one in the Opposition talked about on how quickly we were able to help students in this country. A genuine help, not before an election but before the school was opening - no one talked about that.

Mr. Speaker, in case the honourable Leader of the Opposition forgot, he is a legislator first and foremost. He is supposed to be here to help and create laws and ensure that the laws we craft together within the Parliamentary procedures a robust fit for purpose and forward thinking. Instead, he is crushing the very laws he brought in and wants an exemption where he can threaten us and the nation with humility at will.

All the other Members who spoke with the exception of a few, all seem to create this situation that the country is heading towards anarchy. That is the impression that they are creating. That is what they have been doing. No way, Mr. Speaker! The people of this country know. The people of this country appreciate the new Coalition Government.

This notion that somehow, we owe him and his antics a courtesy or a bow must be put down today, Mr. Speaker. He pulverised the rules of Parliamentary engagement under Standing Order 62(3) and (4) that explicitly prohibits us from raising the conduct of His Excellency the President or the Judiciary or persons acting in their judicial capacity, and my two other colleagues pointed that out.

Yet, Mr. Speaker, he has the ball to lecture us about undermining the Constitution, when the Constitution makes it clear in Section 77 that the Office of the Speaker is independent subject only to this Constitution and any other law and serves to secure the honour and dignity of Parliament. His Excellency the President's Constitutional role states in Section 81(2) that the President is the Head of State, and the executive authority of the State is vested in the President.

The honourable Member actively incited in this august Parliament, hoping to foment an uprising among the armed forces to disrespect and undermine the Commander-in-Chief. Mr. Speaker, that cannot go unchallenged. More specifically when he uses grossly irresponsible language like, and I quote:

“His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji as Head of State in whom rest the executive authority of the State and who is the Commander-in-Chief of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces failed to acknowledge the fact that the very Constitution which he is supposed to uphold is being stripped away almost on a daily basis.”

Mr. Speaker, this is the message we are sending out to the people of this country, we are sending out to the world what the honourable Leader of the Opposition said, and I quote:

“I appeal to the rank and file of the RFMF to preserve their manna, to maintain their credibility and calling and not forsake their constitutional role. I also wish to inform RFMF and its gift and legacy, the Fijian Constitution is being ignored and abused on a daily basis, and the current Prime Minister wants what the RFMF worked so hard for, removed.”

But worst of all, Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition launches a widely contemptuous attack on the Judiciary, saying that we have a Judiciary where the sitting Chief Justice has been suspended for frivolous matters. The constitutional process is being followed. Fiji's judicial authority and its independence and our role as parliamentarians is clearly set out in Section 97(4) of the Constitution which states, and I quote:

“Parliament and Cabinet, through legislative and other measures, must assist and protect the courts to ensure their independence, impartiality, accessibility and effectiveness.”

Our freedom of parliamentary speech by virtue of our privileged of legal immunity as Members of Parliament that the honourable Leader of the Opposition sought to manipulate comes with the responsibility, it is not an absolute right. This is why when any of us abuses these freedoms, our own Standing Order Rules evolved from the Westminster genesis of tension between monarchs and Members of Parliament grants us the ability to self-regulate and hold ourselves above reproach to be worthy of honourable Members of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there can be no other way to put this but to say that the honourable Leader of the Opposition willfully violated his parliamentary privilege as a Member of Parliament to foment an uprising or a *coup* using and manipulating our august Parliament and the privileges accorded to him by using seditious and treasonous words that are prohibited references according to the Standing Order.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, on seditious and treasonous words inciting an insurrection, had the honourable Leader of the Opposition not enjoyed this parliamentary privilege as he does now, according to the Crimes Act 2009 (73) (b), if found guilty of inciting soldiers or police to sedition or to disobey any lawful order by a superior officer, it would earn him a penalty of five years in prison. Such is the gravity of using seditious or treasonable words.

It was very clear that the honourable Leader of the Opposition viciously attacked, threatened and scandalised in one single speech the three arms of the State. If he is permitted to continue in this Parliament, he will do so and raise the notch at every opportunity. Ever since this Coalition Government tried to come together in formation, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and all his sidekicks unquenched thirst for power has actively tried to destabilise the will of the people by inciting communal antagonism since 22nd December, 2022, after that glitch failed.

It continues today and I can see it continuing in Parliament with the turnaround in narrative from the other side all week where they are now the victim agitating to sow discord based on race - shameful. He cannot be allowed to fester on, Mr. Speaker. We have been discharged with the solemn constitutional task of protecting your high Office as well as the Office of the President and Commander-in-Chief as well as the Judiciary.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Attorney-General talked about the precedent but if you compare all those three and the gravity of what the honourable Leader of the Opposition has said and what those three honourable Members at that time faced as a result, this is very serious. We will not waiver from what the people have sent us to do as our Prime Minister exemplifies.

As I have said before, we have a Prime Minister who has openly, publicly showed compassion and humility. His Right of Reply today was a masterclass of humility, humbleness and trying to work together. His contribution just now, his stories embody some of those experiences that he has and all he has got from the honourable Leader of the Opposition and some honourable Members on the Opposition's side is hate, scorn, and ridicule. He does not deserve that, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, I want to gratefully acknowledge the efforts of the Privileges Committee and I thank them for upholding the highest standards of parliamentary procedure and practice for the rest of us. Their report actually reminds us that responsible parliamentarians protect and uphold the integrity and impartiality of these democratic institutions - ensuring that the three arms of the State have the liberty and latitude to do as the Constitution stipulates without reference of threats. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, I support this motion before this august Parliament..

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to comment on the motion that is before Parliament. We all know it is a matter of privilege. I have been a Member of Parliament since 2014 and at that time we were in the Opposition with most of the honourable Members who now form part of the Coalition Government. The first matter of privilege that came during my first tenure in Parliament was the matter that was against you at that time, Mr. Speaker. You will recall that night the former honourable Niko Nawaikula and myself were pleading on your behalf for leniency, and also that you could be forgiven.

The second case was Tupou Draunidalo's case and Ratu Isoa Tikoca's case. I was also part of the Privileges Committee in 2019 when the matter of privilege was raised by the honourable Pio Tikoduadua then against the former honourable Prime Minister. I was fortunate at that time when the former honourable Prime Minister was part of the Privileges Committee with the former honourable Adi Liti Qionibaravi. Given that the former honourable Prime Minister had to recuse himself because he had already made a comment publicly, I was appointed by our Caucus at that time to replace him at the Privileges Committee.

As the honourable Prime Minister alluded to, something with the Privileges Committee comes down to the recommendations and the vote. Whatever will be debated tonight has already been deliberated by the Committee and that will be part of the Hansard report that will be made available later to the honourable Members as an Appendix to the report that is before us.

The issue, the guideline and the baseline as the honourable Prime Minister has raised, he has talked about Kosovo and the *itaukei* word of "*kosova*". I would like to thank him in his Right of Reply the motion thanking His Excellency the President's for his most gracious speech on how we rise above the issues like the most senior member of Parliament, and also the honourable Prime Minister now serving his third term in position as Prime Minister. He talked like a fatherly figure in Parliament when he did his Right of Reply. He also appealed for a "cross-the-floor" cooperation, in terms of what we used to beg for when we were on the Opposition side.

We always sought a bipartisan approach and this is the first sitting of Parliament in this 2023 session, and it was unfortunate that a matter of privilege has come up. We are in a very important stage of transition. We have heard from honourable Seruiratu our acceptance on the transition and the change of Government that is there. We have also heard the honourable Prime Minister in his Right of Reply saying that the Government will build on from the legacy that the FijiFirst Government has already created, and that is the way forward that I see this Parliament going to - on how we can find solutions for a shared destiny as national leaders.

On Monday, I had shared a story (but it was not deliberate honourable Members) during His Excellency the President's trip to the Vatican. He was received by Pope Francis in his visit to UK and also Middle East to see our troops at Golan Heights before going to Great Britain where he met Prince Charles at Norfolk, England at Her Majesty's residence. He had sent me a photo and he said that he was with Prince Charles. That was in July and in the following month, Prince Charles became the King of England. When he sent me the photo, I replied and said "*Sota e rua na 'ai Bolatagane.*" Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President replied and said, "*Sota e rua na 'ai vale.*" The meaning I shared on Monday was that two from the same household had met. That is the moral of

the story.

I had shared something about that and said that we need to listen to what His Excellency the President is not saying. What comes back to me is the story by the honourable Prime Minister himself. He had shared to us one day that being the Chairman of the Great Council of Chiefs at that time, one of his officers had asked him, given that there were conflicting ideas on various resolutions that needs to be passed through the GCC, "how are you able to bring these chiefs into consensus?" He said, "I told them, for the chiefs, we have to listen to what they are not saying." That has been the tool used by the honourable Prime Minister at that time as Chairman of the GCC, on how he used to resolve issues within the GCC.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on our way to Suva in 2021, after the COVID-19 crisis when the ban was lifted, we were with His Excellency the President (the *Turaga Bale na Tui Macuata*) before he was nominated at the airport in Labasa. He had his bag and I asked him where he was going, and he told me he was going to a Board meeting at Fiji Pine. He was a Board member at that time. I told him in the Macuata dialect, "*sa rui a kisi nomu 'ato*", meaning his bag was too small. He asked why and I told him, "*murua sa varau lai tawana na vale boro vulavula*", which meant that he was going to occupy the White House here.

We were seated together on the plane, and I was sharing to him that it was time for some leadership training to prepare his successor as he would probably be elevated to become Head of State. When we reached the airport in Nausori and we bid farewell, I told him that if his name came up as a nominee for President, I would vote for him. He asked if I had heard something and I told him that I had a feeling his name would be put forward for nomination. I said to him in the Macuata dialect, "*esa 'erei me sa vakatututaki na yacamu, muru cikoma*", meaning that if he is approached to be nominated, to accept it. After few hours at home, he contacted me that he was on his way down to Sigatoka to see his son. He was intercepted by some officials and was brought to the then Prime Minister's residence at Muanikau and was approached to be the Prime Minister's nominee and he had accepted.

He gave me a call that night and told me, "*Mo oya na 'a daru veitalanoata'ina mai na waqavu'a sa yaco, oio sa ciqoma, io*", meaning that what we were talking about on the plane had come about and he had agreed. "*O io sa donu, au sa na tio ga nodaru veitalanoa mai na airport*". The very next morning, we had the caucus and, Mr. Speaker, Sir, at that time you will know that you were the Leader of the Opposition and I had requested that I and the Members of Parliament from Macuata be given the liberty to vote for our Chief that morning.

We were in agreement with honourable Adi Litia but some members of the caucus did not see the wisdom. I had asked for us from Macuata to vote *vakavanua* and not to vote on party lines, but some members of the caucus said that we were members of SODELPA and we should vote for the nominee of the party. On our way down with you, Sir, you told me something that I will never forget and you said, "*Mo na vote qo 'ila ga na Kalou kila oio*" - knowing the importance to us in Macuata that our chief was brought up. The difficulty at that time was what I had raised in caucus but there was some understanding in the end on how I should vote or the action I should take, given the advice by the Leader of the Opposition at that time.

Again, back to the motion that is before Parliament, I appeal across the aisle in agreement with what the honourable Prime Minister has urged this august Parliament moving forward in a destination and a new path that we need to follow - a path of reconciliation. We have heard the honourable Attorney-General on many occasions talking about reconciliation and also other things that needs to be done on some of the things that are attached to our political past. This could be the start where we can walk and talk across through cooperation.

And I appeal to you, Sir, through Standing Order 18 and Standing Order 20 to use the Powers of the Speaker in support of what the honourable Prime Minister has said of how the motion can be amended but the power is vested in you, Sir. I am appealing to your chiefly inherited powers that is more powerful than the law and also it is in line with the re-establishment of that authority. “*Ni kemuni na turaga sa mai vua na Kalou*” and I think from this afternoon we have learnt that inherited power and merging it with government leadership, those are the things that can move our country forward. This is the time that is most needed.

As I have said, when I delivered my response to His Excellency the President *Turaga na Tui Macuata* when he opened the Parliament Session in 2021, I shared with Parliament what Sir Winston Churchill had said in one of his famous quoted speeches, and I quote:

“To each there comes in their lifetime a special moment when they are figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered the chance to do a very special thing, unique to them and fitted to their talents. What a tragedy if that moment finds them unprepared or unqualified for that which could have been their finest hour.”

I cited that in my speech, saying that the *Turaga Bale na Tui Macuata* is prepared for this finest hour and I think at that time many did not know what God was calling him for. I had also shared in that speech a time when Sir Winston Churchill had shared that particular quote, the famous attack in London where the Germans had invaded London and there was a famous song at that time that came out when London was facing all those uncertainties and that song was called, “Until the lights of London shine again.” That was translated into the Fijian song, “*Me yacova ni waqa na cina mai Bolatagane.*” I appeal to you, Sir, I think the *cina* from *Bolatagane sa waqa to 'a*.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- *Kua ni veiwali tale tiko.*

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- We need to see that light and that light, again, as being reminded by the honourable Prime Minister, urging Members of this august Parliament and also appealing to your power, Sir, as per Standing Orders 18 and 20 to see a way forward for the betterment of Fiji moving forward.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, I did not realise that I was going to do this very early into my career or my job here in Parliament. I was scared to come to the last Parliament. I would watch from home and listened to the way attacks and missiles were being thrown at each other and I would say to myself, “Vili, lucky you are not in there.”

Today, this is happening, and we are talking about a person when the offence is all hidden in those words, those words that we are saying that this is seditious or treasonous, which is not as clear cut if it was a swear word it would had been easy to talk about. It is how you interpret those words that were said.

Yesterday, I shared a story of that lady in Labasa in 2000 and what happened to her and those of you who were here would have heard that story. When I was telling that story yesterday, the day before with the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, I knew she wrongly said that it was the honourable Leader of Opposition in 2000. I knew she meant 2006 but she said in 2000 and I was going to say, “no, he was not the leader, he was the person that stopped this carnage.” The story that I had told about that lady naked cooking curry for people who were sitting there drinking beer, it is that person that we are talking about today that stood his ground and we gradually moved back into where we are today.

I hear the honourable Deputy Prime Minister that had just spoken again. Just adding on into

that back and forth, the life in this Parliament that I am so scared of when I was outside. And when we try and interpret the words whether it is seditious or treasonous, I know at the end of the day it comes to the vote. We can say as much as we can over here but at the end of the day, it will come to a vote.

The decision in the Committee that had deliberated on this is a three to two Committee. Those that brought up the charges they have more numbers than us and it is how this place sits. At the end of the day, we are going to vote regardless of what we say. The interpretation of words whether it is seditious or treasonous is so hard to just may be lawyers who do it very easily but for us, for a sailor, captain of a ship, it is so difficult to define and say, “look, that word is treasonous or inciting.”

I was sharing with some of my friends on this side of Parliament the fact that people are saying, he is inviting the military to do a *coup* and I was just sharing with them what I saw that could never ever happen again in Fiji is a *coup* because of the Constitution. That is the way I saw my role when I was Commander RFMF because it says that you can never abrogate the Constitution, you can never form a government outside the way it is supposed to be formed over here. You cannot come in and do a *coup* and get away with it, it is not an option in my view.

I was listening to the argument that those words were inciting people in the RFMF and I was just putting my old Commander’s shoes again and said, “did those words incite me?” I said, “no, I know my role and I know what to do.” I am just wondering when will this end? When will this back and forth that I think carried on from the last Parliament when we the new kids who are coming in here, if you listen to all the speeches in this Parliament, you hear the tone of those who are coming in new are totally different from those who were here before. When will this end?

I will have to watch my words very carefully every time I speak in this Parliament because I can say one word and you take it and go to the Committee, it is a three to two-vote all the time. Come back here, vote and throw him out. I appeal for good sense. Seditious word is bad, inciting is bad and I am not saying that they should be said but this game that I saw in this Parliament which made me so scared to come in, should end.

I am just appealing to both sides, as a new Member of Parliament, I hope that we can reshape the way we do our work in this Parliament. For those of you who were here before, if there were animosities between you, it should be thrown out of this Parliament, no more! This is a new Parliament, and we go new from here. I do not know whether that contributes to this motion, but I would like to share my thoughts and the feeling that I feel right now as we debate this motion in this Parliament.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I promise that I will be very brief. Be assured, and, of course, to our friends on the other side of Parliament, we have heard you. We have heard you and heard you well and I thank all those who have spoken on the motion before Parliament. Definitely, it is a serious business, we need to maintain the high standards and the decorum of Parliament, we totally agree.

But Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me say that we welcome the offer by the honourable Prime Minister. If that is a way forward, that is what I said in my deliberations today. I did not know why I used that statement. We are in a new season, probably this is the beginning of the new season. The honourable Naupoto was asking, when will this end? I am asking, when will this start? And I see this as an opportunity for us to start.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is what I am going to ask for, I welcome the recommendation by the honourable Prime Minister. Secondly, it rests on you, Sir, and the Secretary-General based on your

powers under Standing Orders 18 and 20. I would plead that this be referred back to the Committee, taking into consideration the amendment that has been proposed, and probably in the next sitting so that the Committee can come again with the recommendations that has been proposed by the honourable Prime Minister.

I have heard the honourable Attorney-General but I would make an extra plea as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Based on Standing Order 127, the Privileges Committee has the same powers as the High Court. Sitting here today, this is my plea to you as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the fair administration of justice. We have lawyers in this Parliament, I am a bush lawyer, but this is what I want to say, because this Privileges Committee has the powers equivalent to the High Court.

In the military when the Court Martial is convened, we have a Judge from the High Court to ensure that the deliberations of the Court Martial is done according to law. We are politicians here, we know the history of all the disciplinary cases in Parliament and in the fair administration of justice, Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on your wisdom, if this is referred back to the Committee and if you allow the Committee to sit with all due respect because according to the Standing Order, the Madam Deputy Speaker, is the Chairperson, I am not sure whether it is correct by law, but in the name of justice like the Military Court Martial, we have someone to direct them and that is the role of a High Court Judge within the Court Martial to ensure that. Sir, that is justice, that is democracy, that is transparency and that is the way forward, and I leave it with you.

MR. SPEAKER.- There being no other speakers because my name has been mentioned, my position has been mentioned firstly by the honourable Prime Minister of his experiences, what he has gone through, he sought forgiveness several times from high chiefs around the country and he is just throwing in something that for him, perhaps it is the beginning of a new beginning.

But again, let me quote from *Erskine May* a quotation made by William Lenthall, the Speaker of the House of Commons of England in 1642. When King Charles I moved for the impeachment of certain Members of the House and to effect the arrest of William Lenthall because of the Members of Parliament, the Speaker refused and defied the King by saying, “I have neither eyes to see, nor tongue to speak in this place, but as the House is pleased to direct me, whose servant I am here.”

That, honourable Members, embodies what the Speaker of Parliament is, that I am here for this august Parliament and you the honourable Members. I hope we can understand the full effect and meaning of that quotation, as to the role that is now being mentioned because I happen to be wearing a traditional role as well, to see how best this would be outside the Standing Orders.

It is not so much the powers that is with the Speaker, as highlighted by honourable Bultavu under Standing Order 18, but this is something that has already been done in the House of Commons. I hope I have enlightened you, honourable Members, that the role of the Speaker is just to be someone that is a servant of Parliament, and that is embodied in our Standing Orders and we are also part of the tradition that we hold dear to. Who else will be making the move for unity? Honourable Penioni, in his Maiden Speech has prayed - we do not change what is there and what is good - just try and improve on it.

I have been through this. Honourable Seruiratu sat on the Privileges Committee, and it is sad. It is sad, honourable Members, knowing that the Leader of the Opposition who is also a relative of mine, but as honourable Naupoto has asked, when will this come to a halt? Honourable Seruiratu has asked, when will this start? This is a new beginning. It is the 55 Members who are in this Parliament who will be making the decision here.

It has been hard for them, Madam Chairperson of the Privileges Committee, knowing her

but it is the 55 who will have to decide on this. I have been given a note from the Secretary-General, from an honourable Member that if something could be done. The statement made by the honourable Prime Minister is true, honourable Members.

I apologised in the newspapers, I apologised by writing a letter to the Madam Speaker then, the late Dr. Jiko Luveni, but I still went out with no pay, not even to set foot in the precincts of Parliament. I came back and I stated in this Parliament when given a chance to speak that I went out like a man and I came back like a man. It makes you stronger.

Your service as a parliamentarian or as a politician, once you become one you become one for good, so you are stuck there, honourable Naupoto. If you are afraid of coming in, you are in now, so at times you have to stand up and make decisions and such a moment is right in front of you, honourable Members.

I hear so much about praising the good Lord. I have been blessed to be raised up as a Christian. I have heard all that but that is an issue that I would like to share and implore on you, honourable Members. The decision is yours. I am here as your servant and the decision is yours to decide. Once the decision is taken, it would be too late to change things because immediately after this, all these come into effect - no more setting foot into the precincts, he loses everything, the pay is out, even though that was done to us but who are we? I may not be speaking for my two former colleagues, honourable Tupou Draunidalo and honourable Isoa Tikoca, but sitting here in the Chair is not easy.

So, I ask, please make a decision. We have sat late into the night because of the deliberations of the Committee. I know they are loggerheads because this is something new to them but again, being given this and being mentioned here, this Parliament is pleased to direct me and whose servant I am here for. Thank you, honourable Members. Your right of reply, honourable Leader of Government in Parliament.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to share the findings of the Committee. We all have a copy, we can refer to it in paragraph 6.0, just to shed some light in light of what has been discussed in Parliament tonight.

“6.0 FINDINGS

- 6.1 In the matter of the allegation under Standing Order 62(3), the Committee voted and found the Hon. Josaia Bainimarama in breach. Consequently the Committee deliberated where the majority surmised that the penalty be 24 months, while the minority surmised that an apology would suffice, but because Hon. Josaia Bainimarama was cooperative in his testimony, the Committee voted and imposed a penalty of 18 months (reduced by six months, Mr. Speaker, Sir) with an apology to His Excellency the President and to the public.
- 6.2 In the matter of the allegation under Standing Order 62(4), the Committee voted and found the Hon. Josaia Bainimarama in breach specifically of Standing Order 62(4)(c). Consequently the Committee deliberated where the majority surmised that the penalty be 24 months, while the minority surmised that an apology would suffice, but because the Hon. Josaia Bainimarama was cooperative in his testimony the Committee voted and imposed a penalty of 18 months (reduced Mr. Speaker, Sir, by six months) with an apology to His Excellency the President and to the public.”

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on behalf of the Committee, I share these findings to the

honourable Members and to the public that consideration had already been given and the penalty reduced by 12 months. It could have been four years, which meant the rest of the session but it was reduced to three years.

However, in consideration of the honourable Prime Minister's appeal, Mr. Speaker, as Leader of the Government in Parliament whom we, on this side of Parliament, have absolute loyalty to as our leader, has displayed the passion and humility as stated by honourable Professor Prasad, under Standing Orders 104 and 105, I wish to move an amendment to the Motion before Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, it requires under Standing Order 105 that the mover of the amendment must put it in writing and pass it to the Speaker. That has been done and you have that before you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move that the amendment be made to the motion as follows:

That –

- (1) Honourable Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama be suspended for 18 months, effective immediately to be served until 17th August, 2024;
- (2) Honourable Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama issue a written apology to His Excellency the President within 14 days from today, 17th February, 2023;
- (3) Honourable Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama issues an apology to the public within 48 hours from today, 17th February, 2023;
- (4) During the period of suspension, honourable Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama is not allowed to enter the Parliament precincts; and
- (5) If the honourable Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama fails to apologise as outlined in (2) and (3) above, that the penalties be served consecutively for a total of three years.

I commend the motion before Parliament, Mr. Speaker.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we actually request from the Opposition Chambers if we can get 10 minutes break, we would like to deliberate on the amendment and come back.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, this is the problem when one sits in this Chair. The rule in the House of Commons is that, you have to always lend your ears quite a lot to the lesser and smaller parties, but I have been hearing they are the biggest party in Parliament, but this side is the Government. So, as such, I am always obliged to try and listen to what they want to bring up. All they are asking for is another 10 minutes extra. Do you agree to that, honourable Members?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- 10 minutes is fine.

MR. SPEAKER.- And if you put that forward, honourable Leader of Government, all the Opposition is asking is another 10 minutes so they can have some discussion on this.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, we do not object to that, thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Members, we will adjourn for 10 minutes and I hope you return.

The Parliament adjourned at 9.25 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 10.00 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I am just trying to sort out the papers in front of me. Before we took the break on the request of the Opposition, we were on the verge of that amendment to the recommendation. Based on that amendment, the honourable Members of the Opposition have also had a chat with me and they would also like to add on to the debate by saying a few words based on the amendments you have raised, honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament. I feel that it is only proper that we listen to them. If we can agree immediately after that on the continuation and see how best we can resolve all these and come to a better amicable solution.

On that note honourable Members of the Opposition, there are seven of you on the list that is in front of me that would like to speak.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Members, this is not easy. As I have stated, the Speaker has to lend his ears as well, not only to one side but both sides of Parliament.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Respect the good faith, do not play around.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving us the opportunity to talk to this particular motion. We appreciate the suggestions that have been made by the honourable Prime Minister and the amended motion. We would like to share some thoughts on the matter at hand and the way that we have seen this particular situation play out, which I think is important to take into consideration as we consider the revised recommendations that have been made by the Committee. A number of things that I would like to point out to the Members of Parliament.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You never gave us a chance.

HON. J. USAMATE.- In relation to parts of the Standing Orders that were quoted – Standing Order 62(3) and (4), if I was to read from the Standing Orders, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which talks about Prohibited References. In Standing Order 62(3) it states, and I quote:

“The conduct of members, the President, the Chief Justice (performing the functions of the office of 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.”

It talks about the perceived offence and it is saying that if anyone goes against or commits this, it is out of order, which in my reading means that if someone does something in Parliament that you believe contravenes this particular provision of the Standing Orders, if it is deemed to be out of order, the statement must be made in Parliament that, that is out of order.

If you go back a few years, every time that we have His Excellency’s addressing Parliament (there have been a lot of times), the honourable Tikoduadua also admitted during our meeting that other Members, including himself (hope you will agree with that) that when His Excellency has made the statement, there have been Members of the Opposition who have gone against it. We have even had to some extent where Members of the Opposition have said, “His Excellency’s Address is like he is still campaigning for FijiFirst.” The same kind of statement that was made here that denigrated the Office of the President at that particular point in time.

In those instances, we stood up when it was stated and we made a Point of Order because that is the way it is reflected in the Standing Orders. If something it is out of order, then we raise a Point of Order so it is dealt with immediately at that particular point in time. That is the thing that has been brought up here.

The second part here is talking about and I quote Standing Order 63(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...”

Seditious words are what they are talking about here. The first point that I want to make there for that particular point too, if there is an offence, the Point of Order is raised in Parliament, and it is dealt with at that particular point in time. That did not take place...

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- ...on this particular occasion.

It talks about seditious words - seditious. The definition is to incite or cause people to rebel against the authority of a state or monarch. If you are to read every single word that the honourable Leader of the Opposition stated in his statement, nowhere in his statement does he tell anyone to rebel.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are just trying to be a smart Alec.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- (Inaudible)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Let me read that again for the honourable Member who is listening from afar.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- This is the definition of seditious.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You should be embarrassed.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Inciting or causing people to rebel against authority of a state or monarch.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are trying to be a smart Alec.

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is the definition of seditious.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Shame on all of you.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Maybe I should read it again. Inciting or causing people to rebel against authority of the State or Monarch.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You are a mockery of this Parliament.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Nowhere in this transcript because we were not given the opportunity to fully vent and aerate the things that we wanted to say.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Nowhere in the transcript did he tell them to go and do anything that was seditious.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- It was imputed and those were the words of the honourable Complainant himself. Nowhere!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- No merit.

HON. J. USAMATE.- The statement that they have tried to talk about was the statement that was made on page 35 of the *Daily Hansard* in which the honourable Leader of the Opposition said, and I quote:

“Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have to inform the rank and file of the RFMF that all the philosophical commitment and years of hard work of the RFMF is now being undermined and disregarded by this Government.”

He said, “I have to inform”, he did not tell them to take any action. He said, “I have to inform” and in the latter part of that same paragraph, at the end, he states, and I quote:

“I appeal to the rank and file of the RFMF to preserve their manna, to maintain their credibility and calling, and not forsake their constitutional role.”

Their constitutional role is not about taking over Government. Read the Constitution, Section 131(2), what does it say?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that constitutional role is about the RFMF ensuring all the time the security of all Fijians.

(Hon. Prof. B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Nowhere in that Constitution does it say that the Army takes over. If you go into the earlier parts of the Constitution....

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, please, just confine yourself to the amendment. The amendment is the point that I am allowing the Members of the Opposition to say what you want to say on the amendment. I hope you will not take us back to where we left off before the Committee came down with the recommendations. So, all I am asking is, please, stick to the amendment. That is the agreed point where we are going to begin from and we allow you to say, based on what is there. Otherwise, you are going back to the very beginning.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Yes.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, because we were not really given an opportunity to aerate the way that we saw what had happened.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Point of Order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- We are asking someone to give an apology when he did not incite anything.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- He did not incite anything.

MR. SPEAKER.- Point of Order.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Usamate is behaving like a smart Alec, unfortunately.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- What is your Point of Order?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Point of Order on your Point of Order, that is unparliamentary language. Withdraw your statement, withdraw it!

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is unparliamentary language.

MR. SPEAKER.- We still have him on the floor, could we listen to honourable Deputy Prime Minister?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, you are absolutely right.

HON. J. USAMATE.- What is your Point of Order?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The Point of Order is very clear. You had the opportunity to speak on the original motion, but you did not. Mr. Speaker allowed an amendment motion which is before Parliament and now you are going back to the original motion, instead of talking about the amended motion. You are now abusing Parliament's time by going back to the discussions that has already taken place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is what we have been saying all along. This is total disrespect to the honourable Prime Minister of the country who has made the suggestion. Talk about the amendment, whether you accept the amendment or not, we have had the debate on the original motion. That is over! Your debate and contribution now should be on the amended motion, whether you accept the 18 months and the apology or not, and what is the reason for that?

MR. SPEAKER.- Can you confine yourself to what I have stated, honourable Usamate?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to correct the assertions that have been made by honourable Professor Prasad. If you look at Standing Order 104(3):

“An amendment to a question is put before the original question is put and an amendment to a proposed amendment is considered as if the proposed amendment were an original motion.”

If that is the case, this is now an original motion, that gives us leeway to talk about the facts pertaining to the original motion. That is the point, and that is why I have been raising what I have been saying from the Standing Orders.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, I do not want us to play around with English. The amended motion is the one that I agreed that we could speak on and please just confine yourself to the amended one.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the amended motion basically gives a sanction reduced to 18 months provided that the Leader of the Opposition apologises to the public, apologises to His Excellency and if he does not apologise then the three years comes into play and that is precisely why I am stating what I am stating. You only apologise if you know that you have done something wrong.

(Chorus of interjections)

And as I have pointed out here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is why I was talking about what I talked about. You require him to apologise, you cannot apologise if there was no call for sedition taking place. If that did not take place and how can there be an apology.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- It carries no weight.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is why I am talking the way that I am talking...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- That is why you lost, very embarrassing.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I am not embarrassed.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- You are!

HON. J. USAMATE.- I am standing here, I am not embarrassed. My emotions are mine, I know my emotions. You do not know my emotions. So, you cannot tell me what my emotions are...

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Embarrassment is an emotion.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Address the Speaker.

HON. J. USAMATE.- He is talking to me.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Do I still have the floor?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Go.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I was trying to elucidate, that is why I was making that statement. You cannot apologise if you have not done anything wrong. All the accusations have been imputed, there has been no explicit statement inciting anyone. So, if that is the case how can you apologise for something that you have not done. You apologise for what you have done, you apologise for what you have done.

In all the cases that have been brought here about the cases that went to the Privileges Committee, explicit words were spoken and heard and recorded. In this case there are no explicit statements. It is inferred from things that are taken from here and there and from there one tries to build up a case of what was meant but those are imputations, they are all inferences, there is nothing explicit that says that there was any seditious talk or trying to belittle the behaviour of His Excellency the President. That is my point. Thank you very much for the opportunity to address this issue.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are trying to interpret English.

MR. SPEAKER.- I have honourable Bala and honourable Members, the rest of the list is here but I will only accept the first seven that have come before me after my discussions. So, we will take the seven. Honourable Usamate has spoken, now it is honourable Bala. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Members for the consideration on the motion which is now in the amendment form. At the outset, Sir, I oppose the amendment motion that is before us and I will give the reason. Instead of saying, “thank you” to the honourable Leader of the Opposition for leading our beloved nation for eight years...

(Chorus of interjections)

... it was the greatest privilege for all the Fijians but the Leader of the Government in Parliament has come up with an amendment motion which is no different from the original motion.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Read it properly.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has been noted that the Minister for Home Affairs saying, that the words used by the honourable Leader of the Opposition are matters which are out of order.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to ask the honourable Minister and President of the National Federation Party, why did they not raise any Point of Order which is provided under the Standing Orders ...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Read your Standing Orders. It is not required.

HON. P.K. BALA.- ...for the honourable Leader of Opposition to withdraw the comment if it was out of order but at that time there was none? I also wish to ask, where is this freedom of speech that we are talking about?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- So you are talking about freedom of speech now?

HON. P.K. BALA.- Is this the change that we were looking for, for the freedom of speech or it is because of one man’s opinion that it became a breach?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Leader of the Opposition spoke on the role of His Excellency the President and the RFMF which is stated in the 2013 Constitution. We are not kids.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- You are!

HON. P.K. BALA.- He never ever said in this Parliament that he was asking the RFMF to go and take over the Government, he never said that. Where are you people coming from? Is this a politics of revenge?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The report is already there.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, whatever the honourable Leader of the Opposition stated in this Parliament were the concerns of the thousands of people that he brought and he spoke about. Let us not forget when His Excellency the President addressed this Parliament, there was one week break and in that break there were thousands of our supporters who were not happy with the way it was stated.

I am putting it to you because a lot of people are telling us they were not happy with the address and that is exactly what the honourable Leader of Opposition has said. He has brought in the concerns of the public and people because this is the peoples Parliament. Understand that you are a lawyer you should know better.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Where is your evidence?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Bala, I will ask again, please, confine yourself to the amended motion.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, considering all those things, we, therefore, do not agree that there has been any breach of the promise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recommendation made by the Leader of Parliament looks like it is based on, as I have stated, politics of revenge when it should have been a balanced one given the circumstances. I would ask the honourable Members from that side to exercise a degree of common sense.

HON. M.N. KAMIKAMICA.- And you don't have any?

HON. P.K. BALA.- If you people really respect your leader who is the honourable Prime Minister, you will oppose this amended motion that is before us.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I offer the floor to honourable Dr. Waqainabete, I would like to remind us once more. At this juncture, we have reached it through the intervention of both sides from the original recommendations after hearing the interventions from both sides that has come as a result of that the amended recommendations.

Since the amended recommendations have been put, you had also asked that you be given a chance to speak on the amended motion and that is exactly what Parliament is doing. So, honourable Dr. Waqainabete, I hope you will confine yourself to what is before us now - the amended motion.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- I thank you for giving me an opportunity. I will keep it very short, Sir. If you look at section 66 of the 2009 Crimes Act which talks on sedition, a "seditious intention" is an intention –

- i) to bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against the Government of the Republic of Fijians by law established; or

- ii) to excite inhabitants of Fiji to attempt to procure alteration; otherwise than by lawful means, of any matter in Fiji as by law established; or
- iii) to bring into hatred or contempt to excite disaffection against the administration of justice in Fiji; or
- iv) to raise discontent or disaffection amongst the inhabitants of Fiji; or
- v) to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different classes of the population of Fiji.

And then it says:

But an act, speech publication is not seditious by reason only that intends –

- a) to show that the Government of the Republic of Fiji has been misled or mistaken in any of its measures; or
- b) to point out errors or defects in the Government or Constitution of the Republic of Fiji as by law established or in legislation or in the administration of justice with the view to remedying of such errors or defects; or
- c) to persuade the inhabitants of Fiji to procure by lawful means the alterations of any matter in Fiji as by law established; or

Then it has got another (d) then it goes on to (2).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Leader of the Opposition was commenting in response to the speech by His Excellency the President. He was commenting because as we all know that the speech of the President is made by the Government, so that is the speech of the Government of the day - the Coalition Government and he was responding to the speech of the President and addressing the Constitutional roles. That is what he has done.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- If he was here, he would have explained it.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me finish. You have had your time, honourable Tikoduadua. Addressing the constitutional role in this, that you have been given today to look at the report, there is no verbatim. We do not look at the verbatim of the report, it is not the verbatim. Normally speaking when we have had this in the past, the verbatim actually comes also, so we would be able to see the words that have been expressed by the complainant and also by those who are being complained against in the Privilege Committee. Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those short comments, I do not support the motion before Parliament.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the debate was on the President's Address. It was not another day where he mentioned about the President, it was about the speech, and I do not support the motion before Parliament simply because the Leader of the Opposition has done nothing wrong. He commented on the speech and previously even last year, the Opposition Members showed disrespect to the President.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Left, right, centre...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- We did not refer this matter to the Privileges Committee, we did not do that because there was no need to refer that to the Privileges Committee.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- There is a difference...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to raise another point. There are people who have raised or showed disrespect inside and outside Parliament. With due respect to the honourable Prime Minister, he also called for military intervention during election time. That also created fear in people.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- That is not the issue...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- But what I am trying to say, this report which is before us, the reality is the Standing Committee report that comes to Parliament is far superior than this report that is presented to us. It does not have all the information where we can make an informed decision. You cannot make an informed decision. There should be questions asked, responses given so that we can read all that.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It is shorter.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- No, it is not about being shorter, it is about presenting a proper report to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So the quality of the report is not good, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- And no one can make an informed decision and, therefore, I do not support the motion.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, I am surprised that this motion has been brought before this Parliament at a much faster rate at which we used to bring Bills under Standing Order 51 – interesting! Even faster than that.

(Laughter)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, I oppose the amendment by the Leader of the Government in Parliament because it reflects injustice, revenge and vengeance. What our leader was basically doing

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What did you ask outside?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- But the amendment did not come as we expected. So, what the honourable Leader of the Opposition was doing was basically responding to the Address by His Excellency the President. We, as Members of Parliament, Mr. Speaker, are covered under Parliament privilege. By removing the honourable Leader of the Opposition, we are removing the voice of 29.08

percent Fijians, who have actually voted for the honourable Leader of the Opposition – 136,000 votes.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Sir, 136,829 Fijians voted for the honourable Leader of the Opposition.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- In past, Mr. Speaker, there were many instances as elaborated by my fellow colleagues, the Opposition then had objected to the Presidential Address. They opposed and voted against the Address. Most of the words were uttered against the Presidential Address which was demeaning to the President, but no one was taken to the Privileges Committee. That is why Members are covered under the parliamentary privilege.

Mr. Speaker, I was part of one the Privileges Committee. Yes, we do understand, your case came, Sir,

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Listen!

We do understand, Sir, the honourable Draunidalo's case came, the honourable Tikoca's case came but when we were in the Standing Order, we set a precedence. We thought the penalties that were actually given to the honourable Members was too harsh. We gave an option, either to apologise or be removed from Parliament. As honourable Members, they were given an option if they apologised, they did not have to.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- This was brought to us and we actually adhered to.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is a lie.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- We were trying to amend at that point in time the differences that were there between the Government and Opposition. Now, we are going back to the same place where we actually started and the precedence was set against your case, Sir. This is not on, this is not right.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Maharaj, I was asked to do both. Apologise in the newspaper, apologise to the former Speaker and then I went out for two years.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- And the lesson learnt from all those, Mr. Speaker, by the time we actually came....

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I have a Point of Order.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Where is he?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, throughout this week we have been hearing of respect, preaching from the Bible and here we see hatred...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- ...for the person who has done so much for the nation, Mr. Speaker, one person who stood for every Fijian. We all know that from day one, FijiFirst was up against all other parties.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- And the main objective was just to remove FijiFirst Party from Government and now is about removing the honourable Leader of the Opposition from Parliament. The person who had a vision for Fiji, a person who stood by his principle, a person under whose leadership thousands of Fijian students are educated today, Mr. Speaker.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- It is not on if we are actually going to remove him like this. The person who even respected the current Prime Minister and ensured that the immunity clause in 1997 Constitution was part of the 2013 Constitution. I would like to ask honourable Prime Minister, is this the gift you want to give to the person who ensured that you are always protected for what transpired in 1987?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Maharaj, as I have stated before and this will be the second time that I am stating it, this has come about after interventions from both sides, and has resulted in the amendment of the original recommendations. Based on that, I have allowed that you be given time to speak on the amended motion. Can we just confine ourselves to that?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I have a Point of Order.

MR. SPEAKER.- A Point of Order.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think honourable Maharaj just lied in Parliament. He ought to apologise to you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and to Parliament because he said that when he was in the Privileges Committee, when his Party was looking at the privilege issue, they were asking those three honourable Members who were suspended to apologise and if they did not, they would not be suspended.

That is a lie, because, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you, yourself apologised and you were suspended. This bunch used to lie outside of Parliament, inside Parliament and now they are lying in Opposition as they were lying in Government. He should be asked to apologise.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Professor Prasad. Carry on, honourable Maharaj.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, with all due respect, I think we need to improve the quality of the volume the other side, because honourable Professor Prasad is in Nadi I believe, so he was not able to hear properly. I did not actually say what he just uttered, he can actually read that from the Verbatim Report. Finally, I oppose the amended motion by Leader of the Government in Parliament.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I am the last speaker, let me just put a few things into perspective. The motion that was before the floor was amended after an offer was made by the honourable Prime Minister. The reason why everyone did not speak is because the perception this side

MR. SPEAKER.- Could you come again, honourable Koya? I did not hear you quite right.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason why not everyone spoke from this particular side when the first motion was on the floor, was because the offer and the speech given by the honourable Prime Minister was interpreted a particular way. This is why honourable Seruiratu had asked if we could ask you, Sir, to ask the matter to go back to the Committee for re-recommendations, to fit what was our perception of what the honourable Prime Minister said.

What came back from honourable Tabuya was not that which was perceived. This is why a request was made that if there is an amendment because of that particular amendment, that amendment was not aligned with our thoughts because in terms of sanctions, what our interpretation at that time was that the honourable Prime Minister had spoken about forgiveness and also apologies. He had not mentioned the word of being taken out of Parliament for a particular length of time. I can be corrected by you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but that was what he interpreted. That is the reason why not everyone spoke. We have a very loyal bunch of people on this side of Parliament.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It is not a laughing matter.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes, it is.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is actually quite offensive in light of the fact that....
(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is quite embarrassing that I am talking about loyalty, when honourable Tabuya spoke about loyalty to her leader, please respect that.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Move on.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Expeditiously and quickly finishing something off is not justice, Sir. Everyone has a right to be heard. We have got plenty of lawyers on the other side, everyone has a right to be heard. People on this side of Parliament want to defend their leader just as you do your leader.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is all that was asked and that is why honourable Usamate pointed out that within the provisions of the Standing Orders when you amend the Orders, it is to be treated as an original motion. Having said all that, I think everyone has a bit of a say.

I have a few things just raise before you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and to the floor and to the general public so that they do know, bearing in mind that there is a dissenting opinion in the Report on the floor but not all of the records are on the floor. The Verbatim Report is not on the floor and the reason why we did not sign it and we objected to it because our opinion was that the whole matter, the whole file, Verbatim Report, et cetera, needs to come to the floor. Why? Because the ultimate arbiter, ultimate judge of all of these is this Chamber, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

It is not the Privileges Committee. The Privileges Committee comes with a recommendation. The recommendation came three for and two against. So, all of these needed to be on everyone's table. There maybe some on the other side that may not agree with what is actually on the floor. That is all that is being asked.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I will tell you why I actually raised this and this is part of what was given to everyone. The original letter of complaint that came to you, Sir, which you accepted, which you read and which you forwarded to us at the Committee to look at in terms of the matter being raised for the Privileges Committee to look at.

In that letter Mr. Speaker, Sir, that was given to you by honourable Tikoduadua and everyone has this, starts off by saying, and I quote:

“We, write respectfully to your high office. A matter of privilege in which our humble and considered opinion is set out in the Standing Order 134. We, Mr. Speaker, Sir, raise for your consideration that a prima facie breach of Standing Order 62(3) and Standing Order 63(4) by the Leader of the Opposition, honourable Josai Voreqe Bainimarama in his response to His Excellency the President's most gracious speech on Monday, 13th February, 2023. The motion to thank His Excellency the President is the primary order of business this sitting week, as agreed to at the last Business Committee meeting of 27th January, 2023.

Honourable Speaker, it give us no joy to raise this but the words uttered by the honourable Leader of the Opposition in denigrating and humiliating our Head of State, His Excellency the President also Commander-in-Chief, while appealing to the rank and file in the RFMF is in our considered view (Note, please extract other language from Hansard)

It is not the duty of the Committee to extract anything from *Hansard*, it is your complaint.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Semantics.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Please, listen!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Semantics.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- There is a big difference between “we” and “I” and it goes on regarding the actual aggressive and arrogant, rhetoric warrants sanction, et cetera.

Again, it says and I quote, “We humbly simply seek your ruling...” Honourable Kamikamica is saying semantics. Let me tell you something, he has come before the Committee, taken an oath and said on oath after giving this letter to the honourable Speaker, to take on board and decide *prima facie*. He has come to the Committee and said it is “I”. I am the only one that complained, one person.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What is the difference?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a grave injustice. The point is if it is “we” honourable Minister, that could mean all of you, it could mean NFP, it could even also mean the members of the Committee that was sitting.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Semantics.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It is not semantics. The point is that if it is we, honourable Minister, that could mean all of you, NFP, it could even also mean the Members of the Committee that were sitting here.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Look at the substance of the issue.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Before you get to the substance of any issue, you need to look at the complaint.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Honourable Member, you should think about what you are saying.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It is not about that. You start with the actual charge my friend.

Mr. Speaker, that of course will be raised by this side of Parliament as an issue at a later stage.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- That is how you treat the people of Fiji.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Whether he has been truthful on oath or whether he misled you and Parliament by saying it was more than one complainant, that is a grave matter that needs to be looked into and obviously taken on board by this side of the Parliament.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Why didn't you raise it up in the Privileges Committee?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You were not there, it was.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- He does not have to be there.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You were not there, it was. You are not aware of it because the whole Report is not before you.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Semantics! Just picking on words!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, I am not here to listen to people who were not sitting there.

Mr. Speaker, I am being polite, Sir. By his own admission also, in the verbatim report he says that we make statements, I made some statements that question the validity of what His Excellency the President said in terms of the content of his speech. It has been done before.

As mentioned earlier it has been done before. It has been objected upon. We all stood up and said it is out of order and again it is out of order. What it is, Mr. Speaker, is that within the provisions ...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It is very different.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Is he finished?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Carry on!

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You are neither the Speaker nor the Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sections that were referred to by honourable Tikoduadua, and the alleged offences that were committed in accordance with the breach of the Standing Orders 62 and 63, these breaches stand in your purview. You have the absolute right under these orders to stop a person if they are out of order. You did not, Sir.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Are you questioning the Speaker?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- That is entirely your prerogative, Sir. You obviously did not see it as a grave injustice. You even have a right to terminate his speech if you saw it that way. You did not, Sir. No one else in this House even stood up at that time if they saw it as a grave offence. No one did it. It was brought up at a later stage. Again, after the honourable Minister went outside and said this is treasonous in the news, et cetera and then came and complained to you after.

More importantly, Sir, also nowhere does that and I think the lawyers will understand this - nowhere in any part of his speech does the Leader of Opposition fit the mould of any seditious comment. It is a matter of fact in his comments the proviso he actually put in there is the comments that were actually made by him. He did not ask for any illegal act to be done. He merely asked that they follow the Constitution.

There is a particular provision in the Constitution and that very same provision was referred to by the honourable Prime Minister. No, he did not, that was fine nothing happened. He actually did it outside Parliament. All that was asked for was that. So, it was not like he was instigating or inciting someone to go and do something unlawful. Why would he?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Because he lost.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Especially in light of the fact that this was in 2013.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- You thought you would rule forever.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- All of this was done by - we all know! So, the point is, it is incumbent upon us to be just. We must be just, fair, give everyone the right to be heard regardless and despite what we hear from the other side - the quips that come across, but the little knowledge becomes very dangerous.

What was done by the honourable Leader of the Opposition was a speech that was given and was not seditious by reason, but it only intended to show some mistakes. The same way that the other side had done with previous occasions with our former Presidents.

I, for one on this side of Parliament, Sir, completely disagree with both the recommendations whether it be the original motion or the motion currently before Parliament; the amended version, purely on the basis Sir, that we do not find any guilt and I urge everyone to please ensure that they make a very informed decision because there are two people's dissenting opinions there but we do not see the evidence there Sir. I thank the honourable Prime Minister also for making the generous comments that he did.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wanted to speak on the motion on the amended motion before you give the Right of Reply ...

MR. SPEAKER.- I am giving the Right of Reply to the honourable Tabuya now, honourable Professor Biman.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Sir, I had already requested through the Secretary-General that I would want to contribute to the amended motion before you give the Right of Reply to the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- I am giving the Right of Reply to honourable Tabuya now.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am not sure if I misunderstood. All I was saying is that I also want to contribute to the amended motion before the Leader of Government Business has the Right of Reply.

(Inaudible interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Sir, I also wanted to contribute to the amended motion because seven Opposition Members have spoken. I also wanted to contribute on the amended motion, before you give the Right of Reply to the Leader of Government.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will grant you that opportunity.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- One versus seven.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me say this right at the outset, that they talked about the expectation. Honourable Koya talked about the expectation. We, on the Government side also had an expectation when the honourable Prime Minister made that offer and we all agreed with that. We know how compassionate and how thoughtful the honourable Prime Minister can be with these things. That was our expectation and like the interpretation that honourable Koya and his group had.

But Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am actually quite astounded by the debate not only on the substance of the motion which they went back to, but also astounded at the hypocrisy of some of these people who sat in the very same Parliament on three occasions and interpreted what those three honourable Members including yourself Mr. Speaker, went through.

Honourable Koya, being a lawyer, talks about a Point of Order and he is now blaming you, Mr. Speaker, and saying that you should have stopped him.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Speak on the amended motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, there is a Point of Order.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I honestly believe that he is not actually hearing things. I did not point fingers at you, Sir, and I did not speak about a Point of Order.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You lied.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I did not speak about a Point of Order. I did not infer it anyway...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You were not listening.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, could you just confine yourself to the amended motion, as I have also asked the honourable Opposition Members.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am just confining myself, Mr. Speaker, on the amended motion and I am just responding to what honourable Koya said. He was saying that the fact that, what he said may have been out of order, should have been raised there and dealt with. Now, what I am saying, Mr. Speaker, is if something is said in Parliament by an honourable Member and it is out of order, it does not necessarily mean that it is not a privileged matter.

Let me just respond to a point that all of them have been making in their response to the amended motion and it is important for us to respond to that Mr. Speaker. They are saying that despite the amended motion the substance is not correct. They are saying that there was no inference or no attempt by the honourable Leader of the Opposition to bring the office of the President into disrepute and they are referring to examples of Opposition Members in the past making references.

Nowhere - no Opposition Member in my recollection in the eight years said that the President, the Commander in Chief of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, failed to acknowledge the fact that the very Constitution which he is supposed to uphold is being stripped away almost on a daily basis. That is a direct attack on the integrity, on the reputation, and on the role of the President of Fiji. No, Opposition Member ever said that the President failed to uphold his constitutional role.

Mr. Speaker, that is not correct. What is said is very clear and I think the amended motion gives an opportunity to the honourable Leader of the Opposition, gives an opportunity to all honourable Opposition Members to reflect on their own past, reflect on their own hypocrisy and accept that the Government and the honourable Prime Minister have provided - as honourable Seruiratu said - a start of a new beginning of negotiation and dialogue. But what they did, they asked for 10 minutes, they went out, like puppets and consulted their Master, which they did in the past...

HON. P.K. BALA.- What is your Point of Order?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

HON. P.K. BALA.- You are talking nonsense.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It has now become habitual of honourable Professor Prasad to use these fancy words that he suddenly thinks is good behaviour in this Parliament. He has belittled new Members of Parliament, he is now trying to say all these things about parrot, et cetera, he ought to stop. He is the Minister of Finance. Control yourself, honourable Minister.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Shame on you!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I will not be threatened by your loud voice.

MR. SPEAKER.- Deputy Prime Minister, thank you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, I just wanted to make that point.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, under Standing Order 108, I withdraw the amendment and move:

That the question on the original motion be put.

MR. SPEAKER.- Madam, did you quote Standing Order 108?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 108(2).

MR. SPEAKER.- Standing Order 108(2) allows for the original motion to come back to life after the second motion is withdrawn.

HON. MEMBERS.- Debate.

MR. SPEAKER.- No, there will be no debate here.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, as you embark on that honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, I hope you have taken into account the lengthy discussions we have had here, the plea from the honourable Prime Minister in trying to find a way forward. We have heard from honourable Seruiratu and honourable Naupoto on the issues of trying to forge ahead a new beginning. That is where I came in as Speaker just to kind of clarify the issues that had been raised.

It has been given another breath of life, so to speak, and where we were in the original motion. Now, that you have put forward the amendment to the motion and that is why the rest of the honourable Members of the Opposition, seven of them have asked to be heard as well. That is why I am seeking a Right of Reply. Have you changed your position on this based on all that has transpired?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Based on what was offered by the honourable Prime Minister?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I insist on the withdrawal under Standing Order 108 and move that the question in the original motion be put.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we are not going to have another debate on this. We have had a run around on this. We have tried all our best to see how best we can resolve this, but now the Government has decided otherwise, so the original recommendation still sticks here.

Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We are supporting the motion from here, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Professor Prasad I was just about to ask for your vote.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- For the motion, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Voting for the motion. Honourable Radrodro?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Voting for the motion, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- The two honourable Members have voted and we are waiting for the results of the vote, honourable Members.

I seek your indulgence here, all I am asking for is another vote to be taken since the results from the first vote is totally, I might use the word, “glitch”. Honourable Members, all I am asking is if we can take another vote.

(Hon. Professor B.C. Prasad and Hon. A.M. Radrodro voted virtually for the motion)

Votes cast:

Ayes	-	27
Noes	-	24
Not voted	-	4

Motion agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT

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

That Parliament adjourns until Monday, 27th March, 2023 at 9.30 a.m.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that concludes the long and tiring day today, the end of our sitting for this week and I thank you all for the contribution throughout the week to thank His Excellency for his most gracious Address as well as other businesses which were before Parliament.

I would also like to thank the honourable Prime Minister, even though there were some busy schedules in his timetable for this evening to be in the West and has since asked him if he could complete the day with us especially when we were addressing the motion from the Privileges Committee.

I now declare that Parliament is adjourned until Monday, 27th March, 2023 at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 11.11 p.m.