

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 13TH FEBRUARY, 2023

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 13TH FEBRUARY, 2023

The Parliament met at 9.46 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

ADMINISTRATION OF OATH/AFFIRMATION OF ALLEGIANCE

The following Members subscribed to the Administration of Oath/Affirmation of Allegiance and took their seats in Parliament:

Hon. Penioni Koliniwai Ravunawa
Hon. Alipate Tuicolo.

MR. SPEAKER.- Congratulations honourable Members. Welcome, and I wish you well in this term of Parliament.

PRESENT

All Members were present.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sittings of Parliament held on Saturday, 24th December, 2022 and Friday, 3rd 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 take this opportunity to welcome honourable Members in today's sitting and especially for those who are joining us in the gallery. It would be remiss of me if I am not to mention a few names, but for all those who are sitting here, as well as those listening through the livestream, I would like to welcome you all to today's sitting.

To the wife of the present Prime Minister, the wife of the late Prime Minister Qarase, Mr. Misau, Mrs. Mary Chapman, Mrs. McGoon and a few others who are seated in the gallery, *vinaka vakalevu* for making it into today's sitting and thank you for taking an interest in your Parliament.

Vernacular – Daily Hansard

Honourable Members, with respect to the use of the vernacular in Parliament, please, kindly take note that you will have to inform the Speaker if you wish to speak in the vernacular before the Speaker gives you the floor. The *vosa vaka-Viti* or *Hindi* will be recorded in the *Daily Hansard* with

the translated version into English appended to the back of the *Daily Hansard*, after which would be uploaded on the Parliament website after seven days in accordance with Standing Order 32.

Time Limit on Debate

With respect to speeches, you have on your tables the bell timings, detailing the times for the first bell and then the final bell. Please, kindly take note of these timings so that you do not exceed your allocated time. According to Standing Orders 64 and 68, each Member may speak up to 20 minutes and may speak only once to a question or motion before Parliament.

Resolution - Business Committee

Honourable Members, during the Business Committee meeting on Friday, 27th January, 2023, the Business Committee unanimously agreed to the following:

- That Parliament may sit beyond 4.30 p.m. from Monday to Thursday and beyond 12.30 p.m on Friday.
- Lunch breaks to be limited to one hour only.

This is to ensure that all 55 honourable Members have the opportunity to respond to His Excellency's Address and also that Parliament can successfully deliberate on the items listed on the Order Papers for the week.

Reinstatement of Parliamentary Business

Honourable Members, the Business Committee had also unanimously agreed that all pending parliamentary business from the last term of Parliament will be reinstated so that the Standing Committees can continue where the last Parliament left off. For the information of honourable Members, there are 68 Annual Reports, one Treaty and 21 Committee Reports pending with respective Standing Committees.

Honourable Members, please, take note that the reinstatement does not apply to the lapsed Bills. Standing Order 97(2) clearly provides that lapsed Bills cannot be restored to the Order Paper in a new term of Parliament.

Membership - Select Committees and Standing Committees

Honourable Members, I have now received the membership of the six Standing Committees and four Select Committees. Therefore, pursuant to Standing Order 115(4), I hereby advise Parliament of the following appointments:

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

1. Hon. E.Y. Immanuel, Assistant Minister of Finance
2. Hon. S. Tubuna, Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister
3. Hon. J.R. Vocea, Assistant Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management
4. Hon. A.A. Maharaj
5. Hon. H. Chand

Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights

1. Hon. Ratu R.S.S. Vakalalabure, Assistant Minister for Home Affairs
2. Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua, Deputy Speaker and Assistant Minister Housing and Local Government
3. Hon. I.S. Vanawalu, Assistant Minister for Education
4. Hon. F.S. Koya
5. Hon. M.D. Bulitavu

Standing Committee on Economic Affairs

1. Hon. S. Tubuna, Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister
2. Hon. T.N. Tunabuna, Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Waterways
3. Hon. S. Kiran, Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation
4. Hon. P.D. Kumar
5. Hon. S.T. Koroilavesau

Standing Committee on Natural Resources

1. Hon. I. Tuiwailevu, Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs
2. Hon. T.N. Tunabuna, Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Waterways
3. Hon. I.S. Vanawalu, Assistant Minister for Education
4. Hon. I.B. Seruiratu
5. Hon. S.S. Kirpal

Standing Committee on Social Affairs

1. Hon. A.V.B.C. Bainivalu, Assistant Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation
2. Hon. S. Kiran, Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation
3. Hon. Ratu R.S.S. Vakalalabure, Assistant Minister for Home Affairs
4. Hon. P.K. Bala
5. Hon. V. Pillay

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

1. Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua, Deputy Speaker
2. Hon. J.R. Vocea, Assistant Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management
3. Hon. I. Tuiwailevu, Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs
4. Hon. V. Naupoto
5. Hon. I. Naivalurua

Pursuant to Standing Order 116(1) and (2), the Secretary-General will convene the first meeting of each Standing Committee (please be mindful of that, honourable Members), and also notify the Committee Members of the date for the first meeting.

Business Committee

1. Hon. Ratu N.T Lalabalavu, Speaker (Chairman)
2. Hon. S.L. Rabuka, Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs
3. Hon. V.R. Gavoka, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation

4. Hon. Prof. B.C. Prasad, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics
5. Hon. L.D. Tabuya, Leader of the Government in Parliament and Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation
6. Hon. J.V. Bainimarama, Leader of the Opposition
7. Hon. F.S. Koya
8. Hon. I.B. Seruiratu
9. Hon. A.A. Maharaj

House Committee

1. Hon. Ratu N.T. Lalabalavu, Speaker (Chairman)
2. Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua, Deputy Speaker and Assistant Minister Housing and Local Government
3. Hon. F.W.R. Vosarogo, Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources
4. Hon. L.D. Tabuya, Leader of the Government in Parliament and Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation
5. Hon. N.T. Tuinaceva
6. Hon. K. Lal

Standing Orders Committee

1. Hon. Ratu N.T. Lalabalavu, Speaker (Chairman)
2. Hon. L.D. Tabuya, Leader of the Government in Parliament and Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation
3. Hon. A.V.B.C. Bainivalu, Government Whip and Assistant Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation
4. Hon. P. Tikoduadua, NFP Whip and Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration
5. Hon. A.M. Radrodro, SODELPA Whip and Minister for Education
6. Hon. A.A. Maharaj, Opposition Whip

Privileges Committee

1. Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua, Deputy Speaker (Chairman)
2. Hon. L.D. Tabuya, Leader of the Government in Parliament and Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation
3. Hon. Ratu R.S.S. Vakalalabure, Assistant Minister for Home Affairs
4. Hon. E.Y. Immanuel, Assistant Minister of Finance
5. Hon. F.S. Koya
6. Hon. J. Usamate

Lastly for the information of all honourable Members, I will, from time to time, allow the honourable Deputy Speaker to preside over the proceedings, and I trust you will also render your full support to the honourable Deputy Speaker.

DEBATE ON HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have the honour to move:

That this Parliament thanks His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address, 31 years after I moved this motion for the first time.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise as the mover of this motion, to thank His Excellency the President for his most eloquent Address where he gave a very clear message that we must be united for the sake of our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank him for outlining the Executive's Mission, Vision and key programmes and initiatives of the Government and its legislative agenda while opening Parliament on Friday, 3rd February this year. I congratulate honourable Members on both sides of Parliament for winning their seats at the December 14th General Elections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also send greetings to the chiefs, the leaders and the people of Fiji and thank all those candidates of the Government Coalition whose votes have allowed us to be elected with a number of seats that the three parties have won and formed Government according to our constitutional provision therein, the D'Hondt Multi-Member Open List of Proportional Representation in a Single Natural Electoral Roll of all registered voters according to Section 53 of our 2013 Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the People's Coalition Government and the Opposition have many differences, we have a shared common interest, a common duty and that is the welfare of our people and policies and measures that will benefit the people and the nation as a whole. There are many opportunities, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the Government and Opposition to adopt a united approach on certain issues and jointly develop legislation and pursue other initiatives for the common good.

I had hoped we could work together on policies to better protect our children, eliminate violence against women, improve services in our municipalities, provide better opportunities and inspire our sports people, alleviate the level of poverty et cetera, the resolution of many of our national challenges could draw on the combined wisdom and efforts of all Members of this honourable Parliament. I give an assurance that we in Government will continue to ensure that our democracy functions properly and fulfil our democratic obligations to all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the proper and efficient functioning of the Government in serving the people and the country, our Civil Service is very, very important. In recognition of that pivotal role of our civil servants, a Ministry of Civil Service and the Public Service Commission are the responsibilities of the Prime Minister. The core values of the service will be strengthened through the PSC and the Ministry. Our intention is also to improve planning, accountability, efficiency to ultimately lift the standards of service to all Fijians.

In its first month in office, your Government has amended the Civil Service (General) Regulations to deliver on two critical policy changes. The first was to increase the retirement age from 55 to 60. This will give Fiji a greater return from institutional knowledge, experience and skills. It also caters to the aspirations and the needs of our hardworking civil servants. Due to shortages of teachers, nurses and doctors, the increase in retirement age for them is effective from 1st January, 2022. For the other occupational categories, the amendment is effective from 1st January, 2023.

Our second major initiative is the removal of contractual appointments. This provides civil servants with a long-term security of employment which they very much need. Consultations are ongoing for the full implementation of this policy - the policy which represents virtual permanent employment across the Public Service governed by the usual terms and conditions. We look forward to improving morale and productivity in the Public Service once this policy is fully implemented.

The PSC, with the assistance of the Ministry, will develop guidelines and policies to provide better cohesion and coordination throughout the service, consistent with our determination to enhance performance to benefit Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the PSC will be given greater autonomy, greater responsibility within its constitutional mandate. This is to ensure impartiality and integrity in recruitment, remuneration, professional development and in addressing grievances and disputes. The Ministry will engage with all government agencies and development partners in providing training and career growth opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the re-establishment of the Higher Salaries Commission will lead to greater consistency in setting and administering remuneration of senior civil servants and CEOs of State-Owned Enterprises. Compliance with international best practices will ensure that senior civil service executives are remunerated fairly and equitably.

Recent revelations about certain public and state-owned enterprises have generated many interest and debate in the media and in the community. Some disclosures have raised red flags and highlighted the need for greater scrutiny and accountability by executives and directors in these enterprises. These entities, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are involved in food processing, agriculture, livestock, timber, farming and fisheries; postal, trustee and financial services; broadcasting, airport operations and biosecurity. State-owned enterprises relate to aviation, sugar, banking, housing, forestry, energy, digital television, and airport services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Coalition Government invited Expressions of Interest for Board Appointments, over 1,200 applications were received. It is imperative that the right people are appointed to Boards on merit. Board membership must also reflect the dynamics of our population diversity. Some appointments have already been made. With the Fijian Broadcasting Corporation, it was imperative that a new Board be appointed, given the resignation of the previous Board members. The same applied to the Fiji Development Bank, Mr. Speaker, Sir, where resignations prevented the meeting of the Board due to a lack of quorum. The meeting was urgently required to seek a guarantee extension which will be tabled in this honourable Parliament later this week as the current guarantee expires soon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, directors and employees of statutory bodies and state-owned enterprises will be required to observe appropriate standards of conduct, performance, ethics and act within the law. The aim is to lift profitability and sustainability and ensure diligent control. In this regard, it is critical that timely annual reports are produced. Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir, for announcing those Standing Committees and Select Committees; they will be very busy.

In light of publicity about excessive remunerations, the re-establishment of the Higher Salaries Commission will set guidelines for salaries and benefits for CEOs and other high-level executives. The Commission will also be the responsible agency to ensure the consistency of salaries and benefits for CEOs, for State-Owned enterprises and statutory bodies, rather than the prior Prime Minister and the Attorney-General as had been the case between 2011 and 2022. We want to ensure that these are realistic and appropriate for the demand in the labour market. At the same time, there must be consistency and transparency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with regards to our foreign relations, I prioritised rebuilding regional unity as Chairman of the Pacific Islands Forum, a position I inherit from the former Prime Minister. The State visit to Kiribati and the meeting with His Excellency the President, Taneti Maamau, three weeks ago was very successful. The aim was to find a path for Kiribati to re-join the Forum family after their withdrawal last year.

A united Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) is better placed to protect the interests of our region. This is especially significant at a time of international manoeuvring for big power influence in the Pacific and the common challenges we face, in particular, climate change problems. His Excellency, President Maamau and I also agreed on various measures to improve and strengthen the Fiji-Kiribati bilateral relationship.

The Coalition Government has also prioritised mending our relationship with the University of the South Pacific, the most successful example of co-operation in our region. We will make an initial payment to begin reducing our significant debt left with the USP, and we will do that later this week. I am glad the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Pal Ahluwalia has returned to Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I look forward to meeting him later this week.

As Minister for Foreign Affairs, I intend to review the closure of some key diplomatic missions in key strategic locations. The decision, I believe, worked against our interests, particularly at this time where Fiji needs to engage more effectively with our strategic partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I would like to acknowledge the support given by our development partners in helping to make the Black Rock Facility in Votualevu, Nadi, fully operational. I thank the former Government for their effort in the establishment of that. This will surely enhance and strengthen our regional disaster response capabilities.

Australia and New Zealand remain key strategic partners. We will continue to strengthen our relationship with the United States of America while continuing co-operation with the People's Republic of China, respecting our mutual understanding of the 'One China Policy' and respecting our national sovereign rights.

Our long-standing relationship with India continues to grow from strength to strength. We are keen to further develop bilateral and multilateral relations with Asia and the Middle East, particularly with Israel, while we consolidate partnership with the European Union, the United Kingdom and other countries that share our common interest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, climate change and the environment is now under the portfolio of the Prime Minister. The hallmarks of climate change are global warming (as we all know), rising sea levels (as we all see), pollution and more frequent and the increasing intensity of adverse weather conditions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issues that confront us here at home continue to be:

- polluted shorelines and coastal areas, such as the Laucala Bay and Draunibota Bay in Lami;
- clogged drains and waterways, leading to regular flooding;
- Suva Harbour is the graveyard for rusting wrecks and abandoned ships;
- contaminated marine life and related threats to human life;
- rural and urban landscapes polluted by thousands of tonnes of dumped rubbish and waste, including mountains of plastic;
- toxic emissions from buses and other vehicles;
- widespread destruction of mangroves; and

- seawater intrusion into coastal villages which require relocation to higher ground, an expensive and culturally very sensitive exercise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do not yet have a specific masterplan to holistically address these environmental problems, but we are starting to look at opportunities and the possibilities of donor support to help us in that big exercise. I will be recommending a study to be carried out in recycling which will minimise pollution. It will also reduce solid waste and protect the environment. I note with interest, Sir, that Tourism Fiji is now expressing an interest in waste management and recycling, and I commend them for that. There is a need for expensive public consultation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the problems of pollution and environmental damage. This will also be on the agenda for the upcoming National Economic Summit or the People's Forum sometime in April. Individual government agencies are also initiating clean-up programmes around the country, and I encourage all of us in this august Parliament to participate where and when we can.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my portfolio also includes Information, meaning the media and its operations. As Prime Minister, I have made it clear that the Government is totally committed to allowing the nation the freedom of the press. That will include the review of the Media Industry Development Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe we cannot have proper democracy without a free press which has been described as the oxygen of democracy. We depend on newspapers, television, radio and other electronic and digital forms of communication for information and news.

Citizens must be informed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, about events and developments in society. Otherwise, they cannot truly fulfil their democratic obligations to give their views and participate in governance and general debate. An active and free press creates a progressive society. It is a self-correcting mechanism for a free and fair society. Admission of national wrongs is part of that, so is the ability to learn from mistakes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government will carefully study the arrangements by which one of our daily newspapers had received substantial amount of public funds for advertising over more than one-and-a-half decade. We are also interested in the connection between that money and the newspaper's servile admiration of, and bias towards the government of that era. It was no more than a propaganda paper. The Coalition Government has given an assurance that we will end that era of media oppression. We are discussing new legislation reflecting democratic values. There is also discussion about establishing a system of self-regulation, underpinned by a code of conduct, with a media council to adjudicate complaints by the public about media coverage as was the case before 2006.

After the election results of December 2022, the atmosphere in Fiji has changed dramatically. The climate of fear has gone. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his Address, His Excellency called for Fiji to be united as one nation we all call home. We need to be united. Those words resonate with me, with us, and with the entire population. Fiji is home to us all.

That leads me to the question of our national identity, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I had previously stated that I favoured "Fijian" as our common name, however, I always knew that the question of a common name is a difficult one. It is not a simple matter. The commentary by lawyer Graham Leung in the *Fiji Times* on Saturday dealt very well with the complexities involved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are reaping what the former Government sowed in its 2013 Constitution, our national constitution of today. It declared that we were all Fijians but did so without consultation

that should have taken place on such an important and sensitive national matter. I am fully aware that many indigenous Fijians are less than persuaded. Others too have divergent views.

I recently mentioned the possibility of a referendum. It is an option, but there may be other ways to proceed. I am going to add to this debate by briefly quoting social media comments made by Mr. Ranjan Charan, a People's Alliance supporter in Ba. He argues that we will not get togetherness by imposing the name "Fijian" on everyone. He suggests more discussion on the common name. He said, and I quote:

"I am convinced that we have enough good leaders on both sides of the House to get to a result that is acceptable to all."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an *iTaukei* gentlemen from the West also said, and I quote:

"Had the Fijians been consulted via their chiefs and others, they would have shared the name willingly."

He further stated, and I quote:

"There is no doubt in my heart that being the kind and accepting people that they are, the *iTaukei* will bestow on everyone the dignity of a common national identity in the term "Fijian". All you need to do is to politely ask them."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department of Veteran Affairs is now under the Prime Minister's purview. It will be in consultation with the Boards of the Ex-Servicemen and the Returned Sailors and Servicemen Association that I will be developing welfare papers for their benefit.

National unity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a complex matter. I have worked very hard across boundaries to bring people together. I worked in the Solomons, I worked in Nepal, and I will continue to do so here in Fiji. We all now belong to these islands. Our national mission is for a society of equality, fairness and justice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope I have shared some food for thought and democratic discussion. With respect, I commend the motion to Parliament. God bless us all and God bless Fiji.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please take note that we will follow the Batting Order accordingly. Before I offer the floor to the honourable Leader of the Opposition, I, at this juncture, wish to adjourn Parliament so we could take morning tea. When we resume, the honourable Leader of the Opposition will be taking the floor. Sir, we will also be flexible in allowing more time since you have requested for more time to deliver your response to His Excellency's Address. Thank you, honourable Members, we now adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.32 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.10 a.m.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Parliament that I speak in this morning is not the Parliament that it was last year. The Fiji that I speak in today is not the Fiji of 55 days ago. Today's Fiji does not care to follow the rule of the law. It is a Fiji where the honourable Prime Minister, his Attorney-General and his Ministers do not follow the Constitution which brought them to this Parliament in the first place.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- They make their rules and disregard the law as and when it suits them.

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.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Very poor.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Same rhetoric.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- We have a Judiciary where the sitting Chief Justice has been suspended for frivolous matters.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Shame!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- We have Independent Constitutional Officers forced to resign or suspended with no regard for the Constitution and their independence and due process.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Very poor, shame!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have intelligent, diligent and professional civil servants removed, terminated, suspended and sidelined without rhyme or reason or due process.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Very poor.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- We have our regulatory processes being eroded and illegal directives are issued because Ministers, their political cronies and newly appointed civil servants believe that their interests supersedes the law.

We have the honourable Prime Minister almost every second day stating how he will remove the Constitution and thinking of circumventing proper procedures laid out in the Constitution itself.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Reading *Fiji Sun* too much.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- We have the Rabuka-led three uneven legged stool Government stating its intention to dismantle Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) even though there is a constitutional necessity for its existence. His Government is ignoring

the fact that we have ratified the United Nations Convention Against Corruption and the fact that we need such an independent body to eradicate systemic corruption and hold all public officers accountable and maintain our credibility with our donors, bilateral partners and multi-lateral development banks.

We have Ministers in the three uneven legged stool Government directly or indirectly stating that the policies they promised during their campaign will now not be delivered.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Shame!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- One recently stated that those announcements were made in the heat of the moment. It was one of the three Deputy Prime Ministers.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Same old thing coming from the Opposition.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Very poor.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- By the way, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the three Deputy Prime Ministers for a country of our size is a global record.

(Laughter)

Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, every single Member of the three uneven legged stool Government is a Minister or Assistant Minister. Indeed, a record for Fiji...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Not resigning.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... and perhaps even for the world.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Everyone is running away from you, look in the mirror!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would appear that buying loyalty or bribing one to obtain loyalty is the new norm.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Even when no one is there?

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Civil servants including permanent secretaries, teachers and those in Government related companies are no longer recruited, appointed or promoted on objectivity, impartiality ...

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

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... and fair competition, ability, education, experience ...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Talking about yourself.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... and other characteristics of merit.

It is now who you know, your ethnic group, your province, whether you are a political supporter or crony, how much you flatter the powers that be or even perhaps how much money you may have paid.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Aww!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- We now have an environment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, where people are worried to speak openly.

(Laughter)

I am not kidding. They believe...

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... they will be subjected to unjustified and illegal accusations.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Freedom of expression is under threat.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You know what you are talking about?

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Can you shut up?

Freedom of expression is under threat.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

(Laughter)

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Social media is vile and toxic. Supporters of these three uneven legged stool Government are making extremely racist and religiously chauvinistic comments ...

HON. V. PILLAY.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... and indeed threats and getting away with it.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Rubbish.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Shameful.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- For example?

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- These are even on pages on those who can remove those comments but it is allowed to be perpetuated for the sake of political expediency.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Shameful.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- No police action. You have a divisive Prime Minister and his

Government and supporters who are dividing Fiji so rapidly that it is shacking our Constitutional safeguard of common and equal citizenry to its core.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is what you have been saying all along.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- That is one for you honourable Prof. Biman Prasad.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Yet, only those who seemingly making comments, critical of the Government are threatened or hauled in ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Yes.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... by the police or have a illegal stop departure orders or are monitored or declared persons of interest.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Look at yourself in the mirror.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- The farce of the comment “let love shine” is the biggest con job.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Oh!

HON J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- It is a hoax, idiotic and hypocritical of the highest degree. It is very sickening because as in the 80s and early 90s, what is said is exactly opposite to what is happening on the ground.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Shame.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a brief context within which His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji opened Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know when we were in Government and you were in Opposition, the then Opposition had chastised and berated previous presidential statements because of political motivations. I do so today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, not for political reasons but because His Excellency the President has failed to protect the Constitution, the rule of law and failed to halt the resultant chaos that is insidiously and rapidly creeping in and the impending disaster that is going to befall upon our beloved country...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What a shame, the President is there because of you.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... that will fall upon our people, upon our economy and upon our future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji as Head of State in whom rests 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.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- He's receiving free and in impartial advice.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- As the Commander-in-Chief, he has failed to provide proper guidance to the RFMF.

In short, Mr. Speaker, Sir, he who previously espoused to subscribe to the values of the Constitution has now tragically ignored the mockery that the Rabuka-led Government has made of constitutional democracy.

In 2014, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my maiden speech, I thanked my wife, children and grandchildren and today my great granddaughter. I had also thanked my parents who imbibed me with values I hold dear of love for family, love of community and love of country.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Today, I thank them all. I grew up - thanks largely to my parents and brothers at Marist Brothers High School, committed to the notion of Fiji as one big multiracial family in which everyone belongs to and everyone deserves substantive equal treatment.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. V. BAINIMARAMA.- I have always tried to see my fellow citizens through the prism of their own personality and character rather than their ethnic background or religious belief.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- It does not matter to me who you are or what you believe in. What is most important to me is whether you are honest, courageous, compassionate, stand up for what is right, protect the vulnerable and treat the people the way you would like to be treated yourself with consideration and respect.

I passionately believe in one Fiji in which everyone belongs and no one gets left behind - putting our nation's interests before ourselves and defending our unity as a nation against those who wish to divide us. This is why I always want to pay tribute to my colleagues in the military. For those of us in the military in 2006, who passionately believed in national unity, came to the conclusion that the fabric of our nation was unravelling, and that the only radical intervention would enable us to pick up the threads.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thus, the *coup*.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- We had all gone through the trauma of 2000 and the mutiny that had caused us so much pain.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Actions speak louder than words.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Sitiveni Rabuka then and now Prime Minister made a guest appearance during the mutiny with his fully pressed uniform, lurking to pick up the spoils but he was chased away when he was caught hiding under the table.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Subsequent to those events, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it became quite apparent rather quickly that those same racist and corrupt persons who were involved in the removal of the Chaudhry Government in 2000 had reared their heads again. We had no choice, we took the tough decision necessary to keep Fiji united - we prevented large numbers of our people from being relegated to second or third class citizens, halted the spiralling out of control corruption and elitism, the rise in provincialism and began the task of reforming our society from the ground up.

Only a radical intervention in 2006 was capable of getting Fiji back on track, of establishing once and for all the universal democratic principle that all men and women are equal.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Before 2006, that was simply not the case in Fiji, but under our current Constitution, it is. We have a Constitution that not only guarantees genuine equality and democracy, but also provides Fijians with the range of unprecedented socio-economic rights. It puts in place institutions that will not only address the issues of systematic corruption, but also provide unprecedented levels of accountability and transparency in public life and institutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the Republic of Fiji Military Forces for supporting the 2006 reform process. I wish to thank them for carrying out its duty in 2006 to be the ultimate guarantor of our national security of holding Fiji together and for the personal support I received as Commander and those around me, those patriots who shared my vision of a united Fiji. It was through the unwavering and unassailable support of the RFMF and the public support garnered through nationwide consultations that led to the introduction of a genuine democracy, to lead the fight against corruption, tackle the self-serving elite and offer a vision of an inclusive nation with fairness and justice for all.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- And all of this was done through our Constitution promulgated in September, 2013.

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. Fijians, in particular, the weak and vulnerable, those who want actual and practical implementation of the rule of law, those who want the practical implementation of the Constitution and those Fijians who want socio-economic stability all look up to the RFMF to guarantee this, if and when it is under threat. 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 that its gift and legacy, the Fijian Constitution is being ignored and bashed on a daily basis and the current Prime Minister wants what the RFMF worked so hard for, removed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the President spoke about ILO Convention 169. I remember when he was the President of FijiFirst, we had discussed numerous times about how the ethno-nationalists want to use 169 to justify the suppression of rights of others and to use it to advance elitism in Fiji. It has come back now. We had also discussed how 169 was meant not for the countries like Fiji, but for those indigenous people who had faced genocide, had lost their lands, their lands pillaged and taken away and their people raped and killed off. We had also discussed how it was not applicable in the Fijian context, therefore Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was surprised that he so easily rolled over and gave in to this Government's ethno-nationalist agenda.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- We did not say that.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- The Fijian Constitution protects and recognises the indigenous people of this country ...

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear! hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... the *iTaukei* and Rotumans. It recognises their uniqueness. It protects their lands and the ownership of their lands. It absolutely stopped the permanent alienation of indigenous land unlike the 1990 and 1997 Constitutions which allowed for the *iTaukei* land to be converted to freehold when Rabuka and Qarase were Prime Ministers under the SVT and SDL governments respectively. Yet, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this almost xenophobic and whipped-up inward looking fervour are at the expense of an inclusive society, and at the expense of a Constitution which states that all citizens are Fijians, but we have a Prime Minister who refuses to call citizens of this country Fijians. They have even gone to the extent of changing the Government *Facebook* and webpage from Fijian Government to Fiji Government.

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

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- That is how ridiculous it has become.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- It reminds me of a joke about Harry in one of the villages in the Western Division but I will come to that sometime later on. This is how regressive a society, a country we have become, rather amusingly the billboard promoting the World Hindi Conference - the conference facilitated under FijiFirst refers to the Fijian Government as the Fiji Government and the Government of India as the Indian Government. We have become a laughing stock. We no longer have a matured government that feels confident enough to call itself the Fijian Government but can call other governments Australian, American, Indian and British Government – how petty, how pathetic, how immature and how insecure.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Pathetic!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent FBC saga epitomises the disaster and chaos that is unfolding rather rapidly under this incompetent Rabuka-led Government.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Look forward, look forward, it is getting boring!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- This debacle which FBC epitomizes the manner in which this Government conduct itself, it is all over the place, it is amateurish and it is beholden to an ethno-nationalist agenda and a bunch of incompetent people. Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have the *matanigasau* farce - it is making a mockery of the *iTaukei* culture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the amount of *matanigasau*, *sevusevu*, *salusalu* we have seen in the past few weeks can be summarised as not only self-glorification but the denigration and commodification of *iTaukei* culture. The Rabuka Government wants to go back in time to ministerial portfolios that are no longer applicable in the 21st century but they will do it come what may, because it is all about themselves individually not about the country or the organisations.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- You do not know your culture.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- And if their actions will cause social disruptions, they will still do it. It is dogma. For example, in their quest to get PWD come what may, they have already cost hundreds of job losses for those working for Fijian and foreign companies. They will cause extra burden on government finances, they will increase the operational costs of the government, they will remove modern techniques, engineering standards and professionalism and they have already caused grave concern amongst the multilateral development banks, bilateral partners and specialised UN bodies.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Your disaster.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- \$11 billion is too much.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- They want to use the churches to justify this agenda, an anathema to the Constitution. In all of this, the President who we looked up to because we believed that he genuinely believed the values and principles of the Constitution, has done an about turn. He has failed the Fijian people.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- He found out the truth!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- He has failed the Fijian people and he will go down in history...

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- He listened to advice.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... as the person who aided and abetted the most incompetent and divisive government - a government set out to destroy constitutional democracy and in a modern, inclusive and progressive Fiji that the RFMF and FijiFirst worked so hard for.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- The chaos continues on this new dawn government where a permanent dusk seems to be falling on all fronts. The Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Two are at loggerheads over the question of a mini budget. The Fijian public are further subjected to frightening information about the PM's secret think tank group who without any proper appointment or authority, subject countless civil servants with illegal daily instructions which are only followed because of the fear or threats of phone tapping and victimisation.

This Government, Mr. Speaker, continues to appoint their cronies and failed candidates for jobs and two jobs without these positions being advertised or applications and interviews being undertaken. Parmesh Chand, who we understand failed twice to be appointed by the previous PSC is now PS of Civil Service and Pita Wise, advisor to the People's Alliance Party is now the PS in the PM's Office. Both men occupy these posts without any proper recruitment process provided for under the Constitution. Another act of hypocrisy and corruption.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- The "love-all" Rabuka Government does not see the irony in constantly preaching about freedom of speech, free media and lecturing Fijians about not fearing anyone, but at the same time taking in activists and following lawyers and journalists at night, and stopping them, and questioning them, Gestapo Nazi style because they are apparently persons of

interest. All of this, under the watch of the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration, who it appears is now the *de facto* Commissioner of Police.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, under the Fijian Constitution everyone is free to practice their religion. I remember when we had prayers in this Parliament last year, when the Speaker used to say Amen, Members used to say *Jisu*, they were free to do so and no one stopped them. But the Speaker cannot make that part of his formal prayer because he has to be neutral. He has to be inclusive. In the same way Government must be neutral, must be inclusive, not exclusive. Listen Biman!

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Your *de facto* leader must have written your speech. We know that.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- That is how you build a strong and united nation. Very simple, very just, very fair and very Christian. Christ never thrust himself onto others. Christ was loving. Christ taught love. Christ never imposed. Christ loved Jews and Gentiles alike. Christ did not rebuke people who came from different tribes, different ethnicities, different religions, Christ loved all because we are all God's children.

Mr. Speaker, I want all Fijians irrespective of their backgrounds to understand what I am saying, and I know most do. I do not expect the Prime Minister, his three deputy PMs, his ministers or assistant ministers to accept or embrace this teaching of Christ. To them, Christ's teachings are to be used, distorted and abused for their ethnic and political agenda and personal and political advancement.

Mr. Speaker, I want to say that FijiFirst is the largest single political party in this Parliament.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- The next two largest political parties combined, Mr. Speaker, could not get more seats than FijiFirst.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- It had to take the smallest party with three seats joining them for honourable Rabuka to become Prime Minister and all 29 to become Ministers and Assistant Ministers.

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You destroyed everything.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, to be the largest party in Parliament meant that we received singularly the most votes. It also meant that I, as the leader of FijiFirst had nearly double the number of votes than the current Prime Minister.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Wrong voting system!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- It also meant that many Fijians from all walks of life, from all parts of Fiji supported FijiFirst. I wish to take this opportunity to thank our supporters, volunteers, all our candidates elected and unelected, all the families, the young and old, men and women and our General Secretary who all combined to make our electoral campaign a success. We will be meeting and reaching out to you on a regular basis starting with our own get together with our supporters this Saturday at 2.00 p.m. at Tilak High School, Lautoka.

I also wish to pay tribute to the former Supervisor of Elections, a professional with international acclaim and a man who proficiently conducted three successful elections. I wish to also thank the Electoral Commissioners and all the relevant development and bilateral partners, including the co-Chairs, Australia, India and Indonesia of the Multinational Observer Group (MOG), who all ensured that we successfully conducted the 2022 General Election.

Mr. Speaker, thank you and God Bless all Fijians and Fiji.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please be reminded to keep to the timing so as to ensure that we all participate in the delivery of the maiden speeches.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen and to all the people of Fiji joining us through televised broadcast around the world via Parliament *Facebook* live, ni sa yadra vinaka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I join other Members of Parliament in congratulating you on your election as Speaker of this august Parliament and of the Deputy Speaker, honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua on 24th December, 2022. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this date has a lot of significance for me not only because it was the day I was sworn in as a Member of Parliament but because it was also the first time I entered this esteemed Parliament.

As a researcher working at the Office of the Leader of Opposition, I would only come as far as the corridors of this august Parliament to deliver printed documents and resource materials for the Members. Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sitting in this august Parliament as a Member of Parliament and an Assistant Minister.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the party leader of the People's Alliance Party and our current honourable Prime Minister, for trusting me to be part of his candidate line-up in the 2022 General Elections. A lot has been said about the outcome of the recent General Elections but one thing I know for sure is that the people of Ra have been crying for change for far too long and have now rejoiced in the fact that two of their own are representatives in this august Parliament. After the 2014 and then the 2018 General Elections, no representatives from my province in Ra made it to Parliament. I was studying in Japan in 2018 and saw how the outcome of the election unveiled.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the years followed saw discrepancies in our political system, the lack of consultation and the urgent need to review draconian legislations and policies that governed all aspects of Government machineries. Almost a decade later, a daring daughter, wife and a mother from Nabalabala Saivou in Ra decided that it was high time that the voices of our people had to be heard and represented in this august Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I look back and I attest to God faithfulness and in no way was my appointment as a Researcher at the Office of the Leader of Opposition, an accident. Who would have

known? Only God knows. Just as He had assured us in his word in Proverbs 19: 21, I quote: “That we may have many plans in our hearts, but it is his purpose that always prevails”. I would like to thank my Heavenly Father, the mighty God I serve, for His sense of direction and guidance and for granting me the strength and wisdom to be where I am today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank *Na Turaga Bale na Tui Ca'au* for his foresight and words of wisdom and encouragement. *Vina'a va'alevu*, Sir. I would also like to thank His Excellency for his most gracious Address and sharing with our beloved nation our plans and policies going forward as the Coalition Government.

I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the Debate on the Opening Address of His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are a number of people that I wish to acknowledge as they have been very instrumental in my upbringing and in my journey in fulfilling my political aspirations:

- My late paternal grandparents - Bubu Matia and Bubu Vula, who raised me up when I was at a tender age of three, living with them in the village, and taught me a lot of lifelong survival skills and familiarised myself with my kinship ties.
- My late maternal grandmother, Nau Siteri, who lived and looked after us in our home as my parents were sometimes away on duty travel and cooked delicious homecooked meals for us. My children were blessed to have known their great grandmother who, at times, took the liberty of looking after them as well.
- I wish to thank a special person who recently passed, my Nau Salusalu, who offered to raise my three-month old daughter when I had to leave for studies in Japan.
- My husband, Aminiasi, from Tabuya, Nabukelevu in Kadavu, who has been my number one support in my political journey right from day one, encouraging me along the way and reminding me that nothing good comes easy, and if God is for us, who can be against us? Thank you for your love and all that you do Tamai Sakiusa.
- My children whom I love dearly - Sakiusa, Sanaila, Ruth, Vasiti, Lilian, Aloesi kei Dee and Makereta.
- My parents, Ralulu and Penina Cirikiyasawa, for their endless support and their assistance in assisting me in my campaign trail - I thank them sincerely.
- My siblings - Qoli, Cagi, Tuti, Sera, Paula and Vasiti, for their financial support and encouragement.
- Mr. and Mrs. Senimili Bainivalu, I thank you sincerely.
- Mr. Jove Ravulaca, Seattle, USA; Ms. Esiteri Matalau, San Jose, USA; and People's Alliance Party, USA - I thank them for their financial assistance.
- My ACS Old Girls Lillian sisters, and families and friends whom I might have overlooked.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, growing up, there was never a time where we lived as a nuclear family. There were always relatives from Ra and Vanua Levu at home with us to study, whether for their secondary or tertiary education. My mother was a strong advocate for education and was always willing to have relatives stay with us for the duration of their studies. So, at a young age, Sir, I understood the value of education, building relationships with family and relatives and to always have a lending heart to help others.

I wish to especially acknowledge my relatives and those who honoured me with their votes. One of the greatest experiences during the campaign period was the opportunity to meet and reconnect with my relatives and to understand the importance of being related to someone. What a wonderful experience it was!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to thank my relatives in the villages of Tokaimalo, Nalaba and Saivou: Koro o Nabalabala, Vunisea, Nailawa, Ma'aveikai, Nayaulevu, Naraviravi, Naivutu, Vuniyaumunu, Narauyaba, Maniyava, Navavai, Nativi, Burelevu, Namara, Barotu, Navunibitu Catholic Parish, Rokoroko, Vanua o Natawia, Vanua o Yavulevu, Nanukuloa, Naiserelagi, Vaidoko, Naboutolu, Nokonoko, Namuimada, Rewasa, Vatukaceveceva, Vanua o Mataso - Nakorovou, Narikoso; Vanua o Navitilevu - Nasau, Nayavaira, Navuniivi, Veidrala; Vanua o Nakuilava - Toki, Tobu, Savuloto, Bucalevu; Vanua o Bureivanua - Nalidi; Vanua o Nalawa - Vanuakula, Nauria, Waidrata kei Nasukamai.

Ve i kemuni kece na kai ciqu - lavo kai, ako kai, lovara kai, kei kemuni kece na wekaqu ena noqu yasana va'uraga o Ra, sa dua na drauniveva vou vei kia qoi. Sa rua na luvei Ra sa 'iko qoi i Palimedi. Me da yadra 'iko, da vei 'auriliga, cakacaka va'a, da kua ni numi leva a nia na noda i bole na "Mae Na Mae".

[To all my extended family – siblings, parents, relatives and all my relations in my beloved Ra province, we are now onto a fresh new page. Two children from Ra are now in Parliament. Let us wake, hold hands and collaborate selflessly and not forget our motto (Death is the end!)]

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to thank my maternal ties through the Villages of Drekeniwai, Lea, Vunilagi, Tacilevu. *Vina 'a valevu vei 'emudou 'ece a we 'aqu mai* Navatu. [I would like to thank my relatives from Navatu] I would also like to thank my voters from all across Fiji and those who had voted for me through postal ballot, I thank you all sincerely.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the same note, I congratulate all the 55 Members of Parliament for a hard-fought campaign and success in making it this far. I acknowledge the work and efforts of candidates of all political parties, particularly the candidates from Ra. Please, allow me to thank them, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Na kai ciqu [My relatives] - Mr. Napolioni Nasara, Mr. Jale Silimaibau, Mr. Kiniviliame Salabogi, Ms. Ana Naivou, Mr. Pauliasi Matawalu and my *tavale* [cousin] - Ratu Josaia Niudamu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my outstanding campaign team deserves my greatest appreciation for their hard work and perseverance. *Tata Ua, Tutua Ratu, Tutua Vari, Naca, Uliano, Matia, Alumita and Esawa, au va 'vinavinaka levu vei ko dou* [I thank you all], and to my hardworking polling agents who monitored and provided relevant polling information for the People's Alliance Party – Latileta, Evivi, Peni, Mere, Ilisapeci, Liwa, Bolebole, Sereia, Kesaia, Seruwaia, Lavenia, Solomoni, Kalaveti, Naca, Uli, Alumita and Matia.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am here today because of all the people I have mentioned above. If there is anything I would do to repay their sacrifices and hard work, it would be to pledge that I will do everything in my power to look after their interest.

I joined one of only five women in Parliament today. As a wife and a mother, getting here was not easy, I stand here not only as a representative of Parliament or representative of my Party or community, but as a representative of the thousands of women and girls of Fiji, who know are equally capable of standing where I am today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is an honour for me to stand here as a Member of Parliament under the Coalition Government of Fiji – the necessary formation of the three political parties, to help, heal, develop, and move our country forward. The People's Alliance Party, the National Federation Party

and the Social Democratic Liberal Party put aside their differences to work together to move Fiji forward, for where there is unity, God will command his blessings.

I support His Excellency's call for Fiji to be united now more than ever. As a nation, we are up against grave challenges - the impacts of climate change, globalisation and economic downturn, all while still recovering.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for someone who was raised in the village and has worked with several communities during the course of my career, I know the reality on the ground. I understand the everyday struggles of our people and I recognise the need to empower them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Prime Minister for his foresight and vision for a united Fiji, a Fiji that is seeing a new dawn. As the Assistant Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, in the first few days of taking office and having met so many stakeholders, I have a much stronger appreciation of the industry and its contribution to Fiji's economy. The industry - our national airline, have all done wonderfully well. We can see this in the stellar recovery that has today allowed thousands of our people to return to the jobs they love.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the tourism industry has exceeded expectations in terms of recovery. We went from 146,905 visitors in 2020, which was the 16 percent of the 2019 levels, to a recovery of 71 percent today.

HON. P.K. BALA.- That's why we never sold the airline.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- We have had record breaking numbers for the month of July, September and November compared to 2019. We have never seen so many Australians in Fiji in a single month as we did in December last year, and we have had a good turnout from New Zealanders, Americans and the Pacific Islanders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, economic forecasts also show that high visitor numbers and related spending, combined with high prices, boosted tourism receipts, as per overseas exchange transaction records reached just over \$1.4 billion, so the tourism truly is a multi-billion-dollar industry for us. The pandemic had obvious bearing on the global aviation industry, which not only impacted our tourism numbers, but trade as well in terms of cargo.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last year, Fiji Airways carried a remarkable 1.3 million passengers. This is a testament to the airline's commitment to providing quality products and services to its customers. Based on the current booking trend and the overwhelming demand for Fiji as a tourism destination of choice, we envisage an even brighter future. It is our belief that 2023 will be an even more successful year with passenger numbers and forward bookings expected to continue an upward trajectory.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the opening of borders and easing of travel restrictions, passenger air transport has been recovering well with passenger numbers hitting almost 70 percent of pre-pandemic numbers. We know that a safe and secure aviation system goes a long way in ensuring passenger confidence and satisfaction in air travel. When passengers are confident and satisfied, the industry will be more competitive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji and the Pacific rely heavily on our national airline for connectivity, trade and tourism, especially given our geographically isolated and dispersed islands. In this regard, I want to also acknowledge the safety and security aspects of Fiji's aviation industry.

The Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji (CAAF) leads Fiji's aviation safety and security obligations as a member-State of the United Nation's International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO). Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji was recently awarded the ICAO Council President Certificate in a special ceremony at the 41st Session of the ICAO Assembly in September 2022. This was a recognition of the progress Fiji had made in improving the effective implementation of our safety oversight systems in compliance with ICAO standards. The Fiji Civil Aviation System is well above the global average and the highest in the South Pacific, excluding Australia and New Zealand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during my visit to CAAF and Fiji Airports, I met a lot of remarkable women, who are playing very critical roles in the aviation industry, and it is my hope that these women inspire the next generation to take up a career in aviation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my job now as an Assistant Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation is to help nurture these critical sectors - nurture it to a point where it has even greater capability to support other sectors of our economy.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, direct flights to Hong Kong and Japan are starting in April this year, and we expect to see a boost in trade with Asia. While we grow and sustain our traditional tourism markets, we want to diversify into emerging ones who we know have enormous potential.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Airways also plays a critical role in international trade through its A350 wide-body aircraft cargo capacity. In 2022, the company transported 30,000 tonnes of cargo, making growth of nearly 40 percent. Air freight of fresh produce and frozen fish have been the main commodities exported so far with Fiji Airways, projecting further growth in 2023. This is an area we want to grow, not just through the airline, but having the right airport infrastructure to support and leverage Fiji's position as a transshipment hub.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am also encouraged by Fiji Airways' commitment to become a sustainable airline. They have established an Environmental, Social and Governance Committee, who have embarked on a journey to achieving global standards in sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, great airline connectivity requires the necessary infrastructure. The Coalition Government will encourage closer collaboration between our airports, our national airline and our boarder agencies. It will open up new digital and streamline boarder processes offering a swift and secure path into Fiji.

This new facility, Mr. Speaker, Sir, along with other infrastructure improvements at airports and in air traffic management will set a new standard for aviation across Fiji, ensuring travellers experience a level of service that we can all be proud of. In addition to Fiji's Airports Capital Investment Programme, we will invest in technological advancement to enhance the safety of asset operations across all 15 airports and facilitate smoother journey through the terminals.

Using video analytics, the Fiji Airports operations will have access to real time aircraft operations data to make smarter and proactive decisions. In isolation, these are incremental changes but when they are combined, they become a truly transformation of change in the way our airports are operated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a Coalition Government we fully intend on delivering to our people. With more of a strategic focus in the tourism sector, we can ensure everyone reaps the benefits. Our focus will no longer be just to promote Fiji in a way where tourists come, stay at hotels and simply lie on the beach. There is so much more to offer. The new tourism brand "Where Happiness Comes Naturally" speaks to that and reinforces what a special nation we are. We will take tourism to new

regions so that every tourism dollar is spread. We will promote the new niche product such as sports tourism that can help achieve this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in November this year we will host Spartan which is a series of obstacle races, and the event will take nearly 2,000 visitors to remote areas of Fiji so that communities too can benefit from this venture. This will be our first major tourism event since the pandemic, so we are quite excited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, apart from sports tourism, we will place a lot more emphasise on eco-tourism. Tourists are becoming increasingly conscientious; they want more meaningful travel and activities that do not harm the environment. This is an area where we can leverage and should leverage as stewards of our land and resources. We will encourage tourism products where you can swim with the dolphins in the village of Silana, take a tour of a coconut farm in Savusavu or track in the inlands of Ra. The trend towards sustainability will remain in the long term, so we will invest more in this area, not only because it is what tourist demand but because sustainable tourism is the future for all of us.

It is my sincere hope, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that during my tenure, I will serve the people of my country on the values of social justice and equality. It is my hope that our deliberations and the decisions we make in this august Parliament guarantee our people the two democracy they rightfully deserve. May God bless us all and may God bless Fiji.

(Acclamation)

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, allow me first to thank God for this place, time and opportunity that all of us have been called to such a place and for such a time as this.

Before I move on with my contribution to the debate, as *Qase ni Vanua vua na Turaga Bale o Koya na Ratu*, I mourn the loss of Ratu Kolinio Rokotuinaceva Ravoka, youngest son and later younger brother to successive paramount chiefs of my *Vanua o Verata*. If not for the parliamentary sitting today, I would have been at Ucunivanua carrying out my traditional duties. I also convey condolences to the *Vanua o Sukanacagi* on the passing of their paramount chief, *Turaga na Tui Vitogo*. May they both rest in peace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I add my congratulations on your elevation to the Speaker's Chair. It was historically not an enviable seat as we learnt when watching the ceremony of the dragging of the Speaker on previous occasions we met in this august Chamber. We have confidence that your experience as one of the longest serving parliamentarians, winning a seat in the preceding five general elections in 1999, 2001, 2006, 2014 and 2018 mean that you are more than equal to the task.

Before I respond substantively to His Excellency's most gracious Address, with particular focus viz-a-viz the portfolio I have been entrusted by the honourable Prime Minister, I wish to begin by thanking His Excellency. I also wish to acknowledge the dignity and decorum with which His Excellency has carried himself as Head of State in the recent fraught period leading into and immediately after the general election that closed out 2022.

For many of us, learning constitutional parliamentary norms, standing orders and conventions will be a steep learning curve but we have confidence in the leadership team of the Coalition Government and look forward to robust debates with His Excellency's loyal Opposition. I would

not be here making my maiden address to this august Parliament, if not for the trust and confidence of every single voter who saw fit to elect me to this position.

My first vote of thanks on this earthly plane at least, go out to all my voters primarily in Tailevu North but indeed everywhere in Fiji that voted for me - I am truly humbled. There is a saying in the indigenous vernacular, "*qoroqoroya na matai luvena*", literally translated as a parent wondering at his own child's face, but taken to mean a close relative praising another, something culturally considered unseemly. Nonetheless, the home base of my support is none other than that of my own family – my beautiful wife and campaign manager, Salote and her siblings and their families. She and I both acknowledge all those supporters in Fiji and abroad, volunteers and Party officials who assisted in the campaign, chief among them being Simione Samate of Korocau, Cakaudrove, who has become like a member of our family.

In mentioning the campaign, my wife and I became grandparents in the early stages of the Alliance Party's formation and a special mention must be made of our precious granddaughter, Lotiola, who brings us so much joy. It was not easy juggling the demands of campaigning as a candidate, responsibilities of General Secretary, as well as life generally and as a new grandparent, and I thank the honourable Prime Minister for his unwavering trust in, and support of me.

I acknowledge the support of our children - Makelesi, Levani, Fatafehi, Mele, Esetia and Joelinda, not forgetting our sons-in-law Biutoka and Toga and nephews Jason, Koia, Sakiasi and Tulele. The wider extended families of my in-laws, my late siblings - Joeli, Suliasi and Jone and my sole surviving sibling, Tupou, and their respective families and in-laws. I honour my own parents-in-law; my late mother-in-law Sosefina Ongolea, originally from Lapaha, Mua, Tongatapu in the Kingdom of Tonga and my late father-in-law Jekope Rusivakula from Namuka, Tai-o-Bau, Bau, Tailevu. I also honour my late uncle Sakiusa Rokotakala and aunt Makelesi Vora, who were my guardians at Vunibokoi District School, both of whom helped shape the person I am today.

I honour my own parents, my late father, Dr. Levani Raisevu Ditoka and our *Yavusa o Daviko*, our *vanua o Verata*, i *Sanokononoko vua na Gone Turaga Bale o Koya na Ratu*. I especially acknowledge other *vanua* with strong links to Daviko and other villages through Tailevu North and other places around Fiji. I remember my late mother Mele Lagilagi Tikoilomaloma and her connections in Tubou, Lakeba and Dakuiloa, Oneata in Lau of *Mataqali Ceakena* and *Tavaga* in the *Yavusa* and *Vanua o Lakeba* and *Bukatatanoa* respectively.

My father's *vasu* through my Tai Eleni of Nakavu, Nadi. My father's siblings and their families, all our much-beloved extended family from the villages of Tamavua, Sanasana, Naivuruvuru, Lomawai, Wailevu, Naqarani and our own Navunimono. My mother's *vasu*, through my *Pu Roko Lutu* also of Tubou, Lakeba. All my mother's siblings from the chiefly *Tui Kaba/Vusaradave* clans of Bau, Vuanirewa, Onewai and *Ceakena* clans of Lakeba respectively.

I am not a fan of autobiographical speeches but will provide Parliament a short self-introduction. I began primary education following my physician father in his various postings at Veiuto Primary School, Suva; South Pacific Sugar Mills Primary School in Rarawai, Ba before joining Vunibokoi District School where I was classmates with my predecessor and *tavale* honourable Inia Seruiratu. My secondary education began at Lelean Memorial School at Davuilevu where the honourable Jone Usamate was my senior. I then concluded my secondary learning at the Marist Brothers High School in Flagstaff. I joined the Royal Fiji Military Forces in 1985 and attained the rank of Captain by 1990.

I seek the indulgence and forbearance of my late maternal grandmother's chiefly clan of the Vuanirewa in recounting my distinct privilege serving, whilst an army captain as Aide-de-Camp to

the father of modern Fiji, the late *Gone Turaga Bale na Tui Nayau, Tui Lau, Sau ni Vanua o Lau Ratu Sir Kamisese Kapaiwai Tuimacilai Mara*. Chiefly *mana* or *sau* were personified in this late paramount chief and elder statesman who led us to independence and eventually served as President of the Republic with distinction.

Many skills were honed and lessons learned under his sharp and discerning gaze and not so soft rebuke (where warranted); not to mention his late wife, the *Gone Marama Bale na Roko Tui Dreketi* and the indirect tutelage of traditional diplomacy that she conveyed. The Turaga Tui Nayau's fiery temper suffered no foolishness and her sharp wit knew no equal. May the *Turaga* and *Marama Bale* continue to rest in blessed memory.

I also served whilst a Captain as Personal Staff Officer, Mr Speaker, under Commander Republic of Fiji Military Forces, Ratu Epeli Ganilau, as he then was yet another chiefly leader who I had the privilege of observing at close quarters and from which many lessons were gleaned. I acknowledge him and his late wife Adi Ateca Moceiwaqa Mara - may she continue to rest in peace.

I finally attained the rank of Major and in 2002 served until I sought resignation and was honourably discharged from what had then become the regular force of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces into the Reserve of Officers, when I was offered the position of Private Secretary in the Office of the Prime Minister by the venerable, Mr. Jioji Kotobalavu. This was in the administration of the late *Turaga Tui Kobuca*, Mr. Laisenia Qarase.

Mr. Qarase was yet another late statesman from whom I gained immeasurably, not just in terms of leadership and integrity but on a personal level when I and his Police PPO's from the Special Branch with the loyal support of the Fiji Police Force then organised Mr. and Mrs. Qarase's extraction from Suva after the overthrow of the SDL government in 2006. As Mr. Qarase had correctly predicted, Sir, the true clean-up begins now. That is the reality of the matter. I acknowledge Mrs. Leba Qarase and her family for their unwavering support for the *Turaga Tui Kobuca* and the values he stood for. May he also rest in beloved memory.

Upon return to Suva, my family struggled with my wife's single income while all Civil Service jobs were closed to me. In the intervening years two of my three surviving siblings sought asylum abroad as their connection to me appeared to be a red rag to a bull for some. I tried my hand at farming whilst also attaining my Masters in Commerce in Governance at the University of the South Pacific. Farming remains one of my passions today.

I then gained employment in the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) until 2019 where I opted to take my FNPF payout while seriously considering together with my family the weighty decision of entering into politics leading to this very place and time.

I reiterate what I said at the outset and return all the glory and honour of this, my life's journey to our Creator, Almighty God and Sovereign Lord, without whom none of this would have been possible to begin with. With that being said, Mr. Speaker, I now turn to my substantive response to His Excellency's most gracious Address.

I am deeply honoured by the show of confidence bestowed upon me by the honourable Prime Minister in assigning to me the portfolio of Rural and Maritime Development and Natural Disaster Management. To a certain extent, "*qoroqoroya na matai luvena*" may apply here as well but nonetheless, I would like to pay tribute to my Party Leader and Prime Minister, the honourable Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka. His decisive leadership style can be best exemplified by his recent diplomatic accomplishment in bringing Kiribati back into the embrace of the Pacific Islands Forum and more broadly setting the tone for future engagements with our Pacific neighbours. In the short

time I have worked directly under his guidance, I am confident that there is no better person to lead us in this daunting yet exciting new chapter in Fiji's journey of nationhood.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I applaud the decision to introduce elections for the District Advisory Councils. This localization of democracy empowers rural and formal settlements and communities by allowing them to choose their own representatives. This initiative will address other issues including proper demarcation of settlements and DAC constituency boundaries.

Elections of District Advisory Councillors will ensure that the voices of the rural informal settlements are heard. It also ensures that councillors are accountable to the people they represent. In fact, they provide the links between communities and Government in promoting and facilitating the implementation of Government programmes and projects at the community level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency recognized the rights of the indigenous people of Fiji and I celebrate the decision to restore the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga*, traditionally the apex of the *Vanua*. Indeed, the restoration of the Great Council of Chiefs does not seek to place indigenous rights above those of other communities, but to paraphrase the late honourable Justice Jai Ram Reddy - it is a body for all people who call Fiji home.

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

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- The recent "*veisiko*" or visitation to His Excellency the President by the *vanua* of Bau and viral picture of *Turaga Taukei Bolatagane* and the *Turaga Taukei Mataiwelagi* expressing themselves in joyful greeting, is a beautiful reminder of the good times we have ahead of us. We have had a long and grueling campaign and harsh words have been exchanged by all parties. It is now time to pool our resources and work together for the good of our beloved Fiji.

For our country, it is vitally important, as a factor for long-standing stability, that we always maintain a careful balance between the rights of individuals and communities. The special interests of indigenous people, including their right of ownership to their natural resources must also be protected. The interests and equitable participation in all facets of life in Fiji for the *iTaukei* is essential for the long-term peace, stability and sustainable development in the country. Given the above, anything that affects them must affect the nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's population was once concentrated in the rural areas and maritime islands. About 67 percent of Fiji's population lived in the rural areas in 1966. By 2019/2020 this had dropped to 45 percent. These areas constitute 94 percent of the total land area, and the rural economy has the largest resource base which includes tourism, agriculture and sugar which contributes significantly towards the national GDP and the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as has been oft-mentioned in national discourse, our rural areas are resource rich but the majority are cash poor because we have been slow to appreciate the potential wealth and economic gains that we can derive from the sustainable use of our natural resources. All efforts must now be made to unlock the potential to generate wealth in order to improve the living standards and the quality of lives of all citizens, to address food security and to reduce our import bills while boosting our exports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2017 National Census report showed that out of the 15 sources of water that are commonly used for drinking across rural households in Fiji, only 35 percent are connected to metered tap water and about 10 percent relies on high-risk water sources. In addition, about 31 percent of rural households use high risk sanitation in Fiji. The Constitution guarantees all the people

of Fiji the right of access to clean and safe water in adequate quantities, and access to adequate sanitation facilities. This is therefore a priority area for the Ministry.

The issue of rural-to-urban drift has become a major challenge in Fiji as the rural population and households migrate to urban areas in search of better standards of living, quality education facilities, accessibility to health centers, housing and recreational activities. This was also driven by the fact that around 37 percent of the rural population were living below the poverty line compared to 14 percent in the urban areas as noted in the revised 2019/2020 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) Report. To address these issues, Government will intensify efforts to create more opportunities in the rural areas.

Today, poor infrastructural facilities are identified as a problem. It is important to know that most of the population living in the rural areas that are characterized by lack or poor infrastructural facilities such as electricity and good roads, portable drinking water, a good communication system, health centers, et cetera. The absence of these facilities makes life difficult, miserable and unattractive in the rural areas.

The Ministry is embarking on the process to develop the National Rural Development Policy. The policy is to guide and set the model, concepts and strategies for rural and maritime development in Fiji. Rural Development Policy can be broadly defined as all aspects of state action that directly or indirectly, influence the nature of economics and social development in the rural areas.

On the same note, the Ministry will play a lead role through the Integrated Rural Development Framework (IRDF) to coordinate rural development programmes amongst a number of government agencies, Non-Government Organizations, Civil Societies and the private sector to develop and enhance sustainable livelihoods for Fiji's rural sector. The IRDF is a coordinated bottom-up development planning process that is integrated with the top-down aspirations of Government that are evidence-based driven. It aims to promote participatory, inclusive cooperation between all institutions, partners and stakeholders at the national and local levels involved in rural development planning.

The long-term objective of Rural Outer Island Investment (ROI) programme is to enhance the livelihoods of people in the rural areas and outer islands of Fiji. The immediate purpose is to increase market access opportunities and services that will enable beneficiaries in the rural areas and outer islands to exploit those opportunities. There is potential to grow our economy and improve the living standards of our rural people. This forms the core of this Ministry's deliverables, particularly in unlocking these opportunities and developing new ones to assist rural communities raise their living standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, against this backdrop, this Ministry is committed to implementing development strategies that bring Fijians living in rural areas, the same level of access to essential services and economic opportunities as elsewhere in the country. As a rural development facilitator and coordinator, the Ministry through partnership with other rural development stakeholders is committed to improving the quality of people's lives as well as expanding their ability to be masters of their own future in rural and developed regions in our country. This can be achieved through the provision of economic and income generating opportunities and improving access to amenities and services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, substantial resources will continue to be directed towards developing the rural and maritime areas particularly our most vulnerable and isolated communities. Such activities include the construction and improvement of community facilities, water supply, housing, social welfare services, marketing and distribution networks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am excited about the decision to transfer the Rural Housing Assistance (RHA) programme and the Rural Outer Island (ROI) Programme to this Ministry. The Rural Housing Assistance Scheme (RHA) was first established in 1976 with the main objective of providing assistance to the rural population to improve living conditions and reduce vulnerability to natural disasters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the last decade, Fiji has experienced a total of 14 cyclones and flood events, which cumulatively accounted for over 70 deaths and damages over FJ\$3.13 billion. The Climate Vulnerability Assessment conducted reveals that Government will require about FJ\$9.3 billion, in investment over the next 10 years to strengthen resilience, which is almost 100 percent of its annual GDP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Ministry through the National Disaster Management Office, will continue its efforts to improve our nation's disaster preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation initiatives. I would particularly wish to mention that disaster rehabilitation would be an area the Ministry intends to revisit and rebuild capacity in. The 1995 National Disaster Management Plan and the 1998 Natural Disaster Management Act will both be reviewed in order to achieve this. We will work to improve stakeholder coordination mechanisms and accomplish the goals of the 2018–2030 National Disaster Reduction Policy.

Before I resume my seat, I restate my unequivocal support of the motion and commend it accordingly to the House. Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members of Parliament I thank you for your attention and your indulgence.

(Acclamation)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is my honour to speak at this opening session of Parliament for 2023-2024. At the outset, I wish to congratulate you on your appointment as the Speaker of this august Parliament and, of course, to your Deputy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President pointed out in no uncertain terms that the 2013 Constitution is the Supreme Law of the land. It was a timely reminder to all to abide by the 2013 Constitution, and to do so in honour of the laws under which they were elected to office, and under which they all took oath of office, and we are all bound under it during the course of our duties to all the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President reminded us all of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed the pandemic itself is still felt everyday on a much larger scale than we ever did in Fiji and in various parts of the world. The FijiFirst Government through its quick response and action, minimised its impact and paved the way forward for a quick recovery, a recovery we are all benefiting from. We need to keep our guards up and keep listening to the medical advice.

The FijiFirst Government then stood firm to keep the economy afloat during the pandemic and laid the foundation for a fast and strong economic rebound with a focus to get people back to work. We managed to access the vaccines on time and roll out one of the world's fastest vaccination drives. We supported our national airline (Fiji Airways) with a government guarantee to keep it afloat as we recognised the vital role the airline will play in getting back the tourists. But, we were told to sell all those airlines at that time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note the remarks by His Excellency the President, reminding us of our duties as equal citizens of diverse backgrounds of our beloved Fiji. This is the point that we need to

act on with good intentions and integrity of our actions. On this point, and on many other points I make today, and will make in the future, I must commend our leader the honourable Prime Minister of Fiji between 2014 until the last election, honourable Bainimarama for his outstanding role as a leader of all Fijians. Personally, he has inspired and motivated me and continues to do so as I enter the third term into Parliament.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Resign.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I am not going to resign. I have got a thick skin, I am not resigning. There has been no other leader, apart from honourable Bainimarama, who has the following of most of our citizens.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.K. BALA.- He led a Party that dominated the last election with the highest number of votes received and that is the fact.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- That is the problem, relying on one person.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it required the combined manipulation of three parties to come together to form this Government. Stop hitting the airline or the plane.

(Laughter)

Unlike previous leaders, inclusion of equality is not a political line for our honourable leader but a heartfelt expression of his belief

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, do not do a running commentary, address the Speaker.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I will - thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

But a heartfelt expression of his belief that a united Fiji will be the best for Fiji and for all the Fijians. He has instilled in the FijiFirst Party and among all its representatives a strong sense of fairness and justice that we must always work for a nation that unites us all in the common goal of a Fiji for all Fijians.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Honourable Bainimarama's openness and humility as he put together a plan and acted on it to make Fiji truly democratic, which remains his endearing legacy and one that will not end for him and for those who follow, like me, and the 46 percent of the Fijians who voted for him and the Party.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I move on, I wish to take this opportunity to thank all those family members, well wishes and friends and the respected Tui Ba, who supported me in my previous two terms in office and in the last Election. Their show of support along the mandate I have received from those who voted for me keeps me going to achieve the vision of a united and a better Fiji for all Fijians under the FijiFirst Party.

On a personal note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the last Election campaign was a bit of a sad one for me. I lost my niece, Sanjivni, who was my rock and pillar of strength, and she will forever be in my corner as I represent the values of inclusion, justice, and a Fiji for all Fijians that she was so passionate about as a young leader.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to express my sincere congratulations to the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Rabuka, and members of the Government for taking office in leading this beloved nation of ours. Sir, while I am sincere in my congratulations, I am even more sincere in my role as a representative of those Fijians who have given us such a mandate to ensure that governance is open, transparent, and fair to all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the oath that we have taken both, as Government and Opposition under the 2013 Constitution, we are all to uphold the supreme law of this beloved land of ours. This oath applies to all of us in this Parliament, just as the laws of the land apply to all Fijians, and high among that law is the law of one vote for one person and we must respect each and every vote that puts all of us in this august Parliament. After all, Sir, even the honourable Prime Minister has to acknowledge that in the final count, it was the one vote that has put him back into office. So, let us not be dismissive of our people and their power. Let us all respect the 2013 Constitution and its principle of fair and just governance.

On that note of the rule of law and the need for fairness, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all have witnessed actions by the Coalition Government that shows the revenge-driven nature of politics that faces our nation, and these are not driven by concentration of good governance. Their role as Government is to take a measured and considered approach to decide on what is good for the good of Fiji and its people, and not only the interests of the Coalition Government.

We have seen capable officers, qualified civil servants and board members fight. Loyalties are given Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has to stand the test of time. The opportunity to provide loyalty with the right for every Fijian to show that as professionals, they are capable of working under different governments and leadership. A public officer needs to be tested when the government changes and not given the boot in order to create opportunities for the candidate that lost in the election. And many of these new appointees come with grave question marks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, about their capabilities and their qualifications.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have created Ministries without budgets. Ministries are stuck in the middle of their fancy titles with nothing to work with. The honourable Prime Minister says mini budget, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister says no mini budget.

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are reading the *Fiji Sun* too much.

HON. P.K. BALA.- That is your newspaper now!

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- In fact, all media are under you now.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- For 16 years.

HON. P.K. BALA.- In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is indeed a good start for the honourable Minister of Finance...

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- ...to go to India to have a meeting, while the Ministries are looking around for money to run their operations. I do not know whether it is a joke or what, but one of my friends said that in one of the Ministries, the officers are contributing to buy mops and broom. I do not know, but that was what I heard.

(Laughter)

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- \$10 billion debt, that's what you left.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We will correct that, do not worry.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Worry about the workers that are being laid off, honourable Minister of Finance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the contractors and sub-contractors engaged by Fiji Roads Authority, the workers are now being laid off.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You still have to complete the swimming pool.

HON. P.K. BALA.- And I hope

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Do an investigation, honourable Minister of Finance, it is your turn now! Go, do it! Do not just say things, go and do an investigation.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We're going to investigate.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Yes, I challenge you to go and do an investigation. Do not just come here with all these nonsense.

(Laughter)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Were you scared to do the investigation report?

HON. P.K. BALA.- Never ever!

(Laughter)

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Address the Speaker!

HON. P.K. BALA.- You are not the Speaker.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- You try to be what you are.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in reality, what the honourable Minister of Finance should do is to work with the honourable Minister for Sugar and deliver on their promise of the sugarcane funds.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You have destroyed the industry in 16 years. Just have patience.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Minister for Sugar is very vocal about his version of the failings of the sugar industry. He does not say anything about the sugar politics of 1980s and 1990s that laid the foundation of the demise of the sugar industry. It was the FijiFirst Party, under the leadership of honourable Bainimarama, that bailed out the farmers.

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, during that time, leases were not renewed. It was the FijiFirst Government who came, and leases were renewed. We had to face so many floods and cyclones still, and here we have a Minister for Sugar who goes and says, "I am going to sell all the trucks". Does he know what he is talking about? Do you know why the trucks were bought? I am asking you now. Do you know why the trucks were bought? To reduce the cost of cartage by the lorry association. That is the fact! Do not just go around and say, "Stop the"

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Because you destroyed the industry, that's the fact!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Criticising the Field Officers. That is nonsense, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are talking nonsense.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Deliver on your promise ...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- We will.

HON. P.K. BALA.- ... to the sugarcane farmers first, then talk about all your fancy ideas of a sudden extraction on all things to save the industry. When!

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, until the Coalition Government delivers on the magical \$110 per tonne return, all these sugarcane farmers of this country should take the Coalition Government to task for making empty and false promises.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Very poor.

HON. P.K. BALA.- We have heard that the honourable Minister for Sugar went around and said that they are not going to increase the sugar price, but these were the same people. Why? You are on record of saying not to increase.

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Come on, you are on record!

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. P.K. BALA.- I hope so.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you cannot deliver, tell them as openly as often, as you do when it comes to all other aspects of the sugar industry.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- For the town council election, you promised to do....

HON. P.K. BALA.- Do not worry, I am going to contest. I am warning you now, I am going to contest the town council election too. Yes, so do not worry about that.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also note that the Coalition Government is, all of a sudden, quiet on the inflation and their promise to bring prices down on goods and services. They know very well what they said during the campaign.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Oh, very poor.

HON. P.K. BALA.- They were very critical of our Government and made endless promises, but where were their promises when the prices of essentials, like onion, went up? Where were they? I want to ask them.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Just relax.

HON. P.K. BALA.- People were coming to us, \$6 to \$8 a kilogramme. Where were you people? This is truth, that inflation and prices are set by global markets and we pay the price according to supply and demand.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Since you never said it during campaign.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Yes, they were not because of the votes. Yet, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we heard these wild promises but once again, there is no delivery on these promises that some kind of magic that this Government would bring and keep prices down.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- People know about you.

HON. P.K. BALA.- You will have your turn, honourable Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency talked about Fiji's debt level. They should note that debt servicing and decisions on giving of international loans is based on Government policies, especially an assessment of its ability to service the debt. We all know, \$10 billion debt. I know, they will go up to \$25 million or \$30 million debt. I know they will.

(Laughter)

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- We won't!

HON. P.K. BALA.- You will.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You have no idea of what was agreed.

HON. P.K. BALA.-The problem with you, honourable Minister of Finance is that, you think that you know everything, that is the problem.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government, through sound economic policies and a good debt servicing record, was able to source funds for our pandemic recovery and rehabilitation and to serve that debt during those difficult times. You know, you have seen the books now because you are sitting there. Come on, be honest!

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I'm seeing a lot of things.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government, while critical of the debt levels which they used as a major part of their election campaign, have not given any indication to the Fijian people on what their plans are or they have to be in place to ensure that we have access to loans and grants in order to deliver on their promises and not just to come with some excuses.

For the moment, and this is very important, honourable Minister of Finance, the very budget most of you (not all) opposed on so many grounds last year while sitting on this side, is the same budget that is now the source of their operational funds. Mr. Speaker, Sir, how come it was wrong last year and is right now?

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. P.K. BALA.- There is something wrong, there is something wrong!

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is the trouble with you people, everything is FijiFirst.

HON. P.K. BALA.- And I know.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not wish to disclose why there was no mini-Budget because I have been reliably told by a group why there was none, but time will come, when I will.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is credit to the FijiFirst Government which you have to accept and its sound economic policies that the Budget was put into place and credit to the integrity of FijiFirst Government that funds were in the coffers that you are now using.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

(Inaudible interjection)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, you have to warn honourable Professor Prasad.

(Laughter)

It is also sad to note that Government or private entities seek forgiveness from the Coalition Government or should I say from the honourable Prime Minister himself. It is unheard of in a democracy, absolutely unheard of that Government or private entities or groups formally seek forgiveness from a newly elected Government. I want to ask, where is the independence and integrity of Fijian Broadcasting Corporation (FBC) when it comes forward to formally seek forgiveness? Is it a joke?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the same time, questions must be raised of the many quickly forgotten promises of the Coalition Government. What happened to the promise of increasing the minimum wage of to \$5 and \$6?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- *Areh*, you did it?

HON. P.K. BALA.- I did it, \$4. What about your promise - \$5 to \$6, when is it coming? The workers are asking me. We did it, it came into effect in January, now the workers are asking, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when is that \$6 or \$7 coming? I said, "go and ask Minister of Finance. Do not ask me." Very soon I will start naming you, so be careful.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Sixteen years and it takes \$4.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to ask....

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are a joke now.

HON. P.K. BALA.- So it hurts, now I am a joke.

(Laughter)

It hurts when \$6, \$7 and \$8 comes, then it hurts and it becomes a joke for you. You will be a real joke in this four years, honourable Professor Prasad.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you may wish to round off your speech.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Yes, I will, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

As a past Minister of Employment, I wish to put on record that the last Employment Advisory Board Meeting was held last year in August after a lapse of 10 years. I was very surprised to hear the statement that the Advisory Board meeting took place after a lapse of 10 years which is not true.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the related note of job creation, the Vuvale Partnership signed by the two former Prime Ministers has enabled thousands of Fijians to find employment and to better look after their families and communities.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.K. BALA.- You will remember, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the FijiFirst Government and the Australian Government did their due diligence and ensured that a good spread of people were able to make the most of these opportunities and put to bed the doubts of the then Opposition that the policy will lead to the emptying of our villages and loss of labour (that was not true). No such thing has happened.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you, I thank this august Parliament for this opportunity to speak on matters of critical importance towards an inclusive and a fair Fiji for all Fijians. God bless us all, God bless Fiji and God bless you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now wish to adjourn Parliament for lunch and we will resume at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.45 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.36 p.m.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Honourable Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests and our citizenry people of Fiji. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Opening Address of His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, *Turaga Bale Na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere at the 2023-2024 Session of Parliament. Before I begin, I would like to congratulate you, Sir, on your appointment as Speaker of this high Office and to the Deputy Speaker, honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua. This august Parliament and the people of Fiji look forward to your guidance.

I would like to thank His Excellency for his words of encouragement and reassurance as we, the leaders and people of Fiji together walk this new journey of democracy. Thank you, Sir.

I also join His Excellency in acknowledging the previous administration and the smooth transition we have had. We are inheriting a functioning Government and a country that is physically intact, but with my eight years in Parliament, we could have done better and we will do better, especially in strengthening institutions. They have been really weakened over the last few years.

The people of Fiji demanded change because after 16 years they deserve nothing less. So, I take this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to thank our people for exercising their right and making their vote count. I say this not as an elected Minister but as a citizen of our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am humble to be given the opportunity to be part of the leadership, to lead the people of Fiji and to lead in a spirit of conciliation and collaboration. Our duty is to those who had faith and confidence to help us reach where we are today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I look back, it is hard to imagine that the fate of the nation essentially came down to my party. Today, I stand very proudly alongside my colleagues from two other parties knowing that all the effort is starting to pay and in time this will be measured by our delivery.

I take this opportunity to thank my family especially my wife, my children and grandchildren who stood by me as we set out to change the course of democracy. My sincere gratitude to the *Gone Turaga e Mataiwelagi*, Ratu Apenisa Cakobau. Under his presidency, I became Party Leader and our President today, Ratu Manoa Roragaca, *Na Taukei Waimaro* and also my thanks to the General Secretary and his team.

As I did on my appointment to Parliament almost a decade ago, I thank my people of Nadroga/Navosa from Namatakula to Yako, to the highlands and to the islands of Yatu Malolo and Vatulele. During this campaign, I stood also for parts of Ba and I am very grateful for the support, especially from the Yatu Yasawa. My special tribute to my campaign team, *koicalevu Vava Samu* of Yako, *koicalevu Vuki* also of Yako, *koicalevu Namisi* of Nawaka and *koicalevu Buli Ratu* of Narewa. It is, therefore, with great honour that I deliver my maiden speech as the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation.

On democracy, His Excellency the President in his Opening Address rightly highlighted the need for a clear focus on the rule of law and democratic processes. Democracy is not true democracy if the values of transparency, accountability and respect are not upheld. Laws are not made for the government. They are made by the government with its people, for the people. We made a commitment as a Coalition Government to rid this nation of false promises that our people have been beholden to for far too long. We made a commitment not just to hear, but to listen and act. For the first time in nearly two decades, deliberations of the Cabinet are being shared with the public. Even

as Members of this august Parliament, we were never given the courtesy to contribute to matters that affect our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will no longer pass overnight legislations that take away the rights of the indigenous people in the name of streamlining investments. We will no longer rob our people of their freedom of expression in the name of media safety; we will no longer deny residents, the right to choose who they believe has the best civic interest and we will no longer deny employees the right to be represented by unions. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is true democracy.

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

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- On finance, to get our Parliament in order is our priority. We acknowledge the current fiscal space we are in. We also acknowledge debt is not necessarily bad, but to have our national debt reach 85 percent of GDP or \$10 billion by July 2023 is not responsible borrowing at all. At a time where our focus should be on rebuilding, giving the people of Fiji basic infrastructure, such as adequate health, facilities and services, access to safe and clean drinking water and sustainable educational services, we are heavily constrained. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I therefore, support the appointment of a Fiscal Review Committee and National Economic Summit in the spirit of transparency and consultation.

On the Coalition Vision, there is goodwill amongst our people in the international community. This is not necessarily driven by politics, but a renewed sense of optimism that things have changed. As His Excellency the President stated, our mission is to build unity and trust and we truly intend on doing so. The principles of Christianity will remain the foundation of our policies. We will work humbly with others for the common good; we will defend the rights of the poor and needy and give unconditionally to the vulnerable. We will love our neighbours.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of my commitments has always been to give tourism and the civil aviation sector the stature they deserve. Here, we are talking about a sector that contributes 40 percent of our GDP, a sector that supports thousands of jobs and livelihoods. Unfortunately, the previous administration did not see the importance of these key sectors and reduced two very critical arms of the Government (tourism and civil aviation) to mere government departments, clustered with many other departments. Under this Government, this has changed. We have restored the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation as a standalone entity that can act as a better support system to the private sector.

On tourism numbers, I strongly support His Excellency's statement that in the short term economic outlook supporting tourism will be critical - that is a reality. Fiji's economic recovery continues on the back of a strong tourism rebound. In 2022 our visitor arrival surpassed expectation, reaching 71.1 percent of 2019 levels underpinned by the Australia, New Zealand and the US markets. In December last year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we recorded the highest number of Australians in history in a single month.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I come from the industry and I know how challenging the pandemic would have been on the operators, so I take this opportunity to thank the industry for its sacrifices and the remarkable commitment in getting us through some of our darkest days.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the first few days of taking office, I visited many tourism stakeholders. I can say with a lot of confidence that we are now in a new era of economic development. In the first quarter of 2023, we have exceeded pre-trend pandemic levels as far as hotel bookings go. Just in the last week of January, the average occupancy recorded was 75 percent. In 2019, the average

occupancy for the same week was 43 percent. The Revenue per available room (RevPAR) recorded for this week was \$305, much higher than 2019 levels.

Looking at February to April 2023, top countries searching for accommodation are Australia, New Zealand and United States of America with an average length of stay of up to seven days. Tourists intend to stay longer and it shows, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the confidence that people have in our tourism and Fiji as a country.

As an example Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Castaway Island considers 2022 as the best year since beginning its operation in 58 years. This year, they forecast it to be even better. Nationally, occupancy rates were up to 74 percent in 2022 compared to 68.2 percent in 2019 with a higher guest satisfaction. So, there is a lot of optimism Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I am pleased to share that Fiji Airways forward bookings for the next twelve months is 40 percent ahead of the same period in 2019. When I met the executive management of Fiji Airways last month, they were recording bookings at an 8 percent rate weekly, even with our markets open, the bookings are better than 2019. This is an unprecedented and historical achievement, as our national airline exceeded any and all expectations.

Forward plans, Mr. Speaker, Sir - we are currently bound by the budget of the previous administration for the most part, but we will continue to deliver. Nine years ago, I stood in this august Parliament and shared my hopes of contributing to the development of our country. At that time, we spoke of some \$2 billion in tourism earnings. As the former CEO of the then Fiji Visitors Bureau, I questioned who the billions were for. I stand by that today as we strive for a more equitable sharing of the billions from tourism. We will no longer confine our ethos on what we can do for tourists but also significantly, what they can do for us. It will be a give and take.

On enhancing connectivity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, over 90 percent of visitors to Fiji arrived by air. For us, our national airline carries 70 percent of arrivals. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Airways will continue to invest in advanced, fuel-efficient modern aircraft. We are also looking at the addition of two new Airbuses A350s. These aircrafts are the most advanced in commercial aviation and the remarkable addition to our fleet that adds to our reach.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with added seats, we have the option to add capacity to fly to routes that are in demand and the flexibility to explore other markets. As His Excellency shared, Fiji Airways is expanding its global network, which means that we will continue to invest in new routes. We are already reporting strong numbers since the direct flights to Vancouver, Canada. By April 2023, we will also be returning to Japan and Hong Kong. The forecast for 2023 is to carry two million passengers and revenue of over FJ\$1.5 billion in 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the North American middle-income market has a huge potential for us. We are now exploring the possibility of flying to Dallas, Seattle or Houston without compromising our position on Open Skies. The national carrier is a five-star rated airline that is on a journey to becoming world class, a feat that very few airlines have achieved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our national air carrier is our pride, from its inception ...

HON. P.K. BALA.- No!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- ... to the days of Air Pacific

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Wait for it, wait for it!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Our national airline is our pride from its inception to the days of Air Pacific, and now Fiji Airways. There is this weird belief by FijiFirst that they are the only ones who are proud of our airline.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- But you were opposing it.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- We have been proud of it since the days of Air Pacific, Mr. Speaker. We have supported it all along the way.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- One of the CEOs proudly wanted to sell the planes.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, soon we will drop the requirement for vaccination and insurance to enter Fiji. We are a highly vaccinated nation, and this gives us the confidence to take the next step in easing travel.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a new global brand. We have just launched a new brand where happiness comes naturally. This pays homage to our people, our natural, our rich culture, giving visitors a feel of what it truly means to be happy in our context. Tourism Fiji's website tracking shows 20 percent lift in traffic and 20 percent lift in new users since the launch of the new campaign.

On driving investments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with an increase in air capacity and a stronger appetite for the Fiji tourism brand, there is a risk of imbalance between rooms and seats. It is a good problem to have but one that requires a concerted effort to attract investments. At present we have a pipeline of investments valued at approximately \$280 million with about a thousand rooms inventory that should create hundreds of jobs for our people. That is the power of tourism in Fiji so we need more strategic investments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we want to connect investment-ready projects to investors, so we have more rooms to be able to attract more visitors. In March this year, we are looking to host the first Tourism Investment Summit in partnership with Investment Fiji and Tourism Fiji. It is an exclusive gathering of 50 key tourism investors, hoteliers, brands and associated businesses that gives us the opportunity to attract legitimate investors to boost investments. It is about time we think bigger and act on it. A Tourism Investment Report will also be launched capturing key information that an investor requires to know that "Fiji is open for business".

At this point I want to clear the perception of high leakage in tourism. We now own most of the properties in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, in the likes of the Marriott, InterContinental, Sheraton, Westin, GPH, Holiday Inn, all are now locally owned by the people. In community-based tourism, Mr. Speaker, I want to add that the intent is not to build multi-complex 5-stars all around Fiji. Instead, we want to nurture and support smaller, more community-owned businesses who can add to the pipeline of inventory.

A few weeks ago, the honourable Prime Minister and I met the people of Yasawas, Mr. Speaker. In 2016, there were some 38 locally-owned businesses in Yasawa. Today, there are only nine remaining. If we bring them back online, which we will do, we are adding to the room bank that we sorely need. Our plan going forward is to support our resource owners and our indigenous people, so they too can have a larger share of the tourism pie. Tourism destinations like Yasawa who

have a huge potential have been somewhat neglected and we have spoken about this for years in this Parliament.

To support indigenous Fijians, to support the *vanua* does not mean we are going back in time. Indigenous communities have been marginalised to the point of being considered amongst the vulnerable today. What we encourage is the protection and appropriate promotion of indigenous culture, traditional knowledge, the land and waters on which it is based. This way there is an equitable partnership between the tourism industry and indigenous people.

Last week, Mr. Speaker, I was at a UN Development Programme event where eight investment-ready projects are now being scaled up through a Blue Accelerator Grant Scheme. One of them was the *Uto Ni Yalo* and *Talanoa* Treks who intend to develop Fiji's first ever ocean trail building using traditional sailing knowledge. We are bringing back some of the old ways and these are the types of products that can complement tourism in outer islands such as Yasawa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Ministry response for Civil Aviation, we also intend to invest in our airports especially those in the outer islands. I have met with the Chair and management of Fiji Airports Limited and we are looking to upgrade the airport terminals in Labasa, Nausori, Nadi Domestic and Savusavu during the next 18 months. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the intent here is to create a level playing field. We want infrastructure to be built as such that it accommodates different aircraft fleets both the Fiji Link and Northern Air. We need to encourage healthy competition for the sake of not just tourists, but for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on dispersing tourism, Vanua Levu our second largest island needs to get the attention it deserves and so do the other islands in Fiji. We are one and we should grow as one. We are now advancing discussions with the World Bank to finance the upgrade of critical infrastructure in the North. I will soon be taking this to Cabinet and to our people of Vanua Levu.

On improving business and private sector led investments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly support His Excellency's statement on the Coalition Government's focus on building confidence and trust with businesses and investors. For years we have been hearing about business reforms in this august Parliament - to what end, I do not know. Business reforms should be based on its impact to investors and to the people. We know that some good work has been put in making Fiji more investor friendly for both foreign and local investments. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to work on that intensely.

In my first week in office, we allowed the commencement of an important project that was issued a stop work for no apparent or legal reason. This was a development worth \$31 million and had already invested \$9 million in value. We cannot defy transparency and expect investor confidence this way. We quickly uplifted this stop order, Mr. Speaker.

On regionalism, the honourable Prime Minister has lead Fiji's re-engagement with our Pacific family. We are reminded of the power of a coalition - a partnership. We need to restore the balance of interest between Fiji and the Pacific. We are one people with common identity and common challenges and opportunities. Fiji does owe a duty of care to the Pacific family.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will strengthen our relations with the Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO). As a regional Minister, I intend to usher in a new partnership built on a duty of care to one another. We will also bring back our island neighbours to be part of the Fiji Tourism Expo as was the case in the past. It is a premier trade exchange with a huge international profile that bring buyers and sellers together - it should also benefit our neighbours. Fiji should truly become the hub of the region, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to look beyond our short term margins, we need to invest our businesses, invest in our people and their capabilities, invest in preserving the environment - what we take we must return.

To the people of Fiji, please remember your hardships are no longer yours alone to overcome. Time will bear testament. Our leadership as a Coalition Government is what will shape the society we want today and tomorrow. We will walk this journey together.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and may our God Almighty bless our beloved nation.

(Acclamation)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Ministers and fellow Members of Parliament, a very good afternoon, *ram ram, salaam* and *bula* to you all. Today marks my third term in Parliament. What a journey it has been for the past eight years, and I wonder what is instore for us for years to come.

I congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, on your appointment as the honourable Speaker of this Parliament.

Before I respond to His Excellency, I must say, I had the support of many individuals who stood beside me during the campaign and through their effort and hard work, it was made possible for me to make it to Parliament for the third time. To name a few, I would like to start with my parents - Mr. Ambika Prasad, Mrs. Malti Devi, my wife - Swastika Pooja Devi, for providing moral support before, during and after the Election.

From the Northern Division, Mr. Nalesh Sami and his team, Mrs. Nirmala, Mr. Amrit, Mr. Hiren, Mr. Mukesh and Mr. Sami from Bua. From the Western Division, Mr. Keshwa and Priya Sharma and Mr. Dev Nand. From the Central Division, Mr. Ratnesh Bawan and his team.

It is sad to note that given what has transpired in the past few weeks, some of my supporters have requested me not to mention their names as they fear they might be victimised for supporting FijiFirst.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Oh, no.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- This fear is not some conclusion, but reality on the ground. Though I cannot take those names, but you all know who you are, and I thank you all from the bottom of my heart for your hard work.

I would also to thank all my voters who had faith in me to represent them in Parliament. Thank you, once again, and thank you for your precious votes.

I have always said this in this august Parliament, to build any country, we need strong and independent institutions. Independent institutions are regarded as the pillars of development for any nation. The very reason it is called independent is because there should be no political interference or personal interest both, from inside and from outside the institution. How can we have continuity in the institution when the Government of the day is undermining the institution because they do not like the individual that heads the institution and in the process, weaken the institution. This shows direct political interference. I would like to ask, why Constitutional Officers are removed on such allegations?

I urge all Fijians, in particular those in the Public Service, to see and realise what is happening. The same tactics will be used against you tomorrow, if the administration is not happy with you. The precedence that is being set is not good. We are talking about constitutional officers and being suspended and terminated without rhyme or reason without due process. This shows a lack of adherence to the Constitution and national justice.

The Government is being paranoid and try to control everything.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- You think about yourselves.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- They treat professionals like criminals, showing disrespect to professionals.

Having generalised perception that civil servants will favour Opposition just because they were appointed at a time when FijiFirst was in Government is unethical. Everyone needs to be given a fair chance to prove themselves and should not be removed from their position just because they were appointed during the term of the previous government.

Government will come and go, Members of Parliament will retire, but what remains behind is the legacy and what we have built for our future generation. We want our future generation to have a better and brighter future that was guaranteed under the FijiFirst Government. No matter what differences we have in our policies, we should never embed racial discrimination in our younger generations.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Now, you are saying the right thing.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- It was unfortunate for Fiji that the 2022 General Election was fought, once again, on ethnic and religious lines by the three Coalition Parties. It should have been fought on policies, development agendas and ideas.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Look ahead, look ahead!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Fiji has a very young population and it seems like they have lost faith in the system and that is the reason they opted not to vote in General Elections. What matters to younger generation is stability, opportunity, progress and prosperity.

For the younger generation, division based on race, religion and ethnicity does not matter. We need to empower our younger people and not divide them. No country can realise its full potential if the Government will divide its own people. A lot was said during Election campaign, a lot of things that were said or promised were either not practical or sustainable.

We have been saying all these from day one that not everything is practical, we need development, but we need to ensure that we are able to sustain that development. Now, that you people are in Government, it will be interesting to see how many of those promises made during campaign are going to be implemented and how many of it will just remain as false promises.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Like Local Government.

HON. A.A. MAHARAN.- Just like honourable Kamikamica, he has already shown his immaturity by saying that some of the things he said during the campaign was done in the heat of the moment.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Aww!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- We never says such things in that heat of the moment. Maybe his heat of the moment meant, 'I lied'.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Remember Government, the student are still waiting for their TELS loan to be written off.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Aww!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Everyone staying in rural and feeder roads are waiting for their roads to be fixed. The FijiFirst Government started a programme where we were fixing feeder roads...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You left a mess.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- ... so let us see if that continues.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You left a mess.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- People without electricity are waiting to be connected to EFL grids. People are waiting for Government Ministers and Assistant Ministers mobile numbers to raise their concern.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Aww!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- With us, people used to call us anytime.

(Laughter)

Please, distribute your mobile numbers to the general public.

HON. J. USAMATE.- We share.

(Inaudible interjection)

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Even the official directory given by Parliament, they do not have your mobile numbers.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Aww!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- They have the Secretary's name, they are landline numbers. Where are your mobile numbers? Please, distribute it to Fijians. Let them raise their concerns directly to you people.

People are wondering, that under FijiFirst Government there was no stage restrictions for the student fare but now it is only two stages. I will give a typical example of two schools.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They are happy with that.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the distance between Nadogo Secondary School and Naleba College is roughly around 29 kilometres.

(Inaudible intejction)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The District of Nadogo has only one secondary school, Mr. Speaker, Sir. If a student is not able to secure a place in Nadogo Secondary, he or she must travel daily to Naleba College which is eight stages away. Why are the poor parents paying for six stages while the Government covers only for two stages?

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- This is Nadogo, the students are travelling from Dogotuki to Naleba College which is roughly around 50 kilometres, Mr. Speaker, Sir. One can do the math, how many stages are there? What a change the Government has brought for the students and their parents?

Policies are all over the places without any coordination. Ministers are still trying to understand their ministerial duties. The honourable Prime Minister's right arm is unaware what the left arm is saying or doing.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Aww!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The Prime Minister's own Ministers are questioning his decision.

(Inauble interjection)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The Government's legal Advisor is giving legal advice which is not in line with the law. Someone needs to put the act of the current administration together because this will have undesirable impact on the nation such as corruption, breakdown of rule of law, discrimination, and this will create a chaos.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- \$32,000 a month.

HON PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We have a better way of utilising.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The FijiFirst Government was offering progress and prosperity, social economic stability and equal rights. What are we seeing for the past few weeks? Disorientation, confusion and miscommunication.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Ministers think they can do anything. The honourable Attorney-General is issuing directive for stop departure when he does not have the powers to do so.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Very poor.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- It should be done and can only be done by the FICAC Commissioner ...

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- It was issued by FICAC.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- ...or through a Court Order.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Shame, shame!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The separation of powers between the three arms of the Government -the Executive, the Legislature and Judiciary, is no longer there.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Those three institutions should be separate from each other.

HON. DR. I. WAQANIBETE.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Members of Parliament and now, the Government Ministers coming into Parliament in a drunk state for their swearing in ceremony. Bending of law as and how it suits them. Changing the Manifesto, as now the Coalition Government realises that some of the promises uttered during campaign cannot be fulfilled because it will be unsustainable. So now, the Coalition Government has a very good reason to hide, that is, it is a Coalition Government and all Parties must compromise on their manifesto. So, it is all about change, change and change, and since the word 'change' is so deeply rooted in their head, they opted to change their manifesto as well.

(Laughter)

Who is going to suffer at the end of the day? The ordinary Fijians - Fijians who were lured into believing that everything PAP, NFP and SODELPA were saying will be done and will be good, but now, it is going to change. One thing that will be maintained and will be consistent is going to be the everchanging policies of the Coalition Government.

On the other hand, things that were consistent with FijiFirst were our policies and principles. We stood then for the Fijians, and we will continue to stand for the Fijians. I urge the Coalition Government to change the name of the recruitment system from OMRS to FNRS because the way people are being chosen under the current administration is not on open merit but on favouritism and nepotism. So, let us call it favouritism and nepotism-based recruitment system.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- FBC CEO.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am just enjoying the music.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- This is what we feared, and that is exactly what is happening. Based on favouritism and nepotism, Board members are being changed. People who were performing are being removed. Permanent Secretaries are being pressured to either resign or else get

removed. Once people are selected on senior positions through nepotism and ethnic agenda, they will ensure that from Deputy Secretary position down to Government Wage Earners, people are appointed on nepotism and ethnic lines and not on merit.

None of the civil servant positions will be secured. Every civil servant was promised by the Parties in the Coalition Government permanent establishment so why some civil servants are asked or rather forced to resign? Why were so many teachers who were given contracts, especially Head of Schools, had their appointments withheld or terminated? Where are the Unions now? Why is no one saying anything? Where is the Fiji Trades Union Congress? Where is the Fiji Teachers Union? Where is the Fijian Teachers Association? Why are they not fighting for justice?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Masters and teachers have it in black and white that they had been promoted to Head of School and now they are told that the Ministry has recalled their appointment.

FijiFirst was blamed that we have suppressed the trade unions and media, but what is happening now? Why are the Unions not speaking on behalf of their members? Why are they not giving the notice of strike? Are they afraid of the current administration, or they are warming up their chairs and waiting for their benefit package for their silence?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are blamed that we have suppressed the media freedom in Fiji, but we know the reality. No one from the media industry was ever prosecuted under our Government. Some of the media outlets continuously ran biased and one-sided story, but no one was taken to task. Why were the staff of one media outlet forced to go and ask for forgiveness from the honourable Prime Minister? What on earth was that? This is what we call the media suppression, where the Board forces its media personnel to go and ask for forgiveness.

The FBC Board needs to come out and tell the people what the reasons were to ask for forgiveness. Will the staff of FBC have the freedom to report freely? No, I do not think so. Total abuse of office and powers. Government is not holding the law and the 2013 Constitution of Fiji. They must not forget they have been able to form the Government under the 2013 Constitution, which they continue to breach. Members of the Government held the *Bible* and *Ramayan* in their hands and took an oath to uphold the Constitution, yet the Government continues to undermine it on a daily basis. This is the hypocrisy and distortion of our religious teachings.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Talk about breach of the Constitution, my friend. Have some decency.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- We have gone back in the era where it was all about whom you know.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order! order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- It is no longer about one's capabilities or merit, if you know anyone in the top rank, you will get the job done. And for any ordinary Fijian who does not have any link than only God can help you. Amen! With such practices, it is the elites who are going to benefit from all these, and marginalised and ordinary Fijians are going to suffer.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- FijiFirst Party treatment.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The poor and rural iTaukei will be left in the dark with no development going their way, iTtaukei kids with qualification will be forced to go back to the village and do farming.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Indo-Fijians will be left wondering and hunting for jobs, trust me life will get very difficult with OMRS fading away. How come a person not in the system be appointed on Acting Permanent Secretary position? What was PSC thinking or doing when such appointments were done?

HON. V. PILLAY.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Just recently announced, new Acting CEO of FBC is no different case as well. No advertisement, no assessment just direct appointment. What do we call this?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Acting.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- He is still appointed.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Why is that?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- At least, he is qualified.

(Laughter)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- With the position advertised on one side and before closing date, people getting recruited is known as “favouritism and nepotism”. Ministers appointing advisors without creating a position through the Ministry of Civil Service, how can that be justified?

Failed candidates are promised positions in High Commission, Boards and Ministries is a clear-cut case of bias and corruption. These are the changes the Coalition Government promised to the people of Fiji. Fiji has seen unprecedented development in the history of Fiji under the FijiFirst Government, and these current changes are stopping the infrastructure development. Workers are sent home.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- CWM workers?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- No wages and salaries to feed their families. What a change! People working for contractors who used to build roads have laid off hundreds of workers. During the FijiFirst Government, people lost their jobs because of the pandemic, which was not in our hands but now Fijians are losing jobs because of the changes made by the Government which is in your hand.

On one side they are talking about employing people who were made redundant in limited liability companies such as ATS, independent organisation such as FRCS, and on one side more than 500 workers are made redundant. Wow! What a change. These two institutions are independent, Ministers should not interfere with the day-to-day operations, leave it to the Board. See what is happening - no respect for the law.

Reform and restructure are done by experts and consultants, what knowledge do Ministers have to overturn the reform of an organisation? New graduates are waiting to get jobs because civil

servants turning 55 returned to continue work for the next five years. Positions that would have been vacated by retirees at the age of 55 could have been used to absorb new graduates.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Retirement age does not create new jobs.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- It does.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It does not.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- It creates vacancy in the Ministry, people retire, it is a simple process.

If we have changed the retirement age to 60, why is the current administration biased against those civil servants who retired in the past four years? They have not reached 60 yet, they should be given natural justice and should be allowed to return to the Civil Service and complete their term. Why double standards?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- You retire.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- To all young Fijians who study under the loan scheme, at least with FijiFirst, though the loan was there, you had jobs through which you could have repaid the loan. But now with the loan on your head and no job, how are you going to start your career? They told you that they will remove the loan, they will write off close to \$700 million. I ask, why are they not doing so? It will not happen because they have changed their manifesto. As I have said before, forget about getting a job in the Civil Service because now recruitment will take place based on nepotism and discrimination. Where is the increase in pension? People of Fiji were promised \$200 in pension.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is the lie you have been saying for eight years.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Where is it? With retirement age going up to 60 from 55, why is the Government not bringing the pension age down to 60 from 65? Why are people paying VAT on medication? The NFP wanted VAT on medication to be removed, so when will this happen?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It will happen.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Government has created new Ministries.

(Hon. Government Member interjects)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes, you have the full right to do so. It is your Government and you decide how to share the portfolio but where is the budget allocation for the new Ministries. The FMA does not allow virement of funds for a totally new ministry. That needs to be done through a mini-budget. The whole parliamentary process has been bypassed. How can Government just bypass the system, the whole Parliament process? Where is transparency and accountability that you talked about?

Once again, this is the change you were talking about. You asked to slash the cost of flying with Fiji Link by 50 percent.

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

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Why is it not happening? Why has the Government not reduced the cost of an air ticket to Labasa? Your Member asked for it. Change it! Bring it down. Change, change and change - only time will tell what change people have voted for. It is not going to be easy for the next four years.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Assistant Minister of Finance. Honourable Member, I must apologise. The spelling of your name is in English - Esrom. I have just noticed that recently because you hail from the highlands.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Yes, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- It takes a while to get the message through. Anyway, you have the floor, Sir.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, honourable Opposition Members and guests, it is with deep humility, honour and appreciation to be elected as a Member of Parliament for Fiji and a representative, a leader for all Fijians and especially so for all Fijians in the Naitasiri Province who made it possible for me to be in this august Chamber and making this maiden speech.

Today, I wish to do two things. Firstly, to pay tribute to those who were being instrumental in my life and journey, up to where I am today and secondly, to share the value and vision that I am going to bring to Parliament and to the Government in reply to His Excellency the President's most gracious Address.

I begin with acknowledging Yeshua, my Lord God, our Creator who created me, gave me life, sustenance, wisdom, provides the banner and leads me to where I am today and still here for my tomorrows. I would not be here if there is no God and I believe that leaders are from or of God as He puts in place leaders and takes them away as well if they go astray.

Then tribute goes to my parents, Savenaca and Anareta Lewenikuruyasi Lotuicama of Delai, Navolau, Naitasiri and Rara Natavea Nabaitavo, Naitasiri respectively, and my grandparents, both paternal and maternal who were the backbone of my upbringing that is, from birth, primary school, secondary school and then to university. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have passed on and could not be here to celebrate this occasion with me and my family, relatives and all the Fijians in Fiji and overseas. They would be the proudest as they had a vision and dream over 50 years ago and coupled with hard work to make a leader out of me. They brought me up and supported me in a village where the only means of transportation then to sell farm produce, the main source of income, week in and week out was either by *bilibili* or if lucky outboard motors as there was no road.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they inculcated in me the savings and budgeting culture from such a young age to enable me to move around Suva during those school days without a lot of difficulties. That culture is still with me today with the addition of finance and investments and I am grateful that I had adapted to that upbringing.

In my school days from Class One to Class Six was at Dravuni District School in our village. It was one of the pioneer schools in Fiji in those days and I am indebted to our elders then who thought fit to establish the school in the early 19th Century. My secondary school days from Form 1 to Form 6 was spent at Ratu Sukuna Memorial School and I stayed with three faithful guardians during those years. It is only proper that I name and pay tribute to them and their families for sharing

their homes with me to stay and sleep, provided and shared their food with me and guided me to be a disciplined person during those years of studying away from my parents. Unfortunately all of them had passed away. First is Nei Siteri from Dakuinuku, Sawakasa, Tailevu who single-handedly looked after me with her own three children. Second is Unaia Raimua from Navolau, Naitasiri and his wife from Rewa and *tavale* Laisani from Nakorovatu in Naitasiri and her husband from Malakati in Yasawa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to say that Ratu Sukuna Memorial School moulded me in my school days and from the first day I set foot in the school in 1976 until when I came out, I was constantly reminded of Ratu Sukuna's legacy – his vision, leadership, wisdom and how God used him mightily to be a saviour for Fiji during his lifetime against our Colonial powers. I am glad that the holiday to commemorate him will be brought back this year to Fiji and also hope this Government and future ones will continue to assist and develop Ratu Sukuna School in line with Ratu Sukuna's legacy and vision.

I am forever grateful and wish to acknowledge the work of the Christian faith leaders of my life - the Methodist Church, Apostle Gospel, Every Home, Christian Mission Fellowship, All Nation, Kingdom and Assemblies of God Churches. They were all involved in the upbringing of my life and my family's life in faith. Their unwavering faith and the gospel teachings and prayers continues to strengthen, direct the path for me and I believe for the nation of Fiji, and I will urge them to continue their good work.

Then there is the support faith nurturing provided, an experienced gained during my work days from management, supervisors at Fiji Development Bank, the then Colonial Mutual Life Assurance, Colonial National Bank (now Bank South Pacific), Commonwealth Bank of Australia, Auckland Savings Bank and Yasana Holdings Limited. Names such as the late Laisenia Qarase, former Prime Minister, former Minister Tomasi Vuetilovoni, Malakai Naiyaga, Dave Robertson, Simon Swanson, Mike Welsh and others that I have not named here. They were part of my grooming and I am indebted to them for the faith and trust they placed on me whilst working under their leadership.

My sincere appreciation goes out to my immediate family as well. My wife Penuel, son Shaiya and daughter Grace for the sacrifice they placed in me and allowed me to strive for leadership in Fiji. It was not easy. I had to leave most of my responsibilities as a father to my wife, thanks to her, day in and day out most of the time and especially during preparation time and the campaign period. My daughter and son had to study without my supervision and without a father figure, most of the time they endured and were able to move a step further in their studies.

Tribute also goes to all my Fijian supporters in all the 16 *tikina* and 91 villages in Naitasiri – the Naitasiri Provincial Council and the Soqosoqo Vakamarama. I will remember all the chiefs, men, women and youth, who gave their trust to me to be a leader in their midst. We, Naitasirians, have a strong sense of belonging or togetherness. We are deeply proud of our heritage, we are a community knit together by family, hard work and generosity and I am proud to be one.

It is only proper, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to announce that there are three other Members of Parliament from Naitasiri, honourable Aseri is the Minister for Education and two others on the Opposition side. My hope that we will do more for our province during our terms in Parliament. In addition, special tribute goes to all my agents and all the people during the campaign period from the north of Naitasiri, centre, Waidina areas and south of Naitasiri. Your hard work, dedication and support will not be forgotten. I am indebted to you, and we will visit you in the not distanced future if you cannot come to our village on 25th February, 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will not forget to mention my core campaign team of Sakaraia from Wainawaqa, Uraia (Tamai Jo) from Naivucini, Roko Senitiki, Samuela, Goleva and Lemeki (Tamai Vilisi) from Navolau, *Turaga ni ovisa vakacegu* from Sawani, Drika from Nakorosule, Tamai Milio from Nauluvatu, Waidina, Vunaia from Waidra and cousin, Keni Dakuidreketi. They were the crust or the centre of my campaign operation and were with me from the start to the finishing line. They were the go-to guys with different skills and knowledge that assisted me to go wherever I want. They sacrificed their time to follow me almost every day and placed their utmost faith on me and pushing me, saying that I should be a leader not only for Fijians in Naitasiri but to all the Fijians in Fiji. With that, I wish to acknowledge and thank their wives and their families for the support given to me.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, special thank goes to the People's Alliance team from its then leader, my *tau* Sitiveni Rabuka, who is now the honourable Prime Minister, plus all the candidates who put their hands up to contest the 2022 General Elections, and all the volunteers who sacrificed their time and resources to show up and work for us. All the office bearers who made sure there is compliance and governance all around and a big thank you to all the party supporters around Fiji and the whole world. The 2022 Election was the most challenging one but prevailed at the end with the hands of our Almighty God. Thank you so much and I pray that we all be blessed in the days and years ahead.

Special thanks and mention goes out to our coalition partners; the National Federation Party (NFP) and the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) for coming together and subsequently creating the enabling environment to allow us to govern for the next four years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this enabling environment is what we can see and feel today, on the happy and free faces of our people wherever we go.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- On businesses, workers, churches, medias and I think on land, sea and atmosphere alike. They are all happy Mr. Speaker, Sir.

As I have said earlier, there is a sense of freedom, happiness, talking, sharing all around as if the circles have been broken. It is just 33 working days or 51 days, and the coalition machinery is progressing well ahead and I can see the great wisdom, knowledge and skills that were brought in to gel appropriately as a team to govern our beloved Fiji. And all Fijians to bring out the 'feel free and happy' feeling. There may be differences but we choose to forgive and forget them and mainly focus on the similarities that we have - that is the genuineness of being a Fijian like us. We work on our similarities and bring about the love shine attitude.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the second part of my speech is to briefly share the value and vision that I am going to bring to this honourable Parliament, and to reply to His Excellency the President's most gracious speech. However, I wish to advise that most of what will be spoken about finance and the economy will be done by my line Minister of Finance, the honourable Professor Biman Prasad.

I agree with His Excellency the President, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that our ultimate objective of governing is to improve the lives of all the people in Fiji. However, we are faced with the following main challenges apart from others. There is an era of uncertainty and rapid changes in the world right now affecting world trade and prices. There is a need to build unity through social cohesion among our people, we need sustainable growth plus the need to further improve and strengthen our economy.

We should have a clear focus on the rule of law and the broadening of the democratic processes including transparency, human rights and genuine consultation. We will hear the views of

all members of our communities to be heard, we will adhere to the doctrine of separation of power continuously and we will work for greater efficiency and productivity from our civil servant.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to say that Fiji is a strong nation even though we are small, and I believe we can rise above challenges. We have a mixed sense of history of 200 years, most significantly we should acknowledge that some of our forefathers, fathers, brothers and now some sisters, sacrificed their lives to participate and defend world nations in need during the First and Second World Wars, and also on peacekeeping duties in the Middle East.

We should also acknowledge the arrival of the indentured labourers and church evangelists who came in to assist the development of our nation. The labourers' generation and the churches are here today, building our nations and we should be proud of that history. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can also say that we are a prosperous nation, with an abundance of resources such as land, sea, air space and peaceful people. Though we may be lacking in funds, those resources are the backbone in our quest for development, but we must develop them sustainably.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have gone through a number of Governments since independence, and this new Coalition Government faces a daunting task of realigning the economy after 16 years of the FijiFirst Government. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my view is that we should not sit and judge for too long, but encourage apologies for the past and foster reconciliations, where true forgiveness achieves whilst justice takes its course. In that way we can all work together towards the common goal of improving the lives of all the people in Fiji.

Back to our need to reform or realign our economy, focussing on consolidation knowing the challenges I mentioned before. Mr. Speaker, Sir, reform is needed. However, we must proceed carefully, and I am pleased with my role in the Ministry of Finance and as a Member of the Public Accounts Committee. Three major issues come to mind apart from others, we all know that our economy needs help to grow sustainably. We need the private sector to be encouraged to be the engine of growth and we have already started on that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Partnerships will be strengthened with Trade Unions, civil society and traditional organisations. That has already started as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We will work towards reducing our heavy and continuous reliance on consumption, as it will drive imports and subsequently price as currently faced. In reverse psychology we should increase the savings and investment rate for our people. Inflation was high but tracking low now at around 3 percent to 4 percent, hence manageable by one standard and we need to keep it low.

Secondly, is our national debt, which will be around \$10 billion in July this year or 85 percent of the GDP, plus guarantees it will be around \$11.8 billion or around 100 percent of the GDP. We need to slow down the borrowing rate as it limits our borrowing gap for capital expenditure, but this is a challenge for us. We have to rein in unimportant expenditures and stop wastage and that is what we have started, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This is where we need to work quickly to see that funds are efficiently and effectively used – from budgeted funds, grants, subsidies, projects, et cetera, including funds paid or supported given to Government statutory and corporate bodies.

We have started on this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with two of our corporate bodies, and there are others to come, and a few are already on social media. The social media nowadays are whistle blowers. We will have to diversify revenue source by identifying, encouraging and facilitating the widening of economic base, including exports. We already worked on boosting new industry source such as Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO), and value adding to our traditional source. We will look at improving the operations of the statutory bodies and companies to increase Government returns on investments.

The third important issue is to reduce poverty level, especially rural poverty. From the 2020 level of around 24.1 percent or 208,021 individuals and reduce unemployment rate. Currently the rates are much worse because of the effect of COVID-19 and the slow economic growth. From above we can see the need for more diversified economy and the Government is embarking on strategy to achieve this, including consultations and discussions on socio-economic issues, improve the ease of doing business, new products and new markets recognised, and widen the role of MSMEs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the next four years, with the help of the 29 Member of Parliament in Government, I have faith that a lot will be achieved. However, more will be achieved if the other side of Parliament will work with us, and much more will be achieved if the stakeholders such as the private sectors, Trade Unions, development partners and traditional institutions do buy in.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do have a dream as well as the dream of my fellow Government parliamentarians, and vision that with leadership of our God and Lord on this new Government brighter days are ahead of us. May God bless and guide us all on behalf of those who sent us here and God bless our beloved Fiji. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Acclamation)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers and fellow Parliamentarians, those at the gallery and also those listening on the television; I rise to deliver my response to His Excellency's most gracious Address. Before I do that, Sir, allow me to give my views on the recent election.

In the last election, it was clear that there was no outright winner and we went to a period of negotiation with SODELPA who became a hot darling becoming a kingmaker. Sir, PAP, a breakaway from SODELPA suddenly needed SODELPA's help. Indeed, the stone that the builders rejected had become the cornerstone.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, PAP supporters reminded SODELPA not to forget the time the late Prime Minister Qarase wanted to form government and the CAMV Party as kingmaker had to turn down the Fiji Labour Party's offer. No one ever mentioned that the Military Council in 2000 gave the late PM Qarase a banker at that time the opportunity to lead the nation as an Interim Prime Minister. Mr. Qarase was given a plan by the Military Council to reset Fiji's path, but it was overshadowed by the CAMV political interest that resulted in the 2006 military takeover.

Mr. Speaker, Sir technically the people were no longer deciding the next government, as it was to be decided by SODELPA alone. The 30 member SODELPA Management Board was split with 16 in favour of PAP/NFP and 14 in favour of FijiFirst. The next day it was back to the SODELPA Management Board as there were anomalies regarding the rightful management board members.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, SODELPA Management Board members who campaigned for PAP tried to attend the meeting. At the end, the 26 SODELPA Management Board was split with 13 in favour of PAP/NFP and 12 in favour of FijiFirst with one invalid vote. Mr. Joji Senitabua Leweniqila who had campaigned for PAP in Macuata sat in the Management Board as the Labasa/Savusavu member and voted. I remind the honourable Prime Minister, being a Methodist Christian like me in the Vanua Levu dialect, "*Kai saga mo va'adodonu ta'ina.*"

Mr. Speaker Sir, I thought those types of political tactics were no longer part of PAP that had resulted in the High Court overturning the SODELPA AGM election results in Savusavu in 2019 because of rigging. The Coalition is in power by default. And I repeat the Coalition is in power by default. Mr. Speaker Sir, we cannot congratulate any party in this august Parliament for winning the 2022 Elections.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Nevertheless, I will congratulate the honourable Prime Minister for becoming the Prime Minister by a single vote in this august Parliament. Mr. Speaker Sir, no doubt FijiFirst is still the biggest party in the august Parliament.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- The honourable Leader of the Opposition still carries the biggest mandate amongst the 55 MPs in this Parliament and as the only candidate in the 2022 election that has collected over 130,000 votes.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- How many did you get?

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir if I were to be the Prime Minister, I would have opted for a government of national unity given the total percentage of the Coalition votes is only 49.85 percent which is less than 50.01 percent.

(Honourable Members interjected)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- It would be incorrect to call the People's Coalition Government if 50.15 percent of the people are not part of them. I will re-echo the sentiments of the late *Turaga na Tui Nayau* and Statesman Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara who said, and I quote, "Dialogue should become a part of the way of life in every country and that solutions should be reached by dialogue."

Mr. Speaker, Sir the FijiFirst Party and the Commander RFMF have raised concerns on sweeping changes by the Coalition that has threatened our young democracy. His Excellency's Address by convention lays out the Government of the day's plans in this session of Parliament. Mr. Speaker Sir, His Excellency, however revealed a worrying statement and I quote, "... for critical capital expenditure on infrastructure such as roads, ports, hospitals, water, sewerage. ... direct spending into key areas such as education, health and social welfare payments." That clearly shows that the Coalition Government will not deliver the pace of service delivery that the FijiFirst Government made a priority under the 2013 Constitution and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals that is aligned to the 5-Year and 20-Year National Development Plan.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency in revealing the statement, the Government's shortcomings in a much anticipated statement of hope, it was like a *tukutuku ni leqa kei na rarawa*.

(Laughter)

Is this the kind of change that people voted for?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- *Wawa!*

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, people are now saying that the Coalition Government is just continuing and opening the developments that the FijiFirst Government had started or done.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government will set up a Fiscal Review Policy and will be followed by an Economic Summit in April. Let us not reinvent the wheel. The People's Charter and the Strategic Framework for Change and the Roadmap for Democracy and Sustainable Economic Development and the Three-Year Strategic Plan that led to the formation of the 2013 Constitution and the 2013 Constitution became the basis of the 5-Year 20-Year National Development Plan. We have that in place already.

The 5-Year Development Plan aligned to the UN SDGs as you will be familiar with, Mr. Speaker, as being a former Member of the Public Accounts Committee which usually does SDG audits and now as the Speaker of Parliament, you will be subject to the SDGs implementation reporting mechanism under the Inter-Parliamentary Unit (IPU) which requires States to report on how governments' national budget impacts the fulfilment of UN SDGs. The format also is standard by parliamentary Committees in reviewing Annual Reports and Bills under the SDG lenses. I understand it will be in Manama, Bahrain next month for the IPU meeting, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the media reports that the Coalition hints in amending the Constitution even through the Courts. A referendum to decide our current nationality as Fijian and the secular State. Mr. Speaker, Sir, having studied in Israel, it was always interesting to learn the evolution of the State of Israel from Abraham to Jacob and the journey to the Promised Land. They were taken to Egypt through a famine through Joseph after his brothers sold him. After 600 years, Moses led them out of Egypt for another 40 years in the wilderness. Joshua took over and then the Judges led Israel before Prophet Samuel took over.

All along, God wanted Israel to be a priesthood nation. The real Israelites wanted a physical king and God told Prophet Samuel to anoint Saul. After King Saul's demise, David was chosen king and Prophet Samuel had anointed him way back when he was still a shepherd boy. King David's era, his reigning descendants disobeyed God and that resulted in the Babylon captivity for another 70 years. The Prophet Isaiah before the Jews exiled to Babylon had prophesied a child that will be born and the government will be upon his shoulders. When the Persians conquered Babylon, Cyrus the Great gave Jews the permission to return to Palestine. Persia was eventually conquered by Alexander the Great and the land of Israel was again under the Greeks. The Greeks were then conquered by the Romans. The Romans ruled over Israel for another 400 years. Mr. Speaker, Sir, all those events that I have talked about had reshaped Israel and it took away its monarchical system so that He alone be exalted king.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Qarase Government in 2001 in its attempt to unite the nation after the 2000 *coup* decided to form an Assembly of Christian Churches Fiji called the ACCF which was mandated to facilitate reconciliation and unity for a prosperous Fiji. There were a few evangelists who were brought into Fiji to pray over our nation under the ACCF mission, one of them was Australian evangelist, Steve Penny, who prayed over the late Prime Minister Qarase at a prayer breakfast and prophesied, and I quote:

“Some of those rocks and monuments to man’s best efforts and the Spirit of God has begun to run, it has gone around. But you watch! In the next couple of years as the tide of the spirit gains momentum, it will literally sweep all before. Some of those things that have been strong monuments will literally won’t be there because God will have decided to bring his agenda.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency outlines the Government’s plan to review laws concerning the iTaukei community. His Excellency’s Address mentioned ILO 169 and UNDRIP. You will know, Sir, we under the Vitivou Forum in 2012 had done a lot of research in tracing back to the Deed of Cession 1874 and how to bring back a system that was similar to the *Treaty of Waitangi*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Convention 169 and UNDRIP was created to protect indigenous people who are minorities in their own State.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- It calls for those States to develop measures in accordance with the universal framework of minimum standards both individual and collective rights, cultural rights and identity, rights to education, health, employment, language and others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, contrary to our case, Sir Author Gordon had established the Separate Administration System shortly after the Cession in 1874 to form a Colonial tool for direct rule to preserve natives under traditional leaders. It was a semi-autonomous body within the government and in 1945 the Fijian Administration System was re-designed to protect indigenous Fijians politically and economically. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the GCC was tasked to consider questions relating to the good government and wellbeing of the iTaukei people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the use of political ideologies that appeal to the indigenous sense of culture and identity through the use of mainstream institutions such as the GCC and the church gives rise to indigenous Fijian paramountcy and Christian nationalism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while negotiations took place in the year 2000, the GCC delegation that visited Parliament offered George Speight and the group immunity, abrogation of the 1997 Constitution and no Indo-Fijian to be ever Prime Minister again and the blessings to its Speight’s administration. George Speight’s group wanted another demand and that was the removal of the *Turaga na Tui Nayau* as President. The GCC later endorsed Vice President Ratu Iloilo to be President in 2001.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the GCC under the 1997 Constitution and so with the entrenched provisions of iTaukei laws and the compact guaranteed the paramountcy of iTaukei over other communities then why did George Speight stage the 2000 *coup* under the pretence of indigenous rights?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many iTaukei supporting George Speight’s *coup* had no confidence in the GCC because they saw it as a group advancing their own confederacy interests. The 2000 *coup* crisis exposed the rot within the GCC in terms of the shift to rivalry iTaukei communities of a political power. It was a shift to tribalism as the common indigenous people challenged the chiefs who wanted to keep the GCC as a tool to remain in power and control the iTaukei people.

The iTaukei people saw them as corrupt chiefs who had political interests to gain wealth from the generosity of those who served them. Reading the current Bose Levu Vakaturaga discussions on

the Fiji Native Tribal Congress online page where the honourable Minister Ditoka is a moderator, I observe that there is a strong view on many iTaukei in the forum against Colonial-made chiefs. Many want a review of the composition of the GCC membership and have called for the correction of historical injustices done by some chiefs. They have a valid point and G.V. Maxwell, the first Commissioner of the Native Land Commission in the Legislative Council Paper No. 27 of 1915 to the Colonial Secretary stated that, I quote:

“... the conspiracies and perjury (lying under oath/false swearing) that stand and revealed from time to time is simply appalling...”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Evangelist Steve Penny's prophesy in 2001 had mentioned that there is a spirit that causes the *coup* to happen and also is reflected in many that even sit in the church. The danger of advancing iTaukei supremacy and Christian nationalism resulted in the 2000 *coup* despite the multiracial promises of the 1997 Constitution, the Indo-Fijian community were again victims of that *coup* despite the promises of that Constitution that anyone can become Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency reminded us with the late Justice Jai Ram Reddy's address to the GCC in 1997 and I quote: “Fiji is our home. Fiji is our only home. We have no other.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the plea by the late Justice Jai Ram Reddy in 1997, the GCC in the year 2000 with the honourable Prime Minister as the Chairman at that time proposed to resolve the crisis through the release of hostages.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- GCC approved that Constitution.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Yes, release of hostages that no Indo-Fijian should be ever again be Prime Minister. Had they forgotten what the late Jai Ram Reddy had said in 1997 and plea?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2013 Constitution has a more balanced approach to indigenous issues in view of stability and removing discriminatory policies. Fijians are recognising the preamble, their land is protected and cannot be permanently alienated, not like the Momi and Denarau cases. Section 30 of the 2013 Constitution now enables 80 percent of fair share of royalties on minerals to be paid to landowners, something that was never done in the SDL and SVT governments despite that being part of the 1997 Constitution.

The investment capacity of iTLTB in making landowners move from passive land providers to entrepreneurship is prioritised through the iTaukei Land Development Programme that has allowed many landowners and landowning units to sub-divide land.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- More land development for accessible housing through the First Home Buyers scheme allowed resource owners to get economic returns. Landowners have moved into the quarry business partnership with Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) contractors - they earn as far as \$13 per cubic metre where \$3.39 goes to TLTB for royalties and \$9.61 goes into a *mataqali* account to improve their economic position. Now with introduction of the PWD and seizure of contractor's they lose out and many who voted People's Alliance Party (PAP) working under FRA contractors are now without jobs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTaukei Land Trust Board had paid a total of \$243.3 million to the landowners in three years as of November 2021. These landowners have leased out their land for economic development on various sectors of the economy. TLTB has invested a total of \$29 million

as of 30th November, 2021 to 27,000 minors at various investment institutions in the country. These lease monies will be released to the entitled iTaukei children when they turn 18 years. This was never done by the SVT or SDL government in the past.

Under the 2013 Constitution, the iTaukei Trust Fund Board continued to invest in educational programmes, to help uplift the lives of iTaukei around the country in promoting and preserving language and culture. It has carried out leadership training for traditional leaders for its centre at Nadave and also has moved on to post graduate studies in partnership between iTaukei Trust Fund with USP, for those that want to do their post graduate studies in indigenous language - and that was done through the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the 2013 Constitution the Climate Change Act was passed last year and that now allows many landowners to participate in the carbon trading market. For example, in Vunivia Catchment in Dogotuki are now in discussion with the Maori Land Commission and Cooperation on partnership to carbon credits. Section 26(8)(g) of the 2013 Constitution protects iTaukei, Rotuman and Banaban lands and access to marine resources (*qoliqoli*), or the bestowing of iTaukei, Rotuman and Banaban chiefly title rights and rank. No native land has been alienated, no *qoliqoli* lost and no chiefly title or rank was lost under the FijiFirst Government in the 2013 Constitution. Despite this, many still spread lies during the campaign that now we are all Fijians and all other communities can be registered, maybe in the future registered in the VKB to own land & *qoliqoli* and finally the iTaukei people will be swimming in the sea without any ownership to their resources.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the new order in the 2013 Constitution established by the Military was based on two important goals firstly, “uplifting the disadvantaged in all communities” and secondly, “mainstreaming the indigenous Fijian in a modern, progressive Fiji.” Interestingly, that prophecy in 2001 by Steve Penny talked about a government structure that will bring favor to the nation. In explaining the basis of the structure he cited Ezekiel 17:22-24. The passage talks about a shoot that was taken from a top most of a cedar tree and planted into a top mountain in Israel and birds of every feathers will shelter there and find peace.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I believe the splendid cedar tree in the prophecy is the 2013 Constitution that has the ability to produce branches and bear fruit. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the birds of every kind mentioned in the passage refers to all communities in Fiji who are now all Fijians living in peace. We need to grow into the future together as a nation of Fijians in harmony. We need to move away from the view that Fiji is for the iTaukei. The 2013 Constitution unites us as one people towards a shared destiny.

Mr. Speaker Sir, we need to uphold and promote the values of our sovereign democratic State in the 2013 Constitution especially common and equal citizenry and national unity, equality of all race, care for the less fortunate based on values inherent in the Bill of Rights. We all took an oath as Members of Parliament in this august with our holy books in our hand to uphold the Constitution just like the Israeli soldiers taking their own oaths to swear that Masada will never fall. The 2013 Constitution is a fortress that needs to be defended.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Hear, hear!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 1986 his Holiness the Pope John Paul famously declared "Fiji - the way the world should be", a year later we had the 1987 *coup*.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Oh!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- How do we retain that status we did not fall not from 16 years ago...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- The 2006 *coup*.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- .. but from 36 years ago?

We need to deliver our nation out of that evil spirit that caused the *coup* to first birthed in our nation. I urge the honourable Prime Minister not to waste his time on restoring the systems and the monuments that the evangelist has spoken about - that we only encourage instability. Let us not use the freedom as a pretence that will drive us to the past. People are now joking about the new rushed FBC logo and now we hear that they wanted to change it again.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Oh!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- The former Supervisor of Elections was stopped at the Nadi International Airport without any knowledge of an investigation being done by FICAC on him. The honourable Leader of the House last week had her bail condition varied by the Court and she can now travel overseas because she was charged by FICAC. Mr. Saneem without even being caution interviewed was put on the watch list. The former Police Commissioner of Police is being investigated by CID and is already suspended by the COC and pending a tribunal hearing.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- They followed the process.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Process, process.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- I was picked up by the CID Taskforce team last week at 5.00 a.m...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Unlike some.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- ...on an allegation based on the Online Safety Act without an opportunity to respond to the complaint lodged to the Online Commission as required by the Act itself.

I call on the honourable Prime Minister to stop this drama. I also thank the PAP General Secretary for condemning the uncalled behaviour of the PAP President that was circulated online. Many with the wrong motives have taken this opportunity of change of Government to try cause unnecessary fear in the community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat on 1st August, 2022, Pope Francis received His Excellency the President at the Vatican's Apostolic Palace. Prior to that on 29 July, His Excellency the President met with His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales at his Royal residence in Norfolk, England.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- *Io, sa rauta.*

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- He had sent me a photo of him and King Charles and I replied back "*Sota e rua na a'i Bolatagane*" and His Excellency replied to me saying "*Sota e rua na ai 'vale*" meaning, "Two from the same household have met".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency addressed the Government of the day as the People's Coalition government and not "My government." His Excellency true in his character as a leader could not say it because he respected him being elected as President of Fiji in 2021 by the FijiFirst Government. His Excellency, left it to us to find a solution by saying, "The change in our Government gives rise to the opportunity to bring our nation together and start afresh." To understand the meaning of what His Excellency meant in one sentence, I would urge you to listen to what His Excellency is not saying.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, fate does funny things sometimes as the famous poet said "They came for the socialist, I did not speak. They came for the trade unionist, I did not speak. They came for the for the Jewish, I did not speak because I was not a Jew then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat it will be amiss not to congratulate you for ascending to the Chair of this Parliament. I recall the day the honourable Prime Minister as the Leader of the Opposition in 2020 tendered his resignation in Parliament. We had to elect a new Leader of the Opposition the next day. The Party had issued a written directive that honourable Gavoka to be the nominee. However, we managed to sail through those rough seas that morning and finally you were unanimously elected to be the Leader of the Opposition.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Oh!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- We have in the past, Mr. Speaker, Sir, ...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- That is confidential.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- ... maneuvered safely through difficult passages. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know you will not regret...

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Stop pointing.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- ... customarily being dragged unwillingly to the Speaker's bench. I have confidence that you will maintain order and decorum of Parliament by acting impartially without fear or favour as having gained experience, having being on attachment to the British House of Commons in the past.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for indulgence, may God bless Fiji forevermore.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Bulitavu, that was a world tour.

(Laughter)

I now intend to adjourn Parliament so we can take a break for tea before we come back for the final lap. The Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.10 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.46 p.m.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen and the people of Fiji who may be tuning in this afternoon; *bula vinaka, namaste, noaia e mauri* and a very good afternoon to you all.

May I congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on your appointment as Speaker to this august Parliament and with your experience and knowledge, we believe that it was an appropriate appointment - we wish you well in these four years. Likewise, I would like to also congratulate honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua for her appointment as Deputy Speaker and we wish her well as well.

Before I begin, I thought coming into this Parliament that I might be able to elevate the quality of debate in this august Parliament, but clearly, it is going to be a big task. I thank the honourable Bulitavu for taking us around the world on a biblical and geographical journey.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on His Excellency the President's Address and also present my Maiden Speech. In opening my contribution, please allow me to make a few salutations in i-Taukei language.

Ni sa tiko saka na Turaga Bale na Ulu ni Veiliutaki ena ni Bose Lawa, Na Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, Na Turaga na Paraiminisita ni Noda Vanua, Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka, mai na Vanua saka mai Naqorovakarua vua na gone Turaga na Ratu na Tui Navatu,

Rau tiko saka na noqui tokani na vukevuke saka ni Paraiminisita, honourable Viliame Gavoka mai na vanua saka ko Nakuvakarua, Louvatu na Kalevu na Tui Nadroga, ka vaka talega kina nai vukevuke ni Paraiminisita, honourable Professor Biman Prasad.

Ki vua saka talega nai liuliu ni to ni veisaqa, honourable Josia Voreqe Bainimarama, mai Natena saka vua na gone Turaga na Roko Tui Kiuva,

Sa vakaturaga raraba tale tiko ga ki Kubuna, na noqu Valelevu na Vunivalu na Tui Kaba, Gone Marama Bale na Roko Tui Dreketi na Vunivalu, na matanitu veiwekani saka na Tovata, vei kemuni saka nai lawalawa ni Bose Lawa da mai soqoni saka tiko ena siga edai. Sa ka dokai saka tiko vei au meu tucake ena vuku ni noqu vanua, mai Navitomi saka vua saka Na Gone Turaga na Tudrau me dua saka na noqu cau ena veivosaki me baleta na nodra vosa na Turaga na Peresitedi kei na dua talega na noqu vosa mei sevu saka tiko ni noqu vosa ena loma saka ni Bose Lawa.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I speak in full support of His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji and the *Turaga Bale na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere's Address delivered on 3rd February, 2023. May I begin with the following quote in this august Parliament and I am taking you back to 1998, and I quote:

“The coming into force of the Constitution Amendment Act 1997 on Monday 27th July, 1997 will establish a new threshold for multiracial and multi-party cooperation in Fiji. But we must not be complacent. The job has just begun. The provisions of the Constitution have to be fully explained to the people, especially the indigenous Fijians. The rationale of the new amended Constitution and how their rights and interests have been safeguarded in an environment where they have to help themselves by working with people of other

communities must be understood. In fact, the people of Fiji have been working together for more than a hundred years and together we have built a country where we have been blessed by the Almighty with abundant resources and opportunities. This is our reality. We shall not grow in stature and wealth by depriving others of their freedoms and opportunities. We must stand firm against the forces of racism, and ethnic violence, fundamentalist sectarianism and greed which is at large in the world today. We must educate and train the people of Fiji to seek to live with the truth, to respect the law, to be worthy of trust, to be industrious and competent, to respect the religious beliefs of others, to love and help children, honour and help our parents to set a good example, being temperate and not living in the promiscuity and as the Bible says, "Try not to do things that you would not like others to do to you and safeguard and improve the environment."

If we want to make Fiji a happy home for those who live in it, we must encourage and support all the people of goodwill, religious bodies and non-government organisations to promote those principles which must form the foundation of a New Fiji.

Fiji is a few months away from making a historic decision at the next elections - we will be electing the first government of national unity - in which all major parties will be represented. All communities will be working side by side to make Fiji a better place to live and to give our children a better future.

But it will not be easy. It will need men and women who put Fiji first and its people but I believe, the goal of political stability and economic prosperity will be worth the sacrifice. That is the promise of the New Fiji – a prosperous and happy nation.

Josevata Nakausabaria Kamikamica - dated 24th July 1998."

I decided to use this quote of my late father, who was also a Member of this august Parliament in tribute to his life and, of course, my mum, Mrs. Esiteri Kamikamica. His speech which he titled the "Dream for a New Fiji" in 1997 has absolute relevance today. At that time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was an aura of hope in Fiji. That same aura of hope and renewal exists today. It calls for unity, tolerance and respect for each other and for leaders who are wanting to serve.

His Excellency the President speaks and demands unity and I quote:

"Your Government's mission 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."

I can stand here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and wax lyrical with anecdotes or analogies about clapping with one hand or the strength in numbers but I will not. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will challenge this august Parliament and the people of Fiji – are we serious about unity? Like 1998 and as stated by His Excellency, unity is critical. If like myself, we agree that we are serious about unity then we cannot be complacent, and we must lean in and work together.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, unity starts from this august Parliament. Sure, we will have debates, we will lob insults at each other, but we must not forget the task at hand. It is large, it may be daunting, but with God's help, together unified in Parliament and across the nation we can truly build a happy and prosperous nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, together we can! It is vital that as a nation we accept a fundamental truth, that we are one nation under God. Racial and religious intolerance has no place in the new Fiji. Let

me repeat that – racial and religious intolerance has no place in the new Fiji. If we accept this as a country, if we do this in this august Parliament, the road to unity as a people is off to a great start.

There are two other significant keys to unity, Mr. Speaker, Sir. One, we need to find women and men who put the country first. Second, the key to a unified Fiji is a Government that listens, not only in words and platitudes but in actions and deeds, Mr. Speaker, Sir. His Excellency urges us all, the People's Coalition Government, and I quote:

“...to ensure all initiatives and draft legislation must go through a thorough consultation process for better outcomes to ensure inclusiveness and foster greater ownership.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we assure this nation and the people of Fiji that we will listen. There are major challenges that lay in front of us, and His Excellency touched on this as well. His Excellency spoke about the need to get our economic house in order. I am confident that we will get this done. Why? It is because we are in this together. Together, Sir, we can.

However, of equal importance is the need to grow the pie or the cake or the economic cake. Fiji is open for business, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Yes, there are a few impediments to doing business in Fiji and this shall be fixed. If we are to prosper as a country, we need to target to grow our economy aggressively and I am suggesting 50 percent over the next 10 years. It is an ambitious target, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but I have news for the people of Fiji, together as a unified nation, we can.

Over the next 12 months, we need to execute the following to name are few:

- Review the civil service;
- Perform a fiscal review of our Government - the last review was in 2004;
- Hold an economic summit which shall form the basis of the national strategy for Fiji;
- Conduct the National Tripartite Forum – this is exciting as it means the unions will have a true voice in our country; and
- Review the education system so it is fit for purpose and relevant to the employment needs in Fiji for the 21st century.

Those bodies of work may seem daunting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but together we can.

The Ministry which I head covers Trade, Small Micro Enterprises(SMEs), Co-operatives and Communications will work closely with all the ministries - the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Fisheries and Forests and other key ministries to increase the economic pie.

To be honest, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are some significant opportunities out there - energy, tourism, aviation, commercial agriculture with value added, pharmaceuticals, fisheries, forestry and the ICT sector just to name are few. There is a renewed interest for investment in our country. There is also a real opportunity to make Fiji a genuine regional hub in the Pacific working together with our Pacific partners, brothers and sisters to bring about prosperity for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, transparency and investor confidence is fundamental. We shall operate on a no surprises basis. We will contribute to work on modern and innovative trade co-operation agreements that make sense for Fiji.

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) is an example of a modern and forward-looking trade agreement which will evolve as a powerful economic bloc. Mr. Speaker, Sir, IPEF will address non-tariff barriers and modern trade logistical issues which exacerbate the cost of doing

business. The IPEF is a US-led initiative that addresses the issues and challenges of the 21st century. Fiji is currently negotiating IPEF with 13 other countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand, United States of America to name a few which represents about 40 percent of the world's Gross Domestic Product.

It will also leverage Public Private Partnership (PPP) and business-to-business initiatives and it has an opportunity to deliver foreign direct investments and technological transfer. Fiji is already seeing the benefits of IPEF even without signing an agreement and we look forward to more tangible benefits in the coming days.

Another novel agreement that will drive our transformation to a low emission climate resilient economy is the Agreement on Climate Change, Trade and Sustainability (ACCTS). The ACCTS is being negotiated with Costa Rica, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway and Switzerland draws nexus between trade, climate and environmental goals with sustainability at its core. In the regional context, we will focus on renewing cooperation and trade relations with the Pacific.

We also aim to increase Fiji's trading volume by diversifying our exports across a large number of products and trading partners. To do this, it is vital that we build competitive advantages by redirecting incentives and initiatives to build capacities in MSMEs and including co-operatives to engage in cross-border trade. We will particularly target the youth and women in the rural setting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, private sector engagement is more than ever important as it shapes the economic and social landscape. What I want is to see a private sector led growth. They are the key drivers of growth and innovation and most importantly address the biggest challenges facing society today, such as poverty, inequality, and climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government will create a supportive environment in which businesses can thrive and contribute to economic growth. By making things easier businesses can focus on what they do best, providing goods and services to their customers. These hurdles can be fixed, and they will be.

Having the right infrastructure and fair and transparent legislation and policies, that is, when we can boost investments into the country, meaning more jobs and more innovative opportunities for the people. Essentially, we will further and promote economic diversification. When I mean fair and transparent legislation, I mean, a collaborative approach with the private sector forming the right foundation.

Proposed Bills that may come through like the MSME Bill; a review of the Co-operative Act will be on the cards and I assure this august Parliament that those Bills and amendments will go through thorough consultation and review process to ensure that all ideas are heard and considered.

We intend to encourage the development of new industries such as BPO Green Manufacturing Renewable Energy, to name a few. The Blue Economy is also an exciting prospect, and they have significant potential to grow in the coming years. Professional bodies will provide sound advice to our Ministry.

Digitalisation is critical and important, Mr. Speaker, Sir. In communication, we have an opportunity to transform our country as a technological driver. We are steadfast in our dedication to grant connectivity to the remaining 5 percent of the unconnected Fijians which will further enhance financial inclusion and access to digital services. With the Universal Services Fund, we will connect the unconnected. There are areas in Fiji where signals and access are weak, we plan to address this as well. Also Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are prioritizing the second cable landing station which will

transform technology in Fiji and of course, with increasing cyber-attacks, this is something that our Ministry will focus on and commit its resources to.

With regard to the Media Industry as mentioned by the honourable Prime Minister, the Media Industry Development Act (MIDA) will either be amended or repealed. I have heard countless first-hand accounts of the trauma experienced by journalists and the way this law has been used to paralyse the media. Like any democratic society, the media must be able to carry out its critical role in informing our people. This will be coming to the floor of this august Parliament on the amendments that we will be proposing. Be assured, full consultation will take place before it is presented. Mr. Speaker Sir, we are also mindful of significant investments that have been made in *Walesi*. There will be a paper to Cabinet on the need for a detailed review of *Walesi's* operations and the future roadmap.

Mr. Speaker Sir, may I be allowed to conclude with my Maiden Speech to the Parliament. In 1984, a very young man, at his school prize giving ceremony, uttered the famous words of President John Fritzergerald Kennedy (JFK) about service before self. Today, that same not so young man, would like to quote those same words – “*Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country.*”

I challenge all of us in this august Parliament to do the same and I will explain why. Before I do, I would like to thank the God Almighty and his son Jesus Christ for his love, grace and blessings which has allowed me to come and serve my country. If there has been one thing I have learnt on this journey, without God, this would not have been possible.

Now to explain why I chose the words of JFK in my maiden speech. Mr. Speaker Sir, it is very simple, the moment demands it. Fiji has some challenging times ahead which requires sacrifices and the desire to work together for our people. We cannot be complacent and bicker about petty issues. As mentioned by my late father, Fiji needs women and men who will put our country first. I ask my colleagues in this august Parliament, are we such women and men? The people of Fiji, our people deserve no less.

Mr. Speaker Sir, for those who do not know me, I am a descendant of two warrior clans, from *Navitomi*, from the *Turaga na Tudrau*, in Dravo Bau Tailevu, and from *Tacilevu*, from the village of Navunievu in Bua. My dad's village is also one of the warrior clans to the *Vunivalu* of Bau. A warrior is by nature, selfless and their first instinct is to protect those around him and a desire to serve - service before self. This is what I bring to this august Parliament - a desire to serve my country and people well with integrity, truth and justice and that is my pledge to this Parliament and the people of Fiji.

Mr Speaker Sir, this is why I used the quote from JFK. If any of us have come to this Parliament merely to earn a salary or to winge about election results, then this Parliament is not for them. I come to this place with significant hopefulness -- as a practical person, a doer and a tireless worker. Before joining politics, I had a 33-year career in finance, aviation, banking and manufacturing. I am here to make the lives of our people better by implementing actionable level-headed policies and legislation using the knowledge and skill I have gained from the real world. Like many of my colleagues in this august Parliament, I believe we have a duty to our people and the responsibility to create opportunities for our children.

Of course, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge, Mr Speaker Sir, my deepest appreciation and thanks to those who have supported me in my arriving here today. To my late father, Josevata Nakausabaria Kamikamica, my mother Mrs Esiteri Nuenue Kamikamica, my wife

and rock - Ann Steele and our daughter Ann Marie, the Kamikamica, Vakalala and Steele Families - I say, thank you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to my hardworking campaign team in Tailevu South - my *tavales*, Josevata Kamikamica, Tevita Ravai, Mr Pita Usaia Waqatairewa, Samisoni Bai and wife Sera Bai, Mr. Sekove Vadei, *Na Turaga na Matasau and Turaga na Matakibau*. - I will remain truly indebted. To my family in Navunievu, Bua, *vinaka vakalevu na veitokoni*. To the *Momo Levu Na Tui Nadi* - Ratu Vuniyani Navuniuci, the *Momo Na Tui Nawaka* - Ratu Tomasi Kanailagi and *Na Momo Na Taukei Vidilo* - Ratu Viliame Bouwalu, thank you for your support and dedication. The People's Alliance owe you a great debt of gratitude. To Saliceni Raiwalui and his late wife Meseini Raiwalui in Nadi, my Air Pacific, Fiji Airways and the Waqavuka Family, Mr Joveci Balenaivalu, Titilia Vuataki, Ana Gale, Lanoma and Pradeep Singh and the supporters in the West and the People's Alliance Western Regional Team - thank you for your efforts and support – they are deeply appreciated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the 24 patriots that did not make it to Parliament, we will not forget you. To those of you who I have not mentioned and anyone that voted 454, I thank you and say '*vinaka vakalevu*'. I promise that I will not let you down.

Finally, Mr Speaker, Sir, when God approached the young King Solomon and asked him what he wanted, he asked for wisdom. The rest we know is history. I pray that all of us in this august Parliament will seek God and his wisdom, the wisdom he gave King Solomon. The challenges that we face in our nation are many, Mr. Speaker, Sir but with God's wisdom and together unified, we can.

May God bless His Excellency the President of Fiji, may God bless our Prime Minister and his Cabinet and may God bless the Members of this august Parliament and may God bless the people of Fiji.

(Acclamation)

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and our dear people of Fiji - *ni sa bula, namaste, asalaam waalekum* and a very good afternoon to you all. Please, allow me to acknowledge and greet all our people and our friends joining us this afternoon via television, livestreaming or on Parliament website and *Facebook* page.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise before you today as a proud Fijian and Member of Parliament from Lautoka to represent all Fijians. It is indeed an absolute honour and privilege to be here in this capacity. Let me start by thanking God because of whom we are here today. I am greatly humbled this afternoon to deliver my Maiden Speech during this parliamentary session. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I congratulate you on your appointment as Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am originally from Viseisei Lautoka. I attained my primary education at Viseisei Primary School; secondary education at Sangam (SKM) College, Nadi; my teaching certificate from Lautoka Teachers College, Bachelor of Arts Degree from USP and Master of Education from Griffith University in Queensland, Australia. I taught in Primary school for 12 years and was a Senior Lecturer in Education at Lautoka Teachers College and FNU until 2014. From 2015 to 2022, I was at the Ministry of Education as Principal Education Officer, Director Primary Education, Director Early Childhood Education, Director Special Inclusive Education and Head of Human Resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for any constitutional democracy to thrive, the Government must deliver on its election promises. It must subject itself to scrutiny and it must get subjected to be questioned. When we as the Opposition will do so, it will not be for the sake of doing so, but it is the right of every citizen to know, it will not be for the sake of it, it will be done as and when necessary. I wish to echo the sentiments of our honourable Leader and the honourable Member of Parliament who by far alone has the largest number of votes, almost double that of the honourable Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my presence in this Parliament today has been made possible by our FijiFirst Leader and by the people of Fiji. I also wish to thank my campaign team, my wife Sharmila, my daughter Priyashna, brothers, sisters, cousins, family members and village elders for their extremely hard work and support during the election campaign. I am very honoured to be one of the 26th FijiFirst MPs in Parliament. FijiFirst has the biggest number of MPs in this august Parliament after having 26 out of the 55 seats in the 2022 General Election. FijiFirst received 200,246 votes, that is 42.55 percent of the total votes cast.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, mainstream politics was something that I had never wanted to be in until four months prior to the elections. I am now here, and I fully understand the enormous responsibilities bestowed upon me and I am ready to deliver. Unlike, many on the other side of the Chamber who had chosen a defined area as their constituency, I campaigned throughout Fiji. Whenever I will rise to speak in this Chamber, I will always have a clear picture of the people out there for whom the policy is being made, be they from Lautoka, Nadi, Bua, Rakiraki, Labasa, Taveuni or be they from rural, urban, remote, very remote or maritime. I have met them, I have sat with them and shared their concerns and appreciations over a cup of tea or a bowl of grog. Majority have expressed their great appreciation to the FijiFirst Government for the assistance provided and development done by the FijiFirst Government. I have a much better understanding of the development that has taken place in urban, rural, semi-urban, remote and outer islands under the leadership of our leader.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it must be noted with great appreciation that it was the careful planning, wise budgeting and tireless effort of the FijiFirst Government that steered us out of the woods during COVID-19. When the pandemic swept the globe, no country was spared. The impact of COVID-19 was worse than *TC Winston*, *TC Harold* and every storm since 2016 combined. The FijiFirst Government took steps to secure our borders and made sure our hospitals and doctors had medical supplies.

The FijiFirst Government made sure our families had accurate and timely information about what public actions were required and when vaccines became available. The FijiFirst Government made sure that we were first in the line.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must also highlight that the FijiFirst Government during the pandemic, they provided direct cash assistance and rations to Fijians. Those assistance have helped support more than 300,000 Fijians. While in many countries people had to pay for the corona vaccines, the FijiFirst Government provided free vaccines to the citizens.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Donations.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. H. CHAND.- These efforts proved Government's duty of care for the citizens of our beloved country.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- The government did not provide it.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. H. CHAND.- Sir, COVID-19 was not the only issue that gripped our nation.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Who negotiated?

HON. H. CHAND.- Since 2016, we had 14 cyclones, out of which five were either category 5 or category 4. Fiji faced the brunt of some of the worst natural disasters in its history. One cyclone to mention is *TC Winston*. *TC Winston* caused havoc and widespread damage to our nation.

Many Fijians were left homeless, without food, medical supplies and other necessities.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Wait till a category 5 hits again.

HON. H. CHAND.- But what matters when facing a once-in-a-lifetime crisis is a government with experience.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. H. CHAND.- The FijiFirst Government acted quickly to protect our nation, our families and Fiji with a stimulus programme now responsible for putting us back on the road to recovery, faster than anyone thought possible.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to dwell on a subject that is very close to my heart and that is education. Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I started teaching in the 1990s, some teachers used to work at the District Education Officer's farms and homes in the weekends for free because in return the District Education Officers used to favour them by recommending their names for leadership positions. We should avoid going back 30 years and all appointments should be based on merit and not on recommendations by District Education Officers, Divisional Education Officers or the Teacher's Unions. I am very surprised to hear from teachers that now appointments are based on recommendations and not on merit. This is nepotism, discrimination and favouritism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Open Merit Based Recruitment and Selection is the system of appointing employees based on their ability to do the job, assessed against objective selection criteria which do not discriminate against or give preference to any group of individual.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. H. CHAND.- Open Merit Based Recruitment and Selection Guideline ensures consistency in the recruitment and selection of staff across the Fijian Civil Service. Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I was the head of Human Resources, all the recruitments were in accordance with the OMRS

guidelines to ensure consistency in the recruitment and selection of staff, transparency and accountability, fairness and equity.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been reliably informed that some acting leadership appointments have been revoked and now appointments are done on recommendations. This is nepotism, discrimination and favouritism.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the past eight years, the FijiFirst Government has increased investment in education at all levels through the Free Education Initiative, Bus Fare Assistance, Free Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Education and Tertiary Education Scholarship and Loan Schemes. It invested in teachers, salary increase at all levels, providing more scholarships, post graduate qualification appointments and a better work environment.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Short term contracts.

HON. H. CHAND.- It also removed the grog drinking culture which is now back with vengeance.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. H. CHAND.- Quality education for all is essential to create a more skilled and adaptable workforce and create a knowledge-based society.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. H. CHAND.- The Constitution guarantees the right of every child to early childhood, primary, secondary and further education. A number of bold initiatives have been introduced by the FijiFirst Government to improve the provision of quality education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, universal access to primary education has been achieved and today, net secondary school enrolment is over 80 percent. With the free education initiative, free bus fares and free textbooks, enrolment numbers have increased. It is no secret that our education system requires further changes to match-up with the first world countries. We can only build on the foundation laid by the FijiFirst Government.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, FijiFirst Government's initiative that fulfilled the dreams of many secondary school graduates is the National Toppers and Tertiary Education Loan Scheme (TELS). Toppers offered a pathway for high achievers to pursue studies of their choice. Similarly tertiary education loan TELS gave the opportunity to secondary school graduates options

to study courses and chart their career paths. Now, the students are in limbo with no clarity, no certainty and no direction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, free education grant for primary and secondary students was introduced in 2013 and since then more than 200,000 students were assisted annually. Free education grant for early childhood education was introduced in 2015 and since then more than 15,000 students were assisted annually.

Another scheme that literally reached far and wide is transport assistance. Mr. Speaker, Sir, transport assistance provided to students is another very good initiative of the FijiFirst Government to reduce the financial burden on parents who are unable to afford transportation cost involved in sending children to school. Transport assistance ensures equal access to quality education for all Fijian students in primary and secondary. More than 90,000 students are provided transport assistance every year regardless of the location. Since the introduction of free education grant, transport assistance and free textbooks, the school dropout rate has decreased.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to earlier, the education sector continues to evolve. Much groundwork has been done in early childhood education, special inclusive education, primary education, secondary education and at tertiary level. In theory, the Ministry of Education has a sound grounding to forge further.

In addition to the three universities, there are 47 higher education institutions registered with the Fiji Higher Education Commission. To name a few includes Fulton College, Corpus Christi College, Montfort Boys Town Technical College, Centre for Appropriate Technology and Development, Vivekananda Technical College, Pacific Polytech Technical College, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these institutions are small ones mainly involved in offering quality Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programme. The demand for skilled labour is highly a shortage in the country and there is an influx in the migration of skilled labourers out of Fiji. As such it is imperative that these smaller institutions are considered in the development of national education policy and the policy is not only influenced by the three universities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I took oath on 24th December, 2022 for taking office as a Member of Parliament and in doing so, I solemnly and sincerely promised that I will defend the rule of law and the rights of the people and will act with integrity and diligently carry out my responsibilities in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will, at all times, obey, observe, uphold and maintain the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji which is the supreme law of our country, and all Fijians should uphold and respect the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji. I believe the role and purpose of the Government is to work for the people and listen to the people. The Government should remain focused on improving the lives of our families by making them safer, by ensuring they have quality education and health care and by protecting their environment and natural resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I look forward to working with all Members of this Chamber during this term of Parliament and will do all it takes to ensure that I do not fail in my responsibilities. I wish all the honourable Members well. May God bless our beautiful country Fiji.

(Acclamation)

HON. S. KIRAN.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, colleagues, I wish to pay my respects to my elders and to our people and say, *ni bula vinaka* to all including those who are watching on television or livestream. I pay tribute to the *vanua* and my *Girmitiya* ancestors.

I wish to congratulate all Members of Parliament. I am honoured to stand in this august Parliament as the Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation in the Coalition Government and I am somewhat bewildered at the same time having a very short political career. I would like to thank National Federation Party, my family, friends and voters whose faith in me has brought me here. I also wish to thank the honourable Prime Minister for his faith in me.

I would also like to pay a special tribute to late Allen Lockington. Allen was a citizen activist and humanitarian of rare dedication. He supported me among many other brothers in my campaign at a time when the political environment was very challenging for a late comer like me. I wish to acknowledge the family of Mr. Sharda Reddy, sibling of late Shri Jai Ram Reddy who cocooned me during the campaign period.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have come from the NGO sector. Many people know about Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises and Development (FRIEND), the organisation I had founded with other committed people. I have more than two decades of experience working with rural communities and vulnerable families to provide them with social economic and health empowerment opportunities.

Food security through organic agriculture and traditional food system has been a core part of the work I have been involved in. My work with FRIEND has taken me to rural and peri-urban communities in the West, North, as well as the maritime areas. This has given me many insights into challenges faced by communities. My experience also includes disaster response and rehabilitation as well as trauma healing and peace building. I have served on many regional and international development boards over the last two decades that has also provided me with global perspectives.

With that experience, I hope to work with every sector and agency who can work with our Ministry to achieve our goals and targets. Specifically these are income support to families to address poverty, policy interventions and improve services for older persons, people living with disabilities, beggars and people living with mental health challenges and various other wards of the state. I have always felt very invested in this country's development. I strongly believe that through partnerships and using our existing skills and resources we can achieve sustainable development.

I felt I was already in a space where I could plan and deliver definitive outcomes. All the people asked me about politics, I did not think I could survive in a Government machinery and bureaucracy and achieve the wins I wanted, but here I am and I guess time will tell.

My hope was on a FRIEND board member, the prominent lawyer and human rights activist, Mr. Richard Naidu to be in Parliament. I was hoping that our many issues needing national attention could be raised through him. However, political persecution of leaders like him, people who have committed their life to this nation forced me to change course. Many issues that impacted our most vulnerable people had to be brought to national level. The civil society sector was under attack from the previous Government, even though we were trying our best to provide relief and care to communities in need.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, within days after the date of Election was announced, I walked out of the organisation I had created, and my political journey began. Everything happened rather quickly but here I am. I have a lot to learn about how the government machinery works - I find it rather slow I must say. I accept that the Government must consult widely, and I know it must be accountable and

transparent with its money. I know that sometimes these things take time, but I would also like to find ways which we can be more nimble and responsive to the needs of our most vulnerable people. That is not easy.

During the pandemic, I worked extensively with the Commissioner Western's Office to get resources to those affected by the pandemic as well as the natural disasters. We worked across our networks with civil society organisations and faith-based organisations. In those difficult days, we tried to support the Ministry of Health even while the Government attacked and belittled us, so I had some idea of the problems in the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, coming into office, I was still shocked at the neglect of our various government facilities, housing to some of our most vulnerable people. I have met teams at our ministry headquarters and in the field. They are overworked and burnt out. Most buildings we occupy need urgent repairs, the air conditioning does not work, landlords getting regular rent seemed to be in no rush to fix the problems. The IT systems do not work, many of the staff use their own recharge cards to call our clients. They have to deal with child protection, domestic violence and social protection programs.

Each of these needs research and attention to individual humans, so there is a backlog because teams are overstretched. We need better resourced teams, we are talking to various development partners looking for better ways to work together to improve our service delivery.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Ask the Minister of Finance.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Clear up the mess.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S. KIRAN.- We have 94,600 recipients on social protection programs Mr. Speaker, Sir. Our financial support is rarely enough to allow people to live a dignified life where they can meet if they had full potential. For many, welfare support should be temporary to support them while they face challenges of unemployment or illness, but there is no program to help welfare recipients to move out of welfare and to new opportunities.

I hope that we can work with the Ministry of Trade with the support towards Micro Enterprises. I would like us to do more with the Ministry of Agriculture's women in agriculture program among others. We need to find ways to empower the poor and create viable livelihoods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we recognise and hear the feedback from our clients including our welfare partners that the Social Welfare schemes need review and reform. We have global commitments to report on under various international conventions we have ratified. But these have to match the reality on the ground. We have shocking rates of violence against women and children. We have more street dwellers many with mental health challenges. Easily accessible hard drugs are damaging our young population. We do not have drug rehabilitation programs or facilities. We are not focused on our growing mental health crisis. We are grateful to partners like St. Vincent de Paul and Veilomani Home that have stepped up to provide support to street dwellers.

We know that NCD driven amputations are adding weekly numbers to people living with disabilities which means we must work with the Health Ministry to develop sustainable care programmes.

Late last year, the previous Government announced the closure of Golden Age Home in Lautoka with residents to be moved to Suva or Labasa. We have reversed this decision, we have now secured the former Ba Mission Hospital as a new care facility. However, we will be challenged to fund the necessary renovations, and this is my next priority.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have to look at how we care for our children in our orphanages. Girls must leave them at the age of 18 and they are often ill prepared for independent life. The 12 year old boys are placed in alternative care. I am really thankful that St Christopher's Home is now building a facility to accommodate the boys. We have started working with Fiji Women Crisis Centre to cater for girls leaving those homes to upgrade their live skills and finding boarding schools for their education. Scholarship for tertiary education and foster homes will solve some of the challenges of these very vulnerable children, pathways to foster care would also be greatly beneficial.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am grateful that our Prime Minister has announced Local Government elections this year. This means we can begin to address many of the complaints I heard about during the election campaign. These include poor rubbish disposal and dump sites, poor drainage and stray dogs. I ask our youth and women in particular, to rise to the occasion and become elected leaders in this local government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, almost all houses in Lautoka have been impacted in some way by the Asian subterranean termites infestation. This infestation has spread to Nadi, Ba, Tavua and the Northern Division. Many poor and vulnerable people are losing their homes to these infestations. I wish to acknowledge this Government for recognising the challenge and committing to deal with it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now want to talk about race relations and national unity. We also, during and after the election, felt the politics of race being played. Our people have paid dearly in the past decades for this. I have closely witnessed the events of 2000 and I have worked with many impacted communities. I started studying trauma healing and participated in some very difficult conversations. I grew up in a Indo-Fijian settlement, I had no education on cross cultural learning, so to try and understand the culture, fears and pain of the indigenous communities was a steep learning curve, I am still learning. Even now both indigenous and Indo-Fijian communities feel that they are victims of the other. They fear that the other will take away their resources or their sense of belonging.

When I started on this journey, I was shocked and a little ashamed that how little I knew about indigenous culture. I learnt that to build better understanding and improve race relations we need to review our history. I have discovered that if we tried, we build stronger relationships and I wish to acknowledge the *vanua* of Rewa and the *Gone Marama Bale Na Roko Tui Dreketi – Ro Teimumu Kepa* for enabling a healing journey to unfold in 2016. This culminated in the ceremony by which the Indo-Fijian people of Fiji became the *luvedra Na Ratu*. I wish to pay tribute, to the *Turaga Na Tui Noco – the late Ratu Isoa Damudamu* who gave us the descendants of *Girmitiyas* his identity. His *I cavuti*, so we could truly belong to the *Vanua* of Viti.

I would also like to acknowledge the late *Momo Na Tui Vitogo – Ratu Viliame Sovasova* and *Momo Na Tui Tavua – the late Ratu Nacanieli Uqeuqe* for leading the Vanua of Ba to a ceremony in 2017, where they gave the *kamunaga* for protection to the descendants of *Girmitiyas*, I pay my tribute to and offer my condolences to the *vanua* of Sukanacagi on the sad loss of the *Momo Na Tui Vitogo*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for generations to come are physical features will link us back to our proud *Girmitiya* ancestors. In the 1990s when I joined the Board of International NGO CIVICUS one of its prominent leaders said he had only seen the rugby boys from Fiji. He said, “you do not look like them”. I had to explain our *Girmitiyas* history to him. Personally, I am quite comfortable with my

identity as an Indo-Fijian. A person of Indian origins who belongs to Fiji. It is not a common name that gives me a sense belonging I ached for. It is dialogue, learning and being accepted by the *Vanua*. I know our Coalition Government is committed to nation building, healing and ensuring that all people in Fiji belong.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I pray that day come soon when we are able to see beyond our ethnicity, to treat each other with humanity, love each other unconditionally and to build harmony. We all owe it to our country to help build Fiji. We all owe it to our values of humanity that no one sleeps hungry in our communities regardless of ethnicity.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Look, what is happening.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I pledge to do my best to make sure that we serve the people of Fiji. May God bless this nation.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that now brings us to the end of today's Batting Order, and I would like to thank you. We will continue with the next speaker on Wednesday morning. Tomorrow is Cabinet meeting and Parliament sits on Wednesday at 9.30 a.m. Parliament is now adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 5.45 p.m.