

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 10TH JULY, 2023

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 10TH JULY, 2023

The Parliament met at 9.31 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present except the honourable A.A. Maharaj and the honourable V. Naupoto.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 30th June, 2023 as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting. I also welcome those joining us in the gallery and watching the live proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for your interest in this week's National Budget debates.

Honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming the students and teachers from Suva Grammar School. I hope that you will enjoy this morning's proceedings.

Business Committee Decision

Honourable Members, at this juncture, I wish to inform that in its meeting on Monday, 26th June, 2023, the Business Committee unanimously agreed to the following:

1. That the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics be exempted from the ordinary speaking time limitation for his Right of Reply to the Second Reading of the Appropriation Bill.
2. That the Shadow Minister of Finance, in delivering the response to the Budget Address, will speak for the same time as the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.
3. That Parliament will sit beyond 4.30 p.m. during this sitting week.
4. That the votes taken during the Committee of Supply stage will be done through acclamation, as has been the practice. However, the final vote on the Head will be taken electronically.
5. That Parliament will take limited time for refreshments, lunch and dinner breaks at the discretion of the Chair.

6. In the event that business for any given day is concluded earlier, that the business be brought forward accordingly.

2018-2022 Overview of Parliament

Honourable Members, you would have received a copy of the Overview of Parliament for the last term. The publication provides an overview of the Fijian Parliament for the second period, that is, from 2018 to 2022. Essentially, the publication informs readers of the statistical summary of Parliament's core work over the four-year Parliamentary term, and serves the purpose of informing citizens, Parliamentary stakeholders and interested groups about the work of Parliament. The e-copy will also be made available on the Parliamentary website.

DEBATE ON THE 2023-2024 APPROPRIATION BILL 2023

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That a Bill to appropriate a sum of Three Billion, Seven Hundred and Sixty One Million, Nine Hundred and Seventy Nine Thousand, Four Hundred and Four Dollars, for the ordinary services of Government for the year ending 31st July, 2024, be read a second time.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know that the honourable Leader of the Opposition is very keen to begin so I will let him have the floor.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate. We will first hear the response from the honourable Shadow Minister of Finance, after which we will continue with the order of speakers as listed in the Batting Order.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; *ni bula vinaka saka* and a very good morning to you all. I also greet all Fijians who are listening in and all those who are sitting here in the gallery this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is with much honour and privilege that I present to Parliament our response and to begin the debate on the 2023-2024 National Budget. Undoubtedly, this is a critical time in Fiji's history for a number of reasons. Therefore, the choices and decisions we take at crucial times as such, are important and not to be taken lightly.

Why is that, Mr. Speaker, Sir? Simply because our decisions as leaders have implications which can be good or otherwise. I will make my contribution in the same sequence, as presented by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics so as to correct the many fallacies in his statement, and I will try to be brief as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in setting the scene, the honourable Minister started off by referring again to the 2022 General Elections where people voted for a change. According to the honourable Minister they wanted a democracy that exists not on paper but in practice. They want respect for human rights, media freedom, rule of law and good governance. They want water in their taps and better health facilities. They want better roads, uninterrupted electricity and improved transportation. They want their children to get better education, affordable housing and improvement in living standards and better paid jobs. There is nothing in this list that we have not already addressed. This was very well

said by the honourable Minister of Finance, but the Government now faces the hard reality that it is easily said than done.

The last six months have given us a glimpse of the change that they promised and they, as a Government, are bringing in, contrary to what has been said, what we have seen in the last six months is quite worrying. Common ones are the deterioration in the respect for the rule of law and constitutionalism, appointments of senior civil servants, board membership and quality of service delivery and leadership. Sad to say that we have to prepare for the worst that is yet to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government needs to be reminded that democracy is not only about winning elections, but also about respecting the rule of law, constitutionalism, principles, ethics and values, service delivery and good leadership. This is why FijiFirst is still the largest single party in this Parliament. Through its visionary leadership, Fiji has seen the most extensive developments never experienced before in its early history. It is the duty and responsibility of the incoming government to continue with the development work undertaken previously, whether it be water, electricity, education, housing, health services, et cetera. Much of this is dependent on the state of the economy and the Government's ability to create the environment, not only for stability, but growth, development, employment creation and improved living conditions. Again, it is everyone's expectation that the Government will provide these for them.

Then the honourable Minister went on to say what has changed. He spoke about delivering the budget on time, and I do acknowledge him for that. Thank you, honourable Minister. However, what is disappointing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that it is taking Government well over four months to fill the two FijiFirst parliamentary seats vacated in February this year.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Shame!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I say again, four months!

If these two Members are not sworn in during this sitting, they will have to wait till the September sitting; that will be over six months.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- This is an affront to representative democracy. Mr. Speaker, Sir, by not allowing the full Opposition to participate in Parliament debate and vote, the Coalition Government has completely undermined democracy. What are they afraid of? Are they not confident enough about their budget and deliberately keeping out two seats vacant? What is more important are overseas travels and meetings or our national priorities, in particular, representative democracy. I hope that the honourable Minister can commit to his statement made during the 2018 Budget Debate, and I quote; "We will be cutting Ministerial salaries and allowances." We will come back to that, but listen; "We will be cutting out the international conferences and jet-setting, we will keep Ministers at home to focus on making life better for the Fijians."

HON. J. USAMATE.- Complete opposite.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- That should start with the honourable Prime Minister. What have we inherited? Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government should stop making excuses and carry on with the job. The honourable Minister then talked about a few uncomfortable facts. Firstly, he stated that we are a six-month-old Government that had walked into a deeply grim state of affairs.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Very true.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- What is this grim state of affairs that the Government is referring to?

HON. L.D. TABUYA- Debt (*dinau*).

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my response to His Excellency, the President's Address during the 2023 Parliament opening, I stated and may I repeat today, that we, following the conduct of the 2022 General Elections have handed over a better Fiji than the one we inherited.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is inheriting a far better Fiji from where it was whether they want it eight years or 16 years ago. We are handing over to you not a perfect, but a better Fiji than the one we inherited. That is our legacy which we are indeed proud of, and the expectation is for the new Government to continue and make it even better. Let me explain what qualifies me to say that we have handed over a better Fiji. Again, I am going to repeat myself, first, the 2013 Constitution and the rule of law.

The 2013 Constitution promotes common and equal citizenry; recognises and protects the indigenous people of this country, the *iTaukei* and Rotumans; and it recognises the uniqueness and protects their lands and ownership of their lands. Respect for the rule of law is a key ingredient to a successful democracy and plays an important role in creating the environment for development and investment, and some types of basic regulation to prevent fraud and malfeasance.

We handed that over to the Coalition Government, equally important are its institutions systems and processes in the public sector or what we have established are service standards, effective work systems, effective leadership, transparency, accountability and high productivity. This is of particular importance too when you want to create an enabling environment where the State supports the economic activity. I wish to refer here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to inclusive economic institutions that allow and encourage participation by the great mass of people in economic activities that make best use of their talents and skills, and that enables individuals to make the choices they wish. That too was handed over to the Coalition Government six months ago.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, to function well, the society also needs other public services like roads and transport networks so that goods can be transported, a public infrastructure so that economic activity can flourish.

Our infrastructure development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, record was unprecedented. We handed over a better state of infrastructure to the Coalition Government and most importantly, the economy itself.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Look at the hospitals!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- A strong economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the FijiFirst Government, Fiji recorded its strongest period of post-independence economic growth in the decade leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Fijian economy registered its nine years of consecutive economic growth from 2010 to 2018, underpinned by rising productivity, increased public sector investment in infrastructure and development, growing private sector activity supported by high business confidence. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was one of the longest periods of sustained economic growth and that will be the challenge for the honourable Minister and the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the longest periods of sustained economic growth in Fiji which led to major improvements in job creation, infrastructure development, improved access to better public services, more income generating opportunities, increased asset and wealth accumulation by Fijians and significant advancement in the overall living standards. These would be the things that we expect in a Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the majority of the Fijian population became better-off compared to years ago.

During this period, our GDP doubled from \$6 billion to almost \$12 billion at the end of 2019. The GDP per capita on average increased from around \$6,600 to over \$13,000 per person.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, our foreign reserves increased to over \$3.6 billion of imports, compared to just around \$500 million in 2006. This is the highest level of reserves in our history and reflects the strong balance of payment position.

Liquidity levels in the financial sector increased to over \$2.5 billion, bank deposits, an indicator for personal wellbeing, increased to an amount of \$6.1 billion compared to \$2 billion in 2006. This was a three-fold increase, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic coinciding with multiple tropical cyclones caused an economic crisis of unprecedented scale in Fiji – one of the worst economic contractions in the world. But thank God, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst government under the visionary and able leadership of the then Prime Minister Bainimarama stood firm to keep the economy afloat during the pandemic and laid the foundation for a fast and strong economic rebound.

Talking about the rebound, Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite our two years of consecutive contractions, we opened our borders early, our national airline continued to bring in the much needed tourists, jobs were restored, most businesses are recovering and investors are returning. That is what we are handing over, Mr. Speaker, Sir. After COVID-19, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were rated the third fastest growing economy in the world.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We are on the upward growth trajectory again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that is what in our belief the foundation of which the Coalition Government needs to build upon. As you very well know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, businesses, investors need continuity, consistency, certainty which the government is expected to provide.

How they started their administration? Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are all here for the people. They are the ones that voted for us, and it is our duty to serve them and serve them well.

While the honourable Minister was trying his best to justify the consultative process leading to the National Economic Summit, I again wish to clarify to him and all the honourable Members on

the Government side that the consultation we undertook was more thorough and widespread too in terms of coverage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we heard the voice of the people through the nationwide consultation on the State of the Nation Economic Report and the People's Charter for Change, Peace and Progress initially by the Bainimarama Government in 2017. A 45-member National Council for Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF) was established for that purpose. The NCBBF membership was broad-based and inclusive in its composition consisting of representatives and leaders of all major organisations, communities, social, religious, business and political groups in the country.

The forward-looking State of the Nation and Economy Report was to provide a list of recommendations for changes to our system of government, our constitution, laws, economic and resources development policies, leadership values, community relations and institutional reforms. I was surprised to see, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that during the celebration on the *Girmitiyas*, Mr. Jone Dakuvula was invited by the organising committee to speak on why that approach did not work. That celebration was heavily politicised, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the preparation of the State of the Nation and Economy Report was undertaken through a process of extensive countrywide consultation and participation - 1,256 consultations in total, covering villages, settlements and organisations, yet the honourable Minister boasted the Economic Review Committee undertaken by the Coalition Government.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The State of the Nation and Economy Report and the People's Charter were the major guiding documents for the Bainimarama and the FijiFirst government over the recent decade. The wishes of the people enshrined in the People's Charter and the State of the Nation Economy Report fed into the 20-Year National Development Plan, Ministries respective strategic development plans and the economic and resources development policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Prime Minister's *Talanoa* session during official visits and the budget consultations by the Minister for Economy are also forums in which we as a government engaged in constructive dialogue with our communities and organisations. When the honourable Minister was in the Opposition, he was asking why the Minister has to go and do the consultations, it is the job for the officials, but he did exactly the same, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but this time with *salusalu* and *tikka*.

(Laughter)

Government road shows, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was a FijiFirst initiative that was well received by the people particularly those in rural and remote communities. It was not about bringing services down to the people but the empowerment programmes and the *Talanoa* sessions were its major highlights. This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, breached the gap between the top-down and the bottom-up planning processes. The integrated rural development framework was another model that encouraged community participation and dialogue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the UN Resident Coordinator and the Head of UNDP were so impressed with it that they sponsored a few trips to the outer islands in which development partners and officials from the multi-lateral agencies joined government officials to visit and hold consultations at community level. A model they learned from Fiji and considered it for replication in other regional

countries. That is the level of consultation and dialogue by the FijiFirst Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Additionally, the honourable Prime Minister has his weekly talkback show called “*Na Noda Paraiminisita*” - Our Prime Minister, every Fridays. People talk to him directly and ask questions too. Additionally, telephone contacts for all Ministers starting from the honourable Prime Minister are shared to all Fijians. That is service at its best!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- That is exemplary leadership and that is dedication to the call of duty to serve all equally. His votes say it all.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- He is the leader among and not above the people. He was the people’s Prime Minister. I hope that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance can learn from it rather than lamenting about it.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have briefly summarized the political and economic environment that we, the FijiFirst Government, handed over to the Coalition Government. You can see, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that it was not in a deeply grim state, as portrayed.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the smooth transition of power in December 2022, the expectation of the Coalition Government is to continue and improve from where we had left off and take it to the next level. Our ordinary people, businesses, investors, financiers and development partners expect continuity. They expect consistency and certainty. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2023 Budget is so critical for such a purpose.

Before touching on the Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to state my very simple and basic expectations of this Budget. This is the expectation. One, let us steer the economy to full recovery, back to pre-pandemic level. We need to preserve the goose, this is important. Let us be reasonable in our revenue generation targets. Let us tightly control our expenditure. Let us allow room for flexibility given the external factors that is identified and exploit new opportunities to broaden and diversify our economic base and let us address cross-cutting issues such as drugs, climate change, women empowerment, youths, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my first glance of the Budget I wish to refer to what the honourable Minister stated or his response to the 2016 Budget - more politics, less economics. I say that again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, more politics, less economics.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Your words will haunt you, my friend.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- You want the full article, I can give it to you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we understand why. It is the first Budget for the Coalition Government. Two, they made so many promises. Three, they want to compete, they want to be seen to be better. I hope that we do not kill the goose in the process.

As I have always stated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for so long we have been talking about cobwebs,

cobwebs and cobwebs. To get rid of the cobwebs just kill the spider. Right now, our recovery is being driven by tourism. We must do all in our power to ensure that the growth in tourism is not impeded in anyway. We must be mindful of the fact that Fiji is already regarded as a high-cost tourism destination. There are a number of recommendations in this Budget that could further impede our attractiveness as a tourism destination, and this includes the:

- VAT increase of 6 percent that will raise the cost of things bought in hotels;
- increase of company tax by 5 percent;
- increase of excise duty on alcohol and tobacco;
- gradual increase in departure tax;
- increase in duty for carbonated sweetened beverages on juice, ice cream, sweet biscuits and imported goods and snacks;
- increase in 3 percent fiscal duty on Concession 235 applicable to existing hotels and resorts and Concession Code 235 applicable to new resorts.

This is the danger that we face. In our quest to raise Government revenue, we could be killing the goose that is driving our recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government revenue target is driven by what they have already decided upfront to spend on. Government is spending money like drunkards in a nightclub.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Your words haunt you.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister and I have been in this Parliament for quite a while. Every word that he uttered in this Parliament, I remember it.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Your words coming back to haunt you.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We will have more fun.

(Laughter)

Unveiling the Budget, one of my favourite TV shows is the *MasterChef*. What always amazes me is the innovativeness, creativity, talents and skills in those, given the ingredients that they are given, no complaints but they turn those ingredients into the best meals.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Too many cooks, no chef.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I looked at the Budget, there is nothing new in this Budget. It is just a repetition of what we have been doing in the past years with a bit of tweaking here and there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the chef has changed in the last six months, but the same chef has been in the panel of judges for the last eight years and there is very high expectation on the very first meal that he will prepare out of the ingredients that he has been given.

I have talked about what we have handed over, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is not in a green state. No complaints but, unfortunately, it is the same old menu. I refer to this Budget. It is not the magic bullet, it is the magic microwave. Nothing new, just reheating the old menu and serve it to the people.

(Laughter)

In summary, the hallmarks of this Budget are as follows:

- Total estimated revenue of \$3.7 billion;
- Total estimated expenditure \$4.3 billion;
- Estimated Net Deficit \$639 million;
- Additional Debt Repayment of \$516 million;
- Total Gross Deficit of \$1.5 million;
- Net Deficit as a percentage of GDP 4.8 percent; and
- Nominal GDP \$13.3 billion.

Mr. Speaker, this is a big spending Budget. It is the largest in Fiji's history. The net deficit of \$639 million is the largest ever deficit outside of pandemic years. The 2023-2024 Budget will increase the total debt from \$9.9 billion to \$10.5 billion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government debt had been on the decline prior to the onset of COVID-19 and in fact the debt to GDP ratio had dropped to below 50 percent. It only rose as Fiji tried to counter the effects of COVID-19 to ease the impact on our people.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The total amount of debt will now increase to more than \$10 billion despite the fact that they have been harping on about excessive debt over the past few years, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Let me talk about this debt.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before the Budget, we were ridiculed, criticised about Fiji's debt - excessive, *sa sivia na dinau*. They were focussing on the nominal debt. I remembered in 2016 when the honourable Minister was presenting on the debt to GDP ratio, the honourable Minister said in Parliament, "let us talk hard facts, let us talk about hard figures, come away from the debt to GDP ratio." They were always harping on the nominal debt. On top of the nominal debt, they loaded the contingent liabilities. That has been the game plan always; load the contingent liabilities on top of the debt and then they distributed it per capita. Every household or every Fijian has to pay about \$10,000 in debt.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now they are increasing the nominal debt from \$9 million, you add the \$669 million, this is not economics, this is simple mathematics or even arithmetic if you want to call it. Keep it simple. So, if we are talking about the nominal debt, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are raising the nominal debt. But now, the focus is on debt to GDP ratio. We have decreased the debt to GDP ratio, but you are not telling the Fijians that the nominal debt is increasing.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I hope that you are not hoodwinking the people, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is the real story about the debt. Right now, deliberately, they are focusing on the debt to GDP ratio because they have managed to increase their revenue, despite the fact that the nominal debt is going to be increased because of that increase in revenue, the debt to GDP ratio is coming down and that is the key statement ...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Psychology spending.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Ha, ha!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Microwave.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Billion dollar debt.

HON. J. USAMATE.- No new ideas, microwave.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Government debt had been on the decline prior to the onset of COVID-19. In fact, the debt to GDP ratio had dropped to below 50 percent. It only rose as Fiji tried to counter the effects of COVID-19 to ease the impact on our people. The total amount of debt will now increase as I have stated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to more than \$10 billion, despite the fact that they have been harping on about excessive debt over the past few years.

On revenue projection for the 2023-2024 forecast, a 25 percent increase in revenue by various means that have been highlighted by the honourable Minister of Finance. Amongst this, he has included an increase of VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent for all non-zero-rated items. An increase in companies tax from 20 percent to 25 percent with the exception for those listed on the Suva Stock Exchange for which the increase is smaller and the range of excise tax increases in a number of areas, together with the removal of various incentives that were designed to stimulate investment.

As pointed out earlier, there are significant weaknesses in the reasoning behind the revenue forecasts because the forecast do not take into account the likely changes in the spending habits that will happen once the VAT increases (kick-in) and also the impact of recovering departure tax increases, duty increases, et cetera on the continuity of high tourism arrival forecast that we currently have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were a lot of arguments about the policies that we had while we were in government. But I think, the legacy is, we improved particularly on the middle income bracket of our community. They were empowered and once they have money in their pockets, Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are the people who spend. Consumption goes when they have enough take-home pay. It is their disposable income. We, of course, acknowledge Government for the allocation particularly for those who are receiving social welfare. I totally believe that it is not big enough to offset the increase particularly in the non-zero rated VAT items, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to reduce the number of VAT levels to two levels rather than three levels will of course be a welcoming relief to businesses and also FRCS. The notion, however, that the enhanced expenditure support measures will adequately compensate for the losses that the most marginalised will have to pay as a result of VAT increases is something that we do not fully subscribe to, as I have explained, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government has announced that it will reduce fiscal duty from 32 percent to 15 percent on canned Mackerel, corned mutton, corned beef and beef products, canned tomatoes, prawns and duck meat. They have also announced that fiscal duty on sheep and lamb meat will be reduced to zero and that the duty on beef meat being reduced from 32 percent to 15 percent.

Import excise on chicken portions such as wings, drumsticks and thighs from 15 percent to zero percent - all these changes will no doubt raise the choices that our people have. But on the downside, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are always worried about NCDs in the country. Our colleagues will speak more on the issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the two other impacts means that our local suppliers of these food products may well find that they are not able to sell their own products because of cheaper imports. These could then have a negative impact on our strive to broaden agriculture as the base of our economy. Some of these products may also be not very helpful in the drive against NCDs in Fiji.

We note of the companies tax increased from 20 percent to 25 percent, companies on the Suva Stock Exchange were eligible for a corporate tax rate of 10 percent. This will now increase to 15 percent, which will obviously increase the amount of revenue captured from the private sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it could backfire because some of these ventures could close shop if they are unable to cope with the increases in taxes together with increases in duty for importing good supplied for manufacturing.

On that token, the decision by Government to eliminate companies tax from all water bottling companies does not make sense at all ...

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Shame!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- ... because it is entirely focused on helping one company.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Why is Government giving up revenue that could be collected from a whole sector?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Just to allow one company to get tax credits in the United States of America.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Shame!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- How can this be so? What is wrong?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Honourable Prime Minister bending over backwards to do this.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Why?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- You talk about the need to raise revenue and you do the absolute opposite and this is hypocrisy.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Shame!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we note that the Government may consider taxes on shareholders income in the future. Suffice to say, this is a source of revenue that could be tapped into straightaway, but we do note that this could also have an impact on whether or not businesses decide to stay in business or not.

We note the increase in excise tax on alcohol, tobacco, carbonated and sweetened drinks on juices, ice-cream, biscuits, snacks and sugar confectioneries, Mr. Speaker, Sir. As mentioned by the honourable Minister of Finance, this may well help address NCDs to a limited degree by encouraging people to move towards more healthier alternatives. However, they will contribute to increase the prices of food stuff and drinks that people pay in general and will also increase the prices of things that tourists pay for when they come to Fiji.

As I have stated already, Fiji is already seen as a more expensive tourism destination. This could have, therefore, a bad impact on the one sector leading our recovery from COVID-19. Why would any sane government choose to do that?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in motor vehicle excise duty by 5 percent will make it more difficult to purchase motor vehicles. I have talked about us empowering the middle class of this country. Most families now have cars which they were not able to own before. But at the same time, we are mindful of the fact that they may also help assist in maintaining the number of vehicles on our roads which is a major issue because of our road congestion during peak hours.

We note that the social responsible tax will be simplified by merging with PAYE structure which basically means that those earning the most income in Fiji will pay less income tax.

HON. J. USAMATE.- No.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- While there is a whole host of things in this Budget that will make it much hard for the poorest in our society, there are these kinds of provisions that are handing out goodies for the most well-off. I recommend that this be reviewed and there should be a gradual increase in taxation rates from salary levels above \$100,000 to bring about a more progressive and equitable income tax progression.

We note the removal of reduction of concessions on duty free raw materials, packaging products, building materials for hotels, fuel for hotels, manufacturers, cruise vessels, mining companies, warehouse development, all these will raise \$35 million in revenue for Government, if it can be all collected. However, there is a bigger opportunity cost to all these as these additional projected tax measures may well make it far more difficult for struggling business entities in Fiji to survive and flourish.

On expenditure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst government invested heavily in infrastructure development in this country at a level never previously seen. The honourable Minister of Finance has done his best to bad mouth these developments, and he has chosen to be blind, but the people of Fiji are not blind.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- What about the swimming pool?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- They drive on the four-lane highway from Suva to Nadi, they have driven along the Nabouwalu to Labasa Highway, the tourists have driven along the highway from Nadi to Nadi International Airport.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our people have used the new operating theatres in CWM Hospital, Lautoka Hospital and Labasa Hospital, they have the CT scan and the MRI machines, babies have been born in the new Makoi Maternity Unit, people's lives have been saved because of the extended hours and facilities at Valelevu Health Centre, Bhanabhai Health Centre and the new Nakasi Health Centre. We invested in infrastructure because having good infrastructure improves the quality of lives of our people. It provides opportunities, encourages and assists further investment into Fiji.

The honourable Minister of Finance says that they will be spending money only to maintain existing infrastructure, \$200 million is budgeted only for the maintenance of hospitals, health centres, schools, public buildings, government quarters, roads and bridges and water infrastructure. Job creation will be less unless Government invests into bigger capital projects. Not investing in new infrastructure seems to be a strange thing to be doing, especially in an era where we want to diversify away from just the tourism sector. We note that one of the two major infrastructure projects could develop a range of new jobs in Fiji, new livelihoods and of course more consumption.

The Government has decided to maintain the 20 percent reduction in Ministerial salaries that was introduced by the FijiFirst Government. They have decided to also reduce travel allowances. This is to be applauded. However, I do take note that if one was to reduce travel allowances, one could easily bring expenditures back to the same level just by increasing the number of trips one takes, and that is what this Government has been doing. The amount of travel of these have been phenomenal to say the least. One honourable Minister sitting on the other side is said to have gone seven times overseas in the last six months. We have been checking all the gazettes and all your movements are noted and recorded.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The provision of water has always been a key responsibility of all governments. The last explosion of urban migration over the last 20 years has brought immense pressure on our water systems. The problems have been complemented by the old distribution network that exists around the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we admit the fact that our infrastructures are old; leaking pipes are normal in the infrastructure that we have. This is one of the reasons why we established Water Authority of Fiji, and that was also one of the reasons (the honourable Tikoduadua knows) why we have established the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), because of the situation of the infrastructure in Fiji. He was the first Chairman of FRA, he very well knows the audit report that was done by MWH.

In their recommendations, 130-plus bridges in Fiji were already in a condemned state. We have rebuilt 60-plus of those 130-plus bridges, but the question is, how many bridges will they build? There is none in the next budget. Honourable Ro Filipe, they are just continuing with what we have started. The honourable Prime Minister went to Nayarabale, that was the bridge that we started.

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

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The honourable Prime Minister went to Waibula in Taveuni, that was the bridge that we started.

HON. P.K. BALA.- *Khalas.*

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The honourable Prime Minister also went to Naviavia Village. All these are infrastructures that we started. The honourable Minister travels to Muanidevo from Nabouwalu to Deketi. FijiFirst brought electricity from Seaqqa where it was in 2007 down to Dreketi and even the water, a lot of infrastructure work, and it also creates employment. You are the Government now. You cannot judge the work that we did based on door knobs and lack of maintenance.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Come on Minister, do some new projects. Don't just maintain the old.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister stated that there have been some improvements over the past few months, and he attributed this to a new Board being in place. Absolute hogwash! Knowing the Water Authority of Fiji and the water sector quite well, we found that a highly condescending statement to say the least and it demeans the professional nature of the management of Water Authority of Fiji, the plans that they had in place in these past years and the hard work they put in to try and address the issues faced on a daily basis.

The increased budget of Water Authority by \$60 million will assist the delivery of water to all our people as long as it is managed well. I expected more because the honourable Minister, few months into the job, visited the Authority and he was briefed that they will need about \$800 million in the next five years to sort out the outstanding issues that are there. Only \$60 million - not enough.

HON. P.K. BALA.- *Kaam chalao.*

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The Viria or the Rewa River Water Scheme is Fiji's largest ever water project and it was initiated by the FijiFirst Government.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- It will resolve the problems that are faced in the Rewa to Lami corridor. We note in the Budget that it will be completed in July with full commissioning in October. Let us note that date, the whole *salusalu* brigade will be there. This project showcases innovative financing and mechanisms that this Coalition Government must learn from and use for other major projects. This is part of the FijiFirst legacy that is being handed over to the Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we endorsed the various amounts set aside for key areas including \$53.9 million to improve water sources and \$6.4 million to improve wastewater operations. We also note the serious challenges that exist across all areas in Fiji for wastewater operation. The \$4.8 million for asset management; \$4.6 million for digital transformation; \$38.8 million for emergency response and \$7.9 million for rural areas will all have to achieve the targets of providing access to clean and safe water to all citizens of Fiji.

While I am acknowledging all these, at the same time I noted that when they came up with the \$200 "School Assistance Programme", most of the money that was taken out of the Ministries, in order to fulfil that promise probably were taken out from these very key Ministries. I will read the list after this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had always stated over the years, probably I will just read the list right now, a breakdown of the "Back to School" money and where it came from. The highest amounts were taken from the Ministry for Health and Medical Services - \$9.6 million. The allocation was for the construction of the new CWM Hospital Maternity Unit; land stabilisation and refurbishment of Savusavu Hospital - 1.8 million; upgrade of Labasa Hospital interior - \$750,000; biomedical spare parts and maintenance - \$500,000; biomedical equipment service fees - \$500,000; x-ray material - \$1.4 million; appliances - \$400,000; Infection Control Programme - \$700,000; and Dental Equipment - Urban and Sub-Divisional Hospitals - \$900,000. That is just health alone, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

They talk about health services but yet, they are taking away money from these very core services of Government. Sir, a sum of \$8.6 million was taken from the Ministry for Housing and Community Development. I will not go into the list but perhaps just to say that the \$500,000 was meant for the refund for those that owe money for the Lagilagi Housing, but that has been taken away.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I met someone at Nabua a few weeks back, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and he asked me, what is happening to our refund? I told him, “Ask the Minister of Finance, he has given that money for the School Assistance Programme.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$7.1 million that was set aside for Water Authority of Fiji, the breakdown was Operating Grant of \$4.2 million, no wonder there were a lot of water issues in the Suva area. The Ministry for Agriculture \$6 million allocation for machinery outsourcing. I was confirming that with the honourable Minister this morning, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I note in this year’s Budget they have in fact reduced it from \$7 million to \$1 million only.

We want to broaden the economic base, we want to diversify the economy. Agriculture is a key sector. Mr. Speaker, Sir, they took away \$6 million from that allocation and in this year’s Budget they have reduced it by the same amount.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Increased.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Decreased.

Total increase to the Ministry but I am talking about machine outsourcing, it has been reduced by \$6 million. I have been told to move on, the list is still there, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will give it to them after this, perhaps enough on infrastructure.

On Workers’ Rights and FNPF, the Coalition Government has stated that it will revert to the arrangements that were in place for the board membership of FNPF where they will have representatives of workers but perhaps the only thing I want to say is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us bring in people who are fit for purpose.

Sir, FNPF now intends to take back FNPF reductions to the original 18 percent, the reduction to 10 percent during the height of COVID-19 had only been meant as a temporary way to alleviate the burden on employees and members because of the impact of COVID-19 and we thank government for that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The FijiFirst government had a long history of looking after the civil servants of the country. They are regarded as part of the way in which government services, to ensure that Fijians are well looked after. They were at the heart of the COVID-19 battle; they were the unsung heroes of that battle.

Even in the height of COVID-19 the FijiFirst government never reduced their salaries because they were seen as an important part of the way that government continued to provide services to the people of Fiji. Their salaries were also a way of continuing to maintain their consumption levels. Many civil servants became the life saver for extended families during those difficult times. This was a strategic decision made by government at that time, but the current Minister had in fact called for their salaries to be reduced during COVID-19 times.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Very poor!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- On Social Protection and After Care Fund, there has been a substantive increase for the social welfare by \$52.5 million. This is a continuation of the massive increase in social welfare which emanated from the Bainimarama boom. This is the magic microwave which in turn was born out of the nine years of economic growth that was seen in the

period leading up to 2020.

These increases will be most welcomed by the most marginalized in our society and by the most marginalized, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I mean the destitute and the poor in our country and we have a responsibility to look after them. We will not call it freebies as they used to call it.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Who?

HON. J. USAMATE.- You guys.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We welcome the assistance that is given to them, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Government has decided and allowed 1,500 FNPF pensioners to access the social pension of \$125 if they are above the age of 70 years and \$115 between 60 years to 69 years and that comes to \$2 million per year and we are glad to see that the Government has come up with a way to assist FNPF pensioners who were affected by the needed action that was required to preserve the FNPF and ensure its sustainability. This is a sensible move, and we are glad to see that they have not tried to tinker with FNPF retirement policies in doing this, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We take note of the \$100,000 set aside for the new Department of Children and the increase in the Child Protection Allowance of \$6.9 million. Family Assistance Scheme which used to be known as the Poverty Benefit Scheme which was also an innovation brought about by the FijiFirst will have an increase in Budget of \$11 million and will benefit 26,000 households.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we note with concern however that some of the allocations set aside for the disabled have been reduced. This includes the grant for the Fiji National Council for Disabled Persons which has been reduced in this Budget by \$38,000 and that for Economic Empowerment of Disabled Person which has had its budget reduced by \$8,000. This is a sad reflection of this Government's flippant attitude towards those who most require assistance.

We note that there is a 15 percent increase in allowances for ex-servicemen, this will be a most welcomed assistance to them. I declare my interest here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because I am an ex-serviceman, but this will be a most welcomed assistance to them especially considering the effect of VAT increases and duty increases seen in this Budget. This continues the phenomenal improvements that FijiFirst put in place for ex-servicemen and even for serving military officers who under FijiFirst substantially increased their allowances they were paid for Tour of Duties (TODs).

On *iTaukei* empowerment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTaukei Affairs has been given a substantial increase in budget of \$23.2 million. That is a big increase in grants to provincial councils by \$6 million and, of course, we acknowledge this contribution and perhaps the big challenge is for the Minister particularly in terms of governance issues. As you are all aware Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was a lot of effort taken in the past to bring all their records up to date particularly audits in the councils.

We also note the increase in allowance of *Turaga ni Koro* and *Mata ni Tikina* and the new allowance for the *i Liuliu ni Yavusa*. These are budgetary transfers that need to be monitored and managed well so that they do bring about better service delivery to the people that they serve, and of course, we also acknowledge the allocation given to the Advisory Councillors as well. But one of the concerns that I have and have raised with the honourable Minister that the Advisory Councillors are not under Multi-Ethnic Affairs. Advisory Councillors are still under the Ministry for Rural Development. Probably I will come back to that if I have enough time this morning.

One of the major developments undertaken by FijiFirst in order to address the asset rich, cash poor tag that was often used to refer to *iTaukei* landowners was the budgetary provision set aside for *iTaukei* land development. It is to be noted that this is the continuation of the FijiFirst initiative, but it has been moved from the Ministry of Economy to the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. This fund was set up under the auspicious of the Ministry of Economy and incorporated strict procedures and requirements designed to ensure that any money given out for land development would be successful. I hope, honourable Minister, that, that will continue under your watch.

There have been several significant beneficiaries of this grant including Vuda, Yadua in Nadroga, Namata in Tailevu, Tavua and the list goes on. The grant is now to be administered under the Ministry for iTaukei Affairs and as I have stated, we hope that they will manage it to the same degree of objective, professionalism as seen under the FijiFirst Government.

On improving Health Services and Infrastructure, in his Address last week, the honourable Minister of Finance blatantly lied to the Parliament about the status of health in our nation. He has no inkling of the vast amounts of infrastructure and systemic improvement that have been made to the health sector over the years including the massive improvement seen in CWM, Lautoka Hospital, Labasa Hospital, the development of specialist facilities and the ongoing incentives put in place by the FijiFirst government to develop Fiji as a health hub for the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the true status of health in Fiji is to be seen by looking at our health indicators in Fiji. For instance, the ultimate indicator of how well we are doing in terms of obstetrics and gynaecology are to be seen in trends on neonatal mortality or the percentage of mothers who die in childbirth generally through investments into infrastructure and equipment, the improvement in staffing and systems, these indicators continue to improve year upon year. We welcome the Minister's assurance that health will be given the highest priority in this Budget. A simple perusal of the Budget however shows that it is education that is getting the highest level of budget support in the proposed 2023-2024 Budget.

We note the continued increase in the number of positions made available for the health sector including position for nurses, intern nurses, nursing assistants, nursing aids, midwives, medical laboratory scientists and additional support staff. There is also support provided for upgrade of nursing salaries and their overtime. This will continue the trend that has been instituted by FijiFirst over the past 15 years in improving working conditions and remuneration in the health sector. I know that one of the discussions particularly is the exodus of our nurses to other places. This is normal. We live in a benefit-oriented society. People are going for better wages elsewhere, but we just need to continue invest in our people and this is why we see an increase in the remittances that are coming into the country, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Government is reminded there is a need to look into the salaries and conditions of all other categories of staff employed in the health sector. The honourable Minister has stated that a fund of \$63 million has been provided for public health programmes, emergency, radiology and laboratory services, procurement of drugs, consumables, medicines and purchase of biomedical equipment, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I hope that this allocation will not be redeployed as he did early this year.

The increased subsidy for kidney dialysis continues the initial work done in this area. But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in one of his earlier statements in Parliament as well, he insisted that this be free. Thank you for this continued allocation.

We note that the honourable Minister of Finance has mentioned that the Ministry for Finance will work closely with the Ministry for Public Works to ensure timely maintenance of hospitals. This also continues what has been utilised all along in the relationship between the officers in the

Divisional Engineers and the Ministry of Health over the past 16 years.

The Coalition Government has announced that the outsourcing of GP services will now be limited to families that have combined family income of \$30,000. We are glad to see that this FijiFirst initiative is continuing but caution that the limitations will be put in place now, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It does not take into account the inequities that exist between a family of nine earning \$31,000 and a family of three earning \$29,000. The family of three gets the benefit while the family of nine do not get the benefit. For the family of three, a household income of \$29,000 equates to \$9,666 per head whereas the family of nine with a household income of \$31,000 equates to \$3,444 per head. Under this arrangement, the family that gets \$9,666 per head is assisted while the family that gets \$3,444 per head does not get any assistance.

Education sector, we are glad to note that education continues to be given the highest level of funding of \$845 million in this new financial year. The Coalition Government came into power with no idea on what is needed to improve the education sector. FijiFirst has had clear plans spelt out in the National Development Plan on what it will do to address our needs in the education sector. In his comments, the honourable Minister has hinted that the professional staff of the Ministry for Education have not been doing anything to adjusting the curriculum used in our schools to align with the major technological revolutions impacting the world. Nothing can be further from the truth, and we find this to be a very condescending attitude to the skills and abilities of the professionals that man the Ministry for Education and the sector in general, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Fiji has established the mechanisms and structures which can propel the education sector forward in the appropriate way. We do applaud the technical education and the NPTC levy as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to address the shortage of trade technicians where there has been a scourge for Fiji sometime and FijiFirst had invested greatly in this sector over the years.

There were however still significant gaps that needed to be addressed. Over the past few years there have been some incentive investment in the Fiji National University, in particular, National Training and Productivity Centre of the FNU as a Centre of Excellence for TVET Development. This has been complemented by the assistance given to other TVET providers including Montfort Boys Town, Nadave, Chevalier Institute, Sangam Nursing School, and others.

We are quite surprised however, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to see how the honourable Minister of Finance seems to be following over backwards to reach out to Pacific Polytech which is a private company when the NZPTC at FNU has a far more solid reputation, has the facilities and staffing to be able to deliver the kind of training required. It would seem that the honourable Minister of Finance has a soft spot for the Principal of Pacific Polytech who, by the way, was also part of the organisation for which funds were provided for the Girmit celebrations. This is quite appalling to say the list, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and may I refer to his earlier Address, and I quote; “everything is connected to everything else”.

(Laughter)

We note the comments made about revamping the Apprenticeship Scheme. We note that the Apprenticeship Scheme was never lost, that it has always been in place but do recognise and appreciate the focus on apprenticeship and the honourable Minister made a mistake in saying that the NZPTC levy was removed. It was never removed. Same thing for the funding of higher institutions and my colleagues will perhaps address the TELS write-off issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Fiji Roads Authority, the honourable Minister of Finance has noted the immense investment that the FijiFirst government had put into the road infrastructure over the past eight years amounting

to \$3.1 billion. Thank you again for continuing, but in his condescending and arrogant manner, he states that investment was not done with any proper costing or planning. All he must do is to look at the detailed plan targets outlined in the 20-year and 5-year National Development Plan 2017-2037. As usual his remarks are petty and demeaning, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The focus of this Government now is to maintain what FijiFirst had already started. There is nothing new in this Budget; absolutely nothing. There was a great opportunity, here to continue the projects on the four-lane highway from Nadi to Lautoka and the initial planning for the cross Viti Levu Highway, that in the long run would bring about immense benefits and in the short term create a host of employment opportunities. This is a myopic gutless Government.

The Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport, we take note of the Government's decision to re-establish the Public Works Department. At the outset, we must remind everyone of the shenanigans that used to take place at the PWD and the reputation, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I wish to also state that I will talk later about the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF). There have been plans for services provided by PWD to be allocated to the Engineer Regiment of the RFMF. There is a paper already in place, I hope the honourable Minister is aware that after the Maritime Essential Service Centre that is currently being undertaken although there has not been any committed from the New Zealand Government but the discussions that have already been taking place is for this responsibility to be taken over by the RFMF Engineers, particularly, on rural roads.

The honourable Prime Minister would also be aware that during the time of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara there was a Unit in the RFMF Engineers called the Rural Development Unit (RDU) and that is why we revisited that during our time. I just wanted our friends on the other side in Government to be aware of the discussions that have taken place in this regard, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

On Agriculture, the agriculture sector is receiving a substantive budget increase of \$37.3 million. This is welcomed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and this is a sector that needs to grow as part of our diversification on the basis of our economy. The funds allocated for AMA and Committee for Better Utilisation of Land (CBUL) are welcomed, together with the assistance for research and extension. These are parts of the Ministry that will need to be continued to be strengthened, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I wish to talk about the dairy industry, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The honourable Minister and his deputy are well aware of the issue happening in the dairy sector. We need to separate the role between Fiji Co-operative Dairy Limited and the processing which is the Fiji Dairy Company. I know that when this reform took place, Rewa Dairy Co-operative then had a big debt of \$18 million and they were not in a position to finance that debt. That is why the reform took place, but what I wanted to clarify, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no relationship between that reform and the loss of production in milk. The loss of production is mainly due to Brucellosis and TB. The honourable Minister and his deputy are well aware of that issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Talk to them, talk to them.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We appreciate the investment into Waterways and note that it was under the FijiFirst that the role of Waterways was elevated and separate Unit to address the issue of drainage. It has gone back to the Ministry of Agriculture where it was previously as Land and Water Resources Management (LWRM) and the honourable Minister I know at one stage was head of that Unit.

On the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar, in his discussion on the sugar industry, the honourable Minister has not mentioned anything new by the Government to address the state of

the sugar industry. He does not also refer to some of the fundamental problems that began decline of the sugar industry and that is the non-renewal of leases which was a rallying cry for a significant portion of those who are now part of this Coalition Government.

I have just talked about CBUL, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is exactly the allocation to ensure that farmer's leases are renewed so that they can continue with the farming. But as I have stated, I question the fact that money for the Advisory Councillors is still with the Ministry of Rural Development, and I have already discussed this with the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs. We all know the politics behind the work of the Advisory Councillors, and I know that probably this is one of the reasons why the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance has now decided to give this allocation to the Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs.

(Chorus of interjections)

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

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just touch on sugar for a while. We note that they will continue with the guaranteed price of \$85 per tonne which is quite different from what the honourable Minister of Finance said in 2018. He called it "shock therapy". The shock therapy is to rejuvenate the sugar industry, just give the farmers \$100 per tonne. That is the shock therapy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as suggested by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister. Where is the shock therapy? I know that the honourable Minister looked shocked.

(Laughter)

Last year, Sir, when we discussed and debated about the allocation in the sugar industry when it was reduced, we anticipated that there will be an increase in the world price of sugar. The honourable Minister in this Parliament was complaining about the allocation that went into the sugar industry, that is exactly what is happening today. The world price is increasing and that is exactly what we had anticipated last year and thus the allocation in the Ministry. I hope that this shock therapy will materialise in the next Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.K. BALA.- No, you write it down.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I declare my interest, I am a cane farmer as well.

I have skipped a few, Mr. Speaker, Sir, perhaps my colleagues will talk more on it. On the Ministry for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, the Rural and Maritime Development has undergone massive increase under the FijiFirst government as we sought to improve living conditions away from our urban centres in order to reduce urban drift.

We are aware that this will continue to be a challenge, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but over the 16 years there has been a dramatic increase in the budget provided for this sector in a host of different areas. Therefore, money will be provided for self-help projects, community access roads, footpaths and footbridges for rural housing and the upgrade and renovation of civil servants' quarters in the Division, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Let me refer to the allocation on self-help as I have stated, when they were separate ministries back then, the Multi-Ethnic Affairs had their own allocation for self-help projects. Perhaps this is something that can be considered and discuss later with the two respective Ministers.

We note the substantive increase of \$4.2 million for the NDMO which is slightly due to the Disaster Risk Programmes sponsored by the New Zealand – Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade

(NZMFAT). We will be expecting *El Nino* conditions this year and I hope, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we will all be ready. Since the last time we had such conditions was in 2016 when we had *TC Winston*. The Government will need to make sure that the NDMO and its partner entities such as the Fiji Meteorological Office are ready to address the likely challenges that will arise out of *El Nino*.

The only issue that perhaps I wanted to raise with the honourable Minister is the allocation on the construction of Evacuation Centres in the four villages that have already been identified. I hope that will continue in this year's allocation as provided by the Koreans under the IOM Office.

On the Ministry for Local Government, FijiFirst has invested immensely in Local Government in the development of local markets all around the country including Laqere, Nausori and Rakiraki. These markets, for the first time included areas where female vendors have sleeping and shower facilities. In this Budget, funds have been allocated for Savusavu Market, Nakasi Market, Dreketi Market and the completion of the Levuka Market and we applaud Government for that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, over the past few years, Fiji's status internationally and regionally has been elevated. We have served as President and Chair of the G77 in China, we have hosted COP23 and served as President of the United Nations Conference Assembly and we also hosted the 1st World Ocean Conference with the Pacific Island Nations and our partner countries of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). We were able to put the oceans issue as a part of the global agenda.

Fiji has also played a leading role in trade negotiations globally and regionally and developed Fiji as a hub for the region. During this time, we have been friends for all nations and enemy to none, and this has been a major pillar of our growing international stature. This is something that the Coalition Government hopefully will continue.

We note that Government is looking to reopen our missions in Washington, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea and there has been mention about establishing a new embassy in Israel, but I do not see any allocation on that, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Of course, it is critical that we have thorough analysis for a potential return of investment is carried out before we undertake this and the question is, is it the right time for us to re-establish these missions? Perhaps, we could learn from the Israeli and the Singaporean concepts where the ambassadors are based in-country and they just travel to their respective missions and of course come back into the home country. These are cost effective options that probably the Government can consider as we are trying to strengthen the relationship between our bilateral partners. Of course, we value these relationships, and the honourable Naivalurua will talk further on this.

On Independent Bodies, we note the increase of \$7.7 million in the budget of our Fiji Parliament. Of course, this should assist Parliament to carry out its duties more effectively and enhance engagements. Same thing with the Judiciary, I just wish to again emphasise the fact on maintaining the independence of these so-called Independent Bodies.

On the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), thank you, honourable Minister for the increased allocation. As I have stated, there have been ongoing discussions about the strength of the RFMF Engineers and I think this allocation is the first step in that direction.

However, I have some serious questions about the RFMF because I noted, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that in 2016, and let me read out some of the concerns raised by the honourable Minister back then concerning the RFMF. I am quoting the honourable Minister, he was asking the government on a few allocations in the budget then, and I quote:

“That third feature is the continuing increased allocation to the RFMF, for example, \$78 million for peacekeeping. What are we gaining from this expenditure? Fiji, in our view, is losing out on peacekeeping. We are not getting value for money. We should review this part of the RFMF expenditure allocation and redirect to some other priority areas.”

That was something that I wanted to raise.

HON. J. USAMATE.- You say one thing and do something else.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Do not speculate.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Not speculation, that is what was said.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I have to skip a few, Mr. Speaker, Sir, perhaps, I will just conclude. There are some allocations given in this Budget that we consider as probably not of priority and hopefully can be reconsidered for new allocations. One is on the USP grant, we still maintain in the name of good governance and transparency that proper investigations be done at USP.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope as patriotic Fijians, we will support our people at the University. I am talking about Professor Rajeshwar Chandra and Mr. Winston Thompson. They went through the same process by the Council, but the same Council did not allow for investigations when issues were raised against the new Vice-Chancellor. That is the transparency that we demanded.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Secondly, the \$4 million allocation, I have stated about the foreign missions, they are important for our relations, but is the timing right?

The \$5 million allocated to PWD, as I have stated, the RFMF Engineers are ready to take over the responsibility, so this \$5 million probably can be redeployed elsewhere.

Of course, the removal of tax from water bottling companies is another issue as well. I know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that in 2010 when the Bainimarama government came in, they were already on a 13-year tax holiday, Fiji Water, and they claimed that they were operating at a loss. What is happening here? Everything is connected to everything else.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, there is less economics, but more politics.

Let me just go back to the honourable Minister. I acknowledged and listened very carefully to his Budget Address, and he did talk very passionately about everything connected to everything else and professed their humility to listen to others.

I would challenge the honourable Minister if he had humility, he would not have told the former Prime Minister, Mr. Mahendra Chaudhary lately to “shut up” and stop talking garbage when

the former Prime Minister told him to stop wasting government money on summits to meet his friends and supporters who comprise about 8 percent of the national vote.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Summits to discuss their policy homework that should have been done while they spent eight years in Opposition. This is why I raise the issue about them stating that they are only six months in the Government and adopting a grim state of affairs, but they have been government in waiting for eight years. He used to tell us, everyone has heard that and know it, that you are a government with no plans, you are a government with no vision, you are a government with no money, you are spending money like drunkards in a night club. Mr. Speaker, Sir, those were all the things that he used to say, but where is it? They were getting paid as the Opposition by the Fijian taxpayers but doing no policy homework.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- No policy work at all. That is no work. Hence, the need for endless summits after being shocked to find themselves in Government.

Back to interconnectedness, if the honourable Members opposite had any humility they will understand many of the things and reasons why the FijiFirst government did what it did. We did not get to government from a background of political stability, like how governments are staged in Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific nations around us.

In our region, no, we go to government on the back of a *coup* and munity culture, and we invested heavily in its correction, and that is how government changed peacefully to the Coalition Government last December. We know that the honourable Minister does not like to admit that part of the equation because it is a blot on this country's history. But again, everything is connected to everything else, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I remind the honourable Minister and his team that this is just the beginning, and this is all very important because the truth will set them free. The truth will help them understand the FijiFirst investment of billions of dollars in productive capacities to cancel or try to cancel the damage and debts left to this country by the honourable Minister's side of politics. The truth is after the 1987 and the 2000 events, respected economists pulled the bill of bad governance by the honourable Minister's side of politics at about \$20 billion. The list includes the NBF collapse, the two devaluations...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Listen, listen!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- ... the massive brain-drain, the massive investor-drain and on the back of that, what is \$7 billion in Productive Capacities Return tied around?

As I am summarising, I have a few others but in the interest of time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just have to say that when we invested heavily in infrastructure, especially in the rural areas where the disadvantaged live and reside, we were ridiculed and were heavily criticised. But, Sir, I hope, and I

say that again, I hope that they will stop the criticisms and have the humility to connect the dots.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope also that their priorities will not focus on politics but look at the needs that we have. Take the time to learn from the FijiFirst journey!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Listen to the positives and the negatives, make it much better for Fiji and all Fijians. Instead of just removing the levy for those who earn \$217,000 plus a year, you could have imposed the levy progressively from \$100,000 upwards to collect revenue, instead of the 15 percent VAT on the poor which will slow down the economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

While concluding on the Budget itself, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just need to ask three critical questions to the honourable Minister. Firstly, what will happen now to Head 50? I say that again, because this is the conspiracy theories that they used to come up with when they were on this side of Parliament.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, in his 2020 Budget Address, said that we were a rudderless Government because of the allocation under Head 50 because our Government then does not know the priorities and the Ministries where to spend the allocations that are in Head 50. But look at the Budget book today.

HON. J. USAMATE.- And now?

HON. P.K. BALA.- Now?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Millions of dollars in Head 50. That is the conspiracy theory.

(Hon. J. Usamate interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- What did they do, are they rudderless because of that allocation, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Secondly, allocation under “R” (Request to Incur Expenditure), Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, the honourable Minister of Finance is here on record, questioning why there are so many allocations under “R”.

HON. J. USAMATE.- And now you are doing exactly the same thing.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- In this Budget, more than half of the whole Budget is under “R”, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- What has changed?

HON. J. USAMATE.- There you go.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a few minutes, I will read out what the honourable Minister stated back then. This is, again, more politics, less economics.

“How can there be an allocation of just under \$400 million under Head 50, Mr. Speaker, Sir? The core feature of the recent Budget is that, there is a massive allocation to Head 50. Head 50 is for so-called Miscellaneous Expenditure. How can there be an allocation of just \$400 million?”

This is more than 10 percent of the total Budget to Miscellaneous Expenditure, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This allocation reflects poor planning in allocation and the lack of trust in the other Ministries and Ministers to oversee the execution of the expenditures. It also allows the politicisation of expenditure by the Government and to add to this amount, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is those that are on requisition.

The Minister for Economy alone will effectively have a control of about 50 percent of the total expenditure of \$3.6 billion in this Budget, amounting to about \$1.8 billion. So, half of the allocation is under “R” in Head 50. This raises several questions, and this is the conspiracy theory. Is it more likely that this zeal for control will stifle timely and appropriate expenditure by different Ministries?”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he has \$89.9 million in his Ministry. Under “R”, we have \$1.699 billion, plus In-Kind is about \$60 plus million and, of course, the allocation in Head 50.

HON. J. USAMATE.- He’s controlling all of you.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- So, is it because of his zeal for control, Mr. Speaker, Sir? I hope that the honourable Prime Minister is in control because when he wanted a mini-budget....

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my other question on the Budget is on the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA). Again, we thank our development partners. When we were in desperate need and, of course, because of the reforms that have taken place as well according to the recommendations of the World Bank, we have improved on our systems and processes, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I will not go into the detail. I have the report here, but that is when we began to receive more money through our bilateral partners.

However, the honourable Minister who was in the Opposition back then, in a *Fiji Times* article, and I do not have the date, Mr. Speaker, Sir, said and I quote, “The Begging-Bowl Government...”

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Because you had nothing left.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- What is the difference today, Mr. Speaker, Sir? Words do haunt us, Sir...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Your words haunt you, my friend.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- ...because as I used to say in this Parliament, while they were here, they were speaking irresponsibly. They do not realise that one day, they will go to the other side of the floor, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that is what is happening today. That is why in this contribution this morning, I have never talked about freebies, I never talked about hoodwinking, I never talked about electioneering, but those are the very words that always come out from them Mr. Speaker, Sir. But

now, things have changed. This is the article - the Begging-Bowl Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he was quick to receive money from the Australians very early this year. The same thing with the honourable Prime Minister, he received money as well. And then there was a second cycle and he received money from the New Zealand High Commissioner very lately, Sir. Is he the begging Minister?

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I started with our expectations and the expectations are; Firstly, let us, again, steer the economy to recovery. Of course, I have heard from some economists, Sir, that in Fiji, revenue is not an issue. We can raise the revenues that we want to raise, but our challenge, that included as well, is expenditure. How we utilise the revenue that we generated, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Right now, as I have stated, the goose that we need to look after is the tourism sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and with that is Fiji Airways. We did not chew the planes, but we supported Fiji Airways, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I saw that the honourable Prime Minister was in Nadi to congratulate the Fiji Airways staff for their achievement and much of this, Sir, is to the young dedicated staff who joined Fiji Airways recently, so we need to acknowledge them. Secondly, we need to be reasonable in our revenue generation target, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That can be painful, but we need to be fair. We need to be considerate.

Unfortunately, some that are supposed to give us more in this Budget are not giving us what they can afford to give us, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Is this because of everything is connected to everything else?

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that has tightly controlled our expenditure and we need to do that.

I was looking forward because I have been following the recommendations of the National Economic Summit, I followed the statements by the Chairperson of the Review Committee, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister did speak a day before the announcement of the Budget and he talked about the magic bullet. We need to share the pain together but, unfortunately, with all those expectations, I do not see that coming in this Budget. Unfortunately, we have decided to please some and, of course, at the expense of others.

I said that we have to allow room for flexibility, given the external factors. We are not isolating ourselves, Mr. Speaker, Sir. When we talk about geopolitics, when we talk about the war, when we talk about climate change issues, when we talk about disasters, the Opposition back then did not listen to us. But, of course, this is why we need to always prepare for the worst case scenario.

I have stated that this year, we are beginning the *El Nino* cycle, and I hope that we will be prepared to absorb this external source, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because of our source markets, particularly our tourists. Although inflation is under control for now but who knows what will happen in the future because these are the very people that we rely on to give us the much-needed foreign currency so that our economy can continue to grow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to identify and exploit our new opportunities - to broaden and

diversify our economic base. I have given my support to the initiatives that are there, but I can still say that it is not enough. Of course, we need to address cross-cutting issues such as drugs, climate change, women empowerment, youth issues, et cetera.

On climate change, we have the Climate Change Act 2021. There are opportunities in climate-related investments, Mr. Speaker, Sir - our energy bill and our transportation bill. This is a good opportunity for us when we talk about the magic bullet because the initial cost will be high, but the benefit will come later because of our fossil fuel bill which is about 4 percent of GDP alone. It will be a big saving for Fiji in the future, so let us start now with investment in energy and fuel because transportation and energy, particularly the energy sector, are too big issues under the Paris Agreement.

Under our Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) commitment, we need to be seen to be committed to that, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I had told the media few weeks back when they were interviewing me about climate change, “Go and take a picture of the honourable Prime Minister’s residence.” It is not a good example because we want to grow trees, but then they started cutting trees again. That is the investment that we need - we need to keep our forests, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Having said all those, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not support the Budget, but I wish the Government well, particularly with their revenue projections based on what is happening here, Sir, because we are part of what you inherited, so you have to look after us as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish the honourable Minister all the very best in the achievement and implementation of this Budget, but we will continue to monitor Government very closely.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for this opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Leader of Opposition for that rebuttal.

Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament now for tea. When we resume after the bell has been sounded, I will be offering the floor to the honourable Prime Minister for his contribution as well. The House is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 11.25 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 12.04 p.m.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the 2023-2024 Budget, delivered by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, on Friday, 30th June, 2023.

I welcome our citizens who are following these proceedings via television, radio or the livestream.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to pay tribute to the late Taufa Vakatale, who was the Deputy Prime Minister during the SVT/GVP Government, and also the late Ratu Talemo Ratakele, the former late Senator and also late member of the Great Council of Chiefs during their lifetime.

I thank the people of Taveuni for receiving the Squad - our Fiji Rugby World Cup Squad, that was training in Welagi Village last week, and it was great to have been able to visit them.

I also would like to commend the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and his Team for quickly putting together this Budget that we are debating in this august Parliament, aimed at stabilising the situation that we inherited, and moving Fiji forward. We all understand that it is the will and the wish of everyone elected to this august Parliament. I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that it will be the foundation for the consolidation of Government finances to support the socio-economic development and restructuring in the short and the medium term.

The proposed Budget has received quite broad support and acceptance, gauging from the views expressed to the team that had gone around the country in consultation before and after the presentation on the Budget. The encouraging thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that they have been forthright, and they have freely expressed themselves and their views on the Budget that is before us. Non-Government, professional institutions and the private sector on the whole have commended the Budget.

I thank those who have endorsed the Budget in the media and in discussions that we have had around the country. There will be criticisms and political rhetoric, but it is the duty of the honourable Members of the Opposition to try and not criticise but see how best we can better the presentation by Government and allocations.

We will continue to encourage constructive criticisms that is genuine, in the hope that we can all work together for the benefit of our people and the nation.

I will be discussing with my colleagues the best way of introducing an organised feedback system that gives the public an avenue for letting us know directly what they think about our services and our policies. When I say 'our', it means the Government services and politicians. Questions such as:

- How efficient are our departments? How can they improve?
- How much of a difference did the new bridge which was recently opened in their area make to the livelihood and the lives of the people in the area?
- What do they think of the local medical services?
- How well do the Water Authority of Fiji and Energy Fiji Limited communicate over water and power cuts? Are their announcements realistic and the duration of the cuts accurate? They can come back on that network and tell the Government about those.
- Do the Government agencies do a good job of answering the questions from the consumers?

But I also issue a cautionary note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Budget, which is the product of consultations and dialogue among different stakeholders right around the country. No Government anywhere is capable of preparing a budget that gives their people everything that they want, because our resources are scarce and limited, and Government has to prioritise based on the current needs.

This Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is meant to help us out of the crises we knew we would have to contend with when we came into the Elections and eventually got the parliamentary votes to be Government. It is caused by unsustainable debt levels, some of which we could not avoid, and the shocking deterioration of much of our infrastructure, in particular, our health facilities. These are some of the grim realities that the Budget is designed to deal with.

The Budget has been designed to immediately help as many of the poor and needy as possible and give relief to students burdened with Tertiary Education Loans Scheme (TELS) debt. It is also intended to improve education and boost investor confidence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my “State of the Nation” address on the eve of the Budget announcement on Wednesday, 28th June, 2023, I reiterated that it is critical that we must all come together to address the common challenges in rebuilding our nation. There is no doubt that we have to make some hard decisions that will not be pleasant, nor easy, for some of our own people. These decisions are deemed necessary for the common good of our citizens and to take our country forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I made it very clear that we are operating in an uncertain and unpredictable global environment. Therefore, there is a need, and it is very important that we have to make necessary changes to protect our nation from the uncertainty that we face today and possible future shocks.

Structural adjustment policies to improve efficiency, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and productivity are necessary in order for us to be relevant, adaptable and to be competitive in the global environment we are in. Therefore, despite the increase in expenditure, the Budget is intended to consolidate Government finances in the medium term.

Our deficit has been brought down to 4.8 percent, compared to 7.4 percent in 2022-2023 financial year. Despite the reduction, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the deficit compared to the last three years, more work is necessary to further reduce our deficit to a desirable level of, at least, or to be below 4 percent of our GDP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget includes measures to address the high debt level, minimise wastage, direct resources to priority areas and sectors of Government and allow our people access to basic services.

Our current debt portfolio, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is around \$10 billion. This means that with our current commitment, we have to pay over \$1 billion to service our debt annually. That comprises \$536 million in interest alone, and \$516 million in principle, to be repaid annually. This simply means that we do not have the fiscal space.

In other words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no room or very limited capacity for Government to expedite and implement capital projects that are critical for investment to generate employment opportunities to our people.

On revenue measures, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we made some hard decisions to have a balance Budget. In addition to the 21 zero-rated VAT on basic food items, prescription medicine is now also exempted.

The VAT rate of 15 percent will apply to all other goods and services.

While PAYE has been adjusted downwards, import duty on raw materials has been increased by 3 percent. The corporate tax rate has increased from 20 percent to 25 percent.

A few other important item duties have been increased by 5 percent. Duty concessions on fuel for tourism and shipping have been removed. Other duty and tax concessions have also been adjusted to improve revenue collection. The Government is also implementing measures to improve tax administration and minimise tax evasion.

These revenue policy reforms are guided by the principles of fairness, simplicity and revenue adequacy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are committed to transparency and genuine consultation with businesses and taxpayers. Therefore, we will continue to engage with investors and businesses to build their confidence through consistency of our policies and continuous engagement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the target sectors, the 2023-2024 Budget is more balanced and restrained, while it continues to deliver core Government services. We steadfast in our commitment to health, education, infrastructure, public security, skills development, poverty alleviation and welfare. Funds have been allocated to improve our basic infrastructure.

We will continue to engage with our multilateral and bilateral development partners to secure funding in the improvement of basic infrastructure, including health and education facilities, roads, jetties and water supply.

A number of projects will be funded by our multilateral development partners, viz-a-viz the ADB and the World Bank through concessional loans in the vicinity of US\$150 million. Most importantly, these projects will create employment opportunities and create more investment opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health allocation has been increased to improve our healthcare services and facilities. The Ministry has been allocated \$453.8 million, which is an increase of \$69 million to cater for the efficient operation of our healthcare facilities. The increase will also cater for salary increment for our health personnel and urgent recruitment of nurses and medical assistants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the education sector has been given the highest allocation of \$845 million. This is historically the highest allocation ever. The allocation includes grants, salaries and capital expenditure. We will provide better salaries and working conditions for our teachers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in line with our commitment, the Government has written off the TELS debt of approximately of \$650 million owed by 53,725 students. Students and their families will not have to repay that debt. Instead, students who have benefited from that will have to serve a bond by working in Fiji for a certain number of years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have retained social protection allowances for poor households. The allocation has been increased by \$11.5 million from the current financial year.

Across the board, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the social protection allocation has been increased to support those living below the poverty line, and that includes people with disabilities, pensioners, women and children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now turn to the Ministries under my portfolio, and one of them is the Ministry of Civil Service. Within the Civil Service, there will be more human resource and institutional capacity building to improve service delivery to ordinary people and for the civil servants to give them a clear career path.

The Civil Service is our biggest employer, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with a workforce of over 35,000, spread across 31 Ministries, 50 Departments and agencies at 300 locations throughout the country.

For the Service, it is no longer business as usual. Like other parts of national life, the Service too must go through a transition. Our aim is for the entire organisation to become world class. If that sounds ambitious, it is meant to be.

The Ministry is being allocated \$50.6 million, compared to \$2.4 million in the previous Budget. The consolidation and transfer of functions previously carried out by the Ministry of Economy to truly reflect the streamlining of the core functions of the Public Service has led to the substantial increase. This includes the transfer of responsibility for Office Accommodation and Housing Unit of \$47.9 million. The intention is that new standards of excellence will be achieved in service delivery.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs allocation has also increased from \$29.4 million to \$37.9 million, an increase of 28.9 percent. The increase is to support the opening of our Missions in Washington DC, Port Moresby, Kuala Lumpur, the establishment of new Embassy in Israel and the refurbishment of our overseas Missions.

On the Prime Minister's Office's Small Grant Scheme, to honour the former Prime Minister's commitments to rural communities, the Small Grant Scheme allocation has also been increased by \$1 million.

On Aftercare Fund, this Budget provides our ex-servicemen and ex-servicewomen a sum of \$14.9 million in the Aftercare Fund, an increase of \$2.49 million from \$12.4 million before. That increase is due to the increase in beneficiaries, as well as increase in the medical and administration costs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we recognise the commitment and sacrifices of our disciplined service men and women. We salute and render our respect to those who have served our country and with honour and grace.

On the Department of Public Enterprises, to further improve the performance of our public enterprise entities, \$8 million has been allocated in the proposed budget, which is an increase of \$1.8 million from the previous year's allocation. Our public enterprises should be making significant contributions to the economy. There is a long way to go before they can match the output and results and return on investment.

On the Department of Information and National Archives, the dissemination of accurate and timely information is critical to the Coalition Government, to ensure that the people of this country are well informed on matters of national interest, Government services and initiatives.

The Department has been allocated \$3.2 million. Although this is a reduction by \$800,000, it does not mean that the Department will not be able to carry out its core functions. Basically, the reduction is due to the removal of the allocation for Qorvis, which was employed by the previous Government and now have been terminated.

On the Department of Environment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, their total budgetary allocation is \$7.263 million for the fiscal year 2023-2024, an increase from \$3.4 million in the previous year. This budget provides for the Government's commitment to safeguarding our natural environment and ensuring ecosystem integrity through an integrated expedient approach, ensuring an equilibrium between sustainable development and economic prosperity.

On the Climate Change Division, the increasing severity and frequency of natural disasters is disproportionately impacting Small Island Developing States. The Climate Change Division has been allocated a total of \$2.56 million in the financial year, an increase of \$1.4 million from the previous year's allocation.

In addition, \$6.5 million is being provided by development partners, viz-a-viz, the European Union contributing \$5 million for the implementation of the Climate Change Act 2021, and an additional \$1 million from the Australian Government to support climate finance project implementation. I would like to assure the nation that the implementation of the Budget will be closely monitored. The Government will consider the possibility of having a mini budget after six months, to ensure better realignment and in preparation for the change in the financial year to the normal calendar year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must continue to be mindful of the challenges associated with the geopolitical environment, risks associated with climate change, and other headwinds. We must always be conservative in our approach and put into place necessary measures and implement appropriate adaptation and mitigation actions to ensure our resilience.

As I have said earlier in my State of the Nation Address, the Coalition Government is committed to a united, progressive and prosperous nation. I am confident that after next few days of intense debate and discussions, this august Parliament will finally endorse this Budget for the good of our people.

May God bless us all and may God bless Fiji, and I support the motion.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- A very good afternoon to you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. May I also take this time to extend greetings to the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Members of Cabinet, my fellow Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and members of the public in the gallery today and everyone tuning into today's proceedings; *ni sa yadra vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is, indeed, an honor to be on my feet this afternoon and to offer some insights on the Budget as Assistant Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to first thank our honourable Prime Minister for his steady and calm leadership where he has very ably led us over the last few months and has, at every step of the way, kept the people at heart.

I would also like to thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance for providing the people of Fiji with an exceptional Budget - tough but balanced, given the dire economic landscape that our Coalition Government has walked into.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also would like to thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, for his leadership as we both took on our roles to lead the newly established Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation. And most of all, I would like to thank our people of Fiji, for their continued confidence, patience and prayers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget has gone down very well for the people of Fiji. Over the past few days, I have received phone calls from my relatives in Ra, expressing their satisfaction of the National Budget delivered on 30th June, 2023, saying and I quote, "*Lovara, keimami marau a nia dina na kaicimu na i 'uva'uva vou ni lavo ni Ma'ani'u*". [We, your relatives, are really happy about the Government's new Budget]

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the old "order", tourism was always lauded as a critical economic priority because of the returns through tourism receipts to Fiji. Yet, the government arm of Tourism was squashed together with certain economic services pillars of Government.

Now, and especially under this "New Budget for a New Fiji" lies the core of our Coalition Government's unified purpose, that despite any odds, we will rebuild Fiji together with our people.

Our Coalition Government will reconstruct from the ashes, the aging and broken infrastructure for water, health, roads and electricity that had failed the nation over the past 15 years because of the "fake facts" that were dramatically lectured about in this same parliamentary Chambers previously.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Coalition Government is now like a father of a rebellious and disobedient child, having to deal with massive bills after his child's spree of wild parties resulted in unpaid tabs, and damages to property, vehicles and people. That is the parallel of the unfortunate situation we are now in.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it further pains me to know the shocking spike to our national debt situation, that we also carry on our shoulders. As a mother, I cannot in good conscience agree that this *dinau* (debt) burden should be passed down to our children or to our generations to come.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- You will have your chance, honourable Member.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is why this Budget will be supported and passed because we want to carry the obligation to clear the path for a fighting chance at a brighter future for our children and their children now.

Quite apart from our debt servicing where almost a billion dollars of taxes is to pay for the interest and principal repayments, there are other debts and unfulfilled promises that we have to honor, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I refer in this instance to the \$45 million for the film tax rebate that we now have to treat as expenditure. The Coalition Government and the taxpayers are honoring that debt.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I refer to the \$53.3 million *dinau* (debt) to the University of the South Pacific (USP). The Coalition Government and the taxpayers are honouring that debt as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me also refer to shameful saga around the Lautoka Swimming Pool and Govind Park in Ba, where construction had colossal project overruns. My colleague, the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government has the unfortunate job of cleaning this up. But it is the Coalition Government and the taxpayers who will honour those projects to completion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me finally refer to the assault on our pension funds where the Fiji National Provident Fund contributions were unilaterally reduced from 18 percent to 10 percent. It now falls on our Coalition Government and the taxpayers to rectify that, with the restoration to the 18 percent contribution, coming online at the beginning of next year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it really challenged me to realise that as our honourable Minister of Finance shared, one dollar out every four dollars in this Budget is instantly diverted towards servicing Government debt.

I laid out those real scenarios out because all the "wild party" expenses of the parallel illustration mentioned prior about a father cleaning and paying up after the unhinged acts of his rebellious child, means the same scenario for us as a Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it means that we have to make drastic adjustments to squeeze our expansionary plans for the Ministry of Tourism. Like that father cleaning up after his child, he probably had to skip meals and adjust other due bill payments, in order to bail his child out. That is the similar situation that we are presently in.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we understand that the economy is projected to return to pre-pandemic levels this year, in large part due to the resilience and rebound of the tourism industry. However, we are also very cautious about the headwinds ahead, and the slow but steady steps we need to tread, in the coming years.

There are a number of initiatives that have been welcomed by the tourism industry, including the simplified dual-VAT rate system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, although departure tax is set to increase, the transparent announcement and phased approach to the increases, has made a difference.

Our tourism stakeholders tell us that what they appreciated the most was the consultative approach taken by the Coalition Government.

After all, it is very apparent to most in this country that even though it will be hard, we all have to take a hit in order to start restoring and recalibrating Government revenue that was badly manipulated by wrong policies.

Mr Speaker in our Coalition Budget, the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation is being allocated a total budget of \$52.3 million, comprising of:

- \$37 million to Tourism Fiji;
- \$5 million to Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji;
- \$1.9 million to Domestic Air Subsidy; and
- \$5 million to Vanua Levu Tourism Development Project.

We are fully appreciative, Mr. Speaker, that tourism is what has aided our recovery. While the Coalition Government is making efforts to diversify the economy as we should, we will still take care of tourism.

With the \$30 million allocated for tourism marketing, the Ministry fully intends to continue to maintain brand presence in our traditional markets, while pursuing emerging markets, who we project to bring in greater yields.

Within this budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will be hosting and encouraging major events that amplify the Fiji brand in the global market. In November this year, Fiji will proudly host the first Spartan event to solidify our capability to host a very different tourist audience. Spartan in Paradise introduces an Australian obstacle course to a new setting – Fiji. The obstacle course will be held at the Aviva Racecourse in Sabeto, Nadi, from 9th November to 12th November of this year.

Mr. Speaker, equally important is the Ministry's oversight role of the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji (CAAF) in travel and tourism, and the overall safety of Fiji's flying public within our sovereign airspace.

The CAAF is not always at the forefront, but our people out there are our unsung heroes as they audit, regulate and monitor our airspace in compliance with international regulations 24/7.

We were quite pleased, Mr. Speaker, that last month the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) completed its Universal Security Audit Programme for Fiji and gave us a clean record of significant security concerns.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, no significant safety concerns were identified in our safety audit. This is a major boost to Fiji's aviation ranking, which will, undoubtedly, add to our credibility as a safe tourist destination.

Mr. Speaker, these achievements signify that while Fiji may be small, we can stand shoulder to shoulder with global leaders on aviation safety. This is a testament to the high calibre of professional and passionate people at CAAF.

Mr. Speaker, like most other industries grappling with skills shortages, highly specialised sectors like aviation are no exception. Therefore, CAAF will recruit and fill critical technical positions that are absolutely vital to maintaining our aviation safety standards.

In keeping with the changing landscape, Mr. Speaker, CAAF also intends to digitise processes and functions that allow for efficiency and accuracy of operations, so that we are on par with the rest of the world.

Mr. Speaker, we are also very honoured to announce that the ICAO Liaison Office for the Pacific Small Islands Developing States was earlier endorsed by Cabinet and \$500,000 has been allocated towards it.

The ICAO Office will help raise aviation safety standards in the Pacific considerably, and when we host this Office, it will provide the platform for easier access to ICAO's expertise and assistance, which is also the conduit for Civil Aviation Authorities with our Pacific neighbours. This ICAO Office will become operational very shortly at the CAAF Compound in Nadi.

Mr. Speaker, it is only an upfront and honest Coalition Government like ours that will start its terms by laying their cards on the table, like we have with this Budget. Where other countries have to manage strong public outrage for increased taxes and austerity measures, our people of Fiji are in stark contrast – calm and fully aware of why this Budget is this way.

Mr. Speaker, our people understand because they remember our Members of Parliament who used to endure ridicule and scorn when they sat on the other side, pleading for cautious spending and wiser decision-making. The people remembered all that. In fact, many expected a much tougher Budget.

The beauty of this Coalition Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is its simplicity and its attempt to share the burden and spread the cushioning effects among the majority of our most vulnerable. Even we, the Members of Parliament, have had to take cuts.

This Budget, Mr. Speaker, takes us back to the fundamentals. High roller investors are not going to bother investing here, if they cannot be guaranteed that their taps will have water, or that

their lights will stay on 24/7, or if the state of our roads means they will require new car parts every month. This Budget is realistic and is made for Fiji - not Singapore, Australia or any other developed country that we had all been promised that we would take after.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, I can almost guarantee one allocation in the Budget that our colleagues across the aisle will not complain about and, that is, the Parliamentary allocations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir. with my fullest concurrence, I wholeheartedly support the 2023-2024 National Budget.

HON. P.K. BALA.- What happened to Grace Road?

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Do not open your mouth.

MR. SPEAKER.- You started off with a running commentary.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to speak on the 2023-2024 National Budget presented by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, and I wish to commend him and his team for this Budget. Likewise, I would like to thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his most constructive and a good critique of the Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think that one has to do one's job as best as one can, and we think there are certain areas of Government activities which are going to be subject to some criticism which we feel is valid and ought to be made and ought to be answered.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has become the tradition in this Parliament that this is an occasion to debate far and wide which is a good thing because this one opportunity, we have to speak out on issues which, perhaps, during the year, we will not be able to have this opportunity again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, we would like to record our disappointment with this Government by not allowing the Opposition to fully participate in the debate and to vote. It looks like they have the fear of defeat.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is expected to provide the key economic input by the Government to run the nation and provide Fijians with the financial basis for a secure and prosperous life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this past six months of the Coalition Government, we have seen no leadership, no vision and definitely, no way forward for Fiji and its people.

During this time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister said, "We will have a mini budget". The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance said, "No, I will manage with the FijiFirst budget so no mini budget".

In the next round, the honourable Prime Minister said, "I am not aware of the Cabinet approval for the *kalavata* budget for the National Economic Summit". The honourable Deputy Prime

Minister and Minister of Finance said, “Do not worry, I will come back from India and sort it out”. The Office of the Prime Minister said, “Reduce the grant for the Pacific Polytech from \$2.6 million”. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance said, “No, I will still give them \$2.6 million”.

(Hon. L.D. Tabuya interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Just listen! I am going to reveal everything today, just wait.

(Laughter)

By the way, I will talk about your involvement with Grace Road later on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the benefit of this Parliament, this amount was given before the Budget, so no mention of that in this Parliament before us. In this Budget, the honourable Minister of Finance gives another \$1 million, bringing the total to \$2.26 million for Pacific Polytech. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will speak more on that later on.

The honourable Prime Minister asked the Girit Expenditure Audit and the honourable Minister of Finance said, “It is alright, no need to provide”. The honourable Prime Minister, in one of the functions, said, “15 percent VAT is too much”. Right or wrong, honourable Prime Minister? You said that. The honourable Minister of Finance said, “No, it is alright. I will listen to Mr. Naidu, the Chairman of the Fiscal Review Committee and the World Bank”.

(Hon. Prof. B.C. Prasad interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am the one and only Parveen Bala, honourable Biman Prasad.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the theme for this Budget is, “Rebuilding our Future Together”. One wonders, what is being rebuilt?

(Hon. L.D. Tabuya interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Stop modelling in the USA!

(Laughter)

When one set of Coalition Ministers say something, the others state the opposite. The theme should have been, Mr. Speaker, Sir, “I say, you say no Budget”. And what can they build, let alone rebuild, when all the Coalition Government is doing is fulfilling one of the other of their partners’ election promises, no matter what the cost will be to the people of Fiji.

As this Budget makes clear, it will be the poor, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and the working class who will bear the bulk of suffering under its increased cost of living with no vision to take the pressure off these poor people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Finance proudly announced the municipal elections. Even in the recent consultation, he talked about conducting municipal elections. The

Ministry of Local Government said, “No, it will not happen until next year”. On this point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I make

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Twelve months, don't lie.

HON. P.K. BALA.- What did you promise to the people? Third quarter. Come on!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You promised what you preached in 2014.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

(Hon. Prof. B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Hang on, keep quiet!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, sometimes I wonder, when people say, “I am going to give \$100 for sugarcane, we will increase the minimum wage”, and if all those things are not implemented or done, what do you call those type of people?

(Laughter)

Promises not delivered, or liar?

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

HON. P.K. BALA.- Hey, hang on, honourable Minister!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In 2014, you promised election here in this Parliament!

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- This is 2023, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have evidence.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, allow honourable Bala to continue.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In recent times, the honourable Minister of Finance went across the country and people have told me that he had mentioned to them, “I am going to hold the municipal election this year”, but that is not true. It is a lie. Sir, I was taken to task by this same man.

This Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, does nothing for the sugarcane farmers. Who, in the cane belt, is still asking, “What happened to the promise of \$110 per tonne by the honourable Minister of Finance...

(Hon. Government Member interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- You don't know anything.

(Laughter)

... and his candidates in the last

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The honourable Member is lying.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Don't point, don't point!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The honourable Member is lying.

Through you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want him to produce the evidence in this Parliament to prove that I said, "\$110", because he is lying and misleading, not only in Parliament, but the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want him to produce the evidence or withdraw that. I want him to produce the evidence of where, when and which day and time did I promise the \$110 because that is a complete lie. That shows who is the liar.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, continue, honourable Bala.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Produce the evidence!

HON. P.K. BALA.- You are a master of lie!

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I come from a cane belt area. No matter what he says, he can bark like a dog to anyone, but let me say this and I am going to put my point very clear to him, that it was him and his candidates, during the campaign, said to the farmers that they are going to give \$110.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Show the proof! Bring the evidence, bring the evidence!

HON. P.K. BALA.- This is the problem with this man.

At the same time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government, the media and the Sugar Industry Unions are silent on the suffering of the poor cane farmers.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Shame, shame!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Cane access roads have not been maintained as there is little, or no budget.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You used all of them.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I don't want to go on to Grace Road.

(Laughter)

The Ba Sugar Mill has continuous breakdowns, but the honourable Minister for Sugar says, “All is well”. Well, all is not well for the poor cane truck drivers, who sleep in their trucks, hoping to deliver their loads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very convinced that this industry will collapse under this honourable Minister. I have been going through the Budget book, trying to find out where the allocation for Penang Mill is. There is nothing mentioned there, not at all. So, who is telling lies now?

(Hon. Government Member interjects)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Wait for his speech!

HON. P.K. BALA.- You are not aware of anything. I hope you are not sober.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- I hope he is not drunk.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2023-2024 Budget is not a Budget about the people, but it is a Budget about keeping badly thought-out election promises that come at a huge cost to the people of Fiji.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have no hesitation in raising my opposition to a Budget that does not deliver to the ordinary Fijians. As a policy document, it is a ‘cut and paste’ effort that only addresses the fiscal issues as seen by the Coalition Government. As independent reviewers, like the ANZ Bank, have pointed out, this is a Budget directed by election promises.

As I have said in my introduction, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget aims to fulfill badly thought-out promises that serve only political ends.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. P.K. BALA.- This is a bad Budget that all Fijians will regret when their pockets are hit with the coming increases in everyday cost of living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget does not keep track of the concerns and issues that people have on the ground, and it does not take into account the huge economic blows that Fiji has taken through national disasters and the pandemic in the past few years. It is a Budget that will badly impact the working poor and those who are socially disadvantaged, including those in rural and maritime areas, as well as our older citizens. The Budget fails to deliver in key areas through a lack of innovative policies, backed by key budgetary allocations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this includes employment generation, skills training, investor friendly fiscal inputs, and the list goes on. The Budget has the same old approach based on the Coalition Government’s design to rubbish and remove all things put by the FijiFirst Government.

This is not a forward looking and innovative approach, as it means that the Budget, like the

Coalition Government, is reactionary and politically motivated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, rather than following sound fiscal policies based on forward planning to meet current and projected needs. Instead, Sir, the Budget is a backward-looking Budget rather than a forward-looking Budget.

As the honourable Minister of Finance has admitted, this is a Budget based on 90 percent diagnosis of previous conditions, leaving only 10 percent for the future consideration. A nation's economic health is not the same as diagnosing measures for the economic health of an individual. Any first-year economic student will tell you that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget, as it stands, shows the lack of finance and fiscal policy expertise in the honourable Minister of Finance and the Coalition Government leadership, led by the honourable Prime Minister. The 2023-2024 Budget does not carry any initiatives of policy direction that provides balance to recover and grow Fiji for all Fijians. This is a Budget, Sir, that is not only backward-looking, but is back-tracking and does not provide the platform for Fiji to enter a new phase of economic recovery from the fiscal hits that we had undertaken and at the time when recession threatens nations globally from the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no policy statement in the Budget on the global context within which we must frame our national budget. This is a serious lack of consideration by the honourable Minister of Finance and, again, shows inexperience and underlies his first budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important that this Budget is seen and heard for what it is, that it does not provide for the people of Fiji in a sustainable and equitable manner. This is evident in the massive rise in cost of living, as the wide range of goods and services that will go up, apart from the 22 zero-rated items.

The massive return of \$446 million, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will not come from the air, but from the pockets of ordinary Fijians, whose lives cannot be satisfied by the limited zero-rated items. Each government is mandated to provide for and deliver to the people of Fiji, but this Coalition Government is showing that it does not listen to the people. Sir, I wonder what or who was being listened to during the public consultation.

Definitely, not the poor people of Fiji, not the poor rural villages and not the poor sugarcane farmers. Their voices and views are definitely not represented in this Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The keeping of promises through this Budget is a selective one, it does not aim to bring all the people and the nation together in driving forward the economy. As the poor sugarcane farmers will find out with the leaving out of guaranteed minimum tonnage price, as well as the total lack of other incentives and allocations for the sugar industry.

There are no policy initiatives on employment generation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that are new or directed at specific targets or situations. The business initiatives are going backwards with more restrictions and more red tape on the way for investors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if one were to measure Government intentions through this Budget, then it is evident that the Government is not quite as serious about promoting investment and development as it makes out. There is little of substance when it comes to civil service reforms, upskilling, key alignment, nor their budgetary allocation to ensure that ordinary Fijians get the best return from the Government.

The employment and training initiatives to counter the movement of Fijians, Mr. Speaker, Sir, into sustainable employment pathways to Australia and New Zealand is not properly structured, nor is it accountable. There are no committed pathways to retraining or upskilling to meet these

demand areas. There are no plans for site-based or locality focus training to meet local needs and demands. The training needs of the maritime areas are specific to the area, as are that of the other rural and remote areas. Instead, we have the same old centralised and institute-based classroom model training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to say a few words on Tertiary Education and Loans Scheme (TELS). This brings me to the issue of continuation of training programmes that was made available free-of-charge under the FijiFirst Government, apart from increased places for TVET Programme under TELS.

The new scholarship system that replaced TELS, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a selling-out of the principle for equal access to high education, just to keep a badly thought-out election promise. The honourable Minister of Finance is simply keeping his job by keeping these promises. In fact, he knows very well that the scheme such TELS, as they may be, is the only way to have a system that provides the most accessible means to higher education and for all the people of Fiji. Its replacement is a system that many suffered under, and he would know of the discrimination faced on racial grounds, as he was a student from the 1980s and 1990s.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I think the honourable Member is fanning racial hatred by lying because this is what they did before the Election. They said there will be a race-based scholarship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Standing Order 62, this man who had lied before, is now using Parliament to incite racial hatred. That is what he has done, because nowhere in the Budget, nor in this fiscal supplement, that says that the scholarship for any of those programmes will be based on race.

HON. K.K. LAL.- What is your Point of Order?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Under Standing Order 62(4), it has to be dealt with. So, he has done it twice - first, he lied, he misled Parliament and now, he is inciting racial hatred by referring to the scholarship.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Offensive!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Offensive!

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, we will take note of that.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- No, I have not finished, honourable Member. I am still referring to the Point of Order that was raised by him. So I am asking the Secretary-General to take note of that, because that is the second time.

You may continue, honourable Bala.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Finance will have his time to respond, so do not waste Parliament's time.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Whether it is once or twice, I don't care.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we meet in this august Parliament, this past week, the US Supreme Court threw out a Presidential bid by Joe Biden for a student loan forgiveness programme. The bid by President Biden was also to keep an election promise. The US Supreme Court ruling challenged both, the legality of such a programme, as well as its implications for past and future loans and scholarship programmes, as well as the fiscal position of tertiary institutions who were the biggest beneficiaries of TELS, as well as the students who receive equal and unlimited access to tertiary education, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The ruling in the US showed that the political party concentration under the guise of a government policy cannot and should not be allowed to transform and replace the whole policies that are of benefit for the largest number of people. No racial things here! Just to keep election promises, why should Fiji be any different, Sir?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know he has wasted my good time and tried to....

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I said in my opening remarks that I note with great concern the allocation of \$1 million to Pacific Polytech with a justification that it will help solve some of these training issues. Sir, one must ask, what is this Institute and what is its credibility?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my investigation shows that it is currently operating from less than adequate premises and facilities. These allocations is almost the same in total of \$2.26 million, as I had mentioned earlier on, when compared to the allocation to University of Fiji, an established institution with professional staff. Pacific Polytech is run from hired space with no record of enrolment, courses being run and graduates.

(Hon. Prof. B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- You keep quiet, please.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Higher Education Commission.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Currently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of its landlords - Shree Sanatan Dharam Prathinidhi Sabha, is engaged in a legal case against Pacific Polytech. Honourable Prime Minister, Sir, I ask you to have a thorough investigation in this scam.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- For what?

HON. P.K. BALA.- This is not less than a scam, it is a scam because no one knows about this institution, no one knows it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Finance has some serious questions to answer on both allocations made to Pacific Polytech. It is an issue that should also concern his Coalition partners and, in particular, the honourable Prime Minister and the other two Deputy Prime Ministers, that it undermines the reputation of their Government and in all honesty most of all, that of the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my concluding remarks on this is rather unsupporting, a note of gender bias and unequal allocation and lack of policy vision for our youth and sports, which I will give a written speech during my gatherings just after this Parliament session because of time constraint, and this lack of inclusivity and sound fiscal vision in this Budget applies to all Fijians, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can only hope that the people of Fiji are keeping a close watch on the lack of leadership evident in this backward-looking Budget and this is a Budget that will only cause more pain for all Fijians in their day-to-day lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to say, thank you and I would also like to thank Parliament for your patience.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the 2023-2024 Budget debate which was delivered by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics on 30th July, 2023. This is the Budget for the New Fiji.

Let me begin by saying that the most valuable lesson that the FijiFirst government has given Fiji is how not to run government.

(Laughter)

Out of everything that they claim to have left us behind as our inheritance, this is the most valuable, “How not to run a democratic government”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance for delivering what I termed as a “Transparent and Inclusive Budget”, with well thought-out budget policies to grow the economy, assisting the vulnerable, improving livelihoods, improving basic infrastructure and maintaining Government assets that had been forgotten or ignored in the last 16 years, as the previous Government was just trudging along since 2006 in survival fire-fighting mode rather than taking care of the very people who voted them into power.

The FijiFirst government was either unwilling or unable to do anything other than move from crisis to crisis because they refused to consult those who might have been able to help them.

One of the lessons of leadership that I learnt as a young Subaltern is that a good leader should be able to discern good advice from the bad, and once the said advice is received, a leader needs to act swiftly because the lives of people under his or her leadership depends on it. That lesson, Sir, is applicable in all facets of life, including the sacred duty of leading our people towards a prosperous future, whether it be at village or local community level, or at the national level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also thought it pertinent to observe that just by delivering the Budget Address on time speaks volumes of the Peoples Coalition Government’s commitment to correct the many mistakes that had become the norm of the previous Government.

Parliamentarians having to wait for more than one hour in the night for the former Minister for Economy in this Chamber to deliver his Budget Address was a complete abuse of the process. This side of Parliament commits itself never to follow that road of tyranny and bullying. On this side of the Parliament, we will commit to take note of the concerns of all members of our great nation, and that, Sir, includes honorable Members on the opposite side of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the start, the Peoples Coalition aims to attain improvements in accountability and government performance by combining transparency with an invitation for nationwide participation, so that stakeholders can contribute ideas and information to the public sector. Transparency is a means to strengthening governance.

The successful two days’ National Economic Summit, the re-establishment of the Fiscal

Review Committee, and pre and post Budget consultations were just part and parcel of the People's Coalition Government's commitment to uphold a transparent process where everyone is involved. 'Fiscal transparency' were the operational words.

Unlike the previous administration, for the past 16 years, only the "Two" would control the entire process, and everyone sitting across them would have to wait patiently to receive what was offered by them - a totally undemocratic process that they tried to sugarcoat with handouts and giveaways, treating the people of Fiji like little children, as they smashed through the norms of good parliamentary procedure to achieve what they wanted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the Coalition Government, there was no secrecy in the entire process. The honourable Minister of Finance was openly discussing the needs to increase VAT to supplement our below-par revenue performance. This was backed by the Fiscal Review Committee after carefully assessing the available data, both from Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS) and Fiji Bureau of Statistics (FBOS) and the input gathered from the various public consultations across Fiji. Nothing was hidden from the taxpayers of this country. We preached it, and we are living by it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the official poverty rate is 24.1 percent equating to 208,000 people who live below the poverty line. As confirmed by the latest release from FBOS, 75 percent of those who live below the poverty line are *iTaukei*, which is approximately 156,000 people, and the other 25 percent which is approximately 52,000 people belongs to other races. In other words, 18 percent of *iTaukei* are poor and other races constitute the remaining 6.1 percent.

What do these statistics mean? The previous Government had failed to empower every Fiji citizen to improve their livelihood but instead, provided handouts which temporarily addressed the symptoms of poverty and left the roots of it very much intact. That is why the poverty rate had increased. The Peoples Coalition will work towards reducing the poverty rate through sustainable policies and resilient infrastructures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management has been allocated \$29.1 million in the new financial year, which is an increase of \$14.1 million from this financial year's Budget. Major expenditures include the re-establishment of the Rural Housing Programme, which is budgeted at \$3.2 million, and the Rural and Outer Island Development Programme at a tune of \$2.6 million.

New housing schemes will be rolled out to our rural dwellers who meet the criteria set out by the Ministry. On the other hand, the Ministry will work with other stakeholders to construct related infrastructures in the rural space, to improve livelihoods, facilitate trade, improve transportation and expand agricultural commodities which will all be funded under the Rural and Outer Island Programme.

Surprisingly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the decision by the previous Government to transfer the Rural Housing Programme under the Ministry of Housing and Community Development was a complete and utter failure. The low utilisation under this Programme speaks volume of failed policy and lack of consultation with relevant stakeholders. Our rural dwellers were the ones that were adversely affected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ongoing assistance through Self Help Projects budgeted at \$1 million will continue, together with the Seafaring Entrepreneur Assistance Subsidy of \$0.5 million, which has been transferred from the Ministry for Finance to the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management.

In this Subsidy Programme, Government will assist applicants who have sufficient deposits for boats or boats with outboard engines. We will review the criteria and address the gaps identified after

the rollout of this Programme in the last two financial years.

In terms of rural roads improvements, Government has allocated \$18.3 million for rural roads under the Fiji Roads Authority Budget. In addition, the ongoing Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridges (CARFF) allocation under my Ministry is budgeted at \$2 million.

Just a comment on the former Government's misguided notion of employing the RFMF Engineers in road construction as conveyed to us this morning by the honourable Leader of Opposition, I call it misguided because the core role of the RFMF Engineers is to support the operations of the RFMF as a whole. The major civil engineering works for national development is best left to the necessary arm of Government or the private sector.

The Ministry of Agriculture has also been allocated another \$2 million for farm access roads and, unfortunately, the request has been sitting with Ministry of Agriculture for the last five years. Again, the previous Government appeared not to prioritise the needs of our rural farmers.

Also, the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry has been allocated another \$2 million for Cane Access Roads. This Government is committed to improving livelihoods for our rural dwellers. We have set our sights on it, and we will do it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport was provided an additional \$5 million for the re-establishment of the Public Works Department. This is done for three reasons:

- 1) To fast-track the maintenance of rural roads as and when required, given the high cost of contractors assigned to undertake rural roads improvement;
- 2) the new set up will drive down the exorbitant cost charged by private contractors; and
- 3) to build capacity in the Ministry, hence development in the rural space is not affected where the need to develop rural roads arises.

On improving water infrastructure in the rural areas, the Ministry will continue with Rural High Risk Water Sanitation Project and Emergency Water Supplies with a budget of \$1.1 million. On the other hand, the Water Authority of Fiji has been allocated \$8 million for the Rural Water Supply Scheme, rural water carting and rainwater harvesting system.

The Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources has been allocated \$3.5 million for development of groundwater resources, including reticulation to our rural populace. Another \$0.5 million is allocated under Head 50 to improve sanitation for villages and settlements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government has allocated \$1.4 million to support the harvest of pine woodlots in Lakeba and Muani in Kadavu accordingly. This is budgeted under the Ministry of Forestry which will assist the two schemes in selling pine logs to a reputable company in Viti Levu. It is all about empowerment. We want our resource owners to grow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government is also committed to improving service delivery to our people. The Ministry has been provided with additional funding for our manpower needs which will strengthen our services to our rural dwellers.

Apart from the increased allowance to the *Turaga ni Koro*, *Mata ni Tikina* and *Liuliu ni Yavusa* in the new financial year, the Advisory Councillors will also be getting an additional \$27.50 per month and Council Chairmans will receive an additional \$13 per month.

With those under the Social Pension Schemes between the age of 65 years to 69 years, aftercare recipients and other pensioners will receive a 15 percent increase in allowances and those receiving Social Pension Schemes from the age of 70 years and above will receive an additional 25 percent in the new budget. No one is left behind, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the maintenance of rural offices and quarters was not given a priority by the previous Government. What we inherited from the FijiFirst government were buildings that were falling apart. Roofs were leaking and floors in dismal condition. Some buildings were beyond repair. The Ministry has been allocated \$1 million for the renovation of quarters in the rural areas. Civil Servants occupying these quarters are delighted to hear this commitment from the Peoples Coalition.

The Ministry of Health and Medical Services has been allocated \$2 million for the upgrade of Subdivisional Hospitals, Health Centres and Nursing Stations, with another \$1 million allocated under the Ministry of Agriculture for the maintenance of rural offices and quarters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to support rural trade, the Agricultural Marketing Authority has been provided with \$5 million in the new financial year. Part of this funding is for the procurement of agricultural produce from the rural and maritime community where exporters cannot reach.

The Fiji Crop and Livestock Council has been supported with \$0.7 million to establish more commodity associations in the rural space and partner with the Ministry of Agriculture to train our farmers on best agricultural practices.

The Fiji Co-operative Dairy Company Limited will receive \$5 million to support our dairy farmers in the procurement of new breed from overseas, milk subsidy, improvement in pastures and training.

In the disaster management space, the New Zealand Government will provide \$3.2 million as cash grant in the 2023-2024 Budget, with the overall goal of reducing vulnerability to natural disasters and enhance Government's ability to conduct core disaster risk reduction and disaster risk management functions. The Ministry is also being allocated with an additional \$0.2 million as Disaster Risk Reduction Support, which will allow the Ministry to mobilise resources as and when required.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted earlier, the Peoples Coalition is committed to improving livelihoods of our rural people and at the same time, build and improve resilient infrastructure in our rural space.

Just before I take my seat, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to propose that the future of Fiji's prosperity lies in the rural area and the commitment of this Government in developing it is indicated by the allocation made to it in the 2023-2024 Budget, which assures us that the economic future of the nation and all its people look increasingly steadier and brighter. This is the Budget for the new Fiji, and we are rebuilding our future together.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the 2023-2024 Budget and fully support its implementation.

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister and honourable Members of Parliament, please, allow me to make my contribution, as well as share my ideas and thoughts on the National Budget presented to Parliament and to the nation by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance.

Mr. Speaker, on that note, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for delivering the first ever Budget of the Coalition Government. Also, this is all new to me as it is also an honour for me, Mr.

Speaker, to deliver my first Budget response in this august Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, it took me eight times to listen to the Budget Address and try and put things into perspective as to how this Budget will have an impact on the lives of ordinary Fijians and to the thousands of Fijians at the bottom of our economic ladder.

For Fijians living in villages, maritime islands, rural communities and informal settlements, Mr. Speaker, all they wanted to know is whether they will spend more or fork out more money to cater for their daily expenses.

You know very well, Mr. Speaker, after listening to the National Budget Address, the answer to that is, yes, they will have to pay more. And to thousands of Fijians who might be watching today's Parliament session - to any fisherman, construction worker, housekeeper, labourer, garment industry worker and to all Fijians who are at the grassroot level of our economy, you have to find a way to meet the 15 percent VAT living standard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to put it in the most simplest way possible for all Fijians, the Biman's Budget does not care whether you put food on the table or not, in one way or the other, the reality is, it is like telling the people of Fiji whether you like it or not, live with it.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Who is going to pay the debt?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Listen, listen!

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my view, the increase in VAT to 15 percent is a stab in the back of the supporters of the Coalition Government and to the thousands that voted for them. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is what I do not understand. The very people that voted for you to be in Government, the very vote that gives you power, the very vote that gives you the privilege to prepare this Budget and in return a slap of 15 percent VAT right on their faces.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Shame!

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, is this really rebuilding Fiji together or is it a way where honourable Prof. Prasad is telling PAP and SODELPA Members, "let us drown Fiji together."

HON. P.K. BALA.- *Isa lei.*

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for PAP and SODELPA Members on the other side, is the VAT increase to 15 percent what you campaigned for? Were your voters made aware that when you come into power the honourable Minister of Finance will burden them with a hefty increase? No ordinary citizen of this country will ever make a submission to Government to increase VAT. So the question I ask the honourable Minister of Finance...

HON. P.K. BALA.- Easy way out.

HON. A. BIA.- ...was this a submission from just a few business people? To honourable Prof. Prasad and to all Ministers and Assistant Ministers, I want to remind you that we are here for the people and because of the people, we are here. That is why in whatever we do, we need to help them, assist and develop them and not create more financial burden that will demoralise them financially and economically.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do understand the great need for Government to collect more revenue but allow me to ask the honourable Minister of Finance as an economist, is there no other option to generate more revenue rather than making the people suffer?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Easy way out.

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to challenge all Government Members on the other side of Parliament, how is it possible that you will just sit there and watch ordinary Fijians suffer in the hands of the Biman Budget and give freeway to some multi-million dollar water bottling company by not paying tax for seven years.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A. BIA.- Now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, please allow me to bring your attention to the allocation and initiatives announced for the new and most productive Ministry ever since the Coalition Government came into power and that is the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs.

(Laughter)

As a proud Fiji Melanesian descendant, may I remind honourable Charan Jeath Singh, the honourable Sakiusa Tubuna is looking at me, honourable Viliame Gavoka and the honourable Prime Minister of the promises made to the various ethnic groups, especially to the more than 40 Melanesian communities around Fiji that a scholarship will be introduced to cater for them.

The Budget Address has created more confusion amongst various ethnic groups because you are the very ones who initiated the idea of ethnic based scholarships when they were accessing scholarships introduced by the previous government that does not discriminate them by race, ethnicity or gender.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It was a loan, not a scholarship.

HON. A. BIA.- After all the lies during the election campaign, you decided, “okay, we will put TELS and Toppers in the microwave, reheat it, try to make it brand new and a new name but little did they know, it is the same one as the last one.

Just a while ago, the honourable Minister of Finance demanded to the honourable Bala about evidence of the promises made that the ethnic based scholarships will be revealed. I am happy to reveal the evidence in my speech.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs earlier this year, on 7th April, 2023 stated on FBC News, and I quote:

“The Ministry will provide scholarships, cultural activities and provide funds for strategic engagement and partnership.”

In the *Fiji Sun* earlier this year, again, you stated, and I quote:

“There is a great need for a budget for Multi-Ethnic Affairs scholarship.”

Is that the evidence you were looking for, honourable Minister of Finance?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- That is different, that is for sugar.

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the evidence of blatantly lying to the public because none of this was announced in the Budget. Honourable Minister for Sugar, do not worry, we know it is not your fault, maybe the honourable Minister of Finance saw that you will be a big threat to his voter base, that is why he did not approve that scholarship. However, I would like to advise the honourable Minister for Sugar and the likes of the honourable Assistant Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, if you know that you will not deliver multi-ethnic scholarships, please have the courtesy to inform the various ethnic groups beforehand and not create confusion and dissatisfaction amongst them.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. BIA.- Honourable Tabuya, you look at your People's Alliance promises before you come into Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Budget Address, I was waiting for the honourable Minister of Finance to give details to the allocation of the Public Service Broadcast Fee or PSB Fee because I was somehow surprised the same amount of funds provided in the previous Budget. This does not make any sense. At the start of this year, there were wide speculations and media reports that there will be an investigation into the spending of the PSB Fee by FBC. Where has that investigation gone, or have they swept it under the carpet because the former CEO of FBC provided all the relevant facts and figures to the new Chairman and the Board which they totally ignored and instead opted to misinform the media about the operations of FBC?

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

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no indication nor clarification that the fund will go directly to FBC or whether some other media organisation will share the PSB grant or fee. If this is the case, then I am worried about FBC and the detrimental impact it will have on the company and its workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after the change in the Board and leadership of FBC, there have been a huge turnover of staff because some have opted to resign rather than being included in a toxic working environment. In what company will you have the chairman of the Board using the boardroom nearly every week as his office? According to those staff who have resigned (nearly 20 of them), their families are made to suffer because the new FBC leadership have stopped their overtime pay and no longer paid for working during the weekends.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Very poor.

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is your legacy.

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is why we need clarification from the honourable Minister of Finance because FBC in terms of justification, they have every right to the full PSB fee because of the nature of their work. Sir, FBC is the only media company that provides both television and radio stations and most of all, they are the only one that provide AM service to the rural and maritime islands.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. BIA.- May I ask the honourable Minister of Finance, please give clarification of this PSB grant or fee or whether other media companies will be given the allocation as well?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I turn our attention to the allocation for *Walesi*. I am again surprised to see that they have allocated funds for them.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- We have reduced it.

HON. A. BIA.- You still allocated funds for them. The Government has continuously called for an inquiry into *Walesi*. After gathering so much information from conspiracy theories on social media, however, now we are still waiting for that investigation and concrete evidence to prove their case.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It is coming.

HON. P.K. BALA.- When?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Copy and paste.

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a must we heavily invest in *Walesi* because the people of Fiji have benefited greatly from this initiative. For the first time ever, many Fijians living in the maritime islands and rural communities are now able to watch and cheer their Fijian rugby players representing their country. We have seen numerous videos on social media about people watching rugby games through *Walesi* app from their farms and wherever they are in Fiji. That is *Walesi*, and the people of Fiji are not sure whether all these conspiracy theories will bring an end to *Walesi*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I conclude with the honourable Minister of Finance, eight times after listening to his Address, I am bored of the fact that you continuously dwell in the works of the past government.

HON. K.K. LAL.- *Isa*, missing us.

HON. A. BIA.- Honourable Prasad, you have already spent more than six months in Government, the people of Fiji do not want to hear you bragging about the past, they want to hear your ideas and policies for the future.

HON. K.K. LAL.- There are no new ideas.

HON. A. BIA.- May I conclude with a quote and also an advice to all of us as Members of Parliament in this Parliament:

“There is no point looking back when you are doing something great. The only time you need to look back is how your progress is going on. Other than that, do not look back, just stay in the moment and seize this moment. Staying in this moment and looking forward can only make you reach the following levels. When you get stuck in the past, it will become a burden. Carrying extra weight in your head is always not a good idea when you have the vision to do something. So let go of everything that weighs. The past has no power, and the future is before you to make the most of it. Stay in this moment and do not look back.”

To all honourable Members of Parliament, may God continue to bless the nation of Fiji and may His grace continue to empower us so that we may move forward together with His love. *Vinaka vakalevu*, floreat Viti.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 1.37 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.42 p.m.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the media and fellow Fijians; thank you for allowing me to take the floor to deliver my statement in support of the 2023-2024 National Budget.

In acknowledgment, I would like to start by first acknowledging the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister. We have had a Coalition Government for some time, so to have a strong and experienced leader has been instrumental in achieving all that we have, including the 2023-2024 National Budget that is before Parliament.

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

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- I would also like to commend the honourable Minister of Finance, my fellow Deputy Prime Minister, the Permanent Secretary and Team at the Ministry for Finance. I thank them not only for delivering an exceptional Budget, but for doing it consultatively and on time. At this juncture, I can see the strategy of the other side and that is to hit and attack the honourable Minister of Finance but the last time I checked, he is made of steel and all that will be futile.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Since when?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Personally for me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I salute the political will with the Coalition Government to write-off TELS and bring relief to some 53,700 youths or 53,700 families. We do not care and not worried on the makeup of this 53,000 whether they are Indo-Fijians or *iTaukei* or Others. It is for all the young men and women of this nation.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Providing scholarships to the extent that we have in this Budget is unprecedented in the history of this country. Sir, \$148 million is being allocated for scholarships. You will know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that from that side of Parliament I spoke about this, campaigned for this, write-off TELS, provide free tertiary and this Coalition Government is almost equal to free tertiary.

This side of Parliament at that time, Mr. Speaker, used to ask, where are you going to get the money from? We can do it. So, let the whole country know that the Coalition Government has the political will to lift the burden from the men and women of this country and also provide almost unlimited scholarships going forward.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Only time will tell.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It will, say thank you for now.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the backdrop of the Budget was not easy for many reasons and it is important we acknowledge them. Of course, there is the obvious managing expectations, but we made a collective commitment for change for the sake of our people and we will see to it that we deliver.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the pandemic is over, its socio-economic impacts remain. This was

the gravity of it. We are still challenged by the repercussions of growing geo-political conflict, increasing cost of living, commodity prices and a fragile supply chain. On the domestic front, there was of course poor financial management by the previous administration. So much so that this Government, its citizens and the generation to come is inheriting an unsustainable debt. The irony here is that, for the last decade and a half, the other side of Parliament at almost every sitting claimed they were inheriting a failed public system. But in those years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you would think they made an effort to move this nation forward. They did not.

Instead, we have a public debt of close to \$10 billion, almost the size of the economy and about a quarter of this Budget. A burden that this Government is now inheriting. Mr. Speaker, Sir, ultimately, our job as Government is to provide. To provide essentials services to villages who are yet to receive steady water and electricity, upgrade our deplorable medical facilities, allow quality education, create jobs and provide our most vulnerable with better social protection.

At the same time, we need to spur economic activity by easing the regulatory environment to encourage investments, look at new areas of growth such as the ICT sector, and investing in tourism marketing to remain competitive. That essentially, Mr. Speaker, Sir, means striking a balance between supporting the socio-economic wellbeing of our people with the pressure of cost of living and investing in decent jobs and economic security.

On the economic state, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the honourable Minister of Finance had shared, we are looking at an 8 percent economic growth. There used to be this boast from the other side of economic growth that was highly inflated, in actual fact, there was only 3 percent but today we are learning that it will be hovering around 8 percent this year under the Coalition Government fueled by the strong recovery of the tourism sector ...

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Then Fiji Airways.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- ... and the positive flow on impacts to other sectors of the economy. This essentially means we are returning to pre-pandemic levels. This is great news, but our socio-economic objectives are much greater than returning to what once was. There is no doubt that we will have as many visitors to our shores as we did in 2019, if not more., but that is not a measure of success. The Budget focuses on “Rebuilding our Future Together.” It is, in all its essence, the foundation of this Budget and those to come. It considers macroeconomic stability, financial sustainability and accountability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my maiden speech, I said that we, as the People’s Coalition Government, made a commitment 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.

We will no longer pass overnight legislations that take away the rights of the indigenous in the name of investments. We will no longer rob our people of freedom of expression in the name of media safety. We will no longer deny Fijians the right to be represented and heard. This is democracy. So, as you have heard in Parliament and seen, we delivered on what we owed our people immediately such as reinstating jobs, convening stronger more meaningful dialogue and moving past grudges that cost us our education and our friendship with the Pacific.

Today, I hear about Polytech. Polytech is very simple, Sir. It replaces the technical colleges that was a failure by the previous Administration. That is it, to replace something that was a disaster.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- On the tourism sector, Mr. Speaker, globally, international arrivals are estimated to have reached 80 percent of pre-pandemic levels in the first quarter of 2023 with over 230 million tourists having travelled more than double the same period of 2022. For Fiji this year, Mr. Speaker, we have had five consecutive months of year-on-year growth compared to 2019. That means from January to May, we got more visitors than we did in the same months pre-COVID.

Sectoral performances, although varied, reflect the recovery in the domestic economy, but where we are today is a direct result of tourism. The perception remains clear. The tourism industry is what will take us through the next few years. When tourists come and spend money, that not only feeds into the hotels bottom line or to governments tax revenue, it goes into the pockets of the taxi driver who picked them from the airport, from the farmer who sold 20 kilogrammes of tomatoes to a restaurant who then invests in their children's education. It is not a standalone sector, Mr. Speaker, it is central. It supports agriculture, fisheries, construction, manufacturing, creative arts, et cetera. We need to view tourism as an engine that can support other socio-economic sectors with a focus on opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Assistant Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation shared what businesses and the private sector need more than anything for business continuity is consistency and confidence. In terms of the Ministry's allocation in the 2023-2024 National Budget, the Ministry for Tourism and Civil Aviation is allocated a total Budget of \$52.3 million. The big-ticket items include:

- Tourism Fiji Marketing (\$30 million) and Operations (\$7 million);
- Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji (\$5 million);
- Domestic Air Subsidy (\$1.9 million); and
- Vanua Levu Tourism Development Programme (\$5 million).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the tourism sector is a sector that has over the years contributed to 40 percent of our national GDP, creating more jobs directly and indirectly than any other sector. So, to support a sector as crucial to the Fijian economy as tourism requires greater Government support. Mr. Speaker, Sir, by establishing a dedicated Ministry, we are giving the industry the support and recognition they deserve.

When I joined six months ago, Mr. Speaker, we had a combined staff complement of about 10. Despite this limitation, we have managed to deliver key programmes. These two Departments (Tourism and Civil Aviation) were previously under already huge portfolios where they were almost invisible. In this Budget we will fix that.

Tourism, Mr. Speaker, was under the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport. It was merely a department among 10 others. The industry that is contributing 40 percent to GDP was hidden away amongst 10 other departments in a Ministry. The Coalition Government gave recognition to tourism and set up the Ministry for Tourism and Civil Aviation on its own. Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this increased budget and we will ensure to do more and deliver better services to our people.

On community focus, Mr. Speaker, the Ministry is allocated \$105,000 for beefing up its engagement with the industry and with communities (\$100,000 for tourism consultation and \$5,000 for tourism awareness). In the new financial year, the Ministry will work closer with the communities who have shown willingness and ability to be a part of the tourism industry.

For starts, we have re-instated the position of Roko Tui Saravania who has already been instrumental in creating better understanding and support systems with *iTaukei* communities. We will work with development partners to look more seriously at how we can connect farmers to hotels.

We will work with villages who have natural assets like waterfalls, farms, culture and traditions so that we are not only disperse the benefits of tourism but diversify our tourism products offering.

On Vanua Levu, Mr. Speaker, for years we spoke about diversifying and spreading the tourism dollar but in the past decade we have made no real measurable progress. Tourism is still concentrated from the Coral Coast to Nadi, in the outer islands and in Suva. Mr. Speaker, another undertaking of the Ministry in the new financial year is the implementation of the Tourism Development in Vanua Levu Programme. This was recently approved by the World Bank of the Executive Directors.

The Programme is valued at US\$200 million spread over 10 years, essentially looking at the sustainable economic growth of the Vanua Levu economy, as well as Taveuni, through destination development, investments in resilient infrastructure and essential services and improved tourism enabling environment and growing institutional capacity. Mr. Speaker, Sir, within the next few months, we will begin the first phase on implementation that will run from one year to six years at a value of US\$61.5 million.

In this phase, we will implement critical projects to improve access and climate resilience of essential services such as drainage, sewage and transport infrastructure. This includes the Labasa and Savusavu domestic airports as well as an upgrade to the 95-kilometre road connecting the two towns.

On Tourism Fiji, a key role of the Ministry is to promote Fiji as a tourism destination. In the 2023-2024 financial year, Tourism Fiji, our marketing arm is allocated an increase marketing budget of \$30 million from \$22 million. Mr. Speaker, Sir, restoring Tourism Fiji's budget is not with the intention to return to how things were three years ago. It takes into account much stronger competition now especially with Asian markets that are cheaper such as Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines and the Pacific now fully open. In the last financial year, the marketing budget was \$22 million which is when Tourism Fiji began its marketing activities more heavily. At this time, not all markets were open such as Japan and China.

With this Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Tourism Fiji will focus marketing activities across our key markets - Australia, New Zealand, North America, Europe, United Kingdom, China, Hong Kong, India, Singapore, Japan and the Pacific. In line with Fiji Airways' connectivity plans, we will also create brand presence in the new markets such as Korea and Canada. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Airways has already restored all our direct routes to its 22 destinations with plans to explore more routes.

At this point, I would like to acknowledge Fiji Airways who created history by being recognised as the Skytrax Best Airline in Australia and the Pacific. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this financial year, Tourism Fiji in partnership with Fiji Airways launched the "Fiji where happiness comes naturally" campaign. In the new financial year, the campaign will be more heavily promoted to bring out our brand values.

Additionally, new strategic initiatives will be delivered by Tourism Fiji such as Loloma Hour – a project to talk about cultural and environmental respect when visitors come to Fiji and capitalising on transit visitor. It is expected that this will result in around 2,000 to 5,000 visitors per month staying over for three nights and spending in the local economy. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these marketing efforts will be supported by an operational budget of \$7 million.

In addition to an allocation of \$5 million to the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji, we will continue our Domestic Air Services Subsidy with a budget of \$1.9 million in the new Budget. In the previous Administration, Civil Aviation came under the Solicitor-General. It was hidden away

somewhere. This very key part of the tourism equation was hidden away under Solicitor-General.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Cost cutting.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- They had no idea.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- And the Board did not even function. It has all been restored with the proper resources.

On the Air Services Subsidy, this is to ensure that uneconomical air routes of Lakeba, Cicia, Moala, Vanuabalavu, Koro, Gau, Kadavu and Rotuma and possibly new routes such as Ono-i-Lau are catered for and connected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are on the right track here. We know this because as the honourable Minister of Finance shared, this Budget was not prepared within the walls of the top floor of Suvavou House.

(Laughter)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Level nine.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- It was shaped on the most urgent needs of our people, from cost of living to access to better infrastructure and services. It was shaped on the expert opinions of the private sector and independent committees such as the Fiscal Review Committee. More importantly, it was shaped not only to keep our Government Ministers and people happy for the new financial year alone, but to build a strong foundation for the years to come.

At this point, I would like to acknowledge the re-establishments of the Cabinet Sub-Committee on the Budget, led by the honourable Prime Minister and my fellow Deputy Prime Ministers where we collectively contribute to the finalisation of the Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the 2023-2024 National Budget.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver by response to the motion that is before Parliament and that is the Appropriation Bill that includes the 2023-2024 National Budget.

From the outset, Sir, there has been plenty names that this Budget has been labelled. The Labour Party Leader calls this Budget a “flat budget”. The honourable Leader of the Opposition this morning called it a “microwave budget”, but again there is nothing new. The Budget that was delivered by honourable Minister of Finance, given that he had been our Opposition spokesman for Finance in 2014 to 2015. After a while in 2016, we had to remove him because he was not doing a good job.

(Laughter)

We brought in honourable Aseri Radrodro during our time in SODELPA to deliver the key Opposition Address.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Nice try.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- It is a deceptive Budget by a very confused Government. The platform that the honourable Minister of Finance should have started with was to start with a Mini-

Budget, that should have laid the platform for his National Budget, but he had opted to re-deploy funds from here and there and that took away necessary services for other key areas such as agriculture, health that this particular Budget is trying to resolve.

However, again the message in this particular Budget is very simple. The Budget is trying to increase revenue and at the same time it will increase the deficit but no infrastructure. Sir, 72 percent of the Budget is on operating expenditure and only 28 percent is on capital expenditure. That is the reality of this particular Budget and how it looks like. The people will suffer more.

Given it is a large spending Budget and the biggest budget deficit outside the pandemic (as I have said), FijiFirst never took our debt to more than \$10 billion even during the pandemic. This Budget will set a new record in Fiji's overall debt that will come to \$10.5 billion in 2024. Who else has done that? It will be your record honourable Minister of Finance and people will need to know that.

It came out from the Ministry for Finance Quarter Report (January to April) that the Government had accessed round about \$223.2 million in borrowings; that was by the Coalition Government. They are borrowing at a much faster rate, 12.4 percent increase, more faster than the same period last year. If that is allowed to go on, I do not know how high we will go in terms of our debt. This debt theory put by the Government during its campaign is to try to scare people that the debt is really high, but if you put debt into perspective, most of our domestic debts are just with FPNP and other local debts that we have.

It helps investments through FPNP where the Government loans from FPNP and when it repays, it benefits those employees who have funds at FPNP. It strengthens our economy because the money circulates locally. If you look at the Budget that we have here, we have a deficit of \$636 million. I asked the honourable Minister of Finance where will we get the deficit from? We will loan again from FPNP, the very same institution that you used to say that the FijiFirst government was killing. The deficit of this Budget will be funded again from a local institution through the local debts that are there.

But, again, the honourable Minister of Finance is very fond of trying to compare the economic status during COVID-19 with the rate of debt per GDP that is 88.8 percent, but pre-COVID it was 48.8 percent ratio and that is where FijiFirst had been taking our economy to, to a booming stage. The revenue that the FijiFirst government had earned at that time pre-COVID was \$2.8 billion. Even last year, FRCS was able to collect \$1.8 billion in revenue and now you have a very ambitious budget in trying to put out that FRCS will try to collect \$3.7 billion. I think they will not even reach their target and at the same time, the deficit will be there, you will loan more and there will be no development.

What we were looking into, what people were expecting where more investment will be there in the private sector. In terms of construction of roads, there is no capital expenditure here to say that there will be construction of roads or housing that will create employment and also gain more income so that they can spend through their consumption that will help in the economic spin. That is not the environment that is provided to by this particular Budget.

On the other hand, we also see that there is more duplication and wastage in this Budget. On one hand, you have PWD, on the other hand you still have FRA. I do not know what PWD will do, probably soon it will turn into (not only Public Works Department), but it will also be doing some Private Works Department too. These are some of the things that we really need to focus on and put money into areas that will really assist our people.

The other deception that is in this Budget is the idea that if you increase or give rise in VAT, it will automatically generate more revenue. It will depend on the environment, Sir, and also the consumer behaviour on how they spend. Most of the listed items in the zero VAT items was initiated by FijiFirst and only one addition, that was, prescribed medicine but prescribed medicine was already free through the Free Medicine Scheme by the FijiFirst Government.

The people are limited with choices, given they would like to buy items that are outside of the zero-rated list that they would like to enjoy, but the rich people will be able to afford the taxes that will be coming through VAT of 12 percent. Also, it will be unfair for the poor people that the rich people too will also benefit from the list on the zero-rated items. These are the few things that are there about this particular Budget.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What about Grace Road?

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- The other thing that we really need to look at is the argument put forward by the honourable Prof. Prasad that Government is paying off debt. I think that is always refinanced and never at any time that FijiFirst has not serviced our debt. During their time of government, it has serviced their debt and never at any time that FijiFirst has defaulted in making debt repayments.

These are some of the things that the people of Fiji need to hear because these are some of the lies that are spread, that puts that scary picture that FijiFirst has really taken this country down the path that they are trying to project. What we wanted to see was the change of economic direction on moving more investments into private sector and also in strengthening the various sectors that are related. We hear that the honourable Minister of Tourism is trying to boast about tourists. I want to take him back to the last few years when we were talking about the Fiji Airways guarantee.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Yeah!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- When we were at this side of Parliament, the honourable Minister of Tourism did not support that guarantee.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Yes.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- If it was not for the FijiFirst government

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Look at him.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- If it was them ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Listen, listen!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- ... all our aeroplanes would have been sold or eaten.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- All eaten!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- But we are thankful for the decisive leadership of the former Prime Minister and the former Minister for Economy that enabled to keep and secure our airline industry because those who were relying on it, not only those who work in the tourism industry, but if you look down at the hotels, they got filled up and landowners will benefit through land rentals. These are some of the things that the leadership at that time, when they were in the Opposition they could not see, but they are trying to boast about that when they are now in Government.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Shame!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- The honourable Minister of Tourism in his speech said that they are expecting 8 percent economic growth to GDP, but let me take him back to the Supplement. The Supplement says on Page 4, paragraph 1.3 (listen properly honourable Gavoka) and I quote:

“Following the strong recovery last year, the domestic economy is poised to grow further by 8 percent this year.”

HON. J. USAMATE.- Recovery last year.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- That is due to the strong economic recovery path that was laid down by the FijiFirst Government.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- That is not because of the last six months, it is because of the economic recovery policies that were laid down by FijiFirst post-pandemic that had led to this figure that will come up. Again, I reiterate the words of the honourable Leader of the Opposition that we have inherited a better Fiji than the other government in the past.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- We have given you a developed Fiji, we have given you a Fiji that has recovered from a pandemic. I do not know whether this particular Government will be able to manage our economy during a pandemic or no?

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- No.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- I do not know whether this particular Government will be able to manage our economy if they are hit by a Category 5 tropical cyclone.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- They do not have any plan and this is a problem. The only plan that they had in their first Budget when everyone was expecting more growth to our economy, they put the burden on our people, the poor to be more poorer.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Shame!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- You do not have new ideas on how to generate revenue.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- No ideas.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- How to grow the economy?

HON. J. USAMATE.- It is nothing.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Clear the VAT.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Just increase the VAT.

The honourable Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management in his speech today was talking about that most of our indigenous people (*iTaukei*), 70 percent are in poverty.

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

HON. K.K. LAL.- Copy and paste.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Because of you.

(Laughter)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- It is inconsistent and contradicting to with what the honourable Prime Minister had said that the measurement of poverty in our rural areas is quite different because people might not be earning income but they are able to put food on the table because they have their subsistence economy.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- They do farming, they do fishing.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- These are some comments by the honourable Minister. It is not the reality of what is faced on the ground.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- The other thing, Sir, that I would like to look at too, the increase in VAT also threatens our foreign currency debt management. As inflation, it puts pressure on the Fijian dollar, it could be leading to devaluation and other increases in nominal value of debt obligation. These are some of the things that the honourable Minister did not look into.

One of the things about foreign debt is that it should balance out with the foreign currencies that are coming. We had policies during the FijiFirst government through the Duavata Initiative with the Australian Government through PALM where people go overseas and through the remittance, send money back. But now the policy has changed where they are taking their family too. We should be seeing that in the future, there will be less remittance that will be collected by Fiji because people are moving out. We cannot see anything in this particular Budget that will create employment and force people to stay. There are no incentives to the private sector to create employment, so we do not lose our people - brain drain and our skills drained overseas. These are some of the things that should have been in this Budget so that we can ensure that our economy is stronger and also more money circulating through our people.

Let me go into the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I see that the Budget has increased from 14.3 percent in 2022-2023 to 38.6 percent in the 2023-2024 Budget, 95 percent of the activities in that particular Head in SEGs 7 and 9 are under Requisition (R).

HON. P.K. BALA.- Who controls that?

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- The honourable Minister of Finance upon the request of the honourable Minister.

Again, what I was looking at is, more innovation in terms of the policies that should have come in, that should have moved our *iTaukei* institution to a more fully autonomous, self-funded and self-governed. These are some of the things that we should have seen incoming rather than putting more money into areas that were not properly researched.

We can get more models from the Papua New Guinea Mineral Resources Development Company Limited (MRDC) where landowners are partnering with government in terms of their resources. These are some of the economic models that we have. Nothing in this Budget will empower landowners in terms of climate change or moving into carbon trading. The model that is currently used by the Maori Land Commission in terms of buying credits with landowners in Fiji, I think we have not taken advantage of that.

The other thing that we see in the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs' budget is the economic development per province. I would like to suggest that we look into a more better model that not only centres wealth through the province but trickles down to the *tikina*, *yavusa*, *mataqali* and right into the *tokatoka* where most of them are registered landowners. The model that was started by the honourable Prime Minister back then through the Commercial Loan Scheme, I think it only centres around the provincial council. Most of the provincial council companies now are still holding onto assets and the business that should have benefited those *Vola ni Kawa Bula* (VKB) members.

We see the allocation of a Village Improvement Scheme and we look forward to that implementation in various villages and also buildings and structures to be constructed that are Category 5 or cyclone resistance.

We see the *iTaukei* Land Development Grant that is with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, it used to be with the Ministry of Economy before. We would like to ensure that the Minister looks into other specialties like surveyors, those that will do the scheme plan plus other things that will help the applicants. Most of the applicants fail to meet the requirements because they do not have the funding to engage surveyors, et cetera, if the requirements can be lowered a little bit.

The other thing that we see, there is a new allowance for the *Turaga ni Yavusa*. The biggest question by some of the landowners in Vanua Levu, why did you not include the *Turaga ni Mataqali* and *Turaga ni Tokatoka*? Because most of the *Turaga ni Mataqali* or the *mataqali* have more land mass than the *Turaga ni Yavusa*. Why are you only focusing on the *Turaga ni Yavusa*, when the *iTaukei* obligations they do funeral and other *lotu* obligations at *mataqali* level and *tokatoka* level.

The other thing that people are asking honourable Minister of Finance, if the Great Council of Chiefs had approved \$200 for that allowance, why did you reduce it to \$100? This is the common question coming from the ordinary Fijians, the natives. You have to tell them why you reduced it, because if the GCC had approved \$200, why did you have to reduce it to \$100.

The other thing, Sir, the honourable Attorney-General and the Great Council of Chiefs. The big blunder that he did when he had not introduced, given the GCC was abolished, and he should have introduced a Bill in Parliament in order for the GCC to be the authority to sit. I think this is a big blunder and I urge the honourable Prime Minister, due to the few legal blunders that the honourable Attorney-General has done so far that has really threatened his leadership in terms of his decision and given that this legal advice has come from him, to change the Attorney-General.

(Laughter)

I call on the honourable Prime Minister to do a quick reshuffle, the honourable Filimone Vosarogo could be a better Attorney-General.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Or the honourable Lynda Tabuya is a better Attorney-General.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- This is the Budget that is being put forward by this particular Government, again it is a painful Budget by a very confused Government. I do not know whether they will be able to collect the revenue that they have projected to collect. They have increased debt and people will suffer more in this country because of the policies that this particular Government has put forward through this Budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will not support the Budget, again because it is anti-people and anti-poor.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and fellow honourable Members. I rise in support of the 2023-2024 National Budget which is termed, “The Budget for a New Fiji -Rebuilding our Fiji Together” and I take this opportunity to commend the honourable Minister of Finance for a well-crafted, inclusive, balanced and responsible Budget.

HON. I. VANAWALU.- Yes.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Leader of the Opposition mentioned that the Budget is a “big spending” one but he did not mention that it is big on revenue as well. If he looked carefully at both the revenue and expenditure, they were increased because of the need based on prioritized expectations.

HON. J. USAMATE.- While you only copy and paste?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- It is not politics, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Most or all the ministries, independent bodies and commissions have an increase in this Budget. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to state here that it is not a boom budget or a fluffy budget that they normally expect to be presented as happened in the past years.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- This Budget puts our fiscal situation on a path of sustainability.

HON. J. USAMATE.- By increasing VAT.

HON. E. IMMANUEL.- This Budget directs adequate resources with a clear game plan to fix our infrastructure, address our water problems, improve health facilities and lift public service delivery. At the same time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget ensures that our vulnerable, including those

who are poor, elderly, disabled or disadvantaged are protected.

HON. J. USAMATE.- By increasing VAT?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have spent most of my life working in the private sector and worked on corporate budgets and this was my first experience of working with the honourable Minister of Finance and a team of dedicated and qualified professionals at the Ministry for Finance to put together this National Budget. I must thank the Permanent Secretary for Finance, CEO of FRCS and the entire team at the Ministry for their selfless service to the nation and for their collaborative and valuable professional support towards the first Budget of the Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the last few days, we have received overwhelming support for the Budget from every sector of society and economy. Our people are happy for being genuinely involved in the Budget process and having their say in its formulation and for being actively informed in a transparent manner in the build up to the Budget presentation and deliberations. Our civil society groups have welcomed the freedom to diagnose the Budget, ask questions, demand clarity, and openly criticize any aspect of the Budget without fear. This did not happen in the last how many budgets that we had. Our media has been able to report freely, keep the public informed ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- ... and the Government in check. All this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has built a lot of trust between the Government and our people and is inspiring confidence in the economy.

Our businesses have welcomed the Budget and the government's commitment to improve the ease of doing business, simplify the overall tax regime and create a conducive and stable environment for business activity and investment.

Our tertiary students and their families have welcomed the Budget for the relief that they have gained from the thousands of dollars relieved off their shoulders. Our social welfare recipients, pensioners and ex-servicemen are happy with the increase in their allowances. Our development partners have quietly applauded the Budget for being responsible and inclusive and in fact we were told that many in the Opposition are also happy, although they might criticise the Budget publicly. The honourable Leader of the Opposition's reply seems to have been the same tired old rhetoric that the country has been hearing for many years and that led to the mess that you have had to deal with for 16 years. In fact, there was very little in his response which makes economic sense to make an alternative Budget, again no Alternative Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the nation has suffered a lot over the years and the Coalition Government has inherited a lot of challenges to deal with. We inherited a large debt of close to \$10 billion. I was surprised that the former *de facto* Leader of the Opposition cunningly engineered himself out of the Parliament, as he knew he had to answer for his ill-conceived and disastrous economic policies that led to this mess. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his own words, "the fact of the matter is" he will go down in Fiji's history as the leader that took Fiji to the brink of economic disaster.

(Chorus of interjections)

I thank God, we have had a change of government and a Prime Minister and a Minister of Finance who knows what they are talking about. Our health facilities have deteriorated from the years of the lack of attention and under investments. Our people have been struggling with daily

water cuts. Our roads, especially in rural areas have been left unattended and there have been no real focus on overall rural and maritime development. These, they did not mention in their speeches.

This Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, sets the foundation. Again, I wish to repeat the foundation to deal with these chronic challenges. We are confident that by working together with our people, we will eventually bring back prosperity and development. We will build a future that is secure for everyone and make sure that our future generation do not inherit this mess.

Our economy is rebounding quickly. People are optimistic and there is a renewed sense of hope. Our state coffers are being stabilised, revenue levels are picking up, wastage have been put under control and we have redirected taxpayer funds to more productive purposes. We are strengthening mechanisms for proper scrutiny of projects before any funding is allocated to them. We are strengthening, monitoring and evaluation to ensure that we get value for money, and we are tightening processes to eliminate pilferage and cronyism which used to be a practice in the past.

Office of the Auditor-General, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, I am pleased that we are strengthening the Office of the Auditor-General. The Cabinet had earlier endorsed the review of the Audit Act 1969 which will strengthen the Legislative Framework and give the Office of the Auditor-General more independence towards external scrutiny of how public funds have been used. We will ensure that the Act is aligned to international best practices, and we will do all this in a proper consultative manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also making sure that the Office of the Auditor-General is well resourced and the budget allocation for the office has been increased to \$7 million, an increase of \$1.2 million. This increase will ensure that we are able to get in the right people with appropriate skills and with proper resources to keep the Government in check with proper accountability of taxpayer funds.

To clear the backlog of audits that have been dragging for some time under the previous government, the Office of the Auditor-General has been allocated a specific budget of around \$722,000 to fast track these pending audits through the engagement of external auditing firms. A further \$552,000 is allocated to clear the audit backlog for provincial councils and mataqali trusts. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will work together with the Office of the Auditor-General to make sure that moving forward audit reports are up to date and presented in a timely manner for Parliament scrutiny.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry for Finance is also undergoing several reforms to strengthen our Public Financial Management System, tighten compliance and promote good governance. We are reviewing the legislative guidelines including the financial instructions, procurement regulations, finance manuals and other policies and procedures to ensure that taxpayers' resources are used efficiently and effectively. The Ministry has adopted a new Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP) guidelines which will assist with proper due diligence and cost benefit analysis in the appraisal and selection of public sector projects that was missing in past years.

All capital projects will now go through these stringent processes which will ensure that we do not fund regrettable projects that do not give us the right return and value for money. Through this process monitoring and evaluation will also be tightened with timely tracking of projects to make sure that we deliver projects on time and at the right cost.

The newly established Strategic Planning Office with a budgetary allocation of \$3.4 million will beef up project coordination and delivery and support the overall development of a pipeline of bankable projects for future funding. The office will also start work on a new National Development Plan from next year. The Planning Office, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will also ensure that we monitor the

implementation of the expenditure laid out in the Budget. There is so much to do, Mr. Speaker, that ministries will have to be in their feet to ensure that we are able to address so many challenges in every sector of our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also in the process of upgrading the Finance Management Information and Payroll System to modernise Government's accounting system and replace the almost two-decade old FMIS that has served its purpose now. This transition will enhance efficiency with availability of real time financial data, improve responsiveness in budget execution and monitoring, introduce better accounting controls and mitigate any risks from cyber security challenges. A funding of \$14 million is allocated in this Budget and we would like to thank the Asian Development Bank for the technical support provided towards this transition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry for Finance is also in the process of automating its budget system with an allocation of \$2 million. This will be integrated with the new FMIS and make national budgeting more efficient and easier compared to the current manual system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Gender-Responsive Planning and Budgeting (GRPB) efforts have been a key feature of recent budgets. Building on this progress, 18 Government Ministries had implemented gender budgeting in this Budget. These Ministries submitted their budgets that were better targeted at these beneficiaries ensuring a fairer and inclusive budget that takes into consideration the need to empower our women and ensure that public services are delivered equitably.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is exciting to note that the Ministry for Finance also has a Gender Equality Social Inclusion (GESI) Policy in place to facilitate the process to gender mainstreaming and gender responsive planning and budgeting. In its key role as guardian of Government's finances, the Ministry for Finance plays an instrumental part in ensuring that gender mainstreaming is reflected in all aspects of the budget cycle.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also strengthening the Statistics Office and review is underway for the Statistics Act which will give more independence to the Fiji Bureau of Statistics. The Bureau is provided in increased funding of \$7.6 million in this Budget, an increase of \$3.2 million. This increased funding will cater for the Employment and Unemployment Survey which will provide up to-date data on our labour force and employment conditions.

On FRCS, Mr. Speaker, Sir, FRCS is an important arm of Government and supports the delivery of Government services by ensuring that taxes are collected in a timely and transparent manner. To equip FRCS with the right resources, an increased funding of \$45 million is provided in this Budget. This will support FRCS in implementing its newly unveiled Strategic Plan which is focused on FRCS becoming a customer centric organisation, an employer of choice and to support the overall transformation of FRCS including digitisation.

On TELS write-off, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was part of the working group that was set up to guide the write off the TELS debt and I am pleased that 53,750 students and their families are now relieved off their debt and is replaced with a fairer and less burdensome bonding arrangement. The forgiveness of \$650 million of TELS debt reiterates the commitment of the Coalition Government's promise to our students, who are the future of our country. This ensures that their future is secured without the burden of debt and loan repayment as they start earning. Moving forward, Mr. Speaker, Sir, all our students will have the opportunity to get a scholarship which they do not have to repay. This is the biggest relief that has been provided to thousands of our students and families.

On *iTaukei* Development and Empowerment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2023–2024 Budget also provides a range of measures to strengthen our *iTaukei* institutions and bring about improvements in

the lives of the *iTaukei*, including Government's commitment to promote and preserve *iTaukei* culture, customs, traditions and language. Again, I thank God for the change in government, as had it not changed the *iTaukei*, their institutions would have been subjected to the sunset clause ideology.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- In the 2023–2024 Budget, the Coalition Government has recognised some of these needs and has provided its support to the 14 provincial councils to effectively address the issues faced by our *iTaukei* communities. For the 14 provincial councils, Government will now cater for the cost of operations for each Council which used to be funded through the *solu ni yasana*.

In addition to this, Government has increased the *Turaga ni Koro* monthly allowance from \$100 to \$150 to support village leadership and ensure good governance and well-being in *iTaukei* village communities at a total cost of \$2.1 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the *Mata ni Tikina* quarterly allowance has also been increased by \$150 per quarter for 262 *Mata ni Tikina*. The *Mata ni Tikina* is responsible for communicating and assisting the *Turaga ni Koro* with the implementation of new government policies and strategies and address issues faced by each *tikina* to the *bose vanua* for the formulation of an efficient and effective dispute resolution mechanism in the village council.

The Government has also recognised the importance in the decision-making role of the *Turaga ni Yavusa* and therefore have provided a monthly allowance of \$100 for 648 *Turaga ni Yavusa* under the Vanua Leadership Allowance allocation with a budget of \$777,000. That is just a start, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This will assist the leaders of the *vanua* in effective and efficient contribution to the *vanua*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the 2023–2024 Budget, the Ministry for *iTaukei* Affairs has been allocated \$2 million for Village Development Programme which aims to provide assistance for the physical beautification and general improvement of living standards in *iTaukei* villages and settlements, including a further \$4 million for *iTaukei* land development. All these, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will strengthen *iTaukei* development and empowerment and will support the overall development of our nation.

With this contribution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the Budget before Parliament.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, Assistant Ministers and fellow Members of Parliament. I rise to speak on the 2023–2024 National Budget presented by the honourable Minister of Finance. I wish to thank him and his staff for this Budget.

I will begin my reply to the 2023–2024 Budget Address by offering my deepest condolences to the family of the 21 year old woman, who was the victim of the ferris wheel incident on 30th June. My thoughts and prayers are with the families of the two who are still in hospital. Someone's negligence has caused the life of the young woman and lifelong injuries to the two young surviving women.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to extend my sympathy to those teachers who are being witch-hunted and accused by the Coalition Government of being FijiFirst supporters in what is quickly turning our beloved Fiji into a third world dictatorship where anyone who does not support their political views gets victimised.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his words of wisdom which I fully support and wholeheartedly endorse the sentiments offered to promote economic growth and manage the affairs of the State prudently. I also endorse the name given to this Budget by the honourable Leader of the Opposition and that is “microwave budget”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a loyal member of the Opposition and representative of my people, I intend to highlight some issues related to the policy measures announced through this Parliament on 30th June, 2023. The primary objective of Government Budget should focus on boosting GDP growth by promoting balanced economic development and improving people’s standard of living. That is done by considering the general public welfare. However, it is very surprising that there are no innovative measures by the Coalition Government to grow the economy and address poverty in the 2023–2024 Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget is mainly based on the recommendations of the Fiscal Review Committee’s Report. One of the recommendations of the Fiscal Review Committee that has been adopted is a VAT hike which will have a great impact on Fijian livelihood. This directly affects the bread and butter issues of the Fijians and the Government has given no regards to the cost of living they were harping about in the election promises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in the rate of VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent will see consumer demand soften with the rise in cost of living. The substantial increase in VAT will impact the cost of living and would mean that all Fijians will have to dig deeper into their pockets to make ends meet. Many will just be left with the desire to buy but lack the ability to do so. Fijians will suffer in this country.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Shame!

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Finance boasted in this Parliament on 25th July, 2022 that budget speech can be finished in an hour. Did he finish his Budget Address in an hour? No, he did not. He took almost two hours.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Talk is cheap.

HON. H. CHAND.- It is easier said than done. The honourable Minister of Finance could have finished his Budget Address in an hour if he had spent less time making unjustified and unsubstantiated remarks against FijiFirst and the former Prime Minister and Attorney-General and Minister for Economy. Do not preach what is impractical, cheap line politics.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Minister of Finance confirmed in his Budget Address that more than 90,000 people on social welfare will benefit from the allowances.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- They are being removed.

HON. H. CHAND.- I am sure the figure provided by honourable Prof. Prasad is correct because earlier this year, honourable Sashi Kiran made a threatening statement by saying that many of the 96,000 plus welfare recipients should not be receiving assistance from the State. It is almost seven months now since she made the comment.

I do not understand on what basis she made that comment. Does she have statistics? Premature and baseless statements cause unnecessary panic and anxiety among people. Comments should be backed by facts and figures and not on assumptions.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Hear, hear!

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, another promise not kept is that of doubling the welfare payment rates. The biased increase from \$100 per month to \$115 and \$125 per month for those between 65 to 69 years old and over 70 years old respectively is not only inadequate, bearing in mind the increase in VAT, corporate tax and high cost of living but it is also discriminatory. Why is there a disparity? What is the rationale behind the difference in increase? Is it because there are more people between 65 to 69 years old compared to over 70 years old? The 2013 Fijian Constitution prohibits discrimination by age, yet, the Coalition Government has decided to do exactly the opposite.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, National Federation Party promised to the people of this nation that in first 100 days the salaries of Government Ministers would be slashed by one-third. There was no mention of salary deduction in the honourable Minister's Budget Address. He only spoke on the reduction of Government Minister's allowances; promise not delivered.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Another lie.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was expecting an increase in the allocation of food vouchers for rural pregnant mothers. The reason, the cost of living will go up with the hike in VAT and to cater for that, an increase in the allocation is necessary. The Coalition Government could have gone a step further and catered for pregnant mothers in urban areas with low income. The Coalition Government should come up with some new initiatives rather than riding on the initiative of the FijiFirst. This is an indication that the Coalition Government lacks in critical thinking, creativity and originality.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Shame.

HON. H. CHAND.- The Coalition Government is doing copy and paste...

HON. K.K. LAL.- Copy and paste.

HON. H. CHAND.- ... and is just rewording the successful policies designed and successfully implemented by FijiFirst.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have gone through the Budget books and there is nothing on the restoration of the Executive Teacher positions in primary schools.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Shame.

HON. H. CHAND.- The former General Secretary of Fiji Teachers Union and the current honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations in one of his press statements on 27th June, 2018 said that FTU wants full restoration of Executive Teacher positions in Fiji. There was no mention of Executive Teacher restoration in the honourable Minister's Budget Address. Will the Executive Teacher positions be restored in 2024 which the honourable Agni Deo Singh was harping on when he was the General Secretary of Fiji Teachers Union.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Only talk.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now turn my attention to one of the most pressing matters that affect the future of this country. This relates to the scholarship and TELS debt forgiveness announced by the honourable Minister of Finance.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- *Bhatao*.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the policies as announced by the honourable Minister of Finance in the Budget have let the Fijians more confused than ever before. What happens to students who have already paid their debt?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. H. CHAND.- Listen, listen!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. K.K. LAL.- You people lied to the students.

HON. H. CHAND.- Will they be refunded? If not, where is the fairness? Those who were honest, upfront with their payments and paid off, they get no benefit from this new policy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, why did the Government not announce a reimbursement scheme for those who have already paid? Where is fairness and equity that the Coalition Government is harping about? By forgiving TELS debt, the Government is essentially wiping out potential revenue of over \$650 million.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. H. CHAND.- Imagine the positive impact this revenue could have had on addressing critical issues such as formalising informal settlements, building markets for vendors and improving essential services like health, roads, electricity, internet services and water supply. It also means that there is no sustainability in this scheme. We know that honourable Prof. Prasad does not understand sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the agreement signed between the parties to form the Government had TELS as non-negotiable condition by SODELPA. No matter how hard TELS and Coalition Government are trying to convince the taxpayers, the facts remains that this policy is to keep the Coalition Government and its Ministers in power.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. H. CHAND.- This is a huge trade-off, of the Government at the cost of taxpayers, our future generation and our economy, a situation where the political survival of the Coalition Government has been put before the country's best interest.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- No political will.

HON. H. CHAND.- The honourable Minister of Finance opted for a political decision to ensure the marriage of convenience between the NFP-PAP pre-election coalition and SODELPA is given more oxygen to survive.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has also failed to recognise and appreciate the fact that TELS was a revolving fund scheme.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It is a loan.

HON. H. CHAND.- Rushing into announcing a policy to meet SODELPA's demand for debt forgiveness, the Coalition Government has failed to understand simple logic and sound financial model. A student enrolled for a three-year programme in 2014 would start repaying after 2017. A MBBS student enrolled in 2014 will start repaying after 2020. So, it is unfair and childish for the honourable Minister to say that the scheme recoveries were poor. Also, the loan repayments holidays announced by the FijiFirst government during the COVID-19 hardship period should not have been included in assessing the returns. This actually has been his problem and level of deceit. He wants to compare a pandemic term with a non-pandemic period.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. H. CHAND.- It is not Aiyaz, it is Hem Chand.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir,...

HON. P.K. BALA.- Tell Richard Naidu.

HON. H. CHAND.- ... it is sad to see...

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. H. CHAND.- ...the Coalition Government has failed to perform such a basic financial model and has tried to defend its decision ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. H. CHAND.- ... to meet SODELPA's demand. Let me remind the honourable Minister, Fijians are smart and watching every move of this three uneven legged stool. The decision to forgive TELS debt without considering its long-term financial implication raises serious concerns about responsible leadership and fiscal prudence.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Poor leadership.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to raise an issue concerning a reduction in duty on lamb products from 5 percent to zero percent. The way this message was presented in Parliament led to Fijians on the 1st Reading of the Budget believe that they will pay less for lamb chops now.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in announcing a 5 percent reduction in duty on lamb chops, the honourable Minister intentionally and clearly failed to explain the impact on prices due to his hidden agenda in his other policy announcement such as increase in VAT and corporate tax rate. This shows that the

combined impact on the prices of lamb chops due to the policy changes will definitely increase the price of lamb chops. Any unfavourable movement in the exchange rate and freight cost will further increase the domestic price of lamb chops. Fijians will not get fooled easily, Fijians are smarter.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to raise a serious concern about the decision by the Coalition Government to include Pacific Polytech as an eligible institution for the new scholarship scheme with an allocation of \$1 million to this newly established institution. Mr. Speaker, Sir, everyone knows who is behind this institution.

HON. MEMBER.- Taxpayers money, not your money.

HON. H. CHAND.- The allocation of funds to the Girit Day Celebrations to Global Girit Institute and then allocation of \$1 million to Pacific Polytech cannot be mere coincidence. It is a clearly calculated and smart move. A search at the Companies Office shows that Pacific Polytech is registered as a private company under the name of Pacific Polytech Limited. My question is, who are the stakeholders?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the decision by the Coalition Government to rush into allocating \$1 million to this newly established limited liability company which is, of course, a privately owned institution whereas so far, the Government has been assisting non-private entities, education institutes such as Montfort Boys Town, Corpus Christi and Fulton College, why is the Government providing \$1 million to a private company with no experience in this field? Has the Government policy changed to accommodate a private company?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if this Budget passes on this floor, we are condemning ordinary Fijians to suffering which will last for decades. The Budget is biased against low and middle income families and fails to provide them with adequate protection from the looming inflation crisis. This Budget will ensure that thousands are trapped in a cycle of poverty. This Budget has shown Fijians that the Government does not care for the people but instead, have contempt for them.

I do not support this hopeless and heartless Budget.

(Laughter)

And I urge all those who are sensible on the other side not to support this Budget.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, *Na Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau*; the People's Prime Minister; the honourable Leader of the Opposition; my fellow Deputy Prime Ministers - the honourable Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation and the honourable Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics; honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers of the realm; honourable Members of Parliament, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen; *bula vinaka* and good afternoon to everyone who may be listening to this broadcast or streaming in live today. It is with honour, Sir, that I rise today to deliver my statement in support of the 2023-2024 National Budget.

I would like to thank my fellow Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, for an excellent, well-crafted and people-centered Budget. I commend his Team as well for their hard work and recognise the outgoing CEO of FRCS, Mr. Mark Dixon, for his contributions as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, the Budget announcement was delivered on time. The honourable

Leader of the Opposition asked for humility. If that is not indication of humility to the people of Fiji, I do not know what is.

It was delivered in simple language so that the whole country could understand, and it was well received by the majority of the people of Fiji. It was done in a consultative, open, compassionate and transparent manner, Mr. Speaker, Sir, without any hidden agendas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to talk briefly about the People's Coalition's legacy in less than a year of being in office, and this is something that the honourable Members on the other side do not understand. They have 16 years of history and we have only been here for seven months, so I urge them to wait. Good things are coming. It is about promises made, Sir, and promises delivered.

(Chorus of interjections)

We promised true democracy, Sir, removal of the Media Industry Development Authority (MIDA) and facilitating free speech, removal of Bill No. 17 or Act No. 22, return of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), removal of excessive Ministerial allowances that enraged the other side...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- ...introduced public holidays, like Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna and the Girmitiya Day which will form the basis for true reconciliation in the new Fiji, removal of TELS, repayments to USP, no more *solu ni yasana*, and the increase of social welfare payments to the people of Fiji, contrary to the suggestion during the campaign that we were going to reduce social welfare payments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can go on with the full list of promises and embellish a little bit on what we delivered in such a short span of time. We, on this side of Parliament, are not boastful in our makeup. All we know is that we are here to serve the people of Fiji and we are just getting warmed up.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Let me talk about the mess and maybe, this will make them understand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on why we had to deliver a very high Budget.

When Mr. Richard Naidu and Ms. Lisa Apted, who were the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Fiscal Review Committee delivered their findings, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it confirmed our deepest fears. This country was in a mess. The mess was a result poor leadership, which resulted in –

- high unsustainable debt levels;
- improper spending;
- shambolic and pathetic state of our health facilities, school facilities, government quarters and government assets;
- poor management of infrastructure, such as water and roads; and
- a famous swimming pool which has still not seen the light of the day after so much wastage of taxpayers' money.

Perhaps, honourable Bala may be able to elucidate us on that That begs the question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, how on earth did we get to this place? And this is a learning for all of us in this august Chamber, especially the aspiring young leaders of tomorrow.

When you armchair yourself into positions of leadership without one relevant experience or training, in this case, I am chairing through a *coup*, think that you know more than anyone else and refuse to listen, you are setting yourself up for catastrophic failure.

Basically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this mess falls at the feet of the former Prime Minister, Voreqe Bainimarama, and the former Attorney-General. Where are they, Sir? Where are they?

HON. P.K. BALA.- *Areh*, they are not here. Ah, you know!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- They ran away...

(Laughter)

... and refused to account themselves to the people of Fiji in this august Chamber. I leave it to the people of Fiji to judge them.

Let me cover some facts about the mess, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I have five examples. The first is Film Tax Rebate. When foreign companies come to Fiji, they are entitled to rebates. So, a portion of the money they spend in our country is refunded to them. This happens around the world, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but for some reason, the rebate levels in Fiji were excessive. Even film companies were telling the Government that it was too generous. As a result, the FijiFirst government has handed us an outstanding bill of \$178 million owing to these companies. So, for the next four years to five years, we will be paying \$40 million a year to make good on this colossal muck-up. Be assured, Sir, we will honor this debt.

The worst fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that the payouts were never recorded in the budget of the country. I will say that again, Sir, the payouts from the rebates were never ever recorded in the budget in the country. So, one can argue that the former Minister for Economy was misleading Parliament on this matter. I will be lodging a complaint to the Office of the Attorney-General for an investigation.

The second is that the *Walesi* investigation is ongoing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but again, it is a mess. We have asked for some additional resources to complete the investigation and be assured, Sir, we will leave no stone unturned. If we account for this year's budgetary allocation of \$8 million, we would have spent \$136 million on *Walesi*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how does one government and Cabinet first allow money to be spent without any feasibility study done? The honourable Assistant Minister of Finance talked about feasibility studies and business cases and worst still, the true cost of *Walesi* was never ever fully disclosed in this Parliament, and that is a shame. What a mess, Mr. Speaker, Sir!

The third is the USP dues. Much has been said about the refusal by the former Attorney-General to pay the dues of USP. The quality of education for our children, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was hijacked by one individual and honourable Members on the other side were scared to tell him – the height of arrogance.

As a result, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we owed \$80 million, before the Coalition took over, and this has now been repaid. Sir, \$20 million is being provided in the current Budget.

The fourth is FRA amounts unpaid. The FijiFirst government fully spent the FRA budget within six months before we took over.

HON. P.K. BALA.- So!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mismanagement, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So, there is \$40 million set aside in this Budget to pay for liabilities that they incurred.

Finally, the fifth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which is the crime of the century, is the backdating of Capital Gains Tax to benefit or exempt certain individuals. Totally unacceptable, Sir! I was particularly vocal about this in the campaign. The amount of revenue lost was \$70 million, according to the honourable Minister of Finance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on these five examples alone...

HON. P.K. BALA.- What about Grace Road?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- ...the FijiFirst government has handed a gaping hole of \$506 million to the people of Fiji and the Peoples Coalition Government, more than half a billion dollars.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Half a billion.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- No wonder, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had to increase taxes because of this hole, and they are wondering why we are increasing taxes. It was done because of the mismanagement of the FijiFirst government.

Rest assured, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I guarantee you that this half a billion will grow and by the time we reach the end of the year, there will be a bigger number to report in this Chamber.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is like we are beginning a 100-metre race, at least, 50 metres behind the starting line. That is the impact of what they have done to this country.

Do not be despaired, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us not despair. The good news is, that there is a new leadership in Fiji which believes that if we work together as one people under God - the people of Fiji can overcome our current challenges. Therefore, the 2023-2024 National Budget is the first step in building the new Fiji.

We are under no illusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the road ahead will be hard, but together as one people, we can build the new Fiji. Allow me to talk about the economic setting, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I am very optimistic about the current trajectory of the Fijian economy. It is projected to grow at 8 percent this year, 3.8 percent in 2024 and 3 percent in 2025.

The economic indicators are in the right direction, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Liquidity is strong, lending rates remain at historic lows and the private sector has been showing continuous growth in terms of credit and optimism is up. For sure, Sir, there are headwinds building globally but as we know, best opportunities arise from challenges and adversity.

Most importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are wondering about where the economic growth will come from. The investment pipeline - foreign and domestic, in Fiji right now is \$4.25 billion, and growing. This represents 179 active projects in Fiji from the private sector alone, and this

includes major public sector investments that are being planned in Fiji. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are positioned for some very good times in our country.

I would like to touch on our Ministry allocation and priorities, Mr. Speaker and perhaps, answer some of the questions around how we are going to grow the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Trade, Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications was actually identified as a new portfolio in the 2023-2024 Budget. The Ministry is very thankful with its total allocation of \$116.5 million, which consists of:

- \$98.9 million in operating expenditure;
- \$6.3 million in capital expenditure; and
- \$11.3 in VAT.

Some of the core allocations, Mr. Speaker, Sir are:

- 1) \$45 million for the outstanding rebates and new rebates. Just imagine, if that \$40 million could be used for something else in Fiji. Perhaps, we are now paying for other people's stupidity.
- 2) \$9 million on the ease of doing business.
- 3) \$8 million for Walesi and I think I had addressed the honourable Bia here, the problem is not Walesi but the problem is how they set up Walesi, without understanding how we are going to recover the money once we spent the money on Walesi. They have no idea, so that is the job of this investigation - to find out how we can sustainably keep Walesi, or if we have to exit, to exit sustainably. That is the key.
- 4) \$4.4 million for Trade Commissions in Australia, New Zealand, North America and China.
- 5) \$2.8 million for Investment Fiji.
- 6) \$2.6 million in grants for SMEs and Co-operatives. I will come back to that figure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but it is an increase of about 80 percent (I think).
- 7) \$2.5 million to support the ICT/BPO sector;
- 8) \$1.4 million to purchase weights for one of our Departments – National Trade Measurement and Standards.
- 9) \$800,000 for Film Fiji.
- 10) \$500,000 for Business Assistance.

One of the important things to note, and I think you will hear it from all the Ministers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that when we entered our Ministries, they were severely under-resourced. So, part of this Budget is to actually address the under-resourcing.

These allocations from our Ministry underpin five priority areas in the Ministry that we are going to focus on:

- 1) Genuine economic diversity;
- 2) Driving Fiji as a regional hub;
- 3) Driving a fully digital economy;
- 4) Connecting the unconnected; and
- 5) Improving regulatory and governance frameworks.

Allow me to elaborate very briefly, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The Ministry will be collaborating with all Government Ministries and agencies - Investment Fiji, our Trade Commissioners, High Commissioners, Bilateral and Multilateral partners, the private

sector and NGOs, which was a bad word on the other side of the House, to continue to expand and diversify the economy.

There is an intense focus on renewable energy, green and blue solutions such as recycling, commercial agriculture and aquaculture with strategic and foreign local partners, manufacturing in renewable spaces and niche products, the fast-growing BPO sector, education and ICT/Data Warehousing opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation talked about tourism and what growth is happening there.

For the film industry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they almost destroyed the film industry because of this rebate issue. We, on this side of Parliament, will not allow that to happen.

In the MSME sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I put it under diversification because it is a very important part of what we are wanting to do. It is a major job creator and is about 19 percent of GDP. It has significant potential. With the current funding, we will assist MSMEs to link up to formal markets, start up, or scale up their businesses.

I would like to acknowledge Rise Beyond the Reef with Mr. Semi Lotawa, who just recently through our assistance, has got on this product on Amazon, which means that our ladies will now be able to actually market their goods internationally. What an exciting development - diversification in practical terms.

Assisting farmers under the Smallholder Farming Models, we plan to do this and there is already examples in Fiji on how it is done. British American Tobacco (BAT), Goodman Fielder and Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) are good examples of using Smallholder Models.

One step further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we would like to incorporate co-operatives into these models, such as they do in Fonterra in the Dairy Industry in New Zealand and the Espree Model for Kiwi Fruit in New Zealand as well. So, watch this space, it is happening.

Targetting assistance to tourism projects is very important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I would like to acknowledge Mr. Josefa Bau from the Takalana Beach Resort in Nataleira for dolphin watching.

With these allocations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are developing an ecosystem to support MSMEs and co-operatives by collaborating with the private sector and the banks, such as the Fiji Development Bank (FDB), Bank of South Pacific (BSP) and the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF).

In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we look at the support to MSMEs across the Ministries, the MSME funding envelope is about \$30 million, excluding the private sector. Our plan is to launch, at least, one new industry in our country every year, and reboot existing export opportunities.

New emerging industries, such as medicinal cannabis, Mr. Speaker, Sir, look promising. Nutraceuticals such as kava tablets and juices, cosmetics, the cocoa industry, ginger, turmeric, mahogany and noni commonly known as *kura*, are industries that will be of focus.

Trade is the lifeblood of our economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We will focus on traditional, bilateral and multilateral trade opportunities that make sense to Fiji. As part of this commitment, we are prioritising the conclusion of negotiations on the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) for Prosperity. This agreement represents immense opportunities for our region to expand our trade horizons beyond our immediate region.

Of course, there is import replacement. I am in discussion with some manufacturers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we will, hopefully, be making some announcements soon on genuine import substitution in Fiji. We will continue to support their efforts.

Driving Fiji as a regional hub, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We will continue to drive Fiji as a regional hub. Discussions about a second submarine cable into Fiji is progressing positively, the expanding reach of our national carrier (Fiji Airways), and the strategic position of our ports of entries in Suva and Lautoka makes Fiji well positioned. But most importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's intent is that all countries in our region benefit because of this regional hub agenda. We all rise together.

On driving a fully digital economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will endeavour to unlock our potential in terms of digitalisation, and we will launch a National Digital Strategy soon. The second cable, Sir, if it happens, is a game changer for our country.

The Ministry is collaborating also with our Telco operators on a plan to implement a 5G network in Fiji. It will require some policy and regulatory adjustments.

Progress towards making businesses and processes more efficient under the "Business Fiji Now Initiative" or Ease of Doing Business is underway and ultimately in the first phase, we plan to automate 16 processes across 25 agencies in about 18 months.

Another thing that we are looking at, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the digitalisation of our trade. Working with United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), we will endeavour to establish a National Single Window which, if happens, becomes a one stop shop and will simplify and streamline trade procedures.

On connecting the unconnected, Mr. Speaker, Sir, very briefly, we plan to actually connect the remaining 5 percent over the next 24 to 48 months using the Universal Service Trust Fund, working in close collaboration with our partners. We have also launched an initiative called the Smart Islands Initiative with the United Nations, and we are focusing on Rotuma.

In terms of improving regulatory and governance framework, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are undertaking some legislation reviews - the Real Estate Agents Act 2006, National and Trade Measurement Act 1989, Trade Standards and Quality Control Act 1992, a possible MSME Bill to support MSMEs, and a review of the Co-Operative Act 1996.

Cybersecurity is also a major priority in our Ministry and this framework is being strengthened by the introduction of the National Crisis Emergency Response Team (CERT) to deal with emerging threats.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are looking at Data Protection Laws and this will be important as we try and continue to push for the BPO industry and also protect the flow of transborder personal data.

As I conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you may recall that in my Maiden Speech, I invited all of us to seek the wisdom of King Solomon, and what I am about to say comes from that well pool of goodwill.

In the last few weeks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen the release of a 50 page dossier of garbage, attempting to destabilise our beloved country, which was saddening. What saddened me more was the silence and lack of condemnation on the other side of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this type of thinking has no place in the new Fiji, and I condemn whoever wrote that nonsense in no uncertain terms. I hope Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the law catches up with him or her. I hope my colleagues on this side of Parliament will do the same and condemn this document publicly and on record.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent suspension of the FijiFirst Party revealed all the flaws in our electoral system created, obviously, by the former Attorney-General for self-preservation. Even the honourable Leader of the Opposition in the Business Committee which I attended on behalf of the honourable Prime Minister, admitted that the laws did not make sense.

HON. P.K. BALA.- No, you are telling lies.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I repeat the challenge I issued in the spirit of goodwill to the Business Committee in this august Chamber - let us work together to change all the unjust laws set up in the last 16 years and let us, once and for all, set Fiji on a new path for the new Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly support the 2023-2024 National Budget, and look forward to working with all honourable Members in this august Parliament and the people of Fiji, as we take the first step in building the new Fiji. May God bless Fiji, may God bless us all.

MR. SPEAKER.- I intend to adjourn Parliament for afternoon tea. When we resume, I will call upon the honourable Sanjay Kirpal to make his contribution. The Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.28 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 5.02 p.m.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I start, I would like to ask the honourable Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications on the investigation into breaking the law, is there also supposed to be an investigation if you trash the Constitution?

MR. SPEAKER.- Are you asking me or ...

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Honourable Prime Minister?

MR. SPEAKER.- No, no, honourable Kirpal...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I am not a lawyer.

MR. SPEAKER.- ... you should be directing your question to the Chair rather than straight across to the honourable Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications. You have been in Parliament for quite some time.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- The honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; greetings and a very good afternoon to you all who are present here today, at home, and those listening to other mediums.

On Friday, 30th June, 2023 at 10.00 a.m., the honourable Minister of Finance spoke for about two hours about our country's future.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Less than two hours.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Fijians listened attentively in the hope that the promised cost of living relief would be delivered, but it was not and thousands of Fijians have every right to be disappointed with this Government. Sometimes, the most important thing about a Budget speech is not what the Minister of Finance says, but it is what he does not say and tries to keep hidden in the Budget papers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are few things that the honourable Minister of Finance failed to mention which are not only important to all Fijians but are very essential and that is education assistance - the removal of Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (TELS) being replaced with the Fijian Scholarship. You do not have to be a rocket scientist to figure that out, the TELS loan has not been forgiven but the students have to serve the bond to get themselves free. In this bond system until a student is free from this completely, he or she cannot progress further in his or her studies.

I would like to ask the honourable Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, where is your free tertiary education promise which you were singing before the Elections? There is no write-off in the student loans since they are all under bond. This is a great deceit for the students in Fiji. Where is your SODELPA Party's promise?

On the sugarcane price, when in Opposition, the honourable Minister of Finance had boasted that when his Party will be in Government, they will give farmers \$100 per tonne guaranteed price. So, I am asking now, where is your promise? Nothing was mentioned about this price of sugarcane in the Budget.

It is very sad that poor farmers fell for that and eventually voted you in Parliament. Each and every time, poor farmers are being used as political football for political games and that is your old

trick. I was taught this long time ago and I quote: “If farmers are rich, so is the nation.”

It was simply under FijiFirst government that farmers were given bulk of incentives. What has happened now? Farmers have no faith in this three-legged stool Government who has failed to give our beloved farmers further incentives.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 15 percent VAT, this will have a huge impact on poor and low income earners as they cannot survive on only 22 zero-rated VAT items. The rich will get richer and the poor will get poorer. It is sad to see that their situation will not improve further as they might have anticipated from this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on corporate tax, this has been increased to 25 percent on all levels. This will have a huge impact on small and medium enterprise businesses, as some businesses may close down and I am being told that some are already in the process of closing down. When increasing the corporate tax, there should have been some brackets so that smaller businesses could have survived and thrive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this 2023-2024 Budget, the Coalition Government has decreased the capital expenditure and increased the operating expenditure, which simply means that the Government wants its Ministers to have luxurious term in office rather than cutting on operating expenditure, to have more funds on capital expenditure where our Fijian people can benefit.

During the FijiFirst’s term, if you look at the percentage ratio, capital expense has been more than 30 percent, while this three-legged stool Government has decreased the capital expenditure and allowed the operational expenditure to increase. The reason may be simple - more overseas trips to the Ministers, Assistant Ministers and their staff.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Housing is allocated with \$25.7 million, compared to the 2022-2023 Budget where it was \$30.3 million. In 2018, the NFP promised that they will invest \$200 million a year or \$800 million for four years in housing, so what happened now? According to the honourable Minister of Finance, I quote from what he said: “The Government has completely failed on housing.”

Even if it was \$100 million, people could have had some relief of what he said but it was a blatant lie to our people to no avail. Saying something for a personal gain or taking advantage of the poor is not a good quality of a leader when actually what they do in reality is totally the opposite of that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government have always said all along that they will improve the health sector and solve all health-related issues but yet, they are full of fake promises and lies. For example, it will not take much time to figure out that they have reallocated the FijiFirst budgetary allocation of \$1.8 million to the Savusavu Hospital for maintenance and refurbishment at the cost of only \$250,000. It seems that this Government is full of false promises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has been observed that the service at the Titles Office is very inconvenient to the general public, as well as to the daily user companies. Previously, within a day, they used to get title copy searches done but now it takes two to three days. I ask, where is service efficiency, honourable Minister for Justice?

The delay really affects the running of the company which deals with Title searches for

valuation, transfers, caveats, and the list goes on. Mainly, replacing people will not do any good but it will make things from bad to worse.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Ministry of Lands, it is very difficult to get the sales data, even though Valuers and other financial institutions pay for the service. It is almost seven months now that companies are facing problems to get the real market value of properties around Fiji. Service inefficiency will have a huge impact to Government and financial institutions in generating revenue and lending loans respectively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another important matter is the processing time for transfer of concern which takes longer than the normal time, hence the buyers get frustrated, and the deal gets cancelled, or at times, the concerned time expires and re-application has to be made with additional fees and charges and the same applies to the mortgage concerned. With this increase in the budget, the honourable Minister should take some proactive measures to ease the problem in the Ministry of Lands, which the poor lessees go through.

Furthermore, the arrears of rents are in millions of dollars and the Government loses out a lot in revenue, hence some measures should be in place to get the arrears paid. However, I am thankful to the honourable Minister of Finance for the increase in the Ministry of Lands' budget and also keeping the Land Bank which was initiated by the Bainimarama-led Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I was in West last week, it was an eyesore to see the roads in pathetic condition. There is no proper maintenance of roads but only small patch-up by this Government. I met some rural residents, and they told me that they are neglected by this Government, as before they use their vehicles for transporting goods and traveling, but now with this Government they are going back to the 17th century and they may be using horses.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Giving a huge budget to the Fiji Roads Authority does not make sense if you cannot fix the roads, instead, use that money. If the Government complaint waiting for this budget, then where is your mini budget, honourable Minister of Finance?

The poor road condition is one of the major contributing factors of road accidents and higher death numbers compared to previous years. Mr. Speaker, Sir, so far, the current Government has just enjoyed opening the roads and bridges which were the Bainimarama-led Government initiatives, and this was also mentioned by the honourable Leader of the Opposition this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is in power for almost seven months, but nothing fruitful for the ordinary Fijians have materialised. The only thing that the Government does is to disregard the Constitution, the supreme law of the nation.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Look in the mirror.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- One of the failures to comply with the Constitution is that two Members of Parliament who are representatives of the FijiFirst Party are not sworn in just because they deliberately delayed the Constitutional Officers Commission meeting. The reason is best known to the Coalition partners. Our honourable Leader of the Opposition has given a hint this morning on the reasons why this has not been done. It simply deprives the people's voice in Parliament and is a direct insult to our Constitution. Instead of owning up to the mistakes, the honourable Prime Minister blamed the honourable Leader of the Opposition, which is very unfair and uncalled for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, instead of outlining their agenda and plans to address the development needs of this country and governing within the framework of the Constitution, they are trying to amend the Constitution and give executive powers to the Great Council of Chiefs which is unconstitutional.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Republic of Fiji Military Forces is there to safeguard and protect the Constitution and the well-being of every Fijian in this land. I am proud that the establishment is leading best to our expectation.

Furthermore, the crime rate has increased significantly. It is an everyday news that some crime is committed somewhere. Government should be more concerned about this rather than trying to amend the Constitution. Why is the honourable Minister for Home Affairs quiet now?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- No one is changing the Constitution.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Investor confidence is zero since the day the Coalition Government came into power. First, they tried to investigate the Grace Road but slowly, it faded. It was just to get the public attention. What is happening now? Nothing is coming. It was just to discredit the previous Government and humiliate Grace Road, or someone is scratching someone's back.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is good to see that the honourable Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation is praising Fiji Airways, as previously, he used to criticise our airline and was praising Qantas. At least, but not leased. Now, the honourable Minister has realised how important it is to keep our national carrier...

(Hon. V.R. Gavoka interjects)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Well, you were always criticising when we bought two

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- ... which is the critical link for our tourism industry. It is not only generating revenue directly, but also indirectly through visitor spending. He should thank the FijiFirst government for protecting the Airline during the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, looking at the overall Budget, it is just a copy and paste Budget from the 2022-2023 FijiFirst Budget. However, in this Budget there is nothing for the poor and no new incentives for the under privileged. Absolutely nothing new for farmers and it will make life difficult for the poor due to various VAT components.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me this opportunity, and I do not support this Budget. May God bless Fiji.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Members and honourable Members of Parliament; *ni sa bula vinaka saka, aur sab ko mera pranam*.

I speak today in support of, and also in appreciation of, the Coalition Government's Budget for the financial year 2023-2024. I believe it is a Budget that indicates that the Government is listening to the needs of the people and trying to meet them, despite the mounting debt burden that Government faces.

I thank the Government for recognising the need for an increase in social protection allowances for the most vulnerable, with an allocation of \$200.2 million overall. This is by far the biggest ever allocation for the Ministry, especially for the Social Pension Scheme.

The Government has allocated an estimated amount of \$169.8 million, 84 percent of the Ministry's total budget, for the new financial year towards social protection programmes to try to ensure that more than 97,000 beneficiaries on our various support schemes have an increase in their allowances.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may repeat that in Hindi, *humari sarkar ne is budget mein social welfare allowance mein vridhi lai hai*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection will discuss in depth the overall impact of the new budget and the Ministry's plan for the new financial year. But I want to focus on a few things in the Department of Social Welfare where we are making changes, and that may answer honourable Bala's question.

We have a new budgetary allocation for poverty graduation. This is because we recognise two particular weaknesses in our current systems. The first weakness is that we do not have active plans to move our current beneficiaries out of poverty. The second weakness is, we do not have the means to identify when many of our beneficiaries have ceased to need our help, often through a change in family or other circumstances. At that point, we should be in a position to reduce assistance to them or re-direct our limited resources to helping others in need.

It is important to remember that the Department does not currently support everyone in need. We have many applications for assistance which are still unmet due to lack of funds. So, we must be able to use our money as wisely as possible, and I will come back to that in a moment.

Most important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the need for us to help our people move off schemes, such as the Family Assistance Scheme, to improved incomes through economic empowerment, skills development and pathways for employment. These are matters I am passionate about. Sometimes, it is just a matter of making the right connections.

One of our small success stories is being able to connect a major hotel group to a non-government organisation with many unemployed women on its records. At a time when the hotel industry is desperate to replace staff because of losses overseas, we were able to help with recruitment of hundreds of trainees into this hotel group's training programme, simply using smarter and more relevant connections. There are situations where single mums are willing to go and work and all they need is childcare support, for example, so it is just about thinking. Think about it.

Many job vacancies are advertised in newspapers, but the poor and the unemployed are not reading newspapers, whether in print or online. Their time and limited money is directed to more urgent things. But there are NGOs who can help bring them together with potential employers, because they read the newspapers and they know where to find the people.

We have to find ways to make better connections, including with NGOs, who are often better connected to the poor than some of us in Government. This is a matter I know from personal experience, and this is why building relationships with NGO partners remains a critical need across all sectors of Government.

The Government recognises the importance of the Civil Society Sector, and I am thankful for the allocation of grants to organisations that works towards our deliverables. In this Budget, \$200,000 is a new allocation to community-based organisations that encourage women's social and economic empowerment programmes.

I have seen first-hand during the global COVID pandemic when the past Government was

out of its depth in dealing with the crisis and took its time to plan assistance, it was the community-based organisations that mobilized basic needs.

Mr. Speaker, sometimes Government systems are inflexible and bureaucratic, and lack the human element. Let me talk about another bureaucratic failure which we have addressed.

Previously, girls from Fiji's 11 Orphanages had to leave when they turned 18 years old. This was a rule which applied, regardless of their personal circumstances, abilities or specific needs. There was a reason these girls were in Orphanages, Mr. Speaker, they had no family support. Their legal status may have changed when they turned 18, but they were not better able to fend for themselves on their 18th birthday than they were the day before.

This year, we have retained all those coming of age under State Care and are enrolling them in skills programmes with economic pathways. This is preparing them to enter either the job market or to use their skills to become entrepreneurs.

This is a challenge for us. Each one of these young women is a human being, like all of us, with different hopes, ambitions, strengths and weaknesses. They do not necessarily respond in the same way to a training programme, but it is an improvement on the gap that we had before.

Mr. Speaker, this is an example of where, as a Ministry, we need to be less rule-bound and more focussed on the people we serve. It only takes a little bit of thinking and recognition that people are not numbers. We can do better.

Mr. Speaker, the Social Welfare Department is committed to delivering an integrated social protection system with improved targeting, effectiveness, coverage and impact on poverty reduction. We cannot do this without good information. At the moment, our information on our welfare recipients is poor, spread over multiple databases, which we cannot integrate and analyse. So, we are unable to understand how and where we can be more effective.

We are working with the Australian Government assistance to change this. We have a total of \$3 million in budgetary allocation to completely overhaul our management information system, so that we can become more effective in targeting those who need help, but also identifying those in our system who can now be phased out of help.

Mr. Speaker, in March this year, when I tried to talk publicly about these challenges, I was attacked by a senior politician, who accused me of trying to undermine the rights of the poor people. And now that the Ministry's budget has been substantially increased, the same politician is now saying that welfare payments are handouts and erode the dignity of those receiving it.

Mr. Speaker, I accept that in the Government, we must be open to criticism of our mistakes and scrutiny of what we do. But those who criticise us must do more than just talk.

We are trying to be more open and transparent about how we work and the challenges we face. Welfare recipients are not a political plaything, Mr. Speaker. People who want to criticise should take the time to find out the problems and offer solutions, and I will certainly talk to anyone with a genuine interest in helping us.

Mr. Speaker Sir, our Ministry will also continue to work with development partners on new initiatives and programmes in strengthening the social protection sector. Some of these will include:

- An adaptive social protection strategy to better respond to recovery from disasters and

- in mitigating the impacts of climate change.
- Pilot parametric insurance with selected social assistance beneficiaries as a way to provide faster and more flexible funds to those affected by disasters.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I had earlier told this Parliament that the State Homes, the places where we accommodate our young people and our elderly, are in poor condition because of insufficient budgetary allocations for maintenance. Pearly Gates Home in Suva has been allocated \$100,000 for maintenance, infrastructure, as well as administration cost.

The Ministry has also been allocated more than \$700,000 towards the refurbishment of the former Ba Mission Hospital complex. The intent is to transfer the operations of the Golden Age Home in Lautoka, to allow the scoping works for the upgrade of the Golden Age Home.

Mr. Speaker, this property has been neglected for years and is now under attack from termites. The safety of the residents is compromised, and we have run out of options. We have to do the best we can, and that is why I am grateful that we have a specific allocation of \$250,000 for these scoping works.

Mr. Speaker, having worked with rural communities for the past 25 years, I have seen how committed and crucial our community leaders are for outreach programmes, disaster relief and ensuring that voices of our communities are heard in decision-making, and I applaud the increase in the allowances of *Turaga ni Koro*, Advisory Councillors, *Mata ni Tikina* and *Turaga ni Yavusa*, to enable them to function better.

I cannot help but appreciate the allocation for our rural roads in the Ministry of Health. Visiting rural communities, we are constantly bombarded with narratives for the urgent need for improvement in rural infrastructure, and our health services.

During the pandemic while in the civil society sector, I was directly involved in making medication and equipment available to help the Ministry of Health cope with the crisis. With this budget, I for one am glad that the Ministry of Health will be better equipped to serve those in need.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I want to touch briefly on the plight of the people suffering from the devastating effects of Asian Subterranean termite infestation. This is another issue that for years, the previous Government simply ignored.

Many people, particularly in the West have seen their homes destroyed by termites. No politician from the previous Government took the time to even visit them or hear them out. The problem was left to the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF) to manage within its existing budget.

Earlier this year, together with the Assistant Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, we met with stakeholders in Lautoka which still remains the hotspot. None of the affected homeowners was aware of any remediation plan from BAF or any other government body. The City Council has no solution.

Termites have severely affected businesses, homes, the tourism industry and Government infrastructure. We have discovered that there has been no effort to coordinate or collate data from business, tourism, municipalities or rural housing to indicate the extent of the problem and economic cost of termite infestation that has been fast spreading to other parts of the Western, as well as now the Northern Division. We have had a few meetings with various stakeholders and have developed a taskforce to look into this mammoth problem.

People have been crying out to be heard for the past 10 years on this but for the first time, the Coalition Government has taken the time to listen and there is an allocation of \$3 million to begin a support programme to those affected.

If I may repeat that in Hindi, Mr. Speaker, Sir, *dus saal se humari jan samudaye termite ke vishe me awaaz utha rahi hai par pahli baar Coalition sarkaar ne unki sunwayee ki hai aur sahyog ke liye \$3 million ka allocation kya hai.*

Mr. Speaker, I want to finish my contribution on a subject that is important and very dear to my heart and, that is, the subject of national unity and reconciliation.

The subject of our debate this week is, of course, the Budget. I agree with the honourable Minister of Finance when he reminded us that in economics, “everything is connected to everything else”. So, it is in nation-building. We cannot have a strong nation without a strong economy and sound economic policy, but we also need resources and support for the most fundamental things that are important to all of us - care of our people, peace, a sense of belonging, a sense of one Fiji. These things strengthen us and build confidence. A confident forward-looking country will become economically stronger and with that, we hope better able to care for those who are left behind.

Mr. Speaker, for 16 years, we had a Government that believed that some kind of national unity could be created by treating us as though we were all the same, denying our ethnic and cultural identities, treating our differences as sources of weakness, not strength. We were not even allowed to know our own nation’s ethnic composition, despite the urgent need for such information in policymaking for health, education and so many other things. These actions did not bring us together. They tore us apart. They fed mistrust, division and suspicion among our different communities and now, we have urgent work to do to fix it.

Mr. Speaker, in our first six months in Government, we have made a start. We commemorated Girit Day and Ratu Sukuna Day with national holidays and consequential events. The return of the Great Council of Chiefs is a recognition of the rights of our indigenous people, even as that important body itself goes through a process of self-review. The Terms of Reference of that review recognises the Council of Chiefs’ responsibilities towards other communities in Fiji. These things may all seem merely symbolic, but they are consequential, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We witnessed the Methodist Church Leader reconciliation ceremony in which all Churches and faith groups participated; a commitment was made that we will celebrate all of us in our full diversity as we build our new nation. These are signs of greater things ahead - a new Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a Fiji where every citizen has a role to play in nation building.

I attended the recent ‘Fiji Times at 150’ book launch. This book reminds us of the contributions of all communities – the Europeans, the early Chinese settlers from the sandalwood trade who found home in island villages, the Melanesian community who were brought before my ancestors as part of the slave trade have contributed to our nation, just as have Kioans, Rabi Islanders and Rotumans and everyone who calls Fiji their home.

Much of our history is not taught, often each of our people feel isolated and alone in their suffering. And when history is told, it is done in isolation, of one people at a time. But where is the history of how we all developed together? How is it that we are not learning about it?

Our President, His Excellency, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, has given us a clear direction to include Fiji’s collective history in our education system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when it comes to national unity and nation building, there is still much to do, and I believe our Government has begun well. This Budget has something for all our people, each one of us in our diversity to help us progress as a people, as communities and as one nation. I would like to thank the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, for crafting this amazing Budget that is people-centered, and I fully support and commend the Budget for the Financial Year 2023-2024 for a new Fiji. *Vinaka vakalevu* and God bless Fiji.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, economic growth hinges on political stability and respect for the rule of law. It hinges on the confidence of the people that live in our country and how they perceive their political and social activities that is happening around them.

The political and social ground must be stabilized to create confidence in people who own or run businesses that are established or companies looking around to establish a base for their businesses. This will not only give security but allow business to grow and give returns to their owners and shareholders.

It is the confidence to establish and operate in Fiji whether it is a small, medium or large business which will provide snowball effect of creating employment within but also provide grounds to other supporting industries and businesses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the honourable Minister of Finance stated in his speech, and I quote from Page 1014 of the *Daily Hansard* on Friday, 30th June, 2023:

“Everyone expects me today to talk about economics. Let me remind everyone of the old maxim, well understood by good scientists, good environmentalists, and good economists that everything is connected to everything else.”

Well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can advise the learned Professor and honourable Minister of Finance that the conditions we are experiencing is not conducive to stable and good economic growth. He can lecture us on the good economic plans that he has mastered over the years, but he needs to ask the honourable Prime Minister and his Cabinet colleagues, including the Assistant Ministers, to work towards providing a conducive ground to nurture confidence at all levels of our society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government must be seen to establish the independence of the three separate arms of governing and keep them separated at arm's length.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Look in the mirror.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- What we have witnessed in the last six months is not right and will haunt Fiji in the future. I will not go into the detail but it is a phenomenon that is well known in Fiji and neighbouring countries, and I am sure that my colleagues will cover this in detail.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not profess to be an expert on finance, economy or budget, like the honourable Minister of Finance. As a layman, all I can see is we are heading downhill on a slippery slope and unless the honourable Prime Minister and the Coalition Government carries drastic corrective actions, Fijians will face the consequences of a financial doom in the medium to long term. Unintended consequences will kick in as we move forward under these uncertain circumstances.

The Budget estimate is \$4.3 billion, but Budget is heading to a big spending and big deficit. Borrowing will be around \$1.28 billion, operation estimated at 75 percent, capital at only 25 percent. This rate of spending needs to be monitored as it could run out of control very fast. We have gone

busted on the \$10 million debt and I estimate the debt will be in the vicinity of \$11 billion in the very near future.

The rise of VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent will create a rise in the cost of living and food. Transport cost will also soon rise, and everything will be less affordable to our people. The economy will slow down, as we are already at a high inflammatory environment. New prices are emerging and slow growth will take revenue out of Government.

The timing of this Budget is not right. This is a big spending Budget and with a huge deficit of \$639 million, VAT increases will slow the economy down. Debt and deficit will go higher if Government does not control spending.

What are the main features of the Budget? A well-known fact, \$3.7 billion revenue, estimated expenditure of \$4.3 billion and estimated deficit of \$639 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to arouse the interest of listeners, the honourable Minister of Finance planned the Budget layout and calculated that the best way to defend is to attack. Unfortunately, the honourable Minister decided to attack the FijiFirst Government's performance, and this was covered in the first 25 pages of his 91 page speech, basically continuing his election campaign gimmicks.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- \$500 million debt.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- The 'Biman Budget' launched its delivery to appease everyone. At the end, it disappointed all, except him and his cronies, who supposedly were given the task to soften the impact of tax increases. What a fuss!

The Budget is inflated by putting out the requisition in every Budget Estimate. I wish to draw your attention to line nine and ten in every Head of the Ministries' budget.

What are the facts of Fiji's economy? Fiji's economy is basically tourism based. We need to continue to support tourism but look for other growth areas. We need to diversify; we need to look at resource-based economic development. We need to support manufacturing and construction. We need to encourage Business Process Outsourcing and Information Technology Outsourcing.

I reviewed the resource-based Ministries to see funding that will innovate them and encourage growth. Unfortunately, the Budget does not reflect any new projects to improve activities in agriculture, fisheries and forestry, including lands and mineral resources.

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

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I will ask for your opinion, honourable Kamikamica, if I need to.

On the general outlook, the Budget is pro-rich and attacks the poor and the marginalised. It will make the low and medium bracket income earners struggle and provides little or no way out. It does not innovate to provide incentives for investment and provide new work for unemployed people, graduating out of university and other training institutions.

With increase retirement age to 60 years, it will create less employment opportunities to our younger population, as people over 50 years will benefit from obtaining their FNPF savings while they turn 55, but they will still hold on to their jobs until 60 years. There is no current contract term of employment, they just turn up daily and get paid. It has nothing for our young people to look of

to in terms of prospects.

The increase in VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent will affect low and medium income earners more than rich people in our society. Zero-rated VAT which will assist the rich people too is equally for low and middle wage earners, who will suffer more due to increase in the 15 percent VAT increase. No investment in the infrastructure will lead to less work available in the companies that employ people in the construction industry and other supporting companies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me begin by exploring and explaining my interpretation of the 2023-2024 Budget. To get a better understanding of this, we need to examine the last years of what transpired in the last two terms of Parliament prior to the formation of the Coalition Government. This Budget, in its entirety, is all about honourable Professor Prasad, his thoughts and attitude for the last eight years.

The introduction of the Budget and the excuses reflect the culmination of attitude and arrogance that he had displayed in this Parliament over the last two terms. I understand the difficulties that he is facing, trying to balance a Budget to satisfy the three Parties in the Coalition Government. I also know that he must satisfy all the General Election promises made by the three Parties over six months ago, and also the promise made by the Coalition Government to deliver in its first 100 days which is impossible but promised anyway. This is the level of blaming and trying to camouflage this Budget to hoodwink the people of Fiji, especially the poor and marginalised people of this country.

Honourable Minister of Finance, the great Abraham Lincoln said, I quote:

“You can fool some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.”

Your lies and concoction will haunt you in the next few months and certainly before the next Budget.

This Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will destroy this country and will weaken the medium class spending power and further improvise the low-income earners and the poor people of our beloved Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in reviewing the Budget Estimates, it is evident that the main aim of this Budget is to increase revenue and increasing revenue will increase VAT and increase taxes. Ultimately, this is the worst action to take now, especially when the world over is trying to grapple with economic distress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has already made its mind that it will need more money to satisfy all its promises. The honourable Prime Minister then gave the honourable Minister of Finance a guideline to collect and cover the expected inflated Budget. This has forced the increase in VAT to 15 percent.

The items in zero-VAT list have not changed from what was brought up by the FijiFirst Government, but with a single exception of adding prescribed medication, which is already part of the Free Medicine Scheme. This is just the continuation or the initiative of the FijiFirst government to assist Fijians financially.

During the Budget announcement, I was thinking that maybe the honourable Minister of Finance was presenting the Budget on behalf of the previous FijiFirst government with all its initiatives incorporated, as most of the initiatives were brought in by FijiFirst government to cater

for the needs of all Fijians. It seems that the honourable Minister has taken a likening of the Budget policies of the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to protect the tourism industry, as it is the mainstay of the economy and a major income earner for Fiji. What the Government has done in this Budget will basically kill tourism, divert tourists to other destinations around the Pacific and Asia by increasing VAT, increasing in the Airport Tax from \$100 to \$125 and \$140 from January 2024.

Tourism has undergone a boom period after the Airport Tax was reduced from \$200 to \$100 by the FijiFirst government to attract tourists to Fiji. Over-dependence on tourism is not good but we need to assist this sector as it provides the major fuel for the economic engine of our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me examine four the resource-based Ministries - the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry and the Mineral Resources Department, to see if allocation had reflected the importance of developing these important sectors. While there are increases in the resource-based sectors, the funding in Ministries as highlighted above is not directed to areas that will matter.

In the Ministry of Agriculture, an increase is noted on all major budgeted items, but are all under requisition. Forestry should have shown funds that will be deployed to improve the mahogany sector and thus, lead to the development of commercial entities, similar to the Pacific Green Coconut Furniture Company. The Ministry of Fisheries should be allocated more funds for the start-up of aquaculture farm for brackishwater, caged farming of fish in our coastal areas, to cushion the effect of climate change and overfishing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Budget of 2023-2024 is geared towards the rich people of Fiji. It has completely ignored the middle and low income earners, and our marginalised. The rich will get richer and the poor will get poorer. It has ignored the young people of this country, who are looking around for work opportunities to start a business and earn a decent, respectable and affordable living.

The increase in VAT will have a huge ripple effect on the economy of Fiji. The cost of investing in Fiji will be too expensive and investors will look elsewhere to invest and get returns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have alluded to the tourism industry. Tourists will look elsewhere to spend their holidays and harden dollars. The increase in VAT will subsequently make holiday in Fiji very expensive, as hotels, cruise and tour operators, including suppliers and contractors will have to pass this cost to tourists as consumers.

Airline tickets to Fiji will become expensive as the Airport Tax will now be included in the cost of buying their ticket.

Investors and hotels and operators will not build extra rooms required for tourists as material for construction will become too expensive. There will be massive unemployment as construction will stop and infrastructure development grinds to a halt.

Our Fijians will need to go overseas to look for better opportunities. Only the poor and the downtrodden will be left in Fiji, as they do not have any other choice.

In summary and to conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a big spending budget with total expenditure expected to rise above 25.2 percent, at an all-time high of \$4.3 billion by 2023-2024.

The increase in VAT in an already high inflammatory environment could see consumer demands take revenue away from the Government and push that to higher level.

Additionally, inevitable inflation is to be expected after 1st August, when the new tax rate will put pressure on Government revenue, pushing a high level of debt. On the other hand, VAT increase will burden the construction and manufacturing sector.

The increased VAT, FNPF and duty on raw materials will push costs outwards and this will be passed down to consumers, who are the people of Fiji. Duty on raw materials does not raise a lot of revenue but will push costs in the industry who are the big employers, including the tourism, manufacturing and construction industry.

I do not support the Budget as it penalises the poor, while giving tax breaks for multinational corporations. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, for this opportunity.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable fellow Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; I rise to affirm the Ministry of Health and Medical Services' full support for the 2023-2024 Budget that was presented on Friday, 30th June, 2023.

I wish to commend the honourable Minister of Finance and his staff, who had worked tirelessly to deliver a visionary Budget that sets the platform for a smart and resilient recovery. This Budget is, indeed, a people's Budget.

Coming out of the woes of one in a hundred-year global pandemic, the people want better social services to help them overcome their daily struggles, and this Budget has answered the call. The Coalition Government, as promised, has prioritised the health of the people of Fiji by allocating \$453.6 million for the next financial year, compared to \$395.1 million in the current financial period.

The Ministry of Health and Medical Services is, indeed, grateful to Government for the \$58.5 million budget increase, as we have many strategies to implement in the next 12 months to improve the provision of quality healthcare services around Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the 2023-2024 Budget, the Ministry aims to achieve outcomes across key health system components that will support effectiveness and efficiency in health service delivery, including the upgrading and improvement of healthcare facilities and health services support systems; strengthening the management of our human resources for health; taking innovative approaches, including private sector engagement to mitigate the impact of staff exodus; refocusing on public health and primary healthcare to build a more resilient health system; tackling the ever-increasing burden of Non-Communicable Diseases in the country; and instilling the culture of wellness that empowers our communities to live a healthy and productive life.

On the point of capital projects, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation of \$39.6 million for capital projects under the Ministry will facilitate the planned health infrastructure improvements. Out of these, the Ministry has allocated \$1.8 million for the upgrade and maintenance of urban hospitals and institutional quarters, and this will address the much needed work in the painting and repairing of the CWM Maternity Unit exterior, construction of the walkway that connects the East and West Wing of the CWM Hospital, incinerator infrastructure, rehabilitation works for CWM Hospital, road works for the Labasa Hospital Road and undertaking the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for Labasa Hospital refurbishment worksite.

The Ministry has also allocated \$2 million for the upgrade and maintenance of Subdivisional

Hospitals, Health Centres, Nursing Stations and these will be directed towards the planned renovations at Valelevu Health Centre, Makoi Health Centre, Lami Health Centre, Wainibokasi Subdivisional Hospital and Korovou Subdivisional Hospital.

A further \$6.75 million has been allocated in the Budget towards the refurbishment of Savusavu Hospital, the upgrade of Labasa Hospital interior and the construction works for the new National Rehabilitation Centre at the Tamavua Twomey Hospital.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, other important construction preparatory works that include the construction of Qamea Health Centre, construction of doctors and nurses' quarters and refurbishment of nursing stations at Nagado in Ba; Tokaimalo in Ra; Nacula and Yaqeta in Yasawa; Kubulau in Bua; Tuvu, Naqalimare and Raiwaqa in the Nadroga/ Navosa Subdivision, has been allocated \$1.6 million.

Having well-maintained clinics and dwellings are essential for maintaining the health and morale of our healthcare workers, as they provide health services to our people.

On the point of minor works, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation of \$3 million for minor works which is a significant increase from \$1 million allocated in the current financial year, is welcomed and it is very important in ensuring that the Ministry can continue to maintain and repair its hospitals and institutions in a timely manner.

In this regard and preparation for the new financial year, the Ministry has taken plans to establish its minor work plans to be able to segregate this allocation further to all the core centres for ease of implementation and monitoring of activities. The Ministry is also taking steps to engage suitably qualified technical staff to assist in implementing the much-needed works towards changing the outlook for the more and wanted healthcare infrastructure under the Ministry.

On accessing medicine and medical products, Mr. Speaker, Sir, equitable and uninterrupted access to essential medicine is an important component of our focus on strengthening primary healthcare in Fiji. As we have stated before, we firmly believe that the primary healthcare approach provides the best platform and conduit for the Fiji health services efforts towards achieving universal health coverage for our population. These mammoth tasks rest with the Fiji Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Services (FPBS), who are responsible for procuring essential medicine, consumables, medical supplies, medical appliances, biomedical equipment, x-ray materials, laboratory reagents, infection prevention and control supplies and staff clothing for the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FPBS has invested with strategic partnership support on an online stock and inventory management tool called m-supply, which is geared towards improving our stock management system. The m-supply system provides for the ordering, procurement and inventory management of pharmaceutical and medical supplies held at the FPBS and all participating health facilities. As of today, 45 percent of our targeted healthcare facilities, departments and service areas have been connected and are now utilising m-supply system when managing their clinical stock.

This means that 94 health facilities out of 236 target sites now use either a template or PC to place their orders and monitor their inventory. These facilities and sites include dental departments, radiology departments, laboratory departments, operating theatres at the CWM Hospital, Labasa Hospital, Subdivisional Hospitals in Nadi, Sigatoka and Nabouwalu in Bua and the rural healthcare facilities in Cicia and Lakeba in the Lau Group, Kioa, Saqani, Lekutu, Kubulau and Qamea in Northern Division and Bouma in Taveuni.

The Ministry is grateful that the Government has, in the next financial year, increased the allocation for –

- medicine and consumables from \$30 million to \$33 million;
- Laboratory re-agents from \$9.4 million to \$13 million;
- Biomedical Spare Parts and Maintenance Spare Parts from \$1.5 million to \$2.5 million;
- Dental equipment from \$389,200 to \$1.21 million; and
- Allocation to purchase biomedical equipment for our hospitals has been significantly increased from \$3 million to \$12.3 million, which will allow the Ministry to replace obsolete and non-functioning biomedical equipment and establish functional service contract agreements that will ensure the longevity of major biomedical equipment.

The budgetary allocation under FPBS will ensure that we will accomplish the full roll-out of the m-supply within the next financial year so that we can achieve our targets of reducing and eliminating stockout of essential medicine and supplies of our health facilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another major focus of the Ministry is on tackling the disease burden of NCD and endemic communicable diseases in Fiji.

As the world come to terms with the new normal way of living and working with the COVID-19 virus, the Ministry is focussed on strengthening the primary healthcare, particularly in the area of preventative healthcare.

The increase in excise tax of alcohol and tobacco by 5 percent and the increase in excise for carbonated and sugar sweetened drinks for 40 cents per litre is much welcomed and it indicates the Government's intent to tackle the current NCD crisis in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, NCD remains the number one cause of sickness and premature mortality in our population and addressing the risk factors for our population is a necessary step towards halting this silent epidemic.

The allocation for NCDs in the Ministry's Budget has also been increased substantially to \$350,000 from \$150,000 allocated in this financial year for the implementation of crucial NCD Programmes. This increase is important, to ensure that we are able to implement our action plans for NCDs, as well as engage effectively with our health partners who are supporting us in this battle.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught the world the dangers of neglecting the threat of communicable diseases, whether endemic or novel to a country, public health programmes actions and initiatives should be constantly assessed, strengthened and enhanced to ensure that we are able to effectively prepare for, recognise, diagnose, manage and protect our people when communicable disease outbreaks are on the horizon.

In recognition of this critical role in Fiji's fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, the Health Protection Division of the Ministry has been designated as a new cost centre under the Ministry in the new financial year. This is an important and essential step towards strengthening and further enhancing our capabilities to conduct effectively disease surveillance programme for Fiji through an enhanced diagnostic capacity at the Tamavua Hospital and Namaka in Nadi through effective, collaborative border health surveillance services provided at our international ports and facilitated by the Border Health Protection Unit in Nadi.

The Health Protection Division is responsible for prevention and protection against acute threats to public health, including from communicable diseases, environmental hazards and health emergencies. The Division worked closely with the Medical Divisions in programme implementation and consists of the Environmental Health Unit, the Fiji Centre for Disease Control (FCDC) and Health Emergencies and Climate Change.

In this Budget, the Health Protection Unit which is the Ministry's newest cost centre has been allocated \$2.8 million and this will enable greater flexibility, oversight and planning of programmes and operations.

The Programme Budget for Health Protection increased from \$815,000 to \$1.29 million, which is a different of \$480,000. This included increases in allocation for leptospirosis and dengue control, tobacco control enforcement and water sanitation and hygiene promotion, as well as the new allocation for outreach. This increase in the restoration of health protection allocations to levels that will better enable outreach and field activities for the prevention, preparedness and response to public health events of concern.

Programmatically, the focus will be on the following areas:

- 1) Leptospirosis, Typhoid, Dengue Fever Prevention and Control: The allocation will allow for the increase in outreach activities on Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) in schools, healthcare facilities in communities with the support of our health partners, it also supports WASH Cluster preparedness and interventions.
- 2) Training for Division Outbreak Response Teams and Community Awareness in Preparation for the start of the rainy season.
- 3) Finalising of the mosquito control strategic plan and operational research to support vector control activities.
- 4) Operationalising the Fiji Share Project with French Polynesia for a mosquito borne virus surveillance.

Sir, on food safety, the allocation will support the Food Safety Awareness and Training, given that the Ministry is a competent authority for food safety and food export market certification.

For Tobacco control, the allocation will support the review of relevant legislation related to health protection and public health, strengthening of tobacco control enforcement activities, including the promotion of tobacco free setting initiatives; and enhancing quarantine and the port health facilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during and after COVID-19, we seem to have shifted our focus away from this deadly disease - HIV. However, it is alarming that Fiji has increased its estimated HIV infection by 129 percent over the last decade, and according to the UNAIDS Global Report, we are now one of the top five countries out of a pool of 38 countries with an alarming rise in infection rates.

According to the UNAIDS Report, Fiji is rated second in the Asia/Pacific Region, with the fastest growing HIV infection, and recording 46 HIV-related deaths last year which is also the highest in the region and for Fiji. In 2022, Fiji recorded 245 HIV cases, compared to 151 cases in 2021, which is almost an increase of 100 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is alarming to note that 14 of these cases are children or under the tender age of four years old.

The Ministry will not rest on its laurels in the fight against HIV, and we are grateful that the HIV/AIDS Prevention Programme has been allocated to \$200,000 in the 2023-2024 Budget, which is an increase of \$110,000, approximately 122 percent.

On Universal Health Coverage, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the proposed National Budget has also indicated Government's commitment towards achieving universal health coverage for the people of

Fiji and leaving no one behind. For the first time ever, Government has allocated to each cost centre in the Ministry an allocation of \$50,000 to \$200,000 respectively to undertake outreach services into their respective communities.

The new Budget has allocated a resounding \$655,000, compared to \$493,500 in this current financial year. This is an increase of \$161,500, or 33 percent. This will allow our clinical and public health teams and specialist doctors and nurses to go out into our remote and hard-to-reach villages and communities to provide primary and secondary healthcare services to our people, who may not have the means to access healthcare for their health conditions in a timely manner.

Government has also recognised the role of Health Partner Organisations in the delivery of health services in Fiji and has allocated \$900,000 for NGOs who support the priorities of the Ministry by providing essential health services to the vulnerable population in our communities.

In addition to allocations provided to Frank Hilton Organisation for the disabled people, Sai Prema Specialist Children Hospital for children born with congenital heart conditions and the St. John Ambulance for the timely ambulance services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, community health workers or *nasi-ni-koro* as we know, the Ministry has been allocated \$3 million for community health workers or *nasi-ni-koro*. They are the hands, eyes, ears and feet of the Ministry in the communities and play an important role in ensuring that our health programmes are supporting and meeting the health needs of Fijians in their homes and communities.

Trained through our public health system, community health workers assist members of their respective communities on community health priorities such as maintaining good child health, safe motherhood and promote wellness while working closely with their zone nurses for our home based care and domiciliary care programmes. During the COVID-19 outbreak, community health workers were effectively involved in checking, assessing and reporting on individuals or on home isolation in the communities. There are a total of 1,582 community healthcare workers in the country - 411 healthcare workers in the West, 438 in the North, 455 in the Central and 278 in the Eastern Division. The allocation will assist the Ministry in meeting the payment of their monthly allowance of \$200.

Sir, on the more important point of nursing workforce. The Government has heard the plight of our nurses in this Budget and responded to the exodus of this valuable health workforce from the Ministry. A sum of \$5.08 million has been allocated for the movement of about 1,600 nurses to their correct salary band relative to the years of their work experience.

The upward movement of Intern Nurses' salary to Band F is allocated \$1.15 million which will benefit 330 new nursing graduates. At least 98 registered nurses will benefit from the \$399,246.82 allocated for consolidated allowance while the \$4.83 million allocated as retention allowance will benefit the current 2,447 nursing workforce under the Ministry. These incentives for the nursing workforce will go a long way in addressing the unprecedented attrition of nurses that is threatening the integrity of our health systems and will greatly assist in stabilising and planning the delivery of health services in the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government has again shown commendable leadership in this Budget and that while the Ministers and Assistant Ministers has taken reduction in salaries and privileges, the current salaries of healthcare workforce and indeed all civil servants in Fiji has been protected and maintained in the midst of economic challenges we are facing.

In this way, the hard work and dedication of more than 7,500 staff of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services have been acknowledged and rewarded and this is indeed commendable. In

addition, the provision of overtime will assist in carrying out essential tasks that cannot be completed within the normal working hours.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also aware that like all agencies of Government, it has a role in economic recovery for the nation. In this regard, the Ministry has put into action strategies that include the following:

- the recruitment of more staff in the Food Unit and Tobacco Unit that will ensure timely issuance of licenses that facilitate the work of industries that deal with these products; and
- the digitalisation of application process to minimise the laborious processes associated with application and reduce turnaround time for response.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I would like to respond to the honourable Leader of the Opposition's remarks on the funds from the Ministry being utilised in the Ministry of Education's \$200 "Back to School" initiative. The Ministry re-deployed \$10.4 million back to the Ministry for Finance in the latter half of this last Budget year. In essence, the deployment of funds were from allocations that we knew would not be spent within the allocated financial year because of the following reasons.

By the latter half of the last financial year, the scoping of a number of capital projects including Savusavu Hospital Refurbishment Project had not yet been completed. We knew by the time that scoping would be completed, we would have to rely on the budget that is currently under debate and discussions today to fund the refurbishment. This was because of a highly centralised tender process which in the previous government was all done in the Construction Implementation Unit. To compensate this inherited shortcoming, we embarked on a strong community engagement programme which was already born fruit as we see in the Savusavu Hospital and many of the small healthcare facilities around the country.

Furthermore, moving forward I have initiated control the centralised process to ensure the more completion of tender processes so that we can facilitate more timely capital expenditure. So, in summary, the redeployment was a logical response where unavoidable expenditure difficulties within the Ministry of Health from factors we inherited and urgent needs within the Ministry of Education was mitigated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Leader of the Opposition further adds that they have done so much in regards to infrastructure in the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. He stated that whilst the previous government built Nakasi Health Centre, Valelevu Health Centre, Navosa Hospital in Keiyasi, Rotuma, renovation at CWM Hospital, et cetera, congratulations for your efforts but today, there is no connection of sewerage to the main line at Nakasi Health Centre.

Now, Navosa Hospital in Keiyasi had officially opened its doors with borrowed items from various hospitals and health centres, thus affecting the provision of quality healthcare in these facilities. Rotuma Hospital cost the Ministry approximately \$8 million to build, the groundbreaking ceremony was held in 2014, yet nine years down the line it is yet to be completed and this time we will do it right when the time is ready for opening. Sir, the state of nation's infrastructure mid-year to February revealed the appalling state of our 100-year old Colonial War Memorial Hospital (CWMH). The picture is worth a thousand words.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in concluding, the Ministry has taken steps to ensure that the budgetary allocations will be utilised as intended by the Government. The Ministry is thankful that it will be able to recruit essential corporate support services staff such as clerical officers, labourers, boat captains, handymen, boiler men and store officers amongst others and these support staff are critical

for the efficient implementation of the new Budget towards the delivery of quality healthcare services in our facility.

The proposed National Budget allocation for the financial year of 2023–2024 is one that will ensure Fijians are able to build back better and stronger and this is pivotal in building a resilient healthcare system economy and society. In affirming my full support for this Budget, I urge Fijians to continue to support Government's visionary plans that are aimed at achieving our full economic and social recovery in laying the platform for a secure healthier future for our people.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, distinguished Members of this Parliament, fellow citizens, I actually rise today as a representative of the Opposition and most importantly as a Fijian compelled by the responsibility entrusted upon us by the people of Fiji and especially those who voted for FijiFirst into Parliament as the single largest political party.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were elected to ensure that our citizens' voices are heard, their rights are respected and their aspirations addressed. It is with this duty in mind that I stand here to give my remarks on the 2023- 2024 National Budget.

Let us begin by acknowledging the sentiments that were expressed in the Budget Address. The people of Fiji actually desire accountability, respect and the well-being of our nation. We, the Opposition, share these aspirations and acknowledge the importance of leadership that respects the contributions of those who came before and recognizes the essential role of every citizen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, stability, security and equality – that is meant to be the covenant that every single person who takes on the mantle of leading our country actually upholds. As we delve deeper into the discussion on Fiji's National Budget, it is imperative to emphasize that these three crucial pillars that underpin economic prosperity are stability, security and equality. Without these fundamental elements, any economic plan is destined to fail, leaving our nation in a perpetual state of turmoil and inequality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the former Prime Minister, Voreqe Bainimarama and the FijiFirst government brought about changes that actually upheld these critical values.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Solicitor-General sacking, what is that?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Good governance, Mr. Speake, Sir, is a new concept for the other side of Parliament then, so allow me to explain how these values underpin the very fabric of our society and economic prosperity. Stability plays a pivotal role in fostering an environment conducive to economic growth. Investors, Mr. Speaker, Sir, both local and foreign, seek actual stability to make long-term commitments and contribute to the development of our economy. Repeated attacks on our Constitution, independent institutions and those who play a critical role in nation-building actually erode the very foundations of stability.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Let me repeat, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reckless decisions that we have seen so far, and those embedded in this particular Budget erode the stability that we desperately need. Case in point or look at the numbers the people that are actually migrating and leaving for greener pastures.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, uncertainty in fiscal policies only serve to deter potential investors. It will only leave us trapped in a cycle of stagnation. So, while it lasts, they can ride on the good works that we did. For example, they have boasted about 7 percent interest paid out by FNPF, that same FNPF that they criticised and said was not making prudent investments.

However, this is the same FNPF that has paid out \$2.06 billion in interest payments to members over the past six years. And while we were battling COVID-19 and assisting our airlines and keeping our country afloat, we had an honourable Member that side who was actually eating planes on social media, calling on the government to abandon Fiji Airways. I have a great comment in store right at the end which will actually tell you the exact makeup of the other side of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our own honourable Prime Minister at the moment praised Fiji Airways and said that the recent achievement by the airline makes it evident that the great airline powers of the world recognise and know the service of Fiji Airways staff. You're welcome, honourable Prime Minister. Fiji Airways is another FijiFirst success. It is not a laughing matter, honourable Minister of Finance. Please give credit where credit is due. I know you got a love affair with Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum but just stop it.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Not me, it is you.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, remember also that part of the airline was actually purchased by FNPF at the height of COVID. So, all our Fiji citizens have part of that particular airline. We all know that security is a vital component also in a thriving economy. Our citizens need to feel safe and protected in their daily lives. At the moment, they do not, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Economic growth cannot be achieved if people are plagued by fear ...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Where is your facts?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- ... and insecurity. We still have pressing issues for crime, corruption and ethno-national discrimination that continues to haunt our society, now even more so, Mr. Speaker, Sir. To truly pave the way for economic prosperity, we must absolutely prioritise the well-being and security of our people by upholding constitutional values. Unfortunately, Fiji now knows the track record of the other side of Parliament where our Constitution is concerned.

Mr. Speaker Sir, equality is the cornerstone of any economic plan and indeed for any nation. A thriving economy cannot be built on a foundation of disparity and of injustice. We must strive for a society where every citizen, regardless of who they are or their circumstances has equal access to opportunities and resources.

This Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, falls short, way short in addressing the glaring wealth gaps and systematic inequalities that persist in our nation. You have actually killed the middle-income society with this Budget, a society that was created by the FijiFirst Government.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We have no idea what you are talking about.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- He knows everything, Mr. Speaker, Sir, he does not like it when he hears

the truth. Very soon he will turn around and talk to them about it because that is the way he does it.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- All of them, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Without this commitment for equality and we are actually risk perpetuating social divisions and hindering the overall progress of Fiji and it is going to be a sad day indeed, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This Government came into power on the back of some shady offerings and deals to coerce Coalition partnerships and to fund these promises and do good on deals that were made.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget, touted as a milestone has actually elicited a sense of disdain and disappointment amongst those who understand the ramifications of poor economic management and I will get to that.

Let us begin by examining the numbers. The Government proudly declares a massive increase in spending, a staggering \$4.3 billion, which is purportedly the largest in Fiji's history. But at what cost? A record revenue of \$3.7 billion supported by an unjustifiable hike in VAT and corporate tax rates is nothing more than a smokescreen to disguise the truth.

A net deficit of \$639 million, the largest outside of pandemic years, and a ballooning debt from \$9.9 billion to \$10.5 billion. Let me just qualify something, they are going to say, “it is just large debt”, they keep forgetting about COVID-19. We had to take on debt ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- ... to look after our people, remember that, for which they are grateful.

At the moment the honourable Minister of Finance who does not possess ability to actually manage the economy, Sir, is just beyond me. It is indeed a "big" Budget, as the Government proudly proclaims, with expenses soaring to new heights. However, let us not be blinded by this particular veil of deception and I will tell you the kind of veil of deception, “oh, let us reduce the per diem that goes out to every Minister.” But guess what? We are going to travel more. Instead of the 10 they will do the 20 which works out to the same thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Who is going to do the work? Despite the promised revenue increase, Fiji is still headed towards a \$639 million deficit. The VAT hike is actually an ill-conceived strategy, we were all looking forward to his earlier predictions. We will bring down VAT – ha ha guess what?

Someone lied, this ill-conceived strategy threatens, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to exacerbate this deficit and catapult our nation into even deeper debt. It is not just us speaking, go speak to those outside this Parliament. The dreams of a balanced budget remain nothing more than a distant mirage. This Budget offers little relief to those that are suffering, in fact the rich will get richer, I said it before, and the poor shall fund their glossy promises and fancy lifestyles. Let me expound, a seven-year tax holiday being given to a multi-billionaire company while everyday Jone and Premila are going to pay 6 percent more every time they buy anything.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Poor me.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- So officially the new sponsors of the Emmy's and the red carpets and the award ceremonies are Jone and Premila.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Wrong, totally wrong.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Absolutely right!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Read your notes.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- The defender of the water companies.

Reduce income tax by 5 percent to individuals earning more than \$270,000, so the rich can spend more on fancy restaurants while Jone and Premila think twice about buying food for their families. They promised change to make lives better but, what did they do? Increased VAT and reduced income tax by 5 percent to those individuals earning \$270,000. Does that not seem like you are protecting the poor? You are protecting the rich. What did they do? They said equal distribution of land lease money was not the right way. Does that seem like you are protecting the everyday *iTaukei*?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I hope those minutes get added on. The reality of the matter is VAT is going up so that Ministers can sit in business class and take their selfies.

(Laughter)

And so that they can enjoy endless trips overseas to do what they want. Unfortunately, the reality we face today is far from what was promised. I do not begrudge them being in Government, fine, no problem. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Finance spoke about the desire for change and the need for a government that works towards the betterment of its citizens. However, the actions and policies outlined in this Budget do not align with those particular noble aspirations.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Instead, they perpetuate a narrative of continued mismanagement, neglect and disregard for the needs and aspirations of our people. They applaud themselves to delivering the budget on time but let us not forget the timely delivery is just merely a basic expectation. The real issue lies in the content and the effectiveness of the Budget, and this has far-reaching effects for thousands of families in Fiji. This Budget fails to address those challenges that are being faced.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of fundamentals, and I hope the honourable Prof. Prasad is actually listening.

HON. K.K. LAL.- He is not listening.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Your review process. You do not instil confidence when you have your lawyer-cum speech writer, become the Chairman of the Fiscal Review Committee whilst his still convicted, putting together a report without any declarations of numerous conflicts.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He is not a failed lawyer.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I did not say failed.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I just wanted to remind you that he is not a failed lawyer like many others.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It hurts you, does it not?

We were not even made aware of these conflicts. No wonder certain companies are actually getting tax free status. You do not instil confidence when you mess up the review process and its order. Everyone knows you first get a small group to review something in detail and then you present the findings to a wider group for their comments, but you decided to do the summit first and then do the fiscal review. It does not make sense, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Would it not have made sense to bring better policies if the Fiscal Review Report was published and discussed in the Economic Summit? There were about 500 top minds from around Fiji that you had invited to the Summit with a taxpayer funded *kalavata*; analyse the recommendations that your party associates put in the Fiscal Review Report. You do not instil confidence when a family member of yours, taxpayer dollars are given to an institution that your family member is in. And then also, to a single education provider like Polytech and that person within that Polytech happens to be a compatriot.

This sort of collusive approach is not only morally bankrupt but bordering on illegal. You do not instil confidence when police brutality is committed in broad daylight in the middle of the city, yet your budget has not even touched on the allocations to eradicate human right abuses. You do not instil confidence when you remove subsidies, we had provided to give relief to thousands of Fijian families. You do not instil confidence when you do not keep your word.

The change you promised pre-election was VAT reduction, you have been told that today, and I saw the expression on your face when the honourable Leader of the Opposition brought it up. Not a good expression, honourable Minister of Finance. We actually have you on video saying that in your Manifesto saying that.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Don't play it.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- We know you are not going to reduce the debt, in fact, you are taking on more debt and silently. Tell the people! The gross borrowing requirement is of \$1.2 billion and tell the people that it is higher because maturing debt is refinanced, it is not paid. All governments around the world, when it comes to mature time to actually pay, they do not pay it off, they refinance it. It is the simple philosophy that maybe everyone should know.

When we were in government, we borrowed at near zero at very low interest rates and we actually managed it well, contrary to what may they believe, but do not ask us, go and ask our development partners and everyone else around town, the international institutions that said that to us - we were one of the best managed economies during COVID-19.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You may laugh, you may laugh, but guess what?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must call this budget out for what it is. It is unimaginative budget, it is not creative, it is the biggest spending budget, the largest in Fiji's history post COVID, \$4.3 billion, an increase of 37.8 percent, so much for fiscal consolidation and reducing expenditure. The consequences for Fiji and the future of Fiji are actually dying. We must correct the course of this particular economic policies and we will be shipwrecked otherwise. There are some things that I need to address before I run out of time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is actually going to kill the middle-income society, it has no creativity and no innovation. The engine for growth for any economy has been stalled, which is the middle-income society. As a matter of fact, there is a massive disconnect between all the honourable Ministers, especially the major ones, one says something, the other one says something else, they just do not connect.

Even the honourable Prime Minister has not connected to the honourable Minister of Finance. He says something, this person says something else. You know, honourable Kamikamica, Sir, he waxes lyrical about innovation, creativity; fantastic speeches. Guess what? They have done nothing for all of that. The honourable Minister of Finance has not given one incentive to him, he has not given him one initiative, nothing to actually create more employment, nothing to keep our Fijians here. Absolutely nothing! All they are relying on is FijiFirst policies that we had put in place.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Microwave.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Hot air, that is all they are about. Honourable Gavoka sat there and also waxed lyrical. Guess what, honourable Gavoka, (who he is not here), be careful of the honourable Minister of Finance because he the other day in the newspaper said, he is the right man for the job. But guess what? He qualified his statement by saying, at the moment. Be very wise about what is sitting around you, honourable Gavoka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is very poor financial management when it comes to all of these. We have got the largest deficit since 1992. The net deficit budget sits outside pandemic years, and all these hysteria that they have created about debt, now the Government is on a spend-a-thon. What matters is, actually the size of the debt does not matter, it is if you are a growing economy then you can actually repay that.

We have always been in that particular state. Debt as a proportion of GDP is actually coming down and we all know that, but the answer to all of these is growing the economy. What has the honourable Minister of Finance given us in this Budget that is actually going to grow the economy? Absolutely nothing, zero, nada, *kuch nahi*.

Mr. Speaker, no innovation, no incentives, no creativity and guess what, poor old Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Kamikamica is now going to fall flat on his face with respect to all that waxing lyrical that his done about growing the economy, ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- ... bringing in more investments. No encouragement to the middle-income society. The middle-income society is the one that actually spends. They are the ones that are

aspirational, Mr. Speaker. Right now, we are heading into unsustainable debt levels. That is what, honourable Gavoka said. I guess that is completely wrong. He needs to put things in perspective.

A couple of things that I just quickly need to address, honourable Kamikamica actually spoke about film tax rebate. Honourable Kamikamica, I think you need to tell the whole story. As a matter of fact, *Survivor* is still here. All of those movies that were filmed here, they spent hundreds of millions of dollars. The training that was given to our people was huge. Guess what? The marketing dollars that we obtained out of these movies is actually huge.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- By the way if you are talking about *Walesi* too, we welcome the investigation. You know as far as USP is concerned, honourable Minister all they had to do was do the investigation, they would have got their money.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- This Government has never been scared of one person. As far as the FRA is concerned, go take a great look around you. We made sure we supported FRA to put the necessary infrastructure in so that our trade could work, people could move, goods could move in a better road that has ever been, Mr. Speaker. You just have to take it on and continue with it.

Mr. Speaker, the consequences for Fiji are too dire to actually imagine if we do not correct our course and our economic policies. We will be shipwrecked.

I just want to leave, Mr. Speaker, with one last comment and this is really good. According to them there is economic woes. According to honourable Tabuya absolute economic most. She has been harping on whole day, *dinau* and debt. On 1st December, 2021, honourable Tabuya says, “print more money.”

(Laughter)

She has suggested that Government should print more money to solve economic woes. Print more money but she does not understand that will not work, Mr. Speaker. What happened to the waxing lyrical here about printing more money?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Out of date.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- She said the idea is bold and controversial but unprecedented times call for such measures. Well according to your book, you are in unprecedented times. There are economic woes. What you doing - print more money.

Mr. Speaker, I think my time is up.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I thank you for the extended time, Mr. Speaker. I do not support this Budget and I thank all the speakers previous to me and thank you for listening.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament for dinner. Dinner is being served at the Big Committee Room and we will resume when the bell sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.44 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 7.47 p.m.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, the general public who are here in the gallery and also those watching on television and via livestream. *Nu bula nakwa* and good evening to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is with great privilege and deep appreciation that I address this august Parliament to express my explicit support for the National Budget delivered on 30th June, 2023. I commend the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance along with his dedicated team for their unwavering commitment and tireless efforts in formulating a budget. It is a Budget that not only insists hopes but also paves the way for a prosperous future for our beloved nation of Fiji. This Budget embodies a spirit of unity and collaboration igniting a renewed sense of purpose amongst our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is steadfast in its mission to construct a new Fiji, one that prioritises solidarity and trust, pleases the people at the heart of its endeavours and demonstrates prudence in its fiscal framework to maintain a sustainable national debt to GDP ratio.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to remind the other side of Parliament that this is not a copy and paste Budget, a Budget that is warmed in a microwave. This is a smart and a well-crafted Budget. We will continue to be innovative, inclusive and stronger together.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, rising debt to GDP ratio in Fiji has become a grave concern for our nation's future. It is alarming to witness the ratio spike from 48.8 percent from 2018 to 2019 to a staggering 88.8 percent by the end of 2021–2022 financial year. While the impact of the pandemic cannot be ignored, it is crucial to acknowledge that there was an underlying issue preceding it. The current state of affairs demands immediate attention and action and the Coalition Government is committed to rectifying this situation.

This Budget reverses 16 years of misrule and false promises, 16 years of poor, unstable and bad governance and 16 years of lost hope. This Budget goes beyond addressing immediate needs, it lays the groundwork for instilling hope in future generations. Through collaborative efforts and cautious steps, we have embarked on a journey of recovery, taking decisive measures to overcome the crisis faced by various sectors in Fiji. While we have made significant progress, it is vital to acknowledge that our work has just begun.

Notable aspect of this Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the increased allocation of key sectors such as health, education, infrastructure and agriculture. This exemplifies the Coalition Government's commitment in enhancing essential services that directly impact the lives of ordinary Fijians by fostering a healthy, well-educated population and improving access to better roads, water and coordinated agriculture programmes. We will invigorate a more vibrant and prosperous new Fiji.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of *iTaukei* Affairs which has been neglected for 16 years has received increased funding. This signifies our commitment to ensure that the *iTaukei* Affairs administration is adequately resourced to address issues such as poverty and resource management effectively. At the heart of Fiji, a reality persists that cannot be ignored. It weighs heavily on our collective conscience. It is harsh truth that 24 percent of our fellow Fijians live in a grim of poverty, among them a staggering 75 percent are *iTaukei*, our resource owners who bear the burden of hardship. This is a reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we cannot turn away from and it is our duty to confront it head on.

By providing timely support for the *iTaukei* community, we aim to address the deep-rooted issue of poverty. We understand that the key lies in empowering those who own the very resources that hold the potential for economic prosperity. It is imperative that we help them recognise the true value of the resources and guide them towards sustainable avenues of growth and development. Let us rise together, driven by compassion and a burning desire for a change. Let us extend a helping hand to those in need, ensuring that the future holds a brighter prospect for every Fijian. Through unity and sheer determination, we will build a Fiji where poverty becomes a thing of the past and where the *iTaukei* people can reclaim their rightful place of strength and resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today we stand together to prove that our promises are not empty rhetoric but resolute commitments. The responsibility now lies with the Coalition Government to continue the vital work of ensuring that every Fijian can enjoy the security of a safe and permanent place to call their home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the shortage of housing in our country is not solely the result of one government's action but rather a consequence of inadequate measures taken over several decades. To address the pressing issue, the Ministry of Housing has been allocated a substantial sum of \$25.7 million in the 2023–2024 National Budget. This allocation will enable the Ministry to fulfill its mandate of providing accessible, adequate and affordable housing to low and middle income earners.

The escalating rate of rural to urban migration compounded by the adverse effects of climate change necessitates urgent action to tackle housing challenges and formulate policies that cater for the rising demand for affordable housing. Additionally, our focus extends to safeguarding the needs of the vulnerable population within our society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government will continue to assist the Ministry in the development of new housing projects by the Housing Authority and Public Rental Board. As such more Public Private Partnership (PPP) initiatives will be promoted for efficient delivery of affordable housing projects. Funding for assisting in the provision of affordable and decent housing will continue as allocated in this Budget. More consultation will be done with a lot of agencies in the First Home Ownership Scheme to ensure that all Fijians have access to proper and affordable housing.

In recognising the importance of supporting individuals living with disabilities, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget allocation for assistance in retrofitting their homes has been increased by 50 percent. The increase in allocation will benefit under applicants and provide them with necessary, accessibility modifications. Furthermore, families affected by accidental fires will continue to receive grants of up to \$5,000 enabling them to rebuild their homes and lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has acquired 48 informal settlement development leases since 2015, however, only three settlements are near completion of the formalisation process. This indicates that the former government did not have the political will to upgrade informal settlements. Had they done so would have contributed to the alleviation of the rising number of informal settlements today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the formalisation of informal settlements programme has been allocated a budget of \$10 million in the next financial year. With the primary focus of completing capital works in Sakoca, Tavela in Nadi, Tore and Field 4 in Lautoka. These capital works should provide 378 households access to affordable infrastructure at subsidised cost. Furthermore, nine settlements will begin capital works and additionally preparation works for nine more settlements are well underway.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the housing sector, the Coalition Government is serious about upgrading informal settlements in Fiji. The increased budget allocation is a testament of our commitment to those living in informal settlements to be provided with basic services such as roads, water, sanitation, drainage and electricity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the past government did not do much upgrading of informal settlements. They were more concerned about acquiring development leases but lacked proper planning to develop the settlements. Hence, some of these development leases have expired without any development work undertaken. In this regard, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government's comprehensive approach encompasses a work plan designed to formalise the remaining 45 informal settlements by considering the needs and priorities of the residents. The holistic approach will significantly enhance their livelihoods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry remains committed to refunding deposits paid by individuals to the People's Community Network (PCN) for housing units at Lagilagi. Regrettably, these projects remain incomplete despite the previous government's allocation of over \$12 million. This showed a lack of commitment and vigour by the previous government which is definitely not the case for the Coalition Government. To-date, a total of 434 refunds have been made from the initial 336 complainants, amounting to \$3.5 million. A budget of \$150,000 has been allocated to refund applicants in the coming financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is actively working on the review of the National Housing Policy which will provide an updated strategic direction for our stakeholders in the housing sector. This policy aims to standardise the assessment of our housing needs with specific focus on affordability. This was supposed to be reviewed in 2021.

The Ministry will continue its collaboration with housing partners such as Koroipita and the Revitalising Informal Settlements and their Environment (RISE) Project with an allocation of \$1.7 million and \$1 million respectively. These collaborative efforts are designed to benefit vulnerable families by providing cyclone safe homes and improving sanitation and access to safe drinking water.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through this budgetary support, the Ministry will continue its crucial role in facilitating the provision of accessible, adequate and affordable housing thereby contributing to broader socio-economic development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now shift to the priority areas for the Ministry of Local Government. Our Coalition Government not only upholds the principle of freedom of expression and freedom for the Fijian people but also translates these principles into action. Over the past six months we have empowered the people to actively participate in the governance of their country. We have fostered an environment where people can voice their concerns and demand accountability from their government.

Most notably, we have ushered in a new era of democratic participation by involving our citizens in municipal elections. As the Minister responsible for Local Government, my primary objective is to mobilise my team towards conducting a successful municipal council elections as promised by the Coalition Government. Our achievements go beyond mere rhetoric surpassing the previous government's failed promises since 2014. *Sa rui sivia na lasu!* In this august Parliament, honourable Bala mentioned in his speech in Parliament that Municipal Elections will be held. It is now 2023, municipalitiess are still waiting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, conducting elections after nearly two decades is a formidable task. However, the Coalition Government's unwavering vision and determination has cleared the path to

this accomplishment. We did not yield to legislate, legislative and regulatory challenges used as delaying tactics by the previous government instead we took decisive action. In the spirit of rebuilding our future together, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we actively engaged with residents from all 13 towns and cities, seeking their valuable input on the desired changes in their municipal councils. Our aim is to ensure that these institutions truly served the people, the people's involvement in the process is vital for their benefit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the past 18 years, we have witnessed a decline in democracy within municipal councils, excessive reliance on Government grants, undue interference, lack of long-term planning and vision had become pervasive issues. We are determined to reverse this trend by reducing Council dependence on grants and focusing on strengthening their revenue streams for long-term sustainability. We have endorsed an action plan for the elections, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Ministry of Local Government, Office of the Solicitor-General and the Fijian Elections Office are working diligently to ensure a free and fair Municipal Elections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to enhance the positions and service delivery of the Municipal Councils, the Cabinet endorsed the review of the Special Administrators in January this year. Following the performance review, the Cabinet has approved the Expression of Interest for new Special Administrators. These Special Administrators will be appointed to promote accountability, transparency and good governance and addressing long standing issues of service delivery.

The Ministry has defined job responsibilities and Key Performance Indicators (KPI) to improve the quality of services. As per the Local Government Act 1972, section 9(a) stated, and I quote:

“Special Administrators may perform the function of the Council until the Election date is determined by the Electoral Commission.”

As alluded to earlier, the newly appointed Special Administrators will play a pivotal role in the transition to elected councillors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the lack of council ownership has resulted in unacceptable delays in crucial capital projects such as the Lautoka City Swimming Pool. What was meant to benefit the residents of Lautoka has been turned into an international level competition pool through ministerial intervention, leaving it unfinished and disregarding the needs of our own people. The swimming pool was supposed to be completed in one year and nine months from January 2018, from an initial cost of \$2 million, this has now ballooned to \$11.2 million.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Tell the truth. You are a Minister.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- We are in July 2023, and the project is nowhere complete.

HON. P.K. BALA.- The size has gone up.

(Laughter)

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Similarly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Govind Park started in January 2018 for completion by the end of the same year, but the story remains the same. Another failed promise by the previous government.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Never expected things from you.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Recognising the urgency to rectify such issues, our Ministry is in damage control mode and has taken decisive action. We are committed to ensuring the timely completion of the Lautoka Swimming Pool and the Govind Park in Ba, making the necessary modifications and allocating the required services in the new financial year.

In the pursuit of accountability and transparency, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been allocated a budgetary support for a dedicated Compliance and Audit Team. This team will diligently monitor capital projects, conduct thorough financial audits of municipal councils and enforce strict compliance with established KPIs and milestones. Furthermore, this team will be the primary point of contact for all customer service inquiries related to the Department of Local Government, National Fire Authority and the Department of Town and Country Planning.

By centralising these inquiries, we aim to streamline processes, eliminating any trace of corruption, favouritism and enable the Department of Town and Country Planning to focus exclusively on processing applications. These measures not only demonstrate our commitment to efficient delivery service, but also underscore our unwavering dedication to fostering a system of governance that prioritises accountability, transparency and timely completion of vital projects within our local government system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our process for doing business, particularly construction permits have become burdensome, and hindering progress over the years. Fiji's standing in terms of ease of doing this, it is at a risk of declining further. In line with the Coalition Government's commitment to streamline processes and improve ease of doing business, we are actively digitalising planning process with the Department of Town and Country Planning.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Microwave oven.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Our aim is to eliminate bureaucratic barriers associated with obtaining development permits. As part of the larger Government doing this project, we are transitioning from the manual system to digital transformation. By 31st August, 2023, we will pilot the standing planning procedures and processes in three councils - Savusavu, Suva and Lautoka. This digital transformation will revolutionise service delivery, reduce application timelines and enhance transparency and promote stakeholder accountability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the development of new towns is a key focus of our Government's proactive approach to urban growth. We aim to create self-sufficient, resilient and thriving communities while minimising the need to commit to larger centres for services. In this regard, I am delighted to share that Nabouwalu and Keiyasi have been earmarked as commercial hubs for trade. However, extensive groundwork is required to provide the necessary infrastructure that supports commercial, industrial activities while considering climate change adaptation.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mind blowing.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- These initiatives will create a solid foundation for economic growth and provide opportunities for both local and international businesses. This programme has been allocated \$2 million.

In conclusion, I proudly lend my full support to the 2023-2024 National Budget. It reflects the unwavering commitment of the Coalition Government to address the pressing needs of our people. This Budget paves the way for a future where for every Fijian can have access to affordable

housing, and where towns and cities are better planned. Together, let us march forward with unwavering determination and unity, embracing innovation and strategic planning. By working hand in hand, we can create a Fiji where communities thrive, our towns and cities flourish, and our dreams and aspirations become a reality. I extend my heartfelt gratitude for this opportunity to contribute, and I assure you, that the Coalition Government remains steadfast in its mission to build a better future for all Fijians. I fully commend and support this Budget.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak on the Budget Estimate for 2023-2024 financial year. Before that, I would like to join my colleagues to express my dissatisfaction with the honourable Prime Minister, the Chair of the Constitutional Offices Commission (COC) for denying two members of FijiFirst to be in this Parliament today. In other words, we missed two people who could have analysed this Budget and given their comments.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It all boils down to his failure to convene a meeting to appoint the members of the Electoral Commission, which we have heard from our leader. So why blame the former Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and FijiFirst suspension to cover your deliberate attempt to deny full representation of FijiFirst in Parliament? You had 49 days from the time the honourable Leader of Opposition was appointed in March to the suspension of FijiFirst in May to convene COC.

Even when he did convene the COC last Friday, he did not have a full list of names to appoint the Electoral Commission. So why blame others? It seems the honourable Prime Minister cannot trust his Coalition partners, and he is playing safe to get the budget passed without any risk. This is the level of insecurity.

Moving on to the National Budget, to say the honourable Minister of Finance's National Budget is disappointing would be an understatement. This Budget is underwhelming, unfair, irresponsible, unimaginative, lacks creativity and above all, deceitful. Instead of instilling hope, this Budget has left us in despair. Mr. Speaker Sir, the Budget is merely pushing the different priorities of each leg of the uneven stool, rather than taking a collective approach to growing the economy and building confidence.

The National Budget raises very serious concerns regarding its impact on citizens, businesses, and the overall economy. The increase in VAT, duties and corporate tax will have a detrimental effect on the economy and the livelihood of citizens. This Budget lacks a comprehensive strategy for lowering the cost of living for ordinary Fijians, or promoting private sector growth, essential for creating jobs and boosting economic productivity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after so much frenzy that the debt is high and we need to control the expenditure and start paying the debt, the honourable Minister of Finance did the opposite. He chose to borrow more to spend more on operations rather than capital works. He has delivered the largest deficit outside the pandemic years in the Fijian history.

There is no sign that Fiji is on the path of fiscal repair, absolutely no sign. We have heard from honourable Prof. Biman Prasad that 25 percent of the Government Budget will go towards servicing debt. To pay debt, one needs a balanced or surplus budget, not a budget deficit. This is what we are seeing. We all know that this Professor is very good at hoodwinking.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he is the same Professor who used the *Saqamoli* Budget as he termed it to run the government from December 2022 after voting against it.

(Laughter)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- What they called freebies and handouts are now the main feature of the Coalition Government's Budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the cost of living is at an all-time high and it will get much worse if this Budget is passed.

The Budget is heavily tilted against the poor, working and middle-income families, MSMEs, farmers and tourists. They will feel the pain at the cash registers with the VAT increases from 9 percent to 15 percent. It is obvious, the burden of raising government revenue lies squarely on them. Fijians should brace themselves for an increase in the price of everything by 6 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fijians who think that a measly increase in pension and other allowances including reduced duty on meat and prawns will improve access to these categories of food are being fooled. All these items attract 15 percent VAT which will further increase the price by at least 1 percent.

Fijians should be ready to pay more for over-the-counter medicines such as balm, eye and ear drops, cough mixtures, baby products, painkillers, vitamins, and other supplements. Mr. Speaker, Sir, generally when someone is under the weather, they normally go to the pharmacy to get this medication over the counter to actually fix themselves before they go to the doctor. Now, when they go to the pharmacy, they will find that all the over the counter products are 15 percent and that will push the price further. Do Fijians realise that under this Coalition Government their water, electricity and telecommunication bills will go up? Is this what they promised to the people that they are going to look after them by increasing all their bills?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Tell them!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- If consumers are thinking that they are not affected by an increase in corporate tax then they are naïve. An increase in corporate tax will be passed on to consumers through price increases as businesses will always protect their profits. A meagre increase in pension is still not enough to counter price increases on thousands of products because of VAT increases.

Most of these items are not under price control, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The meagre increase in social allowance may give the false impression of improved support, but in practice, it will cause financial strain on pensioners and low-income earners. In fact, they are actually worse off.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am appalled by institutions like the Consumer Council of Fiji, FCOSS and other organisations and individuals for supporting this Budget without really understanding the full repercussion of this Budget on our people.

HON. K.K. LAL.- They are getting the money from there.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- In all these, I wonder what honourable Tabuya has to say. She was opposing a 12.5 percent VAT increase through social media. If she thought 12.5 percent was inhumane, I wonder what she has to say about 15 percent VAT increase which her party is now pushing for and she is happily supporting.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Of course.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, any tax hikes hurt consumers and businesses alike, affecting their purchasing power and decreasing investments. Consumers' disposable income will shrink causing cut back on other goods and services. Such behavioral change can affect businesses, causing the economy to slow down and impacting the revenue collection for the government. Tourism will become more expensive, particularly with an increase in VAT and departure tax but the question is, why are we squeezing the tourism sector and letting the water bottling industry go scot-free?

Mr. Speaker Sir, prior to the Budget, the honourable Prime Minister made a National Address asking the Fijian people to understand and accept the hard times, alluding to the Budget while shamelessly in the same vein, giving all water bottling companies a 7-year tax holiday.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- We all wonder, what exactly was discussed between the honourable Prime Minister and the billionaire owners of Fiji Water earlier this year for him to make an unjust decision. One thing is for sure, the honourable Prime Minister has put the interest of Fiji Water first, much ahead of Fiji and the Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how can this Budget justify the exemption of corporate tax specifically for established water bottling companies, while increasing corporate tax to all other companies and new companies registering on the South Pacific Stock Exchange? Is this fair to our garment industry, food processing companies, furniture manufacturing companies and other export businesses to pay more in corporate income tax?

It is strange, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the honourable Minister of Finance (who is never tired of speaking about accountability and transparency) failed to mention tax exemption for all water bottling companies (whether new or old) in his Address. This is the level of protection the Rabuka Government is trying to give to rich and influential companies. Absolutely no transparency.

Again, Mr. Speaker Sir, it is illogical for honourable Prof. Biman Prasad to defend by saying that the increase in water resource tax will give an overall gain for Fiji. How? Currently, the companies are paying two taxes; water resource tax for water as raw materials, and corporate tax on the profits.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by exempting corporate tax, the water bottling companies will only pay water resource tax, and zero tax on their profits. So how is this a revenue gain? Unless these companies are showing losses in their books which is really hard to believe. No matter what, you are forgoing revenue and setting a dangerous precedent. The closer you are to this Government, the more you can get, you can get away with tax exemption. Let the other business suffer, who cares, ultimately let the country suffer.

Another interesting observation, just for one established international company to claim tax credits in USA, the Rabuka Government decided to forgo corporate tax on all water bottling companies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Water has become a gatekeeper, stopping Fijian companies from selling any products with the name "Fiji" in the USA market. Was this problem solved by the Prime Minister in all fairness to our local companies? I hope international consumers and NGOs are watching how rich and powerful global brand is influencing politicians for their own gain in a developing country.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Tell them!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- The honourable Minister of Finance also rewarded lawyers and accountants, and other professionals (some of them are on the Fiscal Review Committee) by endorsing the removal of the social responsibility tax and reducing personal tax by 5 percent, resulting in a revenue loss of \$2.2 million, while ignoring the recommendation made by the same Committee to reduce income tax for those earning between \$30,000 to \$50,000, this was not done. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this income group with no social protection will be badly affected if this Budget is passed. He also deferred the taxing of dividend income benefitting the rich while taxing the working and middle class families.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Do you know what you are talking about?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Oh, yes, I know what I am talking about, thank you.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Budget intends to tax Fijians earning any interest on their savings while exempting tax on the profits earned by companies like Fiji Water. This is not only unethical, this is shameful. I will give you an example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if a farmer or a market vendor puts \$5,000 in their bank account and they are earning 2 percent interest rate, at the end of the year they earn \$100 as their interest income, this Government is going to tax that \$100. This is how low they have gone in collecting revenue from all these people.

Previously, under the FijiFirst Government, the resident withholding tax on interest income, less than \$1,000 was exempted from taxes. Which Coalition Government will remove it once this Budget is passed, and I hope that the people of this country are listening. This is the Government that promised that we will look after your interest and this is what they are doing to the people of this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the honourable Minister of Finance claims the debt situation is so bad, then a right-thinking person will ask - why is the Government forgoing all these revenues from professionals and businesses that have the means to pay? In fact, every penny should count.

Mr. Speaker Sir, moving on to TELS. To say TELS have been forgiven is deceptive. It is not forgiven; it is converted to a bond, with just a name change from Toppers Scholarship to Merit-based scholarship. You know microwave, re-heating.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, 53,725 students will reap the benefit at the expense of most Fijians who do not have student debt. It is unfair and inappropriate to ask the rest of the citizens to pay by dismantling a sustainable financial model of loan scheme just to meet SODELPA's demand. This means, every year, (and taxpayers should listen to this very carefully) the Government will have to raise around \$150 million or even more through taxes, maybe another VAT, maybe another duty increase (I do not know what it would be) or redirect funds away from other services to continue paying for tertiary education. Is this responsible leadership?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Why not?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Is this your money that you can make a decision recklessly, Mr. Speaker, Sir? The policy decision is not sustainable. Of course, we know that the honourable Minister of Finance does not care about financial sustainability. I thought, as an honourable Minister of Finance, he would understand financial sustainability, he would have made the right decision, but he did not do it. Why did he not do it? Because he cares only about pleasing the Coalition partners at the expense of taxpayers.

Mr. Speaker Sir, honourable Prasad mentioned that only \$5 million TELS debt was collected every year without disclosing the fact that for the last three years, students' loans were suspended because of COVID-19, and of course, those unemployed were not expected to pay till they find employment. Forgiving loans solely based on low repayment rate lacks logical justification. Strengthening loan recovery was a better option, now that the economy is growing.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the budget for the education sector has definitely increased but this increase is not really going to the schools or Free Education Grant has increased or bus fare has increased or something else has increased. No, it has increased because we are paying USP. In other words, chunk of the money has gone to the tertiary institutions.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Realistically, the actual grants payable to these institutions should be reviewed based on the guaranteed tuition fees given to them.

While the Coalition Government is preaching sacrifice with the increase in taxes and duties, we continue to see Ministers trotting around the globe. In just 6 months, they have made more than 65 overseas trips paid by the taxpayers. Some have an average of at least one trip a month. Actually, someone mentioned to me that Nadi Airport has become a revolving door for Ministers and Assistant Ministers.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Is this not extravagance? I expected the expenditure to reduce, but what has happened in a country with less than a million people? We have 29 Ministers and 3 Deputy Prime Ministers. I feel very ashamed if someone asks me, "how big is your Government?" I say, "29 and all of them are Ministers." It has become a laughing matter.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the lack of investor and consumer confidence is not only demonstrated through this Budget but also through the Coalition Government for not complying with the Rule of Law and the Constitution. In fact, honourable Manoa Kamikamica's (who is not here) effort to encourage investors to invest in Fiji is ruined by the honourable Minister of Finance. Always negative utterances, inconsistent messaging on the economy; all these creates fear in the market.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a fact that every country had to borrow money to deal with prolonged COVID-19, induced economic and social crises. We had to support the economy when business activities slowed down or started to shut down.

The tourism sector, our largest foreign exchange earner was near zero. One-third of Fiji's workforce was either unemployed or on reduced hours. During this period, our economy contracted by 17.2 percent and 4.1 percent in 2020 and 2021 respectively. There was a high risk of balance of payment crisis. In spite of this, Fijians were supported by the Government during quarantine, isolation, hospitalisation, even death with assistance (either cash or kind).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite that, the economy was managed well to put Fiji on the path to recovery. That is why you can openly talk about 8 percent economic growth. If we had not put our country on the path of recovery, you would not be talking about 8 percent economic growth. We were the third fastest growing economy in the world.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- In 2022, our economic growth was 18.4 percent which the Opposition refused to believe when the projected figure of 12.4 percent was announced in the last Budget. This year, the economy is poised to grow by 8 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite calls made by the Opposition, we did not devalue our dollar or print money or return the aircrafts or shut our national airline or cut civil service pay. Our decision helped in the economic recovery with low inflation, high liquidity, healthy foreign reserves and manageable debt. I want to repeat once again, manageable debt not unsustainable debt. I have heard the honourable Prime Minister saying unsustainable, I have heard honourable Kamikamica saying unsustainable. Please when they appoint a Fiscal Review Committee and when the Report comes out, at least they should have the courtesy of reading that Report.

The multinational organisation and even the honourable Minister of Finance's own Fiscal Review Committee Report stated that the debt is significant but manageable. Manageable is the word underlined, go and read that Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, instead of complaining, I urge the honourable Minister of Finance and other Ministers to show initiative to deal with problems as we did during COVID-19 and during several disasters caused by cyclones and floods.

Mr. Speaker Sir, FijiFirst Government's fiscal policies played an important role in the recovery process. We kept our taxes low to support private sector investment and to fuel consumer demand. There is a stark diversion from this, as we can see the Coalition Government is relying on tax increases to raise Government revenue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the budget allocation for the Ministry for Housing has been reduced and we have heard from the Minister, but the major concern is the First Home Ownership Grant. Sadly, this Grant will now be available to fewer families, further reducing economic activities in the construction and financial services. There is always a very high demand for First Home Grant. In the first few months of the year, generally this money is all used up. Given the overall positive impact of this programme on the Fijian economy, I cannot understand why honourable Prasad reduced housing funding and diverted \$8.6 million in January when Fijians had been waiting for this assistance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to end by thanking our leader, Frank Bainimarama, for resisting the urge to sell or eat our Fiji Airways planes.

(Chorus of interjections)

He did not listen to honourable Gavoka's many proposals promoting Qantas with no national pride for Fiji Airways. After Fiji Airways created history by topping the prestigious Skytrax Award, beating Qantas and Air New Zealand, honourable Gavoka and others from the Government side are not tired of praising our national airline or ringing Fiji Airways to ask for invitations for the celebrations last week. Of course, the accommodation was probably paid by Fiji Airways.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me reiterate, our economy will suffer if this disastrous Budget is passed in Parliament.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- *Ni sa bula vinaka*, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers and fellow Members of Parliament and also to members of the public who are watching this evening, I extend to you all a very good evening and *bula vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, I begin by just thanking God Almighty from whom all blessings flow, for sure is His faithfulness and His enduring mercy. I rise this evening, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to deliver my response to the 2023-2024 National Budget and provide my total support to it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know, it is not the *Saqamoli* Budget that was delivered last year by the former government. It is certainly not the “mother of all budgets” delivered in November 2014 for the 2015 Financial Year, which in reality turned out to be anything but.

Firstly, allow me to make a few comments in response to a few speeches from the Opposition. On the topic of rising cost of living due to the VAT increase and corporate taxes and duties, this Budget’s welfare policies are very well targeted to address the VAT effects on the people who need it the most. Need I remind the other side, that all of us in this country, including those of us here in this Parliament and not just “Jones and Premila”, to quote a Member from the other side, have to pay for the mess left behind by their two legged stool of a government.

Mr. Speaker the 2023-2024 Budget is a budget that learns from the past, it is rooted in the present and has its eyes firmly on the future. This is the Budget for the New Fiji. The question therefore, is what kind of Fiji are we trying to build; a Fiji where we can accept one another at the table of brotherhood and sisterhood. A Fiji where our children can grow up, safe and sure, confident that the law works and that the Government works for them. This is a Budget that lays the firm foundation of rebuilding our future together. A Budget that caters for the advancement of everyone, and has come against a backdrop where more than \$1 billion or 25 percent of the money our Government spends is to be applied to paying interest and principal on our debts. A legacy left behind by a government that did not know how to manage the economy except to borrow and spend, and now that it is out of government, it turns out, cannot even balance its own books as a political party and then they got suspended. So please do not lecture the new Government.

Mr Speaker, I thank the honourable Prime Minister and Members of the Coalition Government for their confidence in my new appointment as Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs, an appointment that I am assuming with humility and commitment. I am fully aware of the great responsibility that is placed on the shoulders of those who are called upon by our nation to represent them into the world. Be assured, Sir, that I will give it my utmost loyalty and service.

I take this moment to acknowledge the support of the staff of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government where I previously served. They have my appreciation for their dedication, for being gracious and helpful in their performance of their duties and their help to me in the performance of mine.

Mr. Speaker, our beautiful country is undergoing a positive transformation and a new Fiji is unfolding before our very eyes. A Fiji that has embraced real democracy and good governance. A Fiji that values freedom, inclusiveness, trust and accountability where the people is our focus.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Government’s mandated arm of diplomacy, and the national vanguard reaching out to and managing new fields and relationships, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took a giant leap forward when the People’s Coalition Government took up the baton of leadership. From being tucked under different portfolios, to the forefront where it rightly belongs for Fiji, the regional hub.

Mr. Speaker, this milestone was amplified at the very first official engagement by the honourable Prime Minister in Kiribati where through time-tested Pacific way, he stopped the Pacific Family from coming apart. Our previous government treated our Pasifika neighbours with disdain,

as people unworthy of its attention as it clamoured for a bigger stage. The ridiculous fight over USP funding was a triumph of personal ego over common sense. How could we in Fiji speak confidently in the wider world if we did not have the goodwill of our neighbours? Who were we to talk about the global threats to our region when it was our own government that was the greatest threat to regional unity? But our honourable Prime Minister has moved swiftly to rebuild our bridges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it takes someone who understands and is prepared to take the time to be sensitive to Pasifika, Pasifika identity, Pasifika values and Pasifika sense of affinity to be able to cross the geopolitical, cultural and legalistic lines and offer the hand of hope and trust that can only be offered by those who speak from the heart. The honourable Prime Minister did that. He understands that everything we do as a region from this point onward is possible only upon that platform of unity and solidarity as a Pasifika family.

Mr. Speaker, as countries begin to adjust to a post-pandemic world and the socio-economic development challenges that come with it, a worsening climate and biodiversity crisis, and geopolitical competition, the leveraging of international cooperation and solidarity is even more critical in our diplomacy. The way we frame our issues and interests to shore up support and generate new opportunities is indispensable to building new alliances and agreements. Our efforts are not only to ensure that our interests are protected at the global stage but that desired returns are realised through targeted engagements within our very limited capacity.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will therefore embrace closer working relations with other Ministries and agencies to streamline systems and processes, improve coordination and ease of doing business as we approach our development and security partners. We will be investing in coordinating the levers of Government to ensure that domestic policy and foreign policy are working in tandem at all times.

Our region, Mr Speaker, Sir, is increasingly becoming more complex and contested. The diplomatic lens we wear to tease out and articulate our issues, to manage regional dynamics, navigate our way around associated challenges and opportunities is changing. Our focus remains to conjointly safeguard and strengthen our sovereignty, security and prosperity. Our foreign policy is guided by our commitment to multilateralism and regionalism. Our diplomacy will therefore be determined, calculating and persistent.

Recent official bilateral and multilateral meetings attended by the honourable Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Ministers, Government Ministers and Senior Government Officials deepen our relations and shore up cooperation. We have been forthright, honest and willing to do our part. These are building blocks to new frontiers and a re-calibrated diplomatic landscape.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the contested space we find ourselves, we endeavour to maintain constructive relations with development partners while upholding good practices within the international rules-based order. This approach gives us the safeguard for desired returns from bilateral and multilateral engagements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the \$4 million allocated for the re-opening of the three diplomatic Missions in Port Moresby, Washington and Kuala Lumpur signals the Coalition Government's commitment to restoring Fiji's presence to countries that have been and will continue to be major security and development partners. The focus will be on widening cooperation on a number of complementary fronts. Our selectiveness is key to optimising our opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our physical presence in selected regions and countries is needed at a time when we reach out to our friends for we do not have everything we need to deal with issues that are

transnational in nature and require cooperative responses. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the general state of disrepair of some of our Mission properties after years of neglect reflects very poorly on us.

As I have heard so many times since the Budget Address, maintenance seems to have been forgotten by some. It is something that seems to have been forgotten by the previous Government and something for which we now must find funds to catch up. The \$2.2 million allocated for capital refurbishment work is a start and, therefore, greatly welcomed. I commend our Mission staff who carry on their work with diligence and loyalty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the \$37.9 million allocated, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will raise its deliverance capacity to be more active and cohesive. An immediate focus is in enabling the Ministry to operate smartly with tested internal controls and accountability measures, a focus that the Coalition Government is bringing to all its decisions and actions.

There is an increased expectation on our Missions, Mr. Speaker. This includes the facilitation of other Ministry engagements abroad which are not yet budgeted for. The Ministry will coordinate closely with other sectors within and outside Government, to find creative ways of providing needed support with allocated resources.

Mr. Speaker, there is renewed emphasis on serving our diaspora communities, the latter having contributed substantially to our economy in recent years. Our diaspora community is not a side issue. It is central to our image, voice and our purpose abroad.

Our diaspora community are initiators, they are suppliers and markets, investors and facilitators of humanitarian assistance. They are our people, we will work with them and together, find new strategies to optimising their potential in their new country of residence to help grow our own economy, our skills and our human capacities at home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will continue to reach out to other Ministries in an effort to strengthen coordination of our efforts at the international front. In these, we are mindful of the 2030 Agenda, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including other umbrella Development Agendas that will continue to underscore the Ministry's attention.

Mr. Speaker, negotiations and advocacy on labour mobility, treaties and conventions, international security, trade, human rights, Small Island Development States and social economic agendas are priority areas in the Ministry's core business. We will endeavour to provide timely support to counterparts in the formulation and coordination of the Government's positions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the work of the Fiscal Review Committee and the Ministry for Finance must be commended. They have put forth a budget that is smart and restorative. It is an example of what can be achieved when we are united, open and consultative.

Durable solutions are realised when the very people whose lives are affected are involved in that search for solutions. This Budget is a demonstration of this inclusiveness. It is part of the Coalition Government's ongoing work towards re-setting our moral compass in terms of governance, economic management and real and practical help for our people.

I, therefore, commend the great work of the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance and his team, and hereby give my full support to the Budget. God bless Fiji.

HON. S. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise to contribute to the 2023- 2024 Budget Debate. Before I do, I would like to thank you for allowing me an opportunity to respond to the Budget.

I also thank the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Ministers and all honourable Members on the Government side. I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition and the 26 Members of Parliament that make up the Opposition, although we are being denied parliamentary representative democracy with our two seats yet to be filled.

I would like to start my response to the 2023-2024 Budget on the Ministry of Civil Service. The Ministry, under Head 17, is being allocated \$50.6 million in the Budget. In the 2022-2023 Budget, the Ministry was allocated \$2.74 million. In the 2021-2022 Budget, the allocation was \$2.4 million and in 2020-2021, the Ministry was allocated \$3 million.

Looking at the 2023-2024 National Budget, there has been a big increase of 95 percent in the Ministry's allocation. Every year, the Ministry ran under one programme. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this reflects the Government's wasteful spending and yet, the honourable Minister of Finance blames the last Administration for the wasteful spending.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the rent of office space amounts to \$34 million plus. The rent of all UN Offices is \$3.3 million, and renovation of quarters and public buildings is being allocated \$3 million. It accumulates 95 percent of the Ministry's allocation, which is my point that this big spending could be used on other programmes or development work to help Fijians who are in need or fix road that needs to be looked into. Can we be enlightened on who are the private stakeholders? I hope that they are not the supporters of the Coalition Government that are looking to gain from public funds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, only \$3 million for renovation of quarters which house the Government official is understood, but to requisite \$46.6 million to the Ministry of Civil Service is a very familiar sight for corruption. Why cannot the allocation be stored under the Ministry for Finance for monitoring and control purpose?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is my hope that funding for SGDs, Global Leadership Programme, Kizuna Programme, Agri-Net Programme, DRR Programme and Clean City Programme with JICA, for which \$972,132 will be put to good use.

As stated by the honourable Minister of Finance, I will quote from what he said:

“And let me remind everyone, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that COVID-19 pandemic was not the underlying cause of our problems. COVID-19 certainly made them worse, but this has been a decade of missed opportunities.”

We had nine consecutive years of economic growth from 2010 to 2018. I thank the honourable Minister for finally admitting to the fact that he chose to ignore for a very long time, and the above quote is just one of the many. If you look into the 2018-2019 Budget, the economy was at its peak. Then COVID-19 struck the world and Fiji was badly hit for two years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before coming into power, the honourable Minister criticised FNPF and the Government for using FNPF members' funds to support their families. After the 2023-2024 Budget Address, the honourable Minister was on record on “Straight Talk”, thanking FNPF for the support during the two years of COVID-19.

In 1998, the FNPF net worth was \$2.15 billion under the SVT Government. In 2005, the FNPF net worth was \$3.2 billion under the SDL Government. During COVID-19 year which was 2021, the FNPF net worth was \$8.2 billion. This was a great achievement for FNPF during COVID-19. The honourable Minister also criticised Fiji Airways, which is now ranked 14th in the world and the leading airline company in the region, way above New Zealand and Australia. This is because of the smart and decisive leadership of FijiFirst.

If we would have gone with the suggestion from honourable Tabuya or honourable Professor Prasad to sell or eat the planes, we would not have reached the climax that we have achieved today, and I congratulate Fiji Airways for the achievement.

The honourable Minister of Finance also claims that we left the great debt of \$10 million, but what he fails to tell the public on the separation between domestic debt and foreign debts, the values of debts and the history behind these debts.

If only the honourable Minister of Finance can be honest about the simple facts, the people of Fiji can see the reality of the current status of Fiji's economy and the truth behind these debts, then only the honourable Minister can stop the blame game and work on taking Fiji forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was really surprised with the current Coalition Government's borrowing which is \$223.2 million, according to the RBF Quarterly Reports for the first three months of 2023. Imagine, in three months, the amount of debt this Government has accumulated, only then can you understand where we are heading in years to come. This clearly shows that the Government can spend so much on themselves, and the people will pay for their bills through increased VAT and TAX. That is why the Government is manipulating the members of the public, taxpayers and corporate businesses that we must be ready for the hard times ahead, while Fiji Water gets a tax exemption for seven years along with all other water bottling companies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the Government emptying the pocket of the poor and filling up the pocket of the rich? Going through the Budget, I thank the FijiFirst for eight years of governance - never once we forgot the people of Fiji. Even during COVID-19, we did not tell them, "We will face hard times ahead", but we still found ways to bring Fiji back on the world map.

If there was no money in Government as claimed by the honourable Minister of Finance, then how he, in six months, has been able to table a Budget with an estimate of \$4.33 billion and net deficit percentage of GDP 4.8 percent? That clearly shows that FijiFirst left the economy in good state, and the job of the Government that takes over is to stop complaining and move it to the next level.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. S. KUMAR.- Fiji was the third country in the world to recover from COVID-19 which speaks volume about FijiFirst leadership and our leader then, Mr. Voreqe Bainimarama. Mr. Speaker, Sir,

HON. L.D. TABUYA.-You have two leaders, so who is the leader? It is really confusing.

HON. S. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the revenue collection for the year ending 2022-2023 was \$2.2 billion. Our foreign reserve sits comfortably at \$3.3 billion. The Government fails to secure a protection plan for the people and the increasing cost of living to justify why the capital expenditure increased by \$28 million and operational expenditure increased by \$437.6 million, which clearly reflects that the Government spending is very high and meeting the needs of the people is very low.

If I may put this into percentage, the Coalition Government's capital expense is 39 percent while their operational expenses is 61 percent.

When FijiFirst was in power, its capital expenditure was always more than the operational expenses. FijiFirst prioritised more on the people and less on the Government operation. The people are tired of hearing the story that always replays when the honourable Minister of Finance speaks titled, "16 years of leadership". We would like to hear what is there for people under your leadership. It is time for you to showcase your experience as an experienced Opposition Member for the past eight years and provide better solutions.

The road condition in the recent six months is at its worst up in the Naitasiri, Navosa and Ra Highlands, as well as in streets in towns and cities. This is due to funds that got diverted to fulfil promises such as the Back-to-School Programme, GCC, Girit Day, Ratu Sukuna Day, Fiscal Review, and the consultation list goes on and on. All we see is *salusalu* here, *salusalu* there, opening here, commissioning there, and expensive travels of the 29 Members of the Coalition Government.

The time for partying is over. The people are waiting to see what is going to benefit them and yet, the Government puts a burden on people's shoulders. This is certainly not a great answer for people of Fiji who voted for change.

There are a few questions I would like to ask the Government of the day. Where is fairness? Where is transparency? Where is equality? Where is accountability?

As stated as the theme of the 2023-2024 National Budget - Rebuilding our Future Together, that brings me to my final question, where is togetherness in this Budget when only few groups are benefitting and the majority get to pay the bills? The people have got to realise that this Government does not have a vision.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this can be seen in people's movement for the past six months, people prefer migrating than to stay in Fiji. They are being neglected and marginalised by the Coalition Government which is a greater threat to braindrain in our beloved Fiji. If the Coalition Government wants to talk about human resource development and fails to see the reality, then it needs to relook at their plan for a better Fiji.

Renown economies around the Pacific are keenly following Fiji's economic situation and they have predicted, and I quote, "It is a big Budget. Expenses up significantly but so too is revenue prediction." Economists are looking at the large deficit of \$639 million. They are forecasting that the high VAT could end up slowing the GDP and taking revenue away from Government. Deficit and debt can higher than forecasted, if Government sticks to its expenditure plans.

On modest fiscal tightening over forward estimates, looking at the large deficit, they are forecasting that balanced Budget is still far away. With banks recording a large deficit, it is not a good sign for the economy. People who applied for loans before the change in Government are not accessing the loans due to the uncertainty of the Coalition Government's financial management.

People are either paying their loans or buying policies to safeguard their business and their families' future, but not to take loans. When will the tyre meet the road, honourable Minister of Finance? Basically, all development works officiated in the past six months and in the months to come is the work of the FijiFirst Budget, of the so-called Administration you always replay in all your speeches.

The Viria Water Project is an example of FijiFirst plan to solve the water problem in Nausori, Suva to Lami corridor, and will be open soon. This facility is the biggest in the South Pacific, providing 40 mega litres of treatment plant, benefiting 360,000 Fijians at a cost of \$270 million. Like all others, the Coalition Government will be opening this facility soon.

I would say that the taxation system is at its worst if we pass the 2023-2024 Budget. It will not solve anything but only bring more problem to the economy and the effects will land heavily on the low to middle income earners of Fiji. Sir, 15 percent VAT still does not help.

I will also quote honourable Tabuya's *TikTok* video and I quote, "Increasing of VAT is inhumane. Whoever is responsible must stop it." I will repeat honourable Tabuya's *TikTok* video and I quote; "Increasing of VAT is inhumane. Whoever is responsible must stop it."

It will only increase poverty in Fiji, departure tax increase reduces Fiji's popularity as one of the best tourist destinations, not forgetting departmental tax. The 22 items VAT exempt is not enough to help low-income families because they will worry about other things, for example, ruler, rubber, plates, pots, uniforms, shoes, bags, lunch box, clothing, traveling and shelter. In fact, 21 items were already zero-rated. This Government only adds one item. Could this Government not add 21 more items for the betterment, for the change?

With the increase in cost of living and justifying this to benefit our future, the Coalition Government is failing to secure the low to middle income families with more children. Are we going back in time whereby a child who lives with five or more siblings, will have to sacrifice his future to secure his or her siblings? It is certainly the case, looking at the new TELS Waiver Guideline, and the new policy that comes with it.

The Coalition Government believes in human development but minimising the opportunity. The Government fails to capitalise or plan for basic human rights on the Rights to Education for all Fijians under Section 31 of 2013 Constitution. My advice to the parents, if you are a farmer, fisherman or whatever trade you are in, work hard and plan to save. If you are working and you are enjoying your 7 percent FNPF, increase and enjoy while it lasts because in a few months, you will be funding your child's education in tertiary schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is an ambitious Budget by the ambitious Government. This Budget will make the rich richer and poor poorer. This Budget is uninteresting and lacking in many ways.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with all those said, I do not support the 2023-2024 Budget tabled before Parliament but wish the Coalition Government a very best on implementing their Budget for the so-called benefit of the Fijians.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians and concerned taxpayers; good evening and *bula vinaka*. I stand before you as the final speaker for tonight for this Budget debate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today we are here to discuss the recently released Budget, a financial blueprint that is meant to reflect our collective aspirations, our shared commitment to progress and in many ways, our covenant with the future of Fiji. But it is with deep concern, that I voice my objections to this Budget which falls dramatically short of our taxpayers' expectations and needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the people who are watching this debate today, I want to state with complete conviction that this is the worst self-destructing Budget in the history of Budgets, just like the FBC logo.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Very interesting line, honourable Member.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just this morning, our honourable Leader of the Opposition said that the Government is spending money like drunkards in the nightclub. Mr. Speaker, Sir, instead of keeping metal detectors in front, we should keep breathalysers to check if none of our honourable Members are drunk.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must look back into our history books. From this retrospection, we can clearly see that we have in front of us the largest Budget with the largest deficit in the history of Budgets of Fiji during the non-COVID-19 period. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must congratulate the honourable Minister of Finance. He has made history for preparing the worst Budget ever.

I do not know what chopper-nomics he used to write this Budget, I guess that is what happened when you only have theoretical knowledge and no practical experience.

(Hon. L.D. Tabuya interjects)

(Laughter)

HON. K.K. LAL.- Hold on, I am coming to that.

Since our previous Parliament needed more time to prepare his Budget, I want to take a moment to remember the sons of the *Girmityas*, who actually fought for our nation. These are strong leaders, like Jai Ram Reddy, S.M. Koya and A.D. Patel.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the citizens and the taxpayers who are watching right now, they want the contact numbers of all those Ministers sitting on the other side.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. K.K. LAL.- But that is not available to the citizens, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The previous FijiFirst Government, each and every Minister gave their number to everyone. They are scared of the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have received complaints from students and youth that even the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance is not even picking or replying to the calls of young students. Is this why we have elected this Government? They will know, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The honourable Prime Minister should learn from the example set by the former Prime Minister and the former RFMF Commander, Mr. Voreqe Bainimarama. The former Prime Minister had a clear vision for a free Fiji, without discriminating anyone, from equal citizenry to fair taxation policy for everyone, especially those who extracted and made millions from our natural resources.

These Cabinet Ministers have not even read the Constitution. I am shocked to see that the honourable Minister who is responsible for the security of the nation is quiet. There is an increase in criminal activity, but he is quiet. People are suffering, Mr. Speaker, Sir. There are tax cuts for the rich but more burden for the poor.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during previous Parliament session, the honourable Minister of Finance made disparaging comments about being a law student for too long. As an academic and professor, such a personal attack displays the profound lack of understanding and maturity towards the issues faced by our young population, and that shows the maturity of this Cabinet as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, politicians like the honourable Member should never hold positions of power in this esteemed Parliament.

Let us face it. The truth is, the honourable Prime Minister is afraid of FijiFirst because he, being the Chair of the Constitutional Offices Commission (COC), has failed to appoint any commissioners to the Electoral Commission to confirm the replacement of our seats. This raises the question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, why is the honourable Prime Minister afraid?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to say to the honourable Prime Minister, “*Kua ni rere, kua ni rere*. This FijiFirst government is your friend as well. You need to work with us, but why are you not giving us our seats?

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we look at this Budget, we see the biggest betrayal by this Government. VAT increase - the substantial hike in VAT will cause the cost of essential goods and services to increase. The impact of this decision will be felt far and wide - from the bustling markets of Suva to the quiet fishing villages along the coast of Cakaudrove. The burden of this increase will weigh heavily on the people of Fiji, especially those who are struggling to make ends meet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us not forget the burden that this new VAT hike places on our vibrant community of SMEs, the backbone of our Fijian economy. These enterprises, already contending with the challenging market conditions, will now face the massive task of managing higher operational costs, while trying to keep their prices competitive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, corporate tax has also increased by 5 percent, together with the VAT increase of 6 percent. This is a total of 11 percent increase. That means on average, the value of goods and services will increase by a whopping \$10 for every \$100 spent. Now, the big question here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the income tax, where do you think the inflation will go?

Well, it will trickle down to the consumer, that means they will pay even more. This kind of small-minded vision is what we expect from the Budget. Some Members have already talked about lamb chops, so let us not talk about lamb chops.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Public Works Department (PWD), some citizens have called PWD or renamed it as Potholes Works Department. They have been given \$5 million, to do what? The same job as FRA?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget has demonstrated a complete disregard of the needs and aspirations of our young people. There is a shocking absence of youth policies and initiatives. The allocation for the first home buyers' initiative has been reduced, despite the fact that it has positively impacted the lives of many young individuals.

From the beginning of their term we can only see these honourable Ministers jetting off to overseas countries, wasting taxpayers' funds on six months of holiday, while the people of Fiji suffer. What have they come up with? This 15 percent VAT, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The honourable Prime Minister is already jetting off to some countries, I guess. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has been cheating the people of Fiji from the beginning and lying to our hardworking youth and taxpayers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they said they are repaying the debt, but that is not true. Again, they have lied to the people of Fiji. This Budget is a refinancing Budget, which means not paying debt. Another lie, and this is the biggest lie of all.

I cannot see honourable Gavoka here because he is the main person who should be listening to this. Before the Election, Mr. Speaker, Sir, SODELPA Members and the honourable Prime Minister also went on *TikTok* doing this. He said that they will remove the TELS debt. They went and begged students for their votes and the students gave them their vote. Now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, without consulting the students, the same Government changes their condition from one form of debt to another form of debt.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. K.K. LAL.- When they said “free education”, they should have delivered on their promise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also astonishing to note that the Government did not bother to read the Constitution before bringing a motion to Parliament which had to be corrected by honourable Koya.

It is clear that many of these Members of Parliament, particularly the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Justice and maybe some other Ministers, like the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs have no understanding of this Constitution. If I ask them, what is Chapter 8 Part A of the Constitution, he will not be able to answer. So, let me answer, Chapter 8 – Accountability; Part A – Code of Conduct. You should be learning that. This book is not a joke. Because of this Constitution, all the Ministers, even the honourable Prime Minister who is sitting there, would not be breaching Sections of the Constitution.

In the previous Budget Response in July 2020, the honourable Minister of Finance called on the FijiFirst government to reduce the size of Cabinet size to decrease borrowing. However, in a glaring display of hypocrisy, honourable Rabuka’s Government now boasts the largest Cabinet in the history of Fiji with 19 Ministers and 10 Assistant Ministers. Congratulation again, you have made history. *Khali baat iske*, Mr. Speaker, Sir, empty words.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in February, the media reported that the honourable Minister of Finance had discovered instances of wastages and financial negligence within the Government. Yet, he turns a blind eye and allocates millions of dollars for wasteful events, even including a questionable allocation of \$200,000 to some organisation named Global Girit Institute - an organisation where the honourable Minister’s wife is a trustee and this is on public record. Why I am bringing this here is because that is taxpayers’ money and he should be answerable to the taxpayers. These actions expose the lack of transparency and accountability within this Government.

Furthermore, it is concerning that the same individual associated with the Global Girit Institute, one of those individuals, is also allegedly heading Pacific Polytech, which is receiving a grant of \$1 million. Why is this institution favoured over our Government-owned Fiji National University (FNU), or local universities, like University of Fiji. The honourable Minister and his Party, Mr. Speaker, Sir, must be investigated for potential conflict of interest. Something is fishy and the taxpayers deserve to know these answers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji are not only on life support but this Government itself is on life support, desperately trying to save their failing marriage. Their claim that this Budget addresses the challenges we face are empty and misleading. I do not know why the honourable Prime Minister appointed honourable Professor Prasad as the Minister of Finance, there are other capable Ministers in Cabinet, so he should reshuffle his Cabinet Ministers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, something has also been brought to my attention that Fiji Water, that recently received a tax exemption, their lawyers are Munro Leys. Apparently, one of the senior lawyers at Munro Leys, Mr. Richard Naidu, is also the Chairman of the Fiscal Review Committee appointed by the honourable Minister of Finance, Mr. Speaker, Sir. You can connect the dots and it all connects to itself.

At the same time, in the beginning of this year, the honourable Prime Minister visited Fiji Water Head Office in the USA. Why tax the poor and not the rich, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

I say this, it is not just about numbers, figures or percentage, it is about our people. It is about the people who have voted you to this Chamber. It is about the people who have put you here. It is about the people who gave us the mandate under this Constitution to fulfil their wishes, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I urge the Government to revisit this path and make decisions that truly serve all Fijians. The honourable Minister of Finance can cry all about the past. In fact, he should read the comments on social media - just get on with it and stop wasting time. I do not think his echo chamber told him all these, it might have hurt his ego, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, have you seen the condition of our roads? Everywhere, there are potholes. They do not care because they are riding in their black cars and redlights. They are not driving those vehicles, it is driven by their drivers. They are saving all the potholes, but what about the common Fijians, what about the common people? She is laughing, she does not care about people.

(Hon. L.D. Tabuya interjects)

HON. K.K. LAL.- What about the people, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

They have failed to provide effective leadership, prioritise the needs of the youth and address the concerns of the working class, and display transparency and accountability. Their false promises and lies have deeply disappointed the people of Fiji. And I feel sorry for those who have voted for them and who will now suffer, I really do.

So, it is time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we should *tuba* this Government. It is time for change and we need true leaders, like FijiFirst, to step forward and restore faith in the governance of the nation.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Member, for your lively contribution.

Honourable Members, whilst still on that, I thank you for your participation today, bearing with the long sitting, but at the same time, I just want to simply ask if some level of respect could also be shown here. We may go out of our way in trying to say what we want to say, but at the same time, we still need to ensure the decorum of Parliament is kept and maintained.

The honourable Prime Minister has been labelled. Honourable Members, he has served his time as a Prime Minister, he has done great things, just like the previous Prime Minister. So, our duty is to ensure that we have that respect all the time. That is all I want to ask you to observe, come tomorrow.

I will now adjourn Parliament until tomorrow.

The Parliament adjourned at 9.25 p.m.