

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 11TH JULY, 2023

[CORRECTED COPY]

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TUESDAY, 11TH JULY, 2023

The Parliament met at 10.06 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All honourable Members were present, except the honourable Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, honourable S.S. Kirpal, honourable A.A. Maharaj and honourable V. Naupoto.

POINT OF ORDER

Breach of Standing Orders – Hon. Ketan Lal

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- I rise on a Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir, under Standing Order 62(1), 62(4)(a) and (d). Under Standing Order 62(1), I raise a Point of Order against honourable Ketan Lal for imputing an improper motive against another Member of Parliament, the honourable Prime Minister, by imputing that is because of the honourable Prime Minister, there is a rise in crime rate in this country without providing any evidence or statistics to connect the honourable Prime Minister to the rise in crime rate.

Under Standing Order 62(4)(a) and I quote:

“It is out of order for a member, when speaking, to use –

(a) offensive words against Parliament or another member.”

Honourable Lal had stated offensive words against the honourable Prime Minister by referring to his age, that he is not fit to lead, and told him to go out. That is discrimination, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to speak about age alone and to pick on the honourable Prime Minister about that.

I will quote Standing Order 62(4)(d), as follows:

“It is out of order for a member, when speaking, to use -

(d) words that are likely to promote or provoke feelings of ill will or hostility between communities or ethnic groups within Fiji.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Lal referred to the 1987 *coup* for no other reason than to raise the issue or to attack race relations in Fiji. Yesterday, not one honourable Member from this side of Parliament attacked the former Prime Minister or mentioned about the 2006 *coup*. In fact, it was the honourable Leader of the Opposition who volunteered that information because it is the aim of the Coalition Government and I would like to think the whole Parliament, is to bring national reconciliation and unity into this Parliament and to this country. If there is for no other reason but to raise that issue alone by itself, under Standing Order 62(4)(d), they are words that are likely to promote ill-will and feelings amongst our ethnic groups in Fiji. I raise my points under the Standing Order for the honourable Parliament to deal with.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we are on the verge of confirming the Minutes of yesterday’s meeting. In the process, this has now been raised by the honourable Leader of the

Government in Parliament. So, in effect, what the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament is putting forward is for us to look at the Standing Orders, maybe the Minutes highlighting this particular incident could be expunged from the Minutes that we are about to confirm. It is quite a sticky issue.

As Speaker, I do not blame honourable Ketan for the outburst he made yesterday. We, as part of the Secretariat, find that we are falling short of addressing this very critical issue of the role of MPs in a workshop that should have been undertaken, where new Members are slowly shown the rope as to how to behave and lead themselves in this august Parliament. It is not an easy process.

The Standing Orders raised by the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament is one that should have been raised when the incident occurred. We are not far off, just couple of hours when that happened at about quarter past nine last evening. I did sound a cautious remark in this august Parliament by asking each and every honourable Member to please, try and observe a lot of respect in this august Parliament so that we can maintain and properly ensure the decorum of Parliament is well protected - how you speak, let alone how you dress to come into this august Parliament and how you address your honourable colleagues on both sides of the aisle.

We are all equal here, honourable Members. What the Standing Orders entail is something that will lead up to privilege. I am not trying to curtail the way the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament is trying to address this by raising that Point of Order, but before we go any further, I would like to move to the floor of Parliament for the sake of addressing this very important issue that we try and observe Standing Order 6 – Suspension of Standing Orders for a couple of minutes. Let us discuss this. Let us thrash it out amicably and amongst ourselves as to how to address this.

It is no use referring it to the Privileges Committee for the sake of addressing this very important issue, that we try and observe Standing Order 6. We suspend Standing Order for a couple of minutes and let us discuss this, let us thrash it out amicably and amongst ourselves as to how to address this. It is no use referring it to the Privileges Committee because we have not had a chance to discuss this amongst ourselves.

The honourable Ketan Lal is a young and vibrant Member of Parliament, he hails from Savusavu. That affects me in my traditional role as well, but be that as it may, the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, perhaps if you may move Standing Order 6 so that we can suspend Standing Orders and we give ourselves about 30 minutes, let us debate this very well so this does not happen again.

In the absence of the workshop that we are supposed to have, may I add a little bit on that? We are being provided money by overseas donors especially the Government of Japan where the money has been funneled to the United Nations because they keep a watch and help us a lot in our training to become better Members of Parliament and better persons in Parliament and how we could effectively undertake our role as well.

But the cost of providing this, I raised with the honourable Deputy Prime Minister yesterday is beyond what they have budgeted for and as such that may not happen, but this has erupted. And if that is accepted by the honorable Leader of the Government in Parliament then I suggest that we go first to suspending Standing Orders so that we can make an attempt instead of referring everything to the Privileges Committee. Let us try and resort this and discuss it, after 30 minutes we resume again like they do in the United Nations and let us continue the daily duty that we are required to undertake as already approved by the Business Committee for the Standing Orders for today.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move under Standing Order 6 that:

The Standing Orders be suspended in part by leave of Parliament so as to discuss the matter that is before Parliament that is being raised myself.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, is there any opposition? There being no opposition, the motion is carried and Parliament is suspended for 30 minutes.

This is a rare thing to occur, we usually suspend Standing Orders for 51 to kick-in everytime, but here we are suspending Standing Orders so that we may freely discuss this. I am not trying to defend the honourable Member here but given that we have not had a chance to properly induct our new honourable Members into this august Parliament and the etiquette that goes with it plus the protocol, the floor is now open for debate. The honourable Prime Minister, you were the so-called victim here because of the way he made his statement yesterday but I did sound out a cautious advice yesterday evening before we rose.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I was the subject of the attack, I think I should have a chance to speak. I understand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we have not had that workshop, nor had we had the workshop before the suspension of the former Leader of the Opposition. It was sort of understood that as we stood for Elections to represent people who voted for us, we would have that good sense, maturity and wisdom to be able to conduct ourselves in this august Parliament in a manner in keeping with the status, reputation and the history of Parliament.

I sat and listened to the honourable Member last night and I could not interject, I did not want to respond. It was still the first six months of our term in Parliament and the only thing that concerned me was his reference to matters that I had apologized to the nation about. Many senior members of the Government at that time (1987) and senior members of the Indo-Fijian communities in Fiji have accepted my apologies and some later on have tried to ask me not to continue to apologize.

The fact that the honourable Member brought this up yesterday, perhaps shows the need for me to keep reminding people that there is a need to forgive and move forward and not to go back to things that bring back malice into our hearts and malicious words that perhaps we do not really mean but at the spur of the moment, the heat of the debate, it comes up.

I only hope Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we can have that workshop soon, perhaps the honourable Members of the Opposition have not really been spoken to by the honourable Leader of the Opposition because yesterday most of them were referring to our leader and referring to a gentleman who was a former leader and no longer in Parliament.

I hope Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the honourable Leader of the Opposition as leader of their parliamentary group at the moment could, before the workshop, speak to the honourable Members of the Opposition and tell them what they are going to be hearing from the workshop anyway. As far as I am concerned, I am not offended, I am used to it. It has been almost 50 years of abuse and it is like water off a duck's back.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, let me first convey on behalf of the Opposition Members our gratitude and I acknowledge you for your wisdom in allowing us to have some discussions on this issue before we proceed with the Order of Business as already laid out and agreed by the Business Committee. Thank you, Sir, for allowing us to discuss this very important issue.

Let me first of all again assure yourself, Sir, and all honourable Members of Parliament particularly on the Government side that I, as the Leader of the Opposition take full responsibility for the conduct of our Members inside in Parliament. Once again, I take full responsibility for that, Sir. Be assured that this morning when we had our caucus meeting at 8.30 a.m., although we were not all present, I am going to convene another meeting during lunch hour to address some of the key issues particularly with regards to the debate on the Budget and most particularly about the conduct in Parliament as well given your concluding remarks as we finished off yesterday's session about decorum in Parliament.

I just wish to assure you, Sir, and of course the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, Cabinet Ministers and the Government side that I have raised the issue this morning with the Members of the Opposition about decorum and of course, the words that we use in Parliament as well to express our feelings, ideas and thoughts but we need to argue on facts and express ourselves in the proper context as well. So, I wish again to assure you, Sir, that I have addressed that issue about the decorum in Parliament with the honourable Members of the Opposition this morning and I have also spoken to the honourable Ketan Lal. I intend to have another session with him probably later today just to guide him in certain aspects of his conduct inside Parliament.

As you have alluded to, Mr. Speaker, Sir, young and vibrant and very enthusiastic about the issues, passionate as well, patriotic but proper guidance. We are here as mentors for the young and aspiring leaders and politicians who are coming up in the country and we want to raise and nurture them to be good leaders to take over the baton as we finish from here. Huge potentials in the honourable Member, and I hope that this will not proceed to the Privileges Committee, and we sort it out here in Parliament this morning and should Government think that certain or particularly on the areas referred to, be withdrawn from the Minutes of the sitting. I probably can ask the honourable Member to withdraw that portion that the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament is referring to.

But again, let me assure the august Chamber once again, Sir, that I take full responsibility and I have taken some actions this morning to address that. This is why we need the training but while waiting for that, we will sort the matter out and ensure that there is proper conduct in this august Parliament. That very briefly is my contribution. As I have stated, I have taken some responsibilities already and we will be receptive to suggestions from the Government side so that this can be sorted this morning, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I called the honourable Prime Minister last night when we finished from here just to apologise to him because what was said last night by honourable Ketan Lal was not only disgraceful, it was in bad taste, it was designed to fan further racial ill will and hostility between the communities. As the honourable Prime Minister said himself, I was around, say in 1987, and had started my work. I was probably younger than honourable Ketan Lal and honourable Rinesh Sharma. We know what happened. We have history. We saw what happened since 1987. We saw honourable Prime Minister over those many years. We saw when he was Prime Minister. We saw when he led this country into a process of reconciliation and formulation of the 1997 Constitution. The 1990 Constitution, Sir, was imposed on us under which the honourable Prime Minister was the Prime Minister. He had no reason. He had the majority to change that Constitution. That was a landmark historical, leadership shown by the honourable Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition very much for stating what he had stated, taking the responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, in this august Chamber in the past, we have suspended Members of Parliament when I was in Opposition for statements much less hostile than what was uttered by honourable

Ketan Lal. In fact, in the last sitting of Parliament when he spoke, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was tempted to refer him to the Privileges Committee then, if you look at the *Daily Hansard* and the speech that he made. Sir, as you quite rightly pointed out, I know him. He once used to be a very strong National Federation Party supporter. I do not know what happened. He moved to some people, he became FijiFirst. He is a Member of Parliament. I respect him and as the honourable Leader of the Opposition said, I myself was an activist during 1987 and beyond that.

We like young people to be in Parliament to contribute and we want them to grow outside the shadows of some others, but what I heard yesterday, not only from him, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but from some others as well were some disgraceful personal attacks, attacks on the family. I sat on the Opposition, Sir, for eight years. Never once I attacked the honourable Members' families.

In politics, Sir, in this day and age, the families have a lot of burden on them. When you make those kind of statements as was made by him, I do not mind, Sir. I always remember Winston Churchill's famous saying where he said that you will never reach your destination if you stop and throw stones at every dog that barks. I always tell myself and I accept what people say about me.

I think if this matter is not to go to the Privileges Committee, then honourable Ketan Lal must unreservedly apologise to the honourable Prime Minister and give an undertaking that he will not repeat, not only to the honourable Prime Minister but to other honourable Members on the Government side, or even with his own colleagues.

I know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were other things said by other Members yesterday, those who are experienced, we will deal with that separately, but on this, I accept your very wise intervention and counsel in this matter. I once again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, apologise to the honourable Prime Minister on behalf of whoever is there, if they are members of the Indo-Fijian community, in fact a lot of them called me last night and they were deeply disturbed by the way in which honourable Ketan Lal spoke and spoke disparagingly not only about the Prime Minister calling him incompetent, but also invoking incidents (1987) to invoke racial hatred, racial ill-will and link it to crime and other things, when in fact, we should be hosing all those down in the social media that comes. Otherwise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will be stuck.

Past is important, we look at history, it is important, we learn from history. She is commenting but she also talks about 1987. Already we are talking about how to get over it and here, she is still not pleased with what has happened and that is the arrogance that we want to take out of this Parliament. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we are to move forward with this, then I move that we ask honourable Ketan Lal to apologise unreservedly and give an undertaking that he would not repeat this.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must applaud the manner this is being addressed today. Being a relatively new Parliament, we need to have this discussion and to set the standards that should be becoming of this august House in this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the tone has been set by the honourable Prime Minister from the beginning of the administration; a tone of humility, forgiveness and reconciliation to move forward. Again, today he showed to us that, let us have this dialogue, let us agree on how to address these issues and move forward. That is something that we must all celebrate.

For the young Members of Parliament, there is a line that you do not cross and that we must always remember that. There are some of us who have sat in this Parliament for the last eight years, things got heated but we knew that you do not go beyond a certain line and those who did, were penalised. We do not mind dialogue on policies, you can disagree with us, you can hit us, you can attack us on policies – no problems. That is what we are here for, but one thing we must remember,

we must treasure the cosmopolitan and the heterogeneous make up of our country and that takes a lot of tender loving care and not to upset the equilibrium that we must keep every day.

I know we have made mistakes in the past, but we are a new generation. This is a new Fiji and from this experience, let us move forward and make this Parliament the light that our people need to help navigate our way forward. I would urge us all to please know the limits that are there, protect our Parliament and let us all move together as one people. We do not mind any attack on our policies on what you believe in, but please let us keep it within the lines of civility.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Since we are talking about respect, Mr. Speaker, Sir, actually I wanted to meet you in person. After my maiden speech, I had the honourable Minister of Finance “eye to eye” connection doing this to me. I am a new Member of Parliament; see he is smiling. Is this the respect you give the young ones? I took all that night to prepare and then he says on national television, “oh, I know who wrote it for you”, as if we did not go to school or we were uneducated. How does it reflect on us? He said it to a few other Members and this is just on the topic of respect and this is something I wanted to put before you.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Sir, I think if we have a prolonged debate on this, there will be many things that will be raised with respect to the behaviour in this Parliament. I believe that one of the most important weapons (if you want to put it that way) in an MP's arsenal is the right to freedom of speech. I am not saying, I condone anything at the moment, but it is a right and a privilege given under Standing Order 133 with respect to every Member and any other person speaking in Parliament having the freedom of speech and debate, but it is subject to the Standing Orders.

Within those Standing Orders, you, yourself, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have the authority to actually do something about it, if a particular Member is out of order and with respect to his disorderly conduct. You can actually throw them out of Parliament, if I remember correctly, I think once or twice that has happened. These Standing Orders actually contain a lot of powers that you have, Sir, with respect to dealing with these issues and I commend you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for letting us deal with this today. All of us must remember that freedom of speech is not given lightly, we must be careful in how we use it. I think both sides of Parliament have actually gone at each other's throats.

If I could just relay a little story and historically, Sir, I am sure you will appreciate this and the honourable Prime Minister. It is a very private story, but I will say it. As you know, my late father was on this side of Parliament, at that time the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara was the Prime Minister, and I happened to be asked by him, after my father had passed away to go across and see him one day at the big white house.

We had a very long conversation and he said to me, “My boy, remember your father and I used to go hammer and tongs at each other. You will remember this, son. No quarter given, but the minute we walked out that door, we would go to Fong Lee's and have lunch.” That is the spirit that everyone should have in this Parliament. I practice the same, as a matter of fact, I spoke on that very same issue yesterday with the honourable Kamikamica. That is how we should conduct ourselves.

We must be mindful, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we have a history, and I am sure the honourable Prime Minister will agree that that is part of history. I am not saying cross the line and become offensive, but there are historical things that will be said, we cannot and must not, not talk about it. Our history is important, whether it be bad or good, and we must also remember that particular right of freedom of speech must be maintained at all times. I understand his zeal, as you say rightfully, and his fervour, maybe it needs to be nurtured, I understand all of that. However, we cannot use today's platform to take it to another level where we are actually going to start feeling restrained in the way we are able to speak here. I got out at hammer and tongs with honourable Professor Prasad,

he does the same to me, but when I go outside that door, it is never personal. None of us should ever do that. In the words of the late Ratu Mara, Sir, “lunch at Fong Lee’s.”

That was the way that it was actually resolved. I think the honourable Minister should shout him lunch at Fong Lee’s and maybe have chat about it later on. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the best thing for us to learn from this is, the honourable Leader of the Opposition said he will have a chat, I am sure we all will. He is a young man. There is no need to go any further with this, Sir, but we must be mindful of the fact that these particular Standing Orders contain the right to freedom of speech and it is very important and it is very important that we are, it is not an unfettered discretion. We must remember that, that we cannot do that.

As we see, another occasion has been raised by the young gentleman about honourable Prof. Prasad saying things to him. We have all seen that. Even yesterday we have seen him do that, but that is okay, it goes on. He called someone a failed lawyer who cannot defend himself and he was not here yesterday but that is okay. He does that. It is just the way he projects himself. But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must not cross the line and I am sure the honourable Prime Minister will understand that historically he will forever be hearing this. He understands that, he is thick skinned and he knows. So, my point is, Sir, please let us not cross the line with respect to our privilege given to us within the Standing Orders of freedom of speech, but I am sure on this occasion, there will be a, as the honourable Leader of the Opposition has said, it is something that we will have to deal with and we can deal with it within ourselves. I am grateful also to the Government for dealing with it in this particular manner.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think we have heard quite a lot just a while ago, having shared the same thoughts that we have as regards what we have before us. We have heard from the honourable Leader of the Opposition, he is still to finish what he intends to do. He had a few meetings and he still wants to continue, one with the honourable Ketan. I understand where you are coming from, honourable Deputy Prime Minister Prasad, but it is that same respect that we would like to see. We leave things with the honourable Leader of the Opposition as he stated in this Parliament, that he still has a few more meetings. One is with the honourable Ketan and the rest with the honourable Members of the Opposition Caucus before they will be able to take a position clearly as part of the Opposition on how they are going to be addressing this situation, and thereafter. So, I beg your indulgence once more, honourable Members that we agree that we leave it entirely now to the honourable Leader of the Opposition.

(Honourable Member interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- No. He is not going to say anything because he has not spoken with the honourable Leader of the Opposition.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- My apologies, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have already spoken with him this morning after the Caucus, but I want to again sit down with him so that we have more time on the subject. I have spoken to him about it this morning and I have asked him if can also address Parliament on the issue.

MR. SPEAKER.- You want him to address Parliament now?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Yes, because I have already spoken to him this morning, but very briefly.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Leader of the Opposition, the honourable Prime Minister and honourable Members of Parliament. Democracy comes with a cost, and at this juncture,

I withdraw my comments that have hurt the democracy of the country and at the same time promise that I will adhere to the Standing Orders before us and ensure that decorum is maintained. I have been called names, but as a young Member I am still learning. I hope that I am forgiven by the honourable Members on the Government side and wish to learn more from the learned politicians and leaders who are present in this Parliament. At the same time, I look forward to the training session that is organised for all Member of Parliament and hope to learn and engage more during that session.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank all the speakers who have spoken before me. I thank the honourable Ketan Lal for his apology and the withdrawal of the comments from the record. On that note, I have been instructed not to take this matter any further and that it will end here. There are no more contributions from our side on the matter.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, what was said by honourable Ketan yesterday if you could all agree to be expunged from the Minutes of the meeting that is now before us to confirm.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Monday, 10th July, 2023, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed, subject to the expunged items that have been mentioned before.

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, yesterday was a lengthy one and I also welcome those joining us in the gallery. There are former Members of Parliament who are here today listening.

Speaker - National Assembly of Korea

Honourable Members, I wish to inform the Parliament that I met with the Speaker of the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, the honourable Kim Jin-pyo during his official visit to Fiji in June. We discussed areas of mutual interest to both Parliaments, and we also discussed the ongoing assistance rendered by the Korean Government particularly in the area of rehabilitation services, which will see the establishment of a new Rehabilitation Center in the old Tamavua Hospital complex along Princess Road.

Delay – Daily Hansard Report

For the information of Honourable Members, the Uncorrected *Daily Hansard* for yesterday's Sitting will be circulated later today.

SPEAKER'S RULING

Points of Order – Hon. Professor B.C. Prasad

Yesterday, we saw a bit of fiery exchanges that occurred on the floor of Parliament, and I intervened by stating that the Secretary-General will take note of those exchanges that happened on the floor. For the information of honourable Members, a Point of Order pursuant to Standing Order 62(4) was raised yesterday by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Strategic Planning and National Development and Statistics.

Honourable Members, whilst the Uncorrected Hansard Report for yesterday has not been finalised, I can confirm that I have reviewed the relevant excerpts in question.

Honourable Members, privilege is accorded to everyone in this august Parliament as a matter of right as stated by a few honourable Members just a while ago and that is pursuant to Standing Order 133, which states, and I quote:

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

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

Therefore, any honourable Member can say whatever they want in Parliament but what you say in Parliament is subject to the Standing Orders. The dignity and respect of this Parliament must at all times be upheld. Honourable Members, it is pertinent to highlight that deliberately misleading Parliament is a very serious matter, and maybe viewed as contempt of Parliament. There are three elements which must be established in order to show that a Member deliberately misled Parliament:

- 1) The statement must, in fact, have been misleading.
- 2) The Member must have known at the time the statement made was incorrect.
- 3) In making the statement, the Member must have intended to mislead Parliament.

The following extract from the Uncorrected *Daily Hansard* from honourable Parveen Bala states, and I quote:

“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?”

The honourable Parveen Bala continued as follows:

“Mr. Speaker, Sir, I came 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. 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.”

Honourable Parveen Bala further stated:

“The new scholarship system that replaced TELS, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a selling-out of the principle for equal access to higher 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 as TELS, as

they may be, is the only way to have a system that provides the most accessible means to higher education 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”.

In both statements, the honourable Parveen Bala did not provide proof or evidence. In respect to Standing Order 62(4) it states, and I quote:

“It is out of order for a member, when speaking, to use -

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

As I indicated earlier, deliberately misleading Parliament is indeed a serious matter which can also be a contempt of Parliament. It is equally important to ensure that whilst speaking in Parliament one needs to be factually correct as the public is listening and we do not want to mislead the public or create any community or ethnic tensions.

Furthermore, allegations of bringing dishonour and disrepute to Parliament are very serious in nature which should not be taken lightly without proper factual foundation. Examples of conducts can be categorised as bringing dishonour and disrepute to Parliament or offensive words against Parliament or another Member include statements which had been referred to the Privileges Committee.

Therefore, in light of the above, I hereby rule that the honourable Parveen Bala must provide proof that the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance did say those actual words, the place he said it, when he said it, the date he said it, or he should withdraw both his statements on those issues before the Budget debates are completed on Thursday, 13th July, 2023. I further rule that in the event that these are not done, the matter will then be referred to the Privileges Committee for consideration.

LIQUOR (AMENDMENT) BILL 2023

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the –

- (a) Liquor (Amendment) Bill 2023 (Bill No. 16/2023), be considered by Parliament without delay.
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a standing committee or other Committee of Parliament; and
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Friday, 14th July, 2023 but that ample time be given to debate the Bill after the vote on the 2023-2024 Appropriation Bill 2023 and Consequential Bills with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Liquor Act 2006 provides for, *inter alia*, the

regulation of liquor licensing and permitted hours for the sale of liquor and as generally had a direct link to the opening hours of various venues which sell liquor.

Under the Schedule to the Act, special zones are identified as areas in the city of Suva and township of Nadi. In recent years there has been numerous reports regarding brawls, robberies, attacks during the early hours in Suva and Nadi and these also resulted in serious injuries and loss of lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the Liquor (Amendment) Bill 2023, it seeks to amend the Act to remove the special zones which provides for the sale of liquor for extended hours in taverns, restaurants and nightclubs in areas of Suva and Nadi.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill must be considered urgently to address and assist the social issues arising out long hours of night clubs and the subsequent for consumption of alcohol.

Criminal activity in the early hours of the morning of Suva and Nadi have also resulted in serious injuries or loss of lives and therefore we need to look at one of the solutions to assist in advocating this problem.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honorable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. At the end of the debate, we will have the Right of Reply from the mover.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity. I think the motion at the moment is that we will debate this using Standing Order 51. So, once again the word that I have used before in Parliament - flabbergasted.

While the honorable Turaga who is the Attorney-General was not a Member of the former Opposition and the honorable Member was not here at that time, but the Members of the Government time and time again, we continually say this. Why bring things through Standing Order 51? If this is an issue that is so important why not allow it to be debated through Committee and other means. That is my response to this.

I think it is an issue that needs to be addressed, why do we have to rush it through this way because I think ultimately on Friday we will talk about the contents of this particular motion. But once again, why do we have to rush it? Why cannot we go through the normal processes where we can have a different view being aired and discussed on this particular issue. That is why I object to the idea of this being rushed through Standing Order 51.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may just quickly add to it and I agree with honorable Usamate. In all fairness to all the nightclub owners and the tourists, et cetera, that frequent our bars and taverns post 1.00 p.m. These special economic zones were created for a reason, so again I agree with the fact that you might want to do a consultative exercise with all the nightclub owners, et cetera, before you do this.

Mr. Speaker, it is a considerable amount of revenue that is generated during those hours. I do not drink but I am sure those that drink will agree that there is quite a lot of money that is actually spent. So, there were specific reasons for those particular zones.

Again, that is something that we can argue on Friday but we do not see any reason being proffered by the honorable Attorney-General to say that there is an urgency because of x, y or z, say for in a Bill itself saying that there has been incidents of brawls, robberies and attacks. How does that become attributable to the nightclub opening hours, no one knows. So, the use of Standing Order 51,

we are the ones who did it, we agree. We can use Standing Order 51 sometimes. Who has an urgency, honorable Attorney-General. Why is it going through this particular process?

In your own words have you gone through this consultative exercise with respect to the nightclub owners. I do not think so. Why not allow the Committees to canvas it properly, independently instead of knee-jerk reacting out of something because that particular provision that was made, was done for a very important reason. Ask the officers at that Ministry for Finance they will tell you. Mr. Speaker, I do not think the use of Standing Order 51 for this particular amendment to the Act is quite appropriate at this time, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Just a quick contribution on this one. I am sure the honorable Attorney-General will speak about the consultation that we had. I take the point that ideally, we would like any Bill which is not consequential to go through appropriate Committees and consultation. Honorable Usamate is right, we always argued that non-urgent Bills ought to come through, even if it takes one session of Parliament.

On this one, we had quite a bit of extensive consultation. I take honorable Koya's point that the Committee is probably the right forum to do that. This is really not a substantive Bill in that sense. A lot of consultation was done with the nightclub owners and communities generally. Since we came into Government, a lot of representations have been made to us through consultations that I had. It is a catch-22, I know what you are saying but generally the substance will debate, but generally we thought that this is an urgent Bill that we should go through it, so have two or three days.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Attorney-General, your Right of Reply.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were wide consultations. They were held at the Office of the Solicitor-General, Level 9. Public consultations were also held in Suva where members of the public were invited to come and submit, attend or send in their submissions. Also, in Labasa, Nadi, Lautoka, Beqa, Vanua Levu, Lomaiviti and the Central Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the beginning we said we will be a Government that will listen and consult. This went through Cabinet, Cabinet endorsed it for consultation then we went for consultation. It came back to Cabinet, now we endorse. We care what was going on. We see what is going on. As a responsible Government, we have taken the lead.

As to the honourable Usamate and honourable Koya, on Friday I will give a litany of Bills that were tabled that were not consequential. I do not know why you find it offensive.

Question put.

Votes cast:

Ayes - 28

Noes - 17

Not voted - 8

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- At this juncture, I intend to adjourn Parliament for morning tea and when we will resume when the bell is sounded, I will once again offer the floor to the honorable Attorney-General for his other motion. The Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 11.17 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.52 a.m.

IMMIGRATION (AMENDMENT) BILL 2023

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the –

- (a) Immigration (Amendment) Bill 2023 (Bill No. 17/2023), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament;
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Friday, 14th July, 2023 but that ample time be given to debate the Bill after the vote on the 2023-2024 Appropriation Bill 2023 and Consequential Bills with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I only speak as to why the Parliament must consider the Immigration (Amendment) Bill 2023 without delay. It is hoped that the Members of this august Parliament will also limit their contribution fairly to the motion and substantive contribution to the merits of the Bill itself be made during the debate on Friday, 14th July, 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Immigration Act 2003 amongst other things provides for the regulation of individuals entering or transiting through Fiji and the purpose of such travel. Under the Act, a person who is a non-Fiji citizen cannot enter Fiji unless he or she is a holder of a visa or permit or is exempted under Section 8 of the Act.

Currently, Section 8 of the Act lists the categories of persons who are entitled to enter, reside and work in Fiji without having to obtain a permit under the Act. The Bill, therefore, seeks to amend Section 8 of the Act to now allow a person who is a non-Fiji citizen and whose name is registered in the *Vola ni Kawa Bula* (VKB), hence the registrations for all *iTaukei* people, to be entitled to enter, reside and work in Fiji without obtaining a visa or permit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Act was first passed by the House of Representative and Senate in 2003, there was a provision that allowed for non-Fiji citizens but registered in the VKB to enter, reside and work in Fiji without having to apply for a permit. However, in 2007, this provision was repealed by the Immigration (Amendment) Promulgation 2007 and in doing so, was removed at a time when there was no Parliament and Opposition to question such removal.

Previously, the use of Standing Order 51 has been criticised as Bills were introduced without proper consultations. However, as said earlier and I say it again, from this Government, public consultations were held on the Bill and based on the outcome of these consultations, this Bill is now being introduced in Parliament. There were consultations or representatives from the Office of the Prime Minister, Ministry for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Ministry for iTaukei, Culture, Heritage and Arts, Fiji Revenue and Customs Service, iTaukei Land Trust Board and the the Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission. There have been comprehensive consultations including visits to islands and villages in Lomaiviti, Beqa and Vanua Levu including the consultations that were held in Suva, Nadi and other urban centres.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, once again I would like to raise the notion of objecting to the fact that this issue is once again being brought through Standing Order 51. Over the past eight years, if the honourable Turaga will look to his immediate right, immediately behind him, immediately to his left on this side; these were all the people that used to oppose this issue. The honourable Turaga seems to be under the misguided notion that just because Government has undertaken consultation, that that is all the consultations that is needed.

I need to remind the Government, sitting on this side is the FijiFirst Party which represents almost 50 percent of all the voters in this country. Just because Government has undertaken all those consultations does not mean that it has done all the necessary consultations. I do not see why something that has been in play like this needs to be all of a sudden just taken to Standing Order 51 and dealt with quickly. What is wrong with us undertaking the full requirements of consultation in Parliament through a Committee that calls upon other people that it can question.

We, here on this side of the House did not hear all the comments that were made in the consultations that the Government undertook. If it is brought to Parliament, goes through the normal processes, we will have that opportunity for ourselves as Members of Parliament or Members of the Committee to listen to what the comments that are made by the people and finally, once we go through that full consultation, then we can proceed with deciding whether or not to pass this particular Bill.

Once again Mr. Speaker, Sir, I object once more. We do not agree with this idea that this has to be fast tracked through Standing Order 51.

MR. SPEAKER.- Just some clarification, you mentioned Head 50 or Standing Order 51.

HON. J. USAMATE.- My apologies, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is Standing Order 51.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, just reiterating what my friend to the right, honourable Usamate has actually just mentioned. Yes, we have grave objections to this being brought in under Standing Order 51 and the question that is begged here to be asked is, what is so offensive with respect to this particular Bill that would stop it from being vetted and thoroughly done through Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you are talking about a sovereign country that at the end of the day, this is something that needs to be carefully vented with the Committee and a lot of the Committees have shown a lot of independence when actually making the decisions in the recent times. I think the amendments that are being made probably require a little bit more airing and vetting with respect to what is in it, instead of just saying that we have done a couple of consultations around the country. It really does require the Committee.

My point is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, why is it that the honourable Attorney-General finds it offensive to send it before a Committee? What is the urgency? It is not a Bill that is required with respect to the Budget? What is the actual urgency? I do not think he has actually spelt it out, there are things we will debate obviously at a later time, but I really do not see the need for this to go under Standing Order 51.

I think honourable Usamate has actually mentioned all the other things that there are quite a number of people on the other side who had grave objections to a lot of things that we did when we were in government with respect to Standing Order 51. But in this one, it is quite plain, it is quite

simple. Where is the urgency? What is the urgency? Have we got 20,000 people waiting to actually come into the country and this will provide for them? Are they losing a right? Is there something being lost and we need to do this on that particular urgent basis, I do not see it, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I strongly oppose this particular motion that it is going under Standing Order 51.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are two components which I would like to respond:

1. the amendment of the Act will allow for a regulation to provide for the Fijian diaspora are also permitted to come to Fiji without permit. That has never been done before, that is related and that is why it is urgent to amend the Act before the Regulations are made; and
2. for the first time, a Government who cares for its people and the Fijian diaspora overseas will provide them that right. They should not complain because it came out of the window, no one was sitting, so it is going to go out the window also. But on Friday, that is when we will hear the real issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Votes cast:

Ayes	-	24
Noes	-	21
Not voted	-	8

Motion is agreed to.

INTERPRETATION (AMENDMENT) BILL 2023

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the –

- (a) Interpretation (Amendment) Bill 2023 (Bill No. 18/2023), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament; and
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Friday, 14th July, 2023, but that ample time be given to debate the Bill after the vote on the 2023-2024 Appropriation Bill 2023 and the Consequential Bills with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, very briefly the Interpretation Act 1967, sets out the principles and rules for the interpretation of written laws and public documents in Fiji. The Interpretation (Amendment) Act 2021 or otherwise known as Act 42/2021 provides where any written law authorises or require a person to provide his or her name, the person must provide his or her name as specified on his or her Birth Certificate. And where any written law authorises or request a person to provide any form of identification of himself or herself, the person must provide such form of identification which accurately reflects his or her name as specified on his or her Birth Certificate.

The Interpretation (Amendment) Act 2021 was seen to disadvantage people who chose to use their spouse's surname when providing their name under any written law. Therefore, the Interpretation Bill 2023 seeks to amend the Act to allow a person to use his or her spouses surname when providing their name under any written law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, consultations were held at the Office of the Prime Minister, Ministry for Finance and the Office of the Solicitor-General. The following stakeholders were formally invited by the Office of the Attorney-General for consultation - the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, the Fiji Women's Rights Movement, Fiji Council of Churches, iTaukei Land Trust Board, Fijian Elections Office, Fiji National Provident Fund, Fiji Revenue and Customs Service, Land Transport Authority and the Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration. Public consultations were also carried out in Suva, Labasa, Lautoka, Nadi and outer islands including Lomaiviti, Gau, Batiki and Nairai.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give my contribution to the motion that is before Parliament and that is the Interpretation (Amendment) Bill 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will say that we are against the procedure used – Standing Order 51 because there is nothing urgent. This week, Sir, is just for the Appropriation Bill and Consequential Bill and this particular Bill and the last one is not related to the Budget. Again, I would urge the honourable Attorney-General to come through the right procedure under the Standing Orders and that is to go to the Standing Committees. And all the consultations that he has done is done by Government, most of it done in Lomaiviti, Nairai and Gau and all the islands that he said, probably to his own voters. The consultation done by the Office of the Prime Minister. One of the core functions of legislature (Parliament) is law making and that is why we have Standing Committees. The Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights deals with Bills.

The other thing too that the honourable Attorney-General is missing, this particular Bill came from complaints by women who complained about their voter cards. A Parliament Standing Committee just received a copy of the 2022 Elections Report from Acting Supervisor of Elections and the Acting Supervisor is yet to present the Report before the Committee. Last Friday, the COC has just appointed an interim Chairman for the Electoral Commission. The Electoral Commission with those Commissioners will present the combined Report on the Fiji Elections Report and the Elections Report that will include the findings that should also see the changes in some of our electoral laws.

This Bill has come very fast, and I know the honourable Attorney-General is trying to prove a point here, but he can wait for the right procedure. This is not the right procedure, honourable Attorney-General. That is why yesterday I suggested for a change of the Attorney-General because of these shortcuts and these kinds of breaches and legal blunders happening.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no right time than now. This law was brought in under Standing Order 51, the women of this country were not consulted. The point honourable Bilitavu is raising that it is only an Elections Office issue is deluded because the women who need to change their IDs now is not just limited to the voter ID card. It is now their passport, their driver's licence, bank documents wherever their names are used and the spouse's name held jointly, they need to change that.

The women are being affected as we speak, and this law needs to change so that there is justice for the women of this country. In fact, honourable Bilitavu might be very shockingly surprised to see the statistics from the Fijian Elections Office, and I have asked for that information about the

voters who turned up to vote on that day. They may just be surprised to realise why they lost the elections. I believe it is the women of this country who voted them out.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the height of hypocrisy when you say, “do not ever do this” and then when you are in a position to make the decision to “not to do it” you do the exact opposite.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Shame!

HON. J. USAMATE.- You should be ashamed. That is hypocrisy.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Helping the women!

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is hypocrisy, if you are saying that we should use the due processes of Parliament, as soon as you are in power, you say, “okay when we were on that side, forget all that. Let us do whatever we want to do.” We had the flippant type of ludicrous comments made by the honourable Turaga here. Completely overriding all the things you said for the past eight years.

On that ground, I totally object to this and I object to the absurd illogical logic that was used by the honourable Tabuya.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have just had this garbled confused logic. Yes, we opposed Standing Order 51 This was, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know he is frustrated about lots of things....

HON. P.K. BALA.- Who? Who is frustrated?

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He is using a Hindi word, he is saying *taulo* which means weighing. I do not know what he means because if he has been weighing his own position in the last eight years, then there are a lot to say. The people in this country understand in Hindi what *taulo* means and this guy has been *taulo-ing* all his life but let me come back to that.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Point of Order! You sit down.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The Speaker will tell me, not you. This is the problem with you.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I am addressing the Speaker, not you. I take those words as an offence and I want the honourable Member to withdraw. In the morning he was very quick to talk about respect. What sort of respect are you talking about?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What is your Point of Order?

HON. P.K. BALA.- Withdraw.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, send him out.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Who the hell are you to tell me?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I was just responding to what he said in Hindi, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that makes sense. Let us come back to what we are discussing on this Bill, the need for urgency.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member for clarification, *taulo* is Hindi or *vaka Viti*?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Hindi.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Naisa is laughing.

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, he said to me *taulo* which means I am weighing. So, I said, “well you have been weighing all your life. You could be weighing sugar, weighing fish, weighing *kava*.”

HON. P.K. BALA.- But we know what you are weighing!

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And I know how he is there?

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are destroying Sangam, fix that first.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, can you please ask him, he is just so irritating.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This honourable Member is displaying uncouth behaviour in Parliament.

Coming back to the Bill, this is urgent, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because it was a bad law to begin with because what the previous government was trying to do, by changing all these laws because they wanted to just restrict and restrict through electoral laws and making it difficult ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... for people to participate in the election process. That was a bad law at a bad time and many women are still complaining. If they want to travel, I know at least one that I met has to travel to New Zealand, they had to apply for visa. It was such a big inconvenience that was created unnecessarily because someone just thought, okay this might be a good idea. That is why this Bill is urgent and we support it.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very short and I think I do not have to say

much say for the fact that this is the same thing that we have just raised on the other two Bills. But I just wanted to point out and also support my brother here, the honourable Usamate that it is quite astounding, Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the level of hypocrisy that exists like he rightfully pointed out. We have had eight years of earbashing going on with respect to Standing Order 51. As soon as they change their clothes, they are doing exactly the same thing. We will argue the merits of this particular Bill on another day but the use of it now is what we are actually talking about.

Guess what, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the level of debate just on Standing Order 51 has gone to another level. The insults are now flying around, and the point is, you know when we tell children in one ear out the other. All they were doing was saying something but when it suits them now, they have adopted all that. Just like our Budget, they have taken everything that we did and turned it into what they are actually doing.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Microwave.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- So, please, do not do that. That is offensive, honourable Minister.

(Hon. Professor B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You see what I mean. I am not jumping around in my chair, you are.

(Hon. Professor B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- No!

(Hon. Professor B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, I know very well that I properly conducted myself but it is quite distasteful when it comes from our honourable Minister of Finance.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You started it.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Please, I did not start anything. I just stood quietly listening to you.

(Hon. Professor B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I am not insulting him, Sir, not by any means. He has had his say, let me have mine.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- If he wants to stand up and interject, I will let him speak because I know you will give me the extra minutes. That is all. It does not need to get personal. That is his problem, Mr. Speaker. He starts getting agitated in his seat. It is most likely you have ants in your pants.

(Laughter)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I want to add one short point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to remind the Opposition that this law is just a reversal - the proposal. It was brought into place to reverse a court decision on Niko Nawaikula...

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Yes, that is right.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- ...when there was an issue about his surname. So, that was why it was brought into place and that was the normal procedure for the Government then which is now in the Opposition when something goes against them, they will create a law to nullify it.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Tuisawau. I invite the honourable Attorney-General for his Right of Reply.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I endorse the comments raised by honourable Tabuya. I have had a pleasure of travelling to the United States, London, Russia, Denmark, Washington DC and this is what has been expressed to me - the difficulty of trying. They refuse to renew their passport on the basis of a bad law. As a responsible Government, we bring it in today and the merits and demerits we will hear them on Friday.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Votes cast:

Ayes	-	27
Noes	-	21
Not voted	-	5

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice to move his motion.

ELECTORAL (REGISTRATION OF VOTERS)(AMENDMENT) BILL 2023

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the –

- (a) Electoral (Registration of Voters)(Amendment) Bill 2023 (Bill No. 19/2023), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committees of Parliament;
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Friday, 14th July, 2023, but then ample be given to debate the Bill after the vote on the 2023-2024 Appropriation Bill 2023 and Consequential Bills with the Right of Reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, essentially, this Bill and the Electoral Bill are linked and, of course, the case of Niko Nawaikula is well known to us. This is to change what was provided for in the Registration of Voters (Amendment Bill) 2023.

As a result, these changes were made after the Supervisor of Elections lost his case. There were wider consultations, just like other related Bills, with Government agencies and, of course, key stakeholders were heard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill must be considered urgently to address the concerns raised by women who want their birth certificates to be changed to reflect their maiden names, as they had previously changed their birth certificates to reflect their spouse's surname for election purposes only. The longer we delay the Bill, the longer individuals are being denied their rights to vote, as some women wish to vote under their married name and other official documents such as passports, driving licence, et cetera.

MR. SPEAKER.- Now, the floor is open for debate.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- I rise to give my contribution on the Bill. That is why I have said in during the debate on the Interpretation (Amendment) Bill 2023 for us to wait for that Election Report because this has come after that Bill and now the honourable Attorney-General is moving this Registration of Voters (Amendment Bill) 2023.

We were part of the Committee then that just reviewed those three Electoral Laws that were used in the 2022 Elections. This was one of the amendments that was proposed by the former Supervisor of Elections (SOE) and his Team then.

If the current Acting SOE, Ms. Ana Mataiciwa, wants to bring up those amendments, then they should come through the right procedure, that is, for her to first table the 2022 Election Report and from those findings and from the Multi Observer Group findings, if there are things that need to be improved for the 2026 Election, the honourable Attorney-General, closer to Election time, can move those amendments that would facilitate the Election in 2026. Those amendments also do come with the request for a budget to hold that Election.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not the right time, this is too early. This is just trying to play some emotions with some voters and trying to politicise things, so Standing Order 51 should not be used. We are talking about the Budget this week. Honourable Attorney-General, the only Bills that are entertained this week are those Consequential Bills that affect the Appropriation Bill. This Bill should go through the normal procedure under the Standing Orders and, please, do respect the Standing Orders and Parliament. The procedures are laid out in there.

I do not support the use of Standing Order 51 as we should respect the Standing Committee that should do the necessary consultations on this electoral law - they move around the country and conduct consultations as part of their role as parliamentary committee.

He is just talking about executive consultation. Executive consultation is totally different from a legislative consultation.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Hear, hear!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Sometimes when you do a legislative consultation, when we ask the Solicitor-General and the drafters when they come down to the Standing Committees to give us the list of the consultations they do and when we move around to check those centres where they conducted the consultations, people do not attend in numbers. Even the Solicitor-General does not facilitate us with the submissions that were provided during the executive consultation.

That is why we need to have checks and balance, the consultation conducted by parliamentary committee so that we can move around and do a wider consultation where more people will have their say on how the law that should govern them.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to add to the earlier discussion, I agree

with honourable Bulitavu that we must try and adopt that process when these are substantial Bills.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is just another example of what the previous Administration tried to do in terms of bringing laws without any consultation at all. In fact, we have adopted a slightly different process in the sense that those laws that need quick amendments such as this, the Attorney-General's Office, after Cabinet, does the consultation. Sometimes, it is actually quite an appropriate thing to do, Mr. Speaker, for new laws or amendment to laws to have the discussion first before you do the drafting. We have seen how poorly drafted laws without any consultation through Standing Order 51 have resulted in really bad consequences.

This is a pretty straightforward and urgent as well, so we do not want to delay this until September or October. That is why we are using Standing Order 51. It is different from what they used to do - no consultation at all, it used to come like no one knew. We had some very, very substantial serious Bills, and this law was bad in the sense that when a government loses a case in the Court, then they come and change the law to prove their point.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.-Yes.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is not just one example, there are several examples of what happened, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I think the Opposition should accept that this is a pretty straightforward change that was brought. It is a bad law and let us debate it on Friday and do it.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, I love the change of tunes. One day it is Jimi Hendrix, the next day it is Santana.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am actually flabbergasted, to use the word, that they have cried out in the origins of this particular law right at the beginning. Why have we not consulted? We have not done this.

As a matter of fact, a lot of consultations went on with respect to the electoral laws and it think it was almost eight months, if I remember correctly, and honourable Bulitavu actually sat there. I am talking about the electoral laws and not a specific law.

As we can see, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this particular Bill and the issue within it has had quite a number of opinions on it across the board, whether it is good or for bad. So, taking a lesson out of that particular book, you would say, "Alright, maybe we need to do that consultative exercise. Let the committees deal with it because there is quite a degree of independence when they actually do that to find out.

Most importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and this is extremely important and such a critical component of it, is the report that needs to come out from the Elections Office which was pointed out by honourable Bulitavu. That is important, and that has a bearing on this.

Sir, we are not saying anything with respect to what the content of the Bill is at the moment, we are actually objecting to the fact that you are bringing this in. But this is the question that now, everyone on this side of the Parliament is thinking. What is the hurry? Are they anticipating having a failed Budget? Are they anticipating having snap elections?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- In your dreams!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- What is the hurry?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- No, it is not about dreams. The harsh reality is, this is politics. Remember, things change overnight. The point is, Sir, what is it that they are trying to pre-empt here? Is there some kind of fear factor?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- For the women. This is for the women.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I am not talking about the content of the Bill, honourable Member. You will hear our opinion on it when we debate the Bill.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It is urgent because it is for the women.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You are saying urgent because it is for women?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- What about everyone else?

HON. J. USAMATE.- What if it was for men?

(Hon. L.D. Tabuya interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- The point is that there is large amount of diverse opinion on this, and it requires it to go before the committee. As a matter of fact, you are starving the committee of works, Sir, which they really should need to do and we would do quite thoroughly, as you have seen.

Again, Sir, it is something that we gravely object to with respect to how it is actually being dealt. We will argue the merits of what is in it at a later stage. But what is the fear? Why the urgency? No explanation proffered by the honourable Attorney-General - none to say that this is going to be detrimental to something tomorrow, so it needs to be done today. That is not being offered.

Again, very hypocritical of all of them to stand up, “Oh, we are using Standing Order 51 because it suits our purpose right now.” That is exactly what they were saying to us that we should not be doing.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable Attorney-General to speak in reply.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issue here is, the other party have a fixed mindset.

HON. P.K. BALA.- You have a fixed mindset!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- After being articulated by honourable Tabuya as to the need, how can they understand because it is the women who are crying.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- That is why we are, as the Government for the people and elected by the people.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- In a scale of one to ten, when I weigh their objectives, it is really two out of ten. The merits will be discussed on Friday.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Votes cast:

Ayes	-	27
Noes	-	21
Not Voted	-	5

Motion agreed to.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE 2023-2024 APPROPRIATION BILL 2023

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, those joining us through livestreaming and those sitting at the public gallery, *ni bula vinaka* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the announcement of 2023-2024 Budget was received with much enthusiasm and optimism by our Ministry, and I take this time to acknowledge the mercy of the Almighty God, who continues to bless us and guide us as we persevere to serve our nation.

Today, I stand to speak in this august Parliament as the Minister for Education. It is almost ironic when I had spent eight years standing in this august Parliament to fight for our people and our nation from the Opposition bench. On my ninth year, my God given season and calling has been bestowed, and if there is a lesson, we can impart from this, it is that perseverance and hard work that will get us to our destinies.

We must never lose sight of our end goals, and with honesty, sincerity of our heart and mind, we will achieve our purpose in life. So, once again, I must thank the SODELPA Party and all my campaign team and family and our supporters for their unwavering steadfast faith in me.

I also extend my sincere gratitude towards the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and staff of the Ministry for Finance, for an overwhelming allocation of \$845.5 million towards the education sector. This is an allocation that is responding to the needs of the people. Of this, the following was allocated:

- Ministry of Education - \$505.3 million;
- Higher Education Institutes - \$103 million;
- TELS - \$148 million;
- Back to School - \$45 million;
- DFAT - \$30 million; and
- Ongoing Rehabilitation and Construction of Schools and Public Buildings - \$12 million.

This was an increase of \$132 million from last year's allocation.

The budgetary allocation is a result of extensive and competitive submissions made by the respective Ministries. I must, therefore, thank the hardworking staff of the Ministry of Education, led by our Executive Support Unit Team, for being able to achieve such a huge Budget to be approved. However, the challenges that now come with such commitment is to ensure that we build and growth outputs of the Ministry to reflect the targets we have set for the Ministry of Education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, overall, in the past few years, the education sector in Fiji has had to deal with a lot of challenges. Right from within the Ministry, amendments made to the staffing structure, saw a lot of crucial positions being removed which affected the direction in which the Ministry was operating. These are some major factors that the Ministry of Education wishes to revisit.

The Ministry being the largest in the Civil Service sector is custodian to the future of our children. It is also responsible for looking after the welfare of teachers and support staff. Ultimately, the overall goal of the Ministry of Education is to uplift the standard of quality education in Fiji to be universally competitive and marketable.

The stakeholders of the Education sector are many, and the Ministry of Education has the important role to harness all relevant resources to be able to satisfy and meet global standards of learning and teaching. As a result, the Ministry of Education as one of its major important agenda for 2023-2024 Budget, embarked on the four days' workshop which involved all critical senior officials of the Ministry of Education where the strategic direction of the Ministry was chartered to achieve its strategic plan which will be used for the next five years.

The Ministry of Education has had to deal with the reality that in the last 14 years, there were minimal planning, mentoring and monitoring of the direction in which the Ministry of Education was to head. As a result, the last Annual Report produced by the Ministry and presented in Parliament was for the fiscal year 2017 and 2018. These are challenges that the Ministry of Education is now addressing.

From the onset, we must also thank the Public Service Commission for allowing the restoration of three Deputy Secretaries, two of which have now been filled and one to be identified and filled shortly.

Similarly, given the size of the Ministry, we are also re-establishing:

- a Training Department to assist in training and identification of the areas of need for training staff, something which has been an urgent need in the Ministry where staff will be able to go through upskilling and in-service training which used to be one of the hallmarks of the Civil Service.
- Research and Development Department.
- A strengthened Quality Assurance Department to assist in monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the programmes.
- Careers Department.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you all have witnessed, the Ministry of Education has not wasted a day in meeting with stakeholders and dialoguing, something that has been missing in the recent years. By doing so, we are giving back the autonomy of decision-making and management to School Management and Communities.

A bulk of schools in Fiji are managed by faith-based entities and local communities. The Ministry of Education is very grateful for their resilience and accommodating over the years, despite many challenges they have faced. We intend to improve on our relations with these important

stakeholders and build on our trust and dialogue to be able to address many vital issues that the Ministry of Education needs to address.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the People's Coalition Government is committed to building a strong and prosperous nation, and this starts with investing in our most valuable assets - our people.

The 2023-2024 budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Education has been set at \$505.4 million. This does not include the allocations for the Higher Education Institutions and TELS. The good news is that this amount is an increase of \$15.5 million from \$489.9 million last year.

The increased allocation is targeting:

- the strengthening of TVET;
- revision and improvement of academic curriculum;
- re-establishment of a Careers Section which would guide and provide an important role of career planning and advocacy for students through career expos, et cetera;
- assist with teaching aids and resources;
- continue with transport assistance,;
- oversee the engagement of teachers; and
- review of outdated policies to become people-friendly, responsive and relevant.

The allocation will also allow the Ministry of Education to revisit and oversee the re-classification of schools. For example, the Queen Victoria School and Ratu Kadavulevu School in recent years, have been downgraded from large to medium-based schools on unrealistic criteria. The difference between large and medium schools is salaries and workload of staff. First, the school rolls were used as a criteria to determine the classification of school, and that changed to the number of teachers a school has. By reclassifying some of these major boarding schools, teachers had to endure more work without proper compensation because they did not take into account the afterhours work demanded to look after boarders, et cetera.

Naturally, what we can expect is a lot of frustration and demoralized staff, which the Ministry of Education (MOE) will now address and correct.

The MOE is aware that the solution to rural and urban drift lies partly in reclassifying rural, remote and maritime schools to become medium or large schools, for instance. As part of the changes to be considered, the MOE will discuss with the Teacher Unions that each teacher must be able to get a tour stint in a rural or maritime school during their career term.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in recent days, the office of the Minister was requested to provide boats for students in Malake Island District School and was also engaged in the commissioning of the solar power to be used in schools in the islands of Beqa and Yanuca. Such attention to the needs of schools that are often forgotten, is part of the MOE direction for the holistic provision of equitable access to inclusive education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no doubt that while our children are at the heart of learning, our teachers are the ones who are the key instruments in shaping and molding these children. Equally important are the roles of the non-teaching staff, who ensure that these teachers are supported in their service delivery in the schools. It is then vital that the teachers, as well as the non-teaching staff, are given their dues and their welfare is also prioritized.

With the extension of retirement age to 60 years and the removal of Civil Service contracts, the MOE is excited to work with teachers and to engage the institutional knowledge they have by the

time they get to these years of service, which is passed on to younger teachers joining the workforce.

In the last eight years, I have, time and again, commented in this august Parliament on the demerits of the OMRS system, where there is an imbalance of consideration given to experience and knowledge. Qualifications seemed to be the only criteria for career progression or promotion.

With the Budget provided, the MOE will engage in further dialogue and envisages that the Education Summit to be held in August of this year will further establish the direction and the activities needed by MOE to be able to develop the education sector in Fiji and ensure its viability in the long run.

The review of the OMRS system is, hopefully, going to be on the agenda for the Public Service Commission, and the MOE will be keen to make submissions to the Public Service Commission on this issue as we are of the view that a more equitable and acceptable, fair and inclusive system needs to be adopted to remove bias and discrimination against deserving applicants.

The MOE is determined to provide an environment of work that is conducive and exciting for teachers, to allow them to pass on this modus of teaching to students who can be stimulated and excited in return. So, the MOE intends to make submission to PSC to review the MYAPA monitoring tool that is currently being adopted and giving teachers a lot of headaches in its implementation. We will review what is a more suitable monitoring system that is people-friendly and less time consuming.

Unless the MOE adjusts to provide an attractive work environment for our people, we will continue to see the brain-drain and exodus of teachers to overseas schools. So, this is an urgent area we intend to address.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget announcement has covered the re-establishment of the National Education Commission to guide the MOE in its setting of the next 10 years education plan, along with its education partners and stakeholders. This will be important tools for assessment and monitoring of the effectiveness of education programmes, et cetera, used throughout the Fijians schools.

An allocation of \$20,000 has been provided within this new Budget year to review the outdated legislations and policies which removed equity and inclusivity and other privileges for those teachers who serve selflessly in the rural, remote and maritime schools. The review of transfer and rural allowance policies of our teachers that were not fairly remunerated, and the reinstatement of executive positions in primary schools will also be addressed in the plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our recent visit to Levuka, Ovalau, and around Vitilevu, we noted that there was a discrepancy in the application of criteria used to determine which schools are eligible for rural and maritime allowance and which schools are not. It was sad to note that within an island, teachers were aware that some of their colleagues in other nearby schools were being paid maritime allowances, whilst MOE was telling them they were not entitled. Such practices reek of negligence must not be tolerated, so the MOE will be reviewing all entitlements for rural and maritime schools to allow for equity and acknowledgement of the hard work, the dedication and perseverance of our teachers as they carry out the crucial role of being moulders for our future leaders and citizens.

Subsequently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to announce that almost \$5.7 million is being allocated for the Rural and Maritime Location Allowance for approximately 3,355 teachers, as an incentive for teaching in rural and maritime locations. We will, therefore, expect some happy teachers and families, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will also work to confirm around 1,781 acting appointments for Heads of Departments, Heads of Schools, Assistant Principals, Acting Head Teachers, Head Teachers and Vice Principals in various schools in which teachers acted all these years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I wish to thank all teachers who served faithfully and have either migrated, retired and have passed on without being rightly remunerated. It boggles the mind how the former Minister for Education and Human Resources Executives of the MOE allowed such cruelty to exist whereby some teachers acted as Head of Departments or Head of Schools for as long as 10 years to 12 years, or more. Shocking is to say the least and deplorable human resource practices.

If it is any consolation to all the woes the MOE has had to endure for this financial year, the Ministry has been provided with a sum of \$8.9 million for the salary upgrades of our teachers. A total of 1,295 in-service teachers who have upgraded their qualification to relevant undergraduate degree will be moved to Band F/Step 3 – from \$22,000 to over \$26,000. So far, the Ministry has processed the qualification upgrade of 139 teachers. These numbers are expected to increase as universities hold their graduation later in the year and next year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, more than \$100 million of the \$505.4 million is to cater for the Free Education Grant and the Transport Assistance for our ECE, Primary and Secondary students. The current policy for Transport Assistance for school students allows for students whose parents' combined income is \$16,000 or less the opportunity to utilise the Transport Assistance.

For the Year 2023, 110,193 students have been assisted with this, and \$33.3 million has been allocated for this purpose for this financial year. What we would like to see is that the bus and transport providers, whilst receiving this income from the much-needed services, ensure that their buses or transport is safe and of the highest standards as a part of their duty of care to their passengers.

The recent bus accidents involving students from Delana Primary School and other isolated cases around Fiji, has raised serious concerns for the MOE and shortly, the MOE intends to hold discussions with public transport providers to gauge the kind of services being provided and ensure the MOE gets its money's worth and student lives are prioritized for safety purposes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the MOE is in the process of strengthening its staffing in the Asset Management Unit Department which will be responsible for all the capital projects of the Ministry.

The MOE has commenced with the clearing work towards the reconstruction of the Degei Hostel, which was destroyed by fire five years ago, and I see the honourable Leader of the Opposition giving me a thumbs up. The MOE, through the AMU Department, is also working on the technical scoping of the recently destroyed Sukuna House Hostel.

We acknowledge the assistance from our education donor partners, DFAT, who assisted with rehabilitating and constructing schools and public buildings that were damaged by natural disasters.

The MOE is aware of the current infrastructure status of the 13 Government schools because of the absence of the repair and maintenance timetable that used to exist and which we must bring back, and we are committed to carry out repairs and maintenance with the allocation of \$1.88 million. This will allow us to improve the status of the 13 Government schools' infrastructure by conducting the necessary repairs and maintenance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the MOE plays a crucial role in monitoring and evaluating the operations of the Higher Education Institutes through the Higher Education Commission. The MOE will be working closely with the Higher Education Institutions to offer courses that meet the labour market

needs where it addresses the areas of skills shortage, as well as the allocation of \$103 million that support the operations and development.

The MOE has noted a lack of monitoring between the Higher Education Institutions and the Ministry. We will address this area of need to ensure that the MOE properly monitors the use of Government grant provided, as well as effectiveness of education programmes that students are being provided.

The recent revelation that some Veterinary graduates from the Fiji National University (FNU) studied under TSLS and carried the burden of debt after they had graduated, were deemed not suited to be veterinarians. Even some counselling programmes from higher education institutions are still in incomplete stage, and this is the problem that the MOE is discovering and is addressing so that students who pay good money and give in their efforts to study such programmes, are not robbed of their right to graduate and be recognised for the efforts they put in accordingly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, perhaps, one of the most monumental decision by the Government in this Budget is the tuition only Hardship Assistance Scheme for private students, which is a new scheme aimed to assist students enrol in Degree Programmes from second year onwards with the grade point average of 65 percent.

The Scheme will cater for 2,600 awards, while 250 awards is for MBBS studies. I trust that students and parents who have been running to my office crying for this assistance will now breathe a sigh of relief and we want parents, guardians and students to know that we are pragmatic and recognise the gap that existed which must be addressed. Everyone deserves to be assisted and everyone deserves another chance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, the budgetary allocation for the MOE is a testament to our commitment to providing quality education for all Fijians. We believe that investing in education is investing in our future, and we are dedicated to empowering our students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed. We will continue to work tirelessly to improve the educational landscape in Fiji, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that this budget will contribute significantly to the development of our education system and enhance our nation's human capital.

I hereby support the 2023-2024 Budget accordingly and it is now time to deliver.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 1.04 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.11 p.m.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, colleagues, those present in the gallery, people viewing on television and other electronic gadgets, ladies and gentlemen; accept my humble greetings, *ni bula vinaka saka, Jai Siya Ram*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I speak on the Budget, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the honourable Prime Minister and your good self, Sir, for your understanding in regards to the Point of Order raised this morning by the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament.

Sir, I also thank the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament for her understanding and amicably resolving the issue and not taking it any further. And I thank you, Sir, for your indulgence. May God guide us all.

In my response to the 2023-2024 National Budget, I have this to say; for a nation to thrive economically, it needs the confidence and good and honest investors because only under such environment, they will get returns for the investments on terms and conditions beneficial to them, to the Government and people of Fiji.

Budget is not just allocation of funds to different Ministries, it is about creating a conducive environment for people to invest and provide leadership that guarantees stability, equality, security and equal opportunities for all Fijians.

Sir, we have a government whose supporters are making indecent gestures, and many are now resorting to making racist and discriminatory comments on almost a daily basis on social media. I can give many examples of this, but I will not waste my time on that.

Here, we also have people who, instead of condemning the actions of some corrupt people, praise them. In the last six months, we have seen the deterioration in the rule of law and constitutionalism - swearing in of two of our Members is deliberately delayed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the ugly face of the deep-seeded culture of corruption that remains in Fiji, a culture that prioritises certain personalities over the rule of law, a culture that sees some people as untouchable above the rest of us and even above justice, a culture that lurks beneath the surface of a just society waiting to rewrite the rules in its favour.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this frightens people away and that is why many people have left our shores since this Government took office. There is no denial of this fact. The honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration can provide statistics to this august Parliament, and I am sure if you compare this figure to the figures of the same period in the past years, this year's figure will surpass figures of all other years.

Since a lot of people are going away, our population is decreasing, thus the number of people buying goods and services is also decreasing. Increasing VAT is also not encouraging us to buy more, leading to less consumer spending.

I will talk about the effects of VAT later but, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me inform the honourable Prime Minister that under his leadership, his Minister of Finance has delivered the largest deficit Budget outside pandemic. I have noticed in his Budget speech, the honourable Minister of Finance Minister comparing his Budget figures with Budget figures of the last financial year and the year

before that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those were not normal times. The economies of the whole world were almost stagnant during COVID-19. A good economist would compare apples with apples. I am not an economist, but I understand the basics of economy and how it works.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Debt Report for the April quarter says that there has been a 2.4 percent increase in borrowings over the January to March quarter of this year, which is a 12.5 percent increase in debt compared to the same period last year. This means that the honourable Minister of Finance is borrowing at a faster rate. The report states that the honourable Minister borrowed \$223.2 million in the first three months after taking office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is quite extraordinary that instead of reducing debt, the honourable Minister of Finance is now increasing it. He, while in Opposition, had been the most vocal about the debt and we have been having non-stop propaganda from him about the national debt.

Whip mantri jab vipaksh mei the toh karz lene ke bilkul khilaf the, lekin is saal ke pahle teen mahino mein, unhone \$223.2 million karz liya hai. Pichle saal ke is awadhi ke milan mei yeh barah dasham lo paanch- 12.5 percent zyada hai.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am worried about our future now. What happens if we do not achieve the projected revenue? Our debt will further increase. We are very much dependent on the tourism industry but by increasing VAT and increasing Airport Departure Tax, we are making tourism industry less competitive. Tourists will go elsewhere as Fiji will become unaffordable to the budget traveller.

The policies reflected in the Budget provide no real prospects to have real and sustained growth to service the debt. There is very little fiscal space left to cater for any unexpected event, such as a rebuild after a climatic event.

The budget is anti-low income and middle-income families. It has accepted wasteful operational expenditure and seeks to make it the norm. It has dampened the prospects for real growth. It will adversely affect the lives of ordinary Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are other reasons why a lot of people are migrating; hence, we are losing a lot of skilled people. Many of our local development projects are on hold due to this. Some of our local businesses are trying to hire people from abroad to fill the gaps left by those who have migrated but are finding difficulties in doing so because the authorities here are not providing work permits. The honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration can throw some light on this also during his Budget speech.

Sir, I have been reliably informed that the honourable Minister of Finance is against recruiting people from Bangladesh. We already have some people here from Bangladesh, working in different sectors of the economy. They are hardworking people, and we have no problems with them. Why are we discriminating against them?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during his Budget speech, the honourable Minister of Finance, on numerous times, criticised the initiatives of the FijiFirst Government in rebuilding our economy. He forgets the fact that FijiFirst has set the very foundation of governance in this country.

Sir, as a former employee of the Ministry of Communications, I would like to reply to some of the issues raised by him regarding his Ministry and give examples of how some of our initiatives

are not maintained.

Sir, under our flagship initiative - digitalFIJI, the full Government digital directory enabled Fijians to e-communicate feedback directly to the Government and track the status of their feedback, while they await a response, undertook comprehensive assessments, streamline the process of a number of agencies, massively expedited the digital registration of a newborn, provide a suite of full online ROC services such as companies and businesses, systems, name searches, lodgements, amendments, deregistration and cessation services and the ability to make online payments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently the ROC search platform is not working. Up to 31st December, 2022, we got the search results back in less than two minutes via email. It is an automated system. How can businesses in the private sector be run efficiently with this kind of messed up regulatory and record keeping systems?

Everything in that office is going backwards and processing has slowed down – the worst ever workplace in the last 20 years. We cannot even register updates and get the certificates in the seven days that was usually the case up to 31st December, 2022. Sir, you can try that and see the result for yourself.

Regarding Walesi, honourable Minister of Finance questioned the allocations made to Walesi in the previous Budgets presented by FijiFirst. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications during his contribution yesterday also spoken on that. One other honourable Minister on his overseas trip, criticised and questioned the funding for Walesi.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we successfully completed the Digital Switchover Awareness Project for the whole of Viti Levu and another \$14.6 million was allocated to Walesi in the last Budget to fund the completion of Digital Switchover Awareness Project for the rest of Fiji.

The continuation of free wireless internet hotspot access over 16 public areas throughout all towns and cities, as well as cover operational expenses to support universal access to information through digital, television and radio.

Today, we have over 200,000 households with Walesi Set Top Boxes throughout Fiji which have connected through Walesi's 25 transmission sites across Fiji and over 700,000 subscribers to the Walesi App. Sir, 700,000 people watch Walesi on their phones now. In times of disaster, celebration and any time the nation needs notification, you will be connected to the same national network of news, no matter where in Fiji you reside.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Walesi also provides free installations for villages and communities halls to enable access to information for the disadvantaged and marginalised communities. Places that have never had access to live news, live sports and other entertainment and, indeed, access to Parliamentary proceedings. This is where the money was spent.

Not only that, during COVID-19, the FijiFirst Government moved quickly to soften the negative impact on the education of Fijian children from staying home. The Government negotiated with the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation and Walesi to implement a new educational channel. Fijian students from Kindergarten to Year 13 were able to access educational programmes through a new free-to-air Educational Channel on Walesi.

The Government's goal of keeping Fiji up to date with global technology ensured that we had the infrastructure and technological capacity to continue teaching our children during COVID-19

when schools were closed. Students were able to access the Channel at any time through Walesi and the then Government urged parents to also be involved and keep our future leaders educated.

To further ensure that our students were engaged in their studies during this period, the Ministry of Education also prepared supplementary resource materials that were accessible online. The syllabus was carefully prepared by the Curriculum Advisory Services Department of the Ministry of Education with the circumstances in mind and covered all critical information to keep Fijians up to date from the comfort of their own homes. So, you can see how useful Walesi is. Thanks to the FijiFirst Government but time and again, the Coalition Government Members keep criticising Walesi for reasons best known to them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot has been said about the high borrowing by the FijiFirst Government. Sir, we borrowed prudently. We would have seen riots in the streets and that anger would have been justified because people would have had no food to eat. Rising prices, plus jobless people, plus shattered businesses would have added to the worst socio-economic unrest in history.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 10 even 20 years from now, we still would find ourselves recovering. We borrowed to prevent that. Every Government on earth that could borrow did so for the same reason, and we did not just starve off disaster, we prepared for the future.

Any objective business owner understands that Government took on that debt so that they, the businesses, would not have to. If Government had not borrowed money offshore and then injected that liquidity into our domestic financial system, private sector interest rates would have gone through the roof to as high as 10 percent. That means, we prevented debt servicing cost of businesses from skyrocketing upwards of \$1 billion, which would have made serious investment virtually impossible for years to come. We managed that well within the bounds of prudence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my colleagues have spoken on the VAT increase but as earlier alluded to, I would also like to literally speak on it. Sir, increasing VAT by 6 percent and increasing social welfare allowances by merely \$15 and \$25 respectively does not match.

Sir, \$15 and \$25 does not cushion the impact of 6 percent VAT increase on all the items, apart from the basic food items and prescribed medicine as announced in the Budget. Sir, prescribed medicine is already given free under the Free Medicine Scheme, an initiative of the previous Government. It does not have to be included here.

FijiFirst Government with zero-rated VAT on 21 basic food items. The increase in the Social Welfare payment is inadequate, considering the high cost of living. Fijian households will still feel the pinch of paying 15 percent VAT on all other goods and services. From 1st August, customers can expect their electricity bills to go up, and this will be the same for water bills.

Water and electricity are basic necessities and from 1st August, people will have pay more for these necessities. No more subsidies as FijiFirst used to provide for the low-income earners. With the new rate of VAT to kick in from 1st August, there is little room to bring forward new or deferred spending before the higher rate of VAT becomes effective. Hence, in the overall scheme of things, a spike inflation from the increase in VAT will likely slow consumer demand this year, potentially putting pressure on Government revenue which could mean a higher level of deficit and debt.

Aap pandrah dollar aur pachees dollar social welfare payment badha kar yah sochte hai ki isse pandrah percent VAT ki purti ho jayegi? Ya nyaye sanghat nahi hai. Jeene ke liye dher saare cheezo ki zarurat padhti hai aur kewal ikkees samano ko chhod kar sabhi par pandrah percent VAT lagu hai.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Finance or I should say, the National Federation Party, has let the workers of this country down by not increasing the minimum basic wage as promised in its Election campaigns. Not only that, the honourable Minister of Finance has also announced the price of sugarcane to remain at \$85 per tonne, but they promised more during Election campaigns.

I also do not see any allocation in the Budget for rebuilding Penang Sugar Mill and neither is there any allocation for railway tramlines, as promised during Election campaigns to hoodwink the gullible cane farmers of this country. He unsuccessfully tried to reduce the price of lamb chops but did not realise that come 1st August, price of lamb chops will go up by 1 percent. He reduced the duty on import of lamb chops from 5 percent to zero but increased the VAT by 6 percent. So the price will increase by 1 percent. My advised to the honourable Minister is to stop fooling people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have no idea why the fiscal duty on the importation of beef, prawns and ducks is reduced. Sir, by reducing duty on these items, we are not only reducing Government revenue, but we are also discouraging local cattle and poultry farmers. In fact, we should be encouraging local production. But by reducing duty on these items, we encourage overseas suppliers to enter the local market.

We all know that due to the high cost of production here, our local suppliers are unable to compete with the foreign players in the market. Thus, they close their businesses or reduce it to the subsistence level.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is nothing in this Budget to grow the economy. There is no new capital expenditure and our operational expenses have increased. Increasing VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent has restricted people's ability to spend.

Sir, by spending on capital projects, employment is created, and money is circulated in the economy. When people have money, they spend it and by doing so, they pay VAT, which is a revenue for the Government. This microwave Budget is not creating jobs and that is why the size of our economy will remain the same for the next couple of years. When we were in Government, we had plans to do four lane roads between Nadi and Lautoka.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Waste of money.

HON. V. LAL.- We also revealed our plans to build Nadi-Suva Highway.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Think of the hospitals.

HON. V. LAL.- This would have helped people living in the interior of Viti Levu to take their produce to the markets and a lot of other opportunities would have opened up, apart from creating jobs that would have helped our economy to grow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is nothing new or exciting in the Budget that an ordinary person would be proud of. This is the Budget templated from previous years, but with worse insertions. The Budget does not offer any promise to our citizens, but instead asking them to pay a lot more for the same goods and services provided in the past.

The Budget fails to adequately address ordinary people's need for food access, healthcare and workforce. There is nothing innovative in the Budget to make our economy grow, instead, chose heavier borrowing to cushion the shortfalls. Government's reliance on increased taxes and external borrowing is nothing but revenue driven Budget thrust on the people of Fiji. This would make an

ordinary person poorer than what he is now.

With those words, I do not support the Bill before Parliament.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; *bula vinaka* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my response to the 2023-2024 National Budget. The “rebuilding of the future together” National Budget announced by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics two weeks ago, champions freedom, unity, inclusivity and progress as it offers hope and the promise for a better tomorrow to the people of Fiji. I, therefore, commend the honourable Minister, the Permanent Secretary for Finance and their hardworking Team for the thoughtfully considered Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, I would like to applaud the Coalition Government for its foresight and support to the resource-based sectors. Fiji is resource rich and the injection of increased budget in these areas is a blessing to bringing back our economy to full recovery. It is sad to note that this was one of the areas greatly suppressed by the previous Administration.

As custodians of these natural resources, the mandate of the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry still remains. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I had mentioned in my Maiden Speech, I hold a portfolio that is most dear to the people of Fiji. I believe that the Budget has set out an ambition to build on the current efforts and creating something even greater for the next generation. Whilst we prioritise key activities in the new financial year, we will continue to collectively work to maintain a balance between economic gain and conservation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the interest of time, I will focus my response to the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry initiatives that have been newly introduced by the Coalition Government through this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to speak on the Ministry of Fisheries budget. The Ministry of Fisheries welcomes the budget of \$20.3 million, an increase of around 26 percent from the current fiscal year. With the global efforts of protecting an ocean and its resources, the task at hand is, indeed, an overwhelming one.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the role of sustaining, managing and protecting fisheries in Fiji has tripled due to the increasing effect of climate change, as well as the ultimate threat of resources being lost due to overfishing and unsustainable practices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the increase in budget, the Ministry of Fisheries has, indeed, been given a boost as this will ensure that its activities and programmes are elevated to assist towards the overall goal of ocean and resource protection for generations to come.

The Ministry achieves this through smart partnerships and close collaboration with all its stakeholders across the fisheries supply chain. This includes subsistence and commercial fisher folks, resource owners, the fishing industry, exporters, academia and partners in development and research, among others.

Given this setting, the Ministry has commenced the review of the Fiji Fisheries laws to account for new and emerging issues which the current laws rendered inadequate, to address the

develop fit-for-purpose legislations to support growth in the fisheries sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the review of the laws is crucial, however, it was just a talk fest in the previous Administration. Nothing materialised and the review was not implemented.

It is important to note that within the first six months of our being in Government, the review of the law was passed in Cabinet, technical support by the Forum Fisheries Agency sealed and consultation process is well underway.

Climate change and the depleting of natural resources further underscores the importance of research for our governance. An allocation of \$978,000 will allow the Ministry to direct its efforts of research through smart partnerships with key stakeholders to strengthen the science on the culture of high valued marine species and the collection of sound scientific data and information on species of interest. We are, indeed, grateful to have partners in development stepping in to assist the Ministry each step of the way.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is taking a targetted approach to facilitate the fishing industry issues, to ease the cost of doing business and to combat the issue of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. A budget of \$750,000 has been set aside to implement the e-platform system of licensing and permitting, the Marine Stewardship Certification of offshore fisheries products and the Electronic Monitoring System.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, robust activities to support our coastal communities will be rolled out to bring greater prosperity to all Fijians, including resource owners. Improvement of livelihoods whilst achieving sustainable blue economy is the key and the Ministry will ensure that it puts all its efforts towards the task at hand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$1.3 million is allocated towards Coastal Fisheries Development. Key to this budget item is the introduction of empowerment initiatives for fish wardens to support the Ministry with the monitoring of fishing activities within customary fishing right areas. The Ministry will develop a framework for awarding of fisher-warden allowances to support monitoring, control and surveillance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is here to turn all the ‘talk-fest’ of the previous Administration to action and results. Sir, \$0.9 million has been allocated for the construction of the Koro Service Centre and Ice Plant to ensure that fishers on the Island and nearby islands are able to access the much-needed services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$0.8 million is allocated for the ongoing construction of the Multi-Species Hatchery in Ra and this is expected to assist hundreds of aquaculture farmers across the mainland through the introduction of new species for farming, as well as the continued supply of fish and shrimp for aquaculture purposes.

The Ministry will work with communities and the private sector through public private partnerships to focus on mass production of selected fisheries commodities and diversification into agriculture and forestry to sustain operations. An integrated approach is the way to go, and the time is now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will continue to ensure that quality and excellence are embedded in the processes, service delivery and people that provide services at the 32 Fisheries Service Centres across Fiji.

First and foremost, in realising this is to ensure that the staff resides in safe and healthy standard quarters. The Ministry welcomes a total of \$200,000 budget to upgrade quarters. The accounting of this new budget items is an indication that the Coalition Government cares for the welfare of Civil Servants who put in all their efforts to produce results.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's efforts to achieving a sustainable blue economy remains steadfast. It will continue to incorporate climate resilience and adaptation efforts through practical and viable adaption solutions for the benefit of individual fisheries businesses, the sector and the communities it serves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to deliberate on the forestry budget. The Ministry welcomes the \$21.3 million budgetary allocation for Forestry, an increase of 20 percent from the current year. The increased budgetary allocation supports new initiatives that will contribute to rebuilding our nation.

To ensure a solid foundation for forest activities, the Ministry is currently reviewing the Fiji Forest Act 1992. This was one of the key policy work that was never completed by the previous Administration. The Coalition Government is here to complete all these unfinished work and even do better by bringing back key elements that were disintegrated and disjointed previously.

With input from forest stakeholders and the public, the updated Act will address present deficiencies in guidelines and processes to align with international commitment, best practices and national developments, particularly in climate change. Furthermore, the reviewed Act will champion all aspects of sustainable forest management, climate change, forest carbon trade, as well as recent developments in policy and administration of the forest sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to the review of the Fiji Forest Act 1992, the Ministry, in adopting best practices, is introducing a new Code of Practice for wood processing facilities (sawmills and log yards).

The Code will support current forest legislation and policy and will also ensure that the wood resources of Fiji are processed to optimise economic and social benefits in an environmentally responsible manner, consistent with Fiji's commitment to sustainable forest management.

With the recent outbreak of termites in the Western Division, the new code is a timely addition to the forestry law. Under the Code, the Ministry is committed to enhancing efficiency in overall sawmilling and log yard operations to improve production and quality, and to reduce waste. By focussing on timber treatment and quality, we can help to control the infestation of termites and stop the supply of substandard timber into the market.

I commend the Office of the Prime Minister for leading the way to eradicate termites through the Termite Taskforce and hope that the Ministry's efforts will contribute towards a long-term solution to eradicating termites in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with mahogany reverting to the stewardship of the Ministry of Forestry, this opens opportunities for trade and value adding in the wood processing space. This is a welcomed opportunity for the Ministry with a total budget of \$0.5 million, to ensure fair and equitable returns to resource owners and their effective inclusion in decision-making.

The Ministry will closely work with relevant authorities for the development of exit strategies and legislative amendments to foster and address issues that have been affecting the industry and resource owners for far too long. Ultimately, the review of relevant laws will strengthen the

enforcement of sustainable forest management practices and curb illegal forest activities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in balancing economic activity with conservation, forest restoration remains a key activity for the Ministry of Forestry. With \$2.5 million allocated to the restoration of degraded forests, the funding will be used to address challenges and to ensure the survival of trees planted. This will be done through extensive monitoring, undertaking beat up, enhancing quality seed collection, propagation and planting protocols. The previous Administration only focussed on getting numbers on the scoreboard without ever considering the survival rate of what is planted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my aim is to change the narrative and ensure budget is set aside for monitoring and evaluation and for making ineffective processes effective.

The Ministry welcomes the \$2 million allocation for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) which will be used to support the implementation phases of the Emission Reduction Programme in 20 districts of 177 villages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry welcomes the budget of \$200,000, an increase of more than 100 percent allocated for forest subsidy on value adding machines to support forest-based companies and resource owners who are often worse off and left behind in the previous Administration. This includes support to landowners who have leased their land for mahogany plantations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry welcomes the total budget of \$1.4 million to support the subsidising of shipping costs for transporting pine logs to the mainland for further processing and exports. Changing the economic model for maritime pine and introducing the commercial development aspect after the completion of the housing rehabilitation programme was crucial to ensure resource owners realise tangible benefits from matured pine trees within their forests. This change will benefit all those in the supply chain and even more, the economy from anticipated increase in forest exports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will ensure working closely with all relevant stakeholders to bring about sustainable results. Sustainable planting programmes will be introduced to ensure needs of the current and future generations are accounted for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry also welcomes the budget of \$500,000 to reconstruct the Nakavu Bridge which was initially damaged by *TC Winston* in 2016. The reconstruction of the bridge will provide access to the research lease and for the completion of the prescription diameter harvesting trial in Nakavu. This will also ensure mitigation of associated risks to lives and environment. The Nakavu landowners will welcome this development as it will progress their interest as well.

Similar to Fisheries, the Ministry of Forestry welcomes the budget of \$350,000 for the upgrading of offices and quarters. This reaffirms the point I had earlier raised that this Government cares about the safety, health and welfare of civil servants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the allocated budget for 2023-2024 fiscal year, the Ministry will strengthen its commitment in playing a leadership role in our mission to sustain, manage and protect Fiji's fisheries and forestry resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in these difficult times, if I have learned anything, it is the power of love, compassion and hope. If one person can change the world, it is by being compassionate and giving people love and hope. If you do these things, the next generation and the generation that follow will live in a far better nation than the one we have today.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry will escalate, widen and increase our drive to improve service delivery, maximise operational or fiscal efficiency. I would like to end by stating a Chinese verb and I quote:

“Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man how to fish and he will eat forever.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend and support the 2023-2024 Budget as presented in this august Parliament. May God bless us all and may God bless Fiji.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, fellow honourable Members of Parliament; to those who are here with us observing from the gallery and those who are watching from home, the offices and workplaces, *ni sa bula vinaka*.

I rise to give my contribution on the 2023-2024 Budget Debate. Firstly, allow me to congratulate the Fiji Airways as the Skytrax Best Airline in Australia and the Pacific.

HON. P.K. BALA.- FijiFirst, FijiFirst!

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- We are the best in the region and, again, retaining the Skytrax Best Airline Award for the third time in a row.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, to be a champion in a system where competition is battled at the highest level and amidst the industry giants who have big pockets, is not easy and it is not a fight won overnight. That award was years in the making. It would not have been won without the state-of-the-art fleet. In fact, according to the Chief Executive Officer of the Fiji Airways, it was their biggest selling point.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also want to congratulate the Fiji Drua, both the men and the women Teams, for their massive achievements in reaching the quarterfinal and winning the final in what is generally known to be world’s toughest professional rugby competition. Just second year into the Super Competition for the Men’s Team and has already created a historic birth, and for the women’s Team, it was a second final and a win for them.

These brilliant young men and women worked very hard. Huge sacrifice, dedication and commitment from them as an individual and as a team, and that has put them in the rugby world map into the tune ‘the whole of Fiji is proud of you’.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is only proper that when you serve great victories and achievements, you give credit where it is due. I salute the FijiFirst Government and the former Prime Minister, Mr. Voreqe Bainimarama, for not giving up on these two entities during those challenging days.

HON. P.K. BALA.- *Vinaka*.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- The pandemic was there, few natural disasters went past, Mr. Speaker, it took strong and visionary leadership to keep things moving during tough times.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were negative remarks that came from some politicians, especially then Members of the Opposition camp saying, “We do not need a national airline”. There were those who opposed the Government calling, not to support the Fiji Airways’ loan. Someone commented that even the formation of the Drua Franchise was a waste of money.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Point of Order by honourable Tuinaceva.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I think we are starting to slide into non-factual statements.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- What’s your Point of Order!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I would ask the Member to provide evidence on the assertion that some honourable Members on this side said that we did not need a national carrier. Standing Order 62, Sir. Let us stick to factual comments, *kerekere* (please).

(Honourable P.K. Bala interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if anyone is still bitter about Fiji Airways, let me remind them on the words of the honourable Prime Minister during his recent visit to the Fiji Airways Headquarters in Nadi sometimes last week. He said, and I quote: “You have transformed our beloved airline into a symbol of excellence and a source of national pride.”

Vinaka vakalevu, honourable Prime Minister, for the encouraging statement and thank you for recognising the work of the previous Government in that regard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving on, I wish to congratulate the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics on his presentation on the Budget. I also thank him for making available to this Parliament the various supplement materials to assist us in our understanding the 2023–2024 Budget. The honourable Minister and his staff, obviously, have put a lot of hard work in the preparation of the Budget and they deserved to be thanked.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I congratulate the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance, I do not necessarily agree with him in all he had mentioned in his Budget Address. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a big spending Budget and the largest in Fiji’s history, both revenue and expenditure, and one with the largest deficit outside COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I see problems coming. The Budget has violated simple principles. One of them is when a government runs its operation under huge revenue that is supported by a hike in VAT and taxes, they are actually looking for problems. In other words, when you have a government that their only solution to improving the economy is to obtain revenue by digging deep from the people’s pocket, then it is telling us that disaster is up our path.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is going to make our grassroots people suffer. Repercussions will be the increase in social problems, rising crimes, as people struggle to cope with life.

This Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will create a high inflammatory environment that brings a price pressure point, it will slow down the country's GDP and take revenue away from Government. The result will be, there will be more debt for Government and that journey, Mr. Speaker, has already started.

The breakdown provided in the Budget Supplement pointed to an inevitable debt coming our way. The increase by 6.5 percent and in the next financial year will be a \$10.5 billion. Then another 4.7 percent in the 2024-2025 financial year, which will take the debt to \$11 billion and a further 4 percent in 2025-2026 financial year, pushing the debt to \$11.5 billion. The way things are happening, it will only be a matter of time when Government will realise when they are in a swirl of huge debt. Mr. Speaker, Sir, nothing is wrong with that, provided that Government can grow the economy and have the capacity to manage debt.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can see that the very subject that the honourable Minister of Finance normally used as ammunition to attack the FijiFirst Government with is debt and bad spending and this is going to come back and haunt him. The VAT hike, increase in departure tax and increase in corporate tax will hit the tourism industry badly. In 2022, our tourism earnings totalled \$1,499.3 million, the 2023 expectation mentioned by the honourable Minister of Finance is around \$2,142.3 million which is around 43 percent up. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can confidently say, with these new policies introduced by the Coalition Government, I do not believe that the 43 percent target will ever be achieved. This Budget, Mr. Speaker, is going to kill our tourist industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I noted with appreciation the total allocation of \$183.7 million given to the Fiji Police Force; the increase is to beef up work on preventing and combating cybercrimes and illegal drugs. The Police Force definitely needs support to speed up the work of protecting our cyber space. Cybercrime crosses borders, it is extremely harmful and can destroy businesses in many ways and it is a threat to any government because of espionage activities. A study that was done some four years ago concluded that around 1 percent of global GDP which is close to \$600 billion is lost to cybercrime each year. I believe Fiji is already in this circle and the Government may have already been losing millions of dollars, good revenue through cybercrimes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my maiden speech I acknowledged the honourable Minister of Health and Medical Services on the work done by his Ministry to address NCDs in Fiji. In my view \$350,000 given to address NCDs is the most unrealistic, uncompassionate and tokenistic in this Budget. Sir, 80 percent deaths every year alluded to NCDs costing our economy approximately \$400 million. Someone gets a limb amputated every 8 hours in this country because of NCDs. That means three amputations in a day, 21 amputations in a week and 1,097 amputations in a year; that is frightening. A survey conducted sometime back by WHO indicated that 66 percent of our population is overweight. To me that means majority of our society are sickly due to NCDs. It can also mean that 66 percent of our population are not 100 percent productive because of NCDs. Yet, Mr. Speaker, Sir, 0.7 percent of the Budget allocation is given to NCDs under Public Health for prevention and control purposes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am talking about the number one killer in Fiji, the honourable Minister for Health has a big job to do and needs more funds and support from both sides of Parliament to fight and battle this big killer that is taking away about 80 percent of our population every year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our roads are not safe. From January to June this year, we have recorded 48 deaths compared to 15 the same period last year. That is a 220 percent more deaths on our roads. That is the risk we run, we are 220 percent more likely than last year of losing a limb or not returning home alive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are questions to be asked, do we have the confidence as parents in our children's safety when we send them out in public service vehicles like buses, minivans or carriers? For us adults, do we feel safe using our roads or are we just accepting that we do not have a choice and what will be, will be.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this point, I just want to acknowledge the honourable Minister responsible for Transport we were able to at a session this morning talking about this issue. It was a joy to discuss with him ideas of how we can work together in trying to make our roads safe again. Beliefs are there, that something needs to be done urgently to get safety back on our roads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the inception of the Accident Compensation Commission of Fiji in 2018, they have already paid out more than \$44.8 million for Accident Compensation under the No-fault Compensation Scheme and about \$30.3 million of that amount was for motor vehicle accidents only. That is how bad and unsafe of our roads are. Figures do not lie. I appeal to us as law makers in this august Parliament, let us see this life affecting issue, get the attention it deserves and the political will to make our roads safe again.

I noted that the Land Transport Authority has been given a total of \$28.4 million allocation with \$23.6 million for Operations, an increase of 10 percent from the 2022-2023 Budget allocation. It is to boost Enforcement Operations and improve services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we want safety on our roads, the key is Road Safety Education. If we look at the number of jaywalking cases on our roads, over speeding, reckless driving, drivers talking on mobiles when driving, those on *Facebook* or texting on the wheel, those jumping redlights, the level of music in buses, inconsiderate and non-courteous driving behaviour, et cetera. It is really a worse situation. We see these behaviours on our roads everyday.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, LTA must be proactive in their approach towards safety. What we need to see are safe drivers, more matured and responsible in their conduct. It is good to see an increase in Traffic Infringement Notices issued but deaths on our road is on the rise. The question is, what is going wrong? Saying that the Land Transport Authority might need to urgently review its road safety strategies including enforcement policies and quickly find ways to control and bring back safety on our roads. With the kind of budget given and the support received, we can see changes coming to our roads in the near future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is nothing in this Budget to address road congestions during peak hours along the Suva to Nausori, Lami to Suva and Nadi to Lautoka corridors. This is a huge problem out there, people are frustrated, irritated and are sick and tired of this congestion problem. It is affecting our economy, more pollution to the environment and the social and health effects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on an estimated one hour per vehicle idle time and picking on a sample of around 30,000 medium-sized vehicles that run on motor spirit Fiji-wide, on a return trip in a congested situation, it can be estimated that the cost congestion to our economy is around \$30 million to \$40 million in a year. These are the kind of money we need to run our Government and should not be thrown away just like that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, our maritime people have been isolated in this Budget in terms of shipping services subsidy. I noted a drop by \$200,000 in the allocation, which is a 6.2 percent reduction from what was given in the 2022-2023 Budget. This means that the people of Kadavu, Lau, Yasawa and Lomaiviti will have to prepare themselves to face problems in getting a more consistent and reliable shipping service through the Franchise Programme this coming year. This is not good news for the maritime population. Shipping services for them means to replenish supplies,

visiting relatives, shopping, sending produce to markets, getting Government visitations on various programmes and many other activities. I am from the maritime zone; the potential out there is immeasurable. We can contribute to the economy in millions of dollars, what is needed is a reliable shipping link that could only be provided through a shipping programme supported by the Government. Mr. Speaker, Sir, most islands get trips once a month through the subsidy service. With a drop in allocation, some islands may now only see a trip once every two months.

The idea to bring back Public Works Department (PWD) just for the reason to look after the rural roads and with a \$5 million allocation, to me, is a total waste of money and this is backward thinking and lack of wisdom. I say that because the Government has already an established system in place to look after the rural and farm roads, which is with the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and the Ministry of Agriculture. The duplication and overlapping of responsibilities is going to cause waste, stir abuse and create coordination problems which can invite corrupt practices. It would have been a great idea to give a portion of the \$5 million to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services for the NCDs Awareness Programmes and part of that \$5 million to the Ministry of Agriculture to increase support given to farmers to build capacity or coordinate market network so that they can be part of our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the million dollars we are searching for to fix our economy is there with the agriculture. I note a slight increase for the *dalo* farming programme, but nothing much for ginger farmers and *yaqona* farming programmes. My recommendation to the honourable Minister of Finance to give the Ministry for Agriculture more funding under the extension activity and draw a network framework.

HON. P.K. BALA.- *Lelo!*

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- The FijiFirst Government has already laid the foundation. You will never go wrong if you pick where we left off and continued.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, I share the same concerns raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition and my colleagues from this side of Parliament with regards to the two unfilled FijiFirst parliamentary seats. We have said what we have said, but again, I would like to say that we have denied two seats, three months of waiting because the Constitutional Offices Commission (COC) has not stepped up in its duties as stipulated in our Constitution. For us, justice has been denied to voters who were supposed to have their representatives here in this august Parliament to be their voice.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the 2023-2024 Appropriation Bill and like other honourable Members who have spoken before me, offer my congratulations to the honourable Minister of Finance for a well thought out and articulated 2023-2024 National Budget. This is the budget for the future. It is the budget for the new Fiji.

Let me start by responding to the comments from the Opposition. Throughout the two days we have been hearing the Opposition bragging about their initiatives over the last eight years. I would like to say to them that there is nothing new in Government, there is nothing new in this world. We are all in this business together. You have been there for eight years, you have had your chance to come up with the initiatives and now it is our turn. Thank you for your initiatives, and we will see that we continue from where you left off and make sure that the people come first.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Minister responsible for Agriculture and Waterways, I would like to state that over the last 10 years, the budgets allocated to the Ministry has been on a reducing trend. There has been a lot of hot air but nothing to show for it when it came to the money. If we want the

agriculture sector to seriously grow the economy in a sustainable manner, then we must be willing to throw in the money to make it happen. If we choose to give money in drips and drops, then expect drips and drops in the sector's contribution to the national economy.

What the agriculture sector needs is serious money to boost production and productivity right across the value chain. The allocation of \$95.2 million to the Ministry indicates the significance with which this Government recognises the importance of agriculture and its role in Fiji's economic development. It is a major increase from the \$64.1 million budget of the Ministry in the last financial year and is a welcome development that augurs well for the future of agriculture in Fiji as a major player in the economic sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry for Agriculture and Waterways' budget allocation are directed towards the provision of food and nutritional security to all Fijians, income security and to enhance agricultural growth and expansion to stimulate economic activities. This will in turn bolster sector performance, generate export income, ensure sustainable livelihoods and build community resilience in Fiji's agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during my tenure as Minister, I will ensure that the private sector is engaged as much as possible in the activities of the Ministry for Agriculture with the view to increase agro-processing and value addition of commodities as a way out of the seasonality of most of our commodities.

Mr. Speaker Sir, let me say, that the Ministry for Agriculture is not the engine of growth in the agriculture. It is the private sector. So, a fully-fledged agro-processing sector will contribute in a big way to increase production, increase employment, increase economic activity, increase in exports and overall growth in the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me touch on some of the key areas that the Ministry would be focussing on. At production level, the Ministry has been allocated a budget of \$2 million to continue to support farm access roads which are the veins of development at farm level. Without farm roads, farming in Fiji is back breaking. Even horses give up due to the rough terrain under which our farmers operate. I know that most of us here are farmers ourselves including the honourable Leader of the Opposition and they well understand what I am saying.

Planting becomes a problem when it comes to harvesting. You can talk as much as possible to a farmer about planting thousands of *dalo* suckers or thousands of *yaqona* plants but inside the mind of the farmer, he is thinking, come the day of harvesting who is going to carry all these loads back to where it will be sold. This is the purpose of these farm access roads. We need farm access roads. We need to improve farm access roads in order for our farmers to have access to their farms and also to the markets.

Farm mechanization, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is an area that the Ministry will support to ensure mass production and economic viability. The Ministry has been allocated \$400,000 which should be given to farming groups on a one-third or two-thirds basis for the purchase of tractors, excavators and farm implements with the view to ensuring mass production.

Machinery Outsourcing, the demand for machinery services continue to increase over the years due to the commercialisation of farms in the agriculture sector. However, this allocation has been reduced from \$7 million to \$1 million this year. We have had discussions with the Ministry for Finance Officials, and we felt that the funds should be reallocated into other programmes within the Ministry of Agriculture budget partly due to the underutilisation of these funds over the last financial year and hiccups in the Government tender process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$300,000 is allocated for women in agriculture development. The Ministry recognises the immense contribution made by women in both the subsistence and informal income generating sectors and they will be supported through our farming programmes particularly around vanilla and floriculture production. This assistance will cover capacity building training for women, the improvement of nurseries and the provision of seed planting materials for their farms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has embarked on an initiative with investors from Israel. This is to address large scale production technologies. To-date, we have around three projects that we should be finalising over the next two weeks. There are two large scale vegetable production projects that will be based in the Sigatoka Valley and one dairy production facility that will be based in the Central Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a number of new programmes. Procurement of small farm machines, we have been purchasing big machines like tractors, excavators but power tillers and hand rotovators will enable land preparation to support high yielding crops like vegetables and the programme will also support the procurement of yaqona pounding machines and *yaqona* drying equipment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during my maiden speech, I had to the poor state of the Ministry's staff living quarters. I am happy to say that the Ministry has been allocated \$1 million to address this very problem, and I thank the honourable Minister of Finance for this allocation.

For the subsidy for fertilizer and weedicides, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a \$1 million subsidy to support the cost of fertilizer and weedicides has been given. It targets key commodities such as rice, *dalo* and ginger and these subsidies are expected to cushion the high cost of inputs and enable farmers to sell their produce at affordable prices to the domestic market. This is seen as a way of boosting production in terms of volume to boost the exports and reduce the imports of fresh agriculture produce into Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is an initiative for a Regional Training Centre to be based out of Dobuilevu Research Station in Rakiraki. This centre will be used to demonstrate modern technology and for the training of Ministry Extension Officers in Fiji as well as the region on the modern agriculture technology techniques.

On organic agriculture, Mr. Speaker Sir, the development of organic agriculture is gaining momentum in Fiji and the Pacific, and it has enormous benefits given the concerns on NCDs. People are now turning to health foods and countries are now turning to foods that are proven to be grown in pristine environments as a way to healthy living. The Ministry has made a serious commitment to develop organic agriculture in Fiji. Over the next three years, we will convert one of our research stations, that is, Naduruloulou Research Station to solely undertake research and development of organic agriculture in Fiji.

On the Agriculture Marketing Authority (AMA), Mr. Speaker Sir, the Ministry continues to support AMA and there is an increase in their budget by \$800,000 with an allocation of \$3 million for the improvement of their infrastructure and facilities in order for AMA to meet the expected volume of produce that they are going to purchase.

Tutu and Navuso are two of our two training institutions where young farmers are being trained and the Ministry continues to provide support for these two institutions for the benefit of the agriculture sector.

Let me turn to Waterways. The maintenance and well-being of Fiji's waterways remains the responsibility of the people themselves. Communities must learn to take good care of the rivers and

streams as part of their livelihood provisions. Government has a duty to safeguard these waterways should communities fail to live up to their responsibilities.

Watershed Management, \$1.2 million has been allocated. The drainage over flooding problem continues to be an issue in this country and the Ministry has taken steps to reintroduce the Drainage Board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is of the view that the reintroduction of the Drainage Board will help immensely in taking the load off from the Waterways Division in terms of the maintenance and upkeep of most of the irrigation schemes as well as most of the structures which has been neglected for as long as we can remember, but I would not like to play the blame game. We will get on with the job, we will fix the flood gates, we will fix the seawalls and we will make sure that the services that we need to provide to the people are given in a timely manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me conclude by stating once again my appreciation to the honourable Minister of Finance for presenting a well thought out and well-planned National Budget and I know that this Budget will go a long way in elevating the living standards of farmers and enable us to build our economy for our future generation. I extend my full support for the Bill.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, the honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers and of course, my colleagues, the honourable Members on this side of Parliament.

If you allow me, Sir, if I could just convey my congratulations to the honourable Minister of Fisheries and Forestry, hearing his brief on the ice plant in Koro with a figure of about \$900,000. I am sure after that one, you will move into Nairai for the honourable Attorney-General, and I ask if there is a balance in that budget, would you please consider the northern part of Taveuni?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for this opportunity to respond to the proposed 2023-2024 Budget delivered to the distinguished Members of this Parliament by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, Prof. Biman Prasad. This is the first Budget delivered by the Coalition Government since its delivery to the august Parliament, my colleagues and I have been examining the detail and have been in consultation with the people, seeking their views and forming our considered responses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the extensive work that the honourable Minister of Finance and his team undertook in developing the Budget papers and presenting them in a timely manner, *vinaka vakalevu*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also acknowledge the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his Budget response yesterday and, at times, humorous but also serious critical deconstruction. The honourable Leader of the Opposition showed the value of our national debate.

I guess, Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the end of the day, what really matters is only the figures and numbers that is contained therein. That composes of the wishes, desires, dreams of the people of Fiji which has been prepared into ideas and plans. But I believe, at the end of the day what matters most is how this is translated into actions. Actions that capture the wishes and the dreams of our people. Critically more important is whether those actions translate and captures the interest of our people or serves the interest of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, this Coalition Government was given a charter. Our President, His Excellency Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, in opening Parliament on 3rd February, 2023 laid out the charter and I quote:

“Your Government’s mission is to build unity through social cohesion and improve and strengthen our economy through sustainable growth with the ultimate objective of improving the lives of all the people of Fiji”.

In his Budget Address, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Professor Prasad reminded us that everything is connected to everything else and so it is with his proposed Budget. His Budget is connected to the past, the present and the future. The strong economic foundation of the FijiFirst Government provided to the Coalition Government allows the honourable Minister of Finance to prepare and present this proposed Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, his proposed Budget attempts to address the issues of the present, and as we have examined the details, there is nothing new in this Budget, nothing innovative other than having the distinction of being the biggest spending Budget Fiji has ever had.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this proposed Budget will assist or stall Fiji’s future development. A budget cannot just look to today, it must consider a future timeline and develop and secure a nation’s economic base for the next generation. When I look at the revenue and corresponding expenditure, I see much that concerns me and my colleagues on this side of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Finance has attempted to set a scene for his proposed Budget that is a fabrication of the economic realities in my view. This has served to muddy the waters of his responsibility, which is to continue to steer the economy to recovery after the global setbacks of COVID-19. And continue to ensure the opportunity and wellbeing of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the manner in which the honourable Minister of Finance exempted the wealthy from their proportional tax burden, favoured a well-established company with tax exemptions, increased the tax burden on Fiji’s tourism industry and played a half game with VAT, in my view is disheartening. A fundamental principle of a just society is that everyone should contribute according to their means and yet the social responsibility levy has been removed. Fiji Water gains a tax-exempt status. Fiji’s biggest brand, tourism has an increased tax burden, and the poor are considered fortunate because they can buy the 22 items without VAT.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget spends and spends but lacks serious direction and bold initiatives. I state this while also acknowledging that there are some highlights in different ministries portfolios that have the potential to make a difference.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one such highlight is the changes within the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection. These changes are a positive response to the growing needs of our nation’s vulnerable, children and women. I am aware that the Ministry has renewed its commitment to work with Civil Service Organisations, faith-based organisations and community stakeholders to ensure better outcomes in the service delivery and in the critical areas of gender violence. The Budget allocation positively reflects some of these changes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another initiative that deserves credit is the new Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation. Establishing this Ministry allows an appropriate focus on Fiji’s essential tourism industry and collaboration with its stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to see the ongoing support for Youth and Sports to showcase our talented sportsmen and women at regional and international events. The opportunity to build on Fiji’s brand through sports is significant and while the Budget allocation allows for a continuation of what FijiFirst began, I believe much more can and needs to be done to establish a clear and bold Fiji Sports brand.

Sir, FijiFirst provided this opportunity and supported the Fiji Drua and Fijiana Drua Teams engagement in the Super Rugby competitions, something that we are all proud of now. The nation can be proud of what FijiFirst began in further developing Fiji's sports brand and providing exceptional international opportunities for our young sports people.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, while speaking on the area of our nation's youth, I also expressed my surprise and disappointment at the lack of initiative in areas critical to the development of our youth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our young people's rising mental health needs are a concern. I recently spoke to counsellors overwhelmed with the increased mental health demands in our schools, higher education institutions and communities. I see no clear, coordinated approach as I examined this Budget. There is an allocation for Mental Health Awareness in the Ministry of Health and another allocation for Gender Violence Awareness in Education. However, these piecemeal approaches do nothing to address the mental health issues of our young people. Our young people need support, interventions and care and this Budget, I believe, fails to address this issue.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget is silent on the issue of youth unemployment. As I visit Nanuku Settlement in Vatuwaqa, I see and talk with the young people in need of both opportunity and livelihood. As Fiji's population becomes more urbanised, there is an increasing population of young people who will not find their future in farming their own land or fishing their own sea. These young people need a government that can create, innovate and secure pathways to livelihoods in urban centres.

The Coalition Government has provided tax relief to Fiji Water, a well-established and profitable organisation, while here in Suva, we have a young start-up organisation, Bula Outsourcing, which is taking risks and growing by employing our young people, training them and allowing our young people to find livelihood and a future here. This Budget has just increased their tax burden. This Budget has favoured a multinational and overlooked what is essential for our economy...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Point of Order! With due respect to the honourable Naivalurua, all BPO operators, which Bula Outsourcing is one, is tax free. Let us stick to facts.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Thank you honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our nation's largest demographic is below the age of 35 years, yet there are no short to medium term plans that address this group and the real-time issues that support them. For example, what is the budget or Government's response to increasing drug use in our society? What is the response to social media and its impact on our youth? Where is the conversation around the access and harms of pornography? What are the responses to our society's decline in moral values and the evidence of this expressed by our village and community leaders? Let me press this point further. What is the Coalition Government's response to the youth's employment needs, to our young people's desire for housing, to start a family and to secure a future?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are just pointing them overseas and saying farewell or do we have the courage to fund bold initiatives that both build a better Fiji and make Fiji a home of success and security for the next generation? Or, put it simply, they want to remain in Fiji and call Fiji their home. I see nothing in the Budget that addresses the concern of my fellow young Fijians. We are fortunate to be blessed with a young population, and I ask if this Budget is fulfilling its responsibility to them? I believe the Budget needs more funding and bold initiatives to help our youth. Along with

funding and bold initiatives, the Coalition Government needs a leadership that can both talk into the issues and lead to the heart of the issues to move past a reheat of old ideas and see what is needed for our future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note in the honourable Minister's Budget Address the commencement of four new embassies, of which three have received a budget allocation - Washington, Port Moresby and Kuala Lumpur of \$4 million. Fiji's engagement in the region and maintaining our presence globally is vital for our ability to achieve foreign policy objectives. Under the FijiFirst government, we worked hard to balance our foreign relationship and secure Fiji's place and position as a regional and global voice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the recommitment to re-establish the formal representations, we need to ensure we are using our resources wisely and with the confidence of a return on investment. Fiji's economic recovery has priority over re-establishing three missions in the 2023-2024 Budget and I would urge reconsideration on the timing and priority of this.

The world of diplomacy and international relationships has alternative models where Fiji can gain representation and engage in meaningful dialogue without establishing full mission status and bearing the associated costs. These other models deserve to be explored so that funding best supports our economic growth and further builds on our status as a regional hub. We can afford to be creative in exploring what serves our interests well.

Under the FijiFirst Government, our international engagements widened. We took leadership in critical roles and organisations that further strengthened our standing and our opportunity. Fiji has demonstrated that we can engage in dialogue above our size and weight. A renewed effort needs to be taken to secure these opportunities so that we can influence what is important to us in the areas of climate change, regional security and trade policies.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wonder if the honourable Members on the other side of Parliament understand just how everything is connected to everything else. There have been grumbles about the cost of our peacekeeping and so they need to be reminded that the boots of our soldiers on the ground in Lebanon, Sinai, Iraq to name a few, are what we call foreign policy tools. In the same way, the boots of our rugby players as they play and thrill the crowds also serve as an active foreign policy engagement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note that the budget allocation of \$1.2 million to Pacific Island Development Forum (PIDF). I recommend that the PIDF is overdue for a review to identify how it best serves Fiji and the region. The budget allocation would be better served in realigning PIDF to achieve a deeper and more meaningful engagement in the region. If aligned correctly, PIDF has a role to play in building and shaping our region's aspirations and strengthening Fiji's role as a regional hub.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commented earlier on the new Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation. Part of the responsibility of this new Ministry is the Vanua Levu Tourism Development Programme which has been allocated \$5 million in Phase I. While accepting World Bank funding for further tourism development is one issue, do we have the bold and insightful leadership to take our tourism experiences to the next level? Can we, as leaders, vision what is possible in Vanua Levu and Taveuni? What would a bridge between Vanua Levu and Taveuni do for tourism and agriculture? What would a cable car over Taveuni from Somosomo over to Lavena and one falls down to South Taveuni and the other one falling into Matei add to tourism adventure and experience? Some may call these ideas fanciful, but what does it take for us to see with the new vision and new boldness to secure Fiji's future.

Fiji has an appeal and beauty and as the honourable Speaker well knows the friendly North is under appreciated in what it can contribute to Fiji's economy. While I support the initiative of this new Ministry, at the same time, I am challenging the need for innovation and bold vision leadership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we love rugby, and our young people love rugby, yet we have neglected to undertake the available opportunities in sports tourism and developing Fiji as a sports hub. I believe there is work towards that, honourable Minister. While other countries have oil fields and diamond fields, we have an incredible resource of active, vibrant, young people ready to showcase their talent to the world. That is our diamond field, that is our oil field. I suggest at this point, maybe we should consider a rugby academy in the Island of Taveuni and perhaps the manufacturing of rugby balls somewhere in Nardoga and we do something like that that is connected to rugby and sports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, tourism is about connecting the world to Fiji, and I encourage the Coalition Government to think wider and become more innovative in the way they think through investing in our future.

Mr. Speaker, it is encouraging to see the increased allocation to the Fiji Police Force. As a former Police Commissioner, I know the importance of maintaining and improving our local security needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I am encouraged by the budgetary allocation, I am saddened to see increased crimes and how our Police Services responses have deteriorated. There are needs to be more speed responses to community requests. Police officers seem to be more concerned, in my view, in paperwork that immediately responding to complaints. Mr. Speaker, last Thursday the owner of a well-known restaurant was assaulted and robbed inside her home compound when she got home with the day's takings. The single-mother business owner has worked hard to build her life from selling roti parcel in the streets to establishing a quality restaurant. What has been the response to her plight. Apparently, the responsible Minister was alleged to have said, "the next time you carry money, let me know." Was this said because he had lost confidence in his own Department? More importantly, Mr. Speaker, is this the correct way to address a deteriorating secured situation? There are so many other stories.

Mr. Speaker, there are increasing reports that Police on the highways are now openly nudging speedsters for lunch money. I have heard real stories about this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my view FICAC should remain as an independent unit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me emphasize to this august House the importance of good governance in our nation. It is a responsibility we must uphold as entrusted by the people of Fiji. We have been mandated to safeguard their interest and ensure a prosperous future for all. It saddens me to point out the failure of governance by the Coalition Government in ensuring appropriate representation in today's Parliament by the shortage of our two Members. Their responsibility has lapsed and fallen to political point-scoring in my view. The Coalition Government has fiddled with the integrity and timeliness of governance. The Coalition Government demonstrates that they are not interested in true representations but remain more interested in playing politics of self-interest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I return to the words of His Excellency the President in his opening Address to Parliament, and I quote:

"Your Government's mission is to build unity through social cohesion and further improve and strengthen our economy through sustainable growth within the ultimate objective of improving the lives of all people of Fiji."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I ask the question that all Fijians are asking. Does this Budget deliver unity further improve and strengthen our economy, provide sustainable growth and improve the lives of all the people of Fiji?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Yes.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I ask the question of the honourable Prime Minister, is he happy with this Budget?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Yes.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Does the honourable Prime Minister believe it meets the expectation of His Excellency the President and all the people of Fiji?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Yes.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not believe this Budget meets the expectation of many of my fellow Fijians.

My colleagues have termed it a microwave Budget that I would agree and say that at best it is half-baked. The Budget lacks creativity, innovation, imagination and boldness to do the right thing in moving Fiji forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget:

- 1) Fails to support the bold initiatives of our young people and need to make Fiji their future home;
- 2) Underfunds the crisis we have with NCDs;
- 3) Leaves our poor an under-privilege in their current plight;
- 4) Neglects to establish the pathways out of unemployment;
- 5) Ignores the emerging opportunities in agriculture;
- 6) Overlooks the needs for recovery and excessive spends; and
- 7) Taxes the industries and small businesses that are in recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget fails, in my view, to grow the economy, its revenue assumptions are uncertain. It keeps Fijian guessing at what new tax increases might be around the corner. I close with a challenge to the leadership of the Coalition Government. If you cannot take the heat in the kitchen, get out. But I say, if you cannot make some heat, get out of the kitchen. This country deserves a Budget and leadership that unites, creates confidence, delivers sovereignty and stands on truth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget does not meet our expectation. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to me this Budget deserves (honourable Member shows a red card).

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Naivalurua for flashing that red card.

Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament now for afternoon tea and then when we resume the honourable Minister for Youth will take the floor. Parliament is adjourned till 4.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.06 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.37 p.m.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to rise on a Point of Order.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise on a Point of Order under Standing Order 60. It has been a protocol in Parliament and has become a tradition that when a Member presents his maiden speech and makes a contribution to the Budget, normally there is no Point of Order when the Member is on the floor. This allows fluency and the Member to stay within the time frame of 20 minutes.

Normally, if there is any question, it is directed towards the mover of the motion who will answer to all the queries and in this case, the Minister of Finance. I just wanted a clarification from you, Sir, if this has moved away from the normal protocol and tradition of Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Koroilavesau. I will take note of what you have asked and will be making a statement to that effect once I receive it from the Secretary- General.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise to make a brief statement in support of the motion before Parliament. Before I proceed, I would like to take a moment to express my sincere gratitude to the Almighty God for His guidance and blessings throughout my journey. It is through His grace that we find the strength and wisdom to serve our nation and empower our young people.

I take this opportunity to thank honourable Naivalurua for his contribution and hopefully my contribution will shed some light on the issues he has raised.

I also take this opportunity to thank our Special Olympic team that recently participated in the Berlin World Games in Germany. The Special Olympic Fiji returned home with three gold, six silver and four bronze medals.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Winning 13 medals in total was an incredible fete for these dedicated athletes who gave their all and won medals.

Today I stand before this august Parliament to express our unwavering support for the recent Budget announcement for the new financial year. As the Minister for Youths and Sports, I would like to acknowledge and commend the Government for its steadfast commitment towards the development and empowerment of our youths and the promotion of sports in our great nation. I would like to take a moment to acknowledge and express my utmost appreciation for the leadership of our honourable Prime Minister, Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka. As a newly formed Coalition Government, he has demonstrated exceptional dedication and vision to steering our nation towards prosperity and progress. Under his guidance, we have witnessed a renewed commitment to the well-being and empowerment of our youth and the promotion of sports in Fiji.

I also wish to thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics and his team for their tireless efforts in developing this Budget. Crafting a budget that addresses the diverse needs of our nation is a complex task requiring meticulous planning, consultation and foresights. With his team, Government has ensured that the Budget reflects the priorities and aspirations of our people. This is a Budget for a new Fiji where we, as a nation, are all building our future together.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in allocation of funds from \$13.8 million to \$19.5 million for the next financial year to implement youth and sports development programmes is a clear testament to the Government's recognition of the importance of investing in our young people and harnessing the power of sports to drive economic growth and social cohesion. With an allocation as such for Youth and Sports Development, the Ministry has been entrusted with the responsibility of shaping a brighter future for our nation guided by the principles of inclusivity, innovation and sustainability.

The significance of this Budget allocation cannot be understated as it provides us with the necessary resources to effectively execute our strategic plans and initiatives. It is a clear indication of the Government's commitment to the well-being and prosperity of our youths who make up a substantial portion of our population. We have approximately 925,000 people residing in our beautiful country and a significant 40 percent of this population consists of youth aged between 15 years to 35 years.

Also, for sports which was once considered a mere recreational activity has transformed into a robust industry with significant economic potential for Fiji. Therefore, recognising its importance and providing the necessary support and resources to ensure its continued growth and success is critical. It is evident that investing in youth and sports is paramount to the overall future growth and development of our nation.

On youth development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Youths and Sports acknowledges the challenges faced by many young people, especially those who have fallen out of the mainstream education system. The Ministry has recognised the importance of providing a safety net and a second chance to these individuals. This Budget will strengthen our delivery at the community and at our Youth Training Centres.

We have five Training Centres across Fiji specialising in carpentry, organic agriculture, disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation, livestock training programmes, music and aquaculture. Out of the five Youth Training Centres, four are currently in operation while the one in Yavitu, Kadavu, needs to be restored due to damages sustained during *TC Harold* in 2020. I am happy to announce that there is funding allocated in this Budget for the restoration of this Youth Training Centre to ensure its full operation in the next financial year to serve the youths of Kadavu. These centres serve as platforms for skill development, providing opportunities for young people to learn and acquire available vocational skills.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the geographical distribution of villages and youth clubs across Fiji adds another layer of complexity to our efforts. Our nation comprises many remote and isolated communities making access to resources, education and opportunities a significant challenge for our young population. It is crucial that we recognise unique circumstances faced by these communities and work towards bridging gap.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this increased budget will assist us address some to these geographical barriers and provide equal access to resources and opportunities to ensure that no young person is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Youth and Sports has developed strategic plans and initiatives focused on empowering our youth and fostering their holistic development. We have set strategic goals that have encompassed areas such as productive and economically empowered youth, health and well-being and sports development.

In line with these goals, we have implemented various milestones to drive our efforts forward. These milestones include initiatives such as youth, entrepreneurship programmes, grant assistance

for youth movement activities, the development of national youth policies, strengthening youth club registration and the establishment of co-operatives. Through these milestones, we aim to create an enabling environment that nurtures youth-led initiatives, supports their economic empowerment and encourages their active participation in national building.

Mr. Speaker, this Budget supports our commitment to an inclusive and equitable youth development. The Ministry of Youth and Sports aims to implement targeted programmes and initiatives specifically designed to address the needs of street youths. In many of our major towns and cities, we witness the unfortunate sight of unemployed and marginalised young individuals struggling to find their place in society. As a Ministry, we recognise the urgency of supporting and empowering these street youths, providing them with the necessary tools and opportunities for a sustainable future.

Furthermore, we will emphasise the importance of mental health and well-being for our youth. Many of them have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect, leaving lasting emotional scars. By offering counselling services, mentorship and psychosocial support, we aim to restore their self-esteem resilience and overall well-being.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also I firmly believe that it is our responsibility to equip our youth with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and respond to the challenges posed by climate change and natural disasters. I am pleased to inform that the budget allocation for Youth and Sports Development recognises the significance of this issue and provide ample support to ensure our youth are well informed and prepared. This is accomplished through our Certificate I in Resilience Programme offered at our Youth Training Centres.

As custodians of our nation's future, our youth must be empowered to understand and respond to these challenges effectively. By integrating these topics into our educational programmes, youth clubs and community activities, we can foster a generation of informed and resilient individuals who are equipped to mitigate the impacts of climate change and effectively respond to natural disasters. We will also collaborate with relevant stakeholders including international organisations, NGOs and local communities to explore new technologies and best practices. This collaboration will provide our youth with valuable opportunities for knowledge exchange, capacity building and the sharing of experiences in addressing climate related challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our commitment to fostering productive and economically empowered youth, it is crucial that we provide the necessary support and resources for income generating projects amongst other youth led initiatives. Recognising the potential and entrepreneurial spirit of our young people, I am delighted to note that the budget allocation for Youth and Sports Development includes grants, specifically aimed at supporting income generating projects for our youth.

Youth Entrepreneurship is a powerful tool for economic growth, job creation and poverty reduction. By encouraging and supporting our young people in their entrepreneurial endeavours, we empower them to become self-reliant, contribute to the economy and drive innovation. These income generating projects not only provide financial stability but also instil valuable skills, confidence and a sense of purpose in our youth. Moreover, the grants for income generating projects serve as a steppingstone for our youth to explore and capitalise on emerging economic sectors. It is important to note that these grants are not merely financial support but also come with mentorship and guidance. This holistic approach ensures that our young entrepreneurs have access to the tools and support systems necessary for long-term success.

On Sports Development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget announcement reflects the Government's recognition of the emerging potential of the sports sector as a strong contributor to our

economy. The funding in the next financial year will enable us to replace the National Stadium synthetic tracks that is in dire need of repairs. It will also enable us to develop sports fields, indoor facilities, hard courts, enhance sports tourism promotion through hosting of international tournaments, provide sports grant for persons with disabilities and support the development of high-performance athletes and facilities. By doing so, we create an environment that encourages sports participation, fosters talent development and position's Fiji as a leading sporting destination in the region. This funding also provides relevant support for the administration of the Fiji National Sports Commission, Fiji Sports Council and the Boxing Commission of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the Fiji National Sports Commission, we implement sports outreach programmes in communities. Beyond the individual benefits, sports development also has a profound impact on our communities. Through this Budget, we will engage and empower communities to tap into their untapped sports potential.

Many talented individuals reside in our rural communities, and they lack the resources and opportunities to showcase their skills and reach their full potential. By investing in grassroots sports initiatives, sports skills, administration skills and strengthening community sports associations, we can unearth hidden talents, nurture aspiring athletes and transform them into medal prospects in Fiji. This not only brings pride to our nation, but also inspires future generations and serves as a catalyst for community development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition I would like to inform that this Budget also supports the opportunity for overseas sporting tours. Major sporting tours in the new financial year, includes:

- Rugby World Cup Preparation and participation, Pacific Games Preparation and HSBC Sevens;
- Touch Rugby World Cup;
- World Athletics Championships, Pacific Games Preparations;
- World Bowls Championships, Champion versus Champion and World Indoor Singles;
- Cricket Twenty-20 Pacific Cup, ICC Women's Twenty-20 World Cup East Asia Pacific Qualifier, ICC Women's Under 19 Cricket World Cup, East Asia Pacific Qualifier.

These tours provide our athletes with valuable exposure, enabling them to compete with international counterparts and gain valuable experience. Such experiences not only enhance their skills and performance, but also promote cross-cultural exchange, fostering greater understanding and appreciation among nations.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the budget allocation allows us to focus on the development of coaches and trainers. Coaches play a pivotal role in nurturing talent, honing skills and guiding our athletes towards success. By investing in the development and capacity building of coaches, we ensure that our athletes receive the best possible guidance and support. This, in turn, leads to improved performance, increased competitiveness and greater potential for success at regional, international and even Olympic levels.

It is imperative that we recognise the pivotal role that sports plays in combatting the high incidence rate of NCDs in Fiji. By investing in sports, we not only strengthen our communities through social cohesion but also promote physical activities and healthier lifestyles, thereby addressing the pressing issues of NCDs. This budget allocation for youth and sports development recognises the potential of sports in addressing these health challenges and places a strong emphasis on promoting active lifestyles among our population.

Fiji, like any other nations, faces a substantial challenge in combatting NCDs. These diseases

such as diabetes, heart disease and obesity have become a growing concern impacting health and well-being of our population. The statistics are alarming with a high prevalence of NCDs affecting both young and old alike. As a nation, we can afford to overlook the profound consequences of this health crisis.

Sports with its inherent focus on physical activity, offers a powerful solution to combat NCDs and promote overall health and wellness. By engaging in sports and regular physical activity, individuals can reduce their risk of developing chronic diseases, improve cardiovascular health, enhance mental well-being and maintain a healthy weight.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, sports strengthen communities through social cohesion. When individuals come together to participate in sports activities, whether as athletes, spectators or volunteers, they forge bonds, build relationships and foster a sense of belonging. Sports create a shared sense of purpose transcending social, cultural and economic barriers. By investing in sports, we invest in social capital, promoting unity, inclusivity and a sense of pride in a nation.

In recent years, Fiji has witnessed remarkable achievements and outstanding performances by our athletes at the Olympic Games and various international sporting events. These accomplishments have brought immense pride and joy to our nation, inspiring young athletes and capturing the attention of the global sporting community. With such success, it becomes inclusively crucial for us to prioritise anti-doping measures to protect the integrity of our athletes and reputation of our sporting achievements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as an immediate need, we must emphasise and promote clean and fair competition, ensuring that our athletes participate in sports with integrity and without resorting to performance-enhancing substances. I am pleased to announce that the new budget allocation for youth and sports development includes provisions for the establishment of a National Anti-Doping Organisation for Fiji, emphasising our commitment to uphold international standards and promoting clean sports and progressively as part of the Ministry's Strategic Plan equip the organisation with the infrastructure, personnel and testing facilities required to effectively carry out its mandate.

The organisation will play a pivotal role implementing robust anti-doping policies, conducting thorough testings, procedures and educating athletes about the dangers and consequences of doping. By doing so, we not only safeguard the health and well-being of our athletes, but also maintain a level playing field for a fair competition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we deliberate on the budget allocation for our youth and sports development, I thank the Government for recognising the immense possibilities that lie within the world of sports. The returns of investments are not merely financial but extend to social, cultural and national pride. By supporting our athletes, investing in coaching and community development and unlocking under potential in our communities, we create a future where Fiji is renowned for its sporting excellence.

To conclude, while it is important to acknowledge that not all our budget requests have been fully captured, we must commend the Government for its prudent fiscal management and the fair distribution of resourced across various sectors. We understand that there are competing priorities and tough decisions must be made to ensure the optimal utilisation of funds. Nevertheless, as the Ministry of Youths and Sports, we are committed to working within the allocated budget and exploring alternative avenues to bridge any gaps that may arise.

Moreover, we recognise the importance of collaboration and partnership in achieving our goals, we will actively seek partnerships with corporate organisations, educational institutions and

international sports bodies to leverage their expertise, resources and networks. By working together, we can amplify the impact of our programmes, enhance the skills and knowledge of our youth and create a more inclusive community.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and honourable Assistant Ministers, and honourable Members of our Opposition Chambers. I bow my head in respect to every citizen who have contributed immensely to the development of this great nation.

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

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bainimarama Government's achievements are unmatched till to-date, mainly through:

- Building a resilient nation through economic growth projected at 8.3 percent in 2023, at the same time, keeping the Fijian economy and businesses afloat during the pandemic.
- Bringing economic empowerment to rural Fijians.
- Expanding access to private doctors for medical services in all Districts throughout Fiji.
- Providing a reliable social protection scheme for more than 9,000 families, aiding improvised and vulnerable children and providing monthly cash assistance and food vouchers.
- Establishing sign language interpreters unit in Parliament sessions for parliamentary session to recognise the rights of differently abled persons.
- Supporting job losses and unemployment stress through keeping Civil Servants' pay intact.
- Embracing compassionate and care for Fijian elderly people over the age of 60 years for 50 percent concession on bus fares, assisting more than 37,000 individuals.
- During the COVID-19 crisis, supplied the needy families of this nation with food vouchers - over 60,000 food ration packs were provided to the families.
- Improving transportation measures to Yasawa villagers, thus supporting their livelihoods.
- Lending hands that needed the most by distributing \$500 million in unemployment support (\$430 million in unemployment support and \$70 million in other relief measures).
- Launching Open Ranking Taxi System, creating better opportunities through competition and improvement of better taxi services for all Fijians.
- Social Welfare Scheme support to more than 137,000 Fijians to a tune of \$145 million.
- Introduction of Electricity Subsidy Plan for Domestic customers, whose combined income of \$30,000 or less is given a subsidy of 16.34 cents per unit for the first 100 units every month.
- Investment of a total of \$565 million in free education.
- Regardless of the socio-economic background supported over 53,000 students under Tertiary Education Loans Scheme since its launch in 2014 at a budget allocation of \$1.2 billion.
- Reaching a foreign reserve level of \$3.1 billion as at February 2022.

- Building a comprehensive solution to address Climate Change through Climate Change Act.
- Despite school shutdowns, continue to pay teachers their pay for more than eight months.
- Empowering rice farming communities by giving portable rice mills for their local consumption.
- Topping e-transport card to students that qualified under Free Transportation Scheme, and the list goes on, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me rewind and take the people of our nation to the opening remarks made by the former Minister of Economy, Mr. Khaiyum, in the 2022-2023 FijiFirst National Budget, and I quote:

“This is the fourth National Budget that we have announced since the beginning of the pandemic. This Budget is different from the three before because the worst economic crisis in our history is over and our recovery is here.

We promised you in the darkest days of the crisis that our economy would not just recover but would emerge from the pandemic with pace and resilience. Through government’s foresight and decisive leadership and with the tremendous support and participation of the Fijian people, we delivered on that promise. This Budget is possible because of what we did together.

The blueprint for our next financial year is as prudent, responsible and visionary as any we have mentioned or announced.

It rests on the pillars of infrastructure, education and health, and is built on the values that our Prime Minister has made this moral and political mission - family, security, justice, true democracy and equal opportunity.

This Budget creates the certainty that our businesses need to plan, invest and hire.

And as prices of food, fuel, freight and fertilizer remain extremely unpredictable, this Budget provides relief for the families who need it most. It is wholly the strength and speed of our economic recovery that makes all of this possible.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2022-2023 FijiFirst Budget has set the platform for our nation’s economic recovery after the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me briefly highlight some of the key aspects of that Budget:

Construction of Vitilevu Cross-Country Highway

Funds have been allocated for FRA to undertake a pre-feasibility investigation into the construction of the Viti Levu cross-country highway. This will create a greater social mobility and a huge opportunity for commercial, industrial and tourism expansion throughout Vitilevu interior. This will be Fiji’s first ever toll road.

Strata Title Housing Quarters for Civil Servants

Initiatives will be put in place for development of quarters through strata title which will be exclusively for civil servants. This initiative will ensure that civil servants can affordably own homes and alleviate pressure on the wider housing market. To start off, the Fiji Police Force will be the ones to take advantage of this initiative.

Shuttle Bus Pilot Programme

Electrical public transport expected to be implemented by the end of the year, providing services to 13 routes in the greater Nasinu area. \$4 million is being allocated to introduce the first ever electrical public transportation in Fiji.

Internet services to be carried in remote areas

Fifteen new towers were to be built to improve internet services in rural and remote areas. Plans to build a submarine cable landing station in the Western Division to maintain connectivity across nationwide.

Other funding programmes currently was to be continued

The COVID-19 economic support measures announced in the 2021-2022 Budget such as electricity and water subsidies, Stronger Together Job Support Scheme and Jobs for Nature, social welfare support, access to GPS and medical practitioners, support for transportation and, that is, payment of base fees, PSV driver licence fees, stall fees for market vendors, inshore fishing fees will continue for the next 12 months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a number of new measures were announced in the 2022-2023 National Budget, trying to support the most vulnerable in the country. In order to curb the inflationary rate in Fiji, the Bainimarama Government had announced to implement financial support measures such as bus fare assistance, support for tertiary students, social welfare support and tax measures to support businesses in Fiji to cope with the rising prices in Fiji.

The Bainimarama Government has also allocated funds for reprioritizing resources towards infrastructure development, providing provision of public services and social safety measures to protect the disadvantaged.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst 2022-2023 National Budget was tailor-made to improve efficiency and ease cost of living and doing business in Fiji. However, the same cannot be said of this 2023-2024 Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget Debate of yesterday and today by both sides of this Chamber has revealed the extent of political disputation we have in our Parliamentary democracy. This is nothing new and expected in a young and shining democracy like ours.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition Members have raised important issues and constructive suggestions have been made.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government must present a well-balanced assessment on the state of our growing economy, acknowledging the way and manner in which the Bainimarama Government was able to rebuild our nation after *TC Winston* and mitigate the devastating global pandemic and invigorating our economy. The Government must come up with practical solutions that can propel our nation to achieve better economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a growing number of Fijians are in in secure work, many have resigned and moved to find better opportunities elsewhere.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the key measures in this Budget should be about setting Fijians on a course for the next decade and beyond, achieving our targets set in the National Development Plan 2020. And when those measures are wasteful, or unfair, or short-sighted, or just plain wrong, then in the long run, it is the whole country that suffers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the values contained in our 2013 Constitution are essential in creating the nation we want for all Fijians. And it calls for accountability, impartiality and openness in Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our beloved Constitution calls for a society that is based on human dignity, rights and freedom. The values enshrined in our 2013 Constitution demands us to treat one another with respect, integrity, responsibility and compassion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government was committed to providing clean and safe water in adequate quantities and proper and adequate sanitation for every Fijian household. The Constitution guarantees the right of every Fijian to clean and safe water in adequate quantities, and accessible and adequate sanitation facilities. Realizing this entitlement will ensure improved living standards with positive spillover benefits to the entire economy. The FijiFirst plan was for the next five years was to undertake major investments to cater for long term water supply needs in the following regard.

Resources will be allocated for construction of new water treatment plants, reticulation systems and reservoirs to increase supply capacity. An aggressive leakage reduction programme to eliminate water loss will be pursued.

Regarding the development of potential new water sources, Government with the assistance from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Green Climate Fund (GCF) and European Investment Bank (EIB), is embarking on the construction of a new 40 megalitre treatment plant on the Rewa River to meet the increasing demand for water in the greater Suva and Nausori areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) was to explore options for other new dam sites such as at Waibogi in the upper reaches of Navua River and the upper Waimanu River, as well as in the Western Division to meet the increasing demand in the Nadi-Lautoka corridor.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, investments was to be made to renew existing water infrastructure, including pipeline replacement, construction and upgrade of water reticulation systems, electrical upgrades, valve replacements, reservoir upgrades and reducing non-revenue water.

Options for enhanced rainwater harvesting and storage, industrial recycling, storm water management, aquifer management and the use of renewable energy technologies for desalination plants in remote locations will be explored on a continuing basis and implemented where feasible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, free water tanks were distributed to the rural and maritime communities to harvest rainwater. For the remote island communities, funding was available to develop groundwater sources and diesel-powered water-desalination plants. The continuation of the Free Water Initiative for households with combined household income of \$30,000 that are consuming less than 91,250 litres per year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government must engage the platform set by the Bainimarama Government in addressing the challenges of the Water Sector. It must redouble its efforts to mitigate the intermittent water cuts, especially in the greater Suva area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while concluding the 2022-2023 FijiFirst Budget, the former Minister of Economy, Mr. Khaiyum, remarked, and I quote:

“This budget is compassionate. It is sensible. It is disciplined. It is the budget that the nation needs, Mr. Speaker, that our people need; our businesses need; and that our recovery needs

to sustain itself for years to come.

Inflation is rising. This budget mitigates it, especially for those most vulnerable. Our economy is surging. This budget strengthens it.

Job numbers are increasing. This budget adds to them. Climate events are becoming more devastating. This budget strengthens our infrastructure.

We are realistic about the threats we face. Ambitious for our country and children and optimistic about what can be achieved.’’

Mr. Speaker, Sir, compared to that, this Coalition Budget fails to fully address the nation’s unemployment issue. It will benefit only one class of people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget will definitely create a growing inequality between rich and poor. Money is not being spent on the middle class and also fails to provide schemes and subsidies for the small businesses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the Bainimarama Government, many Fijians have risen above the poverty line. With no incentive in this Budget, they will fall below it. Measures imposed will not benefit the people but will break their backs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a dark budget and offers no ray of hope for the poor, the underprivileged and the disabled.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the immediate task of the Government now is to emerge from this debate with a common determination and continue the policies set by the Bainimarama Government and better manage the economy and meet the challenges of the present and renew the commitment the Bainimarama Government had to our nation that no one is left behind and aspire to better the life of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I finish off, I would like to congratulate our National Under 19 Football Team that played the final of the Oceania Nations Qualification Championship for the World Cup Play Off and they lost to the mountainous New Zealand. I have to congratulate the Fiji Football Association President, Rajesh Patel; the Chief Executive Officer, Mr. Mohammed Yusuf; and the coaches, for a job well done and we are the second best in the Oceania Nations Qualification Championship.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me this opportunity and I do not support this Budget. God bless Fiji.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, guests in the gallery and those watching livestream of proceedings from their homes; I rise to join my fellow colleagues in my wholesome support of the 2023-2024 National Budget, as delivered by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, on 30th June, 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge the honourable Minister of Finance for an exceptionally well-presented Budget. After a long time, a budget has been timely delivered and conducted in the normal business hours. A Budget for the new Fiji, as stated by my other colleagues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I go any further, I would just like to respond to some remarks that were made by honourable Members of the Opposition. First of all, honourable Hem Chand questioned whether

the executive teacher positions would be reinstated. I am sure honourable Chand was listening to the honourable Minister for Education and I am very thankful to the honourable Minister for Education for reinstating a host of benefits and provisions that were taken away during the reign of his Government in the last 10 years; during the reign of the four, five or six Ministers that he worked with as Head of Human Resources (HR) and the then equal number of Permanent Secretaries by the way. I am sure the teachers are now smiling.

Executive teacher positions are also coming, and the honourable Minister has already alluded to that. I think you missed it.

HON. P.K. BALA.- No, I heard. When?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Alright, you wait for it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also would like to briefly respond to honourable Naivalurua when he alluded to the fact that we need counsellors. Yes, I fully agree. We need counsellors for our young people and. Again, as a cost cutting measure in 2010, the FijiFirst Government removed the Executive Teacher positions that were in 28 secondary schools in Fiji. That had been their existence since 1999 and despite numerous requests by the Teachers Unions, they did not, of course, reinstate that.

Now, the honourable Minister has assured me that those positions are coming back. There is nothing much to do, all those teachers are there. All we need to do is to reappoint them.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the graduate teachers are also receiving their full salary now after so many years. Honourable Premila Kumar is sitting there, I came to see her. The only meeting I ever had with the Ministry of Education in my former role during her reign was when honourable Chand was the head of HR. She was of the view that those teachers who were on higher salary as graduates as evaluated by the Job Evaluation Exercise (JEE) should be brought down to Step 1 rather than taking those up. If honourable Hem Chand was man enough, he would have said yes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, coming back to the Budget, it has received overwhelming support and messages of appreciation from all sectors of the community, including a public statement by the CEO of the Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation.

(Hon. P.K. Bala interjects)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- This man never saw Geneva. That is why he does not know Geneva. I will tell you about Geneva soon.

This Budget is for rebuilding our future together under the strong and unwavering leadership of our honourable Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe the Opposition must be living on another planet because I do not know where they get their information from that people are unhappy. They voted for you then, they will not vote anymore for you.

As highlighted by the honourable Prime Minister in his address to the nation, I quote:

“The Coalition Government is designed by three words - freedom, unity and progress, in rebuilding Fiji together which is reflective of the scope that we will together with

stakeholders and development partners to develop our nation towards sustainable prosperity.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the above statement further underscores the commitment by the honourable Prime Minister that the Coalition Government is the Government of every Fijian for every Fijian. Unlike the previous Government which practised double standards, used divisive strategies and was selective on whom they want to help.

This 2023-2024 Budget has been formulated to assist all Fijians, irrespective of their political affiliations and aspirations. The Budget has been crafted with realism in response to real issues that our country is facing, but at the same time, identified strategies for economic growth to rebuilding the nation.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Coalition Government’s approach is to listen to the people through genuine engagement and consultations with all stakeholders. This is to ensure we prioritise areas badly neglected by the previous Government for the 16 years they were there, for example, education, health, infrastructure like water, and agriculture, to name a few.

The last 16 years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been a tumultuous chapter in our independent history. We will continue to experience the effects of bad governance for quite some years to come. But under the leadership of our honourable Prime Minister, the Coalition Government will forge ahead to ensure national interest prevails at all times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in achieving this, the Budget reflects the collaborative strategies of the Coalition Government. My Ministry’s vision of “Decent Work and Sustainable Employment For All”, accentuate the mission to “Promote decent work opportunities, ensure safe and healthy workplaces, enhance productivity and encourage good faith employment relations”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is fulfilling the rebuilding of our nation through the revamping of our tripartite machinery, allowing the spirit the tripartism and good faith employment relations to be at the centre of all discussions as a recognised approach that strengthens our ability to meet both, domestic and global challenges, and workforce demands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I had alluded to in this Parliament earlier, the Labour Laws were changed drastically in the past decade to curtail the rights of workers, unions and their leaders. Fiji had been repeatedly cited for numerous breaches of the Core International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions and blatant non-compliance with the joint implementation agreements signed in Geneva in 2015 and, again, in 2016. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had a very, very, very bad international image. ILO is an organisation of 187 countries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first truly tripartite delegation to the International Labour Conference in over a decade was last month.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Hogwash!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- The CEO of the Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation, as well the National Secretary of the Fiji Trades Union Congress, requested me, as the Leader of the delegation, to address the Conference on behalf of the entire delegation.

We also met with the Director General of ILO, as well as the Director Labour Standards, as a team. They were delighted to hear about the progress we have made in the short span of six months to restore the fundamental trade union and human rights.

The icing on the cake was the address by His Excellency the President, who was one of the selected Heads of States invited to do so, the first ever in Fiji's history, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my predecessor did not attend a single International Labour Conference during his term of four years.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Understandable, of course, Mr. Speaker. How could he face the barrage of questions that were waiting for him?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, his Master had prepared all of it for him to go and answer.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, he also would have to answer...

HON. P.K. BALA.- What?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- ...how the National Secretary of the Fiji Trade Union Congress got arrested by Police from inside the Office Boardroom at Level 4 in the presence of the Director ILO South Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he left this onerous task of going to Geneva and facing the embarrassment to his staff - the Permanent Secretary and the rest of them. They told me that they were very embarrassed.

Now, he has the audacity to question our travels. You will never understand because you are over schooled.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, work is in progress to complete this exercise.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, at that point in time, honourable Bala really intended to resolve that impasse and he wanted to travel to Geneva but his Masters have other ideas.

(Laughter)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- That is how that arrest took place, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.K. BALA.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Can you name who was my Master? As a matter of interest, I want to know who my Master was? The rule is not only for Opposition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the rules apply to everyone. I want him to name who my Master was? If you are man enough...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.K. BALA.- You keep quiet, I said.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, let me continue.

MR. SPEAKER.- Carry on, honourable Member.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- The 2023-2024 Budget will assist the Ministry in ensuring that we execute our target within the 12 months. Our commitments to deliver on our promises and objectives to our people is not just to fulfil the budgetary requirements but it is underpinned by our values and principles to serve and provide excellent services to our community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the much-publicised economic boom or the ‘Bainimarama Boom’, as was described by the former Minister for Economy himself, I believe, was only a dream. The current projection by the honourable Minister of Finance is realistic and achievable. It has given us the boost and confidence in planning for the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, its common knowledge that Fiji is a small island nation but intertwined by global and socio geopolitical interventions and conflicts, COVID-19 pandemic, interventions in oceans and climate change, et cetera, that impacted our people and country.

However, we must not forget that while we had little or no control over those events, our country suffered its fair share of man-made disaster that left this country with the huge debt as a result of poor and dictatorial leadership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst I acknowledge some progress made in the last 16 years of COVID-19 (honourable Bala should be happy), I am also challenged by my conviction that the previous Government had also created an environment of mistrust and fear - a Government that brought pain to our citizens via arbitrary rules and laws that impinge on workers’ rights, banned tripartism, suppression of unions, arbitrary termination of workers, inhumane treatment of people, huge financial debts, unemployment, et cetera. .

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry will continue to maintain an efficient and effective service delivery under this new budgetary allocation.

We will continue to deliver quality services to the diverse range of stakeholders, who have a wider impact on our budget. I thank the honourable Minister of Finance for providing my Ministry with an extra \$302,600, that will ensure the efficiency of operations through the provision of the much-needed resources on the ground.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this includes 11 new staff that we are going to recruit, and I have alluded to this Parliament earlier, again, that there are 46 positions that have remained vacant for almost three years and because of that, my staff were overworked. Out of that, we have filled 19 pre-budget and the 10 additional ones are now coming.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we recognise that we have inherited a public debt of close to \$10 billion. With that in mind, we will have to ensure that our resources are fully utilised and rightfully invested

in order to extract the much-needed revenue and returns that will assist Government in mitigating its financial burden.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the theme, “Building our future together”, my Ministry firmly believes that Fiji’s Labour Mobility Programme will play a crucial role in our economic recovery efforts through remittances from all our Fijian workers abroad. Last year, our Labour Mobility Programme under our bilateral arrangement with Australia and New Zealand, saw the participation of 4,072 Fijians.

As alluded to by the honourable Minister of Finance during the delivery of his Budget Address, remittances crossed the billion-dollar mark last year and is likely to cross the \$1.2 billion mark by the end of this year. This is very significant in relation to strengthening our Labour Mobility Programme.

It is for the above reason that I wish to acknowledge the honourable Minister and his team for their kind consideration in providing the necessary funding to support our Labour Mobility Programme. The allocation funding for another five project officers to assist our Foreign Employment Service under NEC will bring the much-needed relief to our team.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with our growing numbers under the programme, welfare issues are also growing, and the budgetary provision of \$250,000 to support the recruitment of an additional Liaison Officer and the setup of a toll-free line for Australia, is a testament of the Coalition Government’s commitment in ensuring that the welfare of our workers, while they are abroad, is fully taken care of.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had earlier stated that the Australian Government had allocated \$100,000 in 2021 for us to appoint a Liaison Officer. That was languishing somewhere until I took office, and I am happy to report that we have now completed the exercise and the incumbent should be reporting to work in the next few weeks. Now, we will have two Liaison Officers in Australia.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is actioned.

In noting the gaps that are being created by our workers who have joined the Labour Mobility Programmes and the honourable Minister of Finance’s statement on the huge responsibility to rebuild our technical education system, as well as address the skills gap issue, I wish to put on record my Ministry’s commitment to work closely with the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders in addressing the current challenges.

The Labour Mobility Programme is currently under review and our Permanent Secretary has already started working in identifying strategies to mitigate various complaints and issues from both, employers and employees abroad. These issues are in various forms and is largely due to the previous Government’s negligence on the duty of care of our citizens. For example, since 2018, the previous Government made only one visitation to New Zealand to meet employers and workers, but none to Australia where the bulk of the workers are.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Yes, tell those to the workers, they will fix you right.

My team is currently working on a new Labour Mobility Framework and matrix and plans to

meet its counterparts in Australia and New Zealand to strengthen the programme and mitigate workers and employers issues. Again, the Opposition will accuse us of traveling for joy. I invite them to ask those workers, they will get an earful.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the restoration of the 18 percent FNNP contributions from 1st January, 2024 is good news for our workers because it will contribute more to their lifelong savings and investment ability. A further welcoming news is the FNNP proposal to set up offshore operations, which will extend membership of Fijians in Australia and New Zealand. This means that our Fijian workers in New Zealand and Australia will have the opportunity to access FNNP services and have their deductions done there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$2,556,500 has been allocated to the National OHS Service and Workers Compensation Service, and my Ministry is fully responsible to ensure that these laws are enforced, and compliance is in practice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry will continue to formulate new OHS laws and revise the laws that are now archaic or obsolete – the Health and Safety at Work (Construction) Regulations, the Health and Safety at Work (Amusement Rides) Code of Practice, and other laws.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also are responsible for Workers Compensation, and we are happy that we have an allocation of \$500,000 to make sure injured workers are taken care of.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the restoration of the tripartite arrangement, my Ministry will ensure that both the workers and employers are respected through dialogue, consultation, good faith and negotiations and this is ongoing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the provisions allocated for labour compliance standards, we will continue to strengthen our enforcement and address issues in a timely manner.

Mediation service, Mr. Speaker, we have a very competent Mediation Team and we have been allocated \$778,200 to carry out this work in the new financial year. Our mediators continue to promote cordial employment relations, promoting good faith, health and safety, productivity and social duties to guide parties, creating harmonious and productive industrial relations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to reiterate what was mentioned by the honourable Minister of Finance regarding the levy for NTPC or the levy for workers' in-service training. The in-service training of 1 percent was deducted and kept by NTPC for in-service training, productivity training, as well as apprenticeship schemes. This was distributed in this manner - 40 percent for Accident Compensation Commission; 50 percent to medical insurance levy and 10 percent to productivity training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 90 percent of the funds are no longer available to employers for training purposes, and this is a very serious state of affairs. We are intending to review this and ensure that the 1 percent levy comes back for the in-service training of workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is a balanced and strong Budget. With decisive social policies by the Coalition Government, it will ensure that people in our communities are supported through its benefits which will open up greater opportunities to all our citizens.

We have to clean up the mess created by 16 years of poor governance and build the economy, while we take care of those in need - eight years extended to another eight years. This Budget clearly demonstrates that we have a workable plan to enable us to do so.

There is no looking back, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Coalition Government has demonstrated its pre-election commitment of being a government of empathy, care and compassion. This Budget is, undoubtedly, the beginning of the greater good that lies ahead.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the privilege to speak on the Budget and I fully support the motion to approve the 2023-2024 National Budget.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, fellow honourable Members of Parliament and all Fijians watching this proceeding from around the world; *bula vinaka*, a very good evening, *salam alaykum* and *Jai Siya Ram* to all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can safely say that 2023-2024 National Budget, presented by honourable Rabuka's Government through the honourable Minister of Finance will go through as the worst in Fiji's history.

After treating Fijians with false promises all through last year's campaign, and then again, during Budget consultation, the Coalition Government has completely failed to deliver on its big promises. They say, "You should promise small and deliver big", but the Coalition Government has gone and done the opposite.

The Government has presented the largest spending Budget in Fiji's history, Mr. Speaker, Sir, excluding the pandemic years. However, this Budget is actually a discreet move of the Government, and it is the highly operational Budget and a low capital expenditure Budget. The operational expenditure has increased by \$437 million while the capital expenditure has only increased by \$28 million. This means that the Government is spending more money on day-to-day operations, such as salaries and wages and less money on investment in infrastructure and other long-term projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has been comparing this Budget to the last year's Budget and talking about the debt. But they have failed to explain to the people of Fiji the truth behind that.

In 2018-2019, the economy was enjoying good growth and the deficit was below \$500 million a year. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the economy to suffer, and the deficit was increased significantly.

The Government has taken steps to save the economy, such as borrowing money and providing financial assistance to businesses. These measures were necessary to prevent the economy from stalling, but they have also increased the debt.

The Government should be transparent about debt and explain to the people of Fiji how it plans to repay it. The Government should also focus on investing its capital expenditure project, such as infrastructure, to help economic growth in the long-term.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they painted a picture that debt is bad, but they do not understand debt. They exploded people's fear to win the vote and even to this day, they go on about the national debt. They know very well that our debt is not out of control when they took power. But now, we hear that in the first three months in office, the Minister has borrowed over \$200 million and even now, refinance our loan.

His action in the last six months has led to a significant increase in national debt, suppressing \$10 billion - a level that was never reached during FijiFirst's tenure, even amidst the challenges posed by COVID-19. So, now I guess, that is alright for the honourable Prime Minister, honourable

Minister of Finance and honourable Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation. This Budget lacks concrete plan for sustainable economic growth.

The emphasis on operational expenditure indicates that the deficit will persist in the long-term, resulting in the continuous accumulation of debt. There is no tangible strategy, no plan, no innovation whatsoever, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how can I not mention the increase in VAT on majority of the goods and services from 9 percent to 15 percent. They have said that duty will be reduced, but when you take into account that VAT will increase by 6 percent, most of the savings they brag about will be nullified by the increase of VAT.

This greedy action was recommended by the Fiscal Review Committee, led by the National Federation Party's Richard Naidu and failed politician candidate, and friends of the Coalition, none of whom have accomplished, experience or expertise required to make such a call.

This Fiscal Review Committee was solely rejected by Fijians with many of the consultation venues having low or even zero attendance, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Yet, somehow, they deemed the need for an increase in taxes. I challenge the Coalition Government to make public all submissions made on the Budget, and we would like to count how many Fijians are asked to pay more VAT during the inflation crisis.

The cost of goods is more expensive now than ever before and this will get worse, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Honourable Tabuya called for a VAT increase to 12.5 percent an inhumane act back when she was in Opposition, but the Minister who is supposed to be alleviating poverty is all of a sudden agreeing with the higher VAT increase now.

(Hon. L.D. Tabuya interjects)

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- Shame!

HON. V. NATH.- When you were on this side!

Such a steep rise in VAT will significantly raise the cost of living for ordinary citizens, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The already recorded price of essential goods and services will skyrocket even more, putting the heavy burden on hardworking individuals and families who are already struggling to make ends meet. Basic necessities like food utilities and healthcare will become increasingly unaffordable, eroding the quality of life for many.

The cost of production goes up, Mr. Speaker. This VAT increase will directly impact the purchasing power of our citizens. As prices soar, the supposed income will diminish, leading to reduced consumer spending.

It is simple Mr. Speaker, Sir, this decline in demand will have far reaching consequences for businesses particularly MSMEs that heavily rely on local customers.

Small businesses will face higher cost of raw materials, supplies and services, eating into their already tight profit margin. This additional financial burden will force some MSMEs to make difficult decision, such as downsizing the workforce or as the worst-case scenario, closing their doors permanently as we are already seeing all over Fiji.

Such an outcome would not only impact employment but also stifle entrepreneurship and hinder economic growth in our nation. Mr. Speaker, MSMEs are also being further bludgeoned by increase in income tax from 20 percent to 25 percent.

It is essential to recognise that MSMEs are the lifeblood of our economy. They drive innovation, create opportunities and contribute significantly to our GDP.

If this Budget passes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will be breaking Fiji's backbone and the consequences will plague us for decade. How can a man claiming to be an economic professor not serious?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the rural community will be the most affected by the Budget increase. *O au kai veikau*, Mr. Speaker. They are already struggling to afford basic necessities and the increase in VAT will make it even harder for them to make ends meet.

The Budget for the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management shows increase, in fact, transferred from 2022 to 2023 Head 50 and of course from the Ministry of Agriculture's fund. This is not enough. The Government needs to do more to help the rural communities such as providing them with the access for affordable food, healthcare and education.

The honourable Minister of Finance said that spending money on rural hospitals is a waste of money. Navosa, I believe. Mr. Speaker, I am not sure if the Coalition Government actually cares about the rural community or are just trying to please their critics.

It is also important to note that the honourable Prime Minister and his Ministers have been travelling the world, going to expensive resorts, enjoying cocktail and posing for a picture in designer dresses. This is while they are asking the people of Fiji to understand the situation and accept the tax increase. How dare! How dare they force ordinary Fijians to shoulder the burden of economic recovery while they are enjoying themselves.

The honourable Minister of Finance seems to be particularly enjoying Tiko's Floating Restaurant, while he is making Fijians who are being forced to eat biscuits with tea, pay more for the goods and services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one issue that has ignited anger amongst the youth is broken promises regarding the forgiveness of TELS debt.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. NATH.- I was not eating the plane, it was you! I haven't been to USA and Australia for the catwalk.

MR. SPEAKER.- Address the Chair, honourable Nath.

HON. V. NATH.- One issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that has ignited anger amongst the youth is the broken promises regarding the forgiveness of TELS debt. All three Parties in the Coalition has stated to forgive the debt, but instead convert it into bond. Let me give the honourable Prime Minister and his Minister of Finance a quick lesson.

The Oxford Dictionary defines the word 'forgive' as to cancel the debt. The Oxford Dictionary defines the word 'convert' is to change into others of a different kind. It is just to be clear. You did not forgive debt, honourable Gavoka. As you promised, you never did, you converted it

into another form of debt.

This betrayal of trust has left many young people feeling deceived and let down for many who are already planning to migrate as they are feeling that their future has been taken away. We warned young people that the TELS promise was not realistic and today, the Coalition has proven us correct. We warned everyone that the promise was tricky and today the people of Fiji can see it openly for themselves. Today, TELS will no longer assist future generation of Fijians in creating better opportunities and many will continue to be trapped in the cycle of poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FijiFirst has always emphasised on the importance of good infrastructure. However, the honourable Minister of Finance has said that they will do away with the fancy spending. This is a mistake.

As we live in Fiji, we need to spend money on proper repair of road, water network, bridges and jetties. In the past, FijiFirst has spent over \$200 million a year on road repairs. The old water network has also required million dollars of annual spending to keep it under control. Bridges were needed to be repaired or replaced to ensure the long-term durability for our infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am proud to say that FijiFirst has completed 81 bridges and crossings to-date when we were in power and three nearly in completion which you will be opening with the *salusalu* here and there. When we left office, we had around 30 bridges on design stages, let us see how many they can finish?

All these came with the cost, honourable Tabuya, I am not saying, *dinau*. The 2023-2024 Budget only included the 8 percent increase in capital expenditure for infrastructure, but 36 percent increase in operating expenditure. This is a concerning trend and it suggests that the Government is not investing enough in new infrastructure projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our plan was the four-lane road from Nadi to Lautoka, which would have been fixed next year.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Forget about it!

HON. V. NATH.- That was our game plan. We would have done it.

(Hon. Ro F.Q. Tuisawau interjects)

HON. V. NATH.- Our game plan was to get this done and followed by the four-lane road from Nadi to Suva. Let us see the Coalition Government. It would be worth watching. Thankfully the Rewa Water Supply and Viria Project is nearly completed, another *salusalu*. This project will solve major water problems in the Central Division.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Thank you, thank you.

HON. V. NATH.- However, it is important that the Government continues to invest in infrastructure projects as this will help to attract investment and create jobs.

I believe that the Government needs to increase its investment in infrastructure. This is essential for a long-term economic development in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, but I do not know why the honourable Minister cannot see this. Maybe, the honourable Minister for Infrastructure is weak.

The Coalition Government loves to say one thing but do another. For example, they criticise

the Health Sector and claimed that it was in the worst state.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Of course!

HON. V. NATH.- Yet, they took \$9.6 million from the Health Sector in January this year, relocating it away from refurbishing Savusavu Hospital, upgrading Labasa Hospital, construction of new CWM Maternity Unit, buying biomedical equipment and improving infection control. This was all planned, but that \$9.6 million was not used there. That money would have ensured infrastructure that would last for generations.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. V. NATH.- Then they had a great clean up session at CWM Hospital, making sure that the media was there to take pictures. What a pretentious move! Look at it!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the alarming rise in crime rate in Fiji is posing a significant threat to our society. Incidents such as mugging, robbing, assault and hated speech, particularly targeting the Indo-Fijian community have created an atmosphere of fear and insecurity. “Go back to India” is a common phrase now used in *Facebook*. Every community I visited, tells the same story of fear of becoming victims of crime.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Standing Order 62, we are getting very close to Standing Order 62 again Sir. We should keep away from this kind of speeches. It is not helpful for our country, stick to the Budget.

HON. P.K. BALA.- It’s the truth!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It is not true, it is a nonsense.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- All your Members speak outside the Budget.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I am just raising the Standing Order, *vinaka*.

HON. V. NATH.- Go back to India, is now a common phrase used on *Facebook*. I have proof, Sir, and I can present it.

Every community I visit, the story is the same - the story of fear of becoming a victim of crime. It is unacceptable that the Fiji Police Force is being unable to effectively address and control this crimes, leading to consequences on our economy and social fabric.

Public safety and security are crucial for fostering a conducive environment for economic growth and attractive investment. Mr. Speaker, Sir, when crime rate escalates, the citizens feel unsafe. It undermines the confidence and hampers the economic activity. This not only affects individual and community but also both domestic and foreign investment.

The targeting of a specific community further dampens social divisions and exaggerates tension. It is disheartening that some members of the Coalition, including the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Minister of Finance, the honourable Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation and others, have seen the indifference in this issue and failed to even acknowledge what is happening. We can show them screenshots of this.

I would like to urge the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration to prioritise

and strengthen the Police Force and focusing on the core responsibilities rather than engaging in activities that do not serve the interest of the public safety, like stalking the former Attorney-General. Such action erodes the reputation of the Police Force and undermines public trust. We cannot allow our Police Force to become a political tool or be influenced by any political alliance.

It is essential to prioritise the safety and wellbeing of all citizens, regardless of their background, and ensure that the Police Force operates independently and professionally as they were. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition cannot blame anyone now, they have no excuse.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget pushes low and middle-income families, it allows the wasteful operation expenditure, normalising inefficient practice instead of prioritising cost effectiveness. This budgetary division tampers the prospect of genuine economic growth and have tangible negative effect on the life of an ordinary Fijian. It reduces opportunity for a business and individual in the low and medium income bracket to own a home, hindering the ability to build wealth and secure their financial future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, people in the West, six months on, are still suffering from the impact of the devastating flood that the Coalition Ministers completely ignored. Broken promises and overseas trips are the trademark of this Coalition.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. V. NATH.- This is what they will be remembered for. Even the media who have sold their souls to the Coalition Government cannot keep the people from complaining about them in the social media has exploded with anger at many questionable things that this Government is doing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no human being with conscience and even a little bit of kindness will tick for this Budget. I, therefore, reject this Budget, thank you.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; *bula vinaka* and good afternoon to you all.

On the outset, Mr. Speaker, Sir, today during tea break, honourable Usamate promised me that he will not interject.

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- At least, Mr. Speaker, I also have the honourable Leader of the Opposition on my side...

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- ...he is a cane farmer and he wants \$100 minimum per tonne of cane...

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- ...so I said, "You vote for me, I will give it to you". I would like to talk about honourable Ratu Josai Niudamu. He is one of the politicians from the other side, who has put up his hand and wants to give more land from his Ra Province to grow more sugarcane. I like that kind of approach.

Before, I go on to my speech proper, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I need to give some observations.

Honourable Naivalurua said something about FICAC and that it should stay, but I do not know what is the plan of the honourable Attorney-General, whether FICAC going to be merged or is it going to stand on its own. But one thing for sure, I would like to say that the person who is currently the CEO of FICAC – Mr. Rashmi Aslam, has to go immediately because three years ago, Abdul Khan, the former CEO of Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC), his corrupt file was handed to FICAC and to-date, nothing has happened. Here, we have small cases that were given to FICAC, immediately people were prosecuted and sent to jail.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you know, I will talk about the sugar industry and the plans we have, but one thing I want to remind honourable Members in this Parliament about is that FSC employed Vishnu Mohan as the Chairman, who was residing in Toronto. He was running FSC remotely. In here, Abdul Khan made the CEO and was paid \$840,000.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Now, listen! The truth hurts. Sit down!

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- He has raised a Point of Order.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- What's your Point of Order?

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am requesting the honourable Member not to point at me.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, before I finish, do not enter into any kind of discussion. No running comment, honourable Member.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Thank you, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Abdul Khan was paid \$840,000 salary, his total package was over a million dollars. Here, FSC was going down, and that type of salary was agreed by the previous Government and the Minister for Sugar who was the former Prime Minister.

When Mr. Khan left, then there was Graham Clark, who was on package of \$750,000. Also, when he left, there was Navin Chandra and he was on a package of \$500,000. Today, we have a CEO, Bhan Pratap Singh, who is on a package of \$200,000 and he is doing a much better job than anyone else.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is another observation I want to make. The honourable Opposition Members keep referring to us as a three-Party Coalition or three-legged stool. Now, I remember very well soon after the Election, the FijiFirst Executives went running to Mr. Saneem - the second legged stool and no stools can stand on two legs.

Here, they thought that the honourable Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation is a small kid where they can dangle a carrot in front of him and throw some lollies too. But little did they realise that he is much more intelligent than the honourable Members on the other side.

So today, the Coalition Party is intact, solid, we are here for four years and beyond to 2014.

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the sugar industry is falling apart, I was commented from the other side that the honourable Prime Minister made a wrong mistake by appointing myself as the Minister of Sugar. In fact, the whole Fiji knows that I am a very successful businessman, I am a successful farmer and this combination is the best combination.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Take that.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as soon as we came into Government, I collected all stakeholders of FSC, I invited Mr. Hari Punja to our office...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Just talk on the Budget!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- ...a businessman who has got a lot of experience. I want him to have an input on how to go about in the sugar industry. One thing I tell you honourable Usamate, Hari Punja had advised FSC some 20 years ago that FSC should have a refinery. If they had listened to him then, the state of FSC would not have been what it is today because the whole world where the sugar industry is, they all have refineries together – attached to it, they have co-generation and they have an ethanol plant, and that makes money. Anyway, Mr. Speaker.

HON. K.K. LAL.- 20 years ago, it was just ...

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Well, that is the same thing.

Figures do not lie, Mr. Speaker. In 2006, the industry was thriving. It had 3.2 million tonnes of cane and that was under the Qarase Government. In 2006, soon after the takeover, the sugar industry declined in its production and today, it stands at 1.6 million tonnes.

HON. V. NATH.- Why was that?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Well, the Minister was sleeping on the job. Mr. Speaker, Sir, having said that.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Now, he is saying that to the former Prime Minister.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- He's the Minister for Sugar.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to start by commending the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance for preparing a sophisticated but a clear and well thought-out Budget within a short time since assuming the office. His dedication, expertise and leadership has been instrumental in drafting a comprehensive Budget that addresses the critical and immediate needs of our nation, probably the the finest Budget that we have seen in a number of years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget aligns with the Coalition Government's vision, addressing carefully ...

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Minister. It is good that you are on track again.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- The Budget aligns with the Coalition Government's vision, addressing

carefully the socio-economic challenges and promotes sustainable development. The level of detailed clarity and strategic thinking is evident in the proposed Budget that demonstrates his depth of understanding our nation's financial landscape and his commitment to ensuring its prosperity.

I also want to place on record, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my appreciation to the Fiscal Review Committee and its Chairman, Mr. Richard Naidu, for leading the discussions and allowing contribution from each and every one that made efforts to get their views heard, and not forgetting all business houses, professionals, economists and everyone that wanted his views.

This Government has finally delivered a Budget that was much needed. And I can assure you that we all will make every effort to ensure that every dollar is well spent on the expected outcomes and not spent lavishly like in the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what the honourable Minister of Finance did was remarkable indeed. However, it would not have been possible without the ever present support of our humble and most gracious Prime Minister.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the honourable Prime Minister for his visionary leadership and steadfast commitment to the welfare of our beautiful nation. Under his guidance, our Government has embarked on a transformative journey, prioritising economic growth, social development and sustainable progress. His guidance and support have been instrumental in shaping the direction of this Budget and ensuring its alignment with our national priorities.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to each and every Cabinet Minister and Assistant Minister, including their Ministry staff for their tireless efforts, dedication and expertise in their respective domains.

As the honourable Minister of Finance has mentioned in the Budget Address, and I quote:

“You can only move forward if you have thoroughly examined the past and learn from it.”

Our predecessors had more than 15 years to right the perceived wrongs of the Government before that if they are so honest too, and I speak specifically on the sugar industry. They had 15 years, and I must stress, 15 years to formulate an Act in the sugar industry, to give the industry a cutting edge, to bring about sweeping changes and give the farmers what they deserve. Yet, they failed and I must stress, they failed miserably.

They stood here in this august Parliament and proudly bragged about the economic boom and unprecedented growth in the past decade while our people suffered because of their ignorance. Since I became the Minister, the sugarcane farmers have been asking me, where is the economic boom and why were they not part of this boom? I told them, “While we cannot change what has happened in the past, but we promise you that this Government will work for the people, with you and for the industry.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now speak on the budget provided to the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry for the 2023-2024 financial year. The Ministry has been allocated \$51.7 million in the new financial year, of which, \$49.7 million is for the sugar industry and \$2 million is for the Multi-Ethnic Affairs.

The proposed Budget reflects our commitment to revitalise and hence the sugar industry which has a vital role in our economy, providing employment opportunities, contributing to rural

development and generating foreign exchange earnings. It has been carefully crafted after extensive consultation with the industry experts, stakeholders, representatives from cane growers, millers and other related sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, previously, the farmers had one voice and the only voice in the sugar industry was the Sugar Cane Growers Council, where farmers representatives could have made their voices heard, which was taken away from them.

As we have promised that we will bring back the farmers' voice in the sugar industry, we will give them the platform to air their grievances, we will support them, and we will listen to them as people's Government. I am pleased to inform this august Parliament that the budgetary allocation of \$187,000 has been provided to hold the Sugar Cane Growers Council Election, which gives back farmers a voice in the affairs of the sugar industry. The allocation for the Sugar Cane Growers Council will give back power to the farmers to choose their representative. Let us face the fact—without farmers, there is no sugar industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us shed some light on the situation of Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC). The FSC has been experiencing extremely financial distress attributed to climate change, volatility in raw sugar price, milling efficiencies and decline in cane production. This has been further exacerbated by the ignorance of the previous Government.

For the current financial year, FSC is looking at making a profit of \$18 million at EBITDA, meaning Earnings Before Interest, Taxes, Depreciation and Amortisation. However, once we factor that FSC has to pay the legacy debt, the profit turns into a loss because of the historical debts of past decades under the past Governments.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are able to resolve the legacy debt issue for FSC. Therefore, if we are able to resolve the legacy debt issue at FSC, we should see a turnaround at FSC as well, as the sugar industry as whole, and we forecast a profit more than \$30 million at EBITDA for the next financial year.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I want to inform this august Parliament that the Government did not contribute any money for the top-up of cane payment for the last season, and we see a similar positive trend for this season as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our predecessors had promised \$85 guaranteed cane price for the past four years. Our hardworking farmers did not reap the benefit that was promised, they were short changed. Since we have come into Government, we are breaking every effort to correct the errors of the past.

For the 2022 crop, farmers have already received \$85.26, and I am pleased to state that there is still one more final cane payment to come. We are pleased to announce that \$85 a tonne will continue with this Government, and I can state now that our Government will not short change the farmers anymore. They will receive what they rightfully should have.

But, as I have added, Mr. Speaker, the world cane price in this coming season, has gone up and hopefully, if not \$95, at least up to \$90 and this is based on the Master Award because we have a 70:30 formula of sharing. So, the more the price we get after selling our sugar, the more the farmers will get.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the industry has received an allocation of \$150,000 under the Sugar Industry Strategic Development Plan which will allow all the stakeholders, including farmers, to contribute to the development of a strategic plan to revitalize the industry. The objective, as we see, will be to

significantly increase cane production, to tap into the markets not explored before.

We want to be able to venture into other markets, such as packing and refinery, to produce white sugar, ethanol and core generation, which will provide some needed value addition and provide high returns to our hardworking farmers. To do that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to invest in new mills that will help us achieve these goals. Sir, these mills can cost up to \$100 million, all depending on what size of mill we would like to have.

Now, recently on our trip to Mauritius, we have seen that we do not really have to go into making sugar. If we want to make ethanol, we can go straight from sugar juice into making ethanol. So, we are planning that if we are to set up our ethanol plant, hopefully in Rakiraki, then we would like to have this type of small mills which are more efficient and it will run 24/7, 365 days a year and based on the balance of the time, we will use molasses out of Ba and Lautoka mill to make ethanol.

So, those are the plans. There was a comment made that there is no allocation in the Budget. Actually, there is a feasibility study being done and this is a mill that we have to have.

(Hon. P.K. Bala interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Look, we will do it within four years. Listen!

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before we are able to realise our dreams of the new mills, the sophisticated sugar products we need to significantly increase sale.

The sugar industry has provided a budget of \$5 million for the sugarcane development and farmers assistance. This is an increase of \$4 million from 2022 to 2023 financial year. The Ministry aims to increase cane production from its current production of 1.6 million to around 2 million tonnes by 2024 season.

The target of 2 million tonnes could be achieved by bringing underutilised land and production replacing uneconomical ratoons, improving adoption of new technologies, promoting best husbandry practice and improving the soil health.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all over the world, the application of fertilizer has been crucial in ensuring good crop production which include sugar cane. Fertilizers provide essential nutrients that are necessary for the healthy growth and development of sugarcane plants.

Proper fertilization can significantly increase cane production. To ensure that the fertilizer application is not compromised, the government will continue to subsidize fertilizer price for the sugarcane farmers.

The sugar industry has been allocated \$20 million to continue the subsidy up to 65.90 for every bag of fertilizer that sugarcane farmers will purchase. This means, sugarcane famers will continue to pay only \$20 per bag.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sugar industry has been facing various challenges, including emerging impacts of climate change. Frequent raining and flooding due to climate change has been one of the major problems for the industry.

Drainage system in the sugar cane areas have been neglected for years or there had been

negligible maintenance in the last several years. Consequently, there has been a significant reduction in cane production in the low-lying areas due to frequent flooding and seawater intrusion.

A total of 6,550 growers are facing issues with infield or main drain blockage which equates to nearly 60 percent of the total active sugarcane growers in Fiji. The drainage system comprising of infield and main drains, culverts and floodgates, need to be repaired or changed to enable farmers to cultivate cane adequately with good yield potential.

The budget support of \$5.5 million provided will mitigate the effects of the poor drainage and increase the cane production and its productivity for the next crushing season. By inviting plant growth maybe some sugar contents and in pending harvest operations. The government has allocated weedicides subsidy of \$1 million which is an increase of \$400,000 in the previous year. The subsidy will assist sugarcane farmers, afford effective weed control measures, ensuring that the crops that are not overshadowed by invasive weeds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure the viability of the sugar industry, the Ministry should take measures to attract new farmers while at the same time maintaining those good farmers by providing some relief for the renewal of lease.

By providing a budget of \$2 million for new farmers and lease premium assistance, the Government has ensured that much needed relief is provided to farmers who want to invest in the sugar industry but have financial barriers.

By encouraging new farmers to enter the industry, it helps to ensure a continuous supply of sugarcane and promotes the growth of the sugar industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the Rakiraki Mill has been closed by the previous Government, we have no alternative but to continue with the cane cartage programme. The programme provides transportation, especially by ensuring farmers not to be burdened with the excessive cost of transporting the cane from the Penanag Mill area to Rarawai Mill. The programme will continue with a budget of \$4,900,000 which will allow the Penang Mill farmers to transport 1300 tonnes of canes to the Rarawai Mill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the cost of producing cane has increased significantly over the years and the growers are relying on Government subsidies sustainably. Whilst the Government has guaranteed the price of \$85, the profit margin has diluted largely because of the transportation cost.

The growers near the Mills are able to absorb the increase, those located on the outer areas are not able to sustain themselves and are slowly leaving the industry. Mechanically harvested cane are allowed to be brought to the Mills by rail mode of transportation which is the cheapest mode of transportation for sugarcane.

Currently, there are 60 cane bins that have been used in Lautoka Mill which has been a success story in easing the transportation issues for farmers. The budget of \$1 million provided in this financial year, the cage bins will ensure that FSC is able to introduce a further 50 cage bins which will further ease transportation issues for the growers.

MR. SPEAKER.- Are we rounding off, honourable Member?

MR. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is something to be said about multi-ethnic, but I leave it to some other day. Thank you very much for listening to me, honourable Members.

HON. A. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; I rise to briefly contribute to the Debate of the 2023-2024 National Budget.

At the outset, I wish to thank the honourable Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for his Budget Address, although I do not agree with the content of the same.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a politician once said, and I quote:

“We are looking for a vision in this Budget, something to spark the imagination of the people. A clear vision of a worthwhile future that stretches beyond what we have in this country today. This Budget and this government has gone into what we could call a “brain glitch” because they cannot truly see the basis of the future of this country.”

He went on to say and I quote:

“There is great room for improvement by this government to display magnanimity after winning the Elections. Unfortunately, it continues with its egoistic “know it all” and vindictive attitude, and has presented a Budget which, in the medium to long term, is going to make our future even bleaker.

It is a Budget which is going to increase the gap between the rich and the poor and also on that, it is going to increase some inequality, continuing with previous tax policies, such as the increase in VAT and reduction in income and corporate tax”.

Honourable Biman Prasad, 2014 Budget Response.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2023-2024 National Budget lacks vision and compassion for citizens, and that is exactly how the people, after the Budget presentation, sum up their feelings about this Budget and the Coalition Government that forms the basis of my opposition to this Budget in this debate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to express my sincere gratitude and heartfelt thanks to the honourable Leader of the Opposition and my fellow members who have spoken before me for their Budget response. I fully agree and wholeheartedly endorse the content and their Budget response.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first and foremost, youth are the biggest hope for the future and Fiji is now a nation of youth with 70 percent of the Fijian population under the age of 40. It is, therefore, very surprising that no new policies and programmes are youth-oriented to attract their attention and support or focusing on youth empowerment and inclusiveness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is deceiving, misleading and discriminatory in nature towards our Fijian youth. There was so much harp on public consultation from Opposition Parties when FijiFirst was in Government. According to honourable Prasad, they believe in consultations, dialogue and making sure that people are free to engage and raise issues with the Government, Ministers and everyone else.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Finance further on mentioned that the Budget is an outcome of the numerous consultations and dialogue he had with diverse groups of stakeholders across Fiji. According to him, they talked with various industry groups, the private sector, businesses and entrepreneurs. The question that we all ask are, who exactly did they consult? Which youth or

women group would suggest and increase in VAT and other indirect taxes? Which student would suggest converting the debt into bond? Which youth group would suggest a decrease in the Fiji Sports Council allocation so that youth would pay more to access sporting facilities?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it seems that the consultation is between him and his cohorts. Therefore, I urge the honourable Minister to exercise some wisdom and refrain from misleading the nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Finance, in his Budget Address, said that he had a one-on-one consultation on the Budget with the Coalition Cabinet Ministers. The outcome of the one-on-one consultation with the Minister for Youth and Sports is a slashed allocation for the Fiji Sports Council under Head 25.

According to the news article published by *Fiji Live* on July 3rd, 2023, the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports is worried about the slashed allocation for the Fiji Sports Council. The youth are worried and we are worried that the reduction in the Fiji Sports Council allocation might result in an increase in their rates. Running the facilities is very costly, therefore, the decrease in allocation would affect the general operation of the Fiji Sports Council.

Perhaps, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Finance will not be worried because he hardly uses these facilities. According to honourable Biman's Budget response on Revenue and Expenditure Policy in 2014, and I quote:

“If we analyse the revenue and expenditure policy between 2009 and 2013, we find that the Government has increasingly relied on indirect taxes, which the people do not know that they have to pay. That is why it is easier for Government to always go for the indirect taxes.

In 2011, Government increased VAT to 15 percent. That is a regressive tax and the burden of this falls more heavily on the poor. In addition, from 2010, Government also increased fees, fines and charges which are, again, a huge burden on the everyday person in this country.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is exactly what is on the Budget today. We noted that the increasing figures, in particular, the estimated revenue from indirect taxes is simply because of the changes to the Value Added Tax (VAT) Structure from 9 percent to 15 percent, Departure Tax increasing from \$100 to \$125, increase in excise duty, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in the estimated Direct Taxes amount is the result of the increase of Corporate Tax rates from 20 percent to 25 percent, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, according to the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) Leader during the launch of the SODELPA's 2022 Manifesto on 22nd September, 2022, the Party believes in removing the burden of student loans and providing free education up to first degree level. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister fails to inform the youth of Fiji that TELS debt forgiveness comes with a condition, that is, debt is converted to bond.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the current scenario, on the right hand, one Coalition partner lets go the hand of the student saying, “Your debt has been forgiven”. On the other hand, the other Coalition partner is holding it tight and telling the student, “You are not going anywhere unless you serve your bond or pay your debt”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, further on the TSL's CEO, Mr. Lal, stated on the *Fiji Live* news on 2nd

July, 2023 that student loans will not be forgiven for those who are in overseas and have made arrangements with FRCS on repayment. This is totally unfair on our youth, who are now in overseas for employment or studies. What happens to those who are not interested in getting employed here locally? How will they serve their bond? Will they be forced to pay their debt?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what will happen to those youth who now have their debts forgiven and will find employment under the Pacific Australian Labour Mobility Scheme (PALMS) in future? Will the Government demand our youth to pay upfront before departing our shores, or will they be required to serve their bond term before they can be allowed to participate in the Scheme?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the decision to convert the debt into bond is very much deceiving, misleading and discriminatory in nature for our youth. The Inflation Mitigation Measures announced in the 2022-2023 National Budget should have been one of the initiative, incorporated in the 2023-2024 Budget. The initiative reflects compassion and care for every Fijian, especially our most vulnerable Fijians. It could have relieved the most vulnerable from the rising prices of goods, with the re-introduction of the 15 percent VAT.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the Coalition Government had continued with the \$180 Inflation Mitigation Allowance, a social pensioner above the age of 65 currently receiving \$100 monthly allowance would receive an additional \$360 per annum, compared to the new rate and increase by \$15, whereby the recipient will only receive an additional of \$180 per annum.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a social pensioner above the age of 70 currently receiving \$100 monthly allowance would receive an additional \$360 per annum, compared to the new rate, an increase by \$25 whereby the recipient will only receive an additional \$300 per annum.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a person with disability currently receiving \$90 monthly allowance would receive an additional \$360 per annum, compared to the new rate and increase by \$14 whereby the recipient would only receive an additional \$168 per annum.

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, a parent would receive \$360 per annum per child - \$100 more should the Inflation Mitigation Support System Scheme continues, compared to the Back-to-School Support of \$200 per child per annum.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I understand that the honourable Minister of Finance will try to find cost-cutting measure to control the Budget deficit, but at the same time, we must not deceive our fellow Fijians at any cost.

Mr. Speaker, while still on the Back-to-School Support, I would like to share the type of question asked by many school parents nowadays in regards to the Back-to-School Support, and I would like to ask the two honourable *Bulous* and *Adi* from the Government side to translate it for us. *Tako, ni gica madji na qulu khe na rua na drau na dola? Madu tei wale boto na wacia*, meaning when are we receiving the \$200? We might wait forever.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, people have the idea that whenever a new initiative is announced during the Budget Address, they expect it to be implemented soon afterwards. This is not the case for the Back-to-School Support. The announcement was sugar-coated, making people believe that it is a new initiative. Young parents had high hopes in receiving the assistance, only to find out that it has already been given.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we thank the Coalition Government for grants allocated to Head 26, the Higher Education Institutions. Surprisingly, Pacific Polytechnic Limited, a new institution unknown

to many Fijians, appears to be allocated a grant of \$1 million.

Mr. Speaker, a few other institutions have been in operation and in existence for some time, namely ServicePro International Tourism Hospitality Institute, Prestige Caregiving Fiji, and few others. Neither one of them have been allocated grants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the SODELPA Leader during the launch of the SODELPA's 2022 Manifesto on 22nd September, 2022, said that the SODELPA Budget allocation for tertiary institutions would result in an increased grant for all existing tertiary institutions including three new institutions namely Technical College of Fiji, ServicePro and Tagitagi Sangam Technical College. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question is, why are they not allocated grants? These institutions have been in existence for some time and are all in full operation. Is it because ServicePro and Prestige Caregiving Fiji both are offering short courses and mainly targeting women and girls? All these institutions enrol our Fijian youths and any form of discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity and religious background should not be allowed to affect the empowerment of our youths.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not the type of Opposition that raises a Point of Order against a fellow member for expressing his views in supporting certain initiatives outlined in the Budget. And with that being said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are grateful and commend the honourable Minister of Finance and the Coalition Government for continuing with initiatives introduced by the FijiFirst Government, as it is there for a purpose and that is not to divide us but enhance the lives of our fellow Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we commend the increase in grant of \$9.7 million allocated to the Fiji National Sports Commission even though it was less than the amount they initially requested. With the increase in allocation, this will enhance sports developments for our youths and communities and it should also allow the welfare of our players to be taken care of in a fair and just manner. Contracts and agreements must be honoured to avoid any repetition of any sort of breaches experienced by our national players.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Pacific Games is a continental multi-sport event held every four years among athletes from Oceania. I thank the honourable Minister of Youth and Sports for declaring their support and making sure that all our youths will participate in the meet. These are our youths, and all have individually sacrificed their time and resources to prepare themselves for the games. Mr. Speaker, Sir, many of these youths are unemployed and with Government assistance, it is very much commendable and appreciated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we welcome the increase of funding allocated to the Young Entrepreneurship Scheme in Head 34. With the increase in allocation, it will enhance the development of more young business entrepreneurs in which it will continue to promote and harness the talents of young Fijians to become job creators rather than just be job seekers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the increase in the construction of hard courts allocation under Head 25, we are grateful, and we hope that it will be utilised according to its purpose, enhance sports development amongst our youth and address the rise of NCD-related diseases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we welcome the increase in grant of \$103,250 for Persons with Disabilities. That will continue to empower these individuals through sports programmes and leaving no Fijian behind.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Navosa will be always forever thankful of the major infrastructure development in Navosa by the FijiFirst Government namely the Navosa Sub-

divisional Hospital, the two-lane Namatewale Super Bridge and the rural electrification programme. Please excuse me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I am using Navosa as a model of infrastructural development need as I am more familiar with the area more than other province in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first let me comment briefly about the Navosa Suv-divisional Hospital at Navatumali, Keiyasi. It is the pride of Navosa, although there is a lot said about it but people are ignorant about the sheer size of Navosa and its physical relief.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, almost the entire population of inland Navosa are born in Sigatoka, some close to 100 miles away from home. To think about that every pregnant mother in Navosa has to plan with the husband where to find a hostel or friendly home near Sigatoka during the pre-and post-natal period which may last two to three months is simply unthinkable. It is a daunting and inevitable task to find a home to cater for the family during the duration of their stay. Some of these women have to walk or on horseback or raft to find transport down to Sigatoka Hospital. This is not to mention the difficulty in transporting the terminally ill patient and transportation of corpse to be taken to the mortuary. I hope that this solemn thought is worth thinking about before the mouth is opened to criticise the extravagance of the FijiFirst Government in building a hospital for one of the last developed province of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sensible thing to reduce drug cultivation in the area is to bring to their door urban environment that will meet their aspiration as rural dwellers. The rural dwellers especially in Navosa know fully well the economic disparity the exist between the urban and rural living. The FijiFirst Government was well aware of this. That was an attempt to show the people that money was of less importance when it comes to the wellbeing to deprived people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a two-lane super bridge that had been the solution to the biggest obstacle in travelling in wet months in that part of the country, now standing serene and absolutely magnificent, which not only solve the flooding problem but was poised as part of the inland highway that was to materialise in a couple of years' time has now been forgotten by government which so far has almost dropped infrastructure development as far as roading is concerned in Navosa. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the only thing we can say now is "*Isa Oilei o Navosa*". The hope of progressive development infrastructure nullified, you have to wait for PWD to be fully resurrected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today as I speak, the rural electrification has reached Korolevu Village in the *Tikina* of Noikoro. We thank the Coalition Government for the continuation of the electrification projects. Villages, settlements and individual farmhouse have been connected with electricity along the Sigatoka River Valley and the other villages of Nubuyanitu, Draubuta and Nakoro on the Nasa River, a tributary of the Sigatoka River, they are completely or designed to be fully solarised like Nakoro Village.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the most important infrastructural development is taking place in the upper Navosa Province. The biggest infrastructural demand is the development of the highway from Narata Village where the tarseal road ends to Keiyasi Village some 30 kilometres.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget session if this Government gives some thought about the well-being of the people of Navosa by completing the highway and thereby, resolve the last and greatest infrastructural demand in Navosa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, should I have a mandate, I would request the Government not to undertake any development in the *Tikina* of Naqalimare, Davutukia, Namataku, Nasikawa and Noikoro but to complete the above highway from Narata to Keiyasi in their term made available to them. We will have been satisfied and immensely gratified.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, overall, the Budget lacks vision and compassion for our citizens, therefore I will not support it.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers and honourable Members. I support the Budget of the Coalition Government presented by our Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as rightly stated by the honourable Minister of Finance, we find ourselves in the midst of an immensely challenging situation. Fiji bears the weight of a burdensome debt level, a consequence of previous government decisions and policies that have fallen short of their intended outcomes and promises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is likened to witnessing a boxer trapped against the ropes, enduring relentless blows one after another. Yet, I assure each and every one of you that the Coalition Government possesses the resilience and expertise necessary to navigate through such treacherous blows. We are steadfast in our commitment under the leadership of our very able honourable Prime Minister to ensure fiscal responsibility, reducing our debt and propelling Fiji towards a future that is robust and prosperous for all.

This Budget signifies the beginning of our journey as a nation, working together to achieve our shared goals while embodies our unwavering commitment to look out for one another and mostly our vulnerable individuals, reflecting the core of our Fijian values. Yes, Fiji we have been absolutely honest and upfront with you. You and I will pay more VAT, but it is not for this Government, it is not for this side of Parliament. One quarter of the budget, \$1 billion is to pay back the huge debt left behind by the FijiFirst Government.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It is to take care of our people who need it the most, our poorest, our 10 percent of people living in poverty that the FijiFirst Government failed to take better care of. They took care of the middle income, the higher income, the one-percenters of this country, but they forgot the bottom 10 percent of this country living in poverty.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- We have not just increased the VAT outright without any benefit. The benefit to our middle-income earners is that your children do not have to carry the debt burden of TELS. Your children and grandchildren do not have to carry the massive FijiFirst national debt in their future.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So who will pay?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- We are paying it for it now, we are paying it, we are not borrowing more of *dinau* (debt) to pay for it.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in VAT now sees the priorities being put in the right place. We have prioritised your health with the increase in budget of almost \$70 million. We have prioritised our women, our children, our elderly and our disabled with the increase in the budget of \$52 million.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- We have prioritised infrastructure with an increase in budget of \$62 million.

We are prioritising your children's education with an increase in budget of a whopping \$184 million.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- So yes, the returns on paying VAT will be these increases in essential services that will benefit you and your families, and they do not understand that simple matter. They just speak on the increase in VAT, they did not talk about the benefits that are coming. This is what balance means, this is a well-balanced Budget. We can take care of our problems, we can live within our means, we can practice self-reliance, we can take back our dignity and have some integrity in restoring our personal and national ability to look out for each other, to take care of each other, to build our nation from within, not keep running to the bank because we want to just buy and buy and buy and have an unlimited appetite to be extravagant and live outside our means and *dinau, dinau dinau*.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- This extravagant lifestyle has trickled down to our people. We hear of our people who live well over three or four times the minimum wage, living in squatter settlements and they *dinau* from the market vendors and canteens and they are struggling to pay back this *dinau*.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- So the *dinau* and living beyond our means mentality is now deeply entrenched. We need to move our people back to self-reliance and addressing poverty is and always has been an effective and efficient way of managing our resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is why I am excited about the vast increase in budget for the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. Why? Because it shows our commitment also to address poverty amongst *iTaukei* which showed in the statistics, the ethnic data which does not lie that our people living under poverty, 75 percent are *iTaukei*. We need to move our people from dependency and welfare, which they created, to self-reliance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to highlight the significant increase in the budget allocated to the Ministry for Women, Children and Social Protection. This substantial rise is particularly focused on three crucial areas. First and foremost, this is about the Coalition Government's determination to leave no room for leaving anyone behind. We fully understand the challenges they face in meeting their basic needs and making difficult choices every day. Rest assured, they will be supported through an increase in the monthly amount of select social protection schemes, ensuring greater support for those in need.

Furthermore, I would like to underline that the Budget carries with it a promise to address the national crisis of gender-based violence of two out of three women who face violence and place a

specific focus on protecting all women and girls, while aiming to prevent violence against them in all their diversity. It recognises the urgency and importance of fostering an environment rooted in respect, equality and inclusivity.

The Coalition Government has made a significant commitment to addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) by allocating a total budget of \$1 million for the implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP). At this point in time, I am proud to announce the introduction for the very first time by the Coalition Government of Gender Responsive Budgeting. There is an allocation of a dedicated National Action Plan budget line in this financial year, with the Ministry for Education, Ministry for iTaukei Affairs and Ministry for Youth and Sports and along with the Department of Women. I want to thank my fellow honourable colleagues, the honourable Aseri Radrodro, honourable Ifereimi Vasu and honourable Jese Saukuru for your strong support in gender equality, and there is more to come.

We have also taken a significant step forward by establishing the Department of Children by the allocation of adequate resources, emphasising our commitment to raising the visibility of our children and safeguarding their well-being and rights. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the statistics are more alarming for children - four out of five children in our country face some form of violence. That is a national crisis that we need to deal with.

Mr. Speaker, I thank UNICEF for coming on board to provide a Child Advisor to the Ministry to assist in our strategic direction. These budgetary commitments resonate strongly and are fundamental as we prioritise reducing debts and making strategic investments in our people in vital areas such as healthcare, education, social protection and infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has been allocated a budget of \$200.2 million in the new financial year which is a \$52.5 million increase from the previous financial year. This represents an increase of approximately 35.51 percent.

Starting from 1st August, the Ministry will be renamed as the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection. This change in name is driven by the rationale that poverty is a complex issue that cannot be effectively addressed by a single Ministry alone. It is positive and it requires a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated Whole-of-Government approach. Furthermore, it is important to note that the majority of the Ministry's efforts and budget are centred around the critical area of social protection.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has allocated an estimated amount of \$169.8 million which is 84 percent of the Ministry's total budget towards social protection which includes, as you know, the Social Pension Scheme. With a budget of \$78.2 million, it marks an impressive increase in \$23 million from the last financial year, a 40 percent increase. We are determined to better support and cater to the needs of our 54,200 senior citizens. I am delighted to announce, of course, in terms of the allocations of 15 percent to 25 percent for our elderly.

In addition, we are working with the FNPF to identify and address the grievances of 1,500 FNPF pensioners who were unjustly deprived of their financial benefits during that government's time in 2011. We are committed to rectifying this injustice and ensuring these individuals have the opportunity to access the Government's Social Pension Allowance, providing them with the rightful financial assistance they need.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also have the Poverty Benefit Scheme (PBS), which is now being renamed as the Family Assistance Scheme. We are expected to benefit a total of 26,000 households to be assisted in this financial year.

The Care and Protection Allowance (C&P), we appreciate our guardians who look after our children who are in need of care and that is a 15 percent increase in their allowance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Disability Allowance Scheme (DAS), the honourable Leader of the Opposition stated yesterday that the reduction of the budget allocation shows a lack of commitment from the Coalition Government to our people living with disabilities. I wish to clarify that the budget allocation for the National Council for People with Disabilities is largely the same, but the grant to voluntary organisations is reduced, because there has been a low utilisation over the last number of years. So, the amount is now adjusted to the average that has been spent. The overall funding for disability though has increased by \$5.6 million. This includes the 15 percent increase of allowance that is going directly to our people in need.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bus-fare Subsidy Programme. This is being allocated \$10 million. In the first quarter of the next financial year, we will transition this assistance from the exclusive bus fare top up card to cash to be paid monthly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a review of the bus fare scheme which we undertook has revealed that the current exclusive mode of transport, the bus, is not serving the needs of our elderly and people with disabilities. Buses are not disability friendly or wheelchair accessible, neither are there bus seats exclusively allocated for our people living with disabilities or the elderly. Giving them cash will give them the freedom to either take a taxi or contribute to fuel money within the household or take the bus if they so wish.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Food Voucher Programme will now be a direct cash top up to the Family Assistance Programme and the Care & Protection Programme as this will allow beneficiaries to better budget their allowance affording them the freedom to purchase from many supermarkets or shops close to them and they can also access the local market for fresh produce.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Rural Pregnant Mothers Scheme (RPM) which is designed to support our women who are pregnant and mothers living in rural areas with the objective of improving maternal health will continue as practiced with a budgetary allocation of \$800,000. Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is administered by the Ministry of Health who identify the mothers that need.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is crucial for us to acknowledge the importance of ensuring the sustainability of our Social Protection Programmes. We are going through a review of our database. There are clients who have been there for many years. Social Protection Programmes of a government is meant only to deal with temporary measures - a loss of employment, natural disasters, a pandemic but clients should not be on the programme for many years. So, to achieve this Mr. Speaker, Sir, we recognise the need to gradually transition our recipients out of the programme, allowing us to extend assistance to other deserving individuals. With this in mind, we are reviving the Welfare Graduation Programme by allocating \$200,000 towards the implementation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to that end, we are happy to announce that we have begun our graduation programme with a specific focus on our women. In September this year in partnership with the Australian Government through APTC, scholarships will be awarded to young women who have recently turned 18 and leaving our state homes, single women and a few men in the HART community who are our welfare recipients who will undertake Engineering Level II Certificate Courses. This is an entry level course, so it does not require any previous experience. We will work to place them upon graduation in Apprenticeships and then secure employment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is just the beginning of the Coalition Government's commitment to putting our people to work. We are currently working with the Ministry for Education so that when

our technical colleges are re-opened, there will be specific allocation of places for our social welfare recipients to be prioritized on scholarships, to be trained and employed, especially our women, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because the PALM Scheme and the Duavata Scheme, the Seasonal Workers Scheme are taking the majority of our men, but our women are left behind, they are ready to be trained and employed and we will put them to work.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to digitize our database of social welfare recipients, so we can determine our able-bodied men and women who need to graduate from poverty to productivity. I thank our USP students who are currently on holiday jobs doing data entry for our Ministry for this purpose. So, they are entering data so that we can move towards digitizing our system. Yes, we are becoming more efficient and more effective in our service delivery and productivity for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has allocated \$100,000 for the establishment of the Department for Children who will be responsible to administer the services and programmes aligned to the care and protection of children. For the next financial year, the Department will be equipped with strategic positions for example, the Director for Children, a Principal Officer and other critical positions at HQ level who then will be tasked with drafting proposals for Cabinet's approval towards the establishment of a fully-fledged department at divisional level. This will be assisted by our Child Advisor who has been provided by UNICEF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to begin and draw this esteemed Parliament's attention to some notable developments in gender equality initiatives over the past six months by the Ministry. You saw the launch of the Fiji Country Gender Assessment under the distinguished presence of our honourable Prime Minister which provides a comprehensive analysis of the current state of gender equality in our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge this initiative by the FijiFirst Government. However, upon taking over this project, I delayed the launch as I saw that the report was incomplete because it was missing ethnic data. I insisted that it include ethnic data, data that was kept from the public by the previous government and the data that was much demonised then is rightly out of hiding and rightly made available.

The Fiji National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls was also launched as I stated earlier with the support from Gender Responsive Budgeting from our Ministers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also have put together an advisory forum to kick start the development of the Fiji Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan and we hope to launch this next year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have several initiatives from the Ministry in the Department of Women but I am happy to confirm that the Department for Women has been allocated a budget of \$5.2 million, an increase of \$1 million. It shows the commitment from the Government towards gender equality. Furthermore, the Department will be able to enhance its efforts in carrying out the National Action Plans and initiatives aimed at achieving gender equality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are continuing, of course, with a budget of \$200,000 for the National Domestic Helpline (1560) as well as the support towards our National Women's Expo. We have increased it from \$500,000 to \$600,000 this year. We have also allocated \$100,000 for the Women Economic Empowerment Scheme. It usually identifies our Women Entrepreneurs (WE) who are aspiring to expand their businesses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to quickly explain about the issue of the Barefoot College Project. Barefoot College International had taken over and were to operate the Barefoot College in Vanua Levu. The Ministry has received this budget allocation of \$1 million to complete the building.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a High Court decision in India has ruled that Barefoot College International cannot operate under the current logo and so it has to change its registration and logo in order to operate. So, it has forced us to relook at this initiative by the previous government and explore options again with Barefoot College, India who was the original organisation that was engaged by the previous government through the Indian High Commission, and I will keep Parliament updated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, very quickly, we have the Poverty Monitoring Unit which is still under our Ministry. I have discussed with the honourable Minister of Finance where it fits, currently it will remain, but it will move towards putting it under the National Planning Office when that comes up again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my apologies, there is one more programme, very quickly which is the REACH programme supported by UNDP. I wish to thank them which takes our services out to the unreachable and the furthest. I thank them for their support this year continually for the REACH programme and for all the Ministries that will come on board and send their people on this programme.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is appreciative of the funding that has been allocated to ensure that we deliver our services with effectiveness and innovation in our collective effort to rebuild a better and stronger Fiji for our people living with disabilities, our elderly, our children and our women.

I fully support this Budget and look forward to continuing to work hard to create a promising future filled with endless possibilities for all our people.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now intend to adjourn Parliament for dinner. It is a bit late in being prepared. It is now ready, and it will be served in the Big Committee Room and all are welcome to partake in it. We will resume when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 7.15 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 8.16 p.m.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, Cabinet Ministers, Members of Parliament, members of the public in the gallery and those who are watching from the comforts of their home this evening through television, radio and livestream - *ni sa yadra vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the National Budget Estimates 2023-2024 presented to this august House by the honourable Minister of Finance on 30th June, 2023. I would like to thank and congratulate the honourable Minister of Finance for the Budget delivered in this august House. But, Mr. Speaker, it is my role to raise issues that are part of the National Budget that affects the citizens of this country even those who have chosen to make Fiji their home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the Coalition Government's move with the rise in Social Welfare Allowances Beneficiaries, the increase of the *Turaga ni Koro* and *Mata ni Tikina* allowances.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe these were all the previous FijiFirst Government's policies and I am delighted that the Coalition Government had seen the light with this assistance and not criticising them by saying that it is a handout that brings laziness to our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note with very deep concern the direction this Government is taking this nation and there is concern that its destiny is not a destiny that we would welcome. With the level of that kind of attitude, the people are starting to wonder if the Government really cares about its commitment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to start with the income tax exemption for water extraction and bottling business. The income of entities involved in the extraction and bottling of water will be exempt from income tax for seven years. I, as honourable Member from Ra Province, wishes is to criticise the concession to bottling companies as unwarranted and discriminatory and I call on the honourable Minister of Finance to justify the seven-year tax holiday granted to water bottling companies including Fiji Water in the 2023-2024 National Budget?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most popular bottled water companies in the world is Fiji Water. The earth finest water and its source comes from a single place in my home province, the remote Yaqara Valley. Fiji Water is well established, and it should be noted that Fiji Water which is 100 percent foreign-owned is by far the largest most profitable and longest established water bottling company in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the *Tikina o Vatukaloko* in which this Fiji Water aquifer sits consists of Drauniivi, Naseyani, Nananu, Togovere and Rabulu. These Villages, Mr. Speaker, Sir, do not get any great benefits from this Fiji Water Company including the province of Ra.

Last month, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I received a complaint from a group of mothers from these villages who earn money from selling food parcels to the workers of the Fiji Water factory. They were banned from selling food in this factory and the catering services was outsourced to an outside company in the past few months. What major benefits, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that this Fiji Water company has done to the people of Ra that entitles them from tax exemption? The Coalition Government should understand that it is not the question of want and needs. It is the question of priority.

On one hand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they had the tightened the neck of average and poor income earners from Ra but at the same time given concession and tax holiday to wealthy tycoons. I ask the Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to think of the people of the *Vanua o Ra* and not to bend down to

these wealthy tycoons. I wish to advise the Coalition Government to remember that the *vanua* will always be there, but the wealthy tycoons will come and go.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in VAT and customs duty will hit hard the lower to middle income families in Fiji as it will push up prices. As it stands, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the poor and the low-income families simply do not have the capacity to sustain any further increases in the cost of living. For example, is the chicken meat which is a most common used meat in Fiji unlike the goats from Kadavu or the cattle meat in Vanuabalavu, maybe because of its sweetness.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a number 14 Rooster chicken in a supermarket now cost nearly \$20. Coming around 1st August I do not know what the cost will be, probably it will be \$30 or \$50. A normal villager in the village cannot afford to pay for a chicken for his Sunday lunch. We can talk in this august House to the moon and come back but the reality is that the grassroot people of this country are suffering.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I plead with the honourable Minister of Finance to please consider the people who are suffering immensely. I suggest that a mini-budget can be done within this financial period to cushion the hike in food prices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am also saddened that there is no budgetary allocation made for the plan or construction of the Cane Juice Extraction Factory in the old Penang Mill site, let alone the new sugar mill promised to the people of Ra. I am not blaming my *'auvu*, honourable Charan Jeeth Singh, but I blame those who had promised this to the people of Ra.

I have received so many complaints about this Budget from the Ra cane farmers. I, as a cane farmer myself, Mr. Speaker, am very disturbed together with the other farmers in Ra that promises of increasing the minimum guaranteed price of cane had not been kept.

Farmers are complaining about the condition of cane access roads and the continuation breakdown of the Ba Sugar Mill where the truck drivers from Ra have to spend more than 24 hours to 48 hours in the mill with no words uttered by the Fiji Sugar Corporation as to a solution to the breakdown in the Ba Sugar Mill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many people met me in Rakiraki Town after the Budget Address and told me that we, the *kai Ra*, have been deceived by this Budget. In my mother tongue, this is what they have told me, “*Ako, sa dua na veilasu 'aki levu sa caka vei ki 'a. Sa ivei na qaqi ni suka va 'a na dua na drau na dola dua na tani ni dovuvu?*”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to apologise to the people of Ra that what majority of us have expected within this financial period of 2023-2024 regarding plans of the re-construction of the Penang Sugar Mill will not eventuate. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I ask the honourable Minister of Finance and the honourable Minister of Sugar to fulfil this promise made to the people of Ra in the next financial year. May I speak again in vernacular, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, carry on.

Ki na vanua saka va 'uraga o Ra, au sa kerea na nomuni veivoso 'i ena vuku saka ni Vale ni Bose Lawa. Au kila ni wara ni na caka rawa noda i qaqi ena loma ni yabaki 'qo, ia sa 'u na va 'nuinui, au sa kerekere saka vua na 'Uruga saka na Paraiminisita, na 'uraga 'auvu, 'auvaa 'inia na 'uraga na Minisita ni Lavo va 'a kei na 'uraga na Minisita ni Suka, ni yabaki ni lavo sa 'u 'qoi ma 'ada na 'Uruga na Paraiminisita, ena caka na i qaqi ni suka mai Rakiraki.

[The chiefly vanua of Ra, I would like to apologise on behalf of Parliament that the mill in Ra will not be built this year. I humbly request the Prime Minister, our tradition kinsman (auvu), and also the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Sugar, that the mill in Rakiraki be built, honourable Prime Minister.]

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also concerned that no budgetary allocation was set aside for the planning or re-construction of the Nalawa Police Station in Ra. The current building which housed the Nalawa Police Station was built by a group of youths from Ra which currently houses more than 10 Police Officers. The condition of that building, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has deteriorated and I ask the honourable Minister for Home Affairs (*na 'uraga ma 'aqali*) to look into this as the officers from that station including the suspects who are taken in for questioning are suffering in silence. Mr. Speaker, this also amounts to Constitutional breach of a suspected person and it should not be taken lightly. The honourable Minister for Home Affairs had already visited the station and I hope he will come up with a solution after my contribution in Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am delighted that the Government has provided a Vanua Leadership Allowance which is empowering our community leaders. However, I am quite disappointed that only \$100 is allocated for the *Turaga ni Yavusa* and not \$200 as already endorsed by the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC). I note that my *'uraga auvu* (the honourable Minister) is shaking his head.

If the GCC which this Government has really fought for has discussed that they will receive \$200, Mr. Speaker, Sir, then why did the Government overrule the decision of the GCC. Is the GCC again being used as a political tool or rubber stamp? Again, I warn the Government, if you reconvene the GCC then I ask that respect, manna and full tradition accorded to chiefs should always be respected at all times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$100 for the *Turaga ni Yavusa* is very less compared to the traditional duties bestowed on a *Turaga* or *Marama ni Yavusa*. The *yavusa* leaders have to maintain decorum in the *yavusa* and his *mataqali*. They have to attend the *Bose ni Vanua*, *Bose ni Tikina* and the *Bose Vanua ni Yasana* and the \$100 to me is very less compared to the work load they have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Members of Parliament (both the Government and the Opposition side) should always think of the hardworking grassroot people of this country, the farmers and villagers who work tirelessly every day from the morning till sunset to put food on the table. They leave their villages at around 4 a.m. to reach the market and return to their homes on Saturday evenings in order to earn a decent life for their families. We cannot allow to bring more hardship to our people by imposing Government policies that will create more hardship to them. All Governments around the world borrow for country development and it is the duty of all incumbent governments to continue with the repayment and borrow more if we can sustain it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, a decision made and the action taken would be a contributing factor to how the people will view the Government whether it really cares. It is now starting to show if it does not do anything to fulfil those promises, the people would be thinking or form the views that the Government is only raising their hope but actually he will not fulfil what he said to them. To rebut that statement, the Coalition Government must take immediate steps now to fulfil those promises, and I hope the Government will actually do what they had promised immediately.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is pro-rich. It ignores the importance of the informal sector and people in the *vanua*. Our people are trapped in poverty with opportunities and alternatives. I remember the book of Proverbs 22:7, it says, and I quote: "The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender."

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, I respectfully oppose the Budget as presented by the honourable Minister of Finance and lend my support to the response by the honourable Leader of the Opposition.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- The honourable Speaker, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and my fellow Fijians. Let me first congratulate the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and his team at the Ministry for Finance for preparing and delivering a Budget that will set Fiji on a path of recovery and success.

However, before I dwell on the gist of my speech, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I, first of all, would like to make a few remarks on the comments and questions from honourable Members on the other side of Parliament. On the matter raised by the honourable Naivalurua, let me say that the statement he made attributed to me was not the response that I gave to the complainant in question. Let me assure the honourable Naivalurua and Parliament that I had spoken to the complainant as the matter was raised to me by a former Member of Parliament. Upon notifying the Police, the Police took the complainant's statement and are investigating the matter.

Secondly, on the matter raised by my good friend the honourable Leader of the Opposition on the People's Charter as the basis for the FijiFirst government's National Development Plan (NDP). The FijiFirst government had completely in my view disregarded the work of the NCBBF whose recommendations played a significant part in the Yash Ghai Draft Constitution. To confirm that, the Co-Chair of the NCBBF, the late Archbishop Emeritus of the Archdiocese of Suva, Petero Mataca wrote to the government to note his concerns that the recommendations of the NCBBF, the People's Charter and the State of the Nation Report were not considered fully in the formulation of the 2013 Constitution. The basis of the 2013 Constitution was a document called the "Strategic Framework for Change" that was authored by the General Secretary of the FijiFirst Party and the NDP was realised as a consequence of that particular document.

On the issues raised by the honourable Virendra Lal, I am glad to provide that information for you, Sir, or perhaps later if you could raise it as a Written Question and I will provide it to Parliament. On the concerns raised by the honourable Ratu Josaia Niudamu just now, *na nodra lewe ni vuvale na Gone Turaga Na Tui Nalawa. Au sa amania ika na nomudrau i 'uku'uku ena nomudrau dali na siga nikua me bale'a na Police Post ni noda'ou vanua o Nalawa kei ira na ovisa era 'awania.*"

[The chiefly *vanua*, the Tui Nalawa, I have heard the request that was brought before the House today about the Police Post in Nalawa and the police officers residing there.]"

Mr. Speaker, on a more pleasant note, I rise today with a sense of great pride and joy to congratulate Father Alan Joseph Finn of the St. John the Apostle Parish in Natovi on his Distinguished Honour for being awarded the Companion of the Order of Fiji (CF). Father Finn's unwavering commitment to serving our community as a priest, mentor and friend has left an indelible mark on our society. Through his tireless efforts he has exemplified the values of compassion, kindness and selflessness becoming an inspiration to us all. We commend Fr. Finn for his outstanding achievements and express our deepest gratitude for his invaluable contributions to the well-being of our nation and of its people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after World War II, the world has never been in a state where global war is more likely. Numerous conflicts in Eastern Europe, Africa and in the Middle East have led to the global security situation that we are now experiencing. The war in Ukraine has offset the balance of power in Europe, and at one stage, Russia was implying a nuclear solution to the war. Rogue leaders

have essentially taken their countries to war at the cost of global peace and global security. The people of Ukraine are suffering from the delusion of one man. By the same token, attentions across Taiwan Strait is creating great tension and geopolitical skirmishes in the bottom half of the globe, especially in the Pacific.

I am informed that there is an increased military activities on a daily basis across the Strait by all parties that are there. Some of them too close for comfort. We are assured by the words of the Chinese Minister for Defence at the Shangri-La Dialogue that I had attended, he said and I: “Any conflict in the Taiwan Strait is not good for the world. I am glad that the greater powers in the world recognised the dire consequences of war.”

At the same Shangri-La Dialogue, the US Secretary for Defence who spoke in the meeting also confirmed that the US will not condone any attack by either side of the Strait to change the status quo unilaterally. What does this imply for Fiji? Our biggest challenge and threat to our security is climate change. The attention of the Western world and the world at large is drawn to the Ukraine. The military build-up along the Taiwan Strait in the Sea of Japan, the South China Sea is diverting not only attention from the small island states, but also taking away billions of dollars promised in climate mitigation and climate adaptation funds.

We have, amongst these issues, problems of our own, dealing with our own security. However, we cannot turn a blind eye to them because we will be affected by them, even if we do not see it. In our own immediate neighbourhood, Australia is significantly building its military defence capabilities and strengthening its medium and long-range strike capabilities. How should we, as small island states, surrounded by other island states accept a military build-up in our region? Nations call it a deterrent. We should adjust our national intentions and priorities accordingly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are a region of peace, a blue Pacific of peace, we do not desire war and we cannot afford war. While those developments are happening, we in Fiji have our own internal security challenges, most significantly of which is to maintain peace and stability. I take this time to thank our law enforcement agencies in the Fiji Police Force, the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, Customs, Immigration, Biosecurity and the Ministry of Health for helping to keep our country and our Fijian people safe.

It is unfortunate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that since the announcement of the outcome of the 2022 General Elections, some people, including politicians who have failed to earn power legitimately at the polls, have continually attempted to destabilise the security of our beloved Fiji. It is a rule of law they do not want to respect. They continually incite and propagate for the RFMF to take power, essentially to remove the elected Government of the people, abusing constitutional provisions to support their ambitions to take power at any cost.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, attempts to remove any government through the barrel of the gun must stop.

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

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- No more *coups*. We, the Fijian people desire peace. Any person or group that wishes to disrupt our peace, our security and our sovereignty deserves to be opposed and resisted accordingly to the law. We have also heard that the Commander of RFMF has noted, as an institution, the RFMF is committed to upholding the Constitution and its values, ensuring their actions align with the principles of democracy and the rule of law and that any suggestion of taking extra constitutional steps to preserve constitutional structures goes against the very democratic principles that RFMF has sworn to uphold. I ask our Fijian people, please, do not use the RFMF as a platform to achieve your own political ambitions which you could not achieve by coming through

the gate. It does not matter if she was citizen Premila or citizen Jone. It is the reason why the Judiciary is the third arm of the State. It is there to hear and judge our grievances, please use it.

Let me assure all Fijians, your security is secured. It is our concern, it is your government's concern, it is our responsibility to keep you safe. Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration to advance our security, strategic stance and consolidate the execution of the Ministry's mandated role, it requires the appropriate budgetary resources to the Ministry's Headquarters and its line agencies and institutions. I am indeed appreciative of the Budget allocated to my Ministry and to the two security Forces. In our ambition for global and regional recognition of being the hub of the Pacific, it is important that we develop and establish mechanisms that recognise the full spectrum of the value that our defence and security interests offer to ordinary Fijians.

The allocated funds of \$324,202 for the National Security and Defence Review as announced by His Excellency the President is a significant investment that will enable the Government to undertake a holistic National Security and Defence Review. The Defence and National Security review will be a strategic assessment of Fiji's national security architecture and the role of the Ministry.

In a world marked by rapid changes and emerging threats, this review is of utmost importance. By proactively adapting to evolving security challenges, we strengthen our ability to protect our citizens, our children, maintain law and order and safeguard our national interests. The Government's commitment to the integrity and security of our travel documents is evident in the allocation of funds for the procurement of passports and the installation of e-passport kits.

We are taking significant steps to align ourselves with the global standards and bolster the confidence of international travellers. The allocation of \$1.5 million for the procurement of passports and an additional \$300,000 for the installation of e-passport kits in Immigration Offices and overseas missions, ensure the issuance of secure and reliable travel documents which are essential for our citizens to exercise their rights and access opportunities abroad.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to by the honourable Minister of Finance, the Fiji Police Force has been allocated a budget of \$183.7 million, an increase of \$3 million from the 2022-2023 Revised Budget. This commitment by the Government will surely bolster policing activities that will ensure a safe and secure Fiji through peaceful co-existence and the general maintenance of law and order. As part of the Security and Defence Review, the Fiji Police Force has been allocated \$50,000 to carry out the Review of the Police Act 1965. This review through public consultation will provide a holistic view of opinions from all those that will be impacted in order for the development of a Police Act that will empower their operations and bring back confidence in our Fiji Police Force.

Furthermore, the increase in budget will greatly assist the Fiji Police Force in upgrading their technical equipment in order to effectively combat transnational organised crimes whilst maintaining the safety and security of our citizens. I commend the allocation of \$2.3 million for the recruitment of 100 additional Police Constables which will strengthen the Force's operational capabilities, enhance its presence and enable more effective crime prevention and response.

Moreover, the allocation of \$700,000.00 to strengthen the Police Beat Patrol in both urban and rural areas is a laudable initiative in our ongoing efforts to improve police visibility and enhance community safety. This strategic investment will foster close engagement between the police force and local communities, build trust and promote a collaborative approach to crime prevention. By proactively patrolling our streets and neighborhoods, the police force will be better positioned to detect and deter criminal activities, ultimately contributing to a safer and more secure Fiji.

Additionally, it is crucial to address the maintenance and improvement of our police infrastructure. The allocation of \$3 million for the renovation and upgrade of police quarters and posts demonstrates the Government's commitment to rectify years of neglect and some existing police stations, quarters, and posts have faced. and I believe here is also included the Nalawa Police Post. Ensuring that our police officers have suitable and well-maintained working environments is vital for their morale, productivity, and overall effectiveness.

By upgrading these facilities, we not only provide better living and working conditions for our police personnel but also enhance their ability to serve and protect our communities with utmost dedication. Community policing is now at the heart and centre of the Police's Priorities and the government will make it its business to support and equip community policing operations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge the increase in the Republic of Fiji Military Forces' (RFMF) allocation from \$94.1 million last financial year to \$103.1 million in the 2023-2024 financial year. The RFMF plays a pivotal role in maintaining our nation's security, defence, and supporting peace efforts both regionally and globally. This allocation is a testament to the government's recognition of the RFMF's important contributions. The RFMF plays a pivotal role in maintaining our national security, defence, and supporting peace efforts both regionally and globally.

Additionally, the increase in the RFMF allocation will provide the strength needed to boost the RFMF Engineers. Apart from the work undertaken by the Engineers within the RFMF, the regiment also assists Government in its rural rehabilitation efforts.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the allocation of \$50,000 is very encouraging for the review of the RFMF Act which will enable the RFMF to amend their archaic legislation. It is anticipated that the review will revamp the RFMF in fulfilling its responsibilities, including safeguarding our sovereignty, contributing to international peacekeeping missions, and responding to emergencies and natural disasters.

The RFMF's dedication, professionalism, and commitment to upholding the values of peace and security are commendable, and this allocation recognizes the invaluable contribution to our nation. Again, I express my unwavering support for the budgetary allocations presented by the honourable Minister of Finance for the Ministry for Home Affairs and Immigration, the Fiji Police Force and the Republic of Fiji Military Forces. These investments epitomize the government's steadfast commitment to our collective safety and security. Let us stand united and work collaboratively to ensure that the allocated funds are utilized effectively and efficiently for the benefit of all our Fijian people. Together, we will build a stronger, more resilient Fiji, a nation that thrives on the foundations of safety, security, prosperity and equality.

In conclusion, as we deliberate on this Budget, let us celebrate the achievements of exemplary individuals like Fr. Alan Finn who embodies the values which we hold dear. Let us confront the challenges before us with determination and a united spirit, committed to upholding democracy, defending the rule of law, and eradicating *coup* culture once and for all. By doing so, we shall pave the way for a future where every Fijian can thrive, and our nation can rise to even greater heights in peace.

I extend my gratitude to each one of you for your tireless dedication to serving our nation, and I express my unwavering faith in our collective ability to steer Fiji towards a brighter future. Thank you, and may we continue to govern with integrity and purpose.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, the honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of our

Opposition Chambers. I stand today to give my response to the Budget Address given by the honourable Minister of Finance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Parliament is convened today to debate on the National Budget for 2023-2024 before us. This is to decide our future fiscal policy ahead of us. However, the first priority in deciding the future of this country is our people. Our people make up this diverse and multicultural nation with different socio-economic backgrounds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge each and every one of us to consider the potential consequences of the increase in VAT on basic consumer goods. While fiscal policies are essential for economic stability and growth, it is important to examine their impact on the economy as a whole, especially on the most vulnerable members of society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must acknowledge that the backbone of our flourishing economy is its consumers. The consumer sector drives demand, fosters innovation, and supports businesses both large and small. However, an increase in VAT on essential goods could burden consumers, particularly those belonging to lower-income brackets or living in poverty. Such measures have the potential to diminish their purchasing power and exacerbate existing inequalities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one must understand that basic consumer goods, including essential food items, clothing and healthcare products constitute a significant portion of household expenditure for many individuals and families. A rise in VAT on these necessities would consequently place undue strain on their budgets, hampering their ability to meet their basic needs. This can lead to a sharp decline in consumer spending, stifling economic activity and potentially triggering a slow down or even a recession.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if consumers are forced to allocate a larger portion of their income to essential goods due to increased VAT, discretionary spending on non-essential items may decline. This, in turn, could adversely affect businesses across various sectors resulting in reduced profits, job losses and a decline in overall economic growth. We must consider the potential ripple effects and unintended consequences before implementing any policies that could hinder consumer spending.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also crucial to remember that the current economic climate, marked by uncertainty and challenges, calls for measures that promote economic recovery and stability. While it may be tempting to generate revenue through VAT increases, alternative solutions should be explored. Increased emphasis on fair taxation, closing loopholes and combating tax evasion can help generate income without burdening consumers. By adopting a more equitable approach, we can foster a thriving economy that benefits individuals from all walks of life.

Mr. Speaker, any decision to increase VAT on basic consumer goods should be made after careful deliberation. We must recognize the essential role consumers play in driving economic growth and the potential repercussions that an increase in VAT can have on their purchasing power, economic activity and overall prosperity. Let us stand for policies that prioritise the wellbeing of people who at the end of the day are our consumers while simultaneously seeking alternative solutions to address fiscal challenges. Only through thoughtful, balanced and fair approaches can we ensure a robust and inclusive economy for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is quite impressive how the honourable Minister of Finance has managed to deceive the public through this Budget. All Fijians regardless of their political affiliation will be going through the price increase.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we wonder who in their right state of mind will want the Government to increase VAT? This deceitful act of increasing VAT for the people is day light robbery. I ask who wins from this and who gains from this?

Mr. Speaker, I come from a sugar cane farming background, and we faced a lot of challenges during our time until FijiFirst stepped in to assist the sugar industry. Under the FijiFirst Government, farmers were provided \$1,900 to prepare hilly land for sugarcane production. This did not stop here, Mr. Speaker, Sir. FijiFirst Government supported more than 200,000 people dependent on sugarcane cultivation in the form of grants and subsidies.

I would just like to inform the current honourable Minister of Sugar that the former Prime Minister and Minister of Sugar was not sleeping on the job. He has done a lot and I will urge the honourable Minister of Sugar to show some respect to the former Prime Minister.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. PILLAY.- I think he is sleeping on the job because of the performance of the sugar mills and the suffering of the farmers and truck drivers. The honourable Minister is sleeping on the job. Further efforts by FijiFirst were geared towards increasing productive capacity, improving transportation, providing in-fielders and cage bins to support mechanical harvesting.

Honourable Minister, all the mechanical harvesters which are running under the co-operatives the former Prime Minister and Minister of Sugar gave \$90,000 grant to purchase all those harvesters. I personally would like to thank him as I am also a founder and the President of Riverside Farmers Co-operative in Ba where we serve about 80 farmers, and we were able to purchase a harvester for the farmers. FijiFirst provided much needed funding for research in improving the quality cane seedlings and improved soil fertility. It also ensured that unused sugar cane leases are acquired and replanted, secured more lease renewals and further mechanisation.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, the sugar industry supports the livelihoods of thousands of Fijians. The industry drives rural development such as upgraded rural roads, giving farmers access to agricultural inputs and machinery for their farms and access to markets, urban centres, schools and health services.

Mr. Speaker, on the economic side, FijiFirst had done all it can to make sure cane farming provided an adequate living. Given the pressure of international prices and the need to make the industry more efficient, FijiFirst allocated public funds to support programmes aimed at increasing cane production and guaranteed cane prices to growers which I hope the honourable Prof. Biman Prasad will upkeep.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the rising cost of production such as cartage, harvesting and the increased labour rates and other hidden costs, farmers are raising questions.

(Chorus of interjections)

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

HON. V. PILLAY.- When will the honourable Minister of Finance keep up to his promise of giving \$100 a tonne? He is on record and apart from this \$100 a tonne promised which has been ongoing from 2017 there were lot other promises made during the last election campaign. Some of

our honourable Members are denying here but the farmers outside know who all made those promises. These are farmers whom he campaigned to who are now asking when will he fulfil his promise? They are looking forward to this payment this season.

Mr. Speaker, this crushing season, the Ministry of Sugar through FSC has increased the cost of cartage of sugarcane by FSC trucks. FSC has also increased the rate of tractor services to farmers from \$85 to \$112.50. Previously cartage rate was subsidised. For example, a farmer from Naruku in Ba was paying \$12 per tonne to cart cane to Rarawai Mill for FSC trucks, however this crushing season this has increased to \$14 per tonne. This is a similar scenario where farmers are using FSC trucks for cane cartage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prof. Biman Prasad had stated that he will give more money to farmers this year as there is one more payment left and that also has been confirmed by the honourable Minister for Sugar. Does this mean that he will give from one hand and take it from the other side? Mr. Speaker, Sir, it should also be noted that all activities under the Ministry of Sugar is under R which means that all funds are under the control and approval of the honourable Minister of Finance. This raises questions that it seems that honourable Prof. Biman Prasad has trust issues with the honourable Minister for Sugar, and I will request to please sort out your differences in the interest of all farmers.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, farmers are grateful to the FijiFirst initiatives that the Coalition Government is now carrying on. However, there seems to be a decrease in fertilizer subsidy for farmers from \$25 million to \$20 million and a major increase in travel and subsistence allocations. We all know that it is connected to everything else.

Fertilizers subsidies plays a crucial role in the sugar industry. Sugar crops require specific nutrients to grow efficiently and produce high yields. Fertilizers provide these essential nutrients to the soil and plants promoting healthy growth and increasing sugar cane productivity. By providing subsidies on fertilizers to farmers, it can make them more affordable and accessible to sugarcane farmers especially smallholders who may have limited financial resources.

By reducing the cost burden, subsidies encourage farmers to invest in fertilisers and use them appropriately. This in turn enhances the overall quality and quantity of sugarcane produce. However, the decrease in subsidies for fertilisers from sugarcane farmers as listed in the Budget items from \$25 million to \$20 million can have significant implications for the sugar industry including decreased productivity due to limited access to affordable fertilisers. This can lead to a decline in a crop yield and lower productivity levels. As a result, the overall sugarcane production may decrease impacting the industry's output.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the decrease in subsidies, sugarcane farmers will have to bear the additional cost of purchasing fertilisers. This can significantly increase their production cost, affecting their profitability. The increased expenses may be passed onto the sugar industry leading to higher prices for consumers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this can also lead to shift in farmer behaviour. Reduce subsidies may prompt some struggling sugarcane farmers to explore alternative crops that require different types of fertilisers, impacting the overall supply of sugarcane. This could result in a shift away from traditional sugarcane farming practices leading to changes in the industry's structure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to point out that this Budget overall does not address concerns of people on the ground. With the increased cost of living this will impact the lives of hundreds of thousands of families who will be burdened to pay more from their limited budget. This will greatly affect the farming communities, settlements and villages in rural and maritime communities. With these words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I strongly oppose this Budget.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, guests sitting at the gallery and those who are watching from their own homes. *Ni 1272inaka1272 1272inaka.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the 2023-2024 Budget that was delivered on Friday, 30th June, 2023 by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance. Firstly, I wish to respond to some of the issues that were just being raised by honourable Pillay with regards to the sugar industry.

For the last 10 years, this industry has been heavily subsidised by the Fiji Government; \$1 billion for the last 10 years and we are subsidising everyone from those who are producing 50 tonnes, 100 tonnes to 400 tonnes. This Government will need to look at this seriously on how we are going to address the industry. We are going to look at the returns of how much we are getting because a lot of funds had been spent - \$1 billion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, compiling a comprehensive budget against an economic backdrop that the Coalition Government has inherited is a difficult task. I want to first acknowledge all the hardworking civil servants who worked long hours to help the honourable Minister of Finance put this Budget together.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a far cry from the Budgets of the last 16 years which were dictated by two men and two men only. Now we can hear them barking, but in the last two Parliaments, they never had any say at all in the planning and formulation of the Budgets. Their inputs were never taken on board by their Minister for Economy.

The Budget for new Fiji provides an adequate prescription to getting the economic management of our country back on track. Indeed, the tough decisions have to be made. This Budget is here to liberate all the Fijians from the shackles of dictatorial leadership that the two men rule which has brought this country to the brink of economic collapse.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Civil Service, to set some context to what the People's Coalition Government has inherited, it is important to remind this august Parliament about the state of the Civil Service merely a little over seven months ago.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government for eight years in Office bragged that they would reform the Civil Service to a more world class international civil service. They introduced policy initiative such as the Open Merit Recruitment System (OMRS) to reform the recruitment system in the Civil Service. Instead, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the size of the Civil Service during their term increased from 27,000 to 35,000. Initially the cost of the Civil Service was only \$700 million. When the FijiFirst ended their term, the cost of maintaining the Civil Service was \$1.26 billion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, where is efficiency that they have talked about? We have not witnessed any evidence of this. Those of us who worked through the ranks of the Government know for a fact how civil servants were manipulated by the previous government. Positive criticism was not encouraged. In summary, it was their way or the highway.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Civil Service became a workforce of “yes people” who did not question policy for fear of being sacked. In fact, there was a running joke for it. Those who dared to question or provide critical analysis of the *status quo* risked reaching 55 prematurely.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many government workplaces became toxic where civil servants were reprimanded if seen in the company of citizens who did not publicly support government policy. It is a known fact that many would avoid fraternising with family members, colleagues and friends just to avoid being accused of disloyalty to government. In effect, the absence of sound analysis so as not to rock the boat was consequently a disservice to our citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the lack of good economic cadre within government cost government. For example, the National Planning Office which was a competent technical secretariat of government and that provided policy analysis and advise to the Minister of Finance and the Prime Minister. When the Ministry of Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics was disbanded, we gradually began to witness the proposal and implementation of policies that lacked thorough analysis and informed advise.

The 2023-2024 Budget tabled before Parliament for debate addresses the anomaly we now have to deal with as a result of poorly researched policies. I am confident, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the 2023-2024 Budget will help steer us out of the economic mess that we have inherited. In an attempt to control everything, self-serving changes to Civil Service structure resulted in one-man-rule that lacked a higher level of scrutiny before recommendations are tabled for consideration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we recognise that our economy is stuck in a serious debt hole of some \$9.8 billion. A debt hole that is a record for Fiji and largely the creation of your previous two-man dictatorship. We heard the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, Manoa Kamikamica yesterday about the gaping hole of of \$500 million created by the FijiFirst Government. That is why we have to increase the VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent. We have to do this to ensure that we cover the various gaping holes created by FijiFirst

VAT Increase, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has been transparent and consultative when it comes to this Budget. We have made it clear, difficult decisions needed to be made to address the major debt crisis we have found ourselves in.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his State of the Nation Address just before the Budget announcement, the honourable Prime Minister highlighted that to rebuild this nation, it will not be for business as usual. The Government needed to consider hard decisions now to ensure future growth and prosperity. Yes, VAT has increased but we have also put in place a number of measures to mitigate the adverse impacts to the poor. We will increase social welfare payments, reduce duty on certain goods and made a commitment to increase access to basic services. We recognised that there will be short-term pain, but this is ultimately for the long-term benefit of all Fijians for a resilient and sustainable Fiji.

I reiterate the honourable Prime Minister’s message that this Budget has been prepared to consolidate Government finances, minimise wastage, address our high debt level, allocate resources to priority sectors and increase access to basic services. This is a people-centered and forward-looking Budget.

Fijian Broadcasting Corporation (FBC), Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday honourable Aliko Bia made a number of unfounded allegations against FBC. Honourable Bia had asked if there has been an investigation into the spending of FBC when the former CEO had provided all the facts to the new

Board, which was apparently ignored. Honourable Bia had alleged that the new FBC Board opted to misinform the media about FBC and its operations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those comments by the honourable Bia as a desperate attempt by him to make allegations without any substance, information or details. The Chairman and the Board have at no time misinformed the public on FBC's operation, but at all times stated the facts of the matter in a transparent and accountable manner, including the fact that under the previous leadership, without the PSB grant, FBC was technically insolvent. It may please honourable Bia to know that in a short space of time of four months, the new leadership have attained for the first six months unaudited figures of \$1 million, more than what was achieved in the same time last year.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Honourable Bia further went on to allege that the Chairman was using the boardroom for his personal business almost every day. This is far from the truth. The Chairman and many Board members use it only for FBC related businesses and the positive results go to show this. The Board had already mandated that any extravagance and wastage such as the \$207,000 vehicle bought by the previous Board for the previous CEO would be eliminated and FBC would be operated in an efficient and effective manner.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S. TUBUNA.-This can be seen in the newsroom operating now in a free, fair, balanced and objective manner rather than as previous where it was at the risk of undue influence by the previous CEO. Yes, or course, some staff have resigned for reasons that will suit them. The FBC leadership is committed to running the company in an efficient and effective manner. The FBC has an obligation to ensure that its staff are utilised well for their skills and the Board and management are extremely grateful for the diligence and hard work shown by the staff to be part of the company that is managed efficiently and has staff safety, including living a balanced life in mind.

The FBC and the Government have an existing contract covering PSB services and we are always open to meeting with them to ensure that there will always be an open transparent process in how the funds are utilised. All things considered, FBC is now free and balanced in reporting and in its use of all content across its many media platforms. It has also cut out extravagant expenses accorded previously and is already ahead of its financial target for the year being \$1 million more positive than the same period last year.

Melanesians, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like touch on a topic that is very dear to me, which is the plight of the Melanesian people who have co-existed with other races that exist in this country for several decades. Honourable Aliki Bia yesterday alluded to the limited scholarships opportunity for Melanesian communities. Access to education remains a key priority of this Coalition Government. We are committed to ensuring students are able to study and unlock greater opportunities for the future.

We recognised that they cannot fully do this while burdened with debt. There is a total allocation of \$148.2 million in this Budget for this initiative. This will cater for the scholarships of 8,720 students and funding needed for the 9,148 existing students. In return, students will serve a bond. I believe that like our Budget, this scheme is fair and balanced. It is a way to make tertiary education available to low-income families without burdening our students with great debt. Mr.

Speaker, Sir, we will accord priority to the needs of Melanesian students who wish to access this programme. Every Melanesian who applies will be provided with this support.

Since I took oath in office, I have since visited many of the Melanesian settlements namely, Maniava, Nabunikadamu, Wailoku, Caubati, Newtown and Nasoata. Mr. Speaker, Sir I learned in those visits about how very little the previous government has cared about the welfare of this important segment of the community. They currently face an uncertain future as majority of the land they live on, have no formal lease with several on the verge of expiring.

The People's Coalition Government promises to look into the plight of our Melanesian communities and ensure that the settlements they live in are formalised. Last week the honourable Minister for Lands was in Ovalau to undertake discussions with the people of Baba and initiate the process of formalising their land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, People's Coalition Government has presented a future focused and people centred Budget, one that considers how our actions today will affect Fiji tomorrow. We must be bold enough to confront the issues head-on and make the tough decision today for the sake of our children and grandchildren.

As the Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, I am honoured to support the honourable Prime Minister in the execution of duties through his ministerial portfolios which include Cabinet, Climate Change Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs. Each portfolio plays a critical role in the sustainable development of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite continued impact from the crisis including the climate change and external conflict, the People's Coalition Government will work towards achieving our vision of "Rebuilding our Future Together" for a resilient Fiji. This vision is clearly reflected in the Budget allocations with the targeted approach to implementation, growth and development. I am heartened by the commitment to the environment and climate change.

The Department of Environment will continue to ensure that Fiji's natural environment is protected, resources are sustainably utilised, all developments are sustainable, the ozone layer is protected, waste is properly managed and pollution is controlled.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2023-2024 Budget provides for the People's Coalition Government's commitment to safeguarding our natural environment and ensuring there is a balance between sustainable development and economic prosperity. The Department of Environment has been allocated funds for the upgrading and maintenance work of the Naboro Landfill. This includes the completion of additional sections to cater for waste generated in the Lami, Suva, Nausori and Korovou corridor. The maintenance of the Naboro Landfill leachate treatment pond and a subsidised gate fee for municipal councils in the Central Division to collect and properly dispose waste. It is imperative that our waste management systems are effective, efficient and safe for the receiving environment and human health.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department of Environment will be developing Fiji's Container Deposit Regulation. This will be an avenue to explore new opportunities to transform waste into valuable resources, reducing our reliance on raw materials and promoting a circular economy.

We know that prevention is better than cure. It is clear that preventing pollution will reduce financial and environmental costs. Reducing pollution and promoting conservation and the protection of Fiji's natural resources including our terrestrial and economic and ocean ecosystems and biodiversity such as coral, forests, rivers, lakes and wildlife will be a key priority for this Government.

The Department of Environment will implement programmes relating to conservation and sustainable resource management and enforcement in safeguarding these ecosystems and species across Fiji, including through the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge that partnerships are key in this work. I recognise the Department for their continued collaboration with relevant agencies in meeting our environmental protection, conservation and biodiversity goals. This includes nationwide Business Roundtables and EIA clinics.

The Department will also develop a series of use-friendly, multi-lingual fact sheets to provide information and guidance on the EIA process. The fact sheets will incorporate quick tips, frequently asked questions and clarification on relevant laws made available through the Department's website for ease of access by investors, businesses and the general public.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department will continue outreach programmes in villages and communities in the areas of proper waste management, conservation and protection of their natural resources, sustainable utilization of resources, including the impacts of climate change.

By empowering Fijians with knowledge, we can encourage greater responsibility towards waste reduction. The Department will collaborate with schools, universities and community organisations to raise awareness in the hope that our citizens will adopt sustainable habits. It is up to all of us, and we each have a part to play in ensuring environmental conservation.

On climate change, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also commend the work of the Climate Change Division. This budget will allow them to continue the good work in addressing the devastating impacts of climate change in vulnerable island nations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Climate Change Division will receive allocations of direct budget support from the European Union (EU) and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This shows the high level of confidence our partners have in Fiji and our ability to implement positive change.

The EU is providing funding to implement the Climate Change Act 2021. This allocation will be used to facilitate and support Fiji's sustainable development objectives, long-term climate ambition, net-zero emission target, and commitment to protecting Fiji's environment. This will also contribute to Fiji's sustainable, inclusive and resilient low carbon development as a long-term goal.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Climate Change Division will also be updating and maintaining Fiji's Climate Change portal, a central information hub that collates and makes available climate change data, reports and other information that can be used to raise awareness and strengthen capacity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has long been a leader on the issue of climate change and seen as a champion regionally and internationally. The People's Coalition Government will continue this work and reaffirm our commitment to addressing this issue both through impacts being faced by our people and communities, as well as advocating for higher ambition at international fora.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reiterate our Ministry for Finance's message, and I quote; "Nations are built by people, on the foundations of unity and mutual cooperation."

In this spirit, I would like to conclude by, again, thanking every individual who contributed to the development of this Budget. I thank everyone who has participated in its preparation,

consultations, sent submissions, engaged in meetings and are committed to working together in moving us towards a unified and thriving Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I extend my full support and endorsement of the 2023-2024 National Budget.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, distinguished Members of Parliament and those who are tuning into the Budget debate via the various telecast network, *ni sa bula vinaka* and good evening to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity to speak on the 2023-2024 National Budget Debate. I would like to begin by thanking all healthcare workers in the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, the Permanent Secretary - Dr. James Fong, right down to the drivers and cleaners for your patriotism, dedication and personal sacrifices in the provision of health services towards all Fijians.

To all the bilateral partners, thank you for assisting Fiji during the COVID-19 pandemic and in supporting the FijiFirst mitigation strategies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today provides me with an opportunity to put on record my heartfelt thanks to all the staff of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. Thank you for your contribution in the last financial year, most importantly, during the uncertain COVID-19 pandemic period.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2023-2024 National Budget is a much-awaited Budget that the whole nation was waiting for since the formation of the Coalition Government in December last year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the nation came to a standstill at around 10.00 am last Friday to listen to the honourable Minister of Finance, the President of the most aging party in Fiji, to give his first-ever National Budget Address.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the nation was eagerly waiting with great anticipation to see that the learned Professor of Economics would be different from a successful lawyer, who managed Fiji's economy effectively with proven 10 years of consecutive unprecedented economic growth. The nation went through two Category 5 Cyclones that shrink our economy over night, the COVID-19 pandemic through which the glaring ongoing challenges of the climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the honourable Minister of Finance's Address, all I can say is that it was anti-climactic. We all expected this amazing Budget that would change Fiji, considering that the honourable Member who presented the Budget has been harping on about this and that for eight years. We all anticipated that something new and innovative would be presented in this Budget, but it was a copy of the last Budget and we all expected he knew what he was doing. Well, I was wrong, but hey, there is a next year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this side of the Parliament are expressing strongly our feelings of worry and concern about what is happening that would become of this Budget for the middle and low income breadwinners in the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the proposed 15 percent VAT increase by the Government will be burdened for the low-income brackets of our society and our country. To all ordinary Fijians who are listening to the sound of my voice, if this Budget is passed, Lord help us!

In less than three weeks, expect a day to dig deeper into your pocket to pay more for almost everything - your EFL, your water bill, hardware materials, lawyers' fees, doctor's fees and dentist fees, plumbing materials, bus fare, food items, cleaning agents and many more. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there will be a rise in cost of almost everything. I say again, help us Lord!

This Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, prepared by the Professor of Economics is, in my opinion, intellectually dishonest and vague.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me sound a warning to the honourable Prime Minister, Sir, sighting what has transpired in the last six months and the content of this budget - be very wary of your money man.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to speak on Head 22. On the onset, I am calling the honourable Minister of Finance to apologize to the staff of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services for the remarks he made about the appalling health services and healthcare staff. The honourable Member chooses to forget that we just came out of a global pandemic that put an extra pressure on the whole world and the whole health sector to a level that it is not designed for.

Here, we have the honourable Minister of Finance, shouting at the entire health professionals and the Permanent Secretary, both inside and outside of this august Parliament as reported in the *Fiji Times* on the 2nd of this month, and I quote:

“Get out of your office and look at what is happening. No use sitting in the office and signing papers.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am here to tell Parliament that all the lies spread by honourable Members on the other side, especially the Leader of NFP, that we have a failed and decaying health system, this is not true. In fact, we have a fantastic healthcare system in Fiji when you compare it with the other developed nations of the world. Look at their waiting time to be seen by a doctor or dentist

The group, Mr. Speaker, need to open their eyes. Other than looking through a binoculars for broken door hinges, or a falling toilet seat pan, they failed to see the bigger picture of the advancement in the health sector under the FijiFirst Government.

FijiFirst, Mr. Speaker, Sir, made some of the very difficult choices through decisive leadership to keep the economy moving forward and making sure that services are still available for ordinary Fijians.

You hear how the honourable Minister of Finance has played the blame game, always trying to paint a bad picture about FijiFirst. It has become one of your favourite line, Mr. Speaker, Sir, “Sound like a broken record”.

Mr. Speaker, the Fiscal Review Committee headed by convicted lawyer/solicitor and legal advisor to the biggest water bottling company - Fiji Water, submitted recommendations to the Coalition, followed by the gathering of big players in economic diligences for a two-day summit at a lucrative hotel with a *kalavata*. Everything is connected to everything.

Mr. Speaker, we are reliably informed by some of these reputable financial institutions that all their suggestions made to the honourable Minister and the entire thematic teams that are there in the National Economic Summit were not taken on board or seen in this Budget. Not only that they were disappointed, but they confidently said that they will not participate in the future economic summit.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, over millions of dollars approved through bank loans are still sitting in the bank. The building industry in coming to a complete halt, no creation of new jobs, spending power of ordinary Fijians being diminished. I can confidently say we are heading to an economic downturn - Lord help us!

Mr. Speaker, I asked the same question raised by honourable Bia yesterday. Does the honourable Minister have any other way in his hat trick to raise Government revenue other than forcing this 15 percent VAT down the throat of ordinary Fijians?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recommendation by the Fiscal Review Committee and endorsed by the honourable Minister of Finance and the honourable Prime Minister consecutively will come as a huge burden to our fellow Fijians, especially those that are in the \$30,000 to \$50,000 income brackets.

Mr. Speaker, the most vulnerable Fijians are not supported at all in this Budget. The health services provided by the FijiFirst aimed at bringing high standard of healthcare every day, improving accessibility and quality healthcare, free of charge to all Fijians and for all Fijians to have good health and a brighter smile.

In this Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it leaves the majority in the \$30,000 to \$50,000 income bracket in the rain as they will no longer be entitled to access free General Practitioners and free medicine, free lab analysis and blood sample analysis under the National Healthcare Scheme.

In addition, in the 2023-2024 Budget, the honourable Minister has lessened the number of medical tests, number of dental feelings, number of dental extractions per patients per day. This will mean patients may have to make several visits to complete their treatment. Loss of productivity regarding time. Excessive sick leave away from work and limiting the doctor's ability to fully investigate the presenting symptoms before making definitive diagnosis on the presenting complaint by the patient because of the limited tests that they have to put in place. And to be able to provide the best treatment for Fijians, this Budget does not address that issued.

Mr. Speaker, the Health Care Scheme has opened opportunities for entrepreneurship. Recently, we noticed that the honourable Minister of Finance was a chief guest at the opening of a new medical clinic and pharmacy belonging to a young couple in Nakasi, praising and congratulating them for taking on the initiative under the SMEs to enter that space.

Mr. Speaker, the demand for high revenue through VAT collection will obviously place an immense pressure also on the FRCS team. One only wonders the timing of the resignation of the former CEO.

The Ministry of Health and Medical Services is allocated a total of \$453.7 million in this financial year, comprising of \$388.6 in operating expenditure and only \$39.6 million in capital expenditure.

Mr. Speaker, how is the Budget fair and just, or balanced as they like to call it? With a mere increase of social benefit allowance on one hand and directly reaching into the pocket of the lower income and middle earners, together with the destitute recipient to pay 15 percent VAT in almost everything they need to buy or the services that will be provided to them.

The Coalition needs to improve and strengthen awareness on healthy behaviour and our health budget needs to be boosted in the Public Health SEG other than being slashed. It is too early to remove the whole COVID-19 allocation from the Public Health allocation entirely. This is my view,

Mr. Speaker. It can be kept under R as COVID-19 is unlikely to go away completely. There are still many unknown variables that are sticking around. It may end up reappearing seasonally.

Mr. Speaker, in addition to this recommendation, we are being advised that the *El Nino* is forecasted for this year. We brace for severe drought, associated food insecurity, flooding, rain, temperature rise due to the effects of *El Nino*. This will cause a wide range of health problems, including disease outbreak, malnutrition, heat stress and respiratory diseases. My question to the Government, are we financially ready for the devastating *El Nino* effects? I do not see that in this Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We need our Public Health team to go out into villages, settlements and populated communities with health promotion message and that is the mission of the Ministry of Health, “Empowering all Fijians to take care of their own health”.

Mr. Speaker, the Fiji Health Care Reform involved the creative of innovative solution that every Fijian is cared for are being heavily subsidised by the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, we do have a very robust healthcare system put in place by the FijiFirst Government and there is no doubt about that. Through the FijiFirst innovative initiatives, Fiji’s Tertiary Care is excellent and is the best in the region at the moment and we designed our system to do that. Today, open-heart surgery, overseas standard specialty care is now done locally. A substantives savings and peace of mind for our family as patients are no longer relocated to India or elsewhere.

Just last week, honourable Kiran, our honourable Prime Minister opened a 100-bed hospital, the Pacific Health Specialist (PHS) Hospital in Nadi. Yes, it is a private hospital, it is a pride of Fiji.

The new Makoi Birthing Unit, taking the load off CWMH; the new Navosa Hospital, this is forward thinking and strategically located for new economic development in the highlands. This morning, we heard the honourable Minister from the other side that Navatumali will be a hub for economic activity up in the Navosa region. The new Nakasi Health Centre, the Namarai Health Centre in Ra, Waimaro Hospital in Naitasiri, Magodro Mortuary in Bukuya, Black Rock Military Academy in Votualevu. I noted that the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services has plans for the maintenance of clinics and staff accommodation where applicable. I applaud his plans and I wish the Ministry well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, furthermore, several nursing stations have been converted to health centre level under the FijiFirst Administration, so that ordinary Fijians living in most remote areas can access quality healthcare from a fully qualified doctor, as compared to a nurse with his or her limited clinical scope. Now with this FijiFirst arrangement, Fijians do not have to travel far to see a doctor and that is a direct saving on their families. I have listed the nursing stations that have been upgraded to health centre level - Tau, Nawaicoba, Naqalimare, Waivaka, Lomaivuna, Laselevu, Dawasamu, Kubulau, Bouma in the Garden Island of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another blow to our low-income earners, amongst others, is that under this Budget, the free General Practitioner (GP) Scheme which the FijiFirst Government initiated will now be means-tested. Under this Budget, family that earns more than \$30,000 combined household income in a year will no longer be eligible to get this free GP or Dental Practitioner (DP) services under the healthcare scheme. While I oppose this arrangement, the Government should have formulated a better monitoring and evaluation tool on the Scheme without causing pain on the poor ordinary Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the World Health Organization (WHO) does not measure the quality of the healthcare system, it ranks systems that treat people equally higher than those that treat patients well. That is where investment in Public Private Partnership (PPP) is important. Under that arrangement, Fijians are equally treated effectively, efficiently and in an accredited medical and dental setting approved by the Medical and Dental Council.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the pay increase for nurses is much welcome, as being announced, the absence of the same for the rest of the health staff will only demoralise the rest of the healthcare cadre. There are issues in the discrepancy of salary of Senior Paramedical Officers compared to the new graduates. For example, a 15-year experienced staff will only be on Step 2 while a new graduate comes in at Step 1 in the salary band.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me remind the honourable Minister of Finance that hospital services are not run by doctors and nurses only. We have pharmacists, medical scientists, X-ray technicians, dieticians, physiotherapists, Environmental Health Inspectors, Oral Health Practitioners, who are part of whole holistic health profession.

Most of these healthcare staff are already on a lower salary band. We have noted that the Job Evaluation Exercise being mentioned, along with this Budget, we need a timeline Mr. Speaker, Sir, as staff continue to migrate due to salary and other factors as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to inform Parliament about the services provided at the CWMH Oral Surgery Unit. This may be the first time, but this speciality care has evolved enormously in the past eight years. In terms of its specific advancement in the clinical scope and the mentoring of Junior Dental Officers in the Oral Surgery Unit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Oral Surgery Team receives one to two oral cancer patients every week to treat. While for decades we focus on NCDs, the incidence of oral cancer in Fiji is also on the rise. In fact, it is more or equal to Sri Lanka.

We have postgraduate training available locally. The College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences for masters of Oral Surgery. The graduates from this programme, a few of them have already graduated, are now treating oral cancer, jaw cysts and the enormous number of soft tissue traumas due to increase in domestic violence, alcohol related jaw injuries and motor vehicle accident. They are very much part of the Clinical Care Committee at the two major hospitals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I humbly request the honourable Minister for Health, who is not here now, to look at the salary disparity for these Oral Surgeons. Their salary needs to be aligned to the specialist care they perform with lots of dedication and passion over the years. The Unit needs to be further supported and developed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me speak briefly on the Department of Radiology. If I may, now we have only one floor mounted digital x-ray machine, one MRI machine and one CT scan machine in the country at CWM Hospital – only one of each of three Units at the moment. These machines which are all radiology resources are stretched to the limit.

The MRI machine is over 10 years old. A financial plan needs to commence for the replacement of this machine, and I hope the honourable Minister will look into this. Also, if I may, there is a software system (PAC), a vital tool for radiologists to display, capture, store and share medical images in the fastest and most reliable way, that also need to be looked into and to be procured. If I may share, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current practice now is the sharing of images through smart phone. The device is of a substandard service and can also cost lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me provide some feedback on some of the issues highlighted this morning. The health facilities have some minor defects. On the Nakasi Health Centre, I was reliably informed that washroom users at Nakasi Health Centre at times use thick toilet tissues or tissue papers, cloth, newspaper leaflets, et cetera, and this causes blockage.

For the Navosa Subdivisional Hospital in Keiyasi, Mr. Speaker, equipment and beddings were relocated from Ba Mission Hospital to Keiyasi Hospital. It was a prudent inventory management decision, knowing fully well that the Ba Mission Hospital will be handed over to the Aspen Medical. It is, indeed, timely, as confirmed by the honourable Minister from the other side this morning, Vatumali will develop to further become an economic hub for the people of Navosa and they have a big hospital there. As we always say, this is a forward-looking infrastructure development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Finance mentioned about the laundry service at CWMH. For the information of Parliament, proper tender process was followed, tender was awarded to a company. If the honourable Minister wants to know more about the boiler room, you can ask the honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau.

On the Engineers report about the stabilisation of the land where the boiler is located at the moment. If we were to look at demolishing this old boiler room, the old Children's Hospital will just collapse. Maybe, the honourable Minister Tuisawau can highlight to the honourable Minister of Finance.

The honourable Minister of Finance also slipped his tongue about the Levuka Mortuary during his speech on Monday. He then realised that it got compromised during their term. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the morgue serves the whole of the Lomaiviti Medical Area which includes Koro, Gau, Batiki and Nairai, where the honourable Attorney-General comes from. We feel that these islanders are being deprived of a proper farewell by their loved ones. The practice of burying the corpse the same day is not only painful, but irresponsible of a Government.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government needs to take urgent actions to address some of the challenges highlighted and this includes increasing the health budget, investing in the in-service training and retention of dedicated outstanding healthcare professionals, upgrading and sustainable medical equipment. Our citizens deserve better, and it is our responsibility to advocate for a more equitable and efficient healthcare system for all Fijians. Unfortunately, under this Budget, it will come at a heavy cost for ordinary Fijians. May God help us!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope that we can learn from this clone budget and maybe in the next budget, the honourable Minister of Finance can move away from a cut and paste which clearly this Budget is. This is my contribution to the Budget and I thank you for the extended time given to me. I do not support this Budget.

HON. RATU I. TUIWAILEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the 2023-2024 National Budget that was delivered by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance. Please allow me to deliver my contribution in the *iTaukei* language.

Turaga na Speaker, Turaga Paraiminisita, i Vukevuke ni Mminisita, Liuliu ni To ni Veisaqa kei na lewe ni lewe ni Palimedi - Miau sa bula re!

Turaga Speaker, au duri ena bogi nikua meu tokona na i Tuvatuva Vakailavo ni 2023-2024 ka vakaraitaka na i Vukevuke ni Paraiminisita ka Minisita ni iLavo. Au gadreva meu vakavinavinakataka na turaga Minisita kei na nona ilawalawa. Turaga Sipika, bogi nikua au na gadreva meu na vosa ena ulutaga bibi me baleta na vosa kei na itovo, e dua na yavu levu e qarava

na Tabacakacaka iTaukei. Ena yabaki qo, sa mai vakarurugi na Tabana ni i Tovo kei na i Yau Vakamareqeti ena Minisitiri ni Veika Vakaitaukei, iTovo kei na iYau Vakamareqeti. Na Tabana ni Vosa kei na iTovo vaka Viti sa tiko rawa ena loma ni Tabacakacaka iTaukei.

Me vaka na vakatulewa ni Bose Yaco ka dabe kina na Bose Levu Vakaturaga, na Tabacakacaka iTaukei sa raica rawa na bibi ni kena vakayagataki na itovo me vakadeitaka na veivakatorocaketaki e lewai matau. Na itovo e tiki ni veivakatorocaketaki.

Ena gauna qo, sa gadrevi me vakanamata na iTaukei ena bula ni vakatubuilavo kei na vakavure bisinisi. Oqo e vueta na itagede ni bula ka vukei ira na itaukei era vakuwai tu mai vakadede. Oqo na vanua e vakaveiwekanitaki kina na itovo ni bula kei na veivakatorocaketaki.

Na Tabacakacaka iTaukei e vaqacacotakä na veiliutaki vakavanua. Nai tovo e dua na yavu bibi ni bula vakavanua, sa rui bibi kina me vakabulabulataki ka taqomaki na itovo ni vanua. Ni laurai eso na leqa vou vei ira na itaukei, na leqa qo e lai vakilai ena vosa kei na itovo, oqoe dua na bolebole levu. Na itovo e tara na veitagede taucoko ni bula, me vaka ga e virikotori ena 2030 Agenda kei na Pacific Regional Cultural Strategy.

Turaga Speaker, na levu ni votavota vakailavo e vakarautaki me baleta na i tovo kei na vosa e \$7.2 milioni. Qo e rauta ni 18.6 na pasede nai votavota e soli ina Tabacakacaka iTaukei. Vinaka vakalevu, honourable Professor Biman Prasad ena ivotavota vakailavo. Na veimatani e vuravura era sa tovolea me ra vakarautaka e due se rua na pasede ena nodra iTuvatuva Vakailavo. Oqo e dua na ivakaraitaki vinaka ena matanitu o Viti. Na umailavo oqo era marautaka na veimatatamata eda bula veimaliwai ena noda vanua. Au marautaka vakalevu na noqu mai vakacolati ena kena qaravi na itovo ka vakarurugi ena veiliutaki ni Minisita ni Veika Vakaitaukei, i Tovo kei na i Yau Vakamareqeti. Na tubu ni votavota vakailavo e vukea na nodra cakacaka vata na veitabana era qarava na itovo ena noda vanua.

Na Bose Yaco e vakadonuya na National Culture Policy ena vula o Me 2023. Era vakararamataki na veitabana era veisemati ena policy qo. E vakacurumi na policy ena nodra ituvatuva ni cakacaka me yacova na 10 na yabaki. Oqo me rawa ni rawati kina na veika e tuvani ena loma ni policy. Na ivotavota vakailavo vou ena vukea na cakacakataki ni policy.

Au gadreva meu vakavinavinakataka na Matanitu ni vakarautaka na umailavo me vakacokotaka na tauni o Levuka ka vakatokai me UNESCO World Heritage Port Town. Oqo e i sevu ni vanua duadua ga e Viti e okati ena UNESCO World Heritage Site. Nai Votavota Vakailavo ni 2023-2024 e vakadeitaka na veitokoni ni Matanitu Cokovata na UNESCO World Heritage Convention ni 1972. E vakarautaki e \$1.5 na milioni me vakacavari kina na Levuka Community Centre. Ni oti na vale oqo, sa toka e loma e dua na vale ni yau maroroi, valenisoqo, valeniwilivola, nodra vanua ni qito na gone lalai kei na vale ni coffee. Na vale oqo ena vukea na vakavure ilavo kei na nodra rawaka vakavuli na luveda mai Levuka. Au gadreva meu vakavinavinakataka na kena taqomaki na iYau Vakamareqeti ka kilai tani kina o Levuka, vakavuna me okati ena World Heritage Site.

Na ivotavota vakailavo e vukei ira talega na kenadau ena itovo matanataki. Oqo me vakataki ira na dau bulisere, dau droini, dau talitali, dau ceuceu kei na vuqa tale. O ira na kenadau oqo era vakayagataka na nodra kila me i vurevure ni bula. Na yabaki vakailavo tarava ena dua na yabaki vinaka vei ira na lewenivanua tiko vei ira nai solisoli vakavanua kei na kena kilaka. Ena vukei ena vakatubuilavo kei na vakaduri bisinisi. Ni ra sa vukei, era na qai vukea na rawaka vakailavo ni noda vanua.

Na Tabacakacaka iTaukei ena vaqacacotaka na sokumuni ni veika vakafika me vaka e virikotori ena Cultural Statistic Framework. Na itukutuku ogo e vukei ira vakalevu na veitabana era qarava na itovo. Ena nodra vakauqeti na lewenivanua mera vakayagataka vinaka na nodra isolisoli kei na kilaka, ena gadrevi me taqomaki talega na vuku kei na kilaka vakavanua mera kuwa ni vakayagataka vakatawa dodonu na lewenivanua, daunibisinisi kei na makete ni veivoli mai vanuatani.

Ena yabaki vakailavo vou, na Tabacakacaka iTaukei ena cakacakataka vata kei na veitabana ena kena vakarautaki na ituvatuva me vukea na vuli ena noda vanua, vakabibi na kena vakauqeti na veikoronivuli mera vakatavulica na bula ni veilomani vakaumatama, na cakacaka vata, da duavata ena vanua o Viti. Na ituvatuva go ena vukea na Matanitu me cakacaka vata kei ira na veitabana ena sasaga mera vakatavulici ena itovo nai tabagone mai vei ira na itabaqase ena vei koronivuli, veikoro kei na loma ni vuvale. Nai tuvatuva talega ogo ena vakaqacacotaka na kena vakayagataki ni mona livaliva me vakabulabulataki kina na vosa kei nai tovo me rawa ni uqeti ira nai tabagone me ra cibitaka na veika me baleti ira.

Au gadreva meu vakavinavinakataka na Matanitu ena kena tubu ni okaoka vakailavo ni Vale Ni Yau Maroroi. Na tubu ogo ena vukea vakalevu na maroroi ni yau mareqeti ena noda vanua kei na qaravi ni vale ni yau vakamareqeti.

Ena vuku ni kena maroroi nai yau bula vakatabui ena noda vanua, na Tabacakacaka iTaukei ena cakacaka vata kei na National Trust of Fiji ena qaravi ni vanua vakatatabutaki ogo me vaka e virikotori ena lawa tu ni National Trust. Na veivuke vakailavo ni Matanitu ena maroroya ka vakamareqeta na veika bula e vakatatabutaka ka maroroya na noda vanua.

Na Tabacakacaka iTaukei ena cakacaka vata kei ira na tabana ni tovo bula (Arts Council) ena nodra qaravi na lewe ni vanua e tiko vei ira nai solisoli kei na kila. Au gadreva meu vakaraitaka ena vale ni bose ni sa digitaki na lewe ni matabose ni tovo bula me raica na qaravi ni yabaki vakailavo tarava ka me raica talega na qaravi ni kena i tuvatuva.

Au marautaka vakalevu ni vakarautaka talega na matanitu cokovata e\$100,000 me cakacakataki kina edua na National Art Gallery. Ogo na vanua era na lai vakaraitaka kina na lewe ni vanua na totoka ni we ni ligadra.

Turaga na Speaker, nai tuvatuva vakailavo vou ena vukea na cakacaka vata, tabacakacaka itaukei, veitabana kei na lewenivanua ena kena maroroi na nodra vuku kei na kila ka vakavanua na wekada e Rabi kei Kioa, Solomone kei Vanuatu, sana tekivutaki talega e dua na yabaki vakailavo vou na veitalanoa me baleta na lawa vakaturi ni vuku vakavanua kei na kena matanataki.

Sa vakarautaki ena tabana ni vosa kei nai tovo nai votavota vakailavo me qarava na cakacaka levu ogo. Na taurivaki ni lawa vakaturi ogo ena yalana na vakayagataki vakatawadodonu na vuku kei na kila ka vakavanua mai vei ira na daunibisinisi kei na veitabana tale eso.

Ogo na toso levu baleta ni sa balavu tiko mai na kena veitalanoa. Na lawa ena qai vakarota me dua na sova ni tukutuku ni vuku kei na kila ka vakavanua ka kumuni mai na cakacaka ni vakosokumuni tukutuku, na Tabana ni Vosa kei nai Tovo Vakaviti sa tekivu vakacuruma tiko yani na gauna ogo nai tukutuku ena loma ni sova ni tukutuku. Na Tabana ni Vosa kei nai Tovo vaka Viti sa tekivu cakacakataka tiko ena gauna ogo nai tuvatuva levu ni duqe ni vosa vakavanua. Nai tuvatuva ogo ena vakabulabulataki na cakacaka ni kena cibitaki ka taqomaki na vosa ni vanua vakabibi na cakacaka ni veivakavulici.

Turaga na Speaker, au gadreva meu tinia na noqu cau ena nodra vosa na Paraiminisita sa bale mai Peritania, Sir Winston Churchill me vaka na levu ga ni nomu kila me baleta na veigauna

sa oti, na yawa ni nomu rai me baleta na veika se bera mai. Oqo na vuna sa dodonu me da qarauna ka cibitaka na noda vosa kei nai tovo. Nai votavota vakailavo vou oqo me vakacokotaka na Tabacakacaka i Taukei me qarava vakavinaka na nonai tavi.

HON. A. BIA.- In regards to the honourable Rinesh Sharma, he is currently editing his speech. His is trying to respond to some of the comments made by the honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers. He knew already at hand that he was going to speak last, he is now still editing some of the comments just to respond to some of the Ministers.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- He is writing his speech, tell him to hurry up.

HON. A. BIA.- I received a note just a while ago from the Secretary-General and according to the Order Paper, the honourable Rinesh is the last speaker for today.

MR. SPEAKER.- According to the list that I have, it is honourable Ratu Isikeli Tuiwailevu, honourable Rinesh Sharma and the last one would be honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau.

HON. A. BIA.- The Batting Order for today, honourable Rinesh is the last speaker. I was just notified about the change just a while ago. I received a note from the Secretary-General and I could not confirm to the change because the honourable Rinesh is listed as the last speaker of today.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- It is not an excuse, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. A. BIA.- It is in the Order Paper

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- He should be ready.

MR. SPEAKER.- I ask that honourable Ro Filipe takes the floor whilst hopefully honourable Rinesh will be the last speaker for the night.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion. The honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for the opportunity to address this august Parliament and elaborate more on the Budget allocation for the Ministry for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport. I also acknowledge the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, Professor Biman Prasad and his team and the Ministry for Finance for the hard work undertaken for the Budget outcome for 2023-2024 and for producing the best Budget ever.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear! Hear

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- At the outset I wanted to say the FijiFirst Government did not do justice to the Ministry I am in charge of and almost closed it down for not providing the necessary support needed by the Ministry to better support our rural and maritime islands. I wish to say to the Opposition that this Ministry is important because it has the key sectors of the nation - infrastructure, roads, water, et cetera.

It is only through this Government that we will improve and better develop these sectors to lessen the load on our urban infrastructure. It is only through the Coalition Government that we will better the services in the rural and maritime areas. As announced by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, the Public Utilities, Meteorology Services sectors are very important in an economy and a small island developing state like ours.

Infrastructures such as roads, bridges, ports, jetties are important in building a sustainable and resilient future. The Ministry is now allocated a significant budget of more than \$98 million with an inclusion of the transport sector. This is significant as we revive the work of the Public Works Department, strengthen our services through Water Authority of Fiji and enhance our connectivity in both land and maritime transport.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Public Utility sector or infrastructure sector consists mainly of public works, water, energy and roads in Fiji with a budget increase of more than 100 percent from the 2022-2023 financial year. This is to cater mainly for development and enhancement of Fiji's infrastructure in the rural and maritime areas.

The Department of Energy, Fiji has embarked on three ambitious targets related to the energy sector, which is to achieve 100 percent electrification rate by 2026, increase our renewable energy mix for electricity generation to 100 percent by 2036, and to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

The Government fully fathoms the important role energy plays towards economic and social development and, therefore, remains steadfast in achieving this target.

Mr. Speaker, in this financial year, there is an increase of \$12 million to \$14 million in the energy budget, mainly focusses on the implementation specifically increase to cater for Kadavu Koro Hydro and Grid Extension Projects.

The Ministry has been working closely with the Global Green Growth Institute (GGI) and other institutions such as KOICA and JICA to secure for the funding. This is to further complement the budgetary allocation for the energy sector.

This is an area totally neglected by the FijiFirst Government, despite the many opportunities, and a result of total suppression of independence in the Civil Service during their 16-year rule which was basically a two-men government. Where are they, anyway?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will continue to work in partnership with other Ministries, Departments, communities and stakeholders to lift the standards of infrastructure in the rural and maritime areas.

The Ministry cannot overemphasise the need to enhance our rural and maritime infrastructure to better our services.

A notable increase in the Budget includes the maintenance and refurbishment of public buildings, also including IT software and hardware, in order to improve monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

Mr. Speaker, as you are aware, the Ministry was also currently working on a revised National Building Code that will standardise the state of our buildings and better align towards safety, particularly for national disasters.

In addition to this work and due to the disbanding of the Construction Implementation Unit (CIU), the Ministry budget is strengthened with increased manpower to cater for the growing demands of the work, particular the upgrading of quarters and office buildings in the three Divisions. The target is to expand the rural economy.

On the CIU, let me share what one of the Audit Reports stated:

“To properly assess and understand the nature and environment in which the CIU operate, we enquired whether there is a documented mandate or intent of the Unit which could be used as a reference point during audit.”

In addition, we inquire the Unit was required to process all government agencies construction projects. However, we were not able to substantiate any documented mandate on intent of the Unit, except in the Ministry of Economy’s Strategic Plan that validates the existence of the CIU. Similarly, we are not able to substantiate any documented requirement that obliges the Unit to process all Government agencies and construction projects.

Clearly this shows that the CIU was created by Mr. Sayed-Khaiyum for control purposes, that is, in disbanding the PWD, and to control the award of contracts and we know to who. Of course, that created overnight millionaires.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also would like to share the water issues. This is one of the challenging issues we face today and the services of wastewater in its current status requires the Government to address the issues with urgency.

Failed water services is a legacy of the FijiFirst Government, despite 16 years of governance. They did not solve the issue.

The Government, in the 2023-2024 Budget, is committed to achieve a 24/7 provision of water and wastewater services, and the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) has been allocation a total budget of \$250.8 million - \$118.1 million for Operational Expenditure and \$132.7 million for Capital Expenditure. This budgeted allocation is targeted towards the upgrading of that.

WAF’s existing water and wastewater infrastructure to improve service sustainability through an efficient and safe robust water supply system.

A total of \$53.8 million is allocated for the water programme. This includes water sources and distribution projects that covers the construction and installation of three package water treatment plants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, funds are also allocated for Water Treatment Plants in Nabouwalu and other centres. The Government will continue its efforts to connecting villages and communities living outside the Central Business District.

The Water Programme Allocation also included feasibility study of new potential water sources in various locations.

Construction of new and upgrading old reservoirs in areas such as Sigatoka, Tavua, Malaqereqere and Levuka pipeline works, in Savudrodoro, maintenance and upgrading of pipelines from Sawani to Colo-i-Suva and also a dedicated 11-kilometre pipeline in the Central Division, in addition to others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, water loss through aging pipe network is a key issue of WAF. The Government has, therefore, allocated \$5.8 million to specifically address leakages or non-revenue water.

Working with ADB through its technical assistance programme, a non-revenue water specialist has been engaged to develop a performance-based contract for non-revenue water

reduction within the Suva-Nausori, Nadi-Lautoka Water Supply Systems. Further, \$7.5 million is allocated for the implementation of integrated meter management to improve meter reading accuracy.

The Wastewater Programme has an allocation of \$6.4 million to increase system performance by improving wastewater operations of WAF's Wastewater Network and Pump Stations. In addition, WAF has allocated \$4.9 million towards developing and implementing a robust asset management programme which has been the subject of the past Audit reports. So, we can also achieve a lot by using the latest and proven technology, which is why WAF is also engaging on a Digital Transformation journey and this programme has been allocated \$4.6 million.

There is also the Suva Automation Strategy which will be implemented whereby WAF plans to automate one of its daily operations which sometimes causes water supply disruptions in the Suva-Nausori corridor.

Of course, as mentioned by the Opposition, we also have the Rewa River Water Supply Scheme Project which is currently underway and due to come online towards July, October and, of course, as a responsible Government, we are committed to seeing this project through and complete it on time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has taken progressive steps to ensure that the citizens of Fiji do not face the same situation again, and we continue with our bold water plans, especially after the development of the Water Sector Strategy 2050 Plan which ensures the participation of all stakeholders and that we have clear plans and strategies in front of us as we move forward.

Transportation is the backbone of any thriving economy. It enables the efficient movement of people and goods and facilitates trade and commerce. In this regards, Sir, I address the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA).

On roads and highways, enabling the seamless movement of people, it is a critical organisation. It has been allocated a budget of more than \$300 million to cater for maintaining, planning and delivering Fiji's Road Network. With the new Board in place, we look forward to a more cost effective and manageable services provided by FRA.

The key goals of the FRA Strategy in the implementation of its 2023-2024 budget is to efficiently and sustainably provide a National Road Network Infrastructure that is affordable, safe and environment friendly.

The Government recognises the vital importance of a well-developed and efficient road network, just as the last Government.

The new FRA Board has been working closely with the Ministry in planning the establishment of the Public Works Department and its associated works in the rural and maritime areas. The two will complement each other, unlike under FijiFirst where Fiji Roads had divided the roads in Fiji in FRA and non-FRA roads, resulting in most of our rural communities, villages, institutions such as schools and public buildings, farms and others being marginalised and discriminated against, as far as road maintenance was concerned.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Totally neglected.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Focus will be centred also on the future maintenance contracts and other procurement modalities that will enable rural and local communities or contractors to successfully acquire tender awards in their localities.

Fiji is faced with the deteriorating road safety situation, which is a critical challenge. One of the key efforts has been to acquire fiscal and financial resources to restore the conditions, despite the FijiFirst Government expending the budget at the point of six months in December 2022. This has been a challenge and a direct result of vote buying by FijiFirst.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The FRA is currently undertaking its task to develop its strategic plans for the next five to ten years. Unfortunately, there was no strategic plan within FRA.

There have been also issues regarding the implementation of projects and monitoring and evaluation as such. FRA has engaged the Office of the Auditor-General to conduct an independent financial audit in the management of its finances.

A technical audit will also be conducted on the procurement and management of certain contracts that have been ongoing and awarded in the recent past. This will also be part of the restructure programme. But some in the Opposition may be asking, why are you doing this?

I refer to past Audit Reports, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and in one of the Audit Reports in terms of the road construction in Nadi from the Airport, it stated and let me read that out:

“Urban designing features and landscaping were important components of the works. The tender was awarded to the contractor for a sum of \$65.9 million. The contract agreement in the Bill of Quantities included \$5.8 million for landscaping and design. It was noted that the authority paid an additional \$623,000 for its beautification project to other contractors without calling for tender. The Authority purchased bougainvillea plants which were not initially planned to be part of the landscaping.

We maintain (this is Auditor-General) that the tenders were not called for beautification projects and obtaining retrospective approval does not validate the non-compliance.”

So, this is just one of the which was in the Audit Report but which we are also going through at the moment. For that, the original contract sum of \$65 million and the final sum ended up \$116 million, a difference of \$50.9 million. So, those are some of the challenges I wanted to share today.

The current Queen Elizabeth Drive Project, again, original contract sum of \$61.9 million. There have been claims of variations and we are looking at a final sum of \$73 million but the Board is currently scrutinising all variations to-date and, of course, looking back and conducting its own, as I have mentioned, technical and financial audit

The other issue or point raised was on the ADB Project. This was also raised in Parliament. The Authority had prepared a contract agreement regarding the Suva Arterial Roads Upgrading but ADB had stated a mis-procurement. as some amendments were made to the original clauses. Without approval, consequently ADB terminated the funding which resulted in the Authority bearing the responsibility to meeting the total cost, totalling \$30.4 million. Again, missed opportunity cost and just a few of the issues that we will need to look into.

On the Foster Road Project, Walu Bay, currently contracted sum of \$31 million, we are looking into an additional \$3 million at the moment, to read \$34 million. Mr. Speaker, Sir, those are some of the challenges faced within the Ministry as we try to move forward.

Let me address some of the issues raised by the Opposition, I note my colleague, honourable Koya, had mentioned that the people are plagued by fear. Sir, I am not sure what that statement means and one of the terms used was ethnonationalism. Again, as mentioned by the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration, this is an issue that we are emphasising to the Opposition to be careful with in how we move forward and to exercise caution.

Sir, I also note honourable Bala mentioning that it is a first-year Economics Student Budget. Please, read the title here, Professor Biman Prasad. Let me remind you, please, give respect to where it is due. I would like to thank the honourable Naisa Tuinaceva for sharing issues regarding LTA which is critical as we move forward.

On traffic congestion, the original plans were to construct two lane highways from Nausori right up to the end of Vatuwaqa Road. Unfortunately, some of these were diverted to the Queen Elizabeth Drive and, again, it is wrong priority. How many vehicles travel on Queen Elizabeth Drive in comparison to the Suva-Nausori corridor?

There has also been condemnation of PWD as duplicating, again, as I have mentioned, PWD will complement FRA and we will be looking at roads which are not currently covered.

Sir, let me end by also responding to honourable Ketan Lal. I know that we had engaged in a friendly discussion this morning to resolve but in terms of the 2013 Constitution, let me remind you that it followed the process which was different from the 1990s and 1997 Constitution.

If you read back, you will understand which process is more valid. The 1997 Constitution process is more valid, and we need to work together to follow that process again which is very, very critical. You will agree that we need to reform the electoral system.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It's a mess.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- When you look at the number of votes, nearly 80 percent of the votes is taken out by Mr. Bainimarama and Mr. Sayed-Khaiyum, so only 20 percent of the votes is sitting here.

(Laughter)

So, your argument that you represent the number of votes you are saying, is invalid. It does not hold any water. So, it is in your interest that we engage in bipartisanship ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Follow the Constitution.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- ...to review that. Then you will have a better chance to beat us in the next Election. At the moment, you have zero chance.

Honourable Niudamu, thank you for your comments. He acknowledged the *Turaga ni Koro* and *Turaga ni Yavusa* allowances that we are increasing.

In the last Parliament, we brought the motion in here five times, and it was rejected. Let me just share with you the issue. I am thankful that you wanted another increase but, unfortunately, due to the huge debt, we cannot do that, and we will need to wait until the economy recovers.

With those words, I support the Budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- I have seen that the honourable Rinesh Sharma has just walked in but I have already had discussions with the honourable Leader of the Opposition. First of all, I must apologise for the mix up - two sets of Batting Orders are here with me. So, I have decided to move you to tomorrow so you will be listed for tomorrow, together with few others who are yet to deliver their contribution to the Budget. So, I apologise for that, honourable Sharma.

As such, honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's deliberations. I thank the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of the Opposition, for bearing with the long sitting hours, but this is part of the debate on the Budget.

I want to thank you and we look forward to tomorrow's meeting and to listen to honourable Rinesh Sharma making his contribution tomorrow. At this juncture, I wish to adjourn Parliament.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.36 p.m.

SCHEDULE I

Translation of the Honourable Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts' iTaukei speech in reply to the 2023-2024 Appropriation Bill 2023 (Ref: Page 1282-1285)

HON. RATU I. TUIWAILEVU.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament. *Miau sa bula re.*

I rise to speak in support of the 2023-2024 Budget as delivered by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and I want to congratulate him and his team for formulating a Budget that is quickly gaining acceptance.

My statement today will mostly touch on language and culture, a core mandate of my Ministry. This year, the Department of Culture, Heritage and Arts was transferred to the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. The Ministry already hosts the iTaukei Institute of Language and Culture. Aligning itself with the outcome of the GCC meeting this year as endorsed by Cabinet, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts is advocating culture as a driver and enabler of sustainable development. Indeed, culture is a development issue.

The economic empowerment of the iTaukei is now the underlying economic philosophy of the iTaukei. This is intended to improve livelihood and address the poverty rate with a particular emphasis on the marginalized. In this regard, culture will play a critical role.

Vanua governance will also be strengthened. Integral to *vanua* governance is culture – revitalising and safeguarding it is vital. The scale of the issues affecting the iTaukei today raises fresh issues about language and culture. These create unprecedented challenges and opportunities. Culture is a cross-cutting issue as articulated in the 2030 Agenda and the Pacific Regional Cultural Strategy.

Mr. Speaker, the total budget for Culture and Language is \$7.2 million. This is 18.6 percent of our total budget. This is very significant increase and I again thank the honourable Professor Biman Prasad for his generosity. While countries have committed to setting aside 1-2 percent of their budget to culture, Fiji has done very well. This budget will cater for all cultural groups in Fiji.

I am really excited to be at the helm of the Ministry leadership with the able leadership of the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage & Arts. The increase will allow for the better coordination of the sector.

Cabinet endorsed Fiji's National Culture policy in May 2023. We will ensure that stakeholders are made aware of the Policy. Implementation will be woven into the work of the relevant cultural agencies and stakeholders in the next 10 years. This is to ensure that key priorities and objectives are achieved. The new budget will fund the implementation of the policy.

I am also glad to highlight the continuation of the Fiji Government's commitment to the rehabilitation work and the funding towards the UNESCO World Heritage Port Town of Levuka

which is Fiji's only UNESCO World Heritage Site. For 2023-2024 Budget, the Fiji Government has continued to show its commitment and its obligation to the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention by giving the \$1.5million to ensure that the proper completion of the Levuka Community Centre. The newly rehabilitated Levuka Community Centre World Heritage Structure once completed will be an historic and iconic center for the people of Levuka and Lomaiviti Group. It will house a museum, community center, library, children's play center and a coffee shop. This will generate economic activities in Levuka Town and will help in the education of the future generation of Levuka. In addition, I am glad that the government has also provided funding for the Preservation of Historical Monuments in the Levuka Town to help in the maintenance of the historical, authenticity and integrity of the World Heritage Site in Levuka.

The Budget will fund the continuous development of the Cultural & Creative Industry in Fiji. Fijian artists, crafters, weavers and carvers have made creative and innovative ideas for the artists using their wealth of cultural knowledge to earn their living and improve their livelihoods in their different communities. In the new financial year, the Ministry is earmarked to develop relevant strategies and plans with the relevant stakeholders to ensure the cultural & creative industry benefit the local artists and entrepreneurs in Fiji. Supporting the Cultural & Creative Industry will also bring about economic benefits to the Fijian economy as a whole.

The Ministry will continue to strengthen the development of Fiji's Cultural Statistic Framework to help the Culture, Heritage & Arts Sector consolidate its statistics from different cultural agencies and stakeholders. While it will encourage artists to be creative, we also need to ensure that the intangible cultural heritage, knowledge and skills are protected and not over-exploited by our local people, business and international markets.

In the new financial year, the Ministry will work with our Cultural Stakeholders to ensure there is a Culture & Education Strategy to help Fijian Government in promotion of social cohesion and national unity amongst the people that had called Fiji home. The strategy will also lay foundation for government to work with relevant stakeholders to ensure that culture, heritage & arts are transmitted from the older generation to the younger ones in the schools, communities and homes. The strategy will suggest ways and means to integrate ICT to ensure that it helps promote culture, heritage and different art forms to our youth and younger generations so that they are aware and be proud of their own culture and identity.

In this new Budget, it is also encouraging to see that the Fiji Government has also continued to increase the funding for the Fiji Museum to ensure that the cultural heritage artefacts are stored safely and the proper managements and operation of the Fiji Museum.

In terms of safeguarding and the management of National Heritage Sites in Fiji, the Ministry will work with relevant statutory bodies like the National Trust of Fiji to provide grants in managing our National Heritage Sites around Fiji as mandated in the National Trust of Fiji Act. I believe the Grants provided to the cultural and natural heritage institutions as such will ensure the Heritage sites in Fiji continue to be recognized and protected by the Fiji Government and also be recognized as it is also a habitat for Fiji's well known flora and fauna.

The Ministry will continue to work with the relevant stakeholders in the Art Sector to help promote our culture and arts through the work of the Fiji Arts Council. I am happy to say that the new Board has also been appointed to look into the development of the Art Sector in Fiji for this new financial year and beyond through its new developed Fiji Arts Council Strategic Plan.

I am happy to highlight today that the Coalition Government has also recognized the need to enhance the Art Sector by providing \$100,000. This is to undertake the feasibility study for the National Art Gallery to ensure that our Fijian Artists talents are showcased are properly housed at the National Art Gallery once the building is completed.

The new Budget will ensure that the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts will continue to work with relevant stakeholders and communities. This is on the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage projects to ensure our minority communities like the Rabi, Kioa, Solomon Island and Ni-Vanuatu intangible cultural heritage are also recognized and captured.

Consultation for the review of the Traditional Knowledge and Traditional Cultural Expressions Bill is funded under the Institute's budget. This is a massive work. The end result, of course, is a legislation to address the increasing exploitation and inappropriate commercialization of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions. This will be a major step forward for the iTaukei because discussions on this has been on-going for some time.

The legislation will create a registry where data gathered from the cultural mapping will be deposited. The Institute is currently cleaning the data for uploading into the traditional knowledge and expression of culture database.

The Institute is also putting together Fiji's National Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Language. The action plan is expected to drive the revival and safeguarding of indigenous language foremost through teaching and learning.

Mr Speaker, to conclude, I am reminded of the words of the late Sir Winston Churchill and I quote: "the farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see". This is the essence of the work we do with language and culture and again, I am grateful that we have been well resourced to deliver the relevant programmes.