

[VERBATIM REPORT]

MEETING OF THE S/C ON JUSTICE, LAW & HUMAN RIGHTS

ANNUAL REPORT

Ministry of Civil Service 2016-2019 Annual Report

INSTITUTION: Ministry of Civil Service
VENUE: Big Committee Room (East Wing)
DATE: Tuesday, 27th June, 2023

VERBATIM REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE, LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS HELD AT THE BIG COMMITTEE ROOM (EAST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, ON TUESDAY, 27TH JUNE, 2023, AT 3.19 P.M.

Interviewee/Submittee: Ministry of Civil Service

In Attendance:

1. Mr. Parmesh Chand - Permanent Secretary
 2. Ms. Pranita Devi - Business Manager
 3. Ms. Bernadette Bainimarama - Director Policy
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MR. CHAIRMAN.- The Permanent Secretary for Civil Service and staff, on behalf of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights, I welcome you this afternoon to this meeting.

Firstly, we apologize on the short correspondence with regards to your attendance, however, we are grateful that you are here this afternoon.

(Introduction of Committee Members)

Honourable Qereqeretabua and honourable Vanawalu are not present with us today.

On that note, honourable Members and Officials from the Ministry of Civil Service, just be mindful that you have your mobile phone on silent as we are in a closed meeting.

I will give the floor to you, Permanent Secretary, if you wish to make an opening statement and then we will continue from there. Before you proceed, if you can just introduce yourselves, please.

MR. P. CHAND.- Honourable Members, *bula vinaka*. I am pleased to be here this afternoon for the invitation of the Committee. The members of my team are Ms. Bernadette Bainimarama who looks after Policy and to her left is Ms. Pranit Devi who looks after Business Services in the Ministry.

We responded to the call by the Committee to come and have interactions with you this afternoon. I, obviously, brought in my two members to assist me because I took over the role from January this year so there may be issues preceding my tenure, although I was in the former Public Service Commission until 2015. Historically, I would have some information but, obviously, some of the recent developments in the Ministry would be covered by my colleagues.

As you know, the 2014 Constitution devolved powers directly to Permanent Secretaries and by that virtue, came into a bit more specific role of the Public Service Commission. That specific role extended only to appointment of Permanent Secretaries, their management of their affairs and by that nature also extending to removal of Permanent Secretaries. The PSC became a Constitutional Office appointed by His Excellency the President on advice of the Constitutional Offices Commission by the advisory of the Chair of the Commission.

Prior to that, the PSC was having constitutional responsibility as well, but the 2014 Constitution defined it more categorically as to what those powers were before the PSC was, kind of, a central body or a HR body covering the whole of the Public Service, including the engagement or employment of Permanent Secretaries. The powers to manage the affairs of Ministries were

delegated to Permanent Secretaries through delegation of powers by regulations by the Public Service Commission. But, in this instance, the 2014 Constitution itself devolved the powers directly to Permanent Secretaries and the Commission. Before, the Commission was holding all those powers and then it was devolved to Permanent Secretaries on a limited extent, and then other powers still rested with the Commission.

The Ministry of Civil Service for which I am the Permanent Secretary, came into being later on, as an offshoot of the dissolving of the former Public Service Commission Secretariat and there became a need to have a ministry to come and provide some guidelines or help with the whole of Government implementation of human resource matters based on issuance of policy and guidelines. Although the powers rest with the Permanent Secretary, the guidelines can be issued by the Commission in the Ministry. Those are policy guidelines.

I think I will stop there and would be happy to interact as the issues of interest get raised by Members of the Committee.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you, Permanent Secretary. Just be mindful, Officials from the Civil Service, that we are touching on your Annual Reports from 2016 to 2019.

Thank you very much, honourable Members, the floor is open for questions.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Through you, thank you very much Permanent Secretary and members of the Ministry, for being here today.

Just in short, one of the main reasons why we had asked for you to attend today is just moving forward. As you understand, these particular Reports taken by us back into Parliament and it contains certain recommendations, et cetera. What we wanted to do was to be aware of the current stand with respect to policy, reform, recruitment, et cetera, so that the recommendations that we make out of these Reports are not defunct. It needs to be aligned to what the policy is today and there are certain things that may need to be answered. So, in short, that is what it really is and it is not going to be a long two-hours question session, just some directions that we need to assist us in our decision-making with respect to recommendations that we make to Parliament.

On the basis of what we have before us and I think we all know this, because of the change in Government, there are obviously things that will change with respect to policy and certain things that had happened and will happen. We wanted to get some guidance from you.

If I could just pick one particular portion and I am talking about the 2017-2018 Report, in terms of the organisational structure that currently exists within the Ministry of Civil Service, has there been or will there be a drastic change in terms of that particular organisational structure that currently exists in your report of 2018?

MR. P. CHAND.- Thank you, honourable Member. The running of the Ministry continues normally, there has been no structural changes in the Ministry. The only change which has happened is that the Events Division has become redundant, so we are not involved in organising events. There was an Events Division and that person who was organizing events and the staff associated with that are now coordinating training. They are in charge of training. Other than that, there has been no structural changes in the structure of the Ministry.

As we go along, depending on the outcomes of the upcoming Budget, there may be some changes, largely brought in the area of monitoring establishment for the Service. Why I am saying

that is that, the establishment for each Ministry gets determined by the Permanent Secretary based on the needs of that Ministry and, obviously, the budget sanctioned.

What we have seen from the Ministry of Civil Service is that there is a need to monitor how the utilisation of that establishment *per se* is happening because vacancies do eventuate and some vacancies are very aged vacancies and there could be, across the whole of Government, a view taken whether those vacancies could be better redeployed into other priority areas.

Having established a vacancy or a position in the Ministry and there has arisen a vacancy which, for example, has not been filled from six to nine months, it raises a question whether that position is needed. So, there is a need for some monitoring right throughout the Civil Service to determine what type of space exists in that area. That would be one of the things which is likely to emanate after the Budget because we are in a phase of more fiscal consolidation, meaning containment of operating expenditure.

One of the big items in operating expenditure is personal emoluments. One of the ways the personal emoluments, in the absence of redundancies, can be contained is through better monitoring, managing from within and through things like natural attrition, et cetera. There arises a need for a bit more monitoring.

The other one area where there will be some changes is in the area of human resource training and capacity building because the two items which have come into being as a result of new government policies - the extension of retirement age to 60 and the removal of contracts for all those officers below Permanent Secretaries, would necessitate a bit more capacity building for career path development, leading up to the year of 60 years. That means there will be a lot more focus within to see how best we look at officers from within for promotion, given there will be lesser turnover of staff as to what we expected. Obviously, things have changed a lot in the last few months with a lot more turnover of staff due to out migration but that need for human resource capacity building and training remains and probably more pertinent now than before.

There will be a lot more emphasis on centralised training on thematic areas in the Civil Service including knowledge about General Orders, dos and don'ts of public service, finance for non-finance managers, human resources succession planning, governance, accountability, et cetera. So, those would be the changes which will come about but not, in any way, requiring a major restructuring.

I apologise, I have been just reminded that the area of office accommodation and government housing has come back to the Ministry of Civil Service from the Ministry of Finance. That Unit shifts lock, stock and barrel into the Ministry of Civil Service with the exception of the Construction Implementation Unit aspects. That item would be devolved to different Ministries to do their own project monitoring and oversight of projects in their respective Ministries.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- *Vinaka*, PS, I just have one question. Just looking through the Annual Reports and there is a lot going on about Open Merit Recruitment System (OMRS). With the current structure as alluded to by honourable Koya - new government comes in with new changes, what is the current status, are we changing it or taking away the OMRS?

MR. P. CHAND.- Mr. Chairman, the Open Merit Recruitment System which is OMRS in short with the contractual nature and the shorter span of time for public servants in public service with the retirement age being 55 years and three-year contracts, there was a necessity, obviously, to open up the Civil Service for outside recruitment, so OMRS was more pertinent.

Having said that, there are a number of good elements in OMRS, particularly the manner in which interviews are conducted, the recruitment takes place and the manner in which the appeals get made and heard. Those are good aspects of OMRS.

We will undertake a review of OMRS post-Budget to see how best it can respond to major policy changes which have taken place, particularly the permanent nature of employment of public servants and the slightly longer lifespan by way of retirement age having being shifted to 60 years.

The quest to see career path development for public officers from within, viz-a-viz what OMRS stood for, OMRS was largely recruiting the best and brightest and based on merit for anyone, not only the public servants, will have to balance the two.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Permanent Secretary, just a follow-on question from what you spoke about, with respect to the longevity now that has been given to civil servants with respect to lifetime contracts, et cetera, that you just spoke about and the increase in retirement age, how is it that you are actually going to deal with performance assessment in comparison to the appraisals and performance appraisals that were being done when it was recruitment under the OMRS and was on a contractual basis? Is that going to change or is there are some other phenomena that you have thought of in terms of performance appraisal of civil servants?

The reason is because in this day and age, obviously, we need to have a very efficient Civil Service, especially also in light of the digital technology that is at hand. It needs to be something that we would have to think about and have a discussion on what kind of recommendations are we making to Parliament.

MR. P. CHAND.- I think that is a good question. Since the policy decision to remove contracts, it was removed with immediate effect. However, the template involving the recruitment or appointment was left open. We had a lot of exchanges with the Office of the Solicitor General and now finally we have come up with a template which has mirrored much of what was in the contract into an appointment letter. Much of the elements which were in the contractual appointment will be carried into the permanent appointment letter.

Having said that, the provisions pertaining to termination on grounds of performance would remain exactly the same as what is in the contractual appointment. So, the appointment letter builds on the contractual appointment letter and the solid parts of it have been carried on into the permanent appointment.

The provisions remain for performance-oriented contracts, meaning for Permanent Secretaries to monitor the performance of their subordinates through KPIs and provisions for downgrade or disciplining of staff for reasons of performance remain as per what it was in the fixed term contracts.

That is basically it, there is a lot more being put in the contracts of Permanent Secretaries to be able to get the best out of their staff, so there are changes happening in the contracts of Permanent Secretaries in terms of what extra KPIs will go into that because the nature of appointment now, obviously, is permanent for those staff but there is a need to be more focused on performance monitoring of individual staff.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.-Through you, Mr. Chairman, I have a question on the policy now - removing the contractual system. You have indicated earlier that we are looking into trying to contain our expenditure. How is that going to increase personal emoluments in other Ministries,

given that we are going to increase that retirement age from 55 years to 60 years. We are retaining more people, so there will be more expenses in terms of personal emoluments. How are we striking a balance in that?

MR. P. CHAND.- The containment would be largely through retaining the size of establishment because when the provisioning of budget gets done, it obviously is based on the establishment. Obviously, in the 2023-2024 Budget guidelines, the Ministries were given guidelines to start on zero gross, meaning wherever we can manage from within, we manage, except in the essential areas.

Increasing the age to 60 years really does not increase the size of establishment. It is just that there will be lesser number of people at base level for recruitment initially for the first five years because the gestation period will be five years to settle all these down. So, that will not increase, in any way, the personal emoluments. How are containing the operating expenditure would be accommodation of obviously looking at personal emoluments, growth in personal emoluments, growth in office space, growth in other ancillary expenses like vehicles, overtime, et cetera. So, there will be a lot more monitoring of all that rather than fiddling around with the size of the establishment. The establishment sizes are based on what the figures were and I think all that will continue into 2023 to 2024.

There has been a number of Ministries merged into one and at the same time, some Ministries have been created in the process. At the end of the day, we are trying to see and what we have done is to manage from within through redeployment into new Ministries and the ones that have been merged to allow them to have shared services, like Fisheries and Forests - two different Ministries, two areas of accounts, records keeping and HR, obviously, we are encouraging them to assimilate the two into one for one Ministry. It has not happened to the fullest, but wherever there is an opportunity, they are working on assimilating the two because there will be no need to keep two separate establishments for those two different Ministries.

On the other hand, there is new Ministries like Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs created, so what we were anticipating was to see the redeployment of these merged activities into Multi-Ethnic Affairs. Some have already happened but, obviously, a lot more will happen through the budget.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- What about the new recruits and graduates, the effects of the increase of the retirement age, will that affect the new intakes?

MR. P. CHAND.- Mr. Chairman, I think one of the things is that, a lot of things have become a bit more convoluted because of high turnover due to out migration. We see a lot more vacancies arising at the moment, both at upper ranks and at lower levels. So, it is not attributed in any way to those structural changes, but it is largely due to people leaving the Service to migrate overseas. So, there is a lot of vacancies arising so recruitment of graduates will continue.

As I have mentioned, I do not think there will be growth in establishment. There will be, however, growth in establishment for essential areas like nursing and teachers, but not in common cadre area.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Do you engage in, especially now, knowing full well that there is quite a substantial demand of younger generation that is migrating and as you have said, you will lose quite a few of the good ones, is there some active recruitment drives, et cetera, that will try and get the best and the brightest out of the universities, et cetera, to ensure that we have that efficient Civil Service? Is that actually happening or will happen in some shape or form?

MR. P. CHAND.- In fact, that is a very valid point - it is a big worry to every Ministry and every Permanent Secretary. What we are falling back now on is the National Employment Centre and the registration of graduates in that pool, to the extent that there is more emphasis to take on volunteers and keep them on hold or in a pool and try and slot them in vacancies in Ministries.

The earlier programme of Government putting in some money and then Ministries putting in their own contribution to engage a volunteer, has now quite picked up in momentum. There are a lot more people being taken in, in anticipation that there will be more vacancies created. Obviously, once you have set your foot in the door, you have a better chance of landing one of those jobs which have become just vacant by someone migrating. We find that one very handy.

We are encouraging Ministries to start their own graduate recruitment programme to see how they have factored that in the budget for 2023-2024. There has even been talks of increasing the retirement age for nurses and doctors beyond 60 years to 65 years, to see how best we can bridge this exodus of people in skilled areas.

You are right, we have to do a lot more to keep people ready to be recruited because you cannot help it, migration will continue. It is a phenomena which probably is a catch up from COVID-19 but, obviously, there is a lot more policies in Australia and New Zealand which have opened up, necessitating a lot more work migration.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Along the same line, is there a movement to invigorate or re-invigorate those, especially in light of the fact that retirement age has gone up and now you have lifetime contracts, so there is no fallout and there is no room to move for those who are looking at moving up from one scale to another to another and to another? Is there an effort being put in with respect to those who are there, to try and keep them as much possible or invigorate them and make them understand that, yes, eventually you will get up to Director level or whatever it is for them at the end of the day that they are trying to do, especially, in light of the fact that the retirement age has been increased? The reason is because there is not going to be a fallout - those who are there are there and if they are not moving, you are literally sitting in a space where they could be sitting as a more senior person? How do you deal with that, PS? I mean, not just you, it is from all the other Ministries at the end of the day.

MR. P. CHAND.- Please, feel free to contribute, but let me start on that. There is now, obviously, innovative thinking is going on in that area, for example, for nurses, there is now a focus to see there can be other cadre of nurses created at lower ranks to quickly promote them to be a nurse, including Nursing Aides, Assistant Nurses, et cetera. For that area, there is a thinking on that term and, obviously, 2023 -2024 Budget will address some of that.

We, in our Permanent Secretaries Forum, have now started talking about these issues to see how we can identify those gaps and be able to remove some of the impediments for accelerated promotion for staff. A lot more focus on career path prospects would help in that area but, essentially, time has caught up and we have not been able to do enough to be able to prepare ourselves for that exodus at the moment.

MS. B. BAINIMARAMA.- We have been working with some development partners so when we are looking at establishment support and establishment monitoring, it is a two-pronged approach. We are not only looking at monitoring establishments of Ministries as they are but also helping them build capacity in succession planning and strategic HR moving forward, so that they are able to look at exactly what we are talking about - building career or career succession planning, career development, looking at some of our capabilities that we need within the Civil Service. So there is

a whole lot of work that needs to go into skills development and skills identification, and a big part of that is strategic planning.

As PS had mentioned earlier, while we are looking at the current establishment monitoring, another part we are focusing on is strengthening strategic planning in the Civil Service which is not a small feat. There is quite a lot involved because there is a lot of forward thinking and projecting that we need to do. But, we have been working with development partners and currently having conversations about how they can support us in building that in the Service.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I am not sure if this is a question or a thought, PS, but in light of the fact with respect to TELS, et cetera, one of the chitchat that is going on about bonding, et cetera, is that some area that the Civil Service can actually look at and say, “Look, these people were bonded and then some of them are gems, really”. Is there something on your table to think about in terms of those who will end up being bonded because they are not going to have to repay their TELS, who could have very, very good units.

MS. B. BAINIMARAMA.- Under the succession planning, we still do bonding in the Service. The criteria and skills area around which we did the bonding had depleted a little bit over the years because we only looked at scarce skills areas because it was as it is. It is paid service while you were away studying, so paid study leave. However, I think the idea is that we are going to extend some of the areas around capacity building and through that do more and more bonding.

As I had mentioned earlier, identifying some of our very serious areas are in trade, law and some of our specific legal areas and looking for development partners to support those areas and at the same time, bonding those people to stay. Now, that we have permanent tenure, there is no longer an issue of managing the contract and trying to extend so that is one area that we have looked at. We still do bond.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I am trying to see if there are some avenues for those who are going to be bonded in any event because the actual paying back of the loan is no longer applicable. A suggestion is that, it will be a bond that you cannot leave until you have done x amount of years in Fiji, et cetera. So, that is an area for recruitment for PSC, where you could pick up some little gems instead of them migrating overseas, we would know whether we have them for five years or ten years. So, from a recruitment perspective, would that be an area you would look at?

MR. P. CHAND.- That is a valid suggestion because really, a number of firms, largely accounting firms, go out and pitch themselves to graduating students at universities to be able to recruit in advance of their graduation. I do not see any problem in the Civil Service doing the same, based on even a well-developed graduate training programme, paying emphasis on those bonded students and yet, still getting their best and brightest out of those graduates. So, we should be able to develop a policy along those lines to do that.

The other area, obviously, would be worth looking at is removing some of the impediments to make a life in the Civil Service more attractive. Obviously, for example, releasing of staff on leave without pay. What does it cost? It does not cost anyone anything to grant leave without pay. Anyone wanting to go to check things out or to be able to go and do some studies. Obviously, if they still have a job back home, they will be trying to come back to that job, having initially taken steps to migrate and if things do not work out for them in those countries. So, I think we should be open about that. Perhaps, leave without pay for a few months to see whether you are happy living overseas or you still want to come back to your job and continue your career, it will not cost anyone. We accept that we might have to keep the job open for that person for a few more months.

There are two options, the other option is very restrictive in the Civil Service to get engaged in other business activities. It is discouraged. You should not be running your sideline taxi business or for that matter, going into other business to sustain your livelihood other than solely being a public servant. We probably will have to look at that as well to see whether we can be more flexibility to allow public servants to do outside work if they have to or if they want to, as far as it does not conflict their main core area of work and as far as it does not compromise their responsibility as a civil servant.

We need to be open about it and, obviously, those are policies which we will look at. I know in smaller countries, such as Tuvalu, people work in a government job and then go back to their villages and do their own things and come back to the office and work again because that is the limited pool of skills they have. So, we might have to do that.

The increase emphasis on training as Bernadette highlighted, will help to bridge that gap and then even cross-fertilization with private sector to see whether we can have secondments from private sector into government and vice-versa into private sector from public service to make jobs more attractive for public servants. So, it will be a whole lot more opening up of Civil Service, given the situation we are facing in terms of loss of skills.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Just on the other side of it, from a Permanent Secretary's perspective, is there a policy change with respect to the appraisals, et cetera, of Permanent Secretaries going into the future? Is there some kind of a gamechanger happening with respect to PSs and their appraisals?

MR. P. CHAND.- We have engaged an expert to develop a bit more robust performance appraisal system for Permanent Secretaries, including this whole area of collegiality and cohesiveness to address some of the cross cutting issues. The devolution of authority and powers had led to much of silo-type operations amongst the Permanent Secretaries. They were largely concentrating on their own Ministries and own staff.

The cross fertilization of transfers via transfers and looking at each other's needs and redeployment into different Ministries was not that forthcoming in the structure which we had. So, now, through the Commission, we will be looking at how best there will be a bit more cohesion to allow for implementation of policies and measures and staff improvements across the Civil Service and that will filter into performance appraisal as well. For example, we now have formed a number of sub-committees of Permanent Secretaries to look at cross cutting issues such as wastage - our cutting down wastage, cutting out red tape amongst the Civil Service and Ministries, how to incorporate better climate change in the work of whole of Government and to see how best all that can be moved on collegiality basis rather than saying, "Oh, this is his area. Do not touch my area. I will handle it as I see it fit".

So, we are trying to enforce all those to be able to see how the Permanent Secretaries are responding to the Civil Service needs and how best they can respond to it through collaboration, be it through shared resources or more consultations, or be it looking at streamlining operations to cut down wastage or be it trying to yield more savings in certain areas, so all those will filter into the Performance Appraisal.

The previous Performance Assessment was largely compliance-oriented, meaning how best you are able to comply in reporting and getting Annual Reports done, in following the financial instructions and following Management Guidelines, et cetera. There was very little work or little appraisal focussing on the whole of Government issues. Permanent Secretaries as leaders should be able to lead by cutting the barriers right across the Civil Service. To address your question, yes, Sir, it will be a bit more of the system.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, PS. Mr. Chairman, I just have two more questions.

Just from the whole of Government digitisation perspective, obviously, there will be continuity with respect to getting the whole of Government digitised. Does that mean effectively that we will probably lose some at the bottom end of the scale once the digitisation is complete, so we are going to have a bit of a lesser number in the Civil Service?

MR. P. CHAND.- Well, digitisation, their primary focus largely would be able to be able to deliver the services smarter, quicker and with the least of disruptions in costs and that will require revamping in areas which will be looking after inputting of data, processing of that data, quality control and oversight of all that use of digital services.

There will be some beefing up of staff in certain areas and, obviously, things like manual filing and records keeping will be affected but at the same time there will be beefing in areas such as quality control, data inputs, data processing and areas associated with digitisation.

Obviously, we will have to launch a retraining programme to help the fallouts from digitisation to see how best they can be used in areas associated with digitisation. We, obviously, at the moment as at a crossroads - the digitisation has come to a kind of a standstill because there have been changes in those people who are working in the background, there has been loss of skills, so there is a Cabinet endorsed or approved review been undertaken on the whole exercise and where we are lacking to take this to the next step rather than pumping more money in it.

A lot of digitation will be downstream to help those agencies involved in business processes or business approvals and much of that are in statutory and departments which are not clearly Civil Servants. But in the Service, I mean, there is a lot of things already happening through digitisation delivery like online payment of Social Welfare benefits. There is already lesser number of people required to process those payments.

We are, at the moment, doing a stocktake to see where this process is, where would the fallouts be in terms of staffing and where there would be a need to revamp in terms of extra resources.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- You have talked about building capacity within the Ministry and across other Ministries. In terms of ensuring that we continue to cultivate this culture of excellence in our civil servants, especially in terms of service delivery to the people because they serve the people of Fiji, how are we going to ensure that we continue that, given now that we reviewing that and we are giving them permanent contract and no more three years contract? So, there will be a culture that now, they have permanent employment. Sometimes the indication from civil servants at Divisional level are more slow and there is nothing to push them.

MR. P. CHAND.- Bernadette will respond to that, if you do not mind, because she is running a programme centred on Service Excellence and Customer Services Improvements.

MS. B. BAINIMARAMA.- We have a Customer Service Guideline that was approved last year. That is aimed at first understanding the baseline of where everyone's customer service level is across the Civil Service so looking at different agencies. It was built to, sort of, end up having a mystery shop element to it and this is what we are doing now which is having volunteers go into different Ministries and actually rate the customer service that is happening there. So, that is happening on the ground.

However, as you have mentioned on creating a culture of excellence, there is still survey to be done - that middle ground is there, we also do reporting and it is linked to Permanent Secretaries' Performance Assessments, so there is sort of an impetus there for PSs to actually get on board and push customer service in the Civil Service in their own Ministries and Departments.

That is an ongoing programme and those reports are still ongoing. I think part of that is kind of keeping the Civil Servants on their toes. Apart from that, there are nine different criteria that we are looking at - ensuring that we have proactive customer service, Information Centres where we have coordinating points in each Division to say, "If I need information from the Ministry of Forests, I can go to this point and get any sort of information there." That is the baseline programme that is happening now. We do a lot of training, so I think since the programme has come out, I think we have trained almost 2,000 Civil Servants, if I am correct. So, that is just frontline customer service skills which is often lacking.

Apart from that, we have the Customer Call Centre which is 157 which is a Toll Free Complaint Centre. So, these are all the different mechanisms - 157 Call Centre we have Customer Complaints Mechanisms, Online Complaints Mechanism in place so these are all operational things that are, sort of, providing the data and information for us to identify key areas where we need to improve customer services in the Civil Service.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- May be last question, I am not sure if you are to answer this and is a Budget question, but on 2017-2018 Annual Report, I think the total Ministry Budget was about \$69 million of which \$18 million was not used, is that correct? Would there have been an underlying reason for that particular large amount not been used? The allocation was \$69.3 million, out of which \$50.9 million or 73 percent was actually utilised but the rest was not, so you had remaining about \$18 million, was there an underlining reason for that?

MS. B. BAINIMARAMA.- Sir, in 2017-2018, the Ministry of Civil Service was responsible for the payment of doctors and there was an underspending there because there were so many vacancies.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- So, that would have been a major part?

MS. B. BAINIMARAMA.- That would have been a major issue there. While we had 968 vacancies, only 683 doctors were employed. So, that would have been the reason why a lot of that would have been underspent.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- The issue of doctors being paid has gone back to the Ministry Health now, am I right?

MS. B. BAINIMARAMA.- Yes.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- We just had a quick meeting with Investment Fiji and one of the issues that comes up and this is a continuous one, I think it created a lot of fantastic investment destination but they find huge problems in projects that are need to be implemented and because of the delays in Civil Service delivery, it could cause up to six months to a year to get things done. It is certainly something that is worrying, and it always has been worrying, I suppose. Is there a concerted effort to get all of these information from institutions like Investment Fiji because they are an investment promotion agency which would have first-hand information in terms of which Ministries need to really up their game and how we actually deal with it. It is great if we are selling the destination but

if we do not deliver, investors just run. So, is there a concerted effort to gain all of these in the near future?

MR. P. CHAND.- One of those Permanent Secretaries Sub-Committees is the Sub-Committee on Investment Facilitation. So, chaired by PS Commerce, he has also asked for several other Permanent Secretaries to join his Committee, including PS for Local Government because National Fire Authority is an obstacle to permits, as well as Ministry of Employment on OHS issues. So, he has started meetings of this Sub-Committee and, obviously, there is another cabinet level sub-committee on investment. But at least at operational level in terms of Permanent Secretaries, we are now increasingly talking about this through our own Permanent Secretaries Forum and this Sub-committee will report to the forum, then to the Commission itself. There will be assessment measures factored into Permanent Secretaries' contract on how you have removed some of those impediments to investment.

So, come to the end of the year when some Permanent Secretaries get assessed, it will clearly highlight cutting down, say processing time in National Fire Authority from six weeks to two weeks or whatever. So, those are things which will have to be enforced through performance measures. As you know, having been Minister responsible for investment before, honourable Member, and I was also involved in investment before, we talked about it every time but it does not happen. It happens, then it fizzles out again. We keep sliding back. We come back in ease of doing business then we go back again, so it is always a hard slog and I think the more we do, the better it is on that.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- My last question, PS, in light of COVID and what COVID did to us and the Civil Service for that matter, any effort going on to make sure that we have measures in place in case something like that ever happens, like a Plan B? I am just speaking very broadly. I mean, it has necessitated us to do many things very differently. So, from our perspective, "Alright, tomorrow we could be hit by something else". We are attuned to national disasters, we deal with it very quickly but this was something out of the blue.

From an economy perspective, we need to continue to run. I mean, if we see that it really puts a stop to the whole country but because the civil servants would continue to work and continue to be paid, they formed a very large part of an economy continuity. So, is there are some kind of an emergency plan that is going to be drawn up with respect to our Civil Servants?

MR. P. CHAND.- Honourable Member, we do talk about this in the Permanent Secretaries Forum but lately, the Permanent Secretary for Health briefed us on the resurgence of infections and he did hint to the fact that the Committee be revitalised again to step up preventative work. So, the infrastructure exists, the institutional mechanisms do exist, we just have to put our framework on it and then be able to keep it out there on folders in terms of contacts, names and database to be able to reactivate the mechanisms at short notices.

Yes, Sir, a very valid point and we should be able to focus a bit more to institutionalise this kind of setup and be able to use it as a body which can be redeployed at very short notice as it happens with DISMAC and other agencies. I will raise this in our next meeting of the PS's Forum.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you very much, honourable Members, and thank you very much Permanent Secretary and the Team from the Ministry of Civil Service.

(Vote of Thanks by Mr. Chairman)

The Committee adjourned at 4.29 p.m.