

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 14TH MARCH, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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THURSDAY, 14TH MARCH, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.44 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All honourable Members were present.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 13th March, 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting and all those joining us in the gallery and those watching the proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for taking interest in the proceedings of your Parliament.

Parliament – ICT Upgrade of Conferencing System

For the information of all honourable Members, there are only a few works left to complete the overall ICT upgrade of the conferencing system in our Chambers. I have been advised that these will be completed after this sitting and will be fully functioning at the next April sitting. These includes the interpretation (captioning) and broadcasting of the vernacular (translation). You may notice that you are not provided with any listening devices since of this fact that there is no final connection. It had just arrived after being bought from a New Zealand firm and that should be ready as I have stated in the next sitting.

Translations – Hon. I. Vasu and Hon I. Tuiwailevu

With that effect, I have also received notification from the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts and the honourable Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs that they will deliver their responses in the vernacular. I can confirm that I have also received the English translations of their responses, and these will be included in the *Daily Hansard* for today. Whatever has been said in this Parliament, you will find after a few seconds being livestreamed in the television, whether it is said in the vernacular, both *iTaukei* and *Hindi*, or is said in English. That is what you will see on our television.

Appointment of Opposition Whip

Honourable Members, I have received and acknowledged official communication from the Office of the Leader of the Opposition, informing that the new Opposition Whip is honourable Viliame Naupoto. I congratulate you, honourable Naupoto, and I also thank the outgoing Opposition Whip, honourable Alvick Maharaj. He has been holding that position for a long time. He came in fresh, very young and even unmarried, but his hairstyle has changed a lot and very quickly after being married.

**RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE
ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI**

HON.V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Point of Order!

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes.

HON.V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to raise a Point of Order.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Minister. There is a Point of Order being raised.

HON.V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, under Standing Order 74(1)(a) and Standing Order 80, I wish to raise a Point of Order against honourable Ketan Lal. Despite my personal explanation here on a question that he raised, he continued to....

MR. SPEAKER.- Can I have a look first, honourable Minister?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Thank you, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, you may continue, honourable Minister.

HON.V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Ketan Lal, despite my full explanation here in answering his question, continued to post on *Facebook* the issue that had already been addressed in Parliament and I would ask him to refrain or to pull it down.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, whatever you say in Parliament can be addressed under Standing Orders, but if you go to the social media, that is beyond my reach. But I certainly would like to ask honourable Ketan Lal, for the sake of ensuring that we maintain the dignity of the Parliament.

Honourable Ketan Lal, I am talking, for the sake of preserving the dignity of Parliament, I ask that in your own good time, please, ensure that whatever is being stated in the social media should not paint that picture of you continuing your diatribe outside of Parliament when full explanations have been given. I am not here to defend the honourable Minister, but his dad, he has also served his time well for Fiji in undertaking duties bestowed to him by the honourable Prime Minister now, and we even served time together. So, that is just one of the things that affects us one way or another since we come from the islands.

His sons have represented the country and I was his running mate in the 1999 General Elections. That, in a nutshell, is just a short explanation of this late great parliamentarian and gentleman. He is a huge man, honourable Member, you can see it by the built of his sons; not this one here. This one grew up in the Raiwai and Raiwaqa area, but his other sons are huge people and they played for the national team as well. I hope you will take that into account, honourable Ketan

Lal, without depriving you of your right to the social media, et cetera. I think we shall leave it at that, honourable Minister.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

**RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE
ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI**

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU.- *Ni sa tiko saka na Turaga Na Sipika, Turaga na Paraiminisita, ni tiko na i Vukevuke ni Paraiminisita, kemudou na Minisita, ni tiko na i Liuliu ni To ni Veisaqa kei kemuni na Lewe ni Bose Lawa; au gadreva me'u dolea na nodra vosa na Turaga na Peresitedi ena dola ni Bose ni 2024. Au dau cibitaka ni'u rogoca na nodra vosa ni veivakabulataki na Turaga na Peresitedi ka ra dau vosataka tu ga na nodra vosa ni vanua – miau sa bula re.*

Au doka, sega walega ena vuku ni nodra i tutu vakaturaga na Tui Macuata, ia, era matanataka na yavu ni Siga ni Vosa ni Vanua e Vuravura ka vakayacori ena i ka 21 ni Veverueri, 2024, ka qarava na Tabacakacaka i Taukei kei na veitabana veiwekani vakacakacacaka vata. Na kena marautaki na siga ogo e vakabibitaka na noda vosa, noda vosa ni vanua, vosa vaka-Rotuma kei na vosa tale eso me vaka na:

- *Kena vakatakilai ena vanua e sega ni kilai kina e vuqa sara ka sa vakavotui mai kina;*
- *Qaravi e dua nai walewale me maroroya ka vakadewataka na vuku vakavanua kei na i tovo ena sala me tudei kina;*
- *Me sala ni veitalanoa;*
- *Me sala ni kena tutaki na duavata kei ira na veimata tamata e Viti;*
- *Tokoni na vuli, tarai cake kina na veivakatorocaketaki rai yawa;kei na*
- *Sala ni kena susugi na veidokai na lewenivanua kei na veika bula.*

Ena i ulutaga vata ga oya, e vakarautaka tale tikoga na Tabacakacaka iTaukei, Tovo kei na Yau Mareqeti e dua na i tuvatuva levu ni Matanitu, oya na 'Duqele ni Vosa ni Vanua e Vuravura' ena 2022-2032. Sa vakadeitaka na Matabose Levu kei Vuravura ni kena i naki oya me ra laurai vakaituvatuva na veivanua sa luluqa tiko kina na vosa ni vanua, ka ra cakacaka vata na veitabana veiwekani ena kena maroroi, taqomaki ka vakabulabulataki - e tauri mai na i tuvatuva me qarava na Matabose Levu kei Vuravura.

Na i tuvatuva ni Duqele ni Vosa ni Vanua e Vuravura e yavutaki ena tolu na i ulutaga:

1. *Bulataka na noda Vosa ni Vanua;*
2. *Tarovi na yali ni noda Vosa ni Vanua; kei na*
3. *Vakadewataki ni noda Vosa ni Vanua, ogo e taurivaki mai ena vakasama e koto ena i vola na 'Three Legged Stool' me baleta na Gone Turaga Talai sa Bale, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna.*

E vakavotui na i tuvatuva ni Matanitu me vaka era veitokoni mai kina e lewe levu na lewenivanua.

Turaga Na Sipika, sa dua na cavuisausau levu ena kena vakadonui na National Cultural Policy e Viti. Ena nodra mala ni vosa na Turaga na Peresitedi, era vakaraitaka ni bibi duadua na domodra na lewenivanua, ni sa rawa ni vakataucokotaka na noda toso kei na tiko sautu ena noda vanua. Na tikina kece ogo sa kovuti tu ena National Cultural Policy ka cakacakataka tiko na Tabacakacaka iTaukei kei na veika me qaravi ena veitaba gauna sa tu e matada.

Turaga na Sipika, e tokona saka na Tabacakacaka iTaukei na i walewale sa taurivaki tiko ena Tabana ni Lavo ni noda Matanitu ena vuku ni kena vakarautaki na i Tuvatuva ni Veivakatorocaketaki se na National Development Plan.

Na vakavotui ni noda i tovo kei na i yau mareqeti e dua na sala ni tubu ena noda bula raraba, ena bula vakailavo ni Matanitu, ka rawa talega ni rawati kina na nodra tiko vinaka na noda lewenivanua. Ena i tuvatuva sa koto, esa vakarautaka e dua na vanua vei ira na tabana era qarava tiko na i tovo mera cakacaka vata ka ra vakadeitaki talega na kedra i sau vakailavo me i vurevure ni bula ena nodra dui matavuvale.

Turaga na Sipika, na cakacaka vakagumatua e dua saka na tiki bibi ni veiqaravi ka rawa ni vakabulabulataka na veitabana ka qarava na i tovo ena noda vanua.

Esa vakarautaka na Matanitu Cokovata na koronivuli makawa na Grammar Boys, ka vakatokai na St. Stephen's Building, me nodra vale na noda Radau ni Vakavovotu kei na cakacaka ni liga ena i matai ni National Arts Centre ena noda vanua. Na vanua ogo era kilai tani kina na Radau ka maroroi vata na kedrai tukutuku, ka ra tomani vata tiko ena kena cakacaka me veiganiti kei na i tuvaki ni vale me rawa ni vakayagataki vinaka vei ira na lewenivanua.

E liutaka tiko na Turaga Minisita ni veika vaka-iTaukei, i tovo kei na i Yau Vakamareqeti, ka na vakarautaki tale tikoga na ripote mai vei iratou na komiti ena vuku ni Levuka World Heritage me vakavoui se vakalesui ena kena i tuvaki makawa koya e kilai tani kina.

Sa mai vakacagau, varau cava tale tikoga na cakacaka ni Levuka Community Centre, ogo ena veitokoni ni Matanitu Cokovata ena kena vakatorocaketaki na veivanua maroroi ena noda koro makawa e Levuka, vaka talega kina na vei vale ni yau maroroi. E dua na tabana makawa ka qarava na i tovo ena Pasifika sa vakavoui tale tikoga ka mera uqeti kina na lewenivanua e Viti kei vanua tani ena veitalanoa makawa me baleti Viti.

Turaga na Sipika, e sega ni ka vou na nodrau veisemati na i tovo, yau mareqeti kei na saravanua. Era vakabibitaka saka tiko na toso vinaka ni bula vakailavo ka wanonova toka na saravanua. Na i Tuvatuva Tudei ni Sara Vanua se National Sustainable Tourism Framework e vakaceguya na tubu ni nodra karamaca na dau siko vanua. Au marau me 'u vakaraitaka ni sa uqeti na Tabacakacaka iTaukei, i Tovo kei na i Yau Mareqeti ena cakacaka ogo, ka sa vakarautaka me vakadeitaka na i tuvatuva ni saravanua ni iTaukei e Viti.

Na i tuvatuva ogo ni saravanua ena vakaqacotaka na i yau bula ni vanua, vakavotukana na talei kei na vakasakiti ni saravanua ena noda vanua. Na noda dokadokataka na vutuniyau ni noda i yau bula, e sa oka ena i tuvatuva ni saravanua ka vaqacotaka na i yau bula ni noda vanua mera taleitaka na nodra gade mai ena noda vanua na saravanua.

Ni se tiko ga ena vakasama ni vakabulabulataki ni tovo, sa vakarautaki tiko ena loma ni Tabacakacaka o ira m ra matataki Viti ki na Solevu ni Vakaraitaki i tovo i Hawaii mai na i ka 3 ki na 16 ni June, 2024. E dau vakabibitaki tiko ena Solevu ogo na vakadewataki kei na vakabulabulataki ni tovo ena Wasa Pasifika. E vakarautaka na noda vanua meda wasea, vulica ka tukunikataka na sautu ni i tukutuku makawa, ka wasea na vuku kei na kila vakavanua me wali kina na leqa ena veiyasai vuravura. Na solevu ogo e vakatakilai na duavata kei na noda vakaitavi e Hawaii, e wili kina o ira ena Yatu Pasifika, era kauta vata tu e dua na i tukutuku bibi me laveta na bula ni vei tikotiko ka vakacacani ena kama levu e Maui.

Turaga na Sipika, sa dolavi tu ena vuravura levu vei ira era maroroya tu na i tovo ni vanua, vakayagataki vakailoa ni veivoli ka sega ni kilikili kei na vuku vakavanua kei na kena i tovo. Na

lawa vakaturi me baleta na vuku vakavanua kei na i tovo e vakalawataka na maroroi ni vuku vakavanua kei na kenai tovo.

Sa sevutaka oti na Turaga na Paraiminisita ni noda vanua ena siga ni iTaukei e Vuravura ena 2023 na kena sova ni i tukutuku ka maroroya na i tukutuku ni vuku vakavanua kei na i tovo, kumuni mai na tini vakacaca na yabaki sa oti mai na 1,173 na koro ena loma ni tinikava na Yasana. Na i tuvatuva ogo e kauta mai na i nuinui ni rawa ni na vakabulai na vuku vakavanua me vaka ni sa dredre na kena vakadewataki, ia, ena tauyavutaki mai kina e dua na kena Vunilewa.

Turaga Na Sipika, e bibi talega na nodra vakaitavitaki keda ena i tuvatuva ni veimatanitu lelevu, ena rai ni noda veiwasei kei na vukei, ka tokoni vakailavo. Sa vakadonui oti e rua na Lawasau - na Lawasau ni i Divi ni Vanua ena 1972 kei na Lawasau ni Vakabulabulataki ni Vuku iTaukei ena 2003.

E na Tiseba 2024, sa na solia na Ripote ni noda vanua na komiti e qarava na Veimatanitu ena Matabose Levu na UNESCO, me baleta na i tuvatuva ni vuku iTaukei ena noda vanua ena loma ni ono na yabaki. E vica na vula mai ogo, sa na cakacakataka na i tukutuku kumuni mai na veitabana me coka na veika e gadrevi me rawata na noda vanua.

Turaga Na Sipika, e laurai ena veigauna sa sivi ni vakabibitaki na i tovo ena veivakatorocaketaki. E tiko kina e dua na i tavi bibi ni veivakatorocaketaki ena bula raraba, veivakaduavatataki, veivakatorocaketaki ni bula vakailavo, maroroi ni i yaubula kei na vakatorocaketaki ni veitikitiko. Sa oti na gauna ni cakacaka duadua, meda veitauriligataka na nodra taraicake na lewe i Viti, vakabibi na i taukei ni vanua. E levu na tabana ni veiqaravi e tu ena veitabana veitacini e qarava na i tovo kei na tatadra vovou me tadolava na nodra tubu na i taba gone ena gauna ogo kei na veigauna sa bera mai. Vinaka saka vakalevu.

[Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to respond to His Excellency the President's most Gracious Speech, delivered in this Parliament to mark the opening of the 2024 Session of Parliament.

As His Excellency the President has always done in every occasion, I was elated to hear His Excellency begin his speech by respectfully greeting all in Parliament with our traditional clansmen salutation – *Miau Sa Bula Re*.

I felt proud, not only as a fellow kinsfolk of the Paramount Chief of Macuata, but it augured with the most recent commemoration of International Mother Language Day on 21st February, 2024 by the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts and stakeholder institutions.

The celebration drives home the importance of our mother languages, our *vosa ni vanu*, *faega* Rotuman and others of which:

- Serves as an identity marker that transcends boundaries with limitless opportunities;
- Serves as a mechanism that transmits and preserves traditional knowledge and cultures in a sustainable way;
- Serves as a communication tool;
- Serves as an approach that promotes harmonious living of the multitude of ethnic groups that live in Fiji;
- Promotes education for sustainable development; and
- Fosters respect for our people and planet.

In the same light, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts will soon submit to Cabinet Fiji's National Action Plan (NAP) for International Decade for Indigenous Language (IDIL) 2022-2032. The United Nations proclaimed decade aims to draw global attention on the critical situation of many indigenous languages and to mobilise stakeholders and resources for their preservation, revitaliation and promotion (quoted from United Nations Resolution).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, using the 'Three Legged Stool' concept championed by our late Statesman, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, the Fiji NSAP for IDIL focuses on the three themes:

1. Living our indigenous languages;
2. Stopping the loss of our indigenous languages; and
3. Growing our indigenous languages.

The National Action Plan will only be realised with the concerted effort and commitment by all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the adoption of Fiji's first ever National Cultural Policy is a milestone achievement. As His Excellency had alluded to in his Speech, the voices of our people are foremost, with an inclusive approach to sustainable development critical for our continued progress and prosperity as a nation. These are all enshrined in the new National Cultural Policy for Fiji which the Ministry is working on its implementation in the coming months and years.

Mr. Speaker Sir, we support the direction with which our Ministry of Finance, National Planning, Strategic Development & Statistics has taken to formulate our New National Development Plan. Reflecting culture and heritage as a vector for social and economic growth in the National Development Plan will contribute enormously to the wellbeing of all our citizens. Through the plan, an enabling environment for cultural industry actors will be created, helping our people to gain a steady income and sustain their families' livelihood.

Robust and resilient infrastructure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is essential for Fiji's culture sector to thrive. The Coalition Government has designated the Old Grammar Boys School, commonly known as St. Stephen's building, as the new "home" for our artists and artisans – Fiji's first National Arts Centre. A space embraced by all practitioners because of its heritage nature, work is ongoing to ensure that the building is artistically relevant and conducive to future users.

Spearheaded by the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts, an internal review team will soon submit their report which will explore options regarding the upgrade and/or restoration of Levuka world heritage structures to its former glory.

Capital works on the Levuka Community Centre is almost completed, exemplary of the continued commitment by the Coalition Government to show tangible improvements to heritage infrastructure in the historical port town. Similarly, the Fiji Museum, as one of the oldest cultural institutions in the Pacific, is undergoing refurbishment to ensure that visitors (both local and overseas alike) are exposed to an array of heirloom that narrates Fiji's rich historical stories.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the link between culture, heritage, the arts and tourism is not surprising. His Excellency, rightfully, dwelled on tourism being a key driver of our economy and the forecasting of a National Sustainable Tourism Framework (NSTF) for Fiji to cater for the increasing demand of global travellers. I am pleased to announce that the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts was inspired by this undertaking and will soon finalise a Fiji Indigenous Tourism Framework, boasting the richness of our cultural heritage resources. The NSTF includes the latter as foremost to creating a holistic holiday experience for our tourists visiting our shores.

Aligned to the notion of cultural promotion and fostering cultural diplomacy, Mr. Speaker Sir, the Ministry is preparing a Fiji delegation to represent our island nation at the 13th Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture (FESTPAC) to be held in Hawaii from 6th to 16th June, 2024. The FESTPAC has been an important avenue for the transmission and revitalization of Pacific arts and cultures. It provides a space for cultural sharing, learning and storytelling of our rich history and offering traditional knowledge and wisdom as local solution to global challenges. The FESTPAC symbolizes resilience and unity and our participation in Hawaii, including that of other Pacific Island countries, carries even a deeper significance as it aims to uplift local communities that were devastated by the recent wildfires in Maui.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our bearers and keepers of culture and heritage are exposed on a regular basis to increasing exploitation and inappropriate commercialization of their traditional knowledge and expressions of culture. The Bill on Traditional Knowledge and Expressions of Culture, as His Excellency has alluded to, is a legal mechanism that will ensure protection of traditional knowledge and expression of culture.

The honourable Prime Minister, during World Indigenous Day 2023, launched the Ministry's traditional knowledge and expression of culture database that will host traditional knowledge and expression of culture information that was collected by Field Officers in the last decade from the 1,173 villages in Fiji's 14 Provinces. Through this exercise, there is hope that knowledge and expressions that may be difficult to transmit now will be able to sustain itself after all, through a registration and cultural authority to be established as a result.

Our internal commitments are equally important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the context of sharing best practices and as recipients of assistance rendered. Fiji had ratified two UNESCO Conventions for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. In December 2024, Fiji will need to submit its periodical report to the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee on Intangible Cultural Heritage, capturing all activities it has pursued in the last six years at the national level relating to intangible cultural heritage safeguarding. In the next few months, the Ministry will implement data comprehensive information from all sectors of our economy and is collated to fulfil this mandatory international requirement for Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last but not the least, contrary to past beliefs, culture is no longer seen as a barrier to development. It plays a central and integrated role as a vehicle for social development, social cohesion and stability, economic development, environment stability and in developing resilient communities. We should no longer work in silos but collectively work for the betterment of all Fijians, especially the indigenous people of these land. The culture sector also has a lot to offer, and the many opportunities waiting to unfold are impetus for growth for the present and future generations.]

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen in the gallery and those who are watching us on livestream television or hearing us on radio; please, allow me to acknowledge all health officials all over the country who are serving our people diligently. *Ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak on the motion moved by the honourable Prime Minister in response to the Speech offered by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji on Monday, 4th March, 2024, while Opening the Second Term of Parliament. The Address by His Excellency the President plays a pivotal role in shaping the tone for the Coalition Government to deliver.

There are various important calls by His Excellency for the Government to take heed of with regards to its policy formulation, aiming to advance the nation where our people may live in security, stability and prosperity. The call, I believe, is also for the honourable Prime Minister, as Leader of the Coalition Government, that he must deliver in an honest, resilient and transparent manner that would actively reduce the many emerging socio-economic challenges faced by our people today.

His Excellency the President's Address encouraged us, as democratically elected representatives, to listen to the voice of the people, not only to those who have elected us, but all citizens, young and old, men and women. He urged us all to faithfully embrace with resolve the principle of democracy and humanity as enshrined in our Constitution. By doing so, we respect the integrity and the dignity of our Parliament and honour all Fijians.

In his Address, His Excellency also reminded us to continue to promote harmony and embrace diversity in our nation. As leaders, we are to leave aside our differences for the common good of our people and to focus on our communality rather than our tiny differences.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's most Gracious Speech is, indeed, gracious because he is speaking his heart out to both sides of this august Parliament, for the common good of everyone that call Fiji our home. It is, indeed, time that we put our Parliament in order.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am reminded of a *Bible* verse in Psalm 133:1, and I quote: "How good and pleasant it is, when God's people live together in unity".

Before I proceed further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to sincerely thank Dr. James Fong, the former Permanent Secretary for Health and Medical Services, for the leadership he provided, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic that caused severe social and economic disruptions around the world. I wish Dr. Fong and his family well in his retirement. I also want to put on record in congratulating, Dr. Jemesa Tudravu, on his new appointment as the new incumbent for the important position of Permanent Secretary for Health and Medical Services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, poverty is on the rise and the truth is, no government can eradicate poverty completely, not even the Coalition Government. Yet, we cannot ignore it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to also share another *Bible* verse to put my response into perspective, a verse from the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes 10:19: "A feast is made for laughter, wine makes life merry, and money is the answer for everything."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to bring laughter and happiness to this nation, money is needed. It is the responsibility of the Coalition Government to find that money. It is the responsibility of the Coalition Government to:

- create that environment for investor confidence to invest in Fiji;
- provide security for all Fijians, our friends and tourists that visit our shores;
- provide stimulus and support for continuous expansion in private sector growth;
- improve access to safe drinking water for all Fijians;
- provide proper sanitation for our people;
- develop and implement good education policies; and
- ensure that our people have access to quality healthcare;

In achieving all of the above, money is needed, and the people of Fiji is looking to the Coalition Government to deliver.

We understand that times are hard on ordinary Fijians because of the imposed 15 percent VAT. During our community visits, many families are expressing the same sentiments, and I quote, “life is really, really tough for us, we deeply regret the change of Government”.

Our people continue to suffer in silence, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we do not see any positive changes coming soon to give them a much-needed relief. Recently, some single moms and widows remained unable to access social welfare funds and family assistance recently. Some just gave up in pursuing their application due to the unprofessionalism and bad attitude of staff in the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection.

In His Excellency the President's Address, he pointed out the challenges posed by the burden of Communicable and Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), together with HIV/AIDS, which impose a substantial burden on our population.

Diabetes is one of the leading causes of deaths in Fiji. This disease does not discriminate. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it affects people from all cultures and backgrounds, male or female, young or old, rich or poor. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), worldwide, one person will die from diabetes in every eight seconds. In Fiji, currently almost one in every three Fijians is being diagnosed with diabetes, which is about 30 percent of our population, and this number will continue to rise in the next to five to ten years if this crisis continues to be ignored. It is estimated that there is one lower limb amputation in every 12 hours, which means two per day, and approximately 730 lower limb amputations annually in Fiji. According to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services' published NCD latest statistics from 2020, we lost an estimated 5,700 Fijians due to NCD-related causes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these lives were ended too early too soon by quiet killers like diabetes, stroke, heart disease, et cetera. Think of the children and partners left behind!

The burden of NCD both, with respect to the risk of premature death and costs to healthcare is alarming. We need an effective whole of society response to deal with it. Government needs to look at fighting NCD in a holistic manner, not just focusing on the Ministry of Health but linking up with the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways, Ministry of Education and, in fact, the whole of Government.

These diseases settle through unhealthy habits which will develop over an extended period of time due primarily to the overconsumption of sugar, salt, oil and highly processed foods and a chronic lack of physical activity.

The selling of junk food in our school canteens and carts that are parked outside many school premises can no longer be ignored. School committees and kiosk vendors are making profits at the cost of destroying the health of our children, and we need to act now.

I was glad to see some coverage this week on the mainstream media of that staggering statistics on NCD and HIV. We must keep talking about these diseases and the burden they place on our society, our economy, and what we can do together to address them. This is a societal problem that affects every community in Fiji and saving lives depends on the actions from all of us, as alluded to by His Excellency the President's Address.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, healthy food choices now come at a substantial cost, and poor government policies triggers the prevalence of NCDs. In 2019, Fiji's National Debt before COVID-19 stood at \$5.7 billion. It rose to \$9.1 billion at the beginning of 2023 because of the COVID-19 pandemic mitigation and recovery packages provided to our fellow Fijians by the previous Administration.

Our main GDP contributor, tourism, was unable to generate any revenue during that time due to the grounding of all international flights. The FijiFirst Government injected money into affected Fijians as stimulus, so our people can survive. All countries around the world suffered the same fate during COVID-19, however, Fiji made impressive strides in its economic growth in 2022.

Fiji secures a spot among the top five fastest growing economies globally. Instead of complaining and wasting taxpayers' money in witch-hunting and setting up various tribunals and sub-committees, the Coalition Government only needs to build on the successes of FijiFirst.

Moving forward, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the effort to step out of poverty, the previous Administration was focusing on the following:

1. Pursuing Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG3) with is universal health coverage.
2. Managing the social determinants of health, like building new roads, jetties, improved connectivity, et cetera.
3. Reduce the out-of-pocket expenses for healthcare.
4. At the same time, reduce the time needed to access a health facility when someone has an emergency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to share some of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services' policies that were under the previous Government which supported and mitigated the work against poverty.

1. Government Free Medicine Scheme where eligible Fijians are able to access this service efficiently without much hassle. Now, this system is becoming slow and confusing, and there is a greater need for registration and public awareness.
2. In addition, FijiFirst introduced a subsidised haemodialysis cost for eligible Fijians who are treated within the hospitals at CWM, Labasa, Lautoka and at the National Dialysis Centre that is receiving chronic cases in Nadera.

FijiFirst recognised the need for affordable and equitable access to dialysis treatment and commenced a Dialysis Subsidy Programme. All patients requiring long term dialysis treatment with household income of less than \$30,000 per annum are eligible for the reduced fee.

Mr. Speaker Sir, this is not a one-time visit treatment but a long-term routine treatment, requiring multiple visits. If stopped, the patient will die. We are receiving calls that many are finding it extremely difficult to access this subsidised dialysis service for reasons unknown to us.

If I may share, Mr. Speaker Sir, during our last sitting of Parliament around the end of last year, you welcomed a gentleman who was seated in the gallery. He passed away on 30th December

last year. He has maternal link to me and was my *Facebook* friend.

During the last few weeks of his life, he posted on his *Facebook* page, not only a couple of distressing videos, calling on the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Minister for Health to please assist him to be included in the subsidised dialysis scheme. He said that he could no longer afford to pay the over hundreds of dollars per session per week for his routine kidney treatment. He was well over 65 years and his age entitled him to receive social benefits from the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection. Unfortunately, he passed away last year, probably because the Coalition Government failed to attend to his distress call.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, many lives were lost to laxity by this Government. I urge the Government to make systems and processes easy for our people. Sir, I was informed that he was a strong SODELPA and PAP supporter. May his soul rest in peace!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in moving forward, FijiFirst also introduced Free Health Care Scheme. In this Scheme, ordinary Fijians can access medical and dental consultation and treatments by an authorised GP Clinic for free. In addition, private doctors prescribe vital medical laboratory diagnostic tests and radiology scans where necessary. These tests were carried out at private medical laboratories and radiology centre, all bills paid by the Government. In this Scheme, the Government is also empowering and improving economic opportunities for the MSME operators to actively participate in doing business in that space.

In his Address, His Excellency encouraged the Government to continue to support MSMEs and co-operatives by enhancing regulatory compliance, access to markets and sustainable finance. Like most Government programmes, this scheme too is taking longer than expected for eligible households to get their approval.

The application form is complicated and the run around for JP certification and uploading of forms online, et cetera, is not really helping our vulnerable groups, who mostly live in remote villages and settlements. They do not have any scanner, they do not have network, and most are not well educated. Patients kept following up, and some of them have submitted their registration since August last year and are still waiting. Government slackness is taking a toll on the health of our people.

FijiFirst's sole purpose for this Scheme is to take the load off our public hospitals Outpatients and Dental Clinics, as well as to aid accessibility to healthcare as part of SDG 3 - Universal Health Coverage.

Moving on, Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, the average waiting time in most hospitals is about two hours to three hours to see a doctor, especially at densely populated areas, like Lami...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Standing Order 60 - Relevance. I am happy with the honourable Member's statement, but I suggest that he be very specific and factual. Otherwise, the relevance is not there.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- When you said it, we did not say anything, what happened now?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Facts, facts!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- He is giving the facts.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Kirpal, would you allow me to rule on that Point of Order ?

Otherwise, everyone is trying to make an attempt to be the Speaker as well here.

Relevancy, honourable Ravunawa. You have been a Member of Parliament and almost going into the second year now and I think you should understand that. I ask that you just confine yourself to the relevancy of your speech based on the reply that you are making on His Excellency's Address.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst handed over to the Coalition Government, some nursing stations that were upgraded to health centre level where medical doctors and nurse practitioners are posted full-time to attend to patient needs efficiently, other than the usual practice of having a staff nurse to see them.

Sir, if I can recall a total 19 nursing stations were upgraded to provide health centre level medical care, and those are:

1. Dawasamu, Tailevu;
2. Namara, Tailevu;
3. Navunikabi, Namosi;
4. Galoa, Namosi;
5. Bouma, Taveuni.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, allow honourable Ravunawa to concentrate on his speech. He is being factual as well.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Also in:

6. Tau, Nadroga;
7. Naqalimare, Navosa;
8. Nuku-i-Lau, Navosa;
9. Nawaicoba Health Centre in the rural of Nadi Subdivision;
10. Cuvu, Nadroga;
11. Vatukarasa, Nadroga;
12. Coqeloa, Macuata;
13. Soso, Macuata;
14. Bua Village, Bua;
15. Kubulau, Bua;
16. Naweni, Cakaudrove;
17. Waidina, Naitasiri;
18. Naboubuco, Naitasiri; including
19. Yalobi in the Lautoka/Yasawa Subdivision.

The access ensures that medical care is brought closer to our people.

Mr. Speaker, the Government needs to realise that decentralising public healthcare remains one means to ensure to reach the unreached. In doing, so we will reduce their out-of-pocket expenses.

I call on the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to provide more funding to entice and incentivise healthcare professionals to nip these NCD crisis and other health issues at the doorsteps of our people.

I also ask the honourable Minister for Health to consider getting back the mobile dental caravan and the health bus so that we can go down and do more community outreach at the community level.

Mr. Speaker, I must continue to thank the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services for prioritising the need to repair and renovate the deteriorating operating theatre at CWM Hospital. This will assist the backlog of theatre cases, especially cancer cases, that have been on the waiting list for some time.

We have seen and are also happy that the honourable Minister for Health has begun infrastructure renovation on various health facilities.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Yes, so we are doing something.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also reliably informed that much of the funding for these renovations is provided by the New Zealand High Commission and other bilateral partners, the Board of Visitors....

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What is wrong with that?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Thank you for investing in the Fijian health sector. I am, indeed, very grateful for everyone, who stepped in to help the Ministry of Health and Medical Services when the Ministry of Finance seems to have turned a blind eye.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Please, round off, honourable Member.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- I am rounding up now, Sir.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- In essence of time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the honourable Minister for Health to consider bringing back the Dental Prosthetic Lab that is currently operating in Nakasi Health Centre, serving people right from the border of Serua, Lami, the whole of Suva, Nausori, Korovou, even up to Wainibuka. Mostly, the senior citizens, who needed to attend clinic at Nakasi are finding it very challenging mostly to utilise this service for the fabrication of their dentures. These senior citizens (we already know) are facing a lot of challenges with their bus fare top-up subsidies under this Government.

Before I sit down, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one important point is the Mortuary at Levuka Hospital in the Lomaiviti Subdivision and also at Vunisea in Kadavu Subdivision are not working. I implore the Government to look at installing temporary mortuaries (maybe a 20-foot or 40-foot cooler container) to be positioned at Vunisea in Kadavu and also at Levuka in the Lomaiviti, where the honourable Attorney-General comes from. It is only important that we do not continue to deny families and loved ones the opportunity to pay their final respects and ritual rights in a culturally accepted manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to by the honourable Leader of the Opposition and the honourable Prime Minister, let us try to work together, uphold our democratic ideas and build a brighter Fiji for our children.

As I end, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I take back the *Bible* verse I shared earlier, Ecclesiastes 19:4: "Money is needed for everything." The people of Fiji need our help. The Coalition Government's active involvement is critical, it should lead the way in setting priorities and driving the primary healthcare initiatives.

I wish to extend my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the incredible health workers and also the support staff who are serving in our hospitals, health centres and nursing stations.

I thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Speech and *vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity to speak on the motion before Parliament today.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Ravunawa, for those very inspiring factual views that you have raised, especially in the moving of honourable Attorney-General's village from Nairai to Ovalau. I do not know how it moved, but strange things can happen.

(Laughter)

Before we continue, I would like to acknowledge once more some very important people sitting in the gallery. From the left, one of our former colleague in the Opposition, who goes by the name of 'Blue'. Then we have behind him Jone from Kalabu, who is in green shirt. Once again, we have the former Assistant Minister, Rajesh Singh, and Mikaele Leawere, whose name has been raised this week in this Parliament sitting. He is sitting there at the back. It is good that he has come to listen to all that is being said about him. All that was said were all good, nothing bad, Mikaele Leawere. We also have the General Secretary of People's Alliance Party sitting there with a former attaché to the Prime Minister's Office who once headed the Water Authority of Fiji at one time. Both are from Tailevu.

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen in the gallery and fellow Fijians viewing in this morning; *miau sa bula re* and a very good morning to you all. I rise this morning to deliver my contribution to this august Parliament in response to the President's Opening remarks for the 2024 Parliamentary Sitting delivered on Monday, 4th March, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji for his most Gracious Speech. His Excellency has set the tone for continued support and commitment to all sectors of the economy, especially to the agriculture sector in Fiji.

I wish to remind us all that, we, the Coalition Government, are guided by the principle that was highlighted to us in the opening remarks of His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji and, that is, we listen to the voices of our people, not only those who elected us, but all our citizens - young and old, men and women. His Excellency also reminded us that we must acknowledge and recognise our differences, however, we must be united with one common goal to ensure that we live in a progressive and prosperous nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this morning, I will focus my contribution to the issues, plans and progress related to agriculture and the food production sector. This sector is of paramount importance, not only to the nation's healthy food production, but also to the wellbeing and the economy of our people. The lack of understanding of biophysical processes, trends and the failure to use information about the natural resources, have led to land degradation, inappropriate land uses, increase the risk of drought, flooding and loss of appropriate land for agricultural use and forestry.

The relative brittleness of Fiji's marginal land may be debated, but, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the agriculture sector has been the backbone of Fiji's economy since Independence. Its impact cuts across all the sectors and individuals in this country. However, there is no question about the level of poverty in some Fijian rural communities today. It is poverty that compels farmers' families to clear forest for subsistence agriculture and to become seasonal migrant labourers or make the move to seek employment in rural areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to thank His Excellency in addressing us all on new global risks and existing challenges linked to climate change. Apart from agriculture and natural resources, Fiji's economy is basically supported by tourism. The tourism industry contributes significantly to Fiji's economy and the country's largest foreign exchange earner. That is the largest export sector and a major employer. For Fiji, tourism is probably highly vulnerable to the impact of climate change due to the sector's dependence on environment and climate. Both agriculture and tourism contributes significantly to Fiji's GDP. Among the various forms of on-farm diversification, agritourism is often indicated as having development potential for farms and rural areas. There is a need to produce food for our expanding population which includes increasing tourist arrivals in the tourism sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an increase in the number of tourists visiting our country presents both the challenge and an opportunity for our resourced-based sector. To ensure that we are prepared to meet the growing demands of our visitors, in particular, to have an adequate food supply to meet this demand, the Ministry is taking a proactive approach to address this. This includes investing in infrastructure and facilities to support agriculture production and agritourism initiatives, as well as implementing measures to safeguard our land, water and marine ecosystem.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways has partnered with the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation to implement programmes on the farm-to-fork initiative. The aim is to promote the use of local agricultural products in the tourism industry by bringing the knowledge gap between farmers, middlemen and the decision-makers in the hotel and tourism-based facilities. This will help create a cooperative business model amongst farmers and cluster groups. This will also promote financial management in the farming communities, an area which needs a lot of attention.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the development of the agriculture sector has continued to navigate several risks and challenges over the years from external economic shocks, environmental issues, social trends and strict implementation processes. Food import volumes into our region have been steadily increasing since the mid-1990s. Today, most of our countries produce less than 65 percent of their dietary energy supply domestically. Our location and distance from global markets impacts food prices and the ability of our communities to access and afford healthy diets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to enhance food and nutrition security for all Fijians, the Ministry has identified two targeted goals in the new Strategic Development Plan. These are:

1. Increase production of nutritious crops and livestock; and
2. Collaborate with other Government Ministries and agencies to execute the Food and Nutrition Security policy.

Fiji had adopted our national policies and has helped our Government prioritise climate investments and strategically engage with funders to access climate finance and direct it to projects that will best protect communities from escalating climate impacts. As part of these priorities, farmers will be assisted with crops and livestock packages, improved crop varieties and livestock breeds. They will also benefit from increased awareness of local, safe and nutritious food, the establishment of resilient backyard models in peri-urban areas and support for primary and secondary schools farm programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Strategic Priority 3 of the Ministry's Strategic Development Plan is dedicated to sustainable resource management and climate-smart agriculture. Fiji's exposure to internal and external pressures in past decades had to some extent provided an opportunity for Fiji to develop itself in managing and mitigating the different risks and challenges in health, nutrition and in terms of economic security.

The Ministry has initiated various actions to address climate change adaptation, such as introducing disease-tolerant productivity and restoring soil fertility. To address the issues of mitigation, initiatives such as manure management, using biogas digesters produce methane gas for household use, recycling manure for fertilisers, reviewing the applications of chemical fertilisers in Fiji and introducing organic fertilisers and bacterium culture to increase soil microbial population and fertility restoration are being implemented.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increasing intensity of tropical cyclones and other natural disasters is having a substantial impact on farming communities. Increasingly, saltwater intrusion and freshwater scarcity present urgent threats to sustainable agriculture in the region. The Ministry will continue building retention dams and seawalls using the nature-based solution method to address flood, coastal erosion and coastal inundation. There will be projects that will also be targeting areas which are normally affected by droughts and prolonged dry spells where irrigation schemes will be established and revived. The formation of drainage boards will also help address problems associated with high water tables causing flooding in low lying areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our approach towards building resilience encompasses various initiatives such as providing continuous training and awareness on the latest production technologies like Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) for farming, sustainable methods and Climate-Smart-Farming Practices. The Ministry also encourages farming as a business, supporting graduate farmers to transition from a subsistence scale to a commercial scale. Non-Government Organisations also provides further support to build resilient communities. In addition to our overall strategy, the Ministry is focusing on reducing food waste through improved processing and storage methods. Our goal is also to change consumers preferences so that locally produced food is available to everyone in the community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is committed to exploring the opportunities for better collaboration with national and international agencies to raise awareness among farmers about invasive pests and diseases and their potential impacts. Furthermore, the government recognises the importance of research in the agriculture value chain for long-term development in the country. Therefore, we plan to increase our investment in research and development including the development of research stations. The Ministry will engage actively in providing to our farmers value-adding machines that will assist in preserving food and also add value to agricultural produce that can be sold as supplementary to imported goods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, population growth, urbanisation, aging agricultural fisheries workforce, over exploitation of oceanic resources and native forests, and pollution present both immediate and long-term challenges to Fiji's food systems and achieving the SDGs. Transformation, therefore, would require a systematic multi-stakeholder approach, taking into consideration the strength of Fijian food systems.

The Ministry has developed commodity plans to tackle problems related to agricultural commodities. In addition to ongoing initiatives, the Ministry has established important commodity task forces and will continue strengthening the Crop and Livestock Council to address issues and concerns related to the production and trade of key commodities such as kava, turmeric, ginger, coconut, rice and root crops. These taskforces will establish the direction for these commodities and

highlight production and trade-related issues. Commercialisation and the use of modern technologies in agricultural development is also being identified to help transform the agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will revitalise the Yalavou, Uluisaivou and Tilivalevu Beef Schemes. This will be implemented through pasture development, road maintenance, water reticulation, infrastructure development and the improvement of stockyards. The respective programmes will ensure an increase in production to cater for domestic demand.

Fiji is now embarking on providing efficient targeted programmes and strengthening our policies to address these issues. Each farm will receive improved breeding heifers along with inclusion of artificial insemination for breed improvement and multiplication programmes. Pasture seeds and planting material will be distributed with agro-inputs for the improvement of pastoral land. The Ministry will continue to work with key stakeholders to support these programmes including the milk industry. This includes strengthening of the Fiji Cooperative Dairy Company Limited with the expansion of the dairy to the West and North.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, genetic conservations, breeding programmes, the employment of digitalization and scientific innovations are also being given priorities in the development of the food sector. Fiji hopes to further strengthen existing disaster risk management capacities including well established climate and disaster risk governance, early warning systems and response to a range of hazards including tropical cyclones, heavy rainfall, long dry seasons and unpredicted weather pattern.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, I also wish to address some of the concerns that were raised from that side of Parliament for the last three days. One is on brain drain. The Ministry as highlighted yesterday most of the skilled workers had migrated and that included veterinarians, plant pathologists, soil scientists, engineers and one of the major causes of the loss of our qualified staff was insecurity they had with their employment in the last term. We had already been working in trying to address this issue. So, in the last 15 months we have started advertising vacant posts and filling vacant positions.

Also, as part of this brain drain, there was no succession plan for staff and also the Ministry was not investing on capacity building and human resource development, and this has also been addressed. The high input cost Fiji is exposed to is because of a lot of products shipped to Fiji. The Government is providing subsidies for fertiliser and also providing planting material at a subsidised price. Most of the transportation cost to farmers for the inputs paid for by the Government, the transport cost is paid by Government.

The assistance given to the dairy industry, which was highlighted by honourable Sachida Nand, this was done to address the reduction in milk production which was caused by the decrease in stock numbers that we have. The programme is initiated to increase the number of stock so that we can increase our dairy products in the dairy sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will continue to focus on achieving its strategic priorities as outlined in the 2024-2028 Strategic Development Plan and we are committed to implementing initiatives that will positively impact the agriculture sector, contributing to the prosperity and wellbeing of all Fijians as alluded to by His Excellency's the President of the Republic of Fiji in his opening remarks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for providing me the opportunity to deliver this address and I fully support the motion before Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Assistant Minister Tomasi Tunabuna for your intervention, especially, making sure that there is a succession plan in the Ministry and you will try and increase the supply of milk per cow. It is right down to five litres now. You want to increase to 20 litres? I hope for the best. He is a veterinarian and is very good at that and highly qualified.

(Laughter)

On that note honourable Members, I would like to adjourn Parliament for tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.55 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.30 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before we move on, I would like to acknowledge the presence in the gallery of our University of Fiji School of Law students and not forgetting Professor Shaista Shameem; a well-known personality in our country.

I now invite and offer the floor to the honourable Taito Rokomatu who hails from Wainibuka – one river, one bus.

(Laughter)

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, I would like to acknowledge God the highest, for the wonderful gift and His blessing that He has given over my life, my family and my beloved nation. Over the years, without God's blessing and favour, I would not have been able to serve His calling that is to serve the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament ladies and gentlemen in the gallery and those connected to Parliament this morning – *ni sa bula vinaka saka, namaste, assalamu alaikum* and *faiakse'ea*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me to speak and respond to His Excellency's most gracious Speech at the Opening of Parliament on Monday, 4th March, 2024. I thank His Excellency the President for his wonderful Address to Parliament on the importance of democracy following the Constitution, human rights, harmony and diversity, financial literacy, foreign policy, global world, Blue Pacific development, civil service performance, education, labour market, national digital strategy and cyber security and most importantly – drugs consumption in Fiji amongst our youths. I quote from the Address of His Excellency which states:

“A major priority for the Coalition Government this year is the formulation of a new National Development Plan that will set our collective vision and the key initiatives and programmes that will allow the nation to grow sustainably in the short and medium term. The key fundamental of Government's Development Agenda is inclusive development, to improve the wellbeing of our citizens.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to focus the honourable Parliament's attention on the development works in parts of Ra heading down the King's Road towards Korovou. Firstly, on development issue, Ra has a big potential but lacks the boost from Government to fulfil its target, the *vanua* and the people of Ra. I am here to raise their voice and allow me to speak in the *iTaukei* language.

Au a via laveta cake nikua o ira na wekaqu ni vanua saka vakaturaga o Ra e lutu bera saka tiko ena veivakatorocaketaki ni noda matanitu, au tucake nikua meu gusudra saka na vanua o Ra.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the villages of Nailuva, Nasukamai, Naqelecibi, Nabalasere, Namasia, *Tikina o Nailuva*; Namara, Burelevu, *Tikina o Nalaba*, they really need a good access road and farm roads to help them transport their produce to the local market and sick people to get treated in the local nursing stations and health centres. These roads will also help school students to travel to school safely. The same sentiment was shared by His Excellency during his Address on the importance of agriculture and better education for our children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, most of the villages that I had mentioned needs tarseal on steep roads. This

starts from Namara Village in Ra and Burelevu Village in the *Tikina o Nalaba*, up to the village that I had mentioned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Nararavou Village and Nasavu Village in Ra really need Irish Crossing. Their bridge was washed away by flooding. Students and people in the community use it everyday. Now, parents and guardians will have to help the students to cross the flooding river from time to time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the access farm road from Nukulau Village to connect to Nasoqo Village and Nasukamai Village is 5.5 kilometres which was approved by the FijiFirst Government to be done but until last year, only 3 kilometers has been done but not properly done. Sir, most of the people farming *yaqona*, *dalo* and cattle farming who are living in that area find it very hard to get access to the main road.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Culanuku Village in the *Tikina o Nalawa, Ra*, need road repairs and it has been seven weeks now that students in the village have to walk to school on a daily basis. Everyone is affected by this damaged road and it needs repair. People are crying and need the Government to help them and reduce spending on unnecessary travels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *tikina* and villages in the Ra Province need clean drinking water and to name a few villages, include Navitilevu Village and Savulotu Village.

I plead with the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, the honourable Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management and the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport to, please, look into this issue and assist ordinary Fijians. I reaffirm this Parliament that all the above issues that have been raised or I will be raising before the end of my response is based on my visitation and firsthand experience.

The Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) grid that was done by the last Government is still in Sawanivo Village. From Sawanivo Village towards inland, we have Nasau Secondary School up to Nubumakita Village and Nukulau Village and they are in need of electricity. Soa Village, Matuku Village, Sovusovu Settlement and Waililai Settlement near Bucalevu Village in Ra are still without electricity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency made a very important point on the need to Address the National Digital Strategy. This problem is faced by the students of Nasau Secondary School in Ra whereby their parents and guardians are sending them to other schools near the main road with better digital connectivity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the issue of health services in Ra, the Nasau Nursing Station is located in the highlands of Ra. The ratio of service which is provided by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services is 1:600. The current practice at this particular nursing station is one nurse serving 2,193 people from nine villages and six settlements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the nursing station needs improvement and renovation with the inclusion of electricity. The honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services needs to look into the above and provide more nurses to meet the standard of service and practice.

Coming down to Northland development issues, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on my Maiden Speech in this august Parliament, I had highlighted issues from Wainibuka. Today, I will speak on the issues raised by the people from Northland in Tailevu, as follows:

1. Colata Cocoa Farm Road in Nayavu needs EFL grid.
2. Naibita Village and Nailega Village need clean drinking water.
3. Nalidi Village and Natuvatuvavatu Village need connectivity and installation of towers and satellite dish.
4. Nabouono Settlement in Nasau Village, Wainibuka, needs good access farm road. More than 15 students are using that road daily.
5. The district of Waibuka and the boader towards the Ra Province needs cooperative awareness or '*solesolevaki*'.
6. Korovou Police Station and Nayavu Police Post needs additional vehicles to better serve the Province of Tailevu.
7. Korovou Police Barrack and Police Station needs renovation.
8. Natovi Jetty needs a Police Post and outboard engine.
9. The people in the *Tikina* of Verata - *dou bula na noqu kabani*, with its three *Tikina makawa* - Verata, Vugalei and Namalata needs clean drinking water.
10. From Korovou to Logani Village they really need clean drinking water.
11. Buses and vehicles travelling through the Kings Roads stop at Korovou Town and I thank the previous Government for the improvement made to its public convenience facility. However, there is a simple issue arising which is the closing time of the public inconvenience. When the bus stops at Korovou Town, passengers, especially ladies, have to make their way elsewhere to carry out their business after four hours ride from Rakiraki Town to Korovou Town, not forgetting passengers from Suva to Natovi. That is why we need to inform our civil servants that they play a very important role in the daily operation of the Government machinery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I recently made a visit to Vatukoula and had a *talanoa* session with the Vatukoula Gold Mine strike workers, on a promise made to them by the honourable Prime Minister (Sitiveni Rabuka) due to payment that was owed to them. I have to carry out their wish and, that is, to relay their message to the other side of Parliament for their voice to be heard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to also speak on youth development, employment and empowerment. To empower youth to acquire employable skills which will help them find better opportunity, this training can be done through formal, informal and non-formal education and training development strategies policy.

On leadership and decision, empowering youth to maximise their leadership skills, including communication, creativity and innovation, as well as introduce more life skills training to promote respect and understanding of cultural education and spiritual values.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, most of the promises made by the Coalition Government during their campaign was not fulfilled. The Turaga ni Koro allowance of \$200 fortnight was not delivered as promised. Villages are waiting for their \$50,000 each for the development works. Honourable Minister of Finance promised the people of Fiji that a drop in food price and life will be much better when they will be in power.

Now, people are suffering, and the crime rate is increasing due to the high cost of living. Mothers resort to shoplifting to provide milk supplement for their babies. During the last Parliament sitting, I had asked the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration on what can be done to the drug issue in Fiji. By looking at the statistics, drugs usage and the drug abuse is on the rise which include the mass import of illegal substances.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, I fully agree with His Excellency's Address when he highlighted, and I quote:

“As I look upon the honourable Members of this august Parliament, I am humbly reminded of the immense responsibility that comes with representing the diverse voices and aspirations of our people.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must listen to the voice of the people who have democratically elected us as their representatives. Everything that we do in this Parliament must be for the people, by the people, and to the people of Fiji. That is why I have highlighted on my response the need for our public servants to work hard and get in touch with the grassroot people and inform their line Ministers on the needs of the nation on the ground.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all the points I am raising are people's voices. It is not important to me what into my pocket, but the reason I am here is to serve my country and the people who have voted all of us in this august Parliament. May God bless Fiji and all Fijians.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of this august Parliament, members of the public here in Parliament and those who are joining us virtually through livestream media; a great morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this opportunity to commend *Turaga Na Tui Macuata, Taukei Bolatagane*, His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Maivilili Katonivere, for his Address last Monday.

I also take this opportunity to convey my condolences to the Tui Yasawa, the *Vanua o Yasawa*, from the *Turaga Na Tui Nairai* and the chiefs of the people of *Kubuna i Wai. Ni qai gole ena vakacegu ni Turaga*.

Taumada au vakavinavinaka i Viti raraba. I Kubuna vua na Vunivalu Na Tui Kaba kei na kena i sasavu; i Burebasaga vua na Gone Marama Na Roko Tui Dreketi, Turaga Na Vunivalu; kei na Vanua qaqa o Tovata. Vinaka vakalevu na nomuni vakarorogo tiko mai na turaga, na marama, na i solisoli, kemuni na tiko i Viti, kemuni na tiko mai Vavalagi, ena loma ni 14 na Yasana and all the communities who are listening in, vinaka vakalevu. Ni qai kalougata tiko.

Mr. Speaker Sir, may I open my speech with Genesis 12:2 that says, and I quote:

“I will make you into a nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.”

That is connected to what Isaiah said in 41:10, and I quote:

“Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand”.

Mr. Speaker Sir, His Excellency's Speech, if anything, it summarises that God has given us all the great purpose to bless this wonderful nation of ours. Members of Parliament, we are not here by accident, we are appointed by the power of God, and as we sit here and go about our usual business that, first of all, we must conduct ourselves so that we respect the dignity of this Parliament and, of course, the people we serve.

If I may summarise, Mr. Speaker Sir, the word love - *na veiqaravi, na siro, na vinaka, na duavata kei na cakacaka vata*. Religious tolerance, reconciliation, you name it, we are all called upon. Members of Parliament today, people are watching us. The prayer of this side of Parliament,

as you sit on the other side, you will support and we will work together.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I rise today in support of the motion raised by the honourable Prime Minister. Indeed, we have reached one year, and I wish to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation. God's inspiration and guidance be with all those who have helped us reach this milestone.

Abraham Lincoln, the former US President, said:

“The trouble with too many people is that they believe realm of truth always lies within their vision.”

And I say this when I hear what the other side said, “where is the progress? Where is the new project? You are not attending to the plight of the people!”

Then I recall on 23rd December, 2022, as we were about to come to Parliament to vote for the new Government, the new Prime Minister and the new President, what year the honourable Prime Minister challenged our Party, and that statement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, touches me. It reminds me and I keep on emphasising the same words over and over again to my staff and to the people, *Na cava na kavou o na cakava mera okata na lewei Viti, oqo na Viti vou*. What is the new thing you will do, so that the people of Fiji will say, ‘yes, this is the new Fiji’, and that is what we carry. That is our focus - the new Fiji.

Mr. Speaker Sir, in the course of my submission, I will, of course highlight some of the new changes we have created in our 14 months and, of course, also rebut some of what has been said from the other side.

There is a lot more on this journey - a lot of more planning, a lot more refining, a lot for change for the betterment of our nation. What an exciting year this year will be. No time for empty words or frivolous debate. No time for beating around the bush. No time for distractions, but only progress, moving Fiji forward, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because there was a mess.

A vesuki tu o Viti, e qai sereki. Me yacova mai qo, se tukuni tu ga, sega mada ga ni macala kea sega ni qaqa na Coalition Government. Where will we be?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last year, we launched the Assessment of the Inequalities in the Registration of Births and Deaths in Fiji from 2016-2021, being the first country in Asia and the Pacific to carry out a quantitative inequality assessment. This, indeed, was the first step for Fiji to bridge registration gaps. What we ask is; what was done all those years?

HON. J. USAMATE. – Hogwash!

HON. S.D. TURAGA₂ – Nothing.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA. – Absolutely nothing!

HON. S.D. TURAGA. – There is a real need to know our people, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure that even the youngest of society is taken care of. This progressive step is to better inform research conducted and policies aimed at social inclusion of the most vulnerable in our society and allows for international comparability. This includes looking into the challenges of teenage and young mothers in order to strengthen the delayed birth registration.

Birth registration, Mr. Speaker, Sir is a fundamental right and a crucial step to accessing

essential services. Sir, to help achieve higher birth registration, specifically targeting this provision of legal identity for all under the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 69) as we all know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with accurate data, we are able to better plan and provide for people beginning with our children.

I would like to state that the Ministry of Justice has just completed its 2018-2011 Annual Report. So, in the last five years, nothing was done. The Ministry is working on a Strategic Development Plan. Imagine, Mr. Speaker, Sir, why this was not done before, the question I ask?

Still on the subject of our children, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2023, we embarked on a public consultation to draft Bills namely, the Childcare and Protection Bill and the Draft Child...

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a Point of Order.

MR. SPEAKER. – Point of Order, honourable Attorney-General.

HON. V. NAUPOTO. – Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise on Point of Order 61 - relevance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he has not referred to any part of His Excellency's Address from when he started. He is talking about reports, et cetera, but nothing on His Excellency's Speech.

MR. SPEAKER. – You may continue, honourable Attorney-General.

HON. S.D. TURAGA. – The draft Bills also established the register for approved child agencies, organisations and children's homes. The draft Child Justice Bill increases the age of criminal responsibility from 10 years to 14 years and establishes the Child Justice Court.

This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are some of the features of the two draft Bills which are undergoing review. You must hear the people and because this impacts our young, we must give it the attention it deserves. That is how you make laws - identifying what needs to be done and ensuring that all have had a chance to share their opinions and expertise.

We are working with the Ministry of Women, Children and Child Protection. As His Excellency has pointed out, honourable Naupoto, that our aim is, indeed, to modernize and strengthen our legislative framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having addressed the issue of children, I now turn to another area that falls under my area of responsibility and, that is, of course, Corrections Service.

I am sorry to report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of the many years I have come across in my discoveries, it would be amiss of me not to outline the changes that have taken place since the era of darkness that overshadowed the institution.

HON. J. USAMATE. – Hogwash!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- It was different when Mr. Naivalurua was there, it was different when Mr. Vasu was there, but I can share, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the last five years was really difficult. Let me enlighten this august Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER. – Honourable Naivalurua and honourable Vasu. Please, address them in that way in Parliament.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Honourable Naivalurua and honourable Vasu, former Commissioners of Fiji Corrections Service. Thank you for your hard work.

The Fiji Corrections Service, just prior to us being in Government, operated on such stringent and almost toxic environment. As you would have seen last year, we removed the policy on single mothers. It was discriminatory on women. There was an atmosphere of fear and disrespect of a person's ranking with decisions made hastily and officers disproportionately disciplined.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is always light at the end of the tunnel. We believe in our people, no matter who you are and where you are. The FCS has severed its partnership with counterpart correction facilities overseas. There is now an MOU with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services for inmates, as well as Fiji Corrections officers and families.

For the first time, the Fiji Corrections Service is focused on a programme designed to impact the rehabilitation of inmates as well as the Fiji Corrections personnel and their families to promote spiritual development and help inculcate self-awareness, self-discipline and to nurture a culture of working together - something unheard of, at least. It definitely would not be something expected of the Fiji Corrections Service in previous years. That is change, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I am reminded of the famous words of Nelson Mandela and I quote: "For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chain, but to live in a way that respects and enhance the freedom of others."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Mercy Commission in 2023, assessed petitions made and a total 15 individuals were pardoned. This is a record. Why I say this, some of them have been pardoned, they have applied so many times but were never considered by the previous Mercy Commission. Having reviewed the guidelines that was previously used, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can honestly say that there was not much done for such a critical role that the Commission has.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I just share what I was told in December that Mr. Silatolu has spent countless years in prison. In December, his son, a pilot, took him to Singapore to visit. That was so lovely. Someone who had been incarcerated for so many years, the bond between a father and son with the mother gone, that is real freedom.

Our Anti-Discrimination Human Rights Commission, the Constitution itself contains a chapter dedicated to human rights. This is an institution that we look to, to spearhead human rights issues in Fiji. This means getting to know our people, empowering our people and speaking for our people when there is no one to do so.

We have since appointed a new Director at the Commission who brings with her a wealth of experience having been the Director of the Samoan National Human Rights Constitution for over seven years. The Commission has been active at the forefront of climate change and related issues, including healthy environment, drinking water and sanitation, food and cultural rights, to name a few, and visiting 27 villages in seven Provinces so far.

I would like to point out that the Commission has since opened their first ever regional office in Lautoka, with the next one to be in Labasa. I want to highlight, Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the opening of the Human Rights Office in Suva, there was no regional office until some weeks back. That shows the commitment and dedication of the Coalition Government in terms of advocating for human rights. The Human Rights Commission Act 1999 set for the initial establishment later repealed by the Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission 2009, this was over 15 years ago.

The Commission has now expanded, expressions visible and is key to reaching out to people. Mr. Speaker, Sir, one main office has been in place this whole time. It is shocking to note that in

2007 the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institution Sub-Committee on the tradition recommended suspending the “A” status of the Commission, that is, the Human Rights Commission in Fiji because it was of the view that the ability of the Commission to implement its human rights was compromised as a result of the *coup* in 2006 and that is the hallmark of the FijiFirst Government. Interference, interference, interference!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- In 2021, Fiji received the “B” status in line with the strategic priority, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Commission now intends to regain its former “A” status in its application by addressing the recommendations by the Sub-Committee. I have no doubt, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we will achieve it. Upholding human rights is a fundamental responsibility and goal of the Coalition Government.

Moving onto legal institutions, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to point at the outset, this Government's priority is to ensure that our people are equipped to do the work. Whilst we appreciate and thankful for the assistance that has been rendered to us over the years, we must change our mindset so that we can adopt a “we can attitude”. We are an independent nation and with that comes the responsibility to ensure that we ourselves are self-sustaining. We cannot continuously depend on others to do the work for us. With full representation, the Constitutional Offices Commission (COC) has met on several occasions to deliberate on pertinent issues that fall within the mandate under the 2013 Constitution.

The Constitutional Office Commission, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has to-date been the most active that I have ever witnessed. Never was a Commission with all its members present, never has there been a single Commission that ensures the due diligence, proper documentation and the right people are appointed to look into matters that require scrutiny. May I say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I started, I asked for the minutes, there was basically no record of this important Commission. So, we basically started afresh.

For the first time, the Commission resolved to consider its own Standing Operating Procedures (SOP) with respect to the conduct of its internal procedures and functions. For the first time, it established an independent committee to advice on the appropriate remuneration allowance that should be payable to all Constitutional Offices under its responsibility, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Some were sitting at \$500,000 some at \$350,000, that is the whole reason and part of the exercise so that it meets what it is required here. That review is currently being done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has been much speculation about the appointment of specific tribunals. Why are there no simultaneous appointments? Why the expenditure? Why is the process so slow? Why cannot specific officers be filled? We outright denounce the accusation of political interference.

May I remind this august Parliament, there is a distinction between the Constitutional Offices Commission and the Judicial Services Commission. The Constitutional Offices Commission operates when a complaint-initiated mechanism. It receives complaints from the members of the public and on assessment either report to the police or take note to initiate proceedings or allegations of misconduct, setup a tribunal and proceed to hearing. The Judicial Service Commission on the other hand is mandated to investigate complaints for other specific officers for instance those appointed by the Office of the Director of Public Prosecution and Judicial Officers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a former President of the United States of America and who many have turned to for his wise words of governance once said and I quote, “when we got into the office, the thing that surprise me most was to find that things were just as bad as we'd been saying they were.”

Those words speaks truth, that is the reason why we must get the right people to do the job, not to rush matters of sensitivity. No overnight analysis and verdicts. This is democracy, it is getting things done the right way and in the proper manner.

In 2023 alone, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the appointment of new Judicial Officers saw an increase on the number of local and qualified men and women appointed to the bench with proper remuneration, deserving of individuals who have spent much of their careers contributing to Fiji's legal system and jurisprudence. The judicial system now is well equipped to handle local cases by our people well-qualified to do so and who are able to understand the local context when it is required. This is also to ease the load of the numerous cases that are before our courts today which, Mr. Speaker, Sir, had to be audited by the Acting Chief Justice himself. This has never been done before in Fiji.

To give you a snapshot of the number of Judicial Officers, in 2021 there were eight new appointments. To-date a record of 22 Judicial Officers have been appointed, 11 Judges, three women and 11 Magistrates. I take this time to thank these men and women for their acceptance, commitment to the cause of justice. This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a change and I am very proud to be part of such a development in Fiji.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now turn to the major law reviews that His Excellency outlined as part of the legislative programmes. As you would know the Office of the Solicitor-General is responsible for the preparation of all laws. Principle subsidiary, this programme would ensure that there is a proper planning and policy mechanism in place to ensure that our laws are properly reviewed in relation to the review of the laws and that includes the setting up of the Fiji Law Reform Commission and Officers who have recently been appointed.

In all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is one thing I can attest to that had not adequately taken place previously – consultation. It is evident from the last 14 months, we are committed to ensure that the voice of the people are heard in formulating the Government policies and laws. This is important because it will determine the way forward to our country and we will ensure that the people's views are taken into account.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I can just round-off now. In one year, the Government assisted ten communities, one secondary school in the Lomaiviti Province through various projects, as the Tavua Village Evacuation Center, retrofitting project, foot bridges, four villages at the St John College, that is the change Government made, making a positive difference to the lives of people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have here a list of projects, I was told that there were no new projects undertaken by the Coalition Government, there are 11 projects in Lomaiviti, costing \$276,330.

(Hon. S.T. Koroilavesau interjects)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was supposed to be implemented 10 years ago or even more. That includes the jetty from my village, Nairai. This Coalition Government has taken action to implement those projects, that is the change that we are calling for.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I would like to support the

honourable Prime Minister's motion of an Ocean of Peace, the sentiments resonates deeply and I am reminded of Romans 14:19 and I quote: "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for this opportunity and I look forward to robust discussions and debate over the coming sittings in this august Parliament. *Vinaka vakalevu, ni kalougata saka tiko.*

MR. SPEAKER.- Remember the great inroads in the consultative stance he took in the nightclub hours. I remember honourable Usamate raising in Parliament - everything Lomaiviti. Now, he is talking about nightclubs, are there any nightclubs in Nairai?

But that is the way he has been undertaking his task by doing consultative work, even outside of the urban areas. Thank you honourable Attorney-General.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, to our audience in the gallery and thousands who have tuned in; *ni sa bula, namaste, assalamu alaikum* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand before you in this august Parliament today, not just as a Member of Parliament but as a voice for the aspirations and dreams of our entire young and dynamic generation, to respond to His Excellency's most Gracious Address delivered on Monday, 4th March, 2024. In response to His Excellency Address, I would like to turn my attention to the Coalition Ministers and their Ministries about their performances in the last 14 months, on matters of truth, constitutional integrity, accountability and transparency of our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Pacific islanders are the guardians of this ocean which is central to their way of life as it underpins their culture, food, livelihood and national economies. But the honourable Prime Minister's support for Japan's compliance with safety protocols for the nuclear waste dump has raised concerns by the youth of Fiji on the future state of our coastlines, marine ecosystems and quality of marine food. Majority of the youth have raised concerns on the health implications that they and their future generations will endure in time to come.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Pacific region produces about 0.03 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, yet we have been victims of climate change for decades. The comments made by the honourable Prime Minister to state that Australia's fossil fuel industries cannot shutdown immediately rather we want them to tone down has left the Pacific civil society representing the voices and concerns of communities deeply disappointed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a youth who has served in several communities, working and advocating for youth empowerment, climate sustainability and resilience, has labelled the honourable Prime Minister's comments to be harmful and destructive, and I quote:

"It was kind of a slap in the face of the hard work that has been put in by Pacific leaders both past and present."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, majority of the youth have expressed their concerns and disappointments over Fiji's vote at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) - a genocide depriving 2.2 million people from accessing food, water, medicine, electricity and fuel, the killings of innocent men, women and children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we come from the Pacific nations. We have already been victims of climate change for decades, Fiji has witnessed an estimated 28 cyclones in the last 40 years, our generations

have suffered, yet, we have supported someone else's suffering in the right for someone to defend their land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the audacity is questionable, and the youth of this country are asking, "is this the leadership we have inherited? I call on the honourable Prime Minister and I urge him to reconsider his decision.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no room for racism and inequality. Just like that, a war is never a solution. What the younger generations are asking for, is for people to stop dying.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another array of disappointment, shooting of stray animals is and will never be an option. Thousands of youth have raised their concerns and shared their disappointment in regard to the comments made by the honourable Minister for Agriculture. Addressing stray animal requires a multifaceted approach that combines Government interventions and societal engagements and most importantly, compassion. I believe there are NGOs who have emailed and are reaching out to the Councils and relevant authorities, and I urge the youth to continue raising their voices for animal welfare and wellbeing. I urge the honourable Prime Minister and his Cabinet to find more tangible but yet compassionate solutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is 2024. Where is the confidence in our economy? Where is the confidence under the Coalition Government? So many Fijians are leaving Fiji by the numbers when this Government came in. The amount of brain-drain has not gone unnoticed. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications says, "oh, there is a mood to invest in the country."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in fact, people are asking as to who authorised the airfare payments for the six *talatala* for a sightseeing trip to Macau city? Who paid? The rumours are that a Chinese group trying to sell the idea for casino.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What has this got to do with us?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the questions have been asked, "who paid?"

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Ask the *talatala*.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, hearing the concerns from that side, they can really fill the heat. Well, more is coming.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Some more, some more!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President highlighted about the efforts to end violence against women and girls and to promote women's economic empowerment. On 22nd November, 2023, Fijivillage stated honourable Sashi Kiran's comments, and I quote:

"Our aim is to mould women into leadership roles and encourage them into the Fijian political life that led to the upcoming municipal elections."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently, a female CEO has resigned because of working conditions she was facing. Did the honourable Minister, and even the honourable Minister for Women said anything about this? In fact, I asked the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection and

her Assistant Minister, how many women are Special Administrators? How many women are in advisory roles? Crime against women has increased by 31 percent.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Very poor!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, furthermore, the honourable Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications likes to talk about 16 years but in 14 months under the Coalition Government, we have witnessed \$122 million wind turbine deal blunder under this Government.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Two agencies had signed it, but we need to note is that a female who was the Permanent Secretary for Fisheries and Forests was removed. What about the other member?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- 16 years did nothing.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Trust the process.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Back to the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection and her Assistant Minister, please, stop hiding behind your fancy speeches of women empowerment and go to the ground and see what is happening. Go and talk to Shamima Ali from the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, who has recently come out with bold statements about the state of the women in this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Ministers need a wake-up call. Sugar coated and fancy words will do no good for this country.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- For 16 years, you did nothing.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- 14 months - \$122 million turbine deal gone wrong. Who was sleeping on the job?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President highlighted about Fiji's debt, that it will be around \$10 billion in July 2024. Some of the politicians on the other side harped at the top of their voices with all the energy they had, about reducing debt in the last campaign, but that has increased under this Government.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Very contradicting statements, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

His Excellency the President also spoke about strengthening our economy and building confidence with investors. I would like to remind this august Parliament and the youth of this country that a Parliament is not a place to give out or speak of unrealistic dreams and promises, so in a matter of accountability ...

(Honourable Tuisawau interjects)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Go fix the roads?

(Laughter)

... on 4th July, 2016, when honourable Professor Prasad was a Member of Parliament on the Opposition side, said and I quote, "The National Minimum Wages rate of \$2.32 has become a joke around grog bowls." He labelled the National Minimum Wage as a joke, and this was an insult to the ordinary Fijians. How can we expect him to increase the National Minimum Wages to \$5?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It's coming.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I would like to tell him, Mr. Speaker, Sir, through you, what is the national joke of the country around grog bowls:

1. When will wages be \$5; and
2. When will lamb chops be \$5 a kilogramme.

That is the national joke of the country.

(Laughter)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, since when were politicians appearing on sponsored talkback shows? Fijian Broadcasting Corporations is there for public service broadcast and it has a wider reach. I have seen some of your talk shows, my goodness!

(Laughter)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, who is paying for all these talkback shows?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- They could have called for an Expressions of Interest or tender but nothing of that sort. This is a party government.

MR. SPEAKER.- A Point of Order has been raised.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Standing Order 60 - Relevance. The honourable Member is going all over the place. He should be sticking to the point and speaking on His Excellency's Address. He is going all over the place, and we cannot be knowing where he is going to.

MR. SPEAKER.- You may continue, honourable Member. He is not going all over the place. I think he is well on track.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I urge the other side to pay attention because I said in a matter of accountability. Again, on a matter of accountability, on 10th July, 2018, honourable Professor Prasad, as a Member of Parliament, said and I quote, "We will be cutting Ministerial salaries and allowances, we will be cutting international conferences and we will be keeping Ministers at home, focusing to make lives better for Fijians."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a matter of accountability, I would like to ask the Coalition Government; how many international trips have you taken in the last 14 months?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Point of Order, honourable Sharma.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Standing Order 60 on Misleading. The honourable Member is misleading Parliament by saying “what I promised in 2018”. We have kept the 20 percent reduction in the salary, we have reduced the allowances and for him to actually lie in this Parliament and said that we have not done anything about the allowances, we have not done anything about the salaries. In this Parliament, he was here, they were actually opposing it.

We reduced the allowances. So, I urge the honourable Member to stop lying in Parliament.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order! Honourable Deputy Prime Minister is raising a Point of Order on relevancy, that is, Standing Order 60 and misleading is under what?

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Relevance.

MR. SPEAKER.- Based on that, you may continue honourable Sharma.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, I urge honourable Coalition Ministers to listen carefully because we are speaking the voices of the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am quoting him and my question is, “how many international trips? They really feel the heat on this question. How many international trips, Coalition Government? In fact, I heard some of them, they are booking their flights right after this Parliament, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Sharma?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Yes, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think you confine yourself a little bit more there because I will be travelling.

(Laughter)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Standing Order 62 – when speaking a Member must not impute improper motives to any other Member.

MR. SPEAKER.- He is just quoting from what was being said.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- He did not name anyone.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Sir, implying that the international travel was unnecessary and

for personal benefit. Because when we look back during the FijiFirst Government where they took thousands of trips for climate change meetings, what happened? Now, he is imputing improper motives for all the travel we did.

The other point, a lot of these travels is funded internationally from international organisations and it is for mandated meetings and international obligations which we are obliged to.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Answer the question.

MR. SPEAKER.- The point that has been raised is misleading Parliament and imputing improper motives. I mean, honourable Sharma, overseas trips are necessary. We are not living in an isolated island but rather we live in this global village that we live in, and we are part and parcel of what is happening immediately surrounding us and those that are beyond us. So, we have to attend the meeting and I think it is only proper that we continue because that is the role made by the previous Government and is done by this Government and the next Government as well. So, if you want to raise issues on these overseas trips, yes, come out with the facts.

What are you really attacking, is it the allowances that they receive because you need to provide a good answer there or reply to that effect so as to what warrants all these trips? Actually, you have raised more than enough in your punches that you have been throwing and it has worked well because Members from this side have reacted as well. You may continue, honourable Sharma.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, with these 14 months, we have witnessed the poor, fiscal and economic policies. Under this honourable Minister of Finance, we see Fiji's largest deficit budget. Accept it, he is very historic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over \$800 million have been...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- ...borrowed. The youths were told that their loan is forgiven, but they are under a bond.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order! Please, allow honourable Sharma to continue with his speech.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, last week, someone met me and said that most of the Special Administrators and Advisors are mostly NFP members. And he further added on and said, "Hey, has NFP already started their election campaign for 2026?"

Who knows, Mr. Speaker, Sir, people are talking. I urge the honourable Prime Minister, that many people are saying that with this honourable Minister for ...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Point of Order! Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, I refer to those Standing Orders. This honourable Member is still lying, misinformation and misleading. He is saying all the Administrators are NFP supporters.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- No!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- To say even 'most'. Remotely, it is not 'most'. He is making a generalisation, telling a lie to the people of Fiji that all those Administrators appointed by the honourable Minister are NFP supporters.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Not all.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He used the word, 'most'. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want him to bring evidence and prove that out of all the Administrators appointed, in all the towns and city councils that most of them are NFP supporters. I want him to do that, otherwise, he should be referred to the Privileges Committee, which we will look into.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- No!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

My ruling on that, since you have indicated generally, imputing proper motives, what else have you stated. But I was waiting for what Standing Orders has he breached.

If I remember correctly and if I heard him right, honourable Sharma indicated that that was something he heard, people were making comments. I would not dare to go that far, because here we are talking about whatever is going to appear in the *Daily Hansard* the next day, and we just have to take it from there. If that could be agreed upon then we will leave it at that and ask honourable Sharma to stay focussed and continue with his speech.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has been 14 months as a Member of Parliament and we are recognised in the public and they do reach out to us anywhere we are - getting in our vans or in the supermarket, and they come and share what they feel about the country. So, I said someone told me, and I do not even know or recognise that person, but they recognised me, and they shared their feelings.

In fact, I remember someone met me in front of Extra Supermarket and said, "Oh I want to go to India as well on the trip that farmers went to." I said, you have to ask the honourable Minister for Sugar. And he said, "Oh, if they can take the plane to Israel then they can take the plane to India as well and take all of us." So, this is the precedence this Government is setting.

With the honourable Minister of Finance, again, people are saying that there are more gaps and potholes in our economy than our roads. God forbid, if honourable Tabuya was Minister of Finance, they might have been printing money, who knows. I urge the honourable Prime Minister to reconsider certain Ministerial positions and conduct a surprise reshuffle very soon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to talk about vision and empowerment. When Fiji hosted the first Super Rugby Game between Chiefs and Crusaders in 2016, it not only boosted our economic activity and income, but it also inspired the ambitions of our younger *iTaukei* generation both, boys and girls. Today, we have the *Fijian Drua*, today we have the *Fijiana Drua*, and I congratulate the *Fijian Drua* for their defeat over Crusaders last week.

Sport or rugby runs in the blood of every indigenous and every Fijian Mr. Speaker, Sir, and the *Fijian Drua* and the *Fijiana Drua* are platforms that will inspire and empower our younger generation, this is called empowerment. This was the vision of the FijiFirst Government under the former Prime Minister, Frank Bainimarama. And the day is not far where Fiji will win the Rugby World Cup. Success is small steps taken consistently and that day is not far.

Honourable Prasad, this is what you call a vision, because I have seen the *Daily Hansard* of the last eight years and I have seen that he always said that we did not have a vision. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the same vision for a career and sports and to empower our younger generations, FijiFirst had the same vision with hosting regional and international games boosting economic activity and inspiring the younger generations for a career in sports with the Lautoka Swimming Pool project. There has been delays but the Coalition Government has allocated a budget to complete the Lautoka Swimming Pool project and the nation and majority of the youth await the completion of this project.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my final words, I would like to congratulate all the newly appointed Prefects in our primary and secondary schools, and I wish you the very best with the responsibility bestowed upon you.

My fellow youths, we stand at a very pivotal moment in history today. Despite the challenges we face, I am filled with hope and optimism because I believe in the boundless potential of our youth. Honourable Prime Minister, I urge you to consider the concerns and voices of our youth because the decisions you make today will shape the world our youth will inherit tomorrow. The question I would like the younger generation to ask themselves is not what the country can do for me but what I can do for my beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note, I wish everyone a prosperous 2024. May God bless us all with good health and prosperity. May God bless our beloved nation, Fiji. *Vinaka*.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament now for lunch as I have another meeting, especially for what honourable Sharma has just highlighted. We need to be having a briefing with the group that will be going to Geneva next week because we are members of the Inter-Parliamentary Unit (IPU) and we need to be presenting and receiving some responsibilities as well in the process.

The Parliament is now adjourned for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.38 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.14 p.m.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and our viewers tuning in today from the comfort of their homes and those who are seated at the gallery, ladies and gentlemen; *ni sa bula vina'a* and very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give my response to His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere's most gracious Address in the opening of the 2024 Parliament Session. At the outset, Sir, I wish to thank His Excellency for his Address which is the pinnacle of the Coalition Government's approach for the year.

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency has raised plans for the Government and also raised some issues and in particular, the one that encapsulates the essence of the whole Address, and I quote:

“As leaders, we are required to leave a side our differences for the common good of our people. We must focus on our shared destiny and commonality rather than our small differences”.

Mr. Speaker, as rightly highlighted by His Excellency, unprincipled politicians still continue to initiate mistrust for their own political mileage and this will be a huge curtain in our endeavour to move Fiji forward.

Mr. Speaker, I now turn my attention to the sentiments alluded to by the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration on the role played by our Law Enforcement – the Police Officers, the Royal Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) and the Department of Immigration.

At the outset, Mr. Speaker, we must acknowledge the collaborative efforts that the hardworking men and women in the RFMF and Police do in preserving the safety, stability, security, defense and general wellbeing of all Fijians. Safety and security are paramount for Fiji and it must be taken in as a collective approach by everyone in this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency has also raised the issue surrounding drugs. For the past few days, this has been one of the major issues heard inside Parliament. The sudden surge in drugs in Fiji is now a national issue and a very concerning one.

However, Sir, it is saddening that it has now being politicized for political gain. The issue of surge in drugs in Fiji, as the honourable Minister Tikoduadua rightfully said, has been an inherited one from the laxity of the previous Administration.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, this has been the wilful neglect of the FijiFirst Government and as honourable Tubuna has rightfully stated this yesterday that in August 2019, an olive branch was extended to the Government of the day by the Opposition when they moved a motion inside this august Parliament for a Committee to be set up to investigate the drug problem. Alarming, the FijiFirst Government then opposed the motion.

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU. Shame!

HON. HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- If this had been set up then, this could have been resolved by now.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the drug problem has been scrutinized by Opposition Members, however, they failed to even acknowledge the sacrifices made by men and women who go out on these raids, day and night, who go and board ships. They even failed to acknowledge those men and women, yet we are called leaders elected by the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fight against drugs is not only an international or national issue. In fact, it has been a contemporary security issue discussed on various multilateral platforms in the regional and national level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, instead of working together to address this issue we, the leaders, are focusing on the alleged laxity of our law enforcement which is very embarrassing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to echo honourable Aliki Bia's sentiments in this august Parliament by stating, if not us, then who? If not now, then when? It is our time to address this critical issue together which requires our collaboration and work towards a drug free Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now turn to address some of the reforms and achievements of the Department of Immigration which will enhance the work of the Department to deliver efficiency.

Firstly, I wish to inform Parliament that the Immigration Department is in its final stages of relocating to the Lala Ramdin Building at 40 Robertson Road, Suva. They will provide immigration services from Monday next week, 18th March, 2024. This is a big achievement for the Department as the former building had not been OHS compliant since 2021. The welfare of the staff and the public as a whole is important and with the new building, all these will be achieved. I wish to acknowledge the assistance of the RFMF, the Fiji Navy, Fiji Police Force, Fiji Corrections Service and the Public Works Department in the relocation exercise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Cabinet approval, Immigration Laws and Regulations will be reviewed with a focus on the importance of security. The national security theme areas will be covered and proper security assessment and implementation will be ensured for operational activities to meet its objective. Another focus area of the review of the Immigration Laws will be a focus on efficiency and deliverance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department has also constructed an intelligence structure to disseminate security assessments and provide useful intelligence information to address both, traditional and non-traditional threats, along with strengthening border enforcement and policy framework. This had spearheaded the development of a 5-Year Strategic Plan for the Immigration Department to support the objective on preserving security integrity and national security.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the development of Fiji's Foreign Policy will re-evaluate our international co-operation and engagements, prioritising border security and protection, and exploring best security measures at our borders. The basis of the security pillar is to use effective mechanism to address emerging migratory patterns and monitor movement of illegal migrants and illicit activities. This will form the core rules of our engagement with our development partners through co-operation and discussion aimed at strengthening our bilateral and international agreements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the Department's mission is to facilitate a seamless accommodation

process for inbound and outbound travellers, at the same time, maintaining the rule of law, upholding integrity and provide a balance of security. This has been implemented by coordinating security assessments to validate any foreign status and to maintain territorial border protection.

In order to achieve the right balance between security and facilitation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are presently establishing an automated system and digitizing the immigration route procedure. The various migrations pathway will be upgraded through the introduction of a Document Management System and Passenger Information System. This is very important because we need advanced information on the people who are coming into our country. This will provide essential information to security apparatus and enabled agencies and clients to experience the efficiency of service. Sir, this is the way forward given that we are in the digital age.

Furthermore, the Cabinet's decision to outsource Immigration Administrative Services is certainly a breakthrough and a turning point for the Coalition Administration. The outsource initiative for the Government will allow efficient delivery of immigration service that are required on a worldwide scale with the convenience of access to our Fijian diaspora around the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot has been said about the migration and the brain-drain that has touched our country. Interestingly, the Opposition has painted the narrative that people are fleeing because of the change of Government. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to provide some numbers to provide some clarity for the viewers, the people and of course, for Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2016 the total number of people who left our shores was 5,949; in 2017 the total number of people who left our shores was 4,765; in 2018 the total number of people who left our shores was 4,944; in 2019 the total number of people that left our shores was 5,365; in 2020 the total number of people of people who left our shores was 1,016, in 2021 the total number of people who left our shores was 1,193; and the largest number by far, in 2022 the total number of people who left our shores was 5,335 and in 2023, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was only 3,207.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- The largest brain drain that has happened in this country was by their administration, Mr. Speaker. These are the facts.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- A lot has been said about the brain drain. The figures do not lie, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I hope that gives some clarity to Parliament.

I wish to thank, in particular, those border law enforcement officers. As I already alluded to, Mr. Speaker, Sir, most of these border law enforcement officers have to go out at night or day and jump in ships and do searches, passport checks given the rise in drugs, in some places bullets are being found, the safety of their lives are at risk. I wish to acknowledge them, Mr. Speaker, Sir. In the Immigration Department, a lot of these are women who are boarding ships and I acknowledge the women and the staff of the Immigration Department and Customs who all go out and protect our borders while we are at the comfort of our homes.

I also wish to acknowledge the Fiji Police Force for the big work that they are doing in fighting drugs, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is one of the major things that we have to look at and we acknowledge that.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to remind Parliament, let us demonstrate to the world

that even in the midst of our disagreement, we are united and commitment to the common good. I urge each and everyone of you to embrace this spirit of cooperation and collaboration. Let us work together, let us cross party lines to build a brighter future to our nation and its citizens.

With those few words, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to respond to His Excellency's Address and I fully support the motion that is before Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Just for clarity, the women boarding the ships. What are these? For clarity because I do not know what you were referring to.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Sir, it is Customs and Immigration.

MR. SPEAKER.- Customs and Immigration?

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Yes, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, it is a lot of clearer now.

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, families and friends who are joining us here at the gallery and who are watching this livestream. *Vina na cola* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Scripture says in 2 Corinthians 9:15 and I quote: "Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, unspeakable gift in that heaven was emptied when Christ came to live among men, to die on the cross for our sins and his glorious resurrection on Sunday morning is a subject worth contemplating for eternity. I thank God for through Jesus for the life I am able to enjoy this far and for the humble duties that I am privileged to enjoy, and to serve this country in this way.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must thank His Excellency the President for his elaborate Address to this august Parliament and the whole of Fiji while Opening the 2024 Session of Parliament, particularly, in his concern and promotion of racial harmony, unity in diversity. That is what is needed now to spearhead development plans that are undertaken by public and private sectors as shown by the resilience of all stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I go any further, I wish to remind both sides of Parliament that as honourable Members, we are here for only one purpose and that one main purpose is to be the voice of our people. People look up to us as leaders, leaders who must uphold the Constitution and the rule of law; Leaders who are here not for personal interest and gain; Leaders who are here and not acting as recruitment agencies for their families and friends; Leaders who are here and not to abuse their powers vested upon them. Leaders who are here not to further their interest of only one religious or social group.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it is only proper to thank the Coalition Government after one year of operation of the three projects that have been started. Paramount to the people of Navosa, was what the honourable Prime Minister and his supportive government entourage visit to Keiyasi on 15th February, 2024, for the groundbreaking ceremony and phase 1 of the Keiyasi Satellite Town Project. This project was in its planning stage in 2019 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the globe. It is one of the four growth centres in Fiji. As part of the Ministry of Local Government, Urban Planning and Management programme, it is earmarked as a town.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since Navosa is the major supplier of many agricultural products and the biggest supply of meat industry, we hope that the tarsealing of the Sigatoka Valley Road from Narata to Keiyasi will be undertaken soon. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also plead with the honourable Prime Minister that the Savusavu-Buca Bay Highway be tarsealed from Bagasau to Napuka. The Valley Road like the Savusavu-Buca Bay Road seems to be forgotten.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whatever the reason, the Government of the day has an obligation to complete these roads for fairness sake both, economically and for community health and wellbeing. In view of what the Government of the day tries to do in the area, one wonders how the honourable Minister of Finance can take exceptions to air his personal negative view about the area. I hope it is not a contradiction that will eat away the trust and solidarity of the Government of the day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, once again the recent *Fiji Sun* report on Monday, 10th March, 2024, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics sadly and unashamedly continued to spew out his poisonous and damaging venom about the Subdivisional Hospital at Keiyasi, Navosa, blaming the FijiFirst Government's conflict of interest in awarding the contract to Chand's Engineering Consultant and the allegations about the Construction Implementation Unit. So what?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no amount of complain and jealousy for the FijiFirst achievements will change the reality that the hospital is in Navosa until the end of time. The worst part is to continue to argue that the hospital is misplaced and to repeat the content of the *Fiji Sun* article, the honourable Minister said, and I quote, "...that the population in Keiyasi is not that many. An ambulance could have been put there, that could save millions of dollars." This is a perfect observation of a technocrat who is there to save money at the expense of real development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think there is general misconception about the area and the population the subdivisional hospital serves. The honourable Minister keeps on talking about Keiyasi population. For his information Mr. Speaker, Sir, Navosa is a province of its own, formerly known as Colo West, one of the provinces of Viti Levu which was abolished in 1945, whereby most of Colo West or Navosa was added to the coastal province of Nadroga. The 2017 census revealed this:

<u>Population</u>	
Navosa	9,536
Magodro (Part of Ba Province)	4,806
Total	14,342

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Keiyasi Hospital currently serves the people of Navosa and the public, not a particular individual or group but the general public, who are now benefiting from easy access to medical services. Unlike organisations and institutions, such as Global Girit and Polytech that appeared from nowhere, have now become beneficiaries of the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with that being said, I take this opportunity to thank the Vatubalavu Village Adventist Women's Group who recently supplied vegetables to the Navosa Hospital health workers, the Salaiba Church members who planted vegetables and cash crops at the Navosa Hospital farm and not forgetting the Sigatoka Central Adventist Youth for clearing the debris under the Sigatoka Old Bridge as part of their community outreach programme, leading up to the Adventist Global Youth Day which will be celebrated worldwide on 16th March, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, choosing the subject to speak on from His Excellency the President's Address on the Opening of the 2024 Session of Parliament is tough. Even though there was not much on the development of youth and sports, however, His Excellency spoke on matters that are important

and relevant and that will enhance the livelihood of our children and youths. Notably, His Excellency spoke and emphasised on racial harmony, financial literacy, climate change, et cetera. I have decided to speak on two topics that I personally feel is of grave importance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have chosen this topic on education because of my concern of the high dropout rate of our education system and the diminishing laws of respect of children to parents and adults. If the home is the child's first school fails to train the child, then the second line of defence is the school to deal with a child's readiness, interest, attitudes and abilities rather than focusing on standardising children's performance through tests and examination. Some years ago, a regional education symposium in the Solomon Islands titled, "Education for What?" What is the purpose of our education system?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in His Excellency's Presidential Address at the Opening of the 2024 Session of Parliament, he alluded to, I quote:

"The formulation of the new Sector Strategic Plan for the next 10 years is aligned to the needs of the labour market and will also address ... a holistic review of our education system, so that it adequately aligned to our needs."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is true that the labour market needs must be met, but not at the expense of the individual development in creativity and character building. This current system of education, as His Excellency the President rightfully asserted, its priority is applying the needs of the labour market or what is commonly called "factory model". David Elkind in his book "*The Hurried Child*" said, I quote:

"We have a lot of failure in our present system of education because we have borrowed the factory model of education, which pays little attention to individual differences in mental abilities, learning roles and learning style. Children are pressed to meet uniform standard as measured by standardised tests and examinations. Those children who cannot keep up in these system as indicated by examination, are often regarded as defective vessels and labelled as learning disable."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he further added, and I quote:"

"Schools have become increasingly industrialised and product oriented, teachers are unionised, textbooks are standardised on national level and examination has become mechanised."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Dorn Fromberg, Director of Early Childhood added, and I quote:

"Children discover very quickly that passing tests or examinations rather than meaningful learning is what school is all about. There is no evidence that standardised test makes a difference in learning who is benefiting. Not the communities but large corporation and publishing companies."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to appeal to the powers that be in our education system that meaningful learning to replace the artificial standardised examination and paying little attention to individual differences. In the book *Education*, says and I quote:

"As the student sacrifices the power to reason and judge for himself, he becomes incapable of discriminating between the truth and error and falls an easy prey to and

is eagerly led to follow tradition and custom.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a distinguish Educationist writing at late 1960 and early 1970s stated, and I quote:

“Fiji is the most examined country in the whole world, Fiji Intermediate Exam at the end of Class 6, Fiji Secondary Entrance after Class 8, Fiji Junior Certificate Examination at the end of Form 4 and Senior Cambridge at the end of Form 6.”

Mr. Speaker, we are not educating children through their natural learning styles but preparing them as a standardised outcome or product at the end of a factory processing programme. Our primary focus should be character building and responsible citizens should be the aim of our education system instead of supplying material for an expected product at the end of a processing plant. Instead of being interested in the Intelligence Quotient (IQ), let us be more concerned with Emotional Quotient (EQ). No wonder in the iTLTB recent report, one of these dailies said that 75 percent of the *iTaukei* are below the poverty line. There are more *iTaukei* begging on streets, more *iTaukei* are criminals and consequently more *iTaukei* are drug users.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the whole scenario is not bright, perhaps a radical shift of our school curriculum and education priorities may help particularly from being a standardised product of the factory model to education based on character building and recognition of individual differences. I hope that the present dilemma and period of uncertainty in the Ministry of Education may provide an appropriate environment to enhance this very important education reform of lessening the impact of standardising the children's performance through tests and exams.

Mr. Speaker, when we were very young, our parents taught us and expected us to recite by memory some of these quotations from the education's classic every morning before our devotion. That kind of wrapping up the holistic education approach, I am trying to explain. The American writer Ellen G. White wrote, and I quote:

“Our ideas of education take too narrow and too low a range. There is a need of a broader scope, a higher aim. True education means more than the pursual of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after all is said and done, I would like this august Parliament and the Ministry of Education to focus more on home schooling rather than the system of education saturated examination, standardised tests, standardised test books and standardised teacher union as the rest of the education agenda could be looked after very well by the artificial intelligence. Therefore, our school for the future should focus more on creative thinking and character building as suggested by the following quotations:

“The greatest want of the world is the want of men. Men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost soul are true and honest. Men who do not fear to call sin by its right name, men whose conscience, is as true to duty as the needle to the pole. Men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving on to the Great Council of Chiefs, while the emphasis is always on the British Divide and Rule Policy, we hardly mentioned the real injustice and problem was over

Protection and Protectionism Policy. When there was a big economic project to be undertaken, the natives from the Indian subcontinent were virtually scarified at the expense of the natives Protectionism Policy. While hell was raging and let loose in the sugarcane farms engulfing the natives from the Indian subcontinent, the natives of Viti (Fijian) were given special privilege to protect their tradition, folklore and way of life in their villages.

Mr. Speaker, after exactly 108 years and seeing the Indians had no stopping economically, the first political upheaval was conducted very clearly in the guise of protecting indigenous interests from Indian dominance and possible takeover. The Indigenous Protectionism Policy was not working, participation in the mere hard work and self-discipline is the way to go for the *iTaukei* who had to choose either to live a comfortable economic lifestyle or be satisfied with preservation of traditional and way of life. Now 37 years later, we are reviving the Council of Chief to continue the British Colonial legacy of protectionism. The mindset of the *iTaukei* must change, and that they must accept the fact that their non-performance in business is caused by dependency mode and lack of self-discipline.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently, we are told that 75 percent of *iTaukei* live below poverty line. There are more *iTaukei* begging in the streets, criminals and drug users than any other ethnicity in this country. The Suva Bus Stand is home to more *iTaukei* than any other ethnic group.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me repeat something I said some time ago. I think we are struggling as a race not because of the migrant race, but because we continue to cling to old ideas and myths. We want things to be the way they were. Old ideas are our biggest liability. They are liabilities because we fail to realize that ideas or way of doing things were as at yesterday, but yesterday is gone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to think beyond ethnicity. Ethnic politics has no place in modern state for it creates division and economic chaos. If our mindset and attitude do not change, then let us prepare for the worse scenario and political humiliation in the years to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the Council of Chiefs is not serious about understanding and resolving *iTaukei's* challenges and myths confronting us, the threat of a major structural erosion of one of the world's finest and most colourful cultures become a real possibility.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of this august Parliament, members of the public who are here at the gallery and those listening online and from their homes; *ni sa bula vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to speak in the *iTaukei* language as I deliver my response to His Excellency's Gracious Speech on Monday, 4th March, 2024.

Turaga na Sipika, au taura na gauna vinaka oqo me'u cavuta na vakavinavinaka vei ira na Turaga na Peresitedi ni noda vanua, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, ena vuku ni vosa vakatama ni veivakadeitaki era mai dolava kina na noda Palimedi ena yabaki vou ni veiqaravi oqo. Ena nodra vosa, e veibolei ka veivakauqeti ena noda rogoca. E bucina na noda duavata na lewenivanua e Viti ka tokona na noda toso ki liu.

Ena nodra vosa, era vakabibitaka tiko na Turaga na Peresitedi ni sa bibi na kena vakagataki na veiqaravi ena yavu ni veiliutaki vinaka kei na bula vinaka ni kawa iTaukei. Ia, sa bibi na kena tutaki na cakacaka ni noda bula veilomani kei na veisaututaki ena keda maliwa vaka duidui kawa tamata.

[Mr. Speaker, I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to His Excellency the President, Ratu Viliame Maivalili Katonivere, for the fatherly words of counsel and his impactful message marking the beginning of another Parliament calendar year. It was, indeed, a Speech that promoted unity and progress.

From His Excellency's Speech, we have learned that in maintaining our focus on good governance and wellbeing of the iTaukei, we must promote peace and harmony among all Fijians as its core value.]

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I wish to respond to an earlier question that was raised by honourable Kirpal on the consultations by the iTaukei Land Trust Board (iTLTB) on the conversion of Crown land to *iTaukei* land.

For the honourable Members' information, the objective of the inquiry is to determine if the claims received from the *iTaukei* landowning units are valid and deserve to be processed, in line with the provisions of section 18 of the iTaukei Land Trust Act 1940 and section 8 of the State Lands Act 1945.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, section 18 of the iTaukei Land Trust Act 1940 states, and I quote:

“If the Minister is satisfied that the land belonging to any mataqali is insufficient for the use, maintenance or support of its members it shall be lawful for the Minister by proclamation to set aside such State land, or land acquired for or on behalf of iTaukei by purchase, as in his or her opinion may be required for the use, maintenance or support of such mataqali. Any area so set aside shall be deemed to be an iTaukei reserve.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, section 8 of the State Lands Act 1945 states, and I quote:

“When any iTaukei land which has been acquired by the State for public purposes under the provisions of the State Acquisitions of Lands Act 1940 or any other written law is no longer required for such purposes, the Minister, after consultation with Cabinet, may, by order, declare such land to be iTaukei land and such declaration shall be recorded in the name of the unit from which it was acquired in the Register of iTaukei Lands kept under the provisions of section 8 of the iTaukei Lands Act 1905.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the above provisions of the two Acts have clearly set out the objectives of the consultations. Under the iTaukei Land (iTaukei Reserves) Regulations 1940, the Reserve Commissioner is appointed under the said Regulations by the Minister to undertake the inquiries mentioned above. Further, under Regulation 10 of the said Regulations, the Commissioner is required to provide the report of the Commissioner to the Board. Once the Board endorses the Report, it is referred to the Ministry of Lands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTLTB was carrying out these inquiries until 2006, as cases referred to the Ministry of Lands were stalled due to the change in Government. Despite that, the iTLTB continued to receive requests from landowning units with insufficient land. However, in 2011, the Government issued a directive that such claims could no longer be entertained. Sir, this ended any hope that the landowning units had.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under this Government, the iTLTB, using its provision as set out earlier, revisited all those received claims since 2006. There was no ulterior motive about these consultations. For honourable Kirpal's information, I was fully aware of the consultations, and I am satisfied that these were within the bounds of the law.

His Excellency, in his Opening Address, had implored in this august Parliament that we are to listen to the voices of the people. In the last 13 years, the landowning units had been denied their right to be heard on these matters. We will hear their views and extend to them natural justice. We cannot love justice and ignore prejudice. The right is not from the Coalition Government generosity but from the hand of God.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I, on behalf of the Government, offer our firm assurance and commitment to all the communities in Fiji that we will listen and consult with all the stakeholders throughout the process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I quickly respond to honourable Bulitavu's statement on the *iTaukei* legislation. The review of the *iTaukei* Affairs Act 1944 and the *iTaukei* Lands Act 1905 are budgetted in the current financial year. These Acts and the institutions under them had to await the re-establishment of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) but will be completed before the end of this financial year. The review of the *iTaukei* Land Trust Act 1940 and the *iTaukei* Trust Fund Act 2004 will be completed before the end of 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now continue with my response in the *iTaukei* language.

Turaga na Sipika, ena tolu na vula sa oti, e a mai vakadaberi lesu tale vakalawa na Bose Levu Vakaturaga. Ena nodra mai dolava nai Liuiu ni Matanitu na Bose Levu Vakaturaga sa oti, era a vakadeitaka kina na rai ni Matanitu ena vuku ni Bose Levu Vakaturaga, ka ra vakaraitaka na bibi ni nodra rogoci ka maroroi na lewenivanua kece sara ena noda vanua me na rawa ni basika kina na bula sautu kei na veilomani. Ia, na bula sautu kei na veilomani ena totoka sara kevaka e maroroi, rokovi ka dokai na noda I tovo kei na i vakarau eda kilai tani kina na i iTaukei, na kena vakadinadinataki ka vakadodonutaki na veika eso ka sega tu ni caka vakasavasava me baleti keda. Ogo na dina levu ka mosimosi, ia sa dodonu meda na veitalanoataka.

Na Tabacakacaka i Taukei sa dei matua ena kena vakasavasavataki ka vakadodonutaki na veika ogo, ka sa tuvai oti eso na i tuvatuva me na rawa ni qaravi kina. Au via vakaraitaka talega eke ni sa mai digitaki oti na Chairman vou ni Bose Levu Vakaturaga ka na qai raica yani na veituvatuva ka ratou kauta mai na GCC Review Team ka sa mai qaravi oti.

Turaga na Sipika, na bula sautu kei na veilomani ena qai rawa ga kevaka e laveti cake na rawa ka vakailavo kei na bula sautu ni kawa iTaukei. Ena noqu a sikova tiko na veiyasana e Viti ena yabaki sa oti, au sa raica na bolebole ni sasaga ni kena curumi yani na buturara ni veiliutaki, vuli, na vakasaqarai ni vurevure ni bula kei na kena veivakatorocaketaki ena veikoro vaka-Viti.

Me vakavotukanataki na i gu ni sasaga ogo, sa tuvana na Tabacakacaka i Taukei e vica na i tuvatuva me na rawa ni yacovi kina. Na laveti cake ni rawa ka vakailavo ni kawa iTaukei esa rui ka bibi ena kena qaravi na veivakatorocaketaki raraba ni noda vanua ko Viti.

Ena loma ni tuvatuva vou ogo ka vakatokai na Solesolevaki Framework, sa tekivu meratou sa taura eso na cavuikalawa lelevu na veitabana kece vaka-iTaukei ena nodra vukei na noda lewenivanua.

Esa mai tauyavutaka na Tabacakacaka ni Qele Maroroi e va na i tuvatuva vovou me ra vukei kina na i taukei ni qele ka vaka ogo:

1. *Esa tauyavu na tobu ni yau ni veivakatoroicaketaki ni iTaukei se na iTaukei Development Fund.*
2. *Esa mai tauyavu talega na tobu ni yau ni iTaukei se na iTaukei Wealth Fund.*

3. *Esa tauyavu talega na tabana ni nodra vukei na i taukei ni qele ena vuravura ni saravanua se eco-tourism.*
4. *Esa tauyavutaki vakatabakidua e dua na tabana ka vakatokai na Land Services and Land Development Unit, ka qarava na kena vakatoroicaketaki na noda qele.*

Turaga na Sipika, esa mai vakalesui tale na nodra i votavota na Turaga iTaukei, Turaga ni Yavusa kei na Turaga ni Mataqali. Esa dua na i tavi levu era qarava ena kena colati na i tavi ni Vanua, Lotu kei na Matanitu.

Esa i ira ogo era dau rai cake kina na lewenivanua ena nodra liutaki, kei na veivakasalataki ena kena colati na i tavi. Esa bibi kina mera liga kaukauwa ena kena sotavi na vei colacola duidui e sotavi ena bula vakavanua.

Turaga na Sipika, na noda tabana ni i yau maroroi ni iTaukei se na iTaukei Trust Fund, esa toso ena nodra vukei eso na noda iTaukei era sa ciciva yani na vakaduri bisinisi. Na i naki ni vei qaravi ogo me na rawa ni vakarautaki ira mera veisemati vinaka kei ira na vei Baqe lelevu se tabana ni vakatubu i lavo ena nodra vukei vakabisinisi.

Turaga na Sipika, na kabani ni vakatubu i lavo ni iTaukei se Fijian Holdings Limited, esa mai dolava talega e dua na katuba vou, ogo ena nodratou sa rawa ni cakacaka vata kei ira na vei itaukei ni qele ena nodra vukei vakailavo ena tauyavutaki ni nodra bisinisi.

Turaga na Sipika, sa mai vakailavotaka talega na Matanitu na vakadidike ni kena qaravi na bisinisi lalai kei na kena vakailavotaki na tabana ni yau bula ni noda vanua. Na cakacaka ogo esa na rawa kina vua na Baqe na Merchant Finance me cicivaka eso na i tuvatuva ni nodra rawa ni vukei vakailavo na i taukei ni qele, ena kena cakacakataki na nodra qele kei na i yau bula, me sa rawa ni ra cicivaka vakabisinisi.

Turaga na Sipika, e dua tale na i tuvatuva levu sa mai qaravi oti sa i koya na kena cicivaki na nodra veivosaki na i taukei ni yau bula kei ira na cicivaka tiko na makete ni veivoli, ka vaka kina na veitabana era vei qaravi ena yalava ni bisinisi. E vakatokai na sota ogo me Resource Owners Forum.

E tekivu na i tuvatuva ogo ena yabaki sa oti ena neitou tovolea me keitou rogoca ka kila na cava sara mada e vakatatao tiko ena noda toso na i taukei ni yau bula. Sa vukei keitou sara vakalevu ni rawa me keitou biuta eso na i tuvatuva lelevu me basuka na i lati ni dravudravua vei ira na i taukei ni yau bula.

Turaga na Sipika, esa qaravi tale tikoga ena gauna ogo na veitalanoa kei iratou na Tabacakacaka ni Teitei, kei ira eso na kabani ni bisinisi ena kena tauyavutaki e dua na i qaqi ni tavioka starch e Viti. Kevaka sa rawa ogo, esa na dua sara na i vurevure levu ni kena volitaki na tavioka vei ira na noda.

Turaga na Sipika, esa qaravi vakavinaka tale tikoga na veivosaki kei iratou na Baqe ni Veivakatorocaketaki se Fiji Development Bank, ena nodra vukei na veikabani ni yasana. Esa neitou tatadra ni na yaco na gauna meda na veivuke vakalevu na i Taukei ena kena vukei na bula vakailavo ni noda vanua.

Turaga na Sipika, e dua tale na i tuvatuva levu ena qaravi vakabibi ena yabaki ogo sa i koya na kena tomani na kena tarai cake na vuli ni iTaukei. Na koronivuli e Nadave se Centre for Appropriate Technology and Development, esa civiva tale e dua na i vakatagedegede vou, oya e na kena vauci vata na vuli tara kei na kena sotavi na draki veisau se Green TVET.

Na porakaramu ni vuli ogo ena okati kina na vuli teitei, buli yaya, tara vale, gacagaca ni veitosoyaki kei na vuli ni vakavure livaliva ka sega ni vakayagataki kina na kasi kei na waiwai se renewable energy. Sa veisemati tale tikoga na Koronivuli e Nadave kei iratou na Australian Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) ena nodra vuli tara na kena gone.

Turaga na Sipika, sa tosoi tale tikoga na parokaramu ni iTaukei Land Development Grant. Ena gauna ogo, keitou sa raica lesu tiko na veidinadinati me baleta na kena i sau era na volitaki kina na vei tiki ni qele yadudua.

Turaga na Sipika, esa na cakacakataki ena yabaki ogo na i tuvatuva ni kena vakamatanataki e na noda vanua na United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP). Ena ruku ni tuvatuva ogo, ena laurai na kena cakacakataki e Viti na veika e tuvai tu e na loma ni UNDRIP Convention. Keitou na qarava na veitalanoa kei ira kece na veitabana kei na veisoqosoqo ena kena qaravi na cakacaka ogo, ka vakabibi ena kena laurai me veirogoci na sasaga ogo kei na nodra vei tabana.

Turaga na Sipika, ena qaravi talega ena yabaki ogo na kena vakaqacotaki na veiliutaki vakavanua, kei na nodra qaravi na noda lewenivanua. Na veiliutaki vakavanua esa yacova tu ogo e dua na i lesu ni sala bolebole, ka sa dodonu meda muria na i vakasala ni noda Kalou, sa i koya meda raica lesu mada na noda i lakolako makawa ka taroga se ivei na sala meda na muri kina.

Na yavu ni rai ogo era sa dabe kina na lewe ni Bose Levu Vakaturaga (BLV) ena nodra vakadonuya na i tuvatuva vou ni kena vaqacotaki na nodra vakarautaki na noda i sausau vou ni veiliutaki vakaturaga, ka me na tekivu sara ga ena nodra sa susugi ni ra se lailai me yacova sara ni ra cabeta na nodra gauna ni veiliutaki.

Na Tabacakacaka iTaukei ena cakacaka vakavoleka kei na Tabacakacaka ni Vuli, me raici na kena veisemati na veivakavulici vakavanua kei na i tuvatuva vakavuli se formal education. Esa na cakacaka vata kei na Mataivalu ni noda vanua e na nodra curuma e dua na i tuvatuva ni Cadet Training ena nodra la'ki vakarautaki vakaivalu ena buturara ni veiliutaki.

Turaga na Sipika, e dua tale na i tuvatuva levu sa i koya na kena vakaqacotaki na bula vakoro kei na kena vakatoroicaketaki. E caka ogo me sotava na kena sa tubu cake tikoga na cakacaka ni basu lawa, na vakayagataki ni waigaga ni veivakamatenitaki kei na nodra vakalolomataki na marama kei na gone. Ena loma ni yabaki ogo ni na oti na neitou kerea na veivakadonui ni Bose Levu Vakaturaga, keitou na biuta lesu mai kina Bose Yaco na lawa sau ni bula vakoro se na Village Bylaws.

Turaga na Sipika, ena Tiseba ni 2023, era a sikovi kina e dua na i lawalawa ka ra a lewe ni Bose Levu Vakaturaga ki na Matanitu ko Jaina. Era a lako mera la'ki raica na i walewale ni nodra valuta na Matanitu ko Jaina na bula dravudravua ena loma ni nodra yasana. Era sa suka lesu mai na i lakolako ni veisiko ogo kei na veika era sa vulica rawa mai ka vakabauti ni na rawa ni vakadamuri e Viti. Ena nodra veivakadonui na Bose Levu Vakaturaga ena bose sa oti, esa na vakatovototaki na veika e vulici mai Jaina ena loma ni yasana ko Rewa ena yabaki ogo.

Turaga na Sipika, me'u tinia, na veivosa eso au sa mai cavuta oti ena loma ni vale cecere ogo, e sega walega ni tukuni tiko na noda tatadra vata vakawa tamata, e dusia talega na noda sa tu vakarau meda veitokonitaka na tarai ni noda vanua lomani ko Viti kei ira kece sara era lewena. Meda tutaka na veilomani vakamata tamata kei na kena sasagataki na bula vinaka vakailavo ni noda vanua, ka vakabibi na noda vakaliuca tiko na Kalou na Yalo Tabu ena nodai lakolako. Au vakabauta ni ogo na gaunisala ena kauta mai na bula vinaka kei na bula sautu.

Turaga na Sipika, sa dodonu me da bolea na vei dredre eda lako curuma tiko ka toso ki liu. Esa na tovolea me vakavinakataka na nona veiqaravi na Tabacakacaka i Taukei, me na rawa ni da biuta koto mai e dua na Viti vinaka era na marautaka na noda kawa ena veisiga ni mataka. Vinaka saka vakalevu.

[Mr. Speaker, less than three months ago, the GCC was legally re-established. The honourable Prime Minister confirmed Government's policy stance on the GCC. In his opening speech, the honourable Prime Minister mentioned the importance of GCC to listen and protect the people of all races in Fiji, in order for peace and prosperity to exist in Fiji. However, that will only be meaningful if iTaukei unique cultural heritage is protected and respected, and historical errors and past injustices are acknowledged - a stark reality that is painfully clear.

My Ministry is determined to work towards rectifying these through specific protection mechanisms. May I add at this point that a new Chairman of the GCC has been appointed, who will then look at the plans brought up by the GCC Review Team.

Mr. Speaker, to foster social cohesion, we must improve the economic position of the iTaukei. In my visits to the Provinces last year, I saw the unwavering determination to embrace opportunities in leadership, education, entrepreneurship, resource and village development.

To realise this, my Ministry is undertaking the following initiatives and programmes that embrace iTaukei concepts:

1. Economic empowerment of the iTaukei is crucial to national development.
2. Through the Solesolevaki Framework, the iTaukei institutions are taking significant steps to assist the iTaukei.

The iTLTB has established four new programmes to assist landowning units in their development, the:

1. iTaukei Land Development Fund;
2. iTaukei Wealth Fund;
3. Landowners Eco-Tourism Projects; and
4. Land Services and Land Development Unit.

Mr. Speaker, we have also re-instated the allocation for the *Turaga iTaukei, Turaga Ni Yavusa* and *Turaga Ni Mataqali*. They play a very important role within the *Vanua*, the Church and the Government. They are the frontline for *Vanua* leadership, counselling and in the carrying out of traditional roles. It is, therefore, important that they be supported in the effective implementation of their roles.

Mr. Speaker, the iTaukei Trust Fund is assisting selected iTaukei entrepreneurs and businesses with business training, to make them investment-ready and enable them to apply for financial assistance and loans with financial institutions and banks.

Mr. Speaker, Fijian Holdings Limited has also opened a facility to invest alongside landowning unit companies so they can convert their resources into economic productivity.

Mr. Speaker, Government has also assisted with the financing of a feasibility study in the MSME and resource-based sector financing. That will allow Merchant Finance Limited to explore financing products in land development and resource-based lending.

Mr. Speaker, last year, we started the iTaukei Resource Owners Forum to better understand the current impediments to the development of their resources. This helped in mapping out approaches to expedite their participation in national economy.

Mr. Speaker, my Ministry, in consultation with the Ministry of Agriculture and some private companies, in the development of a casava starch processing plant in Fiji. If successful, this project will be a major income earner for cassava growers in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, my Ministry has been in close discussion with the Fiji Development Bank for the financial support for provincial companies and the result has been positive. Our vision is to be able to uplift the contribution of the iTaukei in the overall economy of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, the Centre For Appropriate Technology & Development (CATD) in Nadave has transitioned to Green TVET. This is a curriculum framework that covers agriculture, manufacturing, building, transport, and renewable energy. The CATD is also working closely with Australian Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) in the implementation of its training programmes. Please, allow me to extend our deep appreciation to the Government of Japan for their funding of a new classroom and students' dormitory.

Mr. Speaker, we have expanded the services provided by the Survey Unit of the Native Lands and Fisheries Commission to be able to carry out any land survey for landowning units who wish to develop their land.

Mr. Speaker, the iTaukei Land Development Grant for the landowning units will continue this year. We are currently analyzing the initial agreements, to ensure that sale price of subdivision lots will be beneficial to the landowners.

Mr. Speaker, this year, we will also implement a National Action Plan that will localise the UNDRIP Convention. This will result in the amendment of relevant legislations. My Ministry will consult widely with relevant stakeholders with a view to harmonizing it with their respective mandates.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry will work on strengthening Vanua governance and leadership this year. The Vanua leadership is at a very challenging crossroad, where we must adhere to the counsel of Prophet Jeremiah, who said, and I quote; "Ask for the ancient path, ask where the good way is, and walk in it." This principle has now provided useful guidance which prompted the GCC at its recent meeting to adopt a structured bottoms-up approach to addressing leadership and governance of the iTaukei.

We will revisit past successful programmes that nurtured leaders through our formal education system in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. This will be complemented by the informal (*Vanua*) learning approach. Also, a proposed provincial based cadet programme will be undertaken in partnership with the Republic of Fiji Military Forces. This approach will complement existing programmes, such as *Na Vuli Ni Sausauvou* (for future traditional leaders) and *Vuli Ni Sauvaki Ni Vanua* (for other traditional roles).

Mr. Speaker, we are also working on strengthening our village governance and development. This is to address the increasing criminal activities including the use of hard drugs in villages and the domestic violence against women and children. My Ministry, with the endorsement of the Great Council Of Chiefs, will resubmit the village bylaws to Cabinet for consideration.

Mr. Speaker, the Village Improvement Scheme which was reintroduced in the current financial year covers three broad areas:

1. Village beautification.
2. Sanitation; and
3. Maintenance of evacuation centres.

Mr. Speaker, in December 2023, a GCC Delegation visited China to learn Chinese approach to poverty elimination at the provincial level. This is significant as it showed China's commitment to eliminating poverty.

The Delegation returned with insights from the Chinese experience which will be emulated in Fiji. With the endorsement of the GCC, we will pilot best practices from this visit in the Rewa Province, commencing this year.

Mr. Speaker, may I express our sincere appreciation to the Government of China for their invitation and funding for this trip. Also, I would extend my appreciation to the *Vanua*, Provincial Offices, and all staff of the Ministry for their effort so far.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, the words spoken in this august Parliament reflect not just our collective aspirations as iTaukei but our unwavering commitment to the people of Fiji. Let us move forward with unity, resilience, and a deep-seated belief in our nation's potential, embracing the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, seeking the guidance of our Almighty God. I believe that is the pathway that will bring peace and prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs will continue to improve its services so that we can leave a legacy of our efforts today that will be enjoyed by generations to come. Thank you very much.

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament; I rise today in support of the motion raised by the honourable Prime Minister and to offer a response to the Opening Address of His Excellency the President, as a matter of great significance to our nation.

As we convene in this august Chamber, we bear the weight of our collective responsibility to serve the interests of our citizens and uphold the principles of democracy and humanity. We are reminded of our duty of care to the people of our beloved nation in ensuring the sovereignty, security and prosperity of our beloved Fiji Islands and her people.

Representing the diverse voices and aspirations of our people is, indeed, an immense responsibility and one that we, as democratically elected representatives, must perform to the best of our abilities through the best use of our resources at hand and through continued collaboration in consultation with the people. Only then can, we, as an island nation, will truly promote harmony of our people and embrace the beauty and the power of our diversity as an island nation, which will then truly enable us to realise our full economic potential, alleviate poverty, especially the vulnerable of the vulnerable in the remote rural and maritime areas of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in coordinating the Whole of Government approach to implementing Government's national development priorities, particularly in the rural and maritime areas of Fiji, is obviously the way to ensure that development priorities are met, and Government investments are sustainable. Investing in sustainable development is critical given the continued reality of the scarcity

of the already limited development resources. Our people must be given room to cultivate environmentally friendly, climate-resilient, sustainable and gender and socially inclusive development models that we as an island nation may then document to contribute to the sustainable development of the wider Blue Pacific region in line with the priorities and strategic objectives of the 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy.

The Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management assumed responsibility for leadership of the Fiji National Shelter Cluster in early 2023 and has been actively working to set the cluster on a firmer foundation for the future collective shelter activity and response.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in His Opening Address, His Excellency rightly said that even though our contributions to global emissions is negligible, we like other countries in the Pacific, directly bear the full brunt of climate change on our coastlines, communities, livelihoods and security. Therefore, inculcating nature-based, climate mitigation and adaptation strategies into the fabric of implementation of our national development priorities in the rural and maritime areas of Fiji will ensure that the human faces of the impacts of climate change are secured today and empowered to secure the future of their families and future generations as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with regards to sectoral development, Fiji's water sector faces challenges of the impacts of aging infrastructure and the lack of technically skilled personnel to deliver timely service of maintaining the current water and sewage services. The foresight in the development of a 2050 Water Sector Strategy is a timely one and one that improves water and sanitation services across urban, rural and maritime Fiji. However, this water sector strategy will require the necessary financial and technical support from the Government, private sector and development partners to ensure effective implementation particularly in the rural and maritime communities.

In this regard, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry is conducting or is continuing with the implementation of access to clean and safe water for our vulnerable, rural and maritime citizens through the High Risk Water and Sanitation Programme. At the same time, we are engaging with potential partners on water management and conservation practices and for professional management of wastewater as part of our responsibility, to ensure protection of our already vulnerable environment. The Government has already budgeted \$500,000 under Head 50 for Sanitation Projects for villages and settlements in this financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, aligning the Maritime Transport Act 2013 with international standard and promoting a safe and sustainable maritime sector is essential to ensuring the safety and security of the rural and maritime population who are heavily relying on maritime transportation for accessing essential services such as daily commuting to school, health services, access to financial services and other Government services that always require them to travel by boat with associated risks involved. The vast untapped economic potential of the maritime areas of Fiji is one to capitalise on and with the alignment of the Maritime Transport Act 2013 to international standards, the sector is set to attract even more global markets in the near future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on the Ministry of Agriculture Census 2020, 54 percent of the farmland areas fall within traditional tenureship, of which are communally owned *mataqali*, *tokatoka*, *yavusa*, and *kovukovu* (reserve) land. The above statistics also correlate with the high poverty rates noted with most subsistence farmers based on the 2019-2020 Poverty Report by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics.

The above statistics indicate that we need to take action now in order to increase the utilisation of arable land in the rural areas, and fully realise the economic potential of the agricultural sector as well as its contribution to GDP, programmes to revitalise the rural and maritime agricultural sector

must be prioritised alongside a culture and principle of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. This is one of the main reasons for our Ministry's revamped Rural and Outer Island (ROI) programme to supplement and assist the Ministry of Agriculture in fast-tracking the improvement of agriculture productivity and production in the rural and maritime communities through sustainable mechanisation, focusing on land preparation and market access. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need all Government agencies to contribute towards this great effort to improve production and productivity in the rural areas.

As already alluded to by the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development earlier this week on the importance of financial literacy in the rural areas, our Ministry is working closely with the Department of Co-operatives and the Ministry of Youth and Sports on the establishment of more financial cooperatives in the rural areas. This Coalition Government is going to make a significant mindset change towards a savings culture in the rural settings, and this would require an integrated effort from the Government, private sectors, religious bodies and donor agencies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also an immense potential for investment in the tourism sector in the rural and maritime areas of Fiji. Despite its current contribution to our Gross Domestic Product (GDP), there is even more potential for investment in the rural areas, especially through ecotourism and historical sites attraction. We need to work together through proactive sustainable climate resilient initiatives to ensure sustainable monetisation of those resources and promote economic empowerment of our rural population going forward.

The National Energy Policy 2023-2030 documents Government's commitment to a resilient, cost effective and sustainable energy sector. With the frequently rising and constantly fluctuating global prices of fossil fuels, it is imperative to invest in sustainable energy solutions and involve the young generation in the process. This not only inbuilds a sense of ownership of their future, but also empowers them with the necessary knowledge and skills to innovate potential future renewable energy solutions that are climate resilient and environmentally friendly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's Rural Housing Assistance Programme will also play a pivotal role in growing the rural economy. Given the significant demand for this programme, the Ministry is working within the guideline of the different housing schemes as approved by the Cabinet.

As part of improving service delivery in the rural areas, for the first time, the Ministry has made available online through the Ministry's website the approved engineering house plan to assist rural dwellers. This will be one of the many designs that the Ministry is considered to provide more options for our rural dwellers in terms of improving their standard of living in the rural areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an issue at hand that demands our immediate attention and concerted action pertains to the recent surge in unemployment and poverty rates, a challenge that has cast a shadow of uncertainty over the livelihoods of countless individuals and families across our nation. In the face of this adversity, it is imperative that we, as representatives of the people, demonstrate, resolve, compassion, and ingenuity in devising strategies to alleviate the plight of those affected.

In charting a course of action, we must adopt a multi-faceted approach that addresses both the immediate needs of the unemployed and the underlying structural issues contributing to this phenomenon. This necessitates a combination of short-term interventions and aimed at providing immediate relief, as well as long-term strategies geared toward fostering sustainable economic growth and creating opportunities for all.

Going forward Mr. Speaker, Sir, an integrated approach is needed in terms of reviewing or

formulation of our own unemployment benefits as part of overall safety nets during these challenging times. Expansion of skills training and retraining is crucial to ensure our graduates meet the labour market demand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to impress upon one of the most striking features emphasised by His Excellency the President while delivering his keynote Address during the Opening of Parliament on Monday 4th March, 2024 and I quote,

“As democratically elected representatives, I ask that you listen to the voices of our people, not only those who elected you, but to all citizens, young and old, men and women. I urge you to faithfully embrace with resolve the principles of democracy and humanity as enshrined in our Constitution. In doing so, we will continue to respect the integrity and dignity of our Parliament. We must acknowledge and recognise our differences; however, we must be united with one common goal to ensure that we live in a progressive and prosperous nation.”

Yet, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this fell on deaf ears by those on the other side of Parliament. I was flabbergasted in the way the honourable...

(Laughter)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- ...Members on the other side of Parliament boycotted the invitation by His Excellency the President to attend the cocktail he hosted at the State House on Monday, 4th March, 2024 after the Opening of a new Session of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is insubordination in the highest order. Looking at the calibre of those in the driving seat on the other side of Parliament, I just cannot believe that such actions could have eventuated. Honourable Members on the other side of Parliament must be living in another planet.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, to quote from Nelson Mandela who was being imprisoned in South Africa for 27 years for his protest on apartheid. One might expect that he would hold at least a small grudge against those in authority when he was released. But, as he eloquently said to himself, “As I walked out the door towards the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I did not leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I would still be in prison.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am also closely following up on the social media postings by some Members on the other side of Parliament who do not have the audacity to state whatever they would like to express in here but use the social media platform to attack the Government on almost all of the policies it has implemented. Not only that ...

HON. K.K. LAL.- That is my right!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- ... one honourable Member stooped so low to post personal and derogatory remarks against the leadership of this Government and some Cabinet Minister as well. A classic example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was the contradictory nature in which this honourable Member praised the initiative and the vision of the FijiFirst Party under the banner of a Yellow Ribbon project,

a paradigm shift in the way society views rehabilitation.

The *Facebook* posting was done on 6th December, 2023, yet only a few days later (27th December, 2023), he criticised a component of the Yellow Ribbon project, and I quote:

“It is deeply concerning to witness the preferential treatment extended to Ratu Inoke Takiveikata following his release via Presidential Pardon. Such actions by the Fiji Corrections Service raise questions about equality before the law. While all individuals should be treated impartially, this case highlights a disparity in the treatment of convicts.”

HON. K.K. LAL. Do not worry!

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- The honourable Member did not realise that all those who were pardoned by His Excellency the President were done according to law. In addition, they were all escorted to their respective villages and families by the Corrections officials as part of the Yellow Ribbon Programme. The commentary by the honourable Member depicts a lack of political maturity and understanding of the Government system.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the same honourable Member, is very fond of posting malicious and denigrating remarks about Government including one of the fabric of our *iTaukei* institution and that is the Great Council of Chiefs. I quote some of his postings which if allowed to continue will only stir ethnic emotions which was the hallmark of our very past darkest moments in our beloved Fiji.

HON. RATU I. TUIWAILEVU.- Very racist.

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- He posted on:

- 27th November, 2023 – “What a hopeless Government.”
- 27th November, 2023 – “Do we need the Great Council of Chiefs?”
- 9th December, 2023 – “GCC wants to go to China, cava qo party time?”
- 15th December, 2023 – “What good has this Government done for the people of Fiji? Levu ga na vosa.”
- 30th December, 2023 - “Oilei Rabuka, can you please resign? Levu na reshuffle, reh.”
- 1st January, 2024 – “Though it is a new year, this will not stop me from writing against this incompetent Prime Minister and his Government.”
- 3rd January, 2024 – “Great Council of Chiefs is not important, our Fijians are.”

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- No freedom of speech.

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- I have got all the photocopies of these *Facebook* postings. .

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- The honourable Member who posted these articles is perceived as rude, arrogant, full of flattery and lacking respect for our leaders and culture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Members of this august Parliament, we must be good role models to the

people of our beloved nation especially to the younger generation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am only reminded by what my uncle and former politician who used to live at Bulou Drive at Delainavesi used to say and I quote:

“Politicians should be like wine. The older the wine is, the tastier it becomes. Young politicians are like draught beer, full of froth and impossible to get drunk.”

(Laughter)

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to contribute to this debate and I support the motion before Parliament.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank you for allowing me to rise and contribute to today's debate on the motion before Parliament which is to thank His Excellency for his most Gracious Speech. Before I commence, Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister and esteemed Members of Parliament, I just want to remind honourable Vocea of a particular provision in the Constitution. In this particular provision, honourable Assistant Minister, you all flouted before the Elections and you continue to do so, and that is the freedom of expression...

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- ...guaranteed in his blue book, Mr. Speaker.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- In light of what is being said, honourable Attorney-General, we started off by the honourable Leader of the Opposition telling you that you would be critiqued and you have been.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Remember that, read it! and keep.

(Hon. S.D. Turaga interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It is not misplaced, you have done the same to us and we do the same to you, but do not argue, accept it.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Don't point!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You are telling me not to point, you have been doing it all day.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Now that I have raised the tone, Sir, I intend to raise it some more, but I will keep it within the confines of what the President's Speech has said.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Thank you.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Unlike the first time.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Before I forget, Mr. Speaker, I have to correct something.

Mr. Speaker, my good colleague on the other side who happens to be the Chairman of my Committee, honourable Vakalalabure, I think there is a little bit of a disconnect between him and his Minister. The figures that you published with respect to immigration, and I quote your honourable Minister in *FBC News* just a little while ago who stated that the departure records and I quote, “show that between January and August, 3,650 Fijians left for education and training; 5,552 left for employment; and 1,946 migrated.” I think you need to correlate your figures better between you two and the Ministry and then come up with a right one.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Very poor!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- We do not twist figures, honourable Minister of Finance.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Point Of Order.

HON. J. USAMATE.- What is your Point Of Order?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 60 - Relevance. He talked about the figures without saying what was wrong with those figures. He did not compare what he said and what the honourable Minister said.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Continue.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is why he gets his math wrong.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand before you, not merely as an opposing voice within this hallowed Chambers, but as a conduit for the narratives and the aspirations of our cherished people. Our gathering here today is testament to the democratic pillars that began here some 150 years ago...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- ...and I include the Legislative Chamber and that particular chair that you are sitting on, Sir, it was part of the Legislative Chamber. We must pay homage to that and those principles that we have actually been utilising for the last 150 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those principles and pillars, we need to uphold when it comes to our society. We need to have a forum where diverse perspectives (and I am sure you all agree with that). We can argue until we are blue in the face. There is an old Shakespearean saying, Sir, it is part of Hamlet, “the lady doth protest too much”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will structure my speech (as I have said) under the headings of His Excellency's Gracious Speech. I am talking about transparency, shared destiny, respect and recognising differences and sustainable growth, and also with respect to foreign affairs, et cetera. I may touch a nerve here or two but I think everyone is very thick-skinned and they will understand it.

One of the most important things when we sit in this Chamber, Sir, is public trust. We are all entrusted with a huge job, and it is public trust. Unfortunately, in the last 14 months or so, the public

trust in this Government has gone.

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

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Very poor.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What is your evidence?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- How did you assess that?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I hope I get a few minutes extra because of the interjections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I find it quite amusing, I think a lot of people do. As a matter of fact, a lot of public do also, on how they have been making wild accusations about our side and we find it to be very amusing, considering what they are actually insinuating is, in reality, what they are doing.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mismatch.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You must remember, this side of Parliament is a political party, you are three. This side of Parliament is a political party, and that political party was in governance for eight years, not 16 years, Sir.

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

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Obviously, he cannot do the math either. The FijiFirst Party was in governance for eight years. And some of us here under the appointment of His Excellency the President then, were part of an Interim Government, tasked with setting the foundation of our modern and once very prosperous Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me remind Parliament, it has only been eight years for FijiFirst and I will tell you later on what FijiFirst has done in eight years.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Only eight years.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, eight years as an elected Government.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Again, you are being very selective. Please, remember this all of you. Prior to those eight years, they were all presidential appointees, protected under the 1997 Constitution, Mr. Speaker, and the 2013 Constitution after. So, I wish to warn the other side of Parliament, be careful and stop continuing to speak against His Excellency the President then.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the state of affairs and I wish to acknowledge the scope, the initiatives and reforms presented in His Excellency's Speech, and I must admit that as I was preparing for this particular contribution, I look back at the year that has passed and I thought, "Alright, let me be a bit independent even and look back at the year that has passed - a year that we will not get back, and a year in which we handed you (and I know there is going to be a lot of noise here but that is the truth)

an economy that was recovering from COVID-19 and it was on the back of unprecedented growth, and Fiji was one of the five fastest recovering economies in the world.”

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- This is what we gave them, Mr. Speaker. What did you do with it?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- The people are asking, Sir, what did you do with it? Well, there is extravagant travels.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Yes!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- There is tabloid-style gossip. There is in-fighting, there is secret fundraising, there is stifling in the private sector, there is burying investor confidence into the ground and most of all, disappointing the ordinary Fijians.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- This has been an entire year and then some confusion and absolute nothingness.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Point of Order.

HON. P.K. BALA.- What is your Point of Order?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- He is imputing improper motives.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- What motives?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It is publicly known that there has been some suggestion of some things. The mention of fundraising, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- That is under Standing Order 62. Yes, I will allow. Continue, honourable Member.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- The mention of fundraising is directed at me, Sir.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Oh!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- There is a suggestion of improper motives. Honestly, Sir, we fight fair here, we do not go and delve into unsubstantiated facts by someone which I could see who is a bit not well adjusted.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Which Standing Order??

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Can I urge the honourable Member whom I respect a lot,

just fight fair and do not go into personal areas because we all can do that. I just thought I urge honourable Members.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, what I heard was that honourable Koya had made a general remark on fundraising, and that is a general remark. No one has been, kind of, pointed at or feeling vilified but if that does point a finger at you, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, then I ask that we take it like a man and let us continue.

As you have said, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, we need to fight fair here. Honourable Sharma has been making a lot of punches as well when he last spoke. Those were his views and most were hearsay and we really cannot pinpoint him on that particular instance when he said, "People are saying this around the grog bowl and all that". That is why we are here. We need to hear what is coming from the outside, what has been spoken in the streets, et cetera, but let us take it on like a man and be fair as well. If you can give, you can take it as well. So, I ask that we continue along those lines and let us be fair. You may continue, honourable Koya.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Sir. I did do some boxing when I was young, Sir, and I tell you what, you give me a left hook, I will give you a right upper cut. Thank you very much.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said, this has been nothing, but the year of confusion and I like this word, Sir, of 'nothingness'. Absolute nothingness.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA. —I must say, Sir, this is not us speaking, this is your public speaking.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- This is them telling us that what have we gotten in the last 14 months?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Nothing!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Nothingness. Absolutely nothing?

Mr. Speaker Sir, we heard about reforms, however, we must state that we do not have any confidence in the ability with respect to those reforms that were actually being programmed or proposed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I remember also, I think it was late back in January 2023, when the honourable Attorney-General jumped up, got into action and said, "Any issues dealing with Government affairs are to be dealt with by the Coalition Government and its head". Mr. Speaker, I think they are not actually being actually respectful to their Prime Minister, they not listening to him.

HON. J. USAMATE: Very poor!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- They have run a mark, and they are not listening to him and I am sure the honourable Prime Minister, if he has some more hair on his head, he would be scratching it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of security and stability, while the reforms announced by His Excellency maybe well intention, I think what needs to be done is that Government has to focus on the basics. I am glad that we have had a very frank admission from the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration.

The truth is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and again I relay what the general public is saying, that they do not feel safe. They do not feel safe! The security, safety and stability are three key drivers of the economy. Those things drive our economy, and the level of lawlessness has increased dramatically.

The issue also is not just isolated with respect to the bad elements of our society and I say this wholeheartedly, Mr. Speaker, this is not just your problem, this is our problem too. It is an 'us' problem. It is something that we must do together. It is not something about honourable Tikoduadua blaming the previous Government for the drug problem, we did not ask people to come and make drugs here. None of us did! We put the necessary things into place, you are making it better, we are all making it better. Fantastic! That is what we want to see but, please, stop blaming the previous Government for any ill-will because this issue regarding drugs, et cetera, in society is not....

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Again, Sir, they do not listen.

Again, this is not just a problem for Fiji, it is a worldwide problem, and we must do it jointly together to actually get this done. That is all we are saying.

He is right about the fruit, et cetera. You know you are looking at it and you say, "there are some good fruits and some are bad fruits." We gave you a lot of good fruits, you still have not opened it. There are fantastic new police stations that we gave you that you still have not opened, honourable Minister. We want to know why?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even the admission by the honourable Minister with respect to the issues faced by the Police Force, again, I congratulate you, honourable Minister, for actually acknowledging that. It is something that we need to do, and we need to do it jointly. We have had a few conversations, Sir, the honourable Minister and myself, and I think we are actually finding some good footing with respect to advancing for the betterment of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most important things for him is not just doing Home Affairs, he has to ensure that all he does brings back investor confidence because that is what is seriously lacking.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA. – When I was a young gentleman, Mr. Speaker, Sir, every time we went passed Lami, my father used to tell me, "If you see smoke coming out from the cement factory, you know the economy is working." Guess what? There has been no smoke there for 14 months. Nothing is happening. It is just not happening, and this is not us telling you off, it is just critiquing so, please, accept it. It is not happening. Go and ask the construction people.

Now, I am going to tell you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it actually stems from incompetence, and I will tell you where it gets worse. When you move to the Ministry of Finance, the state of the economy, Minister of Finance, is fragile. Unfortunately, instead of building up the economy, in his second year, he is still trying to create a new national plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by the time he is finished with the new national plan, it will be Election time again. What is he going to do with a three year plan?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You're a joke!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I am not a joke, people are laughing at you and saying you are not worthy

of your job.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he is a great example for you. He used to sit here, and he did for eight years. Eight years, he could have developed a great plan, but he did not, Mr. Speaker, he did nothing. Now, we have got a year of nothing from the honourable Minister of Finance.

Again, disconnect. He did not even listen to his honourable Prime Minister when he said, "Do not increase VAT to that much." That tells you about the disconnect.

He has finally got into the driver's seat, Mr. Speaker, Sir. He got in, started the car, he actually thought, "Great, the engine is running", but guess what? There is no wheels on it, Mr. Speaker, because he took them off.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what was so wrong with the 5-Year and 20-Year Development Plan? Why are you wasting resources? You can tweak it but it should not take you that long to do it because guess what? When doing those development plans, our ideas are the same. It is for the betterment of Fiji. We did not put anything in there that was going to ruin Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he is too busy with his friends or consultants or whatever they are. Again, you need to get your mathematics right. Three year plan, it could have taken you two-and-a-half years to get it done. By that time, what are you going to do? Nothing!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, right now the biggest complaints that we get from the general public is, "Sir, before I used to have some loose change in my pocket, now, I do not even have that." I asked them why? He said, "VAT has gone up by 6 percent, cost of living is raised, manufacturing duty has gone up by 3 percent, increase in corporate tax by 5 percent, some have been given no tax."

MR. SPEAKER. – Maybe, it has been safely stashed somewhere.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA. – I am coming to that, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is a staggering 14 percent increase to businesses, but guess what, Mr. Speaker? That has been passed on to the consumers, let alone the increase in overseas market and I am going to give you today some live examples of what people have said and how they are actually suffering.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these policies are atrocious and misguided. They do not take care of our people. These stories echo the daily struggles and we have a resilient population, we know that, Sir, but this time the resilience is wearing thin. They deserve the compassion that we give them, they deserve the urgency that we give them to look after them. Let me take you through the streets, Sir.

I have had the privilege of conversing with the best information that you can actually get from taxi drivers. One day, I got in a pair of shorts, T-Shirt and a hat and he did not recognise me. I asked him, "how are you, Sir?" He said, "good". I asked, "How is it going with the business?" He goes, "very bad". I said, "what is the problem?". He goes, "the money that I used to make, I do not get it." I said, "Why? People are not catching your taxi?" He goes, "All the money that everyone earns goes towards their food bill. How are they going to catch taxi."

In the corridors of our pharmacy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, people were getting prescribed 20 tablets are going to the pharmacies and only asking for 10 tablets because that is all that they can afford. Our hotel workers now find solace in the fact that they do not have to pay rent and thanks to their village homes, yet, they empathise with those who do not have village homes and were to juggle the soaring cost of living, with fear of the next day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for want of a better word, I know it is being used but it is actually very, very appropriate, the attack on the people, the common man is actually brutal. It is really bad, and we face it every day. We have people complaining to us every day on basically about the cost of living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst addressing also things with respect to climate change, we understand there is also initiatives such as relocation of communities, et cetera, in terms of climate change and investment in renewable energy, the steps in the right direction, but we need to combat this with stricter green technologies and stricter environmental protection laws and more substantial effort in global advocacy for climate justice, but I have to put a proviso there, Sir. We cannot do that if we go in this Parliament and say to ourselves, “we will not support the release of nuclear wastewater into the Pacific Ocean”, and then someone goes and agrees to it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot do that. That is not on. That is not very Fijian of us to be doing that. We are protectors of the oceans; we want to be part of the whole Pacific. We want to be the protectors of our people at the end of the day and the ocean forms a huge part of our life. We have had numerous calls and letters, et cetera, regarding that and I think it is such, and I cry when I see that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on transparency and accountability, there is a lot that actually has gone on and a lot that needs to happen. But I just wanted to round off, Sir, and I know you are going to give me a few minutes. I think there is a line that needs to be said. We go at each other all the time but in order to offend a strong man which we know we are, you tell a lie, but in order to offend are weak man, you tell him the truth. All we have been doing, Mr. Speaker, is telling the truth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, I know these people have gone on for 16 months and until you tell me to sit down, I will just read out a quick list of all the things that FijiFirst has done, the -

- new Ba Hospital;
- new Navosa Hospital;
- new Navua Hospital;
- new Nakasi Health Centre;
- new Waimaro Health Centre;
- new Rotuma Airport;
- new Nausori Airport;
- new Nausori Market;
- new Rakiraki Market;
- new Namaka Market;
- new Vunisea Jetty;
- new Valelevu Court House;
- new Valelevu Police Station;
- new Nakasi Police Station;
- new Nadi Police Station;
- new Lautoka Police Station;
- 52 new bridges according to Fiji Roads Authority;
- new Laqere Market;

- new Fire Stations at Nabouwalu, Nakaso, Korovou, Taveuni;
- new pavilion at Albert Park;
- newly renovated Nadi Airport, thank you honourable Minister;
- new fire stations;
- Rewa Water Supply System under construction;
- new Nadarivatu Hydro-Electricity Dam;
- Somosomo Mini Hydro Dam;
- the Hibiscus Highway;
- connecting water supply under the sea from Ovalau to Motoriki which was done;
- providing solar electricity;
- four lanes from Suva to Nausori;
- four lanes from Nadi Airport to Martintar; and
- the new Denarau Road.

I could go on and on and on, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is what you get from FijiFirst. Thank you very much, Sir.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen in the gallery, fellow countrywomen and men and to those from around the world who are listening in through the various media platforms; *bula vinaka*, and in the better part of Fiji we say, *bula vina'a*, *bula si'a*, *mi'au sa bula re*, but I am reminded that in the better part of Fiji, they say, *sa malo bula*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I express my gratitude for the privilege to address Parliament today. I extend my sincere appreciation to His Excellency the President, *Na i Taukei Bolatagane* and *Turaga na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, for his most Gracious Speech and for officially inaugurating the 2024 Parliament of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the perpetual task of ushering a nation into a brighter destiny for her people remains a formidable challenge everywhere around the world, even so true for developing countries. I express my gratitude to His Excellency for providing a roadmap in this Parliament on how those perpetual tasks and formidable challenges can be met by all of us, representatives of our fellow citizens in this Parliament.

His Excellency's articulation of the Government's proposed legislative agenda, policies and programmes signifies a dedicated commitment to the ongoing reconstruction of an advancing and more prosperous Fiji. As Members of this Parliament, it is incumbent upon us to fulfil our duty as legislators and work towards delivering Fijians their country's best days, which we confess, is ahead of us. I urge us all, that we embrace, "Even in our divide we can, and as one, we surely will."

We are reminded by His Excellency the President that as democratically elected Members, to listen to the voices of our people, not limited only to those who elected us, but to all our citizens young and old, men and women, able and disable, people of all faiths and of all creed. "Even in our divide we can, and as one, we will."

Mr. Speaker, as we earnestly strive to collectively rebuild our future together as a nation, the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources remains unwavering in its commitment to innovative strategies, harmoniously aligned with our annual plans and budgeted programmes.

This year, 2024, is poised to be a transformative year anticipated for much better performance,

creation of a much-enhanced work environment, laser focus to customer needs, and streamlined response times to better serve all stakeholders. It is our steadfast pledge as a Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources to usher in a year of uplift across every facet of our operations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have laid a challenge to my Ministry this year - every inch of land under our responsibility must be used and it must be used sustainably, utilised for residential, agricultural development, integrated or otherwise and for organised sustainable forestry planned that is in line with our global targets to resist the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

Consequently, the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources is working with the Department of Town and Country Planning in finalising the State Lands Land Use Plan for Fiji. Apart from the comprehensive review of the antiquated State Lands Act of 1945, we are also looking at critical aspects of our regulations in penalties, revenue collections, lease conditions and reassessments, amongst others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, echoing the sentiments of His Excellency, the importance of agriculture as the backbone of our economy for both food security and export cannot be overstated. In alignment with this vision and to contribute to the diversification of our economy, as well as the generation of income for both rural Fijians and commercial agricultural investments, the Ministry remains steadfast to its commitment, the Fijian Growth. Our focus persists on persevering as much fertile agricultural land as possible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will continue to ensure that all state agricultural land is provided to only those who will plant on it and help maximise its return to benefit not just themselves but the Fijian economy as a whole. Increased collaboration amongst agencies has been reignited with the objective to maximise agricultural opportunities as a tool to alleviating poverty amongst us.

The Ministry together with the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs has started in our cluster meetings to work in partnership to retain as much agricultural land as possible. This brings me to the State Lands known initially as Crown Grants (CGs) and Native Grants (NTs) that was advertised by the iTLTB for consultation in the newspaper. I want to assure the tenants on those parcels of land, do not panic, do not allow unscrupulous politicians to use you as a battering ram for cheap partisan political points.

The State will honour its leases with you full stop. Be at peace, plant, live, let your children go to school, you yourselves go to work, this is your Government and you are valuable citizens of this country. Should there be land that is unused in any of these CGs or NTs, these will be identified and processed through the provisions of the law of our country to be used for the benefit of the original *iTaukei* landowners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as mentioned earlier, we place specific emphasis on the allocation and identification of State Land for high-return investments. This strategic approach aims to attract investments and foster the creation of new job opportunities for a broader spectrum of all Fijians. Our commitment to this endeavour remains unwavering as we strive to stimulate economic growth and prosperity across the nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with Government's commitment to SDG6 in providing access to clean water as a fundamental right of every Fijian and with increase in demand for groundwater resources, for household consumption, agriculture and commercial water bottling, the Ministry has finished and completed the National Groundwater Resource Management Development Policy which will ensure sustainable use and management of one of the world's finest groundwater resources.

The Ministry will prioritize services to all its customers by:

1. Reviewing existing policies and formulating new policies for the sustainable management of land, minerals and under groundwater resources; and
2. Reviewing our Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) at the Ministry to continuously cut out the red-tapes or bureaucratic processes at the same time digitizing some of them;
3. The continual reviewal of the Act or Acts under our purview and its regulations.

The Ministry will continue to ensure that we strike the right balance between the fulfilment of our role and function, support and encourage economic activities whilst ensuring that our environment and resources is sustainably protected and managed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, encouraging foreshore development in Fiji presents a promising avenue for economic growth and sustainable tourism. Embracing the concept of building over water, as successfully implemented overseas, can elevate Fiji's tourism industry to new heights. Integrating eco-friendly and culturally sensitive designs, such developments could showcase the stunning natural beauty of Fiji's coastal areas whilst providing unique and luxurious accommodation to our visitors both local and abroad. Mr. Speaker, the honourable Kirpal (who is not here now) mentioned the poor delivery from the Ministry to the public sector since the Ministry have not provided any sales data on properties sold in Fiji since last year.

I have mentioned here in Parliament last year that FRCS has stopped giving the Ministry of Lands confidential information. We then pursued the option with the Ministry of Justice, and on 6th November, 2023 we signed off our Memorandum of Understanding with them. Now due to the confidentiality and responsibilities that arise out of the MOU, a separate agreement now has been drafted and is now being vetted by the Office of Solicitor-General for individual registered valuers to sign off on. Given that it is an initiative by the Ministry with fees involved and with the new cabinet Circular 1/24, that policy needs to go to Cabinet for endorsement before it is available for execution by registered valuers. We endeavour, Mr. Speaker, to have all of these sorted this month and a Cabinet Paper will be presented and bring out the much-needed data by end of April 2024.

Mr. Speaker, last Friday, the Ministry in alignment with the Ministry of Civil Service has regularised 89 officers who have met the criteria stipulated in the circular for regularisation of the Civil Service. Out of the 89 officers, 47 were confirmed to their positions, whereas 42 officers had their salary bands upgraded and now regularised as part of the Ministry's retention strategies. This commitment, Mr. Speaker, reflects our dedication to fostering a supportive and conducive environment for our staff, recognising that a content and well-equipped team is essential for achieving organisational goals.

Mr. Speaker, this takes me to the point made by the other side on the rise in migration and loss of skilled and professional work force from this country. Do they not realise, Mr. Speaker, the blame falls squarely on the shoulders of their Government when it was in power! The numbers that were presented today by the honourable Vakalalabure that 34,797 emigrated from Fiji between 2012 to 2022; that is an average of 3,866 per year. How do you explain that? Those they lament about that left in 2023, Mr. Speaker, were the ones who were already planning to leave when they were in government. They wanted to throw the blame on us. In our 14 years being in the Government....

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- In our 14 months whilst being in Government (hold on a minute) it will be 14 years. There will be a long ride on that side of Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They want to throw the blame on us for people who left during the 14 months. What have they got

to say about the people who left in 16 years?

They must realise, Mr. Speaker, that the world now grapples with circular migration. World citizens move, and they move in speed. It is inevitable. New Zealanders leaves for Australia, Australians leaves for Europe and the United States, our citizens find green pastures in Australia and New Zealand, and also elsewhere and they are quite entitled to do so. Whilst they are there, they send funds to their families back home. Our remittance go up, our economy improves, which is what we all agree is needed here in Fiji. I encourage the Opposition, Mr. Speaker, please see the bright side of what you criticise.

We all agree, Mr. Speaker, that the recent spate of drug busts in the West is beyond shocking. It wakes us to a dangerous potential that can destroy the nation we all love. When I was a young prosecutor, Mr. Speaker, more than two decades ago, such finds of drugs that we found recently in Legalega and Maqalevu, could not even possibly be thought of. As prosecutors, we learn of the trend. Every crime starts small. Without detection, it festers. Without detection, it aggravates. What is the point that I am making here, Mr. Speaker?

The find of many tonnes recently simply means that in earlier times, a kilogramme passed through, not detected, 10 kilogrammes passed through. It continues until it is detected and as we have seen recently, tonnes of it. You do not get suddenly tonnes passed through our shores. What it means is that it festers and it increases over time.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- You see the capacity of it.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, may I ask who were in charge when the kilogramme passed through, when 10 kilogrammes passed through, when 100 kilogrammes passed through and when the first tonne passed through, came through ...

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- 16 years.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- ... our doors, that government, please put your hands up?

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, the drug problem in our country must now be Parliament's problem because we are legislators. I am told that in 2019, a motion was moved in Parliament by the then Opposition Members for a joint committee to combat Fiji's drug problem. We all know how that day ended. Instead of trying to win cheap partisan points please revisit that motion and bring it up, you will see that this Government will support it without reservation.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, the challenge laid in this Parliament by His Excellency must not fall to the ground. We must catch the challenge like the Drua boys had performed. We must run with the challenge of working bipartisan on all matters that affect us as a nation. We must work together on matters that even the Opposition have laid as challenges that they have heard in their visits.

Mr. Speaker, there is no room for fear mongering in this Parliament. There is no room for generalisation without data as we have heard all day for three days from the Opposition. No room for marginalisation from posts you read on social media unless you have it on credibility. We understand their role as watchdogs of executive decision and so there is no need for marginalisation,

generalisation and fear mongering, get used to the chair that you now occupy because it is going to be a long ride for the next 20 years on that side of Parliament.

(Laughter)

This Government, Mr. Speaker, is a Government for all. There is no political preference for a particular race. This is a Government that was voted into power by all Fijians and we will serve all Fijians.

HON. MEMBERS.- *Vinaka.*

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Like the early memories of His Excellency growing up in the cane belt of Macuata, with all the races that call Macuata their home. My own memories in my village in Loa is very clear. For those of you who know Buca Bay will know of Niuloa, Mr. Speaker, a parcel of arable land that was initially leased in the 1900s to three families of Indian origin. I do not know of the original lessees' name but their offsprings, whom we know when we were children, their names were Kuku Ramu Dasi, Kuku Pitaji, Kuku Nanika, who was the first owner of a Daihatsu van in the whole of Buca Bay. He was my father's brother from another mother; Kuku Nanu, Kuku Jihdo (who went on to establish a shop in Kasavu) and of course we all know Kuku Ramutari.

These hardworking men and their wives have sons, one is Ramesh, we called him Tui because he carried my grandfather's name. Jone Pitaji, son of Kuku Pitaji, carries even my own father's name. These children are all well established in Savusavu, Labasa, Suva and even beyond. We remain close to this day, Mr. Speaker. Rakesh was the son of Prasad. He is the owner and proud owner of Paradise Digging Services Limited, one of the sub-contractors of roads established very well in Savusavu today.

Mr. Speaker, this is the Fiji His Excellency wants us to recreate and deliver to Fiji and her people. His Excellency is speaking to us for the Fiji and the multiracialism that made this country the depiction of the way the world should be. This is the country that we can be remembered for creating and giving to the next batch of young and more vibrant parliamentarians in the future.

I want to wish all Hindus in Fiji a celebration of *Holi*, citizens of Fiji here and abroad well in the holy month of *Ramadan* and to all Christian brothers and sisters a blessed Easter in the month of March.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for your indulgence and I thank His Excellency for his most gracious Speech, and I support the honourable Prime Minister's motion. *Me lagilagi tiko o Viti.*

GOVERNMENT GUARANTEE - FIJI DEVELOPMENT BANK

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the purposes of Section 145(1) of the Constitution and pursuant to Standing Order 131, I move:

That Parliament approves –

- (a) that the Government guarantee for the Fiji Development Bank borrowings for the 12-month period from 1st March, 2024 to 28th February, 2025 through the issuance of short and long-term bonds, promissory notes and RBF financing facility and other short-term borrowings;
- (b) that the Government guarantee for a sum of \$130 million for the guarantee period; and
- (c) that the Bank pay a guarantee fee of 0.075 percent on the cumulative utilised guarantee.

HON. RO. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I second the motion.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, by way of background, as per the establishment of the Fiji Development Bank (FDB) Act in 1966, it is important for me to, once again, highlight the function of the Bank and, that is, to facilitate and stimulate the promotion and development of natural resources, transportation and other industries and enterprises in Fiji and in the discharge of these functions, the Bank shall give a special consideration and priority to the economic development of the rural and agricultural sectors of the economy of Fiji. Furthermore, Sir, the Bank is under the supervision of the Reserve Bank of Fiji, and this requires the Bank to provide a six-monthly report to the Minister of Finance.

Also, as required under section 2(1) of the Financial Management Act which states that subject to any other Act that the Government may guarantee the financial liability of an entity in respect of a loan or otherwise but only if the giving of the guarantee is approved by Parliament. So by way of background, this is why this guarantee comes to Parliament.

This Government guarantee, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the request from the Bank is to:

1. continue the facilitation of the Government's policy by lending to essential sectors of the economy, particularly resource-based sectors including; agriculture, mining and quarrying, manufacturing, transport, communications, storage, small and micro enterprises, wholesale and retail, hotels, sustainable energy from fossils to renewable sources and professional and business services which will assist the disadvantaged community to earn a decent livelihood.
2. lend to the resource-based sector that will assist in the development of the agriculture sector and assist the development of the Fijian economy in the long run.
3. continue provision of finance that can support the growth of the nation's economy and improve the standard of living for the people, as well as improving their social economic status by assisting them with their needs in making the correct investments.
4. ensure that the Bank's borrowings are guaranteed by the Government, therefore, reducing the perceived risks associated with such borrowings. This will make the Bank's instruments more attractive to investors and should reduce the cost of borrowing to the Bank.

I want to also state, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the original intention of the Bank was to ensure that the Bank actually took additional risks in providing financing to sectors which, perhaps traditionally, will not be the ones that commercial banks and other financial institutions would like to lend.

In terms of the Bank's lending portfolio, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bank's Audited Financial Statement as of 31st December, 2023, recorded an accumulative total loan portfolio of \$482.73 million. We are representing about 8,561 accounts of \$371.04 million in the focus sector, which is what I had stated earlier; and 1,058 accounts, amounting to \$111.69 million in the non-focus sector, compared to \$692 million in the 2022 Financial Year. So, that is a significant change, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

On the Bank's financial position for 2023, at the end of the financial year, the Bank doubled its consolidated profit to \$3.8 million, an increase of about 114 percent when compared to the same period last year which was \$1.8 million. This is attributed to the increase in fee income and allowances for interest and fees. The overall asset base stood at \$594 million as at 2023 Financial

Year 2023 and a 5 percent decrease when compared to the \$626.2 million in the 2022 Financial Year.

While total liabilities declined to \$411.7 million, 8 percent decrease from \$449.9 million in the year 2022 so with the decrease in total liabilities, the total shareholders' equity increased by 3 percent to \$182.2 million.

As at the end of 2023 Financial Year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bank had total cash and cash equivalent of \$179.1 million - an increase of about 72 percent when compared to the same year in 2022. The increase was attributed to the higher collection levels during the year and that is understandable (coming out of COVID-19).

On the Bank's borrowing forecast, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for 2024 and that relates to the Government guarantee that we are seeking from Parliament, the Bank's total forecasted outlay from 1st March, 2024 to 28th February, 2025, which is the proposed amount for the 2024 Guarantee, Sir, amounts to \$191.26 million as opposed to \$211.3 million during the 2023 Guarantee that we had approved here in Parliament. So, given that the Bank's forecasted inflow is only \$61.26 million during the proposed guarantee period, Sir, the Bank requires an additional \$130 million to finance the total outlay of \$191.26 million. Henceforth, the guarantee that we are bringing to Parliament is for an additional \$130 million which is proposed to be raised from the issuance of bonds and other instruments - promissory notes, short term borrowings and RBF financing facility.

The FDB Guarantee, Sir, is requested on an annual basis. That is why we have to bring it again this year. Given that Parliament only approves to guarantee FDB borrowings for the next 12 months period, which is a strategy, I think, also put in place to stringently monitor the risk associated with these borrowings to minimise the risk of exposure to Government.

In light of the figures highlighted, the outstanding guaranteed borrowings, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been declining over the years. Every time we have been coming to Parliament, the amount has been declining. For instance, the total approved Government Guarantee for FDB borrowings for the past five years has accumulated to a sum of \$920 million, and as of 31st December 2023, only 25 percent - \$234.21 million of this accumulated approved guarantee is outstanding by which the Debt Management Unit in the Ministry of Finance and Strategic Planning is closely monitoring to ensure that associated fiscal risks are mitigated at all times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bank's current average lending rate and cost of borrowing as of 31st December, 2023 is 5.67 percent and 1.23 percent respectively. Additionally, the Bank accommodates and delivers a variety of Government's socio-economic and directed lending policies, therefore, request that it continues to be assisted by the provision of guarantees. I think that is the rationale behind the guarantees as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bank's outstanding liabilities guaranteed by the Government, as mentioned earlier, as of 31st January 2024 amounts to \$227.6 million, of which bond stood at \$45.5 million - 21 percent; term deposits at \$65.1 million - 29 percent; and RBF import substitution and export finance provision at \$117.02 million, which is 50 percent.

Financial implications of this guarantee, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as of 30th October, 2023, the total Government guaranteed debt stood at \$1.02 billion or 7.7 percent of the GDP. Accessing the \$130 million guarantee that we are asking Parliament to approve for the Bank, will increase the total Government guarantee exposure to \$1.2 billion or 8.7 percent of GDP. I think the honourable Members of Parliament understand this. What that means is that, if there is a default, then the Government will have to come up with that \$130 million. But the good news is that Bank has never

called on the Government guarantee to honour its guarantee, and the Bank continues to pay the guarantee fees.

With those details, I commend the motion and ask the honourable Members to, please, support the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. And before I offer the floor, I wish to inform this august Parliament that I have in front of me a list of speakers who have been identified by both Whips.

The Opposition will lead off the batting and that is to be done by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, and to be followed by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism, Civil Aviation and Education, before we switch back to honourable Koya and then to be rounded off by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises, and Communications.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been listening very carefully to the motion and I can see that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance was smiling most of the time when he was presenting this because he knows how these Guarantees used to be debated in Parliament previously.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me say from the very beginning of my contribution that we, on this side of Parliament, fully support the motion. I am a bit worried about what honourable Koya referred to as “year of nothingness”, probably to salvage the Government of the year of nothingness, we have decided to give it our full support.

However, seriously, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just for three key reasons, it is a development bank and the key things about development bank is providing that long-term financial support and the two key words are to support projects and most importantly, the sectors. We have been talking about diversifying the economy and this is one of my concluding remarks. I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, we had some long discussions here.

During the week, I responded to the request from the Prime Minister’s Office, from Ministry of Foreign Affairs to have consultations with the consultant who is here on our Foreign Policy - White Paper. Again, I discussed with Mr. Peter Varghese. We can come up with a very good Foreign Policy, at the same time, where do you converge with the work that has been undertaken by the Ministry of Defence on national security issues because at the end of all these, to support your Foreign Policy, to support your national security policies, we need a well-functioning economy to provide that support to the policies that we have.

Why I am talking about projects and sectors, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is because if we refer back to the Household Income and Expended Survey Reports (HIES), we will come up with the incidents of poverty and particularly in the areas in Fiji. The honourable Minister for Rural Development has been talking about coming out of dependency syndrome. The honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs has been talking about empowering the *iTaukei* in their respective communities. We fully support that, but we need to be analytical as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Where are the incidents of poverty in Fiji high?

I had noted, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the work of the Fiji Development Bank (FDB), when we established FDB in Taveuni, in Bua, additional to the one that we have in Seaqaqa and the one in Labasa, the 2018 HIES Report specifically stated that the incidents of poverty in Vanualevu reduced from 53 percent to 48 percent.

Apart from the other contributing factors, I will come to MSMEs because of the Northern Development Programme but FDB played a critical role in the achievement of that. That is why data is so important and that is why that analytical thinking needs to be there, and then we look at the potentials in the respective areas - not just the rhetoric, not just the statements but we need to do something about it and this is why the development bank providing these finances for projects and the sectors.

We have talked about the resource-based sector. We have heard a lot from the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry. We have heard a lot from the honourable Minister for Agriculture. Let us do something, let us come up with serious plans, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

On Small and Medium Enterprises, one of the purposes of development banks is to provide banking services principally to cater for the medium to long term needs of agricultural and industrial enterprises with emphasis on small and medium scale industries.

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Cooperatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications and I also had some discussions. Again, going back to the economy because when we are talking about the economy, we are doing our review on our defence and our foreign policies.

During our discussions with the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Cooperatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications, we have been talking about Fiji as a hub, hub for what? Let us get into some serious work so that we can fully utilise that advantage that we have so that we can gain from it.

On the role of SMEs, Japan thrives. They started off with small enterprises and they become big players, not only locally but globally as well out of SMEs.

I know the effect of the Northern Development Programme. I have talked about the incidents of poverty because SMEs in the North have continued to be assisted from 2008 and I hope that, that still continues, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because we need that.

We have been talking about high unemployment. This will be a solution when we have a lot of SMEs. We do not want people to be employees only, we want employers, and this is why it is so important.

Of course, the agriculture sector. As the honourable mover of the motion has correctly stated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the initial purpose of FDB or the main objective is to facilitate and stimulate the promotion and development of natural resources, transportation and other industries and enterprises in Fiji, and to give special consideration and priority to the economic development of the rural and agricultural sectors of the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we go back to His Excellency's the President's Address last year, there was a commitment by Government to set up a special committee for the sugar industry. I will say that again, in His Excellency's Address last year, there was in the statement by His Excellency to set up a special committee to look at sugar.

I have discussed with you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a Chairperson of Natural Resources Committee and being new to Committee work, I did not know where to put that in the Report on the Agriculture Sector, but I decided to put it in the Chairman's foreword. If we can have a special committee, not only to look at sugar, but to look at the whole agricultural sector - sugar and non-sugar, because as stated very recently, again, by the honourable Minister for Lands and, of course, in

concurrence with what His Excellency said, that agriculture is the backbone. Let us do something serious.

We offer our assistance from this end. I know the 2020 Agriculture Policy Agenda and the key thematic areas that is in the policy agenda. From there, they have worked out the five key thematics that are there in the Strategic Plan. It is good to have a plan but let us come up with some concrete work on how to operationalise that plan so that we diversify the economy and we can broaden the economic base.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Natural Resource Sector has a lot of play and that is why we strongly support this motion. Of course, we continue to contribute when Government sees it fit, as consistent with what we have discussed and what has been stated as well by His Excellency in his Address and, of course, the commitments to last year. Once again, we fully support the motion, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Leader of Opposition for your contribution.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the motion on the floor for the Government to guarantee the sum of \$130 million to the Fiji Development Bank (FDB). The way I see it, Sir, quite simply, FDB's role is to provide finance for the development of the country.

Mr. Speaker, we all want the Bank to succeed. There are two parties to the bank; those that manage the bank and those that borrow. In my view, Sir, what we need is for both to be well educated - the one who manages the affairs of the bank and the one who borrows.

One of the finest examples of development banks, Mr. Speaker, is the Development Bank of Singapore. It is dominant in the Asia Pacific region, and it is for that reason, that it is run by people who are well educated, well trained and the borrowers are also well-educated people who put the money they borrow to good use.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am picking the angle that the education policy of the Coalition Government is critical for the economy of this country and critical for the FDB. As I have articulated that our policy is in terms of what we provide in scholarships, there is no other country in the Pacific that provides scholarship for its citizenry, like Fiji, and it is a policy of the Coalition Government.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we wrote off the debt of 53,725 people (young men and women) in this country, debts that were valued at about \$650 million. I hear from honourable Koya that there is nothingness but I tell you, Sir, that that kind of write-off was heavy lifting of the highest order anywhere, not even FijiFirst would have thought of that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.-Mr. Speaker, Sir, I say this because we need education to develop our country. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), in its very positive report of the economy given out this week, had a paragraph there that Fiji should focus on education and skills training for its people. So, we are committed to education policies that provide education to our people in the best way possible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we talk about TELS...

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Talk about FDB.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- ... and education, I met this lady who came up to me and said, "My

daughter is a doctor. Thank you, she does not have to pay her TELS debt.”

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- *Vinaka.*

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- And if you look at that, Mr. Speaker....

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Point Of Order. Order 61 – when speaking, Members must confine their observation to the subject under consideration. Mr. Speaker, Sir, through you, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, we are talking about the Fiji Development Bank Guarantee. That is what we are talking about.

(Laughter)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are talking about the health of the Bank.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, can I just make a Ruling on that Point of Order? Can I humbly ask you just to confine your observations on what is before us?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We are talking about the health of the Bank here and an educated citizenry is very important for the Bank to survive. We can talk about guarantees but if what you guarantee is wasted, then it will all come to nothing. That is why we need policies of Government to support the economy of this country, to support the Bank and to support the development of this country. That is why education is so important.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a lot being said about education. If you do not support it, if all these misleading statements, honourable Sachida Nand said that the FFP policy that they only pay 50 percent is better than ours where we write off 100 percent”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we want the Bank to succeed, we want our people to know what to do with their money and we need training, we need education, and that is why, it is important to educate our people and that our people in education, we train them to execute. We can have all the best plans but if our people cannot execute, it will fall apart. If they are given loans and they do not know how to use it, if you cannot execute, the Bank will fail. That is the point that they do not understand, Sir. They do not get it.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- We look at Fiji in a holistic way, Mr. Speaker, Sir. What is important is for the other side to realise that our education policies is the best that has been in this country and it is always supported. Honourable Premila Kumar is bringing Australia saying that Australia do not even give free education. They used to give free education, but that is history. You do not know your history.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Point of Order, under Standing Order 61, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on relevance. He needs to be instructed to be confined to the subject at hand and he is going all over the place. He has forgotten that he is in Government now, not in Opposition. Thank you, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, you may continue.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, do they think about the last 16 years of wastage?

(Laughter)

It is 16 years of wastage because they did not educate our people properly.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mismanagement because they could not train people to execute. We want people to execute better in this country, Mr. Speaker, that is why education is so important. Without that, the Bank will fail. It is obvious they cannot make the connection, that is why we inherited a sorry state of affairs.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a Point of Order. Standing Order 61. Are you finished? Just because I got up, he finished. Thank you.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I hear one more 16 years quip from the other side, Sir, I will continue reading the list.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as pointed out right at the outset, we fully support this motion. I think sometimes we forget about what actually drives our economy. Again, one of the most important things for us to always remember is that we have guaranteed within our Constitution the right to economic participation, and it is a very important provision within the Constitution. Section 32(1) reads, and I quote:

“Every person has the right to full and free participation in the economic life of the State, which includes the right to choose their own work, trade, occupation, profession or other means of livelihood.”

Why I say this as a reminder, Sir, for eight years because I served as Minister for Trade, I think also the honourable Minister now who looks after the Ministry of Trade and SMEs has really grasped the issue well. I think if I remember correctly, he spoke at the Fiji Enterprises Engine graduation ceremony where he mentioned about the entrepreneurial journey and I quote from him, Sir, as it requires a special kind of determination and resilience.

I am so happy that he actually recognises that and I think what happens is, when we do these things and the FDB for many, many years has formed a huge part of the life of SMEs and continuous to do so, it is something extremely important. If I could just relay some facts and figures, if you look at countries like Indonesia, 60.51 percent of its GDP is actually from these MSMEs and that is quite a substantial amount. Indonesia quite surpasses some of the other countries, but it is huge with respect to their contribution to GDP.

So, when we look at ours, we have to put these things in, we have to support these ideas specifically when it comes to banks, like FDB. We also know that the normal high street banks generally do not easily accommodate these MSMEs. These MSMEs and we recognise these very much a long, long time ago about how they drive the economy and they are the engine for growth when it comes to that.

So, a word of reminder to the honourable Minister of Finance, please, remember them during budget time because they do form a huge part of our economy and currently, they all are suffering and we would gladly support this.

Now, if I may also, Sir, when we talk about MSMEs, we are not actually just talking about one Ministry. It is the Ministry of Tourism with all our ladies who sell their wares during the tourism season, et cetera; it is the Ministry of Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications; obviously, it is the Ministry of Agriculture; it is the Office of the Prime Minister's; the Ministry of Sugar; Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection; Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts; Ministry of Fisheries - these are all the Ministries that are involved in MSMEs and we need to recognise that because they really form a huge part of our country's growth.

The cooperatives are involved in it and I am really happy to see that the Ministry concerned, Ministry of Trade, is continuing to do that, but they actually need assistance and help, especially in light of the fact, as I have said, high street banks, even though they are flushed with cash, they make it a little a bit more impossible for our MSMEs to survive. Again, I think we also need to be a little bit mindful of honourable Gavoka, who is the new Minister for Education so he is just promoting his Ministry.

I think we must also remember, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I think honourable Gavoka pointed out a very important point that if you have a bank, you need a great Chief Executive Officer (CEO) who is actually going to drive this and I understand that the current CEO is a huge admirer of the MSME sector and he actually does quite a lot for them. So, all in all, Sir, just being very short and sharp, I am not going to go on about it, maybe out of the year of nothing as we might get a year of something out of this support that we actually render to FDB. I wholeheartedly support the motion, Sir.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I make some comments in support of the motion before Parliament by the honourable Minister of Finance, I thought I will just touch on honourable Koya's comments in his speech today. I was trying to think of an appropriate word to use when he said that it has been 14 months of nothingness and I came up with one word, - 'comical'.

Honourable Koya cannot be serious and say that we have not done anything in 14 months, compared to 16 years. Let me remind them, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when Mr. Naiqama came out with the report on poverty, he was reporting on the 2019 figures and not 2022 because they would have said that it is COVID-19 related. That was before COVID-19. He said that one-third of the population in Fiji is under extreme poverty; one-third, 16 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services was very polite when he spoke about health. I will tell him a story just for them to know. I spoke to the Chief Surgeon at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir, again on Standing Order 61 on relevance. We are debating the Government Guarantee motion that is before Parliament and he is going all over the place. You had instructed them to be on to the point, it is amazing, I admire you for your patience though, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, patience is for everyone, but I ask the honourable Deputy Prime Minister to, please, continue as most of the speakers are in support from both sides.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Very quickly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was speaking to the Head Surgeon of the CWM Hospital and he said that out of the eight Operating Theatres, only three are operational. So, what these poor doctors have to do, they have to work during the day because of the backlog, and they go and sleep a little bit, then come out at midnight with the nurses and actually

operate on people. It has been like that for so many years - 16 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it goes without saying, we have shared the unsustainable debt problem in this country. They are saying it is COVID-19 related - it is not COVID-19 related, it is because of the wastage in this country that we have arrived at this unsustainable debt problem.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Point of Order! Standing Order 60 - Relevance. Mr. Speaker, Sir, you had directed him to speak on the motion, he is still going on - very disrespectful to the decision that you had made.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Naupoto.

Honourable Members, you are all adults here. When the Speaker has made a ruling, let us continue to respect and honour that, please, because it is so hard when you think you are in the right, then you want to inform other people, "Look you people were wrong." This was the actual thing that happened.

Again, can we just focus on orders before us, that is, this motion by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance on the FDB seeking a guarantee. That is all we want. At the beginning, it worked very well as I was listening, "oh, this will be short one." As we come together to agree, then all of a sudden, we are finger pointing again. I insist on the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, please, but do continue.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just on the unsustainable debt, let me explain how relevant it is. That is why it is very important that we support the FDB guarantee so that we continue to broaden the economy and support the people of Fiji.

May I now be allowed to make my contribution, Sir. I rise to briefly support the motion by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance. The FDB has played a key role in the development of economic progress of Fiji. I recall with fondness that a former Prime Minister of our country was the CEO of FDB, the late Mr. Laisenia Qarase, and whenever FDB comes up, I recall him with fondness his massive contribution towards the FDB in supporting our country at that time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FDB has a big mandate to support MSMEs in the country in areas such as agriculture, sugarcane farmers in particular, and also wholesale, retail, hotels, restaurants, transportation and service sectors, to name a few. I just wish to elaborate a bit more on my support for the motion, Sir.

In fact, the FDB has been working very closely with the Ministry of Trade as it had even during honourable Koya's time, in terms of trying to support our SMEs in terms of, firstly, attaining finance at an affordable rate and also driving development or economic activities in the agriculture sector so that subsistence farming transforms into subsistence and commercial level. This guarantee will provide an opportunity, and for that reason, this guarantee is supported.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to list out a few key things that the FDB has done over the last year. Right now, 93 percent of FDB's portfolio is catering for three sectors - MSME sector, SME sector and also agriculture. They have actually started to focus in recent times on agriculture value chain, such as ginger and rice, in particular, and they continue to focus on trying to de-risk their portfolio and that is why right now the request to Government for a guarantee continues to reduce. Sir, it was \$280 million in 2022, \$150 million in 2023 and now, \$130 million in 2024.

There is a laser focus on women empowerment, and I know the honourable Minister for Women is actually very passionate about financial assistance to women. For the FDB's Women Entrepreneurs Loan in the last 16 months, they have been able to disburse about \$3 million to about 1,100 women with loans. Of course, they do have a digital literacy programme as well, Sir, in collaboration with Visa International and, apparently, just recently their financial literacy platform is online and 5,500 customers or individuals have clicked on to that literacy programme.

They also even do outreach programmes every month, at least, 15 on average, reaching out into places, like Kadavu, Rabi and other areas and we continue to try and work with them in their outreaches. Of course, as alluded to by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance, there has been a reduction in the non-provision in the Non-Performing Loans (NPL) portfolio in the last 24 months which is very positive.

In closing, Sir, just an example of a recent support that we have gave out in Kadavu where I was a few weeks ago, we were there to handover bakery equipment to Mrs. Alumita Tuila under the IHRBP funding which is a one-third two-thirds programme. She was able to get a grant from the Ministry and financed her one-third contribution from FDB under the Women's Entrepreneurs Programme. Mr. Speaker Sir, today she is supplying more than 120 loaves a day to the community, and that is the type of assistance that we will continue to encourage and foster as we move forward.

On honourable Koya's point, we are developing an MSMEs strategic plan which is receiving a lot of positive feedback and the FDB has actually been quite active in contributing to that plan because we can see that with the well-articulated plan and with some key strategies, we can hopefully grow the contribution of MSMEs to GDP, which is now 18 percent to, at least, double or more in the years to come.

I also thought to share with particularly the people of Fiji who are listening in that the Government is not giving FDB actual physical funding - we are merely approving a guarantee which would allow them to access finance.

Mr. Speaker, we speak in support of the contribution, and I fully support the motion.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank all the honourable Members for their contributions and especially thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his support for the motion on Government guarantee. Just very quickly and briefly, Sir, the point raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition on SMEs, in fact, Government has worked very closely with FDB to strengthen its reach to agriculture - to SMEs and MSMEs.

If I could just give you some figures, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last financial year, the Bank disbursed about \$40 million worth of loan to assist in the MSME and agriculture sectors alone. As pointed out by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications, the FDB has also introduced some new innovative projects for the SME and MSME sectors, particularly for women, and he gave the statistics. Women's loan portfolio represents about 28.6 percent of the Bank's overall loan portfolio, which is quite impressive. As the honourable Deputy Prime Minister has said, it represents about \$3 million and about 1,300 accounts.

Also, just to give you some figures and put it for record that the Bank has recorded a substantial decrease in Non-Performing Loans (NPLs) by 30.2 percent; four times more, compared to the previous financial year and the NPL was \$152.3 million. The Non-Performing Loan value as at June 2022 has now reduced to \$116.94 million in June 2023. I think that has been the case overall. A lot of the COVID related loans for businesses that were not able to pay loans during COVID, I am

told by banks that many of them have cleared that as part of the economic recovery in 2022-2023.

Just quickly clarifying the point raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition in terms of the Household Income and Expenditure Survey Report, I think the media also confused us on what was in the Report. What the report said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was 75 percent of those who were in poverty and not 75 percent of the total *iTaukei* population. It is the total which was below poverty line. Of those who were in poverty, 75 percent of them were from the *iTaukei* community.

I see a lot of people saying that 75 percent of the *iTaukei* population are living in poverty, that is incorrect, it is 75 percent of those who were already in poverty. I agree with the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Deputy Prime Ministers that SMEs, even in developed countries, the largest number of employment is created in the SMEs micro enterprises, small businesses, and they contribute significantly to the GDP.

The honourable Prime Minister was saying to me earlier that FDB's role, and I agree with him, is to also take a little bit more risk and expand its portfolio in terms of supporting SMEs, MSMEs and those in the agriculture sector. I know, Mr. Speaker, Sir. My first job was with FDB many years ago and the late former Prime Minister, Mr. Laisenia Qarase, was the Managing Director. Part of our responsibility in the section I worked in was basically to go and identify these very small micro enterprises and we were looking at loans of \$1,000; \$2,000; and \$3,000. What we found at that time was that those very small ones were actually very good. They were able to repay their loans on time and it created a lot more economic activity in those areas. So, I agree with all the honourable Members and with the honourable Prime Minister that we need to focus on SMEs and, particularly, in areas where the Bank could take a bigger risk in lending.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the FDB Board and Management. I think we have a very competent Board, and I am pretty sure that with the new strategic plan going forward, the Bank will serve its intention of promoting those focused sectors that we have identified earlier in our presentations.

Once again Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank all the honourable Members for supporting the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting today. I thank you all for your contributions and Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 5.17 p.m.