

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 6TH MARCH, 2025

[CORRECTED COPY]

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THURSDAY, 6TH MARCH, 2025

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

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable V. Pillay.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the Sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 5th March, 2025, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

POINT OF ORDER

Alleged Breach of Parliamentary Practice

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise on a Point of Order – Standing Order 74(1). There is an alleged breach of practice in the Standing Orders of Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- You may proceed, honourable Member.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to bring to your attention that four of us voted for the Suspension of the Standing Orders as we thought it is necessary to get the Constitution (Amendment) Bill tabled in this august House. After the voting, one of the Members said that we were snakes. This will be given to the Privileges Committee tomorrow for your approval.

It is very sad that honourable Members of Parliament cannot differentiate between suspending of the Standing Order motion and voting on the Bill. The former Attorney-General suspended this motion so many times in the same august House and the Opposition objected, yelling, but none of the former Ministers who were present here objected. So, what has happened to them now? How can we be together, as a nation, when Members of Parliament cannot understand simple things.

Mr. Speaker, we will get back to you in writing by tomorrow regarding the status of the four of us who voted for the motion in this august House. This morning when I went to the Opposition Chambers, honourable Semi Koroilavesau said that I have no place in here. How can the honourable Member say that when he and I are both independent Members? I will raise this case with your honourable office, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Member. I will take note of the issue that you have raised. You have not specified the details of what your complaint is. I will await the written

complaint, and I will make my ruling thereafter. Thank you, that is the end of the matter, we will take note on that.

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 live broadcast and the live streaming of today's proceedings. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

School of Law from the University of Fiji

Honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming the law students and Senior Lecturer from the Justice Davendra Pathik, School of Law from the University of Fiji. His Honour, Justice Pathik for which the School of Law at the University of Fiji was named, was a long-serving member of the Judiciary in the Crown Office, as the Attorney-General's Chambers was then known. I had the privilege and pleasure of serving alongside him for more than a decade. I believe that he is happily retired in coastal Queensland somewhere, and we wish him well and hope that he is safe from the path of Cyclone Alfred.

In any event, it is my absolute pleasure to welcome you to Parliament, the heart of our nation's democratic process. Today, you are in a place where laws are made and unmade, debates echo, and decisions that impact every citizen are made. May this visit enrich your understanding of our democratic traditions.

SPEAKER'S RULING

Clarification on Suspension of Standing Orders - Hon. F.S. Koya

Honourable Members, I wish to now deliver my ruling on the point of order that was raised by honourable Koya yesterday.

I had undertaken to give a reason for my ruling yesterday in not sustaining and dismissing honourable Koya's Point of Order under Standing Order 74, that the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament's motion to suspend Standing Orders 92 and 6(5), was out of order and should not be entertained.

In brief, the motion attempts to suspend Standings Order 6(5) and 92 that have the net effect of prohibiting the introduction of any motion before the House, that attempts to change, alter, amend or modify any provisions of Chapter 11 of the 2013 Constitution. As I have said yesterday, Chapter 11 sub-head reads: "Amendment of Constitution". I had not upheld honourable Koya's objection for the reasons I will now elaborate on.

First, both honourable Koya and I agreed that the amendment to the Constitution has its own procedures and rules as set out under Chapter 11. The Standing Orders of Parliament is subordinate or subservient to the primary law of the land, which is the Constitution.

In as much as the Standing Orders try to modify the procedures and the processes, or attempts to amend any provisions in the Constitution, of which there appears to be an inherent conflict with the enabling provisions of the Constitution to do the same, then the Standing Orders takes second place. In this, both honourable Koya and I agreed.

On that ground alone, honourable Koya's objection under the Standing Order fails and cannot be sustained. Honourable Koya, nevertheless, proceeded to argue that Chapter 11 of the Constitution, specifically Section 159(2)(c), prohibits any amendments that "repeal, infringe or diminish the effect of this Chapter".

I reminded honourable Members that in my view, there appears to be an inherent inconsistency and conflict between the provisions of Section 159(2)(c) of the Constitution and the overall objective of Chapter 11 as perceived from its objective, that is, the amendments to the Constitution.

If the strict interpretation put to Section 159(2)(c), as argued by honourable Koya, were to apply, then any and all attempts to modify, amend or change any provisions of the Constitution must fail. Yet, Chapter 11 sets out the procedures and processes of amending it.

So, in the Chair's view, the interpretation of Section 159(2)(c) must be taken in the consideration of the overall objective of Chapter 11, that is, any amendments to the Constitution, or more precisely, how the Constitution should be amended.

Be that as it may, the motion introduced by the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament is only to allow the process of the amendments as set out under Section 160 of the Constitution to take place.

I remind honourable Members that this House, the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, is the highest court of the land. It makes and unmakes the law. It cannot be shackled by impediments that are not in conformity with the general principles of the law. The Judiciary only serves to interpret the laws made by this body. So, thank you honourable members, that is my reasoning for the decision made yesterday.

We will now proceed to the next item in the Order Paper. Honourable members, we will continue with the responses to His Excellency's address.

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

HON. L.D. Tabuya.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, to all my fellow Fijians and those who are joining us here in the gallery and watching live on the internet; I rise today in full support of His Excellency the President's most Gracious Speech, an address that calls us to reflect on our past, unite in the present and act for our future. When His Excellency said, and I quote: "We must walk together in unity, ensuring that no one is left behind." Those words struck me not only as a leader, but as someone who has personally felt the cost of standing up for what I believe in.

I have often been asked by my family, by close friends and by people on social media — "why do you do it?" Why endure public scrutiny, personal attacks and threats to your dignity? And I will be honest, Mr. Speaker, there have been moments I have asked myself the same questions.

I remember lying in a cold cell at Totogo, charged for daring to speak out. I remember counting the cracks on the wall, wondering if it was worth it. I remember the suffocating silence at home when a private message meant for only one person was broadcast to an entire nation. But in those darkest hours, I came back to the same answer - I do this to serve the people of Fiji.

Service is why we are all here. We were elected to make a real difference in people's lives,

not to seek fame or personal comfort. So, I stand by His Excellency's call that we must keep our eyes focussed on the work ahead. Make no mistake, there is much work to be done, and it will not be easy.

For 16 years, we have lived under strict limitations on what we could say, which leaders or institutions we could criticize, and how freely our media could operate. The era of that is behind us, but the scars are still fresh. As His Excellency the President himself acknowledged, "The socio-economic challenges before us are undeniable. Our people are looking to us for answers and for action. They need better wages, decent hospitals, solid homes, roads that so not crumble after a few months and genuine justice for the wrongs of the past. And let me be clear, they should not have to wait forever.

Let this be our moment to recognise what is at stake. This is not the time to pat ourselves on the back and say, "We've won, let's enjoy the power." No! Our results, not our speeches or our titles, will judge us. It is not enough to point out what is wrong. We must propose solutions and make sure they see the light of day. That will demand humility and determination from us all.

Let us remember that we are human. We are not perfect, and we do fall short. I have fallen short. I have stumbled in the face of criticism, and I felt the sting of personal attacks. Yet, one thing remains certain - I will never stop serving Fiji.

Even if it means facing humiliation or carrying heavy burdens, I choose to continue. I am grateful to everyone who has supported me. The honourable Prime Minister, our Party, our tireless supporters, and above all, my family, who stood by me no matter what. Their faith reminds me why we fought so hard for a Fiji where people can speak their minds freely. Even if that means freedom, sometimes bring that criticism that is sometimes hard to hear.

To those who feel I have not met their standards, and to those who voice their opinions, even harshly, I say, "thank you." This is exactly the freedom we wanted. Democracy should be a space where we can all speak openly, agree or disagree, and work out our differences without fear.

I also want to acknowledge my colleagues, some of whom once sat across the aisle in Opposition. They took a bold step by joining the Government, focussed on solutions rather than disputes. Crossing that line and turning former rivals into partners takes real courage. We are showing that collaboration is not just possible, it is crucial for the future of our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are no longer the Coalition Government. We are a Government of National Unity, with all Parties that voted in, in 2022 represented in Parliament and in Government.

In the last Election, I was deeply humbled by the support of thousands of Fijians who placed their trust in me, making me the second highest number of votes in today's esteemed House. While two with highest votes - me and the honourable Prime Minister, have we abandoned this House? It is the mandate from the people that voted for me that fuels my work in Parliament and in Government. It keeps me accountable and reminding me that I must translate your faith into practical benefits for our communities, every single day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Saturday, 8th March, we celebrate International Women's Day, a day that reminds us of how far we have come and how far we have left to go. During my tenure as Minister for Women, I focused on the stronger child protection laws and better support for families in need, in introducing the Child Care and Protection Act 2024 and the Child Justice Act 2024.

We launched new programmes to combat poverty. We stood up for gender equality and

women's rights with the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls. These priorities go beyond politics. They are promises to our children, to our families, and to every Fijian who hope for a fairer, more inclusive nation. I am proud to see our new Minister, the honourable Sashi Kiran, continue this vital work.

This year also marks 30 years since the Beijing Platform for Action, a historic commitment to promote women's rights. Since then, we have seen victories in education, healthcare and leadership. But let us be honest, too many challenges remain. Women are still underrepresented - leadership and workplace inequality still persists. Worst of all, violence against women continues to rise.

I urge my colleagues and all stakeholders; we need to do more about this. Fiji has made progress, but we must push further. Let us be the generation that makes gender equality a reality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to express my absolute admiration for His Excellency the President for his commitment to transformative leadership. His words resonate deeply, and I quote:

“True leadership is about compassion, empathy and equity. This defines why I chose this path. Leadership is not about being perfect, it is about being present. It is about persevering through challenges.”

I also extend my gratitude to our honourable Prime Minister. In the past two months, yes, I have had people urge me to leave the Coalition Government. Some have suggested I join another Party. Some have even asked me to lead a party. But here is what I have learnt about leadership - People do not want perfect leaders, people do not want the smartest leaders, people want leaders who are resilient and can stand challenges, navigate crises and keep going.

Yes, there is frustration with the pace of change. Yes, we must move faster. But let us not forget what our honourable Prime Minister has already achieved, he:

- led the revolution that freed Fiji from 16 years of dictatorship;
- united three political parties to form the people's Government;
- brought in Opposition Members, a bold and historic move;
- encouraged open dialogue and protected free speech; and
- unlike our previous leaders, is open to the media and takes their questions anytime and anywhere.

That is leadership.

However, change takes time. We cannot undo 16 years of governance in just two years. Can we do better? Yes. Must we do better? Yes. But leadership requires trust - trust in the vision, trust in the process, trust that we are building something greater than ourselves.

Mr. Speaker, we cannot have real development if we ignore rural Fiji. This is why I propose a bold idea, and I have heard the sentiments of my *Turaga Naita* from Naitasiri, honourable Shalen Kumar, who spoke so eloquently in the Naitasiri dialect, like the honourable Attorney-General talked about the under development in our Province of Kadavu.

I have just returned from my mother's village in Udu - Nasauva, Tawake, Cakaudrove, and even travelling on those roads, on the outside and the outskirts of Labasa, shows the lack of underdevelopment they still have. But I do propose a bold idea - that the Constitutional Review to be part of the process. What if we consider decentralising governance through Provincial governance?

Many nations - China, Canada, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands use this model. It works because it brings decision-making closer to the people.

A provincial system would give each province more control over development, while the national government focuses on broader policies. Key areas of responsibility for provincial governance would include:

- (1) Social services - education, healthcare, social programmes tailored to each province.
- (2) Economic development - agriculture, fisheries, roads and transportation.
- (3) Governance - provincial legislatures, local treasury management and policy decisions.

This structure would:

- (1) empower Provinces to take charge of their own development;
- (2) ensure better resource allocation based on local needs;
- (3) strengthen democracy and accountability; and
- (4) improve service delivery in rural and maritime areas.

If we truly want equitable development, then we must embrace bold solutions.

Yes, we will face new challenges, yes, the road ahead may be bumpy, but the lessons we have learned, and the hope as stated by His Excellency the President, 'House of Hope', is what needs to drive us forward.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, I would like to leave fellow Fijians with a simple, urgent message. We have left those days behind but the freedom by itself that we have cannot feed families or fix roads. Our challenge now is to build a Fiji that transforms hopeful words into tangible actions.

We have a government. Now, with the Opposition Members joining us now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to find our footing in working together, in gelling together. That takes leadership that listens, that consults, that makes it work. Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, we have our population that is watching, waiting to see promises that will progress. It is time to deliver them. Let every single Member of this House, every citizen across the land, holding one another accountable for making Fiji fair, strong and prosperous.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you know, the famous saying in Kadavu, "*Je na yava, je na yava, nomu liga, nomu laga*", It means this: Come what may, no matter the storms we face, no matter the hardships that try to break us, we must keep moving. We must keep paddling; we must keep fighting for what is right. This is not just a saying; this is the story of Fiji.

We are a people who have weathered cyclones and crises, *coups* and struggles. We have fallen, but we have always risen. We have stumbled, but we have never stayed down. This is who we are. This is the Fijian spirit.

Today, as we stand at a crossroads, I ask each of us, what kind of Fiji do we want to build? A Fiji where:

- every child, no matter where they are born, has the chance to dream and succeed.
- women no longer have to fight for a seat at the table - they belong at the table.
- our elders live with dignity, our workers earn fair wages and our leaders are held accountable, not just by Parliament, but by the people they serve.

This is our moment, not just to –

- lead, but to lift.
- promise, but to prove that democracy can deliver.
- govern, but to give back to the people who trusted us to build a future for our children.

We cannot waste this moment, so I say this to our fellow leaders here in the House, “*je na yava*” - come what may –

- let us serve with courage.
- let us unite, not for power, but for purpose.
- let us build a Fiji that our children will be proud to inherit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I end with a quote from Mother Teresa,

“People are often unreasonable and self-centred. Forgive them anyway.
If you are kind, people may accuse you of ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.
If you find happiness, people may be jealous. Be happy anyway.
The good you do today, may be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.
Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough. Give your best anyway.
You see, in the end, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for this opportunity. I support the motion before the House to thank His Excellency for his most Gracious Speech.

Je na yava, je na yava - come what may, *nomu liga, nomu laga* - let us move forward together. God bless you all and God bless Fiji. *Vinaka Vakalevu, Dhanyavaad, and fai'aksea.*

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I call on the next speaker, I, on all our behalf, honourable Members, recognise and welcome the presence of Ratu Joe Dimuri, joining us in the gallery this morning. Ratu Joe is a former Member of Parliament and a Cabinet Minister in of the past governments. Ratu Joe, you are welcomed most warmly into your former House.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- The honourable Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and my fellow Fijians; I rise today with deep gratitude to His Excellency the President for his Address which reaffirms the responsibilities that we carry as leaders to secure Fiji's future. His words remind us that national security is not just about protecting our borders, enforcing laws or deploying military strength. Security is about stability, democracy, national unity and the trust our people place in us as their leaders.

Over the years, His Excellency and his predecessors addresses, have called for action in strengthening Fiji's security. The Ministry has delivered on every commitment made in past addresses. From reinforcing the rule of law, improving disaster response, modernising our defence forces and ensuring that Fiji remains a strong and stable member of the Pacific community, we have turned words in actions.

This year, His Excellency's address focusses on an important milestone, the National Security Strategy (NSS) which the honourable Prime Minister will soon launch following Cabinet's endorsement. This document cannot be just another policy document. The NSS is a blueprint for the future of our nation's security. It represents a shift from a reactive approach to a proactive strategy. One that ensures that security is not just about responding to threats, but about building resilience in our institutions, our communities and our national identity. The NSS is not just a plan, it is a commitment. A commitment to a safer, stronger and more just Fiji!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our vision for Fiji's security is clear. It is about building a nation where every Fijian feels secure, not only from crime or external threats, but from division, exclusion and the uncertainty that comes when institutions fail to serve the people. Security is not simply the presence of law enforcement or military forces, it is ensuring that every Fijian regardless of background, ethnicity or status feels valued, protected and included. That is why, I have always believed that national security and national unity go hand in hand! A country divided along racial, economic or political lines is not a strong country. A nation where people feel marginalised or unheard is not a stable nation, and a Fiji where democracy is undermined by force, by fear or by exclusion, is not a secure Fiji.

We must be honest with ourselves. There have been times in our history where the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), was used to undermine democracy, rather than protect it. In 1987, in 2000 and in 2006, our Military was drawn into political affairs and used as a tool to silence our position, rather than uphold the will of the people. These were moments that changed the course of our nation, leaving behind wounds that we are still healing from today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot heal if we do not acknowledge the past. We cannot move forward if we allow history to repeat itself. That is why, under my ministership and leadership, I have worked to ensure that the RFMF remains a force for stability, not political control.

The days of military intervention in governance has come to an end. The RFMF must never again be seen as an institution that dictates political outcomes, but as a pillar of national security, democracy and of public service. This is why I have fought for a redefinition of the military's role, not as a power unto itself, but as a force that serves the people.

The RFMF today is a stabilising institution, working in partnership with civilian authorities and not against them. This is the future that we must build together. His Excellency, the former President's previous addresses have provided clear directives on strengthening Fiji's security and governance.

I am proud to report that the Ministry of Defence and Veterans Affairs, formerly the Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration, has diligently acted upon these directives by their Excellencies. Firstly, strengthening border security and crime prevention. We have modernised Fiji's border control measures, increased intelligence sharing with international partners, and launched joint operations to combat transactional crime and the illicit drug trade.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to especially acknowledge and thank the former Acting Commissioner of Police, Mr. Juki Fong Chew, for his courage in answering the call of the Government and the people of Fiji when the nation needed him most. I wish him well in his retirement.

Secondly, enhancing disaster preparedness responses. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the RFMF has been pivotal in strengthening our national disaster response mechanisms, ensuring that we are always prepared to protect our citizens in times of natural calamities. The Black Rock Camp in Nadi is now a leading regional hub for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), reinforcing our ability to respond quickly and effectively to disasters.

On strengthening regional and global partnerships, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have deepened our alliance with Australia through the renewed and elevated Vuvale Partnership. We are on the final stages of signing a Status of Forces Agreement with the United States of America, and we have developed a new and promising security relationship with the Republic of India. These relationships have enhanced our military capabilities, ensured access to world-class training, and strengthened our

abilities to address modern security challenges. I would also like to take this time to join you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to especially thank the outgoing High Commissioner of Australia to Fiji and the Pacific Envoy, His Excellency Ewan McDonald, for all he has done for Fiji, her government, and her people. We wish him, and his family well in their new assignment.

On National Security and the Defence Review (NSDR), Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have undertaken the most comprehensive review of Fiji's national security and defence policies in decades. This process has ensured that our security framework reflects modern threats and challenges, while reinforcing democratic governance and civilian oversight of security institutions. The NSDR sets the long-term vision for national security and is already shaping our policies and operational frameworks.

On the National Security Strategy (NSS), the NSS, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the NSDR completed, this strategy operationalises the key priorities outlined in the NSDR, ensuring that our security efforts are proactive, well-coordinated, and teacher focus. The NSS represents a whole-of-government approach to security, aligning our military, law enforcement, and civilian agencies towards a shared vision of national resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we strengthen our security forces, we must never forget those who have served before us. The men and women of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, Fiji Police Force, and the Corrections Service, who have retired from active duty and deserve our respect and our support. These veterans have dedicated their lives to the service of our nation, and we must ensure that they are not left behind. This Government remains committed to improving the welfare of retired service personnel, including providing better access to healthcare, financial assistance, and reintegration programmes for those transitioning into civilian lives.

The Veterans Affairs Unit continues to work closely with stakeholders to address the needs of our retired service people, and to ensure that their sacrifices are recognised and honoured. Being a retired service person myself, and as Minister for Defence and Veterans Affairs, I will continue to advocate for policies that uphold their dignity and enhance their quality of life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have said before, and I will say again “true security is not just about preventing threats. It is about addressing the root causes of instability,” That means that Fiji is a country where all people feel included, where opportunity is available to everyone, where justice is applied fairly, and where democracy is never threatened by force or fear. We cannot allow the mistakes of the past to be repeated. The Republic Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) must never again be used as a political tool.

Our democracy must never again be undermined by those in positions of power. And the people of Fiji, must never again feel as though their rights are conditional on who holds office. This is my vision for Fiji. A nation where security is measured not just by the strength of our military, but the strength of our democracy. A Fiji where national unity is not a slogan, but a new reality. A Fiji where every citizen, regardless of background, feels safe, heard, and valued.

As the honourable Prime Minister prepares to launch the National Security Strategy, I want to make it clear. Fiji is ready! We have done the work! We have built the institutions, and most importantly, we have laid the foundation for a security framework that is based on trust and not on fear. Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us move forward with a renewed commitment to justice, peace and national unity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion by the honourable Prime Minister to thank His Excellency for his most Gracious speech. May God bless Fiji. May God bless the Republic of Fiji

Military Forces, our veterans and may He bless this great nation that we all call home. Thank you, *Dhanyavaad* and *Vinaka vakalevu*.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think it is a convenient time to take our tea break. We will now suspend the proceedings, and Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.20 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 10.55 a.m.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Member.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Point of Order 80 – Personal Explanation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this morning, honourable Kirpal stood up and put my name on the floor of Parliament. It is my personal opinion, if I do not want the honourable Member of Parliament in my personal space, I have the right to tell him. He does not have to drag my position, as previous Minister in Parliament, to explain that. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I take on board your explanation, honourable Member. As you correctly pointed out, personal explanation under Standing Order 80 states, and I quote: “A member may explain matters of personal nature with the permission of the Speaker”, which he had done. “A personal explanation is not debatable” which, again, I recognise notwithstanding your clarification.

Honourable Members, we will proceed.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- The honourable Speaker of Parliament, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; *ni sa bula vinaka* and good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we stand here today. *Ki Nadonumai vua na Turaga na Tui Suva, na vasu ki Bau*. We pay our respect to their elders, past, present and those emerging.

Ni sa bula vinaka and namaste to the people of Fiji listening to this broadcast through Walesi livestreaming or listening on the radio today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to begin by extending my sincere gratitude to His Excellency, the President for his inspirational Speech at the Opening of Parliament last week. His Excellency emphasised the need to reflect on our collective responsibility towards building an inclusive and prosperous Fiji. Mr. Speaker, Sir, our nation is blessed to have a great leader at the helm. He is not only a distinguished paramount chief, but a respected politician and a humble public servant, who has contributed immensely over the many years of his service to our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since assuming office the Coalition Government has remained steadfast in its commitment towards uplifting the lives of all Fijians. Simultaneously, it focused on creating and enabling an environment that promotes accountability, impartiality and in a real democracy, as compared to the Government that recently ruled over us for 16 years. Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Coalition Government was elected by the people of Fiji, we understood the immense responsibility that lay ahead of us.

More than two years now, meaningful and proactive changes have now, undoubtedly, improved our current situation, as we all live, but many do not understand was that we had to dismantle the system and many things that were in place, in order to build and move forward. With it, was the culture that such system creates that takes much longer to change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian people are the backbone of our beloved nation, without whom we would not be here today. The voices of all Fijian are crucial in building a prosperous nation that

ensures that no one is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to listen to the people everyday. We have heard the public outcry of our unsustainable national debt levels and exacerbated social challenges that the Coalition Government had inherited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government recognises the necessity of addressing our national debt levels and the need for urgent action. The Coalition Government has reduced national debt levels from 90 percent to 79.4 percent in the 2023-2024 financial year and this is expected to further decrease to 77.8 percent by July this year. This is no small task for any government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a direct reflection of the Coalition Government's collective efforts to drive transformative change that is fundamental to improving the economy, prosperity, social stability, and resilience of all Fijians. These efforts are guided by the recently formulated National Development Plan 2025-2029 and Vision 2050.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this National Development Plan is a holistic blueprint developed through nationwide public consultations and diverse thematic working groups of experts and professionals that reflected the needs and aspirations of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Development Plan or the 'people's plan' includes a comprehensive implementation, monitoring, and evaluation framework to ensure that all deliverables and performance indicators are executed according to agreed targets, budgets and timelines, where accountability and collaboration are at its core. Ongoing work behind this national mechanism is currently spearheaded by the Ministry of Finance, Strategic Planning and Statistics and the Office of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Office of the Prime Minister is responsible for the implementation of the "Small Grants Project," whose aims are to improve the lives of all Fijians especially those that reside or live within the rural areas including the outer islands. I am pleased to inform this august House that within this financial year, there has been a total of 34 grant recipients who have benefitted from this scheme with a total funding commitment of \$1.1 million. We expect this number to further increase before the end of the financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the grant recipients, encompasses the four divisions in the country. The scope of the assistance provided by this scheme varies according to the needs of the communities. For instance, for the Namara District School in Sanima, Kadavu, financing assistance was provided for the supply and installation of a solar home system. This initiative is strategically aligned to the Government's commitment of empowering rural and maritime communities to attain connectivity to renewable energy sources.

Additionally, under the Small Grants Project, the Tokatoka Burekalou Community in Lami, benefitted through co-financing assistance in the construction of a 460 meters concrete footpath to ensure and promote the safety and accessibility of commute for the women, children, elderly and vulnerable in the community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government continues to recognise and acknowledge the aspirations of all communities that affectionately call Fiji "home." These communities have contributed immensely towards, and sustainable development of our beloved nation and the Coalition Government will ensure that their dignity, social stability, and security are met and safeguarded.

In this financial year, cost-sharing arrangements will soon be introduced and the scheme strengthened to better support community needs, promote partnerships, accountability and service delivery and sustainability of projects in communities to ensure long term viability. In my speech at the Opening of the 2024 Parliament session, I alluded to the Coalition Government's establishment of an inter-ministerial taskforce to oversee the needs of the descendants of the Melanesian community. Please, be informed in this august House that work is progressing well. The taskforce is working diligently to ensure that the socio-economic development of the Melanesian community with respect to acquiring and securing land tenancy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to adapt current global trends, it is critical to undertake necessary legislative reviews to meet the needs of the present generation. Currently, there are several archaic laws which require revision. The Coalition Government is actively pursuing legislative reforms to ensure that innovative and equitable measures are incorporated. We are in the process of reviewing the Banaban Settlement Act, Banaban Lands Act and the Rotuman Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the office of the Prime Minister is also in consultation with the Council of Rotuma, Kioa and Rabi Council of Leaders to ensure their perspectives and realities are considered in these reforms through a comprehensive consultative process. The priority areas of this review include good governance, economic stability and security among others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister mentioned the need to create wealthy people from our rich natural resources. The Office will soon devise a tailor-made innovative poverty alleviation strategies to enhance community livelihoods. Such strategy includes focusing on villages as the business units to better access support needed to further develop their own resources for sustenance and development with sustainability as its focus.

Government's effort to improve economic status, guarantee equality for all and improve access to services will be aided by your understanding and support. Such initiatives and programmes are pursued to reinstate the dignity, independence and hope of the people. The strategic intention is to nurture a generation of non-reliance on handouts. This is promoting resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you may be aware, the economy has been inundated by the devastating impact of the infestation of the Asian Subterranean Termites (AST) within the Ba, Nadi, Lautoka and most recently the Nakasi area. The Termite Taskforce remains committed to identifying practical solutions that would assist our Fijian communities navigate through this predicament that has affected their livelihoods and daily lives.

Mr. Speaker, the Termite Control Assistance Programme comprises of two major activities. The first being the Termite Subsidy Programme that provides relief packages to homeowners affected by AST. The second major activity being the Termite Baiting Programme which focusses on the provision of mass baiting services around the Lautoka area where properties have been severely affected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the establishment of the Termite Taskforce, a total of 775 households have been assisted through the Termite Subsidy Programme at a total funding value of \$3.8 million. In alignment with the standard operating procedures, applicants to the Termite Subsidy Programme will be provided with termite baiting services on a first-come, first-serve basis. Subsequently, through the necessary approval processes, Flick Hygiene Fiji Limited - the approved vendor - is to provide 1,000 households with above-the-ground baiting services under the Termite Baiting Programme. Termite baiting services are currently underway in the following areas: Rifle Range, Field 40, Tavakubu, Vitogo, Natabua, Waiyavi and Tomuka in Lautoka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the drastic spread of the termites or pests across local communities, it is imperative that there be a multi-pronged approach to include key stakeholders and expertise in addressing this challenge. I would like to encourage local households to seek further guidance and expert assistance from local agencies that specialise in the eradication of these pests. Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency underscored the need for visionary and ethical leadership that serves the interests of the people rather than personal interests.

Establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a key part of this effort. During this financial year, the Coalition Government remains committed to promoting healing, reconciliation, forgiveness and trust to foster social cohesion and unity in the country. It is through this approach that we will achieve stability, equity and progress for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to address some of the issues that has been raised by the Opposition members. Some of the members of the Opposition are stating that the previous government left a platform of sustainable development. This is far from the truth, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

If you go around the country, you will notice that most of the projects that have been implemented are there to gain political mileage without any conservation of economic efficiency. A typical example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the Lautoka at Aspen Hospital. The Public Accounts Committee was there last week, and we were told that there was no feasibility study undertaken to determine the cost and the benefit of this project to the people of this country.

When this idea was first mooted, we were told that the World Bank had undertaken the feasibility. This never happened, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Other stakeholders such as FNPF were forced to sign the agreement without due regard to the feasibility of this proposal.

The marketing tagline was, 'we are going to conduct open-heart operation, and this is the first time it will be done in this country'. The people of this country are not told that we are going to make \$10 million a month for this project. What a shame!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Most Gracious Address, His Excellency has emphasised Government's commitment to empowering agriculture, yet this is the first time that any government has recognised that we need to revive the sugar industry. This is not a rocket science, Mr. Speaker Sir. It is plain common sense.

We cannot take a path that was taken by the previous government and continue to subsidise the industry that we have no competitive advantage. Honourable Viam Pillay describes how Mr. Bainimarama has supported the survival of the industry over the years. This is far from the fact, Mr. Speaker Sir. Mr. Bainimarama was the chief architect of the demise of the industry when he was the Minister of Sugar. The previous government continued attempts to revive the industry with very little success. Production continued to decline.

This Government did not address the fundamental problems facing the industry but continued to subsidise the non-performing industry at a substantial cost to the people of this country. We are forfeiting other agricultural commodities that are more lucrative and can enhance the farmers' income. This includes vegetables, cocoa, coffee, tropical fruits, and of course the livestock.

No wonder Fiji's the agriculture's contribution to GDP, which used to be 25 percent 30 years ago, has declined substantially to a mere 8 percent. Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency also expanded on Government's plight to battle poverty and to graduate households out of poverty. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition has been quite vocal in the critiques, pointing fingers and laying blame at the feet of this Government claiming that we have somehow failed to address poverty.

They accuse us of ignoring the struggles of the most vulnerable in society while we certainly acknowledge that poverty continues to be a significant issue. I want to set a record straight today to show that the Government is not only aware of the issue but is actively working to tackle this issue with data, honesty and commitment to the truth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was only a few short years ago when the previous government was presented with the HIES, Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2019-2020 report document that was meticulously crafted following international standards. This report was not just a mere snapshot of the poverty levels, it was a detailed breakdown providing an analysis that went beyond numbers.

It took into account the regional ethnic and religious makeup of poverty in Fiji. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2019-2020 HIES Report gave us insight into poverty – where poverty was most severe and where the most marginalised communities were located? Most importantly, it provided x number of data for policy makers to distribute resources effectively. It was the kind of report that could have empowered us to take bold action. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this report was thrown out and not adopted by the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this government is committed to addressing the root causes of poverty and we will not shy away from difficult conversations. We are putting the tools in place to ensure that every Fijians has the opportunity to thrive. We will continue to prioritise policies that uplift the marginalised, support the vulnerable and strengthen our economy.

I urge the Opposition to stop playing the blame game and start working with us, not against us. The poverty levels we see today are not the result of the two years, they are the result of 16 years of mismanagement, denial and inaction. Now is the time for us to face the reality of the situation, confront the challenges head-on and work together for a more prosperous, fair and equitable Fiji.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge us all to rebuilt Fiji together. We owe it to our children and future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the honourable Prime Minister's motion that is before the House. I thank His Excellency for his Most Gracious Speech, and I thank you for your indulgence.

May God Bless Fiji. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- The honourable Speaker of Parliament, the honourable Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, my fellow Fijians seated here in the public gallery and those that are watching and listening through live streaming, families and friends; *Vina na cola* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me this opportunity to respond and thank His Excellency the President, *Na Turaga Bale Na Tui Cakau*, Ratu Naiqama Tawakecolati Lalabalavu, for his most gracious address at the opening of the 2025 session of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, in the book of Psalm 107: 1, it reads, "Oh give thanks to the Lord for He is good, His steadfast love endures forever". I take this opportunity to thank God for His love and mercy. I am forever grateful for His guidance and for all that He has done in my life. *Vinaka.*

Mr. Speaker, at this juncture, I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we stand on today. Before I go any further, Sir, allow me to declare my interest. My parents were both teachers and we spend most of our childhood days in Suvavou, which has become

our second home.

Ki na Vanua o Nadonumai, vua na Turaga na Tui Suva; kivei kemuni kece na lewe ni yavusa e tolu - Yavusa Nayavumata, Yavusa Vatuwaqa kei na Yavusa Nauluvatu, vinaka saka vakalevu na loloma kei na veiciqomi. Dina ni levu na veika keimami mai vakacakava na vulagi ena nomuni dela ni soso, e sega vakadua ni yali vei kemuni na yalo ni loloma kei na veiciqomi.

Mr. Speaker, with that being said, I welcome the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources' plans to revise the annuity payments on State land at Domain in Suva for landowners of Suvavou, *Mataqali Ketenatukani* and Vidilo of Namoli Village, *Mataqali Nadala*, Naivitini and Nabuilevu of Nadala Village.

Mr. Speaker, apart from the regular lease payment from Government and companies utilising their land, I still feel that the *Vanua o Nadonumai* deserves more.

Mr. Speaker, I would recommend that the Coalition Government coordinate the setup of a Community Development Fund, whereby business entities and individuals operating and residing within the *Vanua o Nadonumai* land boundaries would donate or contribute towards these development projects.

Mr. Speaker, the development fund will then be utilised on special projects such as food security, the routine maintenance of community hall and church buildings, and the construction and maintenance of sporting facilities and supporting the youth and sports development of our Suvavou youth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency spoke on the quality of leaders that Fiji needs, to shape the future of our beloved nation by fostering a society that is just, equitable, and resilient. Good leaders represent God, serve others, are wise and humble. Leaders should be trustworthy, compassionate, and accountable. The Gospel of Matthew 20: 26-28 is very clear, and I quote:

“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

As alluded to by His Excellency the President, this verse requires us all as leaders that we must sacrifice ego, ambition, and greed, in order to serve the people's collective interest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to reiterate His Excellency's message to our youth. To all our Fijian youths: “It is your time to set goals and choose life's direction. You must develop a moral and spiritual framework, and to seek God as the center of your lives.” Youth is a crisis time. It is a time life's directions are chosen, and life's goals are set. Youth can also be a time of false sense, false starts, and radical changes. It can be a time of great mistakes.

Young people will respond to a tough challenge, but they need direction. Youth are seeking, beyond peer pressure and hormonal urges, a value system that will provide a moral and spiritual framework for life. Young people were built for God, and without God, as the center of their lives, they become frustrated and confused, ever searching and desperately grasping. We continue reminding young people, you are the future of this nation. But this is true only if they grasp God and have heaven in their hearts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the Ministry of Health and Medical Services plan in expanding access to quality medical services and modernise healthcare facilities across the nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this opportunity to thank the voluntary assistance provided by the International Women Association, non-government organisations and fellow citizens who have assisted in the general repairs and maintenance of the Colonial War Memorial Hospital and healthcare facilities around the country. Thank you so much for your generous support, and your kindness has made a big difference.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having said that, I would also like to acknowledge a group of women, consisting mostly of retirees, who have been supplying fruits to expectant mothers at the antenatal clinic, on every Mondays for the past 17 years for free.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year is the eighteenth year of their existence and service, and due to financial constraints, they now can only afford to supply fruit on a fortnightly basis. To the Dorcas Welfare Hospital Ministry Coordinator, Mrs. Mereoni O'Brien, Dr. Lisi Tikoduadua, Mrs. Salote Rabuka, Sister Sainiana Rokoika, Lanieta Tuberi, Di Lina, Bulou Elenoa, Leweni Naulumatua, Loami and Atelini Dakua. *Vinaka vakalevu* for your dedication, love, and care shown towards our Fijian mothers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the newly established Ministry of Immigration, I would like to commend the Ministry for the launching of the online platform for permits as it will surely enhance efficiency and security.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the improvement of services, I am calling on all higher education institutions who are currently enrolling in regional students to consider the welfare of these students' paramount and ensure that the immigration laws are not violated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we often overlook the economic impact these students have on the local economy, which is through their spending on goods and services while studying, contributing to businesses like local shops, restaurants, and accommodation providers. And for that Mr. Speaker, Sir, we thank all regional students who have studied in Fiji both past and present for their contributions to the Fijian economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the Coalition Government's pursuance of transformative initiatives to empower Fiji's youth and elevating sports development, focusing on the implementation of a rehabilitation and reintegration programme for street kids and youth; youth innovative and entrepreneurship hub; the mobile training programme; the establishment of a national anti-doping organisation; investment in rural sports facilities and sports tourism programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the implementation of a Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programme for street kids and youth, I commend the Coalition Government and fully support this initiative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to thank the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation for the work they do in addressing this growing issue, and not forgetting the work done by non-government organisations, namely Aruka Fiji, Child Benefit Fiji, Mr. Ben Morrison, the Co-founder of Inspire Pacific, Mr. Elia Berabi, youth groups and individuals for your kindness, care, commitment and volunteering your time and resources to take care of these youths.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I understand that there are several reasons why these kids and youths would end up in our streets. The two most common reasons could be attitude, it could be marriage breakdown or abuse. If a marriage breaks down, who is next in line that will take up the responsibility of caring for these children?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the traditional cultures of the region that I hail from is the importance of the “*vasu*.” The “*vasu*” refers to a child or children of a paternal aunt. These children are considered precious, and they are treated like valuable possessions that are cherished and carefully protected. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my *vanua*, if a marriage fails, the child or children’s maternal uncles will take over that responsibility and none of these children will end up in the streets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if profiling is done, I will not be surprised that none of these kids belongs to my *vanua*. If there is one out there, I am requesting the Minister of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation to identify the child so that I will lead that child home. Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important that traditional leaders and members of a *vanua* or *mataqali*, be part of the fight and assist the line ministry in addressing this issue.

Mr. Speaker, I commend the Coalition Government for the recent relocation of 36 families from the Jittu Settlement to the newly constructed Lagilagi PRB flats, and as stated by His Excellency, this relocation efforts will continue to give families in informal settlements a more secure future. The primary housing problem in Fiji is the significant shortage of affordable housing, particularly in urban areas, leading to a large number of people living in informal settlements due to the inability to access adequate and affordable housing options.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the price of housing in urban areas is often out of reach for many low and middle-income earners, causing them to seek alternative housing options. This housing problem can present a significant opportunity for the Government to invest in affordable housing development, that will attract the low and middle-income earners. I understand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the goal of the First Home Ownership Initiative was to help low and middle-income earners buy their first home, and at the same time increase home ownership rates.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, not all those who reside in the rented PRB flats are eligible or able to secure property under this scheme. Therefore, Sir, with the demand for affordable housing from low and middle-income earners, I would recommend that the Ministry of Local Government and Housing, as a priority, consider the construction of affordable housing, as it will benefit both the low and middle-income earners, through affordable housing alternatives and it will also generate revenue for the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, with all that is happening around us, we need leaders and people who are God fearing. No human effort alone can solve the issues and challenges faced by our youths today. We need divine intervention to guide us through in our journey. We need our youths to recommit their lives to God and become an instrument of change. We need the Holy Spirit to move into our hearts so that we will do what is right and serve the nation with love and compassion.

May God bless us all. *Vina valevu*, and I support the motion by the honourable Prime Minister.

HON. RO. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, members of the public in the gallery and all Fijians listening to the proceedings of Parliament today; *bula vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to His Excellency the President, the *Turaga Tui Cakau*, for his inspiring Address and for outlining the Government’s priorities and necessary service delivery for this parliamentary session. His Excellency’s Address eloquently set the course for this Government, providing a clear roadmap towards economic growth, environmental protection, infrastructure development, and national resilience. As we embark on this legislative

journey, we are reminded that our role as policymakers is to ensure that no Fijian is left behind in our pursuit of sustainable development. As highlighted by His Excellency, progress demands vision, determination, and collective action.

Mr. Speaker Sir, as Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport, it is important that we align our service delivery according to this Coalition Government manifesto's intentions and National Development Plan which has set the clear directions in moving forward. This is to ensure that we serve the basic needs of our people in terms of providing basic infrastructure which includes water, roads and electricity access.

In terms of water, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a clear ambitious vision for our nation that outlines our government's commitment in advancing the water sector. Water is not just a basic need. It is a fundamental right in economic growth and pillar of public health. In Fiji, ensuring universal access to safe, clean, and reliable water and wastewater services is central to our mission. Our approach is guided by key national and international frameworks, including the Water Sector Strategy 2050, the National Investment Plan 2025-2030, Sustainable Development Goals SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation for All). Our obligations under the Fijian Constitution of course, and our resilience strategy in response to climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his Address, the His Excellency the President mentioned; "a rising tide lifts all boats" a sentiment that underscores the interconnectedness of our development efforts. This phrase serves as a reminder, that progress in one sector, leads to improvements across the board. When we strengthen our water and wastewater system, we do not just improve infrastructure, we enhance public health, empower economic growth, and safeguard our environment.

The Water Sector Strategy 2050 sets the course for a long-term structured approach to achieving nationwide access to clean water and sustainable wastewater management with three key objectives:

- (1) Infrastructure resilience and modernisation;
- (2) Climate adaptation; and
- (3) Resource management and equitable service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the key developments which I would like to share with the House include:

- (1) Completion of 31 major water projects across the country, including the Waila Offtake Pipeline Project (\$14.08 million), impacting over 330,000 residents;
- (2) During the Financial Year 2023/2024, a total of 31.57 km of pipeline extensions were completed, benefiting 47,350 Fijians;
- (3) The Rewa River Water Supply Scheme Extension (\$13.8 million), covering 24.5km of pipeline of the Sawani - Naqali Corridor benefitting 6,500 households;
- (4) The Upgrading of Tagitagi Reservoir Inlet in Tavua (\$3.1 million), ensuring 1,000 households have a reliable water supply; and
- (5) Completion of the Nabouwalu Packaged Water Treatment Plant, a 2 Mega Litre facility that now serves over 5,400 Fijians.

This project marks a significant improvement in water supply for the Nabouwalu area, of course, some of these projects had begun with the last Government, and we as a government, have the responsibility to continue to its successful conclusion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) has also successfully installed backup Gensets at 14 major pump stations. This critical infrastructure upgrade ensures that power is available during outages, allowing WAF to maintain uninterrupted services across key urban areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another key issue is their leakage, in terms of reduction of non-revenue water which is termed as such. The WAF has successfully reduced non-revenue water from 47 percent to 45 percent, marking progress in leak control and efficient usage. This translates into millions of litres saved daily. For the first time, WAF fully utilised its \$132.67 million CAPEX budget, ensuring the completion of key infrastructure developments, including wastewater upgrades, pipeline replacements and rural water projects.

For rural water carting and rainwater harvesting, this delivered 135.2 million litres to drought affected areas around the country as part of our commitment to ensuring water security in rural and remote maritime areas. Sir, WAF has successfully completed 28 rural water projects, benefitting 7,200 Fijians, who previously lacked access to proper water supply. These projects involved the construction of new water schemes, the installation of standpipes and shower heads in households, providing these communities with a reliable and safe water source. The total project cost was \$4.5 million.

Mr. Speaker Sir, 3,151 rainwater harvesting tanks were delivered across four regions, particularly the drought-affected areas, including the *Yasawa Tikina* and the *Nacula Tikina*.

In terms of modernisation of customer services, WAF has introduced an automated billing system via Amazon Web Services (AWS) for efficient payment processing, the re-engagement with Post Fiji as a bill payment channel, making water bill settlements more accessible nationwide.

Mr. Speaker Sir, to support the implementation of the Water Sector Strategy 2050, we have aligned key projects with the National Investment Plan 2025-2030, and we will expand and upgrade major water treatment plants in Suva, Lautoka, Nadi and Labasa, to increase capacity, quality and service reliability.

Rural water supply systems will be modernised through borehole drilling, gravity-fed systems and desalination plants, ensuring that isolated communities receive sustainable water supply solutions. We are concurrently discussing solar powered solutions, in relation to water pumps and desalination pumps. Other initiatives are in place.

In terms of financing, we are currently working through public-private partnerships, concessional loans and grants from development partners, green financing mechanisms, in addition to the regular budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Master Plan (RWSS) is currently being developed by the Ministry with the support and assistance of UNICEF. This will include a phased investment plan to achieve universal coverage and will be a guide to targeted implementation in terms of rural water.

I make special mention of the Suva-Nausori-Tamavua Water Situation. The Coalition Government acknowledges the ongoing challenges at the Tamavua Water Treatment Plant (WTP) as a major facility, and currently it operates at a capacity of 60 million litres per day (MLD) but is currently operating at 75 MLD to meet growing demand. So, its ability to maintain that level of supply is greatly affected by its low capacity.

The Government, through the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF), has developed a comprehensive response strategy which includes solving some of the issues like the installation of a Trash Boom at Savura Cascade Pump and the Bypass Pumping Systems for improved flow management at the Tamavua treatment plant, maximising chemical intervention for treatment efficiency. The major improvements coming up for projects include the Sawani to Colo-i-Suva Pipeline, Pump Station and Reservoirs Project. The tender has been approved and the contractor is expected to commence work in April 2025. It is estimated to take 12 to 18 months to complete, at an estimated cost of \$35 million, and the new pipeline will help a lot in alleviating the current situation.

Of course, I mentioned the Non-Revenue Water (NRW) which is the leakage, and a contractor has been assigned to work and improve on that situation. The other improvement is the new 20MLD Water Treatment Plant at Tamavua. This is expected to be tendered this month, and we have targeted groundwork to start in August 2025.

With those works and projects in line, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we anticipate and are confident that with the above measures over the next 18 months, by the end of the four-year term of the Coalition Government, the major water issues of Suva-Nausori, Tamavua, Khalsa, Sakoca and Lami will be memories of the past.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of transport, the Government remains committed to modernising Fiji's transport sector through the development of the National Transport Sector Master Plan and the Transport Decarbonisation Implementation Strategy. These two strategic frameworks will provide the guiding principles and actions needed to transition Fiji towards a sustainable, resilient and modern transport system.

The National Transport Sector Master Plan will serve as the blueprint for enhancing transport infrastructure, improving connectivity, and fostering economic development, while the Transport Decarbonization Implementation Strategy will outline clear pathways to reduce emissions and transition towards a low-carbon transport future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government is committed to improving the resilience transport and infrastructure landscape, providing safety to the public. This commitment resonates through the objectives and plans of the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) for a broader transport infrastructure agenda.

The FRA has made remarkable strides in executing essential capital road network projects which includes replacement of crucial bridges (continuing from the work of the last Government) at Tavualevu, Vuniasi, Toge, Naseyani and Yaqara stands out. These projects exemplify our commitment to continue in this essential work. These upgrades have significantly improved access in terms of our economic activities.

There is also other major projects, as you can see, such as the Suva Bus Stand. The benefits of this collaborative undertaking, as we move forward, will be further enhanced with our local governments, city councils, town councils, et cetera, in order to improve the infrastructure. Improvements will be made as we move forward, as I already mentioned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also major road sealing and projects undertaken around the Suva Central Business District (CBD) - upgrades along Rewa Street of 2.3 kilometres. This aims to provide more comfortable travel and also to rehabilitate those areas. Ongoing upgrades to Princess Road and other upgrades on the Laucala Bay Road, Khalsa Road, McGregor Road and Ratu Mara Road.

Similar initiatives are being implemented across the Western and Northern Divisions, with progressive works along Queens Road and a rip and remake programme for Buca Bay Road, as well

as the Trans-insular Road, as well as other current enhancements in Vatunibale, Labasa Hospital premises and rehabilitation of roads in Wainikoro, Labasa and other areas in Savusavu.

Planned improvements are currently ongoing for village frontages across all Divisions that will enhance the quality of life in our rural areas. The Government acknowledges the diverse needs of citizens and in the rural road maintenance upgrades arena, it is currently engaged in extensive road rehabilitation works on Gau Island, Moala, Koro, Vanuabalavu and other maritime islands. We do acknowledge some of the problems or challenges faced, for example, in Rotuma, equipment and personnel will be deployed to Rotuma in one and a half weeks to upgrade the roads to standard.

We look forward with clarity and vision to the next year. We have to prioritise management and maintenance in a more planned and structured manner and, of course, this means urgent upgrades in rehabilitating both land and maritime services in a timely and efficient manner. There is definitely room for improvement, and we are committed to that as a government.

Yes, we do not profess to be perfect, but we will continue to improve and deliver. So, we are committed to extending the services to all road networks and we have worked towards improving areas in the interior of the main islands, as well as the maritime.

We cannot, of course, ignore the pressing issues of urban traffic congestion, particularly in the Suva, Nausori, Lami, Nadi, Lautoka and Labasa township. Joint stakeholder workshops have been held, and we continue to have that. Improvements in terms of traffic signal lights coordination and other measures are being coordinated with stakeholders and development partners.

Moving forward, the programme to upgrade and renew our major trunk roads and bridges to climate resilient standards will continue with the support of our major development partners, as already alluded to by the honourable Assistant Minister for Finance, earlier in the week.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the Public Works Department (PWD), a key priority is to accelerate rural infrastructure development. Its re-establishment will allow for direct Government involvement in infrastructure projects, supporting public sector participation in these areas and timely maintenance of roads and public facilities. Of course, job creation and skills development is part of that, as well as improving service delivery.

On relevant PWD works and progress on the ground in terms of maintenance of roads and key Government buildings, the PWD or the Ministry has already purchased \$2.6 million worth of heavy machinery to assist our development engineers. Some of the works completed or currently in progress include:

- Naisogo Road Access connecting Davuilevu and Colo-i-Suva.
- 2.5 kilometre Naiserelagi to Nalawa Road in Ra.
- Nalidi Village Road upgrade in the Western Division.
- Nasealevu Road upgrade.
- Lea Road upgrade in the Northern Division.
- 31 kilometres of Vanuabalavu Road upgrades.
- Matuku Road upgrades and, of course, we will continue towards Rotuma.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has utilised close to \$0.5 million in constructing and upgrading works with the 73 kilometres of roads around the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, two of the notable projects work delivery of our PWD Building Maintenance Team are the furniture repairs and maintenance, which includes this august House and

the President's residence. The intention too is to rebuild our workforce capacity within the Government, which is being designated with the removal of PWD. These are technical areas which the Government needs to rebuild in order to be self-reliant, moving forward. The re-establishment of the Department of National Roads is also one of the main reform objectives moving forward.

In terms of maritime safety authorities, Mr. Speaker, Sir, maritime is a key critical area in terms of the Ministry, and we are steadfast in strengthening maritime safety and enforcing compliance with national and international standards and enhancing service delivery. The other issue is the continued training in terms of Boat Licence Training Programmes, which we will continue to enhance in order to maintain the standards and safety.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the Qualification and Licencing Department, the department is currently improving its digital or internal IT systems to develop its online processes, and that is part of the capital projects of the Ministry. Ensuring safe navigation within Fiji's waters is critical, and MSAF has made significant progress in infrastructure development in that area in terms of three major lighthouses, navigational aids, including Pindar reef lighthouse in Lautoka, Beqa Southwest Reef Lighthouse, and Northwest and Suva Harbour Lighthouse.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the energy sector, again is a critical area, and the endorsement of the National Energy Policy 2023-2024, confirms our commitment as we move forward, and the target is by 2026, that every Fijian should have access to electricity. The renewable energy sources will account for all electricity production by 2036, and 36 percent reduction in greenhouse gases. As I have already mentioned, there is currently a regulatory and legislative gap analysis in order to better coordinate and regulate the energy sector in Fiji, and that report is currently being finalised and will be submitted to Cabinet for approval.

The Department of Energy has done a lot in terms of extending electricity to our people. For grid extension and house wiring, the Ministry has paid EFL around \$19.1 billion for the grid extension and house wiring projects, and these payments were made in the last three financial years, assisting 111 Grid Funded Schemes, which benefited over 1,500 households. As at February 2025, a total of 38 schemes have been commissioned, with a total cost of \$2.13 million, EFL has a programme in place to complete these projects in the next two years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Home Solar System, Government has invested around \$4 billion in the 2023 financial year with the installation of solar home systems in our rural and maritime villages and communities, and this work will continue.

The Fiji Rural Electrification Fund (FREF), a special purpose entity. It is an innovative approach to ensure that rural electrification continues in an effective manner in its implementation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank our development partners in particular for that fund. There have been various progresses. You have witnessed the Naselesele Programme, the Rural Electrification Programme that we recently opened, and the Mua Solar photovoltaic Programme in Taveuni.

These works will continue, of course. In terms of, just coming to the end, the Fiji Metrological Services, one of the key achievements has been the enactment of the Metrological and Hydrology Bill which is a big milestone which will empower the Fiji Metrological and Hydrological Services to conduct its duties in a more effective manner, having practical provision of weather forecast and promote the collaboration between public private sector engagement.

I wish to thank the Government of Japan, working through JICA for committing to provide the financial and technical assistance for the proposed establishment of a regional centre for the

improvement of metrological services in disaster risk reduction in the Pacific costing \$25 million which will greatly enhance to our climate services in the region.

The Ministry has also formulated internal adjustments in terms of climate financing with more targeted approach in terms of financing as we move forward and also the internal capacity to have those skills in terms of project formulation and project management.

To-date, the global environment facility has approved a concept submission of US\$3 million under its special small climate finance for infrastructure in vulnerable areas and also includes assistance to the Water Authority of Fiji.

The Ministry has also made submissions to Fiji's eligible grant of US\$10 million at the adaptation fund. This was significantly progressed in my face-to-face meetings with GEF and the Adaptation Fund at the COP in Azerbaijan.

Sir, before I end, I would also like to share that the Ministry had established a Marine Environment Joint Committee to hasten the solutions to the problem of derelict ships in Suva. I would like to give a report on progress of their work. As of December 2023, there were 44 floating derelict ships. Through the ongoing efforts of this committee, this number has been reduced to 30, with eight vessels scuttled at owners' cost, four resold and two scrapped. So, this work will continue as we move forward.

There have also been concerns about the issue regarding the Denarau wastewater system. Mr Speaker, Sir, this Denarau Wastewater Reticulation System and Waste Management System has been the same since Denarau was established only one hotel. Now, there are several hotels and as a government we have listened to the tourism sector and also the various stakeholders and have worked closely with them in terms of progressing this project.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, can I interrupt? You wind up your ...

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- ...finalising this by the middle of this year.

In conclusion, Sir, I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for this opportunity and I support the motion of His Excellency the President for his most precious Speech.

MR. SPEAKER.- I remind honourable Members that we do not have a borrowing system of time as exists in other Parliaments, where you can borrow from other friendly neighbours. Please, keep within your time limit that you are allocated.

By pure coincidence, our next speaker is the Assistant Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport. I think in the American jargon, we have a “double whammy”.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament; *ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good morning to you all. It is both an honour and a privilege to stand before you today to support the honourable Prime Minister in his motion in thanking His Excellency the President for his most gracious Speech to the opening of the Parliament on 24th February, 2025, and setting the tone for our collective journey towards a resilient, united and prosperous Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's words resonate deeply with us all as we face a time of poly-crisis marked by economic hardship, environmental challenges and global uncertainties. However, as rightly stated by His Excellency, we may not control the crises that have come our way, but we can certainly control our response to them, and as a nation, we must respond with the courage and tenacity that springs from the very strength of our people. This strength lies not only in the resilience we have demonstrated in the face of adversity, but in the character, we build together as one nation. Our resilience is not something that is solely inherited, it is something that must be nurtured, cultivated and actively empowered.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that resilience begins with one key element, agency. Agency is the power that comes from knowing that we as individuals, communities and districts are not powerless to depend on Government to solve our problems. It comes from the understanding that we are the architects of our own future. In this nation, our people possess deep knowledge, creativity and resourcefulness. There is no need to look beyond our shores for solutions, for our greatest strength lies within us. It is imperative that we as Government and members of this august House empower our people to take control of their destinies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our education system must promote agency from an early age, instilling in our youth, I believe, in their own ability to shape their own future. By enabling an educational environment that nurtures curiosity, problem solving and innovation. We ensure that future generations are equipped to meet the challenges of tomorrow with courage, confidence and creativity. Empowering our people to act, to lead, to create solutions will not only help us build a more resilient nation, but it will also reduce the dependency mentality that can undermine the dignity of our citizens.

Any government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, must never rob its people of the opportunity to take charge of their lives, to act as agents of change and to embrace the privilege of solving their own problems. Yet, there will be macro-level challenges and structures that require Government intervention. We acknowledge them. Infrastructure such as roads, healthcare and the basic pillars of our society need the strength and financial capacity of Government to thrive.

We must also acknowledge that our ability to strengthen these infrastructures is greater when our people are active participants in their own progress. Government's role is to create the enabling environment to ensure that infrastructure is in place to support the empowerment of our people. When we empower the individual, we lay the foundation for a collective strength that supports the growth of our nation.

A thriving community, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is one that takes ownership of its future, using resources available to it and working hand-in-hand with Government to build systems that will ensure prosperity for all. His Excellency spoke about our shared duty to build a Fiji where every citizen has the opportunity to succeed and I echo that vision today, but we must also understand cannot be achieved through top-down mandates alone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must create a culture of resilience where each individual and community know that they have the power to drive the change they seek. A culture where our people understand that they are not passive recipients of Government aid, but active participants in the process of national development. In practical terms, this means, investing in education, in community-based initiatives and in local leadership. It means ensuring that our youth are not just preparing to be the workers of tomorrow but the leaders and innovators and will also be carrying our nation forward. It means empowering our women, rural communities and marginalised groups, ensuring that no one is left behind in our progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as His Excellency stated, the rising tides leaves all boats. This timeless wisdom speaks into the essence of what we must achieve as a nation, a united Fiji, where everyone's potential is maximised, where no one is excluded in the prosperity and progress of our nation. The rising tides does not discriminate and neither should we, we all rise together, we will succeed together.

The challenges we face as a nation are immense but are not insurmountable. We have the tools, the knowledge and the capacity to meet these challenges head on. By continuing to embrace the values of unity, respect, inclusivity and compassion, we will not only build resilience but also create an environment where our people can thrive, where opportunities abound, where every citizen can contribute to the growth and prosperity of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we embark on this new Parliamentary session, let us renew our commitment to empowering the people of Fiji. Let us commit to a leadership that encourages agency, promotes resilience and fosters an environment where every Fijian has the opportunity to flourish! Together we will face the challenges ahead and together we will emerge stronger, united and more resilient than ever.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we discuss the building blocks of our nation, I now turn our focus to a vital sector of our infrastructure that is in the heart of our nation's progress – our transport system. This is an area where the Land Transport Authority (LTA) has been making commendable strides towards ensuring that Fiji's land transport system can stand tough and be relevant in the face of future challenges. It is a matter of great importance that we now shift our attention towards the continued development of this critical sector which not only connects all people but also drives economic and social prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our vision is to establish a sustainable, technology-driven transport system that enhances safety, accessibility and service efficiency, making sure that no citizen is left behind in the journey towards a stronger Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, strengthening regulatory compliance and governance remains a priority, ensuring our transport policies aligns with national development goals and continue to safeguard the wellbeing of our people. With strategic initiatives such as policy reform, digital transformation and strengthened enforcement mechanism, the LTA is pushing the envelope to improve service delivery, road safety and operational efficiency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the notable achievements we have already made include a successful implementation of the bodycam project which enhances transparency in enforcement operations. The investment of \$46 million on portable weighers which help curb overloading and protect our vital road infrastructure and strengthen compliance measures achieved through joint enforcement operations with key stakeholders. Furthermore, the LTA has begun the nationwide expansion of its offices in ensuring that services are accessible to all Fijians regardless of their location.

They have also made substantial investment in ICT, including checkbox and online services to improve customers' convenience and streamline processes. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also leading the way in promoting greener transport solutions. Feasibility studies are underway to adopt electric vehicles across Fiji where we work to establish emission standards to reduce our carbon footprint. Through partnership with international bodies like the World Bank and Japan's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, we are enhancing the efficiency of public transport and vehicle safety inspections across our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite an increase in the number of registered vehicles from 148,000 in 2023 to 154,000 in 2024, our ongoing initiatives have contributed to a notable reduction in the fatality rate for 10,000 vehicles from 5.26 in 2023 to 4.27 in 2024. Similarly, the fatality rate per 100,000 population declined from 8.81 in 2023 to 7.45 in 2024.

This year, from 1st January to 28th February, 2025, there has been two fatalities compared to 10 for the same period last year, and that is an 80 percent improvement. This improvement is largely attributed to enhance enforcement, road safety education, and awareness campaigns by the LTA and Fiji Police Force.

In 2023, our proactive interventions on road safety reached 336,000 individuals with an expected impact on 148,000 people in 2024. These initiatives include the Defensive Driving Course for all licenced holders and the Reformed Drive-Wise Programme, especially designed for those who frequently fail to adhere to road safety regulations. In the so-called disciplinary measures, all drivers are accountable to increased scrutiny and action against repeat offenders.

Over the period 2023 to 2024, as many as 5,000 licence holders have been disciplined through so-called proceedings and 176 driver's licences have been suspended. However, challenges remain as speeding and drunk-driving continue to be the leading cause of accidents, with an increase in serious accidents by 20, from 243 in 2023 to 263 in 2024.

Let me assure is august House and the people of Fiji that we are working towards to reduce accidents by 50 percent. We have portable speed cameras already in operation, and 11 more coming within three months, which is an investment of \$0.8 million. We have 14 static cameras and 31 sites with cameras rotated every fortnight.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in fines will commence soon, aimed at deterrence against violations. Government's intent is to make our roads safe and protect our people from bad, careless, and irresponsible drivers. Government will not stand watching our roads and streets becoming killing fields.

We do our utmost best that our people's right to life is stipulated under the Constitution will not be taken away by another motorist. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Road Safety Council will be back, and they will continue to watch the road with a sole purpose of making sure at the highest level that our roads are safe.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will also play its part in fighting illicit drugs in our beloved country. As announced by the Minister of Works, Metrological Services and Transport, the Ministry, together with the LTA and the Fiji Police Force will be putting together an illicit drug test system for our drivers. Drug testing for our drivers has been prompted by increasing concerns regarding reckless and erratic driving, as well as the alarming scale, severity and frequency of road accidents, which suggest the involvement of illicit substances.

Tests will be conducted for those applying for learners' permit, those completing their provisional licence and awaiting to obtain full licence and those applying for renewal of driving licence. Government will ensure that safety on our roads will not be compromised, and no illicit drug user will be allowed to drive on our roads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our offshore vehicle inspections now ensure that only roadworthy vehicles enter our transport network. We have expanded training programmes for electric vehicle examiners, who will determine fitness for EVs in the country.

Specialised customer service initiatives such as premium service counters and elderly care services are to ensure that our services are inclusive and cater for the needs of every Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government is committed to easing suffering caused by traffic congestion that affects countless Fijians everyday. Traffic congestion continues to be a challenge leading to loss time, missed opportunities, increased fuel costs, environment challenges and significant personal stress.

The Ministry, in partnership with Land Transport Authority, Fiji Police Force, Fiji Roads Authority, Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Local Government are working on practical solutions aimed at reducing people's travelling time during traffic peak periods. Government fully understands the difficulties faced by our people and is determined to act swiftly to mitigate these issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is steadfast in its commitment to modernising Fiji's land transport sector. Its vision is not only about efficiency but also about safety, sustainability and inclusivity. We must continue pursuing policies that align with global best practices, creating a future-proof, resilient transport system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, safety at sea is a priority for Government. With Fiji's vast Exclusive Economic Zone and thousands relying on maritime transport, we must continue to invest in effective regulatory frameworks, safety compliance and enforcement measures.

The Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF) plays a pivotal role in ensuring that all vessels from small fishing boats to large commercial ships adhere to safety regulations and operational standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, safe navigation is essential for both, commercial and passenger vessels. To enhance Fiji's Maritime Safety Framework, MSAF is:

- Upgrading navigational aids and beacons to ensure that vessels can safely transit through Fiji's waters, even in adverse weather conditions; and
- Strengthening port state control inspections to prevent substandard foreign vessels from entering our waters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ensuring that our maritime sector remains safe and efficient requires continuous improvement of our legislative and policy framework. MSAF, under the guidance of the Ministry, is working towards the review of the Maritime Transport Act 2013 to address emerging safety challenges and strengthen enforcement mechanisms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, maritime safety is not just the responsibility of regulatory authorities. It is a collective effort that requires the involvement of all stakeholders, including vessel owners, seafarers and coastal communities. Sir, MSAF is actively engaged in conducting awareness programmes to educate the public on maritime safety practices, lifejacket usage and emergency preparedness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we chart the course for Fiji's maritime future, our commitment to safety, security and environmental protection remains steadfast.

In conclusion, I call upon Parliament, our stakeholders and every Fijian to join us in this endeavour. Together, we can build a safer, more efficient and more sustainable sea and land transport system that will benefit all Fijians, ensuring that the wheels of progress keep turning no matter the challenges we face.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend and fully support the motion by the honourable Prime Minister in thanking His Excellency the President the *Na Turaga Bale Na Tui Cakau* for his most gracious Address.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I invite the next speaker, honourable Members, please join me in welcoming His Excellency Mr. Kamal Kishore to the Chamber.

(Acclamation)

Mr. Kishore is a Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction, and Head of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction that is based in Geneva, Switzerland. Your Excellency and your team, you are warmly welcome to the Fijian Parliament, and we wish you well in the course of your stay in Fiji.

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the media and fellow citizens of Fiji; *mi'au sa bula re*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to commend His Excellency the President for delivering a visionary and inspiring Address that outlines a clear path for our nation's progress and unity. His words of wisdom and timely advice serve as a guiding light to our nation, inspiring us to work together towards a prosperous and united future.

During my ministerial visit around Fiji and throughout my travel with the Standing Committees on Natural Resources, Foreign Affairs and Defence and Justice, Law and Human Rights, I witnessed firsthand the urgent need to enhance service delivery. The Coalition Government remains steadfast in addressing this evolving challenge for the benefit of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Bua welcome the Government's commitment to developing Nabouwalu into a town. While work continues, a few milestones signal progress in infrastructure, economic expansion and improved livelihood. The success of Vuya Village Bakery, supported by iTaukei Trust Fund Board, is a testament to grassroots development driving economic sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, is it not true that a vibrant culture enriches society, preserves heritage and serves as a foundation of unity and progress? This is what His Excellency was alluding to while delivering his Address. Culture is a bedrock of our identity, unity and progress.

The iTaukei Land and Fisheries Commission has broadened its outreach, visiting 511 villages across eight provinces, confirming 1,706 customary title holders and updating the *Vola ni Kawa Bula* with 3,678 new registrations while removing 17,152 deceased members. For the first time since the initial NLC sittings, 75 percent of customary titles are now confirmed, with more to follow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I must commend our culture sector institutions who have been working collectively to ensure that a sense of identity remains unaffected in this ever-changing world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department of Culture, Heritage and Arts is implementing the Fiji National Cultural Policy to ensure activities of the culture sector is well coordinated and mainstreamed into other sectors. In December 2024, Parliament passed the Fiji World Heritage Act and we await the Traditional Knowledge and Expressions of Culture Bill which will redress the misappropriation and unauthorised use of indigenous customary practices, traditional names and

knowledge system for commercial purpose. The Ministry is also analysing existing outdated cultural legislations such as the cultural legislation such as the Fiji Museum and the National Trust of Fiji Act and identify areas that need to be improved including the development of new regulations for the Fiji Arts Council.

The Fiji Museum has completed a major review of its human resource base following on from a similar vision undertaken by the National Trust of Fiji. The Ministry will undertake an institutional review of its five cultural centres, so they become legal entities and implement impactful activities in communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, using culture sector activities as a means to alternative income streams and livelihood of our people is high on the agenda of the proposed Fiji Cultural Creative Industries Strategy. Through the POAPI Act, the Fiji Museum is working to assist developers through the mapping of sites of cultural heritage significance so that these are maintained and developed for tourism purposes.

The Fiji Arts Council works with skilled artists and artisans and recommend those that meet the requirements to the Ministry of Industry and Trade to issue them with Fiji Crafted licenses as a distinguishing brand. This has helped artists and artisans grow their sales and boost their livelihood.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the Government to make concrete decisions including the deployment of funds for the culture sector, evidence-based policies are needed. We need cultural data to support decision making and policy development in this regard. The Department of Culture has engaged two local consultants who have started working on the Development of a Fiji Cultural Statistics Framework.

The National Trust of Fiji manages nine heritage sites located around the country, of which five are natural heritage sites and the largest being Sovi Basin biodiversity area in the hinterland of Naitasiri. Covering over 16,000 hectares, the forest protected area is the largest in Fiji and is home to 13 endangered species. Through a conservation lease signed with landowner from Naitasiri and Namosi, the National Trust of Fiji in partnership with Conservation International and Ministry of Forestry ensures that the undisturbed area is protected. This is a win-win situation for the landowners, environmental conservation and the nation.

Also managed under the National Trust of Fiji, the Waisali Forest Reserve is part of the World Bank funded Na Vualiku Project and is a partnership project with the local *mataqali* to develop sustainable tourism while preserving the cultural and national heritage of the Waisali community.

Implementation of a Cabinet approved Report on the Levuka World Heritage Site is in progress by the Department of Culture. This week, we will receive seven Japanese experts in the area of built heritage conservation, timber conservation and eco-museum development to assist us in finalizing restoration and repair works needed in Levuka and adjoining satellite heritage sites that were damaged since *TC Winston* in 2016. The study and visit by the experts were made possible with the financial and technical assistance of JICA. Once completed, a sustainable tourism plan for Levuka and Ovalau will be implemented and ensure citizens of the island benefits from the world heritage listing of Levuka.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the iTaukei Institute of Language and Culture, together with the cultural institutions celebrated International Mother Language Day at the Bau Central College, Tailevu which was live streamed via the Ministry's *Facebook* page and Fiji TV's *Nai Lololo* programme. Hailed as a success, the programme brought together performing artists, living cultural practitioners, oratory and poetry competition by students, and exhibitions by cultural producers and institutions showcasing

the richness of our *vosa ni vanua* or mother tongue language. This initiative is part of a greater effort by the Institute to foster research through collaboration with NGOs and local universities in the GPS mapping of *vosa ni vanua* in different parts of Fiji.

The Institute is also embarking on socializing of the National Action Plan for the International Decade for Indigenous Language allowing for inclusion of the *vosa vakaviti* in all spheres and sectors of the economy. This was recently approved by Cabinet.

The Rotuman language is considered endangered under UNESCO due to fewer speakers left. In the quest to preserve a mother tongue of Fiji, the iTaukei Trust Fund Board and the iTaukei Institute of Language and Culture are collaborating to kick-start a cultural mapping programme of Rotuman cultural practices, traditional knowledge systems and expressions of intangible heritage. The fieldwork programme will be undertaken by Rotuman youths who have been recruited. The documentation process will also allow for the transmission of knowledge from Rotuman elders taking place.

The Fiji Museum is near completion of its gallery refurbishment. The proposed building will cater a storage facility to house its 10,000-plus collections and become a research resource hub on Fijian culture material, the repatriation of Fijian objects overseas will be possible.

Digitisation of traditional knowledge and expression of culture information is ongoing and will be completed in due time to ensure that the Traditional Knowledge Expression of Culture is operationalised once passed in Parliament. The iTaukei Institute of Language and Culture is also finalising work on digital *iVolavosa* (Dictionary) app that will allow everyone with a smartphone to access words and its meaning. This will be useful for research and learning purposes.

As part of Fiji's obligation as a state party to the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Department has completed drafting the Fiji Intangible Cultural Heritage Framework which will be circulated to stakeholders for consultation before it is presented to Cabinet. The framework will cover safeguarding activities at community level, including the recognition of living treasures so that their knowledge and skills are transmitted and maintained.

Fiji will host the 26th Melanesian Arts and Culture Festival (MACFEST) after a lapse of two decades. The Department has recruited a Festival Director and a National Taskforce will be responsible for preparation works and organising of MACFEST 2026.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department has a cultural and education programme which paves the way for the mainstreaming of culture, heritage and arts issues in the national education curriculum. A study was undertaken recently mapping all categories of education with curricular subjects and courses simply to evaluate cultural themes that are already present. This will be presented first to the Ministry of Education before it is submitted to Cabinet. In addition, a drafted Fiji Cultural Education Strategy is awaiting circulation for consultation.

There are five cultural centres located in Ba, Labasa, Nausori, Savusavu and Suva and they will facilitate cross-cultural classes for local communities to enhance the safeguarding and sustainability of the local communities' cultural heritage especially those in settlements and those outside the village periphery.

Since 2007, talks and national decision to have a home specifically for our artists and artisans in all forms was mooted, discussed and studied. Through this Coalition Government, a space has been allocated to showcase the richness and diversity of Fiji's artistic expression whether it be music, visual arts, dance, craftsmanship and many more. A National Taskforce for the Fiji National Art

Gallery is chaired by the Permanent Secretary for iTaukei Affairs is working on Stage 3 of the initiative which includes establishing a governance and administrative structure, funding sources, and capital refurbishment of the St. Steven's building.

The Department of Culture is piloting the setup of four Provincial Cultural Development Officers in four pilot Provincial Office this month who will link the provinces and Government in implementing cultural activities at the provincial level. They will also serve as desk officers for all Suva based cultural institutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, spearheaded by the Fiji Melanesian Committee, the Ministry assisted in hosting a symposium, and a celebration at the Suva Foreshore to commemorate the arrival and contribution of Melanesian labourers who arrived in the blackbirding period. This was a success, and a report will be tabled before Cabinet soon.

In addition, to honour the contribution of cultural, artistic and heritage practitioners to the nation, a study will be undertaken to develop a framing for the Fiji National Awards for Excellence in the areas of culture, heritage and arts. This is crucial to boost work of cultural actors and incentivise their productivity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, empowerment is necessary to begin narrating our own stories through storytelling sessions and write our historical accounts passed from our ancestors. We are at the cusp of a great revolution in Fiji's culture sector. We have seen the surge in creative and cultural events and social gatherings in the country. We will ensure that a coordinated system is put in place including the development of a national cultural calendar that is accessible to all for leisure and education purposes.

Lastly, to create a robust culture sector, we need funding and human resources, policies and regulations, and infrastructural development to ensure that producers and users alike of cultural products and services are able to champion the cause of cultural practitioners, living treasures and heritage managers alike.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand in support of His Excellency the President's most gracious Address at the opening of the 2025 Session of Parliament, and I commend the motion before the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will suspend the proceedings for lunch. Parliament will resume proceedings at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.34 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.36 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members before we continue with Item 4 of the Agenda. Please, rejoin me in welcoming the participants of the Senior Non-Commissioned Officers from the Republic of Fiji Military Forces who are here with us.

(Acclamation)

Welcome to your Parliament and I hope you will learn more about how Parliament works.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers and Members of the Parliament and those in the gallery and to our fellow Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to His Excellency the President's Address. Right at the outset, I thank him for his gracious Address. I want to acknowledge the President's optimistic tones and also the government's promises that have come through His Excellency the President's Address. However, the spirit of being in the Opposition, I also must be direct and assertive. There is a rosy picture that is painted in the Address, but I must say, Sir, this is not matched with respect to the reality that is faced by our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a stark contrast between the Government's claims and the everyday hardships that are being faced in Fiji. I am going to outline these with respect to how the Address was delivered in terms of the inconsistencies and very candidly, might I add, with respect to the economic promises contained in the President's Address spoke of economic recovery and prosperity.

The Government borrows, improves statistics, and tout for lower inflation and higher revenue collection but what good, Mr. Speaker, are the upbeat numbers if our people cannot afford basic goods. Families today are struggling more than ever. Is this the prosperity that they were promised? Mr. Speaker, Sir, prosperity means that even those that are in the low-income bracket ought to be able to feed their children chocolate and ice cream.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday we heard the honourable Minister for Sugar break-down the three different divisions that he has in respect to him being in the supermarket, where there is lower income, et cetera. But we must ensure that, that particular prosperity deals with all members, all citizens, not those that have been broken down that should be and could be and want to be able to afford.

The truth is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that under this Government, the cost of living has actually skyrocketed.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Hogwash!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- The biggest complaint that we hear from the public, and this is not telling a lie, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the biggest complaint that we hear from the public, all of us, is that once they used to have a little bit of loose change in their pocket, now their pockets are empty, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Why?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Why? I will tell you why.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Hogwash!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You can hogwash all you want, but I think the wash and the hog is on the other side, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, why? Because this Government imposed brutal tax hikes that has affected every ordinary Fijian.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- The Value Added Tax (VAT) increase from 9 percent to 15 percent, driving up the prices of everyday essentials.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You can hide as much as you want, but that is the cold, hard, factual truth, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Manufacturing duty went up by 3 percent, Mr. Speaker, Sir, raising the cost for local goods. Corporate tax jumped up by 5 percent, but guess what, Mr. Speaker? That corporate tax burden is passed down on to the consumers, in terms of higher prices. These policies, amount to 14 percent. A staggering 14 percent increase in cost to businesses. And ultimately to households, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I know the honourable Minister for Finance will come back after me and respond to all of this, so please, just hear me out today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these policies...

HON. B.C. PRASAD.- I am hearing your generalisation.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- That is why, you can respond. These policies, in our view, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are atrocious, misguided, and do not take care of our people.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- The Government claims to champion the poor, yet it has made basic food and necessities more expensive for everyone. And I will tell you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you speak to the taxi drivers who are a wealth of information, and they are the ones that tell you, "Sir, we have lots of passengers throughout the day and they all complaint", Mr. Speaker. Sir. That is the common man telling you the truth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how is that helping the small man? Should we applaud the Government for balancing the books whilst families balance empty plates?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Their self-congratulation is tone deaf to the dire reality of our people, and which our people have to face on a daily basis. This administration, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also preaches about fiscal responsibility. Yet, it is overseeing a spending spree, a spend-a-thon, resulting

in the largest budget deficit since 1992. They warned us about debt when they were in Opposition, but now in Government they rack up a debt with little to show for it. What happened to the responsible management? It seems the only consistency here is the inconsistency itself, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The economic reality for ordinary Fijians is one of hardship, and that is the current economic reality, directly at odds with the Government's triumphalist rhetoric. Our people, you must remember, are resilient. But even that resilience, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is wearing thin.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, with respect to security and law and order, the President's Address touched on national security and safety. We are all in the same boat on this, Sir. We all agree that safety, security and stability are key drivers of the economy, and the wellbeing of our citizens must also be paramount. But look at what is happening on the streets! But there is a good story that I must tell, Mr. Speaker.

There is a good story that, at the moment, we have a Minister for Policing, and I must thank him, Sir. We had a situation where we had a very, very famous guest in the country, who shall remain nameless. He is an elderly gentleman and his wife and he was attended to, an incident happened, and I must say 'thank you' to the honourable Minister for Policing and to our Police Force who have acted in such a swift manner and taken care of the problem. Today, the guy who is responsible for it was actually captured. So, thank you, honourable Minister for Policing for attending to it and I applaud the police officers who actually did their job very swiftly.

By the same token, Sir, we are looking at a huge problem that he faces. He acknowledges also. Week in, week out, we see reports of robberies and violent crimes and another community living in fear. We must make sure that the Government is actually secure with respect to when our people are afraid to walk in their neighbourhoods, we must make sure that all of this is taken care off.

We must have concrete action. We cannot have any excuses. We cannot have any finger-pointing exercises going on with respect to previous governments. We have had a surge in drug trafficking and crime. This has to stop. And there is only one solution to all of this. Remember, Mr. Speaker, these issues and problems are not just for Fiji these are global challenges, and it requires leadership and solutions, not political blame games. We must not entertain this by getting into a finger-pointing exercise.

As I did earlier, Sir, I will give credit where credit is due, and I commend the honourable Minister for Policing for, at least, acknowledging the serious issues faced by the Police Force. Acknowledgement is a start, but it is not enough, Sir.

We must have a robust action plan to combat this dramatic lawlessness. I have had a conversation with him, and I see he is headed in the right direction. However, Mr. Speaker, our officers on the frontline still lack the adequate resources and the support. Our people still wait for the Police Force to be visible on the street. I remember when I was a young child and I am sure you would too, Mr. Speaker, where the visibility of the Police Force was paramount. That makes a difference.

These are decisive steps to cracking down on crime and drugs. Talking tough in speeches will not make our streets safer, Sir. We need urgent action to restore law and order, and we need to ensure that we give enough resources to our police to ensure that that happens. It has an effect. It has an effect on our tourism. It has an effect on our business fraternity, so it has a follow-on effect, and we must make sure that that is undertaken.

With respect to failures and accountabilities, Sir, another glaring inconsistency is actually in the governance. His Excellency the President's Speech had a lot of goals and new initiatives, Sir. But after more than a year in office, what has this Government actually delivered, is the question that is being asked by the general public. So, far, we have seen a lot of confusion, a lot of delays and a startling lack of direction, Mr. Speaker.

The current fragile state of our economy whether it stamps from incompetency at the helm or instead of building on the progress that has been made, this Government has actually lurched from one half big plan to another. A prime example is the National Development Plan. In their second year of governing, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance is still busy drafting a brand-new National Development Plan. Mr. Speaker, if that is complete, I apologise, but I am not sure if it has been.

Mr. Speaker, by the time they finish writing their grand plan, it will be election time. It has been a long time coming.

(Honourable Prof. B.C. Prasad interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It is a bit like the pipeline of investments, it is still very long way away. We cannot procrastinate on all of these things, Mr. Speaker, because if we procrastinate, the economy falls.

The nation cannot survive on plans alone, Mr. Speaker. We implementation and we need it now. I hope in the coming Budget, the honourable Minister for Finance will be very innovative and creative on what he does and how to actually start up this economy again.

Responsible leadership means doing the hard work, Mr. Speaker, not just commissioning another committee or strategy paper that will either gather dust.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Standing Order 74 (1)(a) – breach of practices of Parliament, Sir, when talking about practices in Parliament, we need to confine ourselves to facts. This side of the House already know, Sir, that the National Development Plan was launched at GPH and we announced it to the country. I would just like to point that out, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Koya, do you consider that, that is the fact?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Sir, I did qualify my statement when I said that.

MR. SPEAKER.- In which case are you withdrawing the earlier reference?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I had said that I qualified my statement, that is why I did so, Sir. That is not a lie, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Proceed, please, Sir.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This Government's default response to any problem, and we can see it here, is always to blame someone else. We hear it in nearly every ministerial answer, "previous government did this, the former leaders did that, yes the previous government" which sometimes you may think it was not perfect. Maybe, it is not, but let me remind this House, the people that elected you to fix today's problems is not to really litigate it and the past *ad nauseam*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they keep going on about 16 years, 16 years, 16 years' term. As I have said, you actually do not litigate the past *ad nauseam*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at some point, the Government must stand up on its own record. The irony, of course, is while they blame us for everything under the sun, many of the successes that they actually tout is built on foundations that were laid by the previous Administration.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, the Fijian people are tired of excuses. They want accountability, they want a government that says, "the bucks stops here, we are responsible and we will deliver". One thing I know in politics, Sir, and I think everyone in here will probably end up with a degree after four years – a degree in what is called "deflection". We are getting a master class in deflection. This is a governance failure of the highest order.

True leaders take responsibility for both successes and failures. It is high time the Government practises what it preaches about accountability rather than using it as a slogan. Sir, I used a phrase earlier on yesterday about "approbate and reprobate", and I think it might be aptly applicable here also.

Mr. Speaker, I want to talk about the lack of transparency. The President's Address lauded the principles of transparency and accountability. We heard commitments about open and honest governance, but what has actually transpired, there is a disturbing lack of transparency in how this Government conducts itself. Important decisions are made behind some so-called closed doors and sprung upon the public without proper consultation.

Consider how policies have been rolled out in the past year, Mr. Speaker, some tax changes, abrupt policy shifts and significant reviews of public programmes. People only find out after the fact, if at all. Where is the transparency in the process?

The Government promised to strengthen accountability mechanisms. Yet, we have yet to see meaningful progress in the freedom of information legislation, or empowering independent institutions to scrutinise Government decisions.

The independence and integrity of our institutions is paramount, Mr. Speaker. We see the reluctance also to release some reports that might be politically inconvenient. Such opacity, Mr. Speaker, will only create suspicion.

Mr. Speaker, transparency is not a favour to be handed out when convenient, it is a fundamental obligation of a responsible government. When that transparency is lacking, trust is the casualty and right now, the public trust is very thin, Mr. Speaker. The people of Fiji are asking, "what is going on, on a daily basis? What are they afraid of? Is this Administration concealing something? We do not know. There are lots of shadows of doubt, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will go on to the next topic with respect to the Constitution. There was a lot said, even yesterday, a particular line that was used by the Attorney General with respect to the

legitimacy of this 2013 Constitution. A cornerstone of good governance is a legitimate enduring constitutional framework. I am sure we will all understand that, and I reaffirm that Fiji's 2013 Constitution is entirely lawful. In fact, it was not imposed in isolation, but it actually emerged from a lot of consultation in an exclusive consultation process. The document reflected the will and aspirations of the people. Just ask the honourable Leader of Opposition, he will tell you.

This Constitution belongs to the people. It encapsulates the input of Fijians from all backgrounds, gathered through one of the most comprehensive public consultation exercises in history. Critics who labelled it "imposed", overlooked the genuine grassroots engagements that guided its development. The Constitution was literally written with the public's participation, reinforcing its legitimacy as the supreme law of the land.

Now, the honourable Attorney-General asserted that an "imposed Constitution lacks legitimacy". I also echo the sentiments expressed by the honourable Leader of the Opposition yesterday about being careful. You need to carefully craft a statement before you say something right because it is that very blue book that you swore an oath on when you actually entered this House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, implying somehow that our supreme law is somehow invalid is what comes out of that particular statement, and I respectfully disagree. One legal opinion in our system of government is a collective judicial authority of the courts and, ultimately, the Supreme Court is the arbiter of the constitutional legitimacy. To date, no court, let alone the full bench of the Supreme Court, has ever struck down or questioned the 2013 Constitution's validity.

On the contrary, our Judiciary has upheld it and applied it consistently delivering justice. The Constitution draws the authority and mandate from the fact that it was duly enacted and has since been affirmed through democratic process, including elections and judicial enforcement.

The honourable Attorney-General's view remains exactly that, a personal view. It does not carry the weight of law. The Courts of Fiji, not individual commentator decide what the law of the land is and under our law, this 2013 Constitution stands firm as the bedrock of our democracy. In short, the Constitution's legitimacy is not in doubt. It continues to function with full recognition and the backing of all Government branches and the Fijian people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know the bell has gone off and I only have three minutes left. With respect to transparency and the people's mandate, transparency in government also means being accountable to the will of the people. Here, it is worth remembering, Sir, that the 2014 General Election effectively served as a *de facto* referendum on the 2013 Constitution.

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is right!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- That is what I said yesterday and I stand by it today. That particular landmark election, the first held under that constitution framework was conducted with robust international observation, Mr. Speaker, and saw a very high voter turnout. The results spoke volume. The Fiji First Party then won a landslide victory, securing almost 60 percent of the votes, and 32 out of the 50 seats. No other party came even close.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the verdict was clear then, a strong majority of Fijians chose ...

(Honourable Government Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- ... a better way forward and responsible leadership.

Despite all these criticisms, let me clear, we, on this side of the House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do not raise problems without offering solutions. We heard what His Excellency the President said about a House of Hope. Yes, we heard, but we must not ride roughshod over the law. We must not ride roughshod over this very Constitution that we all swore an oath on. Please, do not treat this with disdain.

The Opposition is ready with ideas and with practical solutions, that the Government could implement today to ease the suffering of our people and set Fiji back on course. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Opposition also contains some very experienced people. It is not too late for responsible leadership, but it requires action, not just talk.

Here is what a genuine accountable government should prioritise now:

- immediate cost of living relief.
- reverse or reduce the recent tax increases on essential items.
- bring VAT back down on basic food items so that no family has to choose between a meal or other necessities, and make sure that even the poor can afford to get chocolate or ice cream if they want to for their children.
- reinstate sensible subsidies where needed to cushion the most vulnerable from the high cost of living.
- reign in the wasteful spending.
- grow the economy and the jobs because right now, we are at a standstill. focus on policies that actually stimulate investment and job creation. consistency and clarity in economic policy will restore investor confidence.

It is no use having a couple of billion dollars' worth of investment sitting in the pipeline for months on end and having nothing to show for it. A growing economy means more jobs. We also need to ensure that the law and order situation helps our young people who are talented, our young people who are the face of Fiji now, our young people who want to represent Fiji in this particular House, we will need to make sure that they stay here.

The level of migration out of here is actually phenomenal, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We need to strengthen the law and order situation, like I actually said earlier, and give more money, honourable Minister of Finance, to our Police Force so that they can actually do their job.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are lying!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I am not lying, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I sometimes I gravely object to the fact that he insinuates that I am actually lying.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, Order!

Honourable Koya, can you please wrap up your response?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Yes, Sir.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they do not like hearing the truth.

The President's Address aimed to inspire hope and confidence. We all want to hope for a better Fiji. That is something both, Government and Opposition Members share. But hope must be underpinned by truth and action, and we cannot build a nation on half-truth and blame-shifting and empty promises.

My message to the Government is simple - step up and take responsibility. Stop the excuses! Stop the contradictions and start delivering the results that every Fijian deserves. Be accountable to the people who put you in those seats. If you say you stand for the poor, prove it by easing their burden. If you promise safety, ensure it by making our streets are safe again. If you claim to champion transparency, demonstrate it by opening your decision-making scrutiny. Words alone will not feed your family, it will not stop a criminal, and we will not build a nation that we want. Actions will. The Fijian people are waiting and watching. They are discerning and patient, but their patience has limits if this Government cannot match its words with deeds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with that, I urge the Government to heed these concerns and take the correct course for the sake of our beloved nation. Enough of the inconsistencies! It is time for integrity and action. And I thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I apologise for going slightly over the time.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Koya, for your response and contribution to the motion. I keep account of those who have exceeded their allotted times and right now, it is almost balanced on both the sides. So that is why I allowed you to go on for a bit more.

In talking about taxi drivers and their knowledge of everything, honourable Koya, reminds me of my taxi driver, Ashwin, who I travel with almost daily on our early morning bread run. He is a wealth of information on almost everything under the sun. But he is particularly knowledgeable and an expert on our Fiji Sevens.

The day after the Fiji Sevens games, I am bombarded with what went wrong and the last lost game for the sevens, he reckoned that we need further speed in the back line. So, I have not revealed to him that the Fiji coach is a relative of mine, from my island. But, yes, honourable Koya, I agree that drivers are endless source of information. Thank you.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- The honourable Speaker of Parliament, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, fellow Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen; *ni sa bula vinaka saka*, and a very good afternoon to you all. I welcome those joining us through livestream from across the globe.

Mr. Speaker, with deep gratitude, I rise before this esteemed House to deliver my response to His Excellency's Address, delivered at the commencement of the 2025 Parliamentary Session of our beloved Fiji.

I would like to begin by acknowledging past and present, the *Vanua o Nadonumai Vua na Gone Turaga Na Tui Suva* whose ancestral land is home to this distinguished institution with its rich history and traditions that form the foundation of our governance.

As the Minister for Justice, I stand in solidarity with the honourable Prime Minister and my fellow parliamentarians in expressing my sincerest appreciation to His Excellency the President of our sovereign nation, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, *Na Gone Turaga Bale Na Tui Cakau*, for his insightful address which opened the 2025 Session of Parliament.

His Excellency's Address encapsulates the collective vision of every Parliamentarian present

in this august House today, a vision centred on progress, prosperity and unity.

How fitting then, that he should call this Chamber, "...a house of hope, a beacon of progress and a symbol of the democratic spirit". With such a profound identify, we as the representatives of our people must rise to our duty, bridging the gap between aspirations and reality and working collaboratively to advance the wellbeing of both present and future generations. As His Excellency so rightfully reminded us, "...no one is left behind in our quest for economic growth, national security, prosperity and sustainable development."

As a devout Christian, I find profound wisdom in the *Bible*, Isaiah 1:17, and I quote:

"Learn to do right, seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow."

At its core, this verse reflects the very essence of governance - the pursuit of social justice. Social justice is not merely an ideal but a commitment to fairness, inclusivity and the protection of society's most vulnerable. True governance is not measured by power alone, but by the ability to serve, uplift and uphold the dignity of every citizen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in alignment with this principle, the Ministry of Justice is dedicated to ensuring that justice is not a privilege for the few but a right for all. We are actively working to extend our services to every corner of the country, making justice services more accessible, efficient and responsive to the needs of all Fijians, regardless of where they live.

We have transcended the divide with 20 outreach programmes across various locations, including Burebasaga in Rewa, Rotuma, *Tikina o* Wainunu Saolo, *Tikina o* Kubulau Waisa, *Tikina o* Lekutu, Vuo and Lutukina Villages in Macuata, Napuka in Tunuloa and Taveuni in Cakaudrove, Koro, Gau, Moturiki, Ovalau, Daku and Nakelo Villages in Tailevu and multiple villages in Nadroga, Ra, Ba and Nadi. Future engagements are planned for Beqa, Kadavu and Lau to further enhance accessibility to government services.

These visits were conducted in collaboration with other government ministries and stakeholders. These engagements have been instrumental in identifying key challenges communities face in accessing essential government services. The services provided during these visits included:

- Late birth registrations;
- New birth registrations;
- Death registrations;
- Marriage registrations;
- Updates to parent particulars;
- Business registrations to support grant applications;
- Cooperative and micro small businesses;
- Registration of titles for charitable trusts and deed of trust registrations;
- Justice of the Peace services;
- Police drug awareness;
- Ministry of Health HIV awareness programme;
- Ministry of iTaukei;
- Fiji Bureau of Statistics; and
- Legal Aid.

Furthermore, this Ministry has made significant strides in enhancing birth and death registrations in Fiji. In 2023, we submitted 529 Death Certificates and 15,486 Birth Certificates to the Native Land Commission (NLC) with further improvements in 2024, increasing birth registrations to 729 per month.

As of March of this year, we have sent 146 Death Certificates and 5,031 Birth Certificates to NLC. A key reform has streamlined the iTaukei birth registrations by enabling direct transmissions from the Ministry of Justice to the NLC, eliminating delays and easing the process of parents. This initiative strengthens the verification of *iTaukei* ancestry for landownership and reflects our commitment to efficiency, modernisation and better service delivery for all Fijians.

Moreover, in partnership with Post Fiji, Birth, Death and Marriages Registry services have been extended to all the 51 Post Offices around Fiji, significantly improving access for Fijians in maritime and rural areas. This initiative, which honourable Ratu Josaia Niudamu and I have personally helped implement across various locations, is a key milestone in the Ministry's ongoing efforts to decentralise services and promote equitable access to government resources.

I draw inspiration from the words of the 16th President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, in his famous Gettysburg Address and I quote: "A government of the people, by the people and for the people." This sentiment truly reflects the mission of our Coalition Government. Through these engagements, we reaffirm our commitment to bringing justice services directly to the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I join His Excellency Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu in acknowledging the ambitious yet necessary legislative agenda for the year - one that is crucial for economic growth, national security and the aspirations of our people. For these reasons, I extend my sincere appreciation to Cabinet for prioritising the long overdue review of our electoral legal framework, a critical step in fostering a more inclusive, fair and just electoral system.

Since the enactment of Fiji's Electoral Act in 1971, the electoral process in Fiji has become more complex and demanding, and its management and conduct has raised controversial issues. While competing priorities have delayed this review, I am pleased to inform this august House, that since Cabinet's endorsement of the review of the Electoral Act 2014, Political Parties (Registration Conduct, Funding and Disclosures) Act 2013 and the Electoral (Registration of Voters) Act 2012, steady progress has been made.

In collaboration with the Attorney-General's Office, the Fiji Law Reform and the Electoral Commission of Fiji, Fiji Law Reform has invited expressions of interest from the appointment of part-time law reform commissioners to undertake this comprehensive review. To-date, 17 applicants have expressed interest, and we anticipate the review process to be completed by mid-April of this year and thereafter, the subsequent process of Bill tabling will follow. Once completed, this reform will ensure a more practical, efficient, democratic, inclusive and equitable electoral process for future elections.

The Ministry of Justice, Attorney-General's Office, the Fiji Law Reform Commission, Electoral Commission and Fiji Elections Office are committed to ensuring that this review alone aligns with the broader constitutional review process, safeguarding the integrity of the supreme law of the land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we prepare for the 2026 General Elections and the anticipated 2025 Local Government Elections, the Fijian Elections Office is actively implementing key projects to ensure a smooth and transparent electoral process. These include polling venue assessments, voter list verification, stakeholder consultation and overseas voter registration efforts. The FEO is working

closely with government ministries and community leaders to enhance voter accessibility, improve registration service and strengthen election administration.

In addition, efforts are underway to align the Fiji Electoral Framework with the best practises, including updating procedures and training staff in line with the recommendations from the Multinational Observer Group. A key operational step will be the secure destruction of sensitive materials from the 2022 General Elections. This process began on Monday, 3rd March and will conclude on 4th April this year. This process, carried out under strict supervision, will ensure proper disposal of election material and support logistical preparations for future elections. This initiative reflects the Government's unwavering commitment to free, fair, and credible elections in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I appreciate the contribution of honourable Ratu Isikeli Tuiwailevu on the Heritage Bill. As a small island developing state, climate change remains an existential threat. Rising sea levels, extreme weather patterns, and environmental degradation threaten our communities and livelihoods. As administrators of Justice in Fiji, the protection of heritage sites like that in Ovalau is critical to nation building and reaffirming our identity and sovereignty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the socio-economic challenges facing our nation today are undeniable. However, as His Excellency rightly stated, these challenges also present opportunities for transformative leadership and national development. Transformative leadership, often synonymous with servant leadership, is best described by Meridian University (2022) as leadership where a person is a servant of the people rather than a master over them. This resonates with Matthew 20:28 on what Jesus said: "Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." This concept underscores our duty as leaders to uplift and empower our citizens.

A prime example of this approach is a collaborative government initiative supporting 34 youths under the care of the Tabuya family in Nabua since 24th April, 2024. These young individuals known as the Gideon Youth, many of whom have faced difficulties such as drug addiction and petty theft have received guidance and assistance from the Ministry for Youth and Sports, Ministry for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations, as well as private sector partners like CK Ezybuy.

The Ministry for Justice successfully coordinated this effort across multiple agencies and for this, I thank my team and honourable Agni Deo Singh, honourable Jese Saukuru and the Ministry for Women, Children and Social Protection with honourable Sashi Kiran and her predecessor, honourable Lynda Tabuya for personally engaging with these youths. Their involvement, alongside the efforts of the Tabuya family, exemplifies transformative leadership in action. I am reminded of the words of President John. F. Kennedy and I quote: "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

Individuals who continue to tirelessly work in some of the most challenging spaces are Mr. Elia Berabi and his family, who through their Seek to Save Ministry, have opened their home in Colo-i-Suva to 17 street children, aged 14 to 24. Through the faith-based rehabilitation, financial empowerment such as setting up of bank accounts and access to agricultural opportunities, they are instilling self-reliance in these youths. Mr. Berabi's unwavering commitment to serving the vulnerable demonstrates the type of leadership we should all aspire to.

Ms. Kalesi Volatabu, the founder of Drug Free World Fiji, for her extensive work in combatting drug use in Fiji. Her dedication serves as an inspiration, reminding us that the battle against drugs is one we must all take part in. As the future of our country is at stake, particularly the wellbeing of your youth, we must rally behind and support who are working to build a drug-free Fiji. Let us, as national leaders, go beyond the confines of our offices and actively serve those in need,

ensuring that no one is left behind in our nation's progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to briefly speak on the commendable efforts of the Ministry of Health in launching the 90-day HIV Outbreak Response Plan and the HIV Surge Strategy. The implementation of this response plan is a crucial response to the recently declared HIV outbreak in Fiji. The dramatic increase in the rate of HIV cases over the past five years reveals an alarming nine-fold escalation, with data indicating that 50 percent of cases are linked to injecting drug use. This highlights the urgent need to address drug abuse alongside the fight against HIV.

To the youth of Fiji, I urge you to rise above the pressures that lead to destructive choices. Your future is bright, and your potential is limitless. Do not allow drugs to steal your dreams or define your destiny.

I call on our traditional chiefs and religious leaders to take a stand in this fight.

Au vakatulou saka kina noqu vanua vakaturaga o Kubuna, vei ira saka na Gone Turaga Bale na Vunivalu na Tui Kaba, ki Burebasaga ke vei ira saka na Gone Marama Bale na Roko Tui Dreketi, Na Gone Turaga na Vunivalu, na vanua qaga veiwekani o Tovata, Na Turaga na Tui Cakau kei na Sau ni Vanua ko Lau, kemuni saka na turaga ni vanua, na mata ni tikina, turaga ni koro kei na vei mata lotu va-Karisito e Viti kei Rotuma. Me da nanumi ira na luveda. Me da veitauriligataka na nodra tuberi na luveda. Da lomani ira, da vosa tiko vei ira, da vakavulici ira me ra vakatulewa vakadodonu. Au vakananuma vei keda na Same 127:3-5: "Raica na gone, era sa nona i solisoli na Kalou; kei na vua ni kete sa kena i sau ni ka vinaka."

We must be united in this fight for our children and our Fiji. My voice, your voices, our collective voices hold great influence in shaping mindsets and preserving the value that have strengthened our communities for generations. Let us all unite - government, churches, vanua and families to protect our young people and build a healthier, drug free Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Justice is strongly supportive of the Counter Narcotics Strategy 2023-2028. My Ministry will work with all our partners to reduce demand and supply, strengthening legislative reforms, approving data analysis, fostering international corporation, prioritising rehabilitation and develop a strong diverse programme as necessary.

Another strategic pathway that we are exploring with UNICEF, Ministry for Women, Ministry for Employment is the Justice Diversion Programme. We must give our young people real options by replacing their addiction and poor choices with viable life changing alternatives. We can learn and must learn from the intervention programmes that highlight the critical need for families, communities and all of our people to work together. Diversion will be explored in greater detail this year.

I salute the Commander of the Republic of the Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), Major-General Ro Jone Kalouniwai who has been a critical and resolute leader since the beginning of the journey of the Coalition Government. *Vinaka saka turaga naita na nomuni yaloqaga kei na nomuni yalo dei.*

To Commissioner of Police, Rusiate Tudravu, congratulations on your new appointment. We are reassured by your statement *turaga mataqali*, and I quote, "We know who you are, and we are coming to get you." As the Minister for Justice, I am reassured that justice will be served and access to justice will be available through collaborative efforts between ministries and government departments.

I welcome the review of the Education Act 1996 and related policies and programmes. I eagerly anticipate the positive impact these reforms will have on our stakeholders, most importantly, our students and teachers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the area of rural development, I extend my appreciation to the honourable Minister of Public Works, Transport and Meteorological Services, the Fiji Roads Authority for their commitment to improving road infrastructure in the Eastern Division of Kadavu, Lau and Lomaiviti - Koro, Gau and Ovalau. As commonly said in the Lomaiviti dialect, “*sa qai dina saraga, qo sa qai dua na matanitu vinaka.*” These long-overdue developments are a testament to the Coalition Government's responsiveness to the needs of our people. The continued investment in infrastructure is not just about connecting the unconnected, it is about enhancing livelihoods, ensuring accessibility and fostering economic opportunities for rural communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government stands firm in its commitment to transform this nation into a just, inclusive, healthy and prosperous society where every Fijian has the opportunity to thrive. Our vision is clear: to uphold the rule of law, safeguard democratic values and foster an environment where justice and equity are not merely ideals but lived realities.

As we chart the course for a stronger and more resilient Fiji, let us be guided by the words of Micah 6:8, and I quote: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to work humbly with God”

In the spirit of national unity, we must rise above political differences and personal views, demonstrating to the people of Fiji that collaboration and mutual respect are the foundations of strong leadership. Our collective responsibility is to work for the wellbeing of all Fijians, ensuring that inclusivity, justice, progress remain the pillars of our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition and my fellow parliamentarians, let us stand together, steadfast in our purpose, resolute in our vision and unwavering in our service for the benefit of our people. I stand alongside the honourable Prime Minister in fully supporting the motion to acknowledge His Excellency the President, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu for his inspiring words and visionary leadership in opening this 2025 Session of Parliament. May God bless Fiji.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and my fellow Fijians, *ni sa bula vinaa.*

Mr. Speaker, before I begin with my response, allow me to pay tribute and share condolences on the passing of the *Turaga na Buli Saqani* immediately last night. I share the condolences with the people of Saqani in this trying time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I join the House to stand before this Chamber to offer my sincere gratitude and share my reply to the gracious Address delivered by His Excellency the President at the Opening of the 2025 Session of Parliament.

His Excellency's Address outlined the Government's direction for the year ahead, reaffirming our commitment to the continued progress and prosperity of Fiji and all Fijians. His message not only highlighted key areas of focus but also reminded us of our collective responsibility to uphold the values of service, sacrifice, unity and dedication for the common good.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government recognises the critical importance of improving public safety and national security. National security cultivates national development. National security cannot just be a whole-of-Government issue but must be a whole-of-nation responsibility.

The Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs will take the lead role in coordinating this work in close consultation with stakeholders locally and abroad.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government has prioritised the development of Fiji's National Security Strategy to drive our collective efforts in the security sector. As the Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs has updated this august House, Fiji's National Security and Defence Review is close to completion and we look forward to releasing the National Security Strategy in the near future.

Alongside the National Development Plan and Foreign Policy White Paper, it will articulate Fiji's vision for national security, peace and stability. It will outline our pathway forward to modernising our security sector, regaining public trust and addressing the challenges impacting our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not isolated from global geopolitical challenges. Our foreign policy will continue to emphasise strategic partnerships and regional cooperation to safeguard our national interests. We will strengthen ties with both traditional allies and emerging partners to secure economic and security benefits for Fiji as, "friends to all and foes to none."

The launch of our first Foreign Policy White Paper is a milestone achievement. The White Paper sets clear, overarching objectives and principles within which domestic and foreign policy work in tandem. Our foreign policy recognises and embraces the critical role of cooperation, promoted by our Pacific family first approach which asserts our role and responsibility to the Pacific region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as His Excellency highlighted in his opening remarks, regional cooperation continues to be strengthened through collaboration on humanitarian and disaster relief assistance. I echo His Excellency's sentiments, in thanking our disciplined forces for their work in providing humanitarian aid and disaster relief assistance to our brothers and sisters in neighbouring island states plagued by severe disasters, calamities and instabilities.

In line with the Foreign Policy White Paper's Family First approach, the Ministry will continue to prioritise defence support for the Pacific Regional Responses and Initiatives, the most recent, of which, included the aid and disaster relief assistance rendered to the people and Government of Vanuatu who experienced the devastating 7.3 magnitude earthquake late last year and are gradually recovering from its aftermath.

I also extend our sincerest gratitude to the members of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) and the Ministry who will be returning from deployments to the Pacific Special Advisory Team within the Pacific Response Group based in Brisbane, Australia. The Pacific Response Group is a new initiative amongst defence forces in the Pacific to collectively and collaboratively respond to disaster relief events in our region, aligning such developments with the 2050 Blue Pacific Strategic theme of Peace and Security highlighting the importance of regional cooperation as a crucial element for a safe, peaceful and prosperous Blue Pacific.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the RFMF continues its commitment to maintaining regional and international peace by undertaking peacekeeping operations in the Middle East and other conflict prone areas. Peacekeeping operations remains a priority for the RFMF and the Ministry. Given the recent developments on the global front and its direct and indirect repercussions felt by our people

here at home, this commitment clearly demonstrates the continued support and unwavering dedication of members and personnel of the RFMF towards the preservation of national, regional and global peace.

Further, the strengthening of Fiji's maritime security will also be a priority, as Fiji's maritime domain is a key vector for many of the threats Fiji is currently facing, particularly the threat of illicit drug trafficking. The Ministry, in conjunction with relevant stakeholders, will develop a new Maritime Security Strategy to help focus and coordinate maritime security efforts, which will be supported at the operational level by the new Maritime Essential Services Centre (MESC). Built with the support of the Australian Government under our renewed and elevated Vuvale Partnership, it will serve as an interagency facility to drive joint operations in the maritime domain in combatting illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing and drug trafficking.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Security and Defence Review report emphasises that work must be continued in terms of the review of the Fijis Security Industry Act 2010, and Government will continue to work with development partners in continuing the review process and the professionalisation of Fiji's security industry. The Fiji Government will need to continue to regulate the sector. The security companies that currently work in Fiji work closely with other stakeholders in the security sector to contribute to peace and stability.

The Fiji Security Industry Employees Association (FSIEA), who is represented on the Security Industry Licensing Board have tried to conduct issues through membership standards, however, it has limited investigative capacity and limited reach through voluntary membership. At this juncture, the default position continues to be for Government to legislate and administer occupational licensing regimes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the work on the professionalisation of the industry, the Security Industry and Regulation Board (SIRLB) is working closely with accredited Higher Education Institutions through the introduction of courses that certify competency through minimum training requirements for all the categories of security activity outlined in Section (3) of the Security Industry Act.

As we reflect on the priorities of the Government, one issue that requires our immediate and unwavering attention is the welfare and wellbeing of our veterans. These men and women, who have served Fiji with distinction in both times of war and peace, have earned our deepest respect, and their contribution must never be forgotten. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Veterans Affairs is an issue that touches the heart of our nation's history. The sacrifices these brave individuals made, both those who returned and those who did not, are woven into the fabric of our national identity. From the battlefields of the world wars to peacekeeping missions across the globe, Fijians have stood resolute in the service of peace, justice, and freedom.

I am pleased to acknowledge the ongoing efforts of the Government in this area. This includes adequate healthcare, proper compensation, and access to social services, and support for their families. Mental health services are also a priority, given the stresses and trauma faced by those who have served in conflict zones.

The Veterans Affairs ensures that veterans' issues are prioritised and effectively addressed. Under the leadership of the Ministry for Defence and Veterans Affairs, progress has been made to improve the support systems available to our veterans, but much work still remains to be done. The Coalition Government has demonstrated its commitment to our servicemen by increasing the Aftercare allowance by 15 percent in the 2023-2024 Budget. This increase aligns with the rise in allowances for social welfare recipients. Furthermore, the budget allocation for the Aftercare Fund

has been boosted from \$12.4 million in 2022-2023 to \$14.9 million in 2023-2024.

Government reaffirms its commitment to honouring the service and sacrifices of our veterans. All allowances and benefits due to them will be paid in full, in accordance with the provisions of the Aftercare Fund Act. Rest assured, no reductions or removals of these benefits have occurred under this Government.

It is also important that we continue to honour and celebrate the stories of our veterans. This can be achieved through educational programmes, the preservation of historical sites and community initiatives that allow our younger generations to learn about the legacy of those who fought to protect the freedoms we enjoy today. Let us not allow the stories of our veterans to fade into the past but instead ensure that their memory is etched in the collective unconsciousness of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency, the President's call for unity and respectful dialogue is both timely and essential. In an era where social media can amplify divisive rhetoric, it is crucial for Members of Parliament and citizens alike, to engage in constructive and respectful discourse. His Excellency's emphasis on setting aside personal interests and partisan politics to work towards the common good, is a reminder that the strength of a nation lies in its ability to come together, especially in times of challenge, by fostering a culture of respectful dialogue. Fiji can build a more cohesive and resilient society.

Fiji's political landscape has long been shaped by a diverse and dynamic mix of cultural, social and economic factors. As a multi-ethnic nation with a history of political instability, fostering unity and bipartisanship among Members of Parliament is essential for national progress and stability. While political divisions and ideological differences naturally exist, cooperation amongst Members of Parliament can lead to stronger governance, effective policymaking and enhanced national cohesion.

National unity within Parliament also fosters an environment where leaders work collaboratively to address pressing issues such as economic development, climate change, education, healthcare and social welfare. These challenges require collective effort and should transcend party lines. When Members of Parliament unite for a common purpose, they can create lasting and impactful policies that benefit the entire nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the strengthening of infrastructure is a critical component of Fiji's development strategy. His Excellency's emphasis on targeted investments in roads, ports and energy systems is essential for enhancing productivity and building long-term economic resilience. Improved infrastructure can facilitate trade, attract investment and provide the quality of life for citizens. It is also important to ensure that infrastructure development is sustainable and resilient to the impacts of climate change given Fiji's vulnerability and natural disasters.

His Excellency's commitment to social inclusion and protection is commendable. Economic growth should be inclusive and benefit all segments of society, particularly vulnerable populations such as the elderly, people with disabilities and low-income families. Strengthening social protection programmes is essential to ensure that these groups have access to essential services and opportunities. By promoting social inclusion, Fiji can build a more just and equitable society where everyone has a chance to thrive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the call for a review of Fiji's Constitution to reflect the evolving aspirations of the population is a significant step towards ensuring fairness, inclusivity and justice. Institutional reform is necessary to ensure that the Government remains responsive to the needs of the people and upholds democratic principles. It is important for the review process to be

inclusive and participatory, allowing citizens to have a voice in shaping the future for their nation. By strengthening democratic institutions, Fiji can build a more transparent and accountable government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our youth of today, are leaders of tomorrow. His Excellency has rightly said it and I quote, “to our youth you are the future of this nation, your dreams, ambitions and hard work will define the destiny of our nation. Be bold in your aspirations, relentless in your pursuit of excellence, and unwavering in your commitment to build a better Fiji that thrives through unity and prosperity.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, youth empowerment is one of the main agendas of the Coalition Government. Youth empowerment is a multifaceted approach that aims to equip young people with skills, knowledge, and opportunities they need, to become active and responsible citizens. This empowerment is essential for fostering a generation that can contribute to the nation's social, economic and political development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency has announced major legislative reforms that will be introduced by Government this year. Some of the proposed laws are:

- (1) Electoral laws;
- (2) Public Health Act review;
- (3) Migration laws;
- (4) Human trafficking;
- (5) Police security; and
- (6) Cyber security laws.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, legislative reform is important, because it ensures that laws remain relevant, fair and effective in addressing society needs. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has evolved, and laws must reflect the changes in values, demographics and cultural norms. Some laws have become obsolete or impractical due to the technological advancements, economic shifts, or new challenges.

His Excellency's announcement of legislative reforms will help correct injustices, reduce discrimination and ensure equal treatment under the law. New challenges such as climate change, artificial intelligence and public health crisis, have changed the boundaries of legal frameworks and it is imperative that we must manage these risks and opportunities effectively.

Finally, as we move forward into this new parliamentary term, let us commit to ensuring that we transcend partition lines and focus on the shared values of respect, gratitude and duty in the aspects of working towards the betterment of our national security, which also contributes to our National Development Plan as a nation.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I extend my deepest gratitude to our veterans and their families for their courage, their sacrifices and their continued contributions to our society. National security are not just matters of policy but pillars upon which the safety, stability and prosperity of our nation are built. As we continue to address evolving threats to our security, we must remain vigilant, adaptable and proactive in safeguarding our borders, citizens and values. Let us work together across all sectors, government, military and civil society to strengthen our national security and secure a future where our nation remains resilient in the face of challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my leave, I would like to wish all the students of Queen Victoria School all the best in their interhouse tomorrow at the National Stadium. And I am hoping that Bure Bau will win, but I leave that for tomorrow.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion that is before Parliament and once again thank His Excellency for his most gracious address. *Vinaka Vakalevu*.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will not comment on the interhouse section.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, fellow Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, Members of Parliament; *bula vinaka* and *namaste* to everyone.

Mr, Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly support the motion by the honourable Prime Minister to thank His Excellency, the President for his most gracious address to open the 2025 legislative year. His Excellency, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, *na Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau*, and President of Fiji, deserves our sincere gratitude for his inspiring and visionary speech, which sets the tone for the legislative and governance priorities of this august Parliament.

His Excellency, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is no stranger to the political landscape of Fiji. In his years of service as a member of Parliament, a Senior Cabinet Minister, Leader of the Opposition and Speaker, have shaped his understanding of good governance, democracy and public service. We have no doubt that he is enriching the High Office of the President with the same wisdom, integrity and commitment to the Fijian people that have defined his leadership over the years. I wish His Excellency and madam First Lady, all the best in their term in office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji stands at a pivotal moment in its history, one defined not just by the challenges we have overcome, but by the opportunities that lie ahead. And 2025 holds great significance for our nation. As we celebrate 55 years of independence this year, we have an opportunity to reflect on our past, and shape our future that is stable, prosperous and inclusive. As a nation, we have always had great potential. We are strategically located in a peaceful region, close to our development partners - Australia and New Zealand. We are blessed with abundant resources, educated and talented population, and a strong position as a regional hub.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also live in a global environment, like no other in recent times which will have far reaching consequences on trade, commerce and international development across the world. The moment of extreme uncertainty in the global and far-reaching disruption, calls for a national resolve that is rooted on our unity and on our shared sense of purpose.

Yet, despite these advantages, our journey has not been without hardship, political instability, periods of strange based relations, prolonged dictatorship and a lack of accountability and good governance have hindered our progress. We cannot change the past, but we must learn from it. Political and national leadership, especially when invested with national responsibility is similar to driving a vehicle, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We must at all times, look ahead, but never forget to look at the rear view and side mirrors to see how we have navigated through the long-winded road, and at the same time, avoid the kind of pitfalls that we may have encountered

For the first time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our 55-year history, a government has successfully transitioned democratically from one group to another, and remained stable beyond its first year, not having been born out of any political upheaval. We have taken significant steps to restore media freedom, uphold the rule of law...

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.-...respect human rights, restore worker's rights...

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.-...and promote bipartisanship both outside and within Parliament. These are the hallmarks of our matured democracy, and we must protect and strengthen them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as elected representatives, we bear profound responsibility in shaping the future of our beloved nation. It is as His Excellency said, “a house of hope, a place where bold decisions must be made to secure a prosperous and resilient Fiji. Our duty is to uphold the values of unity, democracy, economic progress while ensuring that no Fijian is left behind.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency spoke about transformative leadership and bipartisanship. This in our view, are prerequisites for nation building. It requires leaders to always put national interest above personal and political advancement. The honourable Sitiveni Rabuka, Prime Minister for Fiji from May 1992 to May 1999, and once again Prime Minister from 24th December 2022 to date, is an embodiment of what His Excellency stated. A man ostracised, a man dehumanised, a man ridiculed and reduced to planting vegetables for sustenance as a former Prime Minister, returned 23 years later to be elected as the nation's leader...

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.-...is quite remarkable, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in itself.

Honourable Sitiveni Rabuka has an unshakeable vision, that he did not shake, even after losing a general election in 1999, not as a candidate but as leader of his then party. When asked by the media if the 1997 Constitution under which elections were held, a constitution internationally acclaimed and achieved by both him and Justice J. Ram Reddy, honourable Sitiveni Rabuka, without any hesitation, replied that the 1997 Constitution is worth losing an election for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a 37 year old academic, I, too was part of the NFP line of candidates led by Mr. Reddy that was annihilated, but that is history. Honourable Sitiveni Rabuka gladly accepted the election result, so did the NFP and Mr. Reddy. Both went to achieve name and fame.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Rabuka is generally committed to bipartisanship. He mentioned A.D. Patel, NFP's founder and leader, his successor, S.M. Koya, and Mr. Reddy. He also mentioned the Prime Ministers of our historical past while moving his motion. The late Justice Reddy and honourable Sitiveni Rabuka did many things, which were considered impossible - changed the unjust 1990 Constitution through painstaking negotiation, dialogue and consensus building. Both of them and their parties paid a heavy price at the polls, but they did not blame the new Constitution because a comprehensive review report was put out, with a widespread consultation that was never done before.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is our time to do the same. Without and with painstaking negotiation, dialogue, perseverance and consensus building, we shall achieve bipartisanship to give Fiji a document that is not imposed. His Excellency, strongly emphasised on what is, and what will be done as part of consolidating economic growth. A strong economy must be built on solid foundations to ensure economic development is sustainable and long lasting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this philosophy of building stronger economic foundations has guided the Coalition Government's economic and fiscal direction. Before the 2022 general elections, and during our tenure in the Opposition, we had raised constantly, about the issue of public debt, which reached nearly \$10 billion – almost equivalent to the size of our economy.

This was a sharp rise from approximately \$2.8 billion in 2006, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The fiscal situation would have deteriorated further if not for the substantial budget grants from Australia, concessional funding from multilateral financial institutions and over half a billion dollars generated through the sale of shares in EFL, Fiji Ports and ATH by the previous Government. These were one-off funds that should have been used to reduce debt. Instead, they were spent on financing unsustainable levels of expenditure.

When we came into Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had no option. We had very little option. We faced a fiscal crisis, and if we had not done, what we did in terms of our policies, we would have been irresponsible, and the pain and suffering of our people that the Opposition is talking about would have been harsher and more difficult. We implemented essential tax reforms, including adjustments to VAT, corporate tax, and the restoration of departure tax to raise Government revenue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some in the Opposition, suggest that tax increases were unnecessary. This is misleading. Given the massive funding needs for rebuilding public assets, roads, water, sewerage, healthcare and education, tough decisions were inevitable. We simplified the VAT structure, moving from a three-tier system of zero percent, nine percent and fifteen percent to just two-tiers. Zero percent on 22 essential items, and fifteen percent on all other goods and services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the last three days, I have heard constant words such as skyrocketing and uncontrollable, generalisations! Let me just give a fact check, which is very important, because if honourable Members come into this Parliament and mislead and misinform, not just the honourable members of Parliament, but also the people out there, that is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, highly irresponsible! I will give you one recent example, honourable Koya was a former Member of Parliament and a former Minister, comes here and said that the National Development Plan is still in the pipeline!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- A Point of Order, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Koya?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand on Point of Order, Standing Order 74(1)(a). That was brought up by me, and I qualified it, and it has been dealt with already. I did not make a mis-statement, I actually qualified it, so it has been done, and I apologised already. I think that the honourable Minister, now raising it again, is unfair because if I had not qualified it, I understand, but I did, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I think that everyone heard it and it should be left alone. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.-Thank you, honourable Koya.

I did accept, Deputy Prime Minister, his qualification of that. In fact, I did mention that he was withdrawing the statement.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, the reason why I wanted to bring that up again was not because he withdrew, when I said the plan was launched, then he said, "well, if it is launched, it is fine." I wanted to make this point very clear, it is nothing to do with what he said.

The National Development Plan, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was launched on 17th September, 2024 publicly by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Manoa Kamikamica where the whole Opposition was invited - the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Rinesh Sharma, honourable Ketan Lal, honourable Naivalurua were present and on top of that, I had given a Ministerial Statement on 2nd October about the National Development Plan. All I am saying, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that we have honourable Members in this Parliament. If they cannot recall, if they do not know, if they are

not sure, then what do we expect? And more, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they said that we increased the VAT. As I said, we did that because of what I said earlier. They conveniently forget that VAT was increased from 12.5 percent to 15 percent in 2011 and stayed there until 2015.

The honourable Koya said one more thing, he said that we have run a highest deficit since 1992. Mr. Speaker, Sir, a quick fact check. If you look at the overall balance, I have got data here from 1980. If you look at just a few examples, 1998 - 5 percent, 2001- 6.2 percent, 2019 and 2020 - 6 percent, 2 years in COVID-19 – 11 percent and 12 percent, 2023-2024 - 3.4 percent and 2024-2025 - 4.5 percent. Now these are the kind of misinformation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and lies that are being told.

Let me give another example, they said inflation is sky rocketing. You look at the figures for inflation. In 2011 - 6.3 percent, 2023 - 5.1 percent and 2024 - 1.4 percent. This is the kind of lies and misinformation they bring and generalise and say in Parliament, imagine what they would be doing outside in the community.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- *Lasulasu reh!*

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is precisely why we are saying, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that honourable Members ought to be a bit honest. These are the facts, all they can do is just do a Google search and they will find the answers, yet they come and lie here.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the tax reforms that we have done and my honourable colleagues from this side, honourable Assistant Minister of Finance and many others have talked about how this Government has been able to deal with the inflation rate of 5.1 percent in 2023. It is very clear now, the Reserve Bank has said repeatedly, independently, that the effect of VAT rationalisation has waned now.

The inflation that we see is imported inflation and Mr. Speaker, they have actually completely, not one of them from the Opposition said that 22 items are VAT free; not one of them. Not one of them have talked about all the measures that we had in the 2023-2024 Budget - the increase in pension from 15 percent to 20 percent, back to school support, increase in subsidies for agriculture, sugar, increase in the price of sugarcane, all the other subsidies and support including rice as well, free education, free water, free bus fare, subsidized dialysis treatment, first home buyer grant, all these benefits are still there. None of them mentioned that we lifted a burden of \$650 million from 53,000 families to give them a relief. None of them are talking about that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is what I was saying, this is the biggest hypocrisy we have had from the Opposition, they have forgotten what we did in the 2024-2025 Budget. We said that we have done what we could in terms of supporting our people. Then we looked at the income side, in 16 years, under Bainimarama and FijiFirst, minimum wages only went up by 68 percent. It is this Government that has increased in two years wages from \$4 to \$5 from 1st April. We gave the biggest increase to the Civil Service from 17 percent to 20 percent, since 2017 they didn't have any increase.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is a result of prudent physical management and important policies that we have adapted. I know the honourable Minister of Health and honourable Minister for Works have talked about all the projects. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica has talked about the number of new projects, there are major public sector funded projects in the upcoming budget that will be announced Mr. Speaker, Sir, which includes bridges and the Nadi River Flood Alleviation Project and many others that we will be announcing in the Budget on 27th June.

There is major transformation that is happening within EFL where we are looking at renewable energy transition and that itself, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will invite a lot of investment and create more jobs in the economy. Suva Port Development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are looking at that. A number of potential projects are being negotiated.

In the health sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just conclude by talking about health a little bit and I want to thank the honourable Minister for Health and the honourable Assistant Minister for Health for the amount of work that we have done in the last two years to fix the mess of 16 years in the health infrastructure. I was in Kadavu the other day, the Vunisea Government Hospital (I was talking to the honourable Leader of the Opposition) was falling apart, Nausori Health Centre was falling apart. It is this Government that has got the development partners that is now fixing it, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Look at the school infrastructure, it is this Government that got the Australian Government to do the repair. It is this Government, Mr. Speaker, in the Suva-Nausori area, in the last 16 years, not a single classroom has been built. If you look at the school facilities, we had the guts, we had the honesty to get the World Bank, to get the Australian Government to do an independent report. The CWM hospital, the first line in the Australian Government's Independent Report says "years of neglect" – go and read the report. We have 27 projects now, Mr. Speaker, Sir on board and we are going to fix CWM Hospital and there are other plans. The new 100-bed Super Speciality Hospital by the Indian Government is going to start soon and that is expected to be completed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I will again want to thank His Excellency for his gracious Address and for laying out the vision and the foundation, not only for this Parliament, but for this Government and also for the people of Fiji. I want to say to the people of Fiji that this Government has done a lot in the last two years, Mr. Speaker, Sir. There is a lot more to be done and not everything will also be finished in four years because of the mess that we inherited from the previous government.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason why they do not want us to talk about what was there before, because they cannot digest the fact that we have done so many things in two years to fix the mess. Sir, it is very important for us to keep talking about what they did, because as I said, we have to look back into the rear vision because if we do not remind our people and do not remind ourselves, we could make the same mistakes that they did, and we do not want to make that mistake. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, given the time of the day and for the purposes of complying with the Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a suspension motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

Under Standing Order 6 that so much of Standing Order 23(1) is suspended, so as to allow the House to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed in today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have in the Batting Order another three speakers. In addition, in the Standing Order, No. 5 is the Consideration of Bills where we will introduce two Bills.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now open the floor to honourable Members for debate on the motion, if any.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Thank you, Sir, I do not have any further comments.

MR. SPEAKER.- Forgo the reply.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now suspend proceedings for a break. Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.08 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.43 p.m.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, coming towards the end of our batting order, as in cricket, a sport that I love and also I believe the honourable Prime Minister is not familiar with. The tail-end batsmen are normally the attack squad of the team. They comprise of bowlers and especially the fast bowlers. So, I would very much hope that our last three batsmen live up to their attack by being fast, but as a saying goes, we can only live in hope.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, my fellow Fijians listening in this afternoon, *ni sa bula vinaka, namaste* and a very good afternoon to you all. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we stand today.

Ki Nadonumai vua na Turaga na Tui Suva. I pay my respect to their chiefs past and present as well as emerging leaders and members of the *vanua ko Nadonumai. Turaga na Speaker, Sir, au vakabula e nai tikotiko vakaturaga e noda Viti lomani. Vakaturaga saka kina vanua vakaturaga o Kubuna, vua na Turaga Bale na Tui Kaba Na Vunivalu; na vanua vakaturaga saka o Burebasaga vua na Marama Bale na Roko Tui Dreketi na Turaga na Vunivalu; Matanitu veiwekani na Tovata; yasana vakaturaga e 14 e na noda vanua lomani ko Viti; vei kemuni talega na vei liuliu kece sara ni lotu e na noda Viti lomani.*

Au vakavinavinaka vakalevu na kena qaravi ka maroroi tiko nai tikotiko vakavanua kei na qaravi na lotu kei na matanitu e na noda veitikotiko vakaturaga e Viti. E da lako curuma saka tiko e dua na gauna bolebole ena kena vakayagataki saka tiko na wai gaga ni veivakamatenitaki kei na mate levu vei tauvi na HIV/AIDS vei ira na noda i tabagone. Au sa kerea kina vakabibi na noda cakacaka vata me valuti saka na bolebole levu ka donumaka saka tiko na vuravura kei na noda vanua lomani ko Viti e na gauna e daidai. Sa vinakati saka kina na noda veitauriliga e na noda masulaka ka cakacakataka vata me da rawa ni vakalailaitaka sobu na kena vakayagataki na wai gaga ni veivakamatenitaki kei na kena dewa vakasivia na mate na HIV/AIDS.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to commend and respond to His Excellency the President, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, *Na Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau's* visionary Address that called for a Fiji that embraces sustainability, inclusivity and resilience. His Excellency challenged us to set our sights high and create a Fiji where every citizen has the opportunity to succeed, where our environment is to serve for generations to come and where we work hand in hand with our neighbours to promote peace and stability.

The Ministry of *iTaukei* Affairs and its institutions, the *iTaukei* Affairs Board, *iTaukei* Land Trust Board, *iTaukei* Trust Fund Board, *iTaukei* Land and Fisheries Commission, Fijian Holdings Limited and the Centre for Appropriate Technology and Development stand united in our commitment to transform this vision into tangible reality for our *iTaukei* and Fijian communities.

At the heart of our work lies a fundamental principle to build a truly resilient, sustainable and inclusive Fiji. We must first create an equitable foundation where *iTaukei* people and all other communities can access resources, support and opportunities needed to improve the economic wellbeing. This principle guides our comprehensive approach to governance, land management, cultural, preservation, economic empowerment and institutional strengthening.

Today I am pleased to share the significant progress we have made across all our institutions and outline our strategic visions for the coming years as we collaborate to create a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient Fiji for all.

Mr. Speaker, in alignment with the present vision to promote the participation of *iTaukei* in development by empowering them through skill enhancement and encouraging participation in business, the Ministry is co-ordinating initiatives, programmes in its institutions to fast-track *iTaukei* involvement in economic development.

Mr. Speaker, the iTLTB has made tremendous inroads in the provision of financial support for the *iTaukei* landowning units in their desire to commercially use their land and sea resources. As at 31st December, 2024, the wealth fund in the *iTaukei* Land Trust Board transport has accumulated to a total fund of \$12.1 million. This wealth fund is anticipated to be converted into a landowner's bank to allow resource owners to invest, compensate expiring leases, secure loans, enter into joint venture or fund resource owners' developments. The iTLTB set up the *iTaukei* Development Fund in 2024 to provide concessional finance to *iTaukei* businesses with a total budget of \$5 million; \$4 million to go to landowning units and \$1 million to individual members.

In 2024, the iTLTB funded 44 projects valued at \$3.08 million and facilitate investments in *iTaukei*- owned ventures and assistance to small and medium micro enterprises.

In terms of land governance, the iTLTB has approved the return of 1,458.87 acres of extinct mataqali land to *iTaukei* landowning units through the allotment process under Section 19 of the *iTaukei* Land Trust Act. This demonstrates our unwavering commitment to ensuring land remains in the hands of our people while being managed sustainably for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to address the statement made on the Toko 999-year lease. The iTLTB is addressing this historical inequity from 1907 by working to surrender its own arrangement and issue new 99-year lease to residents. I wish to emphasise that this process will not evict any resident but is to update outdated lease conditions, ensure proper boundary demarcation and allow landowners to receive their fair return while providing long-term legal protection for current occupants. Both the landowners, Mataqali Tilivasewa and Mataqali Navusabalavu and the Tui Tavua have expressed support for this initiative. The iTLTB continues consultation with all stakeholders to ensure a just transition with the next consultation scheduled for Tuesday, 11th March.

In regard to the issues raised in this House on the compensation and eviction at the end of their leases, I would like to advise this august House, in regard to compensations, all development on the land should be approved by iTLTB and for sure compensation will be paid at the end of the lease. If you do not approach iTLTB for approval on any development on the land, that is where most of the problems occur. So, I kindly request the community to advise and communicate with iTLTB in regard to any developments on their lease.

In regard to eviction, the current Government had lengthened the time for consultation before the end of the lease. Before it was five years, now it is 10 years, that you can do consultations with TLTB and landowners before the lease expires.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTaukei Trust Fund Board has launched several transformative initiatives that are creating tangible economic opportunities in our communities. The Drua Innovation Incubation Grant Programme has awarded grants totalling of \$240,000 for eight innovative businesses in the sector, ranging from traditional craft modernisation to sustainable agriculture and digital services, with assistance of up to \$90,000 per business. These businesses have collectively created 37 new jobs within the first year of operation.

Similarly, the Business Ready Support Scheme has provided reasonable funding of \$360,000 to 12 SMEs with a support of up to \$30,000 each, enabling them to scale operations and access larger markets both domestically and internationally. The programmes are not merely financial instruments, but catalysts for sustainable economic growth within our communities, with a documented 28 percent average increase in revenue for participating businesses.

The Yasawa-i-Rara Cruise Tourism Initiative now welcomes over 2,000 visitors annually, generating approximately \$450,000 in direct community income. The Board has funded 15 Postgraduate Scholarships valued at 25,000 each in iTaukei Studies at the University of the South Pacific, with eight scholars already completing their research and publishing findings that directly inform policy development. We have also established the first Rotuma Language Studies Programme, with an investment of \$330,000 to preserve the Rotuma language, and which has already documented over 2,000 unique words and cultural practices that were at risk of being lost to future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fijian Holdings also facilitates to support Fijians in business. Through its subsidy, Merchant Finance has launched two financial products that allow more *iTaukei* to access business capital. The Vanua Finance is specifically for resource owners to unlock the commercial value of their resources and target businesses like land subdivision, property development, gravel extraction, and cartage operations.

The Marama Finance specifically targets women SMEs, to access funding between \$100,000 and \$500,000. Both of these facilities are supported by Government through the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs with interest-free loans for the first three years. Through its Impact Investment Mandate, Fijian Holdings Limited (FHL) is now directly investing with landowners in transformative projects like the Tacirua Commercial Property Development and the Nawaibuta Holdings Development in Korovou. These joint ventures represent a paradigm shift, ensuring landowners are not just leaseholders, but active investors in their own land, creating sustainable wealth for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTaukei Land and Fisheries Commission has strategically reviewed its Traditional Leaders' Awareness package in 2023, adopting a proactive approach that targets completion of a whole province at once, rather than responding to individual districts or Yavusa requests as it was done in 2018. This revamped approach has yielded remarkable results, with significant increase in the percentage of customary titles being filled, now reaching 75 percent as of February this year compared to 49 percent in 2022.

This is the first time the Ministry has achieved such a result since the establishment of the Act in 1904. The iTaukei Land and Fisheries Commission has completed the demarcation and survey of Vatulele, Malolo Island in Nadroga/Navosa Province, while the demarcation of Ba Province is now 90 percent complete. The Commission has also commenced vital demarcation work in the Lau Group, beginning with Vanuabalavu and Lakeba. The Commission has established a dedicated definition unit that has already completed 24 surveys by August 2024.

The survey of Mahogany lease in Vanualevu will lead a proper registration and certification of available plantations, creating economic opportunities where confirming *iTaukei* land boundaries and owners. The Commission has completed a comprehensive institution review in December 2024, with the findings approved by the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs Board in February this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our effort to improve access to vocational training, our youths in rural remote communities, the High Education Commission of Fiji has approved the establishment of CATD training centres in 16 locations across Fiji. Our centre for appropriate technology and

development in Nadave, serve as the educational arm of the Ministry, addressing the critical issue of school dropouts among our *iTaukei* youth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTaukei Affairs Board is strongly committed to transforming the lives of the *iTaukei* through good governance practices and improved wellbeing standards. Our Change Management Programme has established three vital initiatives:

- (1) Urban Service Unit addressing challenges in the urban areas;
- (2) Project Management Unit overseeing special projects; and
- (3) Strengthening of commercial units with Senior Economic Planning Officers across the 14 Provinces.

We are also preparing a National Action Plan on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), presenting a whole-of-government approach to uplifting the rights, wellbeing and empowerment of Fiji's *iTaukei* communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, my response to His Excellency, the President's Address, I want to emphasise that the work we are undertaking across our *iTaukei* institutions is integral to building a sustainable, inclusive and resilient Fiji. His Excellency reminded us that "in unity there is strength, in collaboration, there is progress, and in transformation, there is a brighter future for all."

The progress and the work being focused on the *iTaukei* is not only for the betterment of one community, but for Fiji as a whole. Taking the queue from Government's Truth and Reconciliation process, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, although focusing its work on the *iTaukei*, will ensure that no other community is left behind.

As the President emphasised, "transformational leadership requires that we are compassionate at all times, have empathy and ensure equity, and embrace inclusivity." Our mission is to ensure that *iTaukei* for generations to come will have a secure economic wellbeing, are able to contribute significantly and effectively to the economy of Fiji. When indigenous communities thrive, all of Fiji benefits.

The empowerment of *iTaukei* communities strengthen our entire nations, and through collaboration, partnership across all sectors of society, we will build a Fiji where prosperity is shared, culture diversity celebrated, and sustainable development creates opportunities for all citizens. May God bless our beloved nation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before the House.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and people of Fiji; thank you, Sir, for giving me the floor.

I stand to deliver my reply to His Excellency, the President's most gracious Address on the Opening of Parliament this year. The President's Address was wide-ranging, and it included his exhortations on things that we as leaders need to do and also outlined Government's legislative agenda for this year. His Address was infused with his insights garnered over the many years of his services to Fiji as an Executive, a High Chief, a Member of Parliament, a Leader of the Opposition, and also as a Minister, a Speaker of Parliament, and now as our Head of State.

His Excellency spoke about the need to reflect on a collective vision for our beloved nation, a vision centred on progress, prosperity, unity, or solidarity, and he exhorted us here in Parliament to walk in unity, to ensure that no one is left behind. To be inclusive and resilient, for us to turn challenges into opportunities, to transform aspirations into achievements, and to build a vibrant and

prosperous Fiji. I fully support those sentiments, as I am sure we all do.

A collective vision recognises and celebrates our differences, but also seeks the collective good as supreme, over the good of just a segment of our society. This is an important message that we in this House must internalise, live and preach. We must ask ourselves a question, as to where we stand in relation to this collective vision. The fact that this has been expressed by His Excellency probably tells us, that, that collective vision has not been fully subscribed to.

We have different religions, we speak different tongues, we eat different foods, we have differing views of what is critical and what is not. A collective vision, however, must cover all of our needs and our aspirations. We must have solidarity around that vision, and I call upon everybody, all of us here in Parliament, the religious leaders, Heads of all churches, temples, mosques, to take that message to heart, take it to all of our members in our community, and also our community leaders, and the leaders of our *Vanua*.

We must get rid of any ethno-nationalistic tendencies or ultra-religious fundamentalism that has arisen in our country in the past. Those are the things that have driven us apart, and I call upon the honourable Prime Minister and Government to scrutinise every legislation, every policy and every activity of Government through the sieve of His Excellency's words on our collective vision.

His Excellency also told us, that he is firmly committed to transformational leadership to overcome challenges, and also transformational leadership is the key to nation building. Transformational leadership, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is leadership that inspires people to strive beyond what they normally do, what is normally expected of them, so that they can work towards a shared vision. It is a particular kind of leadership approach that is not built on command, but built by inspiring people, so they do the things that need to be done, to get to that particular vision. And it resonates with the words of the Chinese Philosopher Lao-Tzu, who said, "to lead the people, walk behind them."

Mr Speaker, Sir, a leader can only walk behind the people, when those people share the leader's vision, when they believe in that vision. People buy into leaders that they trust, who display integrity and who do not keep changing tune. Not flip-flop leadership that says something, but then does the exact opposite. Not leadership that does nothing but blame others, that plays the blame game and perpetually looking backwards, looking backwards, looking backwards. Leaders need to look ahead, to see what is in front of them. Unfortunately, those characteristics, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are not seen in the leadership that we have in the Government today.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. J. USAMATE.- I will give you five examples.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- The Prime Minister stated in moving the motion, that Fiji is in the midst of a financial crisis requiring urgent action! The Prime Minister said that! The Minister for Finance, he tells us there is no financial crisis. The economy is doing well, and they have money. Who is telling the truth? I believe the Prime Minister, because he has the gumption to admit when problems exist, and he is not in denial like his Minister of Finance.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Order! Point of Order.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Standing Order 62(1), I saw something reported on social media. There is fake news that the honourable Prime Minister said that there is a financial crisis. And I came back and read the *Daily Hansard* of the honourable Prime Minister's speech, and nowhere in that speech, he said that Fiji is in a financial crisis. So, I think honourable Usamate should check because I think he is reading fake news.

MR. SPEAKER.- I understand your Point of Order. I now ask honourable Usamate, even the understanding that it is possible that what you referring to is not correct. Are you willing to qualify what you said in that?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is possible that it is not correct. It is also possible that it is correct. If it is incorrect, then I apologise.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order! Please. proceed.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, this situation was bound to happen with the wasteful expenditure and the poor physical control and weak financial management by the Minister of Finance. Wasteful expenditure! We now have 22 Ministers. Unheard of!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Reading fake news!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very soon you might have a two, three or four. Maybe a Minister of Footpaths or a Minister of something else, who knows?

When I was last in Government, we only had 12 Ministers, that talks to you about efficiency and effectiveness of getting things done! Where is the first time ever highest collection of revenue? How has the aid money been used? And where is the loan of \$1 billion gone? There has been no improvement in people's cost of living issues, businesses are struggling, health and education, and other sectors are at their lowest state ever. Where are the promises made by the NFP leader and honourable Charan Jeet Singh that they will increase the production of cane as soon as they come into Government? As soon! Not four years later. As soon! That is what they promised.

After so many trips overseas to see the sugar plants and industry, the Minister concludes that no mill will be built. He stood in this Parliament last year, and assured the nation that the new mill would be up and running around the mid-2025, just a few months down the line. Instead, the FSC Chair, who has also been on some of the overseas junkets with his Minister, comes out with a very negative report, blaming the past, but no solutions. All they do is blame the past. We knew that a new mill in Rakiraki was not feasible from day one, and we knew how to assist the farmers in that particular area.

Mr Speaker, Sir, number three, the Deputy Prime Minister Prasad, has put in the media that the Local Government Elections will take place in September or October. But the substantive Minister responsible for Local Government, has stated that there is no confirmation as to when the Local Government Elections will take place. What is happening here? Why is the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance making statements about things that are part of the last election?

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, right. Point of Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Point of Order. Again, Standing Order 62(1), Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Usamate has got a habit of reading fake news.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Reading fake news.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- All I said in the news media, and if he goes and reads it correctly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I said this election is likely to be held around September and October. And that is a very fair comment to make in response to a question by the media. And that is what the honourable Minister has been saying himself. That is what the Government has been saying. So, I do not know what he is bragging about, you know.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I will uphold that Point of Order that, in fact, what is reported, he is just seeming or making a view that the elections is going “maybe”, I think that is the operative word “maybe.” Right?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- It is not as of a fact.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just note that the Minister of Local Government said that there is no confirmation at all, as opposed to what he just said. Deputy Prime Minister used to refer to the Minister for Finance, in the last Government as the Minister for everything. It seems now, that he is doing exactly what he used to criticise. Exactly! He is making statements about portfolios that are not his and is not a reflection of a demarcation of the roles in Cabinet or so there in Cabinet. I hope the other Ministers are not feeling cut up about this.

(Laughter)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Transformation of leadership can only happen, when leaders state that they are accountable and responsible, and that the buck stops with them! I think I have heard in this House that one Minister said, “I am not responsible for making roads.” It is in your portfolio! Carry the glory, carry the cross! Do them both! Value, Ministers must take responsibility.

Number Five, Government Ministers have changed their tune on some issues once they cross the floor. If I recall correctly, when we voted on the FDB guarantee in 2022, the Minister of Finance voted against it, even though he was a former employee of FDB. He knows precisely the importance of this organisation. He voted against it for political reasons. Now he exhorts us to vote for it and we do, because we have the country at heart.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Read the *Daily Hansard*!

HON. J. USAMATE.- You see what happens when you just cross the floor from here to there, what happens? These are five examples, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of anti-transformational leadership attributes! I urge all Members and Government in particular, to heed His Excellency's call to practise transformational leadership.

His excellency informed us, that the Education Act and related policies would be reviewed to align to the current educational landscape, and to meet changing requirements, and TVET will be further prioritised. These are very welcomed developments, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This is good news, but what we need is transformational shifts in the education, transformational leadership, transformational shifts.

I was at the Cabinet meeting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that approved the Free Education Policy, which meant that students would not have to pay school fees anymore. I was in that Cabinet meeting at that time, and to my dying day, I will remember the emotion of the then Minister of Education,

Filipe Bole, as he talked about the enormity of the impact of that one decision would have on access to education in this country. That was a transformational shift on access.

There was a further transformational shift in access under FijiFirst, when success to tertiary education was freed up and made available to all. This week we have heard the honourable Vijay Nath tell us about the school that he manages in Baulevu that has lacked a maths/physics teacher from form three since 2024 until today, and this has led to a fall in exam results.

I know that there is a shortage of math and physics teachers, but children must have teachers! Children must have teachers in these classrooms! There should be no instances, which I think has happened in that school, where children had to stand up and teach other children. That should not happen! They should have the right to expect that Government will provide the teachers for them. This must be addressed.

Government must eliminate that shortage. Were there plans and policies to make sure that all schools had teachers in place? To have math and physics teachers? If not, why not? If there were any plans in place, were they implemented? Were they then refined, after looking at initial results? Were improvements made and standardised so that they could be sustainable? That is the basic continuous improvement process, which they call the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle. Government must put in place a transformational, continual improvement programme in place across all of Government.

Not to address only that ministry, all other ministries. Continuous improvement of your processes. The current acting Permanent Secretary for Education is an expert in that field, and I recommend that the Government bring back the Service Excellence Programme that Government used successfully a few years ago.

I have spoken a number of times in this House about my beliefs, about the importance of managing tertiary education in Fiji. We already have the Higher Education Commission in Fiji, the NQF Qualifications Framework, the standard setting committees in place, but we are not getting the kind of results we need.

I believe that there needs to be a review of that whole setup. I have always been a firm believer in that setup that we have, but it is not delivering the results, and we need to be able to deliver on the kinds of things that we need in that particular setup.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of infrastructure, as a former Minister for Infrastructure, I am very aware of the challenges that are faced by Government in the provision of infrastructure. The issue with infrastructure has to be highlighted because people complain about them incessantly. For the first two years, this Government has been opening FijiFirst projects, and that is understandable. You have to come up with your own project which I hope you will start opening soon.

There are a lot of targets that need to be addressed, we look forward to what the Ministry has talked about Water Authority of Fiji (WAF), the implementation of their 2050 Strategy, there has been talk about reviewing the tariff on Water Authority of Fiji and I am a person that believes that this is required and this needs to be done because water in Fiji is cheap. At the same time there is a proviso, if you are going to raise it, make sure the most marginalised in our country are helped, and it is subsidised for them whether it is free water or what not. Sir, WAF has to become much more effective in its work. It has to be able to raise that fund but the most marginalised in society must not be left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the conditions of our roads have declined. I was in Koro this year, I walked around, I got on the vehicle from Muanivanua in Koro in the Tikina o Cawa, went all the way down

to Vatulele, that road is in an atrocious condition. I went across from Nabuna....

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J. USAMATE.- I fixed those roads before I left.

... up to Delaikoro, to Nasau, that road in some places was like a track. I know it has now been fixed but this is a point. That should never have been allowed to happen in Koro Island, one of the most productive islands in Fiji in terms of agriculture produce.

Here in Suva, potholes everywhere. You drive at night, you cannot see the road markings, you do not know whether you are in the middle or where you are. That needs to be fixed. Dangerous on lives and dangerous on vehicles.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to make sure that we have enough energy supply, I know that EFL is focussing on security of supply, so they are continuing to generate electricity out of generators and probably but will increase this. My urge to Government is to take cognisance of our pledge to have completely renewable electricity by 2036, we need to be able to speed that up. Also, our carbon zero targets of 2050, we need to make inroads. We cannot be going on the global stage and saying all these about climate change and do not deliver on our NCDs at home. We need to come up with ways in which we can move those things forward and start addressing them.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J. USAMATE.- I want to see the results, easy to talk about it.

His Excellency highlighted the important work being done to review the Employment Relations Bill, the Work Care Bill and the establishment of the National Productivity Commission. One of the things that we do know, Sir, around the world that there has been a great amount of wealth creation, greater productivity but over the last 100 years, the growth in productivity has been exponential but the share of that wealth that goes to workers has declined exponentially over the last 100 years. That is not something that only happens in Fiji, so there is a need to be able to make sure that the workers who are creating that wealth get a better share. This is one of the challenges the Ministry has.

At the same time, you need to be able to make sure that you do not kill your MSMEs. I know that this is what the Minister has been grappling with, and it is something for us, we need to look after the workers, we need to make sure the industry is well. We look forward to receiving the final version of that Bill when it comes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency called Parliament a “house of hope”. I think we had a lot of talk about this house of hope; a house of hope where democracy thrives and progress is made, but hope is not just a slogan, it is not just a word, it must be backed up by action. That is exactly what my colleague, the honourable Premila Kumar highlighted. She gave clear examples of what must be done, what must be changed to allow the Opposition to perform its scrutiny role effectively. Those were not empty criticisms, they were a call for the majority, the Government in this case, to do better in its response.

In his response, the honourable Viliame Naupoto talked about hope, but I think he somewhat missed the point. Hope is not something that you simply declare, it must be developed and delivered. Parliament does not belong to Government, it does not belong to Opposition, it belongs to the people of Fiji and if it is truly a house of hope, then the majority should not be shutting down debate, blocking

discussions or avoiding scrutiny on issues that affect the daily lives of our people who bring it to our attention with the Opposition. A Parliament that silences the Member, is not a Parliament of hope, it is a Parliament of control and suppression.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. J. USAMATE.- We see the co-operation and bipartisanship in the Standing Committees, but in this Chamber, the Government uses its majority to suppress the opposing view and this is the tyranny of the majority. So, where then is this hope? It is the Government's responsibility to uphold the vision, not through speeches but through real action. That means allowing open debates, respecting democratic principles and ensuring that the people's concerns, which we also represent, some of your own supporters, when they cannot tell you, they tell us, and we bring it here to tell you so you can hear it.

Working together in Parliament does not mean acquiescence to Government. It does not mean saying yes to everything. The G9 members have now joined the Government, and you are very fortunate you are getting some very good Ministers there.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J. USAMATE.- They have made that decision.

We hope that they go in there and show you up because you erred - sailing like a leaking boat with things just coming out all over the place.

However, the G9 now, they are now bound to acquiesce to the demands of the majority. That is the demand. They will have to acquiesce. We, the Opposition, are here to raise the voice against the tyranny of the majority when it needs to be done. We will keep tabs of Government to speak out and to shed light when Government obfuscates and tries to muddy the waters. It is the give and take that strengthens hope because people know then that their concerns are viewed and talked about openly.

Members have the right to freedom of speech in this House within the boundaries set out by the Standing Orders. Members have different ways of expressing themselves. They should be allowed to do that. It is when you do not allow that alternative voice to be heard that you kill hope, you exterminate hope. We are here to ensure that hope survives and thrives and that the coalition, the collective vision becomes a reality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since I have a few minutes left, I want to address some of the issues that were raised by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister. He says that we pick figures out of thin air. He was very good at that when he sat on this side of the House.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very good. He used to pick figures out of here and we raised it with, you know what you used to do?

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, a Point of Order.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think Standing Order 62(1), it is not about digesting, it is about facts. The honourable Usamate earlier said that I voted against a motion for FDB Guarantee in 2022. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you look at page 538 of *Daily Hansard* of 9th February, 2022, it says that motion was agreed unanimously, there was no vote. I am requesting honourable Usamate to go back and check page 538 of *Daily Hansard* of 9th February, 2022, and see what the decision was on the motion for the FDB Guarantee.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Usamate, this is not the first time he has raised issues as to the correctness of the information you are imparting. It is a serious matter, and I would ask that if in fact that is the correct information with the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, that you withdraw the reference to that particular reference to him as voting against the Fiji Development Bank Guarantee.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Sir, We will look into it and if he is correct, then I will withdraw.

MR. SPEAKER.- But he has just quoted from somewhere. No, you have made reference. You had referred to the guarantee of 2022. It is important for the Chair to know that what is imparted is correct in every way. I will ask you to withdraw.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I withdraw, but I will check.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- As I was saying, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister accuse us of pulling figures out of thin air. He used this all the time and you know when he was caught out because when you pulled him, he would put his hands like this and leans back. We always read his body language.

He never believed the official poverty figures, now he quotes them, now he quotes the same figures that he never believed.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- He made the comment back in 2021. The Government then was a begging bowl government because we were getting budget assistance by the Australians during the time of COVID. Now they are getting, the honourable Prime Minister has said, “we are not a begging bowl government”. He is the one who started bringing up this begging bowl government. They are still getting that assistance. He is the one that started it off. He is the one who brought up this begging bowl.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- No, no, we do not call you a begging bowl government because you receive it. We are thankful that you are getting it to give assistance to the people of this country. You are the one that started all that begging bowl talk.

Thirdly, he said that we did not spend any money in building schools. We spent \$250 million. He said that there was no....

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

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you would have heard very clearly, all I said was in reference to the report that this Government commissioned the Australian Government to do about the audit of 80 schools in the Central Division.

HON. J. USAMATE.- No, no!.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- No.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I was making a reference to that, that in the last 16 years, not a single additional room in the schools have been audited. This is what the report says. So, it is factual what I said. I do not know what honourable Usamate is talking about.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe that what the honourable Deputy Prime Minister just said is incorrect. I think we will check the *Daily Hansard* and see what he said. I believe that what I have said is correct. That he said that we did not do it....

MR. SPEAKER.- That is a Point of Order that was raised and I will deal with that Point of Order, that is why I am asking of you for clarification.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Sir, can I continue?

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you.

Sir, if you look at the figures of the Government at that time, it spent \$250 million on building schools. During the time, I must add, from 2016, we had 14 cyclones after *Tropical Cyclone Winston*, the most devastating cyclone ever to touch this country. After that, we had another two Category Five cyclones. This Government has not had any cyclones.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Not a Category One, not a Category Two, not a Category Three. We had 14 cyclones, two Category Five. During *Tropical Cyclone Winston* we lost \$1 billion in GDP. They have not had all those challenges. We have had nine years of consecutive growth, and we doubled GDP in a short span of time. That is not something that you do willy-nilly. The Government at the moment is riding on the wings or whatever, of the recovery from COVID-19.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Eventually you will find out. You also remember that we were the fifth fastest growing economy coming out of COVID-19.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Fifth fastest in the world. What are you fifth fastest in? I do not know what you are fifth fastest in.

The honourable Minister also said that we have not done anything about any schools in Fiji. In 2019, the then Prime Minister opened a double storey, six classroom block in Nausori Primary School. He said we did not do anything in the Suva/Nausori Zone; that is a fact. So, who is telling lies, Mr. Speaker, Sir? We can cast aspersions in this House. Whatever you throw at us, when you

live in a glasshouse, do not throw stones, my brother, it will come back and get you.

(Laughter)

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I endorse the motion to thank His Excellency for his most gracious Address and wish him the very best.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think that makes the score even – three all, for the time overspent.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, fellow Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, my fellow Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen in the public gallery and fellow citizens; I observe all protocols, tradition to the *Turaga na Tui Suva* and his people.

Mr. Speaker, I express my profound gratitude for the opportunity to address this House. I rise to extend my sincere appreciation to His Excellency the President of Fiji and my high chief, Ratu Naiqama Tawakecolati Lalabalavu, for his first Address that was also a very inspiring speech as President, and for officially inaugurating the 2025 Parliament Session of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, the task of building a nation is a noble challenge and is continuous. Governments after governments, parliaments after parliaments, sessions after sessions and year after year, many have stood where we now stand. Considering this, Sir, I thank His Excellency the President for providing a roadmap within this Parliament, a collective vision centred on progress, prosperity and unity.

His Excellency's articulation of the Government's proposed legislative agenda, policies and programmes signifies a dedicated commitment, the ongoing reconstruction for a more prosperous, more just and a freer Fiji. As Members of this Parliament, it is incumbent upon us to fulfil our duty and strive towards delivering the best for the people of Fiji and our treasured nation.

Mr. Speaker, we are reminded by His Excellency that as Members of this august House, let us give hope to the people of this country, let us become beacons of progress, let us remember that our sacred duty is to serve and to lead with integrity in building a better future for all Fijians. As Parliamentarians, with humility, we must strive to keep the democratic spirit alive, although sometimes it is those who we serve will remind us to stay grounded and remain committed to the promises that we have made. I will stand in support of His Excellency's statements, "the change that we seek must start with us".

Mr. Speaker, as we earnestly strive to collectively rebuild our future together as a nation, the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources remains committed to improve, innovate, think, strategise and align with our annual plans and budgeted programmes. This year (2025), I envisage it to be a very transformative period for the Ministry - a year that should be marked by better performance, greater work ethic, diligence and, indeed, improved response time, beginning with me, to better serve our customers, stakeholders and Fiji. I have challenged my staff in my ministerial intent that this year should be a year of urgency and accuracy across every facet of our operations.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry will prioritise service to all its customers by –

- upgrading existing policies and formulating new ones for the sustainable management of land, mineral resources and our groundwater resources; and
- through a recently launched innovative review team that will report to me by July end, we will review all Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that carries the intent of cutting out

red tape or bureaucratic repetitive processes and making the move towards digitizing everything that we must process.

Mr. Speaker, the Government's commitment to SGD6 in providing access to clean drinking water as a fundamental right of every Fijian, and with the increase in demand for groundwater resources, for household consumption and agricultural and commercial water bottling. The Ministry will ensure effective implementation of the National Groundwater Resources Management and Development Policy that was launched last year, which will ensure sustainable use and management of groundwater resources. The groundwater resource law will be developed soon.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji's groundwater reserves or aquifers need to be sustainably managed and protected from pollution from surface areas, and to ensure they are not exhausted or depleted unreasonably. As we speak, the Ministry has assisted over 2,347 households with a total population of over 11,000; 7,000 of whom are male and just over 4,000 female.

Mr. Speaker, before I go into the borehole programme of the Ministry, I want to pay my respects to my Senior Technical Officer, Mr. Saki Cawaru, who passed away at Mineral Resources Department (MRD) yesterday during an internal training programme held in-house. Rest in peace, Saki - condolence to your family.

Since the Budget, Mr. Speaker, the MRD Groundwater Team has so far dug 31 boreholes; 16 have been completed, with 15 envisaged to be completed by the end of this financial year. At the same time, 41 borehole sites have been identified, and they will be constructed by private companies who have gone through the rigorous requirement that ensures that our people have access to clean drinking water. We also envisage that this will be completed by end of July 2025.

We continue to attend to requests from red zone areas - areas where the water network does not reach and rivers and streams are far. Recently, news from Yalava, Tabia and Valelawa No. 2 in Labasa were brought to my attention in the first day of this week's Parliament. I have directed my team to visit Yalava and Valelawa No. 2, to ensure that their request for a borehole and clean drinking water is attended to without delay. To my staff who are watching in live now on live feed, these are your marching orders.

Mr. Speaker, as mentioned by His Excellency in his Address, the Ministry is currently finalising the annuity payments for the Suvavou landowners on State land, which covers 3,000 acres across Domain in Suva, to the *Mataqali Ketenatukani* and Vidilo in Namoli and *Mataqali Nadala*, Naivitini and Nabuilevu of Nadala Village. The last review, Mr. Speaker, was done in 1998 and the new figures will be announced in the new budget.

Mr. Speaker, by operation of law, any land that was acquired for public purpose to which such public purpose no longer exists may be returned, as of right, to the original landowners. The Nadala land is one such land that we envisage to return to the landowner in this calendar year after Cabinet approval. Some more will be considered to be returned between 2025 and 2026.

Mr. Speaker, we must improve in our customer satisfaction index by delivering service on time. Whilst we at the Ministry would make amends to ensure that customers are indeed satisfied, we have identified a concerning trend among those who call our clients. Regrettably, a significant number of our customers are found to be in breach of their lease and licence conditions. Illegal developments continue to happen, despite clear guidelines on approved development leases and leases. Additionally, there is a prevalent issue of negligence in adhering to timely land rent payments.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry is resolute to collect what is due to it and owed to Government. In pursuit of this, we are collaborating closely with the Office of the Solicitor-General to provide us with options for our next step.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to seize this opportunity once more to earnestly remind our lessees with outstanding land rent to promptly settle their dues now. The 'waiver of interests' for all State land leases is currently in place and will end in September 2025. It will not be extended any further - one full year has been given. If lessees do not take the opportunity to pay their lease up on time, we will exercise our right in law to the fullest as your landlord.

As of yesterday, Mr. Speaker, the Ministry has contributed \$14.39 million directly into Government treasury. Through Government's land reform initiatives, designated *iTaukei* land has been able to draw interest from overseas investors valued as of now \$436.2 million. Landowning units who are the main benefits of this land reform programme have been able to receive up to this far \$20.75 million in lease monies through premiums, ground rent and royalties.

In terms of future development, the Ministry will ensure that every inch of land under our responsibility must be sustainably utilised for development and preserved for future resources.

Consequently, the Ministry is working with the Department of Town and Country Planning in finalising the State land's land use master plan, considering factors like population growth, environmental concerns, and economic development. This master plan will provide clearer guidelines for future land development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, echoing the sentiments of His Excellency, the importance of agriculture and the need to empower the agricultural sector to be competitive, sustainable and value-driven to promote food security and export, the Ministry will continue to ensure that all State agricultural land is provided only to those who will plant on it to help maximise its returns to benefit, not only individual households, but the nation as a whole.

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 Fijians. Our commitment to this endeavour remains unwavering, as we strive to stimulate economic growth and prosperity across the nation.

In mining, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there have been recent claims regarding the export of gold ore concentrates from Fiji which are misleading and reflect a very fundamental misunderstanding of the mining industry - whether it is intentional or not. The Ministry is open to constructive engagement, and we are also open to dialogue about our processes. Therefore, we are urging everyone to refrain from spreading misconstrued information, undermining the work performed by hardworking civil servants. The Ministry finds it necessary to set the record straight and express disappointment that such misinformation is being circulated, causing unnecessary alarm. I would urge anyone who wants to know anything about the export of minerals to come to the Ministry at the Mineral Resource Department (MRD) for any clarity sought.

Any mineral, Mr. Speaker, Sir, even in concentrates form, is not illegal if it is moved within the country. For example, the bauxites in Bua are concentrates, and it is not unlawful when it is moved from Nawailevu to its shipping point in Naiviqiri in Lekutu, before it is exported.

The iron ore sand from the Ba River are also concentrates in that form and it is not unlawful when it is moved by barge from the mouth of the Ba River to the storage facility in Lautoka Wharf,

before export. The important point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the point where the mineral is inspected, weighed, its concentrates percentage validated by MRD staff, the royalty is calculated and paid in advance, the customs export paid, and biosecurity seals the container for export. The MRD's role is to ensure that there is compliance to the mining laws and royalty laws. If, on refinery, more percentage of gold is certified by third party, more royalty will be paid. If it is less, the loss is borne by the company. It is a win economically and environmentally, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Less smelting in Fiji, means less cyanide need and less tailing, which can be harmful.

Approving the permit, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to export minerals even in concentrate form is the prerogative of the Director of Mines and no one else. He is a well-qualified engineer, even has completed his Doctorate two years ago. Dr. Soro is a highly competent and hardworking leader in my Ministry. He and his hardworking staff at MRD have worked commendably, and as their line Minister, I will stand honoured alongside them in the work that they do. It is not easy, but it is a job that they have carried with proud shoulders, nevertheless.

In terms of the mining industry contribution to employment and socio-economic development of communities, Vatukoula employs around 1,300 employees. Their weekly wage bill is \$539,000 fortnightly or \$1.08 million. Tuvatu, the newest mine in Fiji, employs over 500 personnel with a monthly wage bill of \$1.6 million. These monies circulate and support the towns in the West. Thousands of families are supported by many businesses in Tavua, Rakiraki, Nadi, Lautoka and Ba.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also a very high demand for development minerals lesser in value - sand, gravel and hard rock, which are very important in the construction industry and in the roading sector. The Ministry will continue to fine tune our information packages and prioritise accessibility to assist potential investors as expected of us by Government. Under the Fair Share of Mineral Royalties Act 2018, a total payment of \$22.5 million has been received from mining companies with \$19.65 million paid to landowners and \$4.52 million received by the State.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as of December 2024, Line One Metals that operates at Tuvatu Gold Mine made a revenue of approximately \$29 million. With sustainable mining practices, the company has already invested more than \$140 million, with an additional \$50 million to \$100 million in capital investment. With the first royalty payment of \$150,605 made to the *Mataqali Nacokula* of the *Yavusa Rarawaqa* of Vaturu, by the third or fourth payment of royalty, it is envisaged and forecasted that the royalty payment will surpass the million-dollar mark to the landowners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the level of investment that Fiji needs. It is a sign of investor confidence investing in Fiji which will aid the country's economic recovery and boost the contribution of the mining sector to Fiji's GDP.

The Ministry will continue to encourage and facilitate development and investment in land sales, transfer, construction and in the mineral resource sector. Despite the negative comments that we hear from the other side, Mr. Speaker, Sir, over \$29 million, was paid last year in capital gains tax (CGT) for land alone. Land plus building, the capital gains tax set at \$8.971 million, just below \$9 million of CGT. Altogether, the capital gains tax of everything that was paid in 2024, sat at \$60.405 million. These figures, Mr. Speaker, Sir, capped at 10 percent suggest that investment is doing extremely well in Fiji.

On the the taxi driver story of my colleague, honourable Koya, I also have a testimony from another taxi driver. When asked of how business is, he replied in *iTaukei*, “Sir, *na bisinisi 'qo, keimami kana na taxi, 'ra kana talega na pari, vo tale tu.*

(Laughter)

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Business is good, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to those who work hard, and those who look for opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I finish with constitutional making. Fiji's pre and post independence founding father, the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, wrote his memoir titled, 'The Pacific Way'. 'The Pacific Way' was the striped rod of his leadership mental in a very young democracy. Fiji was at independence in 1970 with much of our foreign relations still to be charted, Parliament lives still young, and the hope of a future still unknown.

'The Pacific Way', a way of life coined by a founding father, inspired his 1970 partnership, with a then Opposition Leader to produce a Constitution whereby, in the late Ratu Mara's own words, "people of different races, opinions and cultures can live and work together for the good of all, and differ without ranker, govern without malice, and accept responsibility as reasonable people intent on serving the interests of all."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Monday, the honourable Prime Minister made a similar call across the aisle to the Leader of the Opposition, in response to His Excellency's most gracious speech. He made a call to the Opposition, that we can create a constitution together that has the people's aspirations, their ambition, most importantly their voice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with your leave, I ask the honourable Leader of the Opposition and all the Independent Members who are aligned to his leadership, you are also now presented with the opportunity to create a constitution that contains the voices of those who voted for you. Those who voted for you, I am sure want a constitution that 'they could give themselves,' not as the 2013 Constitution says in its preamble 'established for them.'

With yesterday behind us, I salute the four independent Members who supported the motion of the honourable Prime Minister. History will remember you for your patriotism and as the last batsman, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and with victory already on our side, I wish the mighty Verata House and the Never Say Die Brigade all the very best in tomorrow's QVS Inter-House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for your indulgence, and I thank His Excellency for his most Gracious Speech. I support the motion of the honourable Prime Minister.

MR. SPEAKER.- In fact, he is the only speaker, who has stuck to his allocated time right on time. I congratulate him on that, not the House.

Honourable Members, honourable Vosarogo is indeed the last speaker on the agenda item four, and Members' response to the honourable Prime Minister's motion to thank His Excellency the President for his Address. We will complete the debate on the item tomorrow, when the Prime Minister, the honourable Sitiveni Rabuka will speak on the exercise of his right of reply.

LAND TRANSPORT (AMENDMENT) BILL 2025

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the –

- (a) Land Transport (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 03/2025), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament;

- (d) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament; and
- (e) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 13th March, 2025, but that one hour be given to debate the Bill with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to present in this august House the draft Land Transport (Amendment) Bill 2025. This Bill, as distributed, was developed and approved by Cabinet on 18th February, 2025, and now tabled before this House for your consideration.

Sir, road safety remains a pressing national concern. Between January and December 2024, Fiji recorded a total of 54 road fatalities, marking a reduction from the 17 fatalities recorded in 2023. While this reduction is encouraging, we must remain vigilant as data reveals that approximately 20 percent of these fatalities in 2024 were linked to speeding or careless driving by provisional licence holders. This figure only represents fatalities, and the actual number of road accidents involving provisional licence holders is significantly higher.

Further compounding this issue, the number of Traffic Infringement Notices (TINs) issued to provisional licence holders has raised serious concerns. Between January 2021 and December 2024, a total of 68,643 TINS were issued to provisional licence holders, averaging 17,100 per annum. This is quite a high figure. These figures underline the urgent need to address driver behaviour, particularly amongst new drivers, and take decisive action to improve road safety.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to these challenges, Cabinet had approved several policy directives in June 2024, aimed at strengthening Land Transport Management and improving road safety. This include reintroduction of:

- (1) temporary road permits;
- (2) penalty for failure to stop and wait;
- (3) payment plan policy;
- (4) provisional licence Stage B1 and provisional licence Stage B2;
- (5) increasing penalties; and
- (6) temporary suspension to the transfer of permits to the same sentences.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the key amendments in the drafting, as you can see with the copy in front of you, pertains to section 57(2) of the Land Transport Act 1998, which currently states, and I quote:

“A person who has passed a driving test or examination shall be issued with a provisional licence for a period of 2 years before a full driver's licence is issued.”

Under the current system, drivers are issued a provisional licence for a period of two years. However, in light of road safety concerns, Cabinet had endorsed the development of two-stage Provisional Licensing System consisting of Provisional Licensing Stage B1 and Provisional Licensing Stage B2. This system aims to foster safe driving behaviours by gradually increasing the privileges of new drivers, while ensuring that they develop the necessary skills and awareness for safe road safety use, and might I add, in terms of development of driver maturity, responsibility and attitude.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to facilitate the implementation of this new system, the proposed amendment seeks to replace the word “shall” with “may” in section 57(2) of the Land Transport Act 1998. This modification will provide the legal flexibility required to introduce and enforce P1 and P2 licensing stages. It will also ensure that the system is properly aligned with legislative requirements, thereby, promoting the culture of safe driving.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the amendments proposed reflect the Government's unwavering commitment to improving road safety, reducing traffic-related fatalities and fostering responsible driving behaviour. This Bill is a necessary step in addressing the concerning trend of road accidents involving new drivers or provisional licence holders and ensuring that our roads are safe for all Fijians.

I commend the Land Transport (Amendment) Bill 2025 to this House and look forward to constructive discussions from honourable Members.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. At the end of the debate, we will have a right of reply from the mover. Are there any Members who wish to intervene on this Bill?

Since there is no one wishing to contribute, I now call on the honourable Minister for the Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport to speak in reply.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition and Opposition Members for the collaboration in moving this Bill forward for the sake of road safety in our nation.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Minister.

The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC FILMS (AMENDMENT) BILL 2025

HON. G.E LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the –

- (a) Cinematographic Films (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 02/2025), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament; and
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 13th March, 2025, but that one hour be given to debate the Bill with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, the proposed amendment to the Cinematographic Films Act 1971 currently before Parliament, under Standing Order 51, aims to address concerns related to the expanding cinema industry and public access to films. With the increasing number of films being released, implementing a parental guidance rating can ensure safe viewing experiences, particularly in our digital age where access to content is widespread.

The urgency of this amendment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, stems from the need to adapt to this evolving landscape without restricting individuals' leisure activities. It is crucial, therefore, to modify the rating system to keep up with these changes, while promoting the safe enjoyment of film.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the amendment will also ensure that we continue to adhere to our commitment to international standards, particularly with respect to promoting or protecting children from harmful material.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, section 13 of the Act will be amended to reflect the inclusion of PG ratings for film suited for children between the ages of 6 to 12, therefore, allowing the Censorship Board to classify our films under parental guidance. An amendment to Regulation 2 of the Cinematographic Films Regulations of 1972, will be consequential to the amendment made to section 13 of the Act.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I recommend that the Bill be debated. As advised, I commend the Bill to the House.

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

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note that this Bill is coming under Standing Order 51. As I have always stated, there is no issue in using Standing Order 51. However, what I would like to say is that last week and this week, we have been talking about bipartisanship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we understand this is a very important Bill. Next week is just dedicated to debate the Bills. My concern here is, on this kind of important Bill, everyone would like to speak. So, why are we actually restricting ourselves just to one hour? We have the whole week dedicated to debate on the Bills. Opposition Members have been denied asking a single question, next week, to the Government so that we can have more time to debate on the Bills. Even with one week, allocation given is just one hour.

I would urge the mover of the motion to remove the timeframe so that we can give our point of view, as Opposition, on this important Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We are not opposing Standing Order 51. What we are asking is more time to be allocated so that we can give our contribution to such important Bills.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Attorney-General, do you wish to answer now or would you like to hear more comments from the floor?

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- I would like to hear more, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Koya, did I see you stand?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You did, Sir, but I was just going to echo the same sentiments with respect to just lengthening the time so that we can elaborate more. That is all, Sir. It is not an objection to it. I think the content requires a little bit more that needs to be also said by us, so we are asking if the honourable Attorney-General could facilitate a little bit more time.

MR. SPEAKER.- Are there any more speakers from the floor.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give a few comments on the Bill before the House. I think there is ample time given for this Bill to be debated on Thursday next week. Next week, we all know is dedicated to Bills. There will be more Bills coming. We have had instances in the past where overnight, we had to prepare ourselves and the mover of the motion was the former honourable Attorney-General.

We had to give a reply and pass a Bill under Standing Order 51 but, again, it is good that it is coming from my colleague as it is his eleventh year in Parliament. He has now realised that we need to work in bipartisan, he surely found the light at the end of the tunnel.

Again, it could be a start, given the big legislative programme that is here, and Bills will be coming. I urge that we all support this and come prepared on Thursday next week when we will give our formal responses to the substance of this particular Bill.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill is a very simple Bill. It has only 20 Clauses. The substantive provisions are normally from eight to 20. Sufficient time is being given, and I am sure from today to next week, the Opposition can prepare themselves. It is one of the very simplest Bills that does not require detailed examination, in light of the amendment that has been tabled.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a clarification.

MR. SPEAKER.- On a point of clarification.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I am not saying that the amount of time given to us to scrutinise the Bill is less, what I am saying is, 20 minutes will be given to the mover of the motion and 20 minutes for the right of reply which leaves us with 20 minutes to debate on this Bill. That is all I am saying, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that, that time needs to be increased. There is no problem with the one week given to us to scrutinise this. It is just the debate component, to increase from one hour to, at least, two hours. Only 20 minutes will be given to us to debate.

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has listened with sympathy to the voices on the other side. Your good self, Sir, as presiding officer of this august Parliament has a discretion. If you feel that the debate is robust and other Members across the aisle are anxious to ventilate their views, that is a discretion you would exercise, and we, on this side of the House, would have no problems with that.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Attorney-General. It is your motion but if you wish, I can. May I suggest a halfway house, as I normally do in these situations and move it to 90 minutes? Would that be suitable?

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- That is acceptable, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Compromise, thank you.

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Yes, thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think we are living the spirit of what His Excellency the President has said. Honourable Attorney-General are you done with your reply?

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Yes, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 6.17 p.m.