

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

WEDNESDAY, 5TH MARCH, 2025

[CORRECTED COPY]

C O N T E N T S

	<u>Pages</u>
Minutes	158
Communications from the Speaker	158
Debate on His Excellency the President's Address	158-208
<u>List of Speakers</u>	
(1) Hon. Ratu J.B. Niudamu	(Page Nos. 158-163)
(2) Hon. V. Pillay	(Page Nos. 163-167)
(3) Hon. I.S. Vanawalu	(Page Nos. 167-171)
(4) Hon. R.R. Sharma	(Page Nos. 172-176)
(5) Hon. L.S. Qereqeretabua	(Page Nos. 176-182)
(6) Hon. J.R. Vocea	(Page Nos. 182-185)
(7) Hon. A.M. Radrodro	(Page Nos. 185-190)
(8) Hon. K.V. Ravu	(Page Nos. 191-195)
(9) Hon. P.K. Ravunawa	(Page Nos. 195-200)
(10) Hon. V.T.T.K. Rayalu	(Page Nos. 200-202)
(11) Hon. T.R. Matasawalevu	(Page Nos. 202-203)
(12) Hon. J. Saukuru	(Page Nos. 203-208)
(13) Hon. A.D. Singh	(Page Nos. 210-214)
(14) Hon. C.J. Singh	(Page Nos. 214-218)
Suspension of Standing Orders	208-209/218-233
Bills – First Reading	234

WEDNESDAY, 5TH MARCH, 2025

The Parliament met at 9.33 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the Sitting of Parliament held on Tuesday, 4th 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.

COMMUNICATION 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 from the comfort of your homes and offices through electronic devices. Thank you for your continued interest in your Parliament.

Honourable Members, we will now proceed to the next item.

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

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, and the people of Fiji listening to this Parliament sitting; *ni sa yadra vinaka, ni sa bula vinaka*, and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to quote a *Bible* verse that reflects all of us in this august House as a leader, as we embrace the privilege of serving others and encourages us as leaders. This is from the Book of Peter 5: 2-3 that says, and I quote:

“Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to begin by acknowledging past and present, the *vanua vakaturaga 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.

Together with the honourable Prime Minister's vision for modern Fiji, I pay tribute to past and present leaders of Fiji, who have shaped Fiji into the nation it is today. We honour the forefathers of our nation - the late Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna; the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara; the late Mr. A.D. Patel; the late Mr. S.M. Koya; the late Mr. Jai Ram Reddy; the late Ratu Sir George Cakobau; and the late Ratu Sir Penaia Kanatabatu Ganilau; whose leadership and sacrifices laid the groundwork for our nation's progress.

Today, we also recognise our honourable Prime Minister, whose transformative leadership continues to guide Fiji forward, ensuring the aspirations of our forebearers live on and persevere through challenges. The Book of James: 1: 12 promises, and I quote:

“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial, because having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”

Difficulties in leadership can refine your character and deepen your dependence on God.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Assistant Minister for Justice, I join the honourable Prime Minister and fellow Parliamentarians in expressing my deepest gratitude to His Excellency the President, *Na Gone Turaga Bale Na Tui Cakau*, Ratu Naiqama Tawakecolati Lalabalavu, for his enlightening Address in opening this year's session of Parliament.

I want to reflect on His Excellency the President's Speech where we, in this august House, must be visionaries in the way we do things. No more finger pointing, but a visionary leader by reflecting on how we can progress and move forward by sacrificing and build our nation through nation building and improving the lives of our fellow Fijians. A visionary leader ensures the vision becomes a reality by stating clear goals, outlining a strategic plan for achieving these goals and equipping and empowering each member to act on the plan at the organisational, team and individual levels.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation to the *Vanua o Ra*, as well as to the many communities and *vanua* from which I draw my strength. Your unwavering support, as I serve you as your representative in this esteemed House, is deeply valued.

Ni sa yadra vinaka na kaiciqu ena loma ni yasana va'uraga o Ra, ena loma ni kena ciwasagavulu ka'olu na koro, kei na kena ruasagavulu karua na i'kina makawa, au sa vayadra saka i'ko yani; ni sa yadra, ni sa ma'a vinaka saka mai.

[Good morning and greetings to all the people in my Province in Ra. To all of you in the 93 Villages and 22 Districts in the Province, I greet you and good morning to you all.]

I am also grateful for the Coalition Government's commitment in reinstating the sugar mill in Rakiraki - an initiative that has been warmly welcomed by the people of Ra and stands as a testament to our shared vision for progress and economic revitalisation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my appointment as an Assistant Minister aligns to the vision of the Coalition Government, that we can achieve more when we engage collectively; when we, as former members of the Opposition, can bring our experience, knowledge, and skills to work together, fuel economic

empowerment and ensure access to justice for all, whilst promoting a culture of resilience and consultation.

As His Excellency the President rightly stated in his Address on Monday, 24th February, 2025, and I quote from Page 3 of the *Daily Hansard*:

“As a nation, we must walk together in unity, ensuring that no one is left behind in our quest for economic growth, national security, prosperity and sustainable development.”

The goal of ‘leaving no one behind’ is admirable, which provides universal access to basic services and opportunities irrespective of age, sex, ethnicity, wealth, or place, but as we pursue it, we must also recognise that pushing for higher standards is the right goal; that demanding accountability is the right goal; that closing the achievement gap is the right goal; that ensuring equitable access to justice is the right goal. These are the right goals, and we must stay committed to them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Assistant Minister for Justice, I pledge to uphold these principles. Our Ministry of Justice must embody inclusivity, transforming the ‘I’ into a collective ‘we’, and a Ministry that works for and with the people. Achieving this means championing innovative solutions, fostering creativity and ensuring that knowledge, access to justice and second chances are not just ideals, but lead to realities that reflect the Coalition Government’s commitment to a just and inclusive society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is this commitment of inclusion, that is reflected in the Coalition Government’s vision for a better Fiji. But inclusion must go beyond representation, it must guide our governance. That is why bipartisan collaboration in Parliament is very crucial.

If we are to truly “leave no one behind”, we are to work together, across party lines, to build a future where justice and opportunity are accessible to all, and by all, we mean our youth, our disadvantaged, our vulnerable, our unemployed, our incarcerated and those who have been marginalised.

The Ministry of Justice stands firm in this commitment, ensuring access to justice and second chances are not just ideals, but realities that reflect the Coalition Government’s commitment to a just and inclusive society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is this commitment to inclusion that is reflected in the Coalition Government’s vision for a better Fiji, but the inclusion must go beyond representation. It must guide our governance. That is why bipartisan collaboration in Parliament is very crucial. If we are to truly ‘leave no one behind’, we must work together across party lines to build a future where justice and opportunities are accessible to all. And by all, we mean, our youth, our disadvantaged, our vulnerable, our unemployed, our incarcerated and those who have been marginalised. The Ministry of Justice stands firm in this commitment to ensuring access to justice and opportunities through our registries, legislative reviews and legal reforms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to reflect on His Excellency the President’s Speech through the work that had been carried out in the Ministry of Justice as an Assistant Minister. The Ministry of Justice is a leading Government body entrusted with the oversight of justice and law administration. It plays a pivotal role in delivering essential services through its primary legal registries, which manage document registration, official records, maintenance and legal documentation. Key responsibilities include overseeing the Registrar of Titles Office, Registrar of Companies; Births, Deaths, and Marriages Office; Official Receiver’s Office; and the administration of the Justice of Peace services.

Since I took office, Sir, I have reflected and wanted the Ministry to elevate its improvement in all its processes and systems. Some of its processes really need to change to reflect the need for society, so that the Ministry delivers a faithful service delivery to those who use the registries. I must say that the Ministry of Justice has undertaken significant changes with a strong focus on enhancing its operational processes. I share and highlight to the staff at the Ministry that it is our responsibility to adopt the process of continuous improvement and cultivate a culture of service excellence in the Ministry for better service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these efforts aim to modernise the Office of the Registrar of Titles significantly. The benefits of digitisation include enhance transparency, improve efficiency in managing land titles and better service delivery to our citizens. Moreover, fostering collaboration with private and public sector partnerships, will be essential in creating a unified approach. The proactive stance represents a departure from the previous government priorities, emphasising our commitment to safeguarding our financial system and societal wellbeing.

Previously, the digitisation of the Registrar of Titles did not materialise under the previous Government. However, this is now a priority for us, to ensure that transactions related to land title settlements proceed smoothly. Currently, the integrity and reliability of our land title registration process is crucial to fostering a vibrant economy and attracting investment.

The Ministry is focusing its legislative reviews, which have been undertaken by the Ministry, which includes the Personal Insolvency Bill 2024. It is a long overdue reform aimed at modernising Fiji's personal insolvency loss, replacing the outdated Bankruptcy Act 1944, which was inherited from the colonial era English common law. Currently, it is in the phase of stakeholder consultation. The Bill aligns Fiji's insolvency framework with international best practices, promoting economic activity and reducing the financial and social burdens of insolvency.

A key principle of the Bill is the fresh start approach, which allows all debtors to be discharged from unpayable debts, enabling them to regain economic productivity and social participation. The legislation also supports entrepreneurship and the rehabilitation of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) by restructuring debts and giving viable businesses a second chance. It seeks to reduce the stigma of financial failure, fostering resilience in individuals and the wider economy.

The Ministry is actively enhancing its delivery service across all its registries by focusing on improving processes and systems. This strategic initiative aims to ensure efficient and effective delivery of essential services to the public. These efforts aim to educate and inform the public about various services and initiatives provided by the Ministry. The goal is to increase awareness, accessibility and utilisation of essential services amongst the general population.

The Ministry is undertaking several initiatives to improve service delivery, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Firstly, with the streamlining of business registration, we are implementing enhancements to streamline the process of business registrations, aiming to improve efficiency and enhance customer satisfaction.

Secondly, on the enhanced support for insolvency proceedings, we are bolstering our capabilities to provide stronger support for insolvency proceedings. This effort is focused on safeguarding the interests of both, creditors and debtors.

Thirdly, we will also expand access to justice in maritime areas. We are committed to expanding access to justice by facilitating the swearing-in of Justice of Peace in maritime areas. This initiative is crucial in ensuring equitable access to justice services across our diverse geographic

regions, addressing a critical area that was previously neglected.

Fourthly, on the Justice of Peace services, we are also advancing an awareness campaign to educate citizens about the role and availability of Justices of the Peace. This initiative aims to ensure that communities understand and utilise local justice services effectively.

Fifthly, in terms of charity and religious organisations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are promoting the understanding of registration requirements and compliance for charitable and religious organisations. By fostering accountability and transparency in the non-profit sector, we aim to enhance public trust and support.

Sixthly, in terms of registration of birth, deaths, and marriages, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are intensifying efforts to educate the public on the importance and simplicity of registering vital events. This initiative seeks to ensure accurate record-keeping and improve access to essential documentation for citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the key reforms which will include:

- Modernising Personal Insolvency for Economic Recovery and Productivity will transform bankruptcy laws from a debt collection tool into a mechanism of economic resilience and productivity.
- Debt Discharge for Honest Debtors guarantees debt relief after compliance with insolvency procedures.
- Alternatives to Bankruptcy introduces a debt restructuring arrangement, allowing negotiated debt repayment plans and a Debt Protection Moratorium for temporary relief from credit actions.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Personal Insolvency Bill 2024 is a bold step forward in addressing economic challenges and ensuring no individuals or businesses are permanently trapped in financial distress. It is not just about legal reform, it is about ensuring Fiji's future economic stability, and providing a fair and efficient system that benefits businesses, individuals and the nation as a whole.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, apart from the Personal Insolvency Bill 2024, the Birth, Deaths and Marriages (BDM) Registry under the Ministry of Justice manages the civil registration component of the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) system. This legislation is also scheduled for review and modernisation.

Fiji has a well-functioning CRVS Committee which includes the Ministry of Justice, the Fiji Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Health, Fiji National Provident Fund, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Ministry of Women, Ministry of Education and development partners, such as United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), who are very supportive of Fiji's CRVS work.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is also chairing the Regional Steering Committee for Asia and the Pacific and in June this year, we will have the ministerial meeting in Bangkok. In addition, the Regional Steering Group for Asia and the Pacific has come to an agreement to extend the decade of 2014-2024 to 2024-2030, to align with the Sustainable Development Goals of 2030. This will be officially executed during the ministerial conference in June. It will also include resilience and inclusivity principles for CRVS related work.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1975 and the Marriage Act 1968 are the primary legislations that guide the work and processes of the Births, Deaths and

Marriages Registry. The Ministry of Justice through the SPC is in the process of proposing to Global Grants Project (GGP) for technical assistance for the legislative review of the civil registration Acts. If the technical assistance is granted, we will proceed with the review which will be guided by a consultant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving forward, we remain dedicated to collaborating with international partners and organisations to bolster our technical capabilities in the improvement of service delivery to our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the work that we do at the Ministry of Justice has been community-driven and people-centred. As a Coalition Government that listens, we recognise that 'leaving no one behind' must be put into action and not only by mere words. It demands continuous and opportunity improvements which reflect directly on legislative reviews, strengthening legal frameworks and policies, and upholding the highest standards of ethical justice and governance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we go forth in service to our communities during this holy sacred season marked by Ramadan, which is observed by our Muslim brothers and sisters around Fiji and the world, and the Lent season, which begins today and is a solemn day for Christians around the world as they enter into 40 days of prayer, fasting, almsgiving which is a reflection of sins, this is a journey to develop a closer relationship with God. I want to quote from Martin Luther King (Jnr), and I quote, "A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but moulder of consensus." May the Lord God bless Fiji and all its people.

HON. V. PILLAY. – Mr. Speaker Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, and my fellow citizens; I rise to respond to His Excellency's Speech on the opening of the 3rd session of Parliament. I thank His Excellency for the vision he has laid out for our beautiful nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President stated in his Address on Monday, 24th February, 2025, and I quote from Page 13 of the *Daily Hansard*:

"...the Ministry of Sugar has achieved significant milestones, including a record-high cane payment for 2023, with a final payment of \$105.08 per tonne, the highest ever in our history."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all acknowledge the final payment of \$105.08 per tonne. However, what many do not know is that this payment was only possible as a result of the current high price of sugar in the international market.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the \$105 per tonne given to farmers has still not been able to boost tonnage or production. It has continued to decline, and Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) is unable to meet the export quota.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on paper, it looks record breaking but the reality on the ground is totally the opposite. The hidden cost and cost of production is also record-breaking and skyrocketing in each new season of harvesting. Associated with that is the high cost of living. Farmers are grappling with how to manage the high cost of living and high cost of cane production.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I still remember few years back during Bainimarama's legacy, the price per tonne was only \$56 and Government forked out an average of \$50 million per year to meet the guaranteed price of \$85 per tonne. Not only providing \$85 per tonne, but the Bainimarama-led Government had numerous subsidies on fertilisers, chemicals, land development, cane planting, lease

renewal, drainage works, funding for cane-access roads, providing new trucks to FSC and subsidising cartage for farmers.

Having done all those, the industry was buoyant, and farmers were interested in increasing production. If calculated into totality, the price per tonne would go beyond \$105.08. I am very thankful and grateful to our former Prime Minister that he kept the industry afloat without giving farmers a pinch for it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am thankful to His Excellency the President as he has announced that the Ministry of Sugar has launched 15 targeted programmes aimed at enhancing productivity, such as subsidies for transportation, farm mechanisation, fertiliser, and drainage. Those will greatly assist our ailing industry and provide much needed boost to our farmers as in the past. We hope that this will keep the industry buoyant, and farmers will be enticed into increasing production.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the increase in per tonne price, one would have thought it would have propelled farmers to produce more, but it has steadily declined. We all know the reasons. From day one, the honourable Minister of Sugar has misled our vulnerable farmers.

The honourable Minister had promised a new sugar mill in Rakiraki. He even went on to say that ethanol production will take place, giving extra income to farmers. Recently, I drove all the way to Rakiraki to meet the farmers and to, hopefully, catch a glimpse of the new mill under progress. However, to my amusement and disappointment, all I could find was the derelict old mill standing and asking when will its brother, the new mill, be set up. Later on, the honourable Minister improvised his statement and said that he will bring a secondhand mill in Rakiraki.

Contrary to that his Board Chairman is on record saying that a new mill is not viable but yesterday, in Parliament, through interjections, the honourable Minister of Sugar boldly pronounced that a new mill will be constructed. I leave it to the people of Fiji, especially the farmers, to judge for themselves who is lying, who is telling the truth, or simply both are masters of lying.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in regard to the maintenance of the tramline, the honourable Minister of Sugar said they will engage the India-based engineering company Rail India Technical and Economic Service for assistance. On 24th February, 2025, he said, and I quote:

“We are looking at a railway system, right from Rakiraki to Lautoka, not even from Tavua to Lautoka, but right from Rakiraki to Lautoka, which could transport cargo as well as cane. So, this is something that there's another team will be coming in the next couple of weeks.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir the couple of weeks have turned into almost a year, and at this rate come 2026, the honourable Minister will be out of Parliament.

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

HON. V. PILLAY.- He will cease from being the Minister of Sugar, but the farmers will remain and sugarcane farming will continue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the level of hypocrisy from the Minister of Sugar.

Furthermore, the honourable Minister of Sugar said that there are many absentee farmers residing overseas, and as a result, the Ministry is in conversation with the Ministry of Lands and the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs to identify farmers who are not producing and make them return their

land. The goal is to reclaim the unused land and redistribute it to those who are willing and able to cultivate it, thereby, improving productivity and supporting the local economy.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I want to ask the honourable Minister what right does he have to advise the Ministry of Lands to claim the unused land when legally, they are entitled to it.

Furthermore, the honourable Minister stresses the need for the sugar industry to transition from traditional farming practices to larger, modern, and more efficient farming models. This may be the modern solution the Minister is looking into, but his track record so far is very poor. He is unable to fix the ailing sugar mills, lower the cost of production, has not been able to assist in increasing the sugar production and has not been able to entice youth into cane farming.

The honourable Minister has reiterated that current small-scale farming units are no longer economically sustainable. He adds, the practice of small farm units with farmers producing between 300 tonnes to 500 tonnes of sugarcane, is not viable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 300 tonnes would fetch an income of \$31,500 based on the current price of \$105.08 per tonne. That is the gross income. Why is this not profitable? It is because the cost of production has increased. The cost of harvesting and transportation and the cost of living is so high, that farmers are unable to get decent income for their livelihood.

The Government is not trying to address this, but is hell-bent on taking a different route, and that is getting rid of farms that produce 300 tonnes or less of sugarcane and incorporating a more modern model which may mean, amalgamation of three or four farms into one lease to increase tonnage. So, what will happen to the original lessees?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Sugar is on record saying, and I quote:

“The sugar industry needs to produce approximately four million tonnes of cane to get back on track and restore its stability. This production target is crucial for revitalising the sector, ensuring the sustainability of sugar mills, and supporting the livelihoods of farmers and workers dependent on the industry.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the performance of the mills is crucial to the above. So far, year in and year out, we have seen no improvement in the performance of the mills, and they continuously break down, affecting the lorry drivers, canecutters and harvesting gangs, as the harvesting programme is delayed, adding unnecessary extra costs and burden to the farmers.

So far, no concrete solution has been found on how to mitigate these frequent mill breakdowns and yet, wants more production. What is the use of increasing production, when the mill is performing poorly and is unable to crush the current production efficiently. How it will manage if there is more production, simply means that there will be more leftover cane which is a direct loss to the farmers in that crushing season and the farmers are well aware of that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President has very boldly stated that Government will prioritise infrastructure development, ensuring that roads, ports and energy supply systems support national productivity, and we all appreciate that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope that the aging and ailing infrastructure such as cane access roads, bridges and Irish crossings will be given regular maintenance and not only at the start of the crushing season. The conditions of these roads have further deteriorated during the last four floods, especially in the Western Division, and little or nothing concrete has been done so far. We must all realise that

these roads are used by the general populous of this nation and leaving them for repair and maintenance to a later date near the crushing season will further aggravate their condition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even regular road maintenance is neglected, bogged drains are not attended to, and major access roads are not given even minor maintenance, which is also the contributing factor to road accidents. The farmers use these roads on a daily basis, whether the crushing season is on or not. Farmers use these roads to transport their produce to the market and are currently finding it very difficult as roads easily get inundated with flood waters and vehicles laden with agricultural produce get stuck as a result and farmers incur huge losses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also would like to remind the honourable Minister of Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport that the West provides much more for the economy than any other areas. The roads from Nadi to Ba and Rakiraki to the village of Rokovuaka need urgent attention.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many small farmers have given up on increasing their cane tonnage because of stray animals damaging the sugarcane. Also, cattle that farmers use in farming such as ploughing, harrowing and planting are stolen. If these challenges are not addressed immediately, then His Excellency's call and concern to improve our agricultural sector will go into thin air.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Sugar has remarked, and I quote:

“Here, we were so stuck with orthodox ideas that today, our farmers have to spend up to \$35 a tonne to deliver cane by truck to the mills. So, these are the things that have actually taken us backward.”

That is the greatest insult and disrespect to our forefathers and parents, who have worked from fingers to bone to keep the industry alive and provided the much need economic boost to our fragile nation in its building phase.

Those unorthodox techniques have provided the much-needed income to the nation based on which our development took place. I believe the honourable Minister must do the honourable thing and that is, apologise to those hardworking past farmers, many of whom are in eternal abode.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, farmers are human beings, and they deserve empathy and high level of trust. The honourable Minister must improve on his interpersonal relations with the farmers and win their trust to save the industry and increase production.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully understand that His Excellency wants our nation to progress and the sugar industry to remain as a major foreign exchange earner. However, unless and until the following challenges are not mitigated:

- climate change, where severe weather events have disrupted production;
- aging infrastructure such as the poor state of our sugar mills as well as other related infrastructure are aging;
- high production costs where the costs of production are rising;
- fertilizer costs;
- land tenure, that is, unresolved issues with expiring leases and underutilized land discourage investment; and
- institutional fragmentation where there is an overlapping role between multiple entities which leads to inefficiencies.

These need urgent attention to ensure that we are on the right track to revitalise the sugar industry and take heed of His Excellency's vision.

I am thankful to His Excellency the President as he announced that the Ministry of Sugar has launched its targeted programmes aimed at enhancing productivity, such as subsidies for transportation, farm mechanisation, fertilizer, and drainage. However, this must be rolled out on a fair and equitable basis.

As His Excellency has stated, and I quote:

“We know leadership is not about holding power, but about empowering others. It is about lifting those who are struggling and ensuring that no one is left behind.”

That was also very well-articulated in the Peoples Charter orchestrated by our former Prime Minister, Mr. Bainimarama, as this nation is guided by the following principles:

- a just and fair society;
- achieving unity and national identity;
- merit-based equal opportunities for all citizens;
- transparent and accountable government;
- uplifting of the disadvantaged in all communities;
- mainstreaming of the indigenous Fijians in a modern progressive Fiji; and
- sharing spiritual and interfaith dialogues.

Mr. Speaker, as alluded by His Excellency, we must all work together for the progress of this beautiful nation, so much that no one is left behind. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me this opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I call on our next speaker, may I, on all our behalf, recognise and welcome Ratu Tevita Niumataiwalu, na Turaga na Tui Namuka from Macuata, who has joined us in the gallery.

Ratu Niumataiwalu is a former Member of our Parliament, and we welcome him most warmly to our midst. We hope we are living up to your expectations.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- The honourable Speaker of this august House, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and members of the public viewing from various media platform; *Miau sa bula re*, and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to start with a Bible verse from Ephesians 5:17, “Therefore, do not continue in ignorance, but try to understand what is the will of the Lord.” I express my humble gratitude this morning to our Almighty God for the divine guidance of our nation till now. This is especially so, when today marks the beginning of our Lenten season, a time of fasting, prayer and almsgiving.

I wish to pay homage to the traditional owners of the land on which we stand on. *Ni tiko saka na i tikotiko Vakaturaga e Nadonumai, vua na Turaga na Tui Suva*, paying my utmost respect to the chief, as well as the community leaders and members of the *Vanua o Nadonumai* in caring for the *Vanua* of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to also join my fellow Parliamentarians in sharing similar sentiments honouring His Excellency the President, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, and supporting his call, especially for a shared vision that is centred on progress, prosperity and unity. This vision is so important for our nation, as we are all constantly faced with adversities.

Congratulations as well to your good self, Sir, as Speaker of Parliament. Your Excellency, it is a great honour to deliver my maiden speech in this august House. I acknowledge the trust placed in me by the Coalition Government, and I commit myself to serving our nation's future, which is our children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you will indulge me, I wish to say that I have absolute privilege to stand before you today as the Assistant Minister for Education all the way from Wailevu in Cakaudrove. I am greatly indebted to my family - my wife, children and grandchildren, for always being the pillar of my strength and motivation. To the families and friends of the *Vanua o Wailevu* in the *Yasana o Cakaudrove* for their unwavering support in shaping a better politician I have become.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to commend and congratulate the leader of the helm of the Ministry of Education, honourable Aseri Masivou Radrodoro, for his foresight in effecting educational development. His leadership has seen accelerated progress that champions innovation and productivity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would fail in my duty if I do not acknowledge the tireless efforts of our stakeholders, teachers, students and parents, who have journeyed in good faith to ensure that we are driven towards common educational goals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a life in education is not just one of many journeys. We all have the ultimate goal of providing access to quality education for our children and our nation, but our journey to accomplishing these goals is made up of various experiences and smaller journeys.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, education is not just a sector, it is the bedrock of our society and the catalyst for sustainable development. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all and we, in Fiji, are dedicated to making this a reality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, so much value has been added to our educational goals through pivotal changes, one of which is the current review of the Education Act and legislations as alluded to by His Excellency the President. In reality, our education system has evolved rapidly but our policies and legislations are still the same or simply put, outdated. The review of the Education Act and legislations will ensure that we meet modern demands, aligned with international best practices, and set to address emerging challenges ahead of us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the *2024 Denarau Declaration* – Fiji National Education Policy Framework 2024-2033, provides a comprehensive roadmap for educational reforms, emphasising equity, inclusivity, digital transformation and sustainability. These necessitate substantial reforms that would empower Fijians, strengthen national development and secure the country's future in the global economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our goal at the Ministry of Education is to ensure that every child has access to education. Education is the cornerstone of personal and community development. It equips individuals with the necessary knowledge, skills and values to lead productive and fulfilling lives. Furthermore, it plays a pivotal role in breaking the cycle of poverty and reducing inequalities in our society here in Fiji.

Firstly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must achieve equitable education to ensure every child, regardless of their background or geographic location, has access to quality education. This includes increasing investment in rural schools and providing additional resources for disadvantaged communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has worked at institutionalising additional primary and secondary schools, especially in the rural and maritime areas where education can be accessed by the children and the communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when every individual has access to high-quality education, it leads to higher economic productivity, improved health outcomes and increased social connection. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development set up by the United Nations, acknowledges the transformative power of education by including Quality Education (SDG 4) as one of its goals. The goal emphasises the need to ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, achieving this ambitious objective requires addressing the barriers that hinder access to quality education in Fiji. These barriers are human related, socio-economic or financially constrained.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, instead of leaving rural communities stuck in the past, we are steadily expanding the network of high-quality educational facilities across hundreds of rural communities in our beloved country. A number of new schools and infrastructure development for most schools have made accessibility to education a reality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whether a young person comes up in the heart of Suva or from Wailevu, he or she will attend classes in a modern functional facility. He or she will have access to the newest technologies and curriculum, and he or she will be instructed by passionate, eligible and qualified teachers who are compensated fairly, and who live with a security of higher quality housing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have heard the review of the National Curriculum Framework and changes to the curriculum and assessment at various levels of education. Early interest in the curriculum renewal in Fiji was associated with concerns about the national identity and consciousness at the time of political independence back in 1970. The major educational issue during that period, was the lack of relevant curriculum and examinations to replace overseas examinations and curriculum that had dominated the colonial examination system.

Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, changes to the curriculum are guided by global commitments, changes in the expectations of students, society and the job market. The current curriculum is overcrowded, too difficult, exam-oriented and teacher-centred. The review of the curriculum will ensure that content is tailor-made to suit the demands of the society and equip students with lifelong skills learning. Some of the reforms include the:

- (1) introduction of financial literacy education;
- (2) citizenship education as a subject; and
- (3) involvement of vocational studies in schools for less academically inclined students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I cannot emphasise enough that our curriculum must evolve to equip our students with skills necessary for the 21st century that we are in. This means, integrating technology, promoting Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education, and ensuring that our students are prepared for global challenges ahead of us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, digitalisation of education is also given priority with schools installing digital tools and embedding them in their core deliveries of teaching and learning around Fiji. We have also heard in this august House changes in assessment tools, especially at secondary level, to ensure that students get used to the modes of learning at tertiary level, which we are in here today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry through streamlining its human resource processes will ensure adequate staffing in schools. Teacher shortages, however, is a stark reality and constitutes a crisis with profound implications on Fiji's education system. Teachers are the core of any education system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, developing and producing quality teachers are at the heart of our education system. Increasing professional development opportunities and support for teachers will enhance the quality of education and promote a culture of lifelong learning. Hiring and training new and already established teachers is fundamental in protecting children's ability to learn in all our schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as professionals with expertise in education, teachers are uniquely positioned to understand the challenges facing the profession and contribute to reforms that empower and enable them to excel in their roles. The innovations introduced by educators during the pandemic illustrate their capacity for forward-thinking solutions, yet many systems have reverted to outdated norms instead of capitalising on this creativity.

Moving forward, we must engage in meaningful partnerships with teachers and their unions in addressing not only pay and working conditions, but also fundamental issues of equity, curriculum design and system reform.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issue of school dropouts is a significant concern in education as it impacts individuals and society as a whole. Research identifies several factors associated with the increase in dropout rates, including socio-economic status, family dynamics and school environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education, together with stakeholders, are combating the rising dropout rates through several interventions, including early intervention programmes that focus on at-risk students. The increasing rate of school dropouts is a multi-faceted issue requiring a comprehensive approach involving policy changes, community support and targeted interventions. Addressing this challenge is crucial, to ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed academically and beyond.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the words of Wilson 1998, and I quote: "Education is not about repairing all social evils. It is about repairing one, the evil of ignorance." We all have responsibilities as adults for these evils. The education system can, of course, influence positive behaviour. The way to do it is through the development of knowledge and skills and the cultivation of values in our students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact is that schools have their own power to improve students' knowledge and, skills and to encourage the development of defensive values that would prevent social ills, such as drugs, sex and abuse. Schools should be held accountable, if students do not gain essential knowledge and skills regarding health and cannot articulate value in this position.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, education should foster critical thinking, empower individuals and can break the cycle of poverty. Education is a shared responsibility. Engaging parents and communities in educational process will create a supportive environment for our students. I envision stronger partnerships with local and international organisations to enrich our education system.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to all educators, parents, students and faith-based institutions, who strive for excellence in learning everyday. The agenda is ambitious, the task is daunting, and the path will not be easy.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and my fellow Parliamentarians, I am confident we will successfully traverse this path, and we will do it. Let us remember the words of Noam Chomsky who said, and I quote:

“There are no magic answers, no miraculous methods to overcome the problems we face, just the familiar ones: honest search for understanding, education, organisation, action and the kind of commitment that persists, despite the temptations of disillusionment, despite many failures and only limited successes, inspired by the hope of a brighter future.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you very much for the opportunity. I support the motion before this august House. May God bless us all.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 10.29 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.10 a.m.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament; *ni sa bula, namaste, salaam alaykum* and a very good morning to you all.

I stand before you today with a deep sense of gratitude and responsibility, reflecting on the profound words shared by His Excellency. His message resonates deeply with our collective aspirations as a nation, urging us to embrace unity, resilience and the spirit of service.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am adamant in my pursuit to work towards national unity, ensuring that no one is left behind in our quest for economic growth, national security, prosperity and sustainable development, from my community visitations and engagements. Below is a list of aspirations, solutions, ideas, policy reforms needed for our nation. These recommendations will also be emailed to the Ministry of Finance and the Attorney General's Office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the area of youth, climate change, education system and entrepreneurship, we need to focus on zero tolerance for school students loitering around, whether it be up to 5.00 p.m. or 5.30 p.m. Authorities need to re-look at the No-Loitering Policy for students in uniform after school hours. If students are found in towns and cities after school hours, they need to provide a valid reason.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, once the students are home, they are under the responsibility of their parents, and they are free to do as they like. When something is given for free, chances are that it will not be valued, appreciated, nor respected.

This free education system needs to be re-looked at as well. Why I say that Mr. Speaker, Sir, is because when education is free, it must be compulsory for students to be in schools, not at home, not working and not loitering around.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the second recommendation is a One Child One Tree Policy. It is a concept that I have been wanting to bring to the floor of Parliament. If we have 50,000 graduates a year, that is almost 50,000 trees and crops a year. The whole idea behind this is to start this dialogue, where upon graduation from Year 8 to high school and tertiary institutions, one graduate can plant a tree. Land can be located. I am more focused on native land to be allocated for this initiative, provide logistics for schools to these locations and carry out a day of planting.

For the younger generations, this initiative will educate them on the importance of responsibilities, of saving the environment, green entrepreneurship, promoting food security, reducing Fiji's carbon footprint and for a sustainable and healthy living. This can also be part of the 30 million Trees initiative by the Government. And this is something I have addressed with the honourable Minister for Climate Change and Environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of the increase in student allowances, students are asking for Government to reconsider, to increase the allowance for them, to match the cost of living that is currently existing. They are also raising questions on the years of bond they have to serve which, in their perspective, is too long and it feels like a trap.

Coming on to teacher appointments and posting, it remains an issue. There have been cases of schools not allowing children with lower marks and this was brought to the attention of the honourable Minister, and he intervened and many students around Fiji went back to school. I thank the honourable Minister for his intervention.

I also thank him for the curriculum that is under review. However, to my disappointment and on a personal note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to see him since he is the party leader. I hope to see him as the Deputy Prime Minister as well but, unfortunately, what I read in the media was a bit disappointing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a young Parliamentarian, what I see is most things in politics are based on seniority, but I think there is a change. We can definitely change that. Things should be based on merit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another recommendation for the budget consideration this year is a Youth Innovation Summit. It is a platform where Government, NGOs, CSOs, financial institutions, development partners and agencies gather to support and finance the ideas of the youth in the country who are solving some current issues faced in Fiji and the region. This is an initiative to finance them, allow them to be part of the supply chain and conduct capacity-building programmes. Therefore, reduce the brain-drain that we are facing.

To our youth, the future leaders of Fiji, I echo His Excellency's encouragement - your dreams and ambitions are the seeds of our national prosperity. We must invest in your potential, providing the tools and opportunities you need to succeed. Together we can build a Fiji that thrives on innovation, creativity and mutual respect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving on to road safety, one of the recommendations is for LTA or for us as Government to legalise the use of dashcams. Establish a unit within LTA to look at these infringements and these initiatives should provide incentives to those Fijians who provide videos of infringements to LTA and would probably get further discounts when they make their payments. This initiative empowers every Fijian to safeguard our roads.

In this way, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because a lot get said on social media when an accident happens. Where is the Police? Where is the LTA? Police and LTA cannot always be everywhere. Only God can be everywhere, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but not them, and they also have challenges within. So, with this initiative, we will be able to use the whole of Fiji to safeguard our roads.

I thank the honourable Minister for Public Works for amplifying the implementation of portable speed cameras and we also require more red-light cameras.

I had brought the question to Parliament about the drug tests that was referred to the honourable Minister for Education, but I am glad to see that other Ministries and Ministers are now taking the initiative to conduct drug tests for their departments and institutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another recommendation for one of Fiji's future plans is Fiji's Green National Highway. This is an idea of a straight road from Nadi to Suva; it will increase the value of land, reduce logistic cost, reduce the carbon footprint and boost the tourism industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the innovative thing about this is to introduce a toll. A small fee is required for anyone who wants to travel and reach Nadi from Suva in 1 hour and 30 minutes. This toll gate, the innovation that I saw was that when vehicles pass through the toll gates, there are rollers at the bottom of the toll gates, and every time these rollers move, electricity is generated. This is Fiji punching above its weight in terms of carbon capture, sequestration and for a carbon neutral society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of safety, I move my attention to the Online Safety Commission. They need to be given more powers to combat social media violations and charge those who violate and threaten others on social media.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, children should not be seen in their school uniforms online. Talking of safety, in Fiji, we have over 7,000 taxi drivers. We have witnessed and heard their daily battles of assault, harassment and potential robbery and some have lost their lives. So, 7,000 taxi drivers means 7,000 families and we have to introduce policies to protect these Fijian families. This is just one of the strategies that can be endorsed by Government to create a safer working environment for taxi drivers, ultimately benefitting both drivers and passengers.

One of the solutions, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the duty-free import on security screens. When we look at the assault of bus drivers and taxi drivers, we need to impose a longer jail time to ensure treatment and therapy of the victims.

For the perpetrators, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to ensure they go through capacity-building programmes, trainings on virtues, learn a skill or trade so that when they end their jail time, they are better citizens of Fiji. It is up to us, legislators, to create a pathway where a perpetrator can lead a changed and good life.

If I talk about crime at our borders, I will start with the airports. Mr. Speaker, Sir, x-ray machines there are currently being used as detection tools for Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF) and Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS). Most of the x-ray units at Nadi and Nausori Airports have passed their life and currently, we are facing frequent breakdowns, thus affecting passenger clearances and compromises border security. We do have one CT scanner at the Nadi border and the recent detection of drugs and ammunition was made through this machine. However, the call or request to Government is to consider the RTT110 CT Scanner which will cost around \$2.3 million per machine, and I hope Government considers in with their consultations with BAF for protecting our borders, especially at the airports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I recently travelled from Taveuni to Nadi. I was not asked what I was carrying, I did not go through any scanning and that is a possible room for drugs coming into island shores and then slip through our domestic ports. So, it is something for Government to consider.

Another recommendation to Government, and this is something I have spoken to with the Minister for Policing, is the introduction of body cameras for Police and LTA Officers. This is to enhance transparency, accountability, evidence collection, reduce misconduct, build public trust and reduce corruption. Not guns, but tasers, but I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Police need to be equipped with tasers. Not all of them, but a particular unit in every town and city needs to be equipped with tasers because if one police officer confronts five or six group of perpetrators, what will happen?

This morning, I read in the news that a police officer was injured while dealing with a perpetrator. So, we need to protect our men and women who are in uniform. Through proper consultation with stakeholders, this can be one of the pathways to ensure that our Police and LTA Officers enhance transparency, accountability and reduce corruption. As much as we want the Police to monitor and provide protection, we, as legislators, need to protect them, and my heart goes out to the families of those officers who deal with unprecedented risks and consequences every single day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving on to local government and business, one of the requests, and from my observation as well, is the marking of yellow lines. As Government, we want businesses to thrive but simply painting yellow lines in front of shops where there can be provisions for parking, we are limiting and reducing the customers for that particular business. We are also depriving people of the access to goods and services. So, I think the towns and cities need to be looked at where we can create an ecosystem for businesses to thrive; consumers are able to access goods and services and not be penalised in doing so.

I believe Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Cooperatives, Small, Micro and Medium Enterprises and Communications spoke a lot about business or investor confidence, but these are the little things, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on ground that needs to be looked at, to boost consumption for goods and services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, gathering of groups in towns and cities has been raised by many businessowners and it is hindering their volume of customers. Another recommendation to Government is the implementation of security cameras in hotspot areas for theft and robbery, especially around the market area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in areas of security for our maritime and EEZ, we need to equip our Navy with boats, technology and aerial drone surveillance systems to help them monitor better. And like I mentioned, Sir, travelling from Taveuni to Nadi, I could have been carrying anything, to be very honest, and to experience it hands-on, that is why I have included it in my speech, and we need to put in CT scanners for our domestic ports.

Drugs have penetrated the DNA of our society. Imagine your loved ones being addicted to drugs. My cousin is a drug addict, and it is unfortunate to see him being the only hope of his parents, and the future of his parents falling apart. It is a very painful sight, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Several countries have the death penalty for drug-related offences - Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Saudi Arabia and Iran. These laws can vary significantly in terms of enforcement and specific circumstances under which the death penalty is applied. Fiji abolished the death penalty in 1979.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one drug supplier, on average, has ruined the lives of 500 Fijians. Tough times call for tough decisions, and I believe Fiji needs strong policies and legislations, I believe Fiji needs to enforce drug penalties on drug trafficking of certain drugs and on certain amounts. This is a national crisis where the future of this country is impacted by this. This Government is too soft on its policies, and if they do not do it, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe I can be in Government one day and do it with an iron fist because it is about the younger generation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to move to the Constitution amendment and laws of Fiji. I encourage Government to create more dialogue and transparency, not with just the Opposition but with the people of Fiji. As soon as we speak about the constitutional amendment, there is a lot of narratives being stated on social media. One of the ideologies that I stand by is, "Everyone is a Fijian by nationality, although Fiji has a tapestry of cultures, traditions and ethnicities."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other ideology that I stand by is the investment in native land, native land security and compensation for those who lease. For land security, approximately 92 percent of land in Fiji is classified as native land, underscoring the importance of protecting these resources. It is vital to ensure that this land remains secure and sustainable for future generations.

We need to promote investment into this land with well-structured commercial and housing initiatives. Landowners must have the right to reserve their land with investment plans designed to deliver longer-term benefits, Mr. Speaker, Sir. To maintain fairness and accountability, it is crucial that lease agreements include provisions for compensation should they not be renewed.

Evictions without appropriate compensation can lead Fijian families into the cycle of poverty, exacerbating the squatter settlements. Mr. Speaker, Sir, when someone puts their lifetime earnings in building a house and if their lease is affected and they are evicted and not compensated, they are pushed into the cycle of poverty and they rely on Government social welfare, transport assistance and food assistance. So, it is a burden on Government and every taxpayer at the end of the day. That is something that we need to get out of.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have emphasised on the safety and security of our land, resources and people. That is the only way to build confidence and boost our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, change is here and is inclusive of young Parliamentarians. I would like to thank the former Speaker for announcing my name as a permanent member on the Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs and Defence last year. And within six months, I have worked my way up to be the Deputy Chair of the Standing Committee. I am thankful for the responsibilities that the title comes with and the ability to serve Parliament and the nation. I am also thankful to the Fijian Parliament for its ethics in governance, accountability, and transparency and for giving young Parliamentarians the opportunity to lead Fijian delegations and to be part of dialogue and discussions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are all independent and this Parliament has displayed leadership that is inclusive. I also remember that I had the opportunity, thanks to the honourable Leader of Opposition, to be one of the panellists, along with the former Speaker, during the Speakers Debate last year and I look forward to the Mock Youth Parliament that will encourage our youngsters to come into Parliament and serve the nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reflect on my journey, there are no regrets. There have been highs and lows, but it has been moulded me into a stronger, resilient, and more ambitious Member of Parliament in serving the nation. I am hopeful that the next generations who come into Parliament have it easier in carrying out their roles as legislators.

There are potential risks of geopolitical tensions, rising costs, imported labour, leading to outward remittances, national debt is at \$10.7 billion, we have an ageing infrastructure crisis, and there are potential threats to the region as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but I would like to tell this Government, "Elections are not far. If you fail to listen to the plight of Fijians, you do not expect them to listen to you during your campaigns." Government has spoken about its plans. It is easy to come up with plans, but Government needs to be ready with the implementation costs associated with it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I remain firm on the policies, legislations, ideas and initiatives I have highlighted. Tough times call for tough decisions. I remain committed to the oath of serving every Fijian, and I shall work for the best interests of my country. I shall remain fearless in my pursuit to raise your voices, be your voice and together, let us make choices and decisions to take this nation forward.

I also support the honourable Leader of the Opposition's statement. He has called for unity within the House. Let us end the era of divide and rule and let us unite and empower each other. God bless us all for the year ahead. God bless Fiji.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I extend to you all a very good morning, blessed Holy Lent season and Ash Wednesday and *Eid Mubarak*.

I recognise and pay tribute to the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today - *Kina vanua vakaturaga o Nadonumai, vua na Turaga na Tui Suva; kina vanua vakaturaga o Burebasaga, vua na Marama Bale na Roko Tui Dreketi, na Vunivalu.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to respond to the most Gracious Address delivered by His Excellency the President. His Excellency the President's Address comes at a crucial moment, setting a clear and focused direction for the year ahead, serving as a vital reminder of the responsibility we

must all shoulder in ensuring Fiji's continued success, both at home and on the international stage - a message that emphasises the need for a united effort from all of us to turn these aspirations into tangible actions, advancing the goals that will enrich our global standing and protect the interests of every Fijian.

The *Bible* reminds us in Ecclesiastes 4:9 -10, and I quote:

“Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labour. If either of them falls, one can help the other up...”

This verse, to me, stresses the power of unity and collaboration, reminding us that together, we are stronger and more capable of achieving the shared goals that will uplift our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the launch of Fiji's first ever Foreign Policy White Paper is not only a historic moment for our nation, but also a defining step forward toward a future where our international engagements are both purposeful and strategic. This document provides a clear blueprint for our diplomatic journey in the years to come. The White Paper outlines Fiji's approach towards regional challenges, foreign relations, trade partnerships and security concerns, and simultaneously, guarantees that our sovereignty remains sacrosanct.

Mr. Speaker, the White Paper defines three interlinked pillars - sovereignty, security, and prosperity - that form the bedrock of Fiji's foreign policy. These pillars guide our responsible role on the global stage, affirming our commitment to upholding national interests, while engaging the world with mutual respect and shared goals.

Our sovereignty remains paramount as we navigate a complex and increasingly challenging geopolitical environment. While welcoming allies of every stripe, regardless of how they are seen by the rest of the world, the work of the Ministry reaffirms Fiji's commitment to maintaining an independent foreign policy approach, ensuring that we engage with all nations based on mutual respect and shared interests. So, the concept of sovereignty is more than just territorial integrity. Allow me to expand on that.

Territorial integrity for Fiji, means the right to defend our territories and our borders. It also captures territorial oneness and recognises the rich ethnic and cultural diversity in Fiji and the fundamental rights to exist without external influence and be a determinant for one's own destiny, values and interests. The Ministry will work with relevant partner bodies to advocate and collaborate bilaterally and multilaterally for a clear rules-based order at global, regional and national level. This will be engineered through an approach that is fixated on the sovereign interests of Fiji and the region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the national level, this development mandates that the State protects the identity and relations of the various sovereign ethnic groups. The Ministry is committed to preserving and advancing the interests of indigenous and marginalised populations who face disadvantages due to factors such as wealth, gender, residence, disability, ethnicity, or migration status.

In line with United Nation's principle of 'leaving no one behind', the Ministry will ensure that all individuals, regardless of their circumstances, are included in the benefits of national development and progress. In addition, efforts will be channelled to provide the required support towards gender equity, identity, social inclusion and acceptance, including the managing of sovereignty within sovereignty to ensure fairness and equality.

The Ministry will further enlist partner support to optimise initiatives, policies and programmes on culture and heritage that will embrace respect for Fiji's diversity and oneness. and

also enhance livelihoods with equity in education, health and social development. Cultural institutions will be tagged priority, Sir, as they strengthen values and beliefs and increase the significance of cultural property as a currency in foreign relations.

The Ministry will strengthen global alliances using Fiji's unique approach to diplomacy, aiming to tackle challenges at the national, regional and international levels. A renewed focus on the Pacific will also enhance regional ties, drawing on shared historical, cultural, and people-to-people connections, while highlighting our nation's status as a central hub and gateway.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji will continue to pursue strategic leadership and membership roles in international and regional bodies and robustly engage in the related forums with the goal of lobbying for Fiji's agenda, addressing emerging issues and securing alliances to advance Fiji's interests. The hosting of international events will further provide an important opportunity to greatly enhance Fiji's agenda globally, and this will be given priority by the Ministry in its efforts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's diplomatic missions will remain essential conduits to the global community, strengthening international relationships and enhancing our role in global affairs. These missions are pivotal in advancing our foreign policy and ensuring that our national development goals are supported through strategic partnerships and international collaboration.

As part of our commitment to expanding Fiji's global engagement, Sir, we have recently reopened several of our diplomatic missions, making an important step in re-establishing our presence abroad. Additionally, as you know, Sir, we are planning to open more missions in strategic regions to increase our global footprint. This expansion will not only raise Fiji's profile, but also open new opportunities for economic, trade, security and social development.

To achieve these goals, it is essential that our diplomatic missions are properly resourced. This will enable them to effectively pursue key objectives, such as fostering economic growth, advancing security cooperation, and promoting social progress. Proper support will ensure that our missions continue to represent Fiji's interests and drive our collective ambitions on the global stage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I turn to security. The Ministry's focus on security will be driven twofold with traditional and non-traditional aspects. Traditional security will remain focused on protecting our sovereignty, our borders and our citizens through defence, law enforcement and intelligence efforts. Our dedication to national defence is unwavering.

At the same time, non-traditional security challenges are becoming increasingly important. Issues such as cybersecurity, climate change, public health, economic resilience and social unity are critical to the safety of our nation. Effectively addressing these emerging threats necessitates a cohesive and an all-encompassing strategy that incorporates both, traditional defence and global challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know that climate change is a cross-cutting issue and with Fiji's vulnerability to climate and natural disasters, the Ministry will continue to vigorously pursue climate resilience. It will involve the engagement of partners, alliances and multilateral institutions to help Fiji in adaptation and mitigation efforts. A key focus for Fiji will be the efforts to improve our access to climate finance and adaptive research, including national capacities and capabilities for humanitarian assistance and disaster response efforts with strategic partners.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry will continue to advocate for national, regional and international

peace, security, and stability, as essential foundations for sustainable development. Fiji is committed to fostering a united family and acknowledges its shared responsibility in building a secure and resilient future for all its peoples.

The significance of regionalism cannot be overstated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with our regional organisations serving as pivotal platforms for advancing our collective interests. Fiji, therefore, remains steadfast in its commitment to the “Family First” approach within the Pacific, prioritising regional security and development through collaborative efforts.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry will place particular importance on the Ocean of Peace pronouncement by the honourable Prime Minister, which will strengthen national and regional co-existence, tolerance, respect, freedom and peace. These shared commitments will be extended to breaking existing barriers or discrimination, to ensure a safe and better region where we can enjoy to the fullest a life of dignity and hope.

Fiji's stewardship in this area is crucial at a time when global and regional security dynamics are shifting. Our strong advocacy for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons further underscores Fiji's commitment to nuclear non-proliferation and regional security. This Treaty is particularly significant in ensuring that the Pacific remains a nuclear-free zone, thereby, safeguarding our environment and our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, advancing Fiji's economic interests and ensuring the prosperity of all Fijians are key pillars of our foreign policy. A secure Fiji goes hand in hand with economic security, which is essential for improving the living standards of our people.

In a rapidly changing global environment, expanding Fiji's economic space is crucial to ensure long-term sustainable growth and resilience. The key objective focusses on broadening the country's economic opportunities and enhancing its global presence. It involves diversifying trade relations, securing new markets for Fijian-made products, and strengthening partnerships that promote sustainable business development, all aimed at positioning Fiji for future economic success.

Mr. Speaker, expanding key sectors such as tourism, agriculture and digital economy is essential to driving sustainable growth that I speak of, and ensuring resilience in the face of global economic uncertainties. Fiji's active participation in regional economic initiatives, including the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, will be instrumental in unlocking new markets and attracting investment.

The Ministry will focus on strengthening and expanding development cooperation with key bilateral and multilateral partners, emphasising socio-economic priorities, poverty reduction, and fostering people-to-people connections. This will involve securing development assistance, enhancing Fiji's leadership in international forums, and creating employment and labour mobility opportunities for Fijian nationals. Additionally, the Ministry will work to improve education, health and social development, particularly for vulnerable groups, while furthering our diplomatic relations.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry's Annual Operational Plan is fully aligned with the guiding principles outlined in the White Paper, ensuring that its strategic objectives are not only articulated, but also translated into specific actionable steps and measurable outcomes. This alignment provides a clear framework for the Ministry's activities, ensuring consistency in both, short-term initiatives and long-term goals.

Moreover, the cross-cutting nature of this Operational Plan will facilitate the integration of critical issues and priorities across the various Ministries, fostering greater collaboration and

coherence in addressing the challenges that impact multiple sectors. This comprehensive approach will ensure that the Government's initiatives are efficiently coordinated, reinforcing Fiji's foreign policy objectives while driving collective progress across the whole of Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another focus of the Ministry is on projectisation of our core activities, making integrated project implementation a component of our operations. This strategy aligns with the development priorities of Fiji and the Pacific Island Countries (PICs), focussing on critical areas such as sustainable development, the intersection of climate change and migration, research and poverty alleviation.

This is a strategic shift towards more structured and results-oriented approaches in implementing its initiatives. Through projectisation, the Ministry is better positioned to align its efforts with national and regional development priorities, addressing both immediate and long-term challenges through focused measurable projects.

This approach, Mr. Speaker, Sir, allows the Ministry to move beyond traditional diplomatic efforts and engage in tangible, on-the-ground initiatives that contribute to the broader goals of sustainable development, climate change mitigation, poverty alleviation and regional cooperation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs prides itself with the first Foreign Policy White Paper for Fiji, the hard yards will now unfold with this implementation and transformation of the Ministry to an institution which is modern, resilient and transformative.

I am adamant that the Ministry will continue to boost the quality of its delivery and elevate Fiji's international engagements and relations and successfully contribute to economic growth and nation-building. At this stage, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to acknowledge the dedication and commitment of the hard-working team within the Ministry, both here and abroad, whose efforts play a pivotal role in ensuring the continued success and progress of our foreign policy objectives. Their unwavering dedication will remain a key driving force behind the Ministry's achievements.

As I end my reply to His Excellency's most Gracious Speech, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must reflect on earlier speeches. The Assistant Minister for Finance, on Monday, listed a number of gains that the Government has achieved in the last two years to help our people, contrary to misinformation spread by members on the other side. But I cannot let this one slide, Mr. Speaker, Sir. For a Member to say on Monday that the FijiFirst, in 16 years, managed our public health system better than the Coalition Government has in the last two years, frankly, is quite sickening.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, three times on the floor of this Parliament, honourable Pio Tikoduadua, as an Opposition Member, between 2018 and 2022, outlined the state of decay at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital.

On 17th June, 2019, honourable Tikoduadua showed this House a picture of a toilet door in the Acute Men's Medical Ward that had not been repaired for over 16 months. The doorknob on the said door had been replaced with an intravenous tube, and to keep the door closed, one had to use a block of wood.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in reply to honourable Members from the other side about the scourge of drugs, I remind this House and this country of the shameful assault on the honourable Tikoduadua by the then Prime Minister on Friday, 9th August, 2019. But what the people of Fiji must understand, and most of us here were probably not here, is the lead-up to this shameful travesty. On that day, honourable Tikoduadua had moved a motion in this august House, and I quote:

“That Parliament urgently appoints a Special Parliamentary Committee under Standing Orders 129 to holistically look into the multifaceted risks of the hard-drug situation in Fiji.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, unfortunately, not one single Member from the Government at the time voted for the motion on that day, Friday, 9th August, 2019.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, someone said, “We learn how we got where we are and why we live the way we do. It is a study of us, of humans, our place in an ever-changing world.” Without it, we would not understand all our triumphs and failures and we would continually repeat patterns without building forward to something better. Hence, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would be remiss of me not to quote His Excellency when he said on Monday, 24th February, 2025, and I quote from Page 3 of the *Daily Hansard*:

“As we open this Session, let us remember the sacred duty that has been entrusted to us. This is a solemn responsibility to serve and to lead with integrity, in building a better future for all the people of Fiji.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this message is not just for us here in this Chamber, but for each and every one of us in Fiji who has the means to give back to where we came from.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to address the Chamber in my mother tongue.

“Au via bolei keda na sa bau wiliki tu meda sa rawati keda, meda la'ki tara cake na noda dui delaniyavu. E sega tale ni dua ena la'ki tara cake na noda dui koro, tikina se yasana, koi keda sara ga.

Me vaka a kaya o honourable Pio Tikoduadua ena nona vosa eke ena i ka Lima ni Tiseba ena yabaki sa oti:

“Vei keda na i tubutubu e Viti nikua, na Matanitu e sega ni vakasucuma e dua na gone. E sega ni tama, e sega ni tina na Matanitu. E tama ga na i tubutubu, e tina ga na i tubutubu”.

[I would like to challenge those of us who have attained high standards of living, to raise the standard of living in our villages. No one else will do that for us, to raise the standard of living in our villages, districts and provinces; it is only us.

As honourable Pio Tikoduadua said in this august House on 5th December, 2024, and I quote:

“To us parents in Fiji today, Government did not give birth to any child. Government is not a father, nor a mother, but parents are the father and mother of the child.”]

And about one of my pet peeves, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I end, I have to say this, “rubbish and littering.” I would like to say this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to everyone who is watching and listening, where is your pride in your compound? Where is your pride in your street? Where is your pride in your suburb, your village, your town? If you can afford to buy grog, alcohol, data, phone recharge and fuel for your car, I think you can well afford to buy a rubbish bin, at the very least, instead of leaving your trash out in a plastic bag for the neighbourhood strays to rip open and spread up and down your street.

With that being said, Mr. Speaker, I support the motion before the House, and I thank you for this opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.- I am not quite sure whether I have heard right about the new word, but I will await the Hansard to get familiar with that word that she has introduced to Parliament.

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise in this august Parliament to lend my support to the motion by the honourable Prime Minister, to show appreciation to His Excellency the President for his Address on the opening of the 2025 Parliamentary year on Monday, 24th February 2025. It was a proud moment for me and the people of Cakaudrove to witness our paramount Chief excel to this most prestigious hierarchy in Government or national leadership of our beloved country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first and foremost, I would like to applaud His Excellency for his strong leadership and foresight in ensuring that there is political stability when he assumed duties in his prestigious Office last year. Despite cynical criticisms and sceptical perceptions by certain factions of our society at large, His Excellency remained focussed on his vision for our nation that we must progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency, a paramount chief of Fiji, is full of love and compassion for all Fijians irrespective of race or gender. This was showcased when the FijiFirst Party was disbanded. As a paramount chief, he kept them all in Parliament. He clearly portrayed his position as a true leader, not only for the *vanua*, but also for our country.

The establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a testament to His Excellency's commitment to embedding important values within the Government machinery that will encourage forgiveness, unity and advancement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's words serve as both a reminder and a call to action urging us to embrace progress, unity, and service to the people of Fiji. As leaders, we have been entrusted with the sacred duty of shaping policies and implementing programmes that will uplift our citizens, strengthen our communities and build a prosperous nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's message reminds us about the importance of working together to ensure that no Fijian is left behind in our pursuit of economic growth and sustainable development. It is a vision that aligns with the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management mandate to drive inclusive and rural maritime development, strengthen disaster resilience, enhance the wellbeing of our communities across our remote, rural and maritime islands. We must continue to embody the principles of integrity, accountability, and servant leadership, putting the interests of the people above all else.

The diversification of our economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I strongly support the focus on diversification for a broad-based economy. This obviously requires enhancing investment in agriculture, tourism, and digital transformation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all know that agriculture is one of the key economic sectors for rural-based economies across the country. The Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management's, Self-Help Programme (SHP) and the Rural and Outer Island Development Programme (ROI), are intended to complement various initiatives implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways to support the rural-based farmers.

Under the Ministry's ROI Programme, there is support towards digital transformation through assistance for ease of access to reliable communication services. For this financial year, we have assisted the *Vanua o Nabukelevu, Namosi*, in the installation of Starlink equipment using funds available from the ROI Programme. There is the intention to support other rural remote areas so that they are able to access the internet and thereby the outer world through this mode of communication. We believe that this will provide platforms for them to also market themselves even through both, formal and social media.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I totally concur with the plan to review the six agricultural-based public enterprises, namely:

- (1) Agricultural Marketing Authority (AMA);
- (2) Food Processors Fiji Limited;
- (3) Fiji Rice Limited;
- (4) Fiji Coconut Millers;
- (5) Fiji Meat Industry Board; and
- (6) Yaqara Pastoral Company Limited.

These State-Owned Enterprises were set up over number of decades ago when there were limited players in the industries in which they operate. The commercial world has advanced immensely, and yet, these corporate bodies are still lagging behind in many ways. Apart from availability of modern equipment and technology, consistency of quality supply of commodities to the factories and processing facilities, and competitiveness of markets obviously impacts on profitability. I appreciate the intention to review policies and laws to improve the performance of public enterprises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the stance to prioritise strengthening of tourism policies and infrastructure and modernisation of the civil aviation laws. Equally important is having infrastructure and facilities that are safe for our people and our visitors.

On sustainable fisheries, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is committed to sustainable fisheries, forestry and environmental conservation is vital for the resilience of our rural and maritime communities, where these resources are integral to livelihoods. I commend the initiative outlined in the National Fisheries Policy, the Aquaculture Development Plan and the Aquaculture Act, which will strengthen resource sustainability while ensuring economic opportunities for our people.

Our rural and maritime communities must be at the forefront of these efforts, with targeted support to enhance sustainable livelihoods, protect biodiversity and build resilience against climate change. The restoration of mangrove ecosystems and expansion of protected reserves will not only safeguard our environment but also strengthen natural disaster mitigation efforts which are crucial for vulnerable coastal communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am appreciative of the commitment to revitalise the shipbuilding sector, and the consideration to establish a new shipbuilding facility in Fiji. We all know that travel between our main islands and the maritime communities remain to be a challenge. Apart from the need to have good infrastructure in those small islands, access to safe, affordable and regular shipping services is a necessity for our Fijians that live in these islands. Furthermore, they also require good quality boats to assist them in their fishing for their daily living of commercial ventures. Our Ministry has a budget allocation of \$300,000 for the Seafaring Entrepreneur Assistance programme for this current financial year, for which 24 individuals and communities are being assisted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the promotion of value addition in resource-based sectors and encouraging

participation of resource owners will greatly impact the growth of our rural and maritime economies. These are initiatives that will obviously create employment and wealth for our rural citizens. I cannot emphasise more on the need for the relevant agencies to work together to ensure that the right governance mechanisms are also in place, and resource owners are also provided the necessary capacity building programmes that will help in the sustainability of existing or newly established business ventures.

The introduction of the Access to Funding Bill for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) is acknowledged, and I believe it will help boost the operations for eligible resource owner's commercial ventures.

Strengthening traditional knowledge, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I strongly support the Government's commitment to safeguarding customs and traditions while strengthening social frameworks to empower our people. The recognition and protection of traditional knowledge and cultural expression through the proposed legislation will ensure that indigenous practices, wisdom and resources are preserved for future generations while also creating economic opportunities for iTaukei communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our rural and maritime areas, where traditional knowledge is deeply rooted in daily life, it is vital that these reforms align with development initiatives that enhance resilience and sustainability. The review of the Rotuman and Banaban laws is a step forward towards inclusive governance, ensuring that all communities benefit from equitable development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the implementation of the National Blue Town Framework and the New Town Development Programme is a crucial step towards the promotion of sustainable and inclusive development in our rural and maritime areas.

The Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and National Disaster Management, welcomes these initiatives as they will provide essential infrastructure, improve connectivity and enhance service delivery in key locations such as Nabouwalu, Keiyasi and other planned township developments. We remain committed to supporting these developments through coordinated planning and ensuring that disaster risk reduction and climate resilience are integrated into all new town projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of housing and sugar, the Government's commitment to addressing the housing needs of our people, particularly those in informal settlements, is a significant step towards ensuring security and dignity for all Fijians. I recognise the importance of extending these efforts to our rural and maritime communities where access, affordable and resilient housing remains a challenge. Our Ministry will continue to work closely with relevant stakeholders to integrate climate resilient housing solutions and ensure that vulnerable communities, including persons living with disabilities, have access to safe and sustainable housing options.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note that our Ministry is working with the Ministry of Housing to address issues in informal settlements through the establishment of a taskforce that is chaired by the Ministry of Housing, and the secretariat is the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our rural and maritime areas, the sugar industry remains a critical economic driver, supporting livelihoods and strengthening our agricultural sector. The record-high cane payment and the targeted support programmes introduced by the Ministry of Sugar, reflects the Coalition Government's commitment to revitalising this sector. Strengthening infrastructure such as farm access roads, providing subsidies and investing in farm mechanisation, will enable rural farmers to boost productivity and maximise returns, ensuring that agricultural remains a viable and rewarding industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, beyond sugar, the non-sugar agriculture sector plays a fundamental role in our rural economy, providing food security and employment opportunities for thousands of Fijians. Our Ministry fully supports Government initiatives to enhance large scale production technologies and agro-processing which will not only increase value addition, but also open new markets for our farmers. By improving farm-to-market access, we can empower rural communities to contribute meaningfully to the national economy, while ensuring long-term sustainability in food production.

In terms of women participation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the Government's commitment to increasing the participation of women as directors on boards of public enterprises. In the rural and maritime sectors, we have seen firsthand the invaluable contributions of women in driving community resilience, economic development and social cohesion. Ensuring their representation at decision making levels, it is not just a matter of fairness, it is a strategic imperative that will strengthen governance, promote inclusivity and bring diverse perspectives to our national development agenda.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the Government's commitment to reshaping the public service landscape to be more efficient, people centred and responsive to the needs of all Fijians. For rural and maritime communities, an effective public service means, timely and coordinated responses to their needs, whether it is disaster preparedness, infrastructure development, or access to essential Government services.

The Ministry's role in administering ancillary services at the divisional and district levels ensure that rural citizens are not left behind in national development efforts. By streamlining processes and enhancing accountability, we will improve service delivery and ensure that rural and maritime Fijians receive the support they need to progress successfully.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we embark on this parliamentary session, I urge honourable Members of this august Parliament to remain committed to a constructive dialogue, responsible governance and bold transformative action. Let us honour the trust placed in us by the people, by bringing forth policies and promote inclusivity, sustainability and national unity. We remain resolute in our quest that with collective effort, we can turn challenges into opportunities and create a future where every Fijian thrives and prospers.

Just before I take my seat, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just reflecting on one of the issues that His Excellency the President raised in his Speech is that we must be cautious and ensure that information shared on social media is accurate and reflects the reality that is intended for the common good, rather than creating further division amongst our community.

Yet, this piece of advice, Mr. Speaker, Sir, fell on deaf ears. Just a moment later, His Excellency the President was publicly ridiculed on social media, and I agree with the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management's sentiment when he delivered his response on Monday that he was disappointed, as well as I and other honourable Members who were sitting on this side of Parliament with some other Members of Parliament who continue to use social media to gain political mileage rather than promoting national unity. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me the opportunity.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- The Speaker of Parliament, the learned Filimoni Jitiko, Sir, thank you for the opportunity to stand before this Parliament to make my reply to His Excellency Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu's maiden speech as the newly elected President of Fiji. I am much humbled to be part of this historic process, leading our people into a new era of democratic governance, where we hope to deliver development initiatives that will continue progressing our nation.

The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, Deputy Prime Ministers, Cabinet Ministers, Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament. I would like to join my colleagues in acknowledging the traditional owners of the land *na Vanua o Nadonumai, vua na gone Turaga na Tui Suva*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji today stands at a crossroad. Whilst listening to His Excellency the President, *na Gone Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau*, I was quite touched by the significance of the word of God, His Excellency quoted from the Book of King Solomon “That the righteous people rule, the people will rejoice. However, if wicked men rule, our people will groan and sigh.”

That is a profound reminder, not only from our Lord and Savior and the Good Book, but it is a powerful reminder from His Excellency the President to us as leaders, that the fate of our nation is in our hands, and the plight of our people will depend on our leadership. Therefore, the onus is on us as leaders elected by the people, who honour God and the calling He has made in our lives for such a season as this.

His Excellency's Address spoke of the importance of education and its system and structures that is crucial for the preparation of our people. It is therefore my honour to report the work being carried out by the Ministry of Education to advance equitable access to education opportunities for all of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2023, one of the first things we did in the Ministry of Education was to hold the Fiji National Education Summit. This brought together all relevant leaders and stakeholders of the education sector. Together, we reviewed the education landscape in Fiji and there was a general consensus that the education sector was in disarray.

Over the three-day summit, we robustly discussed challenges faced and recommended solutions. As a result, the Denarau Declaration was achieved which stands to correct and improve this important national sector. Two years on, we have got the head office to be more visible to schools and communities, teachers and students. To date, we have visited more than 250 schools all around Fiji and still, we have more schools to cover. These visits have been very fruitful.

As a result of our visibility, along with our Ministry of Education Executives, we have been able to address some of the immediate needs of our communities and provide them with teachers, desks, tables and even boats, for the children to be able to travel on as a means of transportation in maritime and rural remote areas.

Mr Speaker, Sir, one of the challenges noted during the Education Summit was the outdated curriculums being taught to students. With the evolving time and global changes, school curriculums must be relevant and accommodating to the needs of our labour industry.

The Ministry of Education, in 2024, re-established the Curriculum Advisory Services (CAS) Unit, whereby necessary staff were brought in with appropriate subject teachers assigned to their subjects of expertise. The CAS Unit had been reduced significantly in the recent past. For one CAS officer, one person was handling a few subjects, and as a result, the quality and content of the curriculum lacked proper attention and substance.

With the re-engagement of a former PS, and former Director of CDU, Mr. Iowane Ponipate Tiko, the Ministry of Education has thus reviewed school curriculums and has begun to put in more robust, needs-based curriculum created for student learning. Along with this work, we have professional development and curriculum alignment teams visiting schools for teachers to get assimilated to the curriculum they are teaching and to have their feedback on it.

Despite of the curriculum review, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are benchmarking to other successful countries like the United Kingdom, Japan, Finland, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, India and Canada, whereby the Ministry of Education is working to not only teach relevant skills to students, but also assist in their personal development via good moral values and characters, and on how to be financially literate, and so forth.

The Ministry of Education has developed draft curriculum documents on what has been called Citizenship Education, and we have also developed draft curriculum documents for Financial Literacy documents. We have had external stakeholder consultations for both the programmes, and over 250 stakeholders have been consulted in the three Divisions.

The piloting of the Citizenship Education in schools will be from Week nine, Term 1, 2025, and 125 primary schools for Year 1 to Year 4, and 50 secondary schools for Year 9 and Year 10 have been selected for financial literacy education. Sir, 125 schools will be piloting this programme in Year 1 and Year 2.

We are in our last phase of finalising the draft Syllabi and Teacher Guide for piloting. The implementation of the Citizenship Education and Financial Literacy Education in all Fiji schools will commence in 2026.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to briefly highlight the progress being made in reflection to the Literacy and Numeracy Exam percentages:

- (1) For the Year 5 Literacy rates, there has been an increase from 83 percent in 2023 to 90 percent in 2024.
- (2) For the Year 7 Literacy rates, in 2023, it has remained at 93 percent and maintained in 2024.
- (3) For the numeracy rate for Year 5, there has been a significant achievement, an increase from 47 percent in 2023 to 74 percent in 2024.
- (4) For numeracy in Year 7, there has also been a massive increase from a 52 percent pass in 2023 to 83 percent pass in 2024.
- (5) For the Year 8 Exam, we achieved a pass rate of 67 percent in 2023 and in 2024, this increased to 69 percent.
- (6) For Fiji Year 12 Examination, the pass rate for 2023 was 74 percent and in 2024, this has increased to 76 percent.
- (7) For Year 12 Examination, a reflection of the year 2022, has seen a pass rate of 66 percent which means from 2022 to the year 2024, there has been a massive increase of 10 percent in pass rates which is truly commendable.
- (8) For Year 13 Certificate Examination, an average of 86 percent has been achieved over the past five years, with the lowest of 70 percent observed in 2021, and a high of 91 percent attained in 2023. In 2024, 86 percent was achieved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education is on a path of lifting the Fiji's Education Sector, as can be noted from the school results alone. Whilst we had a slight drop in Year 13 result last year, we intend to achieve well this year, and I have recently spoken to School Principals and Head of Schools that a 100 percent pass rate for our students is the goal, with quality passes also a major target that we have set. It has been a commendable journey, and I must thank all stakeholders, especially our students, teachers, parents and guardians, and the education sector community for being part of the journey so far.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, retaining our children in school has been a major target for the Ministry of Education. I am therefore pleased to announce, that this year we have seen a major increase of student intake for primary to secondary school by over 5,000 students. A significant number of these students

are registered for the TVET programmes, and it is very pleasing to see students who had previously dropped out of school returning to be able to attain life skills that can assist them for their future career.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a major part of our education stakeholders are our teachers, and in recent years, there have been massive resignations experienced from teachers and reasons have varied. Notable reasons have been attributed to migration due to better job offers and increased remunerations. To address these challenges, the Ministry of Education has had to address teacher welfare, especially their salaries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in December 2024, 296 teachers received salary upgrades due to upgrading of their qualifications, and in addition, 103 Assistant Principals who were on Band H, Step 1, have been moved a step up to Band H, Step 2. This will differentiate the Assistant Principals from Heads of Departments, who also sit on Band H, Step 1 as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to inform this august Parliament that as at this morning, I have received a number of appreciation messages from the Assistant Principals who have received their upgraded salary in this pay. In addition, we are also looking into upgrading the salaries of close to 400 teachers who have served as teachers for over 20 to 30 years and are still being paid at \$22,000 per annum. These are usually referred to as Non-Post Holder Teachers.

Most of these teachers graduated at a time when the teacher qualifications were only certificates or diplomas. The Ministry of Education acknowledges the years of experience they have, and notes that many of these teachers served in rural areas and this impacts their ability to upgrade their qualification and studies. Many also have families to support, therefore, it becomes financially challenging to meet further the cost of attaining further studies. The Ministry of Education is working with Teacher Unions for all these teacher retention exercises.

The Ministry of Education, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is also emphasising the timely transfer of teachers to allow for those serving in rural areas to be transferred to urban schools so they can also benefit from further studies opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year, we have introduced a teacher trainee interview selection process together with TSLs to fit the gaps in schools, whereby subject teachers can be aligned to meet the areas of need like STEM subjects, PEMAC, computer studies, industrial arts, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education has noted that there are many schools in a debilitated state. There are over 900 schools all around Fiji. Therefore, we are urgently working to address the various needs of schools. We are grateful to DFAT, who has assisted with the funding to rehabilitate WASH facilities for 45 schools all over Fiji. They will get new ablution blocks built for both boys and girls.

Apart from that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education will be building three new schools, one at Davuilevu to accommodate Davuilevu Secondary School from Year 9 to Year 13 students; one at Suva Primary School will also be rebuilt due to its OHS status, and we are also trying to regain Vatuwaqa Primary School. We are awaiting the Solicitor General's advice if Government can regain Vatuwaqa Primary School which is now run under a Trustee. Parents and interested stakeholders of the school have raised to Government the need to re-establish Vatuwaqa Primary School, given its ideal location close to Suva.

In Government's effort to provide affordable and quality education for those living in the maritime and rural areas, following my recent visit to Taveuni and Yasayasa Moala, the Ministry of

Education has approved the establishment of secondary schools in Totoya and Matuku, as well as Wainikeli Secondary School in Taveuni which has now begun with Year 9 students. Teachers have been sent to these schools, and we hope that in the new year, the school will extend to Year 10 to accommodate those currently in Year 9.

I must thank the people of these islands for their persistence to extend the secondary school education as this supports the Government's plan to mitigate the rural-urban migration, and help keep children and families safe on the islands, where previously, children would be separated from their parents to attend schools in Viti Levu, or whole families are uprooted in order to have their children gain access to higher education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for capital projects on the upgrade and enhancement of Government school facilities and teachers' quarters. To date, the following schools have been completed, namely, Delainamasi Primary School, Nasinu Secondary School, QVS, RKS, ACS, Levuka Public School and Suva Grammar School.

On the introduction of e-learning for schools, this has been a major target for Ministry of Education. Therefore, an ICT in Education Policy has been developed and is initiated, funded by the Commonwealth of Learning, which will define the Ministry's general direction in relation to ICT and schools' development.

The consultation for the National TVET Policy has concluded, Mr. Speaker Sir. It will be submitted for Cabinet approval this month. The policy will outline the framework for the implementation plan, and is essential for connecting economic growth and employment, aligning education with market needs, empowering youth, innovation and interpretation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this initiative has been piloted in Year 9 across 15 schools with vocational centres nationwide. New subjects have been offered, it is competency-based, and is offered through three vocational programmes:

- (1) Automotive;
- (2) Hospitality; and
- (3) Carpentry and joinery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, work has commenced on the review of the Education Act 1966 and the Ministry of Education is supported by the Fiji Law Reform Commission and the Office of the Solicitor-General. The review is necessary to bring in line laws that will reflect the changes to education mediums, like e-learning and other crucial Government policies.

Whilst the Education Act Review is in progress, the Ministry of Education would also like to review other accompanying educational establishment laws, like those of the Fiji National University, the Higher Education Commission Act, and the Fiji Teacher Registration Authority Act, to ensure proper aligning to the Principal Act of the Education sector of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, automatic progression has created a culture of complacency, leaving knowledge gaps among students, and the current practise in Fiji enables automatic progression of students to the next level up to Year 12. A national stakeholder consultation was conducted on the 16th January, 2025, with approximately 80 participants attending from stakeholder partners. An online survey was also conducted, and the report of this review will be submitted to Cabinet for a decision, on the removal of the No Repeat Policy or Automatic Progression Policy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, groundwork has also begun for the public consultation for the reintroduction of scaling in the national examination process, and a steering committee has been set up. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Teacher Registration Authority successfully hosted the first ever annual congress, fostering dialogue amongst teachers, policymakers, and stakeholders, and this will be an annual event for the Fiji Teacher Registration Authority.

The Higher Education Commission in Fiji, for the first time, established offices in the Northern Division, which was opened by the honourable Prime Minister, and also in the Western Division. These new offices will facilitate institutional visits, enhance programme quality assurance, guide, monitor, and evaluate the effectiveness of enhanced collaboration and partnership amongst the higher education stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji National University held a conference of resetting TVET and higher education, which was strategically designed to reset and align closely to the Fiji National University's delivery with the National Development Plan, and the Vualiku Programme objectives. The University also plans to hold the Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage Conference in September 2025. I am pleased to inform this august House that the programme, namely Diploma in Vanua Leadership, will commence with a cohort of 30 Chiefs, in conjunction with the Fiji Great Council of Chiefs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the University of the South Pacific, I was instructed by the honourable Prime Minister to resolve the USP strike last year. The Council met in Cook Islands and discussions, issues that had risen, the Vice Chancellor, Professor Pal Ahluwalia, had verbally resigned to the Council, which was minuted, and he was asked to also provide a resignation in writing. The Council will revisit this issue in the next Council meeting, to be able to proceed with the identification of the new Vice Chancellor for USP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for University of Fiji, it has also planned for capital developments. There is a new lecture theatre in Saweni, especially for nursing students, a new centre for Hindi Studies, and a women's hostel for first-year female students is also in the proposal for expansion due to an increasing number of females. As we look towards the future, the Ministry of Education continues to strive for excellence with innovative approaches to learning.

At the Ministry of Education, there is no room for complacency, and we are tightening the belt in terms of service delivery with heightened attention to our HR processes. With these words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I once again extend my deepest gratitude to all the education stakeholders, the parents, guardians, teachers, students, education partners, teacher unions, and statutory bodies for their unwavering dedication and commitment for the holistic development of our students.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, this is a convenient point where we can suspend the proceedings for lunch. Parliament will resume proceedings at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.33 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.40 p.m.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, greetings to you all who are tuning in live on Walesi and the Parliament *Facebook* page; thank you for joining us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand in this esteemed House to express my support for the motion put forward by the honourable Prime Minister, and I would like to extend my warmest congratulations to His Excellency, the President of Fiji for his first term in office. I also wish to express my sincere appreciation to His Excellency, the President, *Na Gone Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau*, Ratu Naiqama Tawakecolati Lalabalavu for his insightful address, and for officially marking the Opening of the 2025 Session of Fiji's Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I respond to His Excellency the President for his most gracious address, I would like to take this moment to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who stood by me during this incredibly challenging time. On 28th June last year, I faced serious allegations of abuse of office under section 139 of the Crimes Act 2009, brought against me by the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC), which resulted in my resignation from my ministerial position.

Throughout these difficulties, the legal battle, I have been under immense pressure, but I am relieved and grateful to share that the case did not meet the necessary threshold for a defence, ultimately leading to my full acquittal. Your unwavering support has meant more to me than words can express. I cannot thank our outstanding lawyers enough, Lavi Rokoika and Ratu Tangaroa Vakalalabure, for their unwavering support and expert counsel throughout this process. Their dedication provided me with immense strength and hope, and I also want to acknowledge the fairness and integrity shown by the Resident Magistrates Court in handling my case.

I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to my supportive family, especially my wife and children, my colleagues in the fisheries and forest sector, and political parties, you know who you are. My dedicated voters, incredible people of my *yasana* in Lomaiviti, the Eastern President, Mr. Joni Rayawa, and the Executive members of the Eastern Division. Your belief in me has built a profound source of strength, and I will always be grateful. I would also like to offer my deepest appreciation to all your prayers during this challenging time, your spiritual support has truly meant the world to me. Thank you for standing by me.

I want to acknowledge those who may have affected my reputation and my position. I choose to forgive you and extend my best wishes in the spirit of compassion, invoking the name of our Savior Jesus Christ. As Paul reminds us in Romans 8:31 and I quote, "*if God is for us who can be against us.*" This inspires me to keep working for our nation. With faith guiding me, I am dedicated to serving the people of Fiji with integrity and commitment. I thank you for your support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to congratulate Fiji Rugby referee, Mr. Tevita Rokovereni, for his amazing achievement that has made Fiji Rugby Union and our nation proud. For the first time in 16 years, he has been selected to officiate the Men's Cup final between Argentina and South Africa at the Vancouver sevens in the HSBC seven's series. We applaud Tevita for his outstanding performance and dedication in reaching this important milestone. This moment serves as an inspiration to aspiring referees and athletes in Fiji, showing that with passion and hard work, anything is possible. Well done Tevita! You make us proud!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge that His Excellency highlighted the Government's commitment in implementing measures aimed at increasing the representation of women as Directors on board of public enterprises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we approach the month of March, I would like to take a moment to celebrate gender equality and recognise the importance of International Women's Day. Observed on 8th March, this day serves as a crucial reminder of the progress we have made, and the challenges that remains in our ongoing pursuit of equality for everyone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all the women in our beloved Fiji. Their remarkable achievement and unwavering contributions significantly shape our nation. Their resilience and dedication inspires us all to try to strive for a better future.

However, we must also confront the harsh reality of gender-based violence, which continues to afflict our communities. It is imperative that we stand united against this issue and actively support initiatives that protect and uplift women and girls throughout Fiji. As Hillary Clinton wisely stated and I quote, "woman are the largest untapped reservoir of talent in the world." Let us work together to ensure this potential is recognised and nurtured, paving the way for a brighter and more equitable future for everyone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we gather in this esteemed Chamber, we must remember that our actions today will shape the future of our nation. Each decision we make carries the potential to uplift our communities and safeguards the right and freedom that lies at the heart of our democracy. Let us commit to being transparent, accountable and compassionate as we face challenges ahead. We should create an inclusive society where every voice is heard, and everyone's dignity is respected. Together, we can promote equality and respect for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in doing so, we not only honour our obligations to our constituents but also reinforce the bonds and trust between the Government and the people we serve. Together, let us work hard to protect Fiji's sovereignty and ensure a secure and prosperous future for our islands. Our priorities should align with the dreams and aspirations of our citizens, focusing on innovation and sustainability for a strong Fiji. As we discuss today, let us do so with integrity and a common vision for a brighter future, where every Fijian can succeed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the State Opening of Parliament, His Excellency, in his statement, rightfully stated that let us set our sights high and work together towards a better future for Fiji. We can create a fair nation, protect our environment, and work with neighbours for peace. Each effort we make today contributes to a sustainable tomorrow. Every person deserves equal opportunities and together we can ensure no one is left behind. Let us build a strong relationship and support each other. Together, we can create a bright future for Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note that His Excellency mentioned that the review of the Illicit Drugs Control Act has begun, and we continue to grapple with the challenges of illicit drugs in Fiji. The rising threat of illicit drug in Fiji, the consequences of drug trafficking rip through our communities, affecting our youths, families and overall safety.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to express my gratitude to the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) for its renewed commitment to assist the Fiji Police Force in this crucial battle. Together, we will enhance our resources, share intelligence and involve our communities in addressing this crisis. I call on all Members of Parliament to join forces in championing stronger legislation and improve support for rehabilitation programmes. We have a duty to ensure a safer future for our

children and to shield our beloved nation from the dangers of drug abuse. Together, let us commit to building a drug-free Fiji with determination and unity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I appreciate the Ministry for Youth for prioritising programmes that engage all youth groups in efforts to prevent young people from succumbing to the rising influence of drugs, which is an increasing concern in Fiji. These initiatives aim to educate and empower youth about the dangers of substance abuse through workshops, community engagement, and collaboration with local organisations. The Ministry is specifically reaching out to church leaders, schoolteachers, chiefs, community leaders, parents and guardians to participate in these efforts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must take this moment to extend my sincere appreciation to the honourable Prime Minister for his outstanding leadership. Under his guidance, we have made significant strides in enhancing our national security. Recently, Israel has pledged invaluable support in the provision of patrol boats, a crucial asset that will strengthen Fiji's efforts in combating illicit drugs - an alarming component of the ongoing crisis in our country.

This commitment was a result of fruitful discussions between our honourable Prime Minister and Israel's Foreign Affairs Minister during the 61st Session of the Munich Security Conference in Germany. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this partnership not only reflects our dedication to tackling pressing challenges but also highlights the importance of international cooperation in ensuring the safety of our communities. Together, we are taking proactive steps toward a safer and drug-free Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency highlighted the Government is committed to revitalizing Fiji's shipbuilding sector, which may pave the way for the establishment of a new ship building facility within the country. This initiative highlights our dedication to enhancing local industry capabilities, creating job opportunities and stimulating economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, establishing a state-of-the art shipbuilding facility will not only strengthen our maritime industry but also position Fiji as a regional hub for ship construction and repair services. We recognize the importance of investing in this sector to support sustainable development and increase our self-reliance in maritime operations. As we move forward, we will engage with industry stakeholders, technical experts and potential investors to ensure that this project meets the needs of our communities and contributes positively to our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the important insights shared by His Excellency regarding the Government's focus for 2025. As we look ahead, our priorities will centre on strengthening tourism policies, improving our infrastructure, promoting sustainability and most importantly ensuring aviation safety. A key element of this initiative is the modernization of the Civil Aviation Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important that we act quickly to advance the new Civil Aviation Bill in the House. This legislation will help us meet international safety standards and make our aviation industry more competitive. By doing this, we can attract investment, which is vital for economic growth and for keeping our strong position in the global aviation market.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is dedicated to diversifying and developing Fiji's economy. As the global landscape changes, we must embrace new opportunities. This year, we will continue to strengthen partnerships with investors eager to expand in Fiji, recognising that their contributions are vital for our economic growth and sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are launching important reforms in our employment sector to create a more dynamic labour market. As His Excellency mentioned during the State Opening of Parliament,

we will focus on labour market reforms, skills development and reviewing our employment laws. These steps will support business while protecting our workers' rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a key part of our reform agenda is introducing important legislation like the Employment Relations Bill and the Work Care Bill. These Bills will update workers' rights and boost productivity. We believe that creating a fair environment for both employers and employees will help us meet international standards and build a strong business ecosystem that benefits everyone.

Further, I am excited to announce the establishment of a National Productivity Commission. This vital institution will serve as a catalyst for innovation, efficiency, enhancing our economy and unlocking new potential for growth across various sectors. Together, we face significant challenges, but we are more than capable of overcoming them. By working together, staying committed, and implementing these strategic initiatives, we will create a brighter future for our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to discuss a crucial initiative for the future of our fisheries - the Ministry of Fisheries Strategic Development Plan 2024-2028. This Strategic Plan will focus on three main areas - offshore fisheries, coastal fisheries and aquaculture.

First, I would like to acknowledge the remarkable efforts of the Ministry of Fisheries in executing this plan, which has been made possible under the Coalition Government. Their commitment to sustainable fisheries management has established a solid foundation for new initiatives. In the next five years, this plan will help position Fiji as a leader in sustainable fisheries in the Pacific region. By focussing on these three areas, we aim to improve the fishing practice, protect our ocean resources and support the families who depend on fishing for their livelihoods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, expanding offshore fisheries will enable us to use our ocean resources responsibly. Coastal fisheries will help preserve the ecosystems that our local communities rely on, while aquaculture will create new opportunities for growth and innovation in our fisheries sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency stated that our youth are the heartbeat of our nation; you are our future. As I stand here, I feel the weight of our responsibility towards our youngest members. To our young people, your energy and passion are inspiring. Your dreams are the foundation of our future, and each of you has the potential to save our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we confront challenges like climate change, social inequality, your voices must be heard in Parliament. You are not just future leaders; you are agents of change today. Embrace your responsibility by taking action, engaging with your communities, and sharing your thoughts. The choices you make now will impact the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a message for our youth; your dreams are important. Each of you have special talents that can make a difference in the world. When you face tough times, be brave and remember to take care of your health and happiness. Support each other, be kind and spread positivity wherever you can. Together, you can create a better future for yourself and others. Together, we can build a future we are proud of. Your potential is limitless - do not hesitate to chase it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *kava* has become a significant revenue source, generating an impressive \$21.8 million in the first half of 2024, highlighting its growing demand and potential. In light of this success, I am calling on and encouraging all *kava* farmers, as well as unemployed youth, street dwellers and school leavers to explore the abundant opportunities available in the *kava* sector. The growth of this industry presents a viable pathway to sustainable livelihoods, enabling

individuals to overcome economic challenges.

Fiji is full of possibilities. With determination and innovation, our young people are experienced *kava* farmers can tap into the growing *kava* market. This partnership can revitalise communities and create brighter future for families. Together, we can turn challenges into opportunities and build a thriving environment for everyone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Premila Kumar stated that the honourable Prime Minister is losing control of the Coalition Government, but in reality, he is leading with true democracy, unlike FijiFirst's way of doing things. This Government encourages open conversations and gives people the freedom to speak without fear.

Leadership is not about control; it is about empowering people. If we truly want to move Fiji forward, we need to focus on productive conversations and viable solutions, not just pointing fingers. Building a better Fiji is about working together, contributing ideas, creating real change, not playing the blame game. At the end of the day, we have to ask ourselves:

- What kind of legacy are we leaving behind?
- What will future generations remember about us?
- Will they see a time of division and blame, or a time when we came together to build a stronger, united Fiji?

The choice is ours.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, together let us fulfil our responsibilities with integrity, compassion and hard work as we strive to build a brighter and more prosperous future for all Fijians. In conclusion, I fully endorse and commend His Excellency's gracious Address. May God bless Fiji.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguish guests, ladies and gentlemen, members of the public joining us virtually on the various platforms, *ni sa bula vinaka* and good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond and support His Excellency the President's most gracious Address during his address in the opening of the 2025-2026 Session of Parliament on Monday, 24th February, 2025.

At the outset, I would like to also put on record my congratulations and sincere thanks to His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji for his decisive leadership in this House during those turbulence times when an abrupt decision was taken by party leaders. It was His Excellency's affirmative response according to law and his wisdom that allowed me and my other 16 former members of the now de-registered FijiFirst continue to pursue our political career, aspiration and nation building into this term of Parliament. *Vinaka saka vakalevu na veiliutaki dei.*

Mr. Speaker, I wish to begin by thanking the honourable Prime Minister for his faith and confidence in me in bestowing the position of Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services. Honourable Prime Minister, Sir, I vow to carry out my duty to the best of my ability and repay your faith in me by assisting and supporting my line Minister, as he steers the Ministry's ship towards the Ministry's vision of having a healthier population in Fiji. To the honourable Minister for Health, Sir, I thank you for the assistance and advice rendered to me in just a few weeks in office.

The 44th President of the United States of America, Mr. Barack Obama in his maiden speech some 16 years ago stated, and I quote:

“Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real. They are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this, America, they will be met.”

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, I wish to reiterate the same message to all Fijians today. Continue to have faith in your Government and in the Ministry and its service. With our far too long ignored health infrastructure, not the best equipment to work with in our health setting and the poor planning over the years, has no doubt given us enormous pain, lost opportunities and greater challenges. My plea to all Fijians with limited resources, give us time and we will surely get there together.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also would like to acknowledge the support of the entire Apostle Fellowship International Church (the church that I lead) for your prayers and for your support. Also, to my family, I thank my family for the support that they rendered to me in this time.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today with deep gratitude and profound sense of duty to respond to the inspiring and visionary speech delivered by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, who is a distinguished leader of the Tovata Confederacy, *Na Turaga na Tui Cakau*. His Excellency's words serve as a guiding light for our nation calling for unity, shared responsibility and collective progress for our beloved Fiji.

His Excellency has reminded us that the change we seek must begin in this very Parliament. As elected leaders, we carry the trust of our people, and it is our duty to work together, rising with the tide as one nation. The vision of rebuilding Fiji together is not just a call to action, it is an obligation that requires us to move forward in unity, embracing our diversity as our greatest strength.

In strengthening our health sector for a united Fiji, Mr. Speaker, as Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services, I reaffirm my unwavering commitment to ensuring that the health and wellbeing of every Fijian remains my top priority. His Excellency has underscored the importance of strengthening our healthcare system, ensuring equitable access to quality medical care services, and fostering resilience in the face of emerging public health challenges. In alignment with his vision, the honourable Minister of Health and the Medical Services will continue its efforts to improve primary healthcare services, ensuring accessibility in urban, rural, and our maritime communities.

Health is not merely a government responsibility, it is a shared commitment that involves communities, faith-based organisations, civil society, the whole of Government and the private sector. We will continue fostering collaborative efforts to promote preventive healthcare, wellness and a healthier Fiji. In his speech, His Excellency spoke about Government's plan to improve the Ministry's infrastructure and modernise our healthcare facilities around the country.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry is committed to improving the long-neglected health infrastructure, ensuring better planning and prioritisation to be in line with the increasing population and our evolving healthcare demands. The Ministry of Health and Medical Services is committed to carrying out its planned infrastructural improvement activity to upgrade and improve its over 200 health facilities around the country.

I am pleased to inform this august House that we have already commenced critical renovation and infrastructure upgrade across the country. Now, for that side of the House to spill out that the honourable Minister of Health is not doing anything, is not true. In fact, we are now fixing up the shambles that were left behind by the previous Government.

In November last year, our maintenance team have completed renovation work, that includes the roofing, plumbing, tiling and painting work at Udu Nursing Station, Fulaga, Ogea, Namuka-i-Lau, Moce and Komo Nursing Stations in the Southern Lau Group. Later this month, the maintenance team will undertake....

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

I urge honourable Members to give the opportunity to the speaker to speak and explain in his speech what he is in support of and give his response to His Excellency's Address. Give him the opportunity!

You may continue, honourable Member.

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

In November last year, our maintenance team completed renovation works, including painting at those Nursing Stations and health facilities. Later this month, the maintenance team will undertake renovation works at Soso and Vacalea Nursing Stations in Kadavu. This will then be followed by planned renovation works at Ono-i-Lau Health Centre, Vatoa Nursing Station, Totoya Nursing Station, Moala Health Centre and Nasoki Nursing Station on Moala Island, the Matuku Health Centre and Levuka-i-Daku Nursing Station on Matuku Island in Lau. Renovations are planned by April this year for Nayau Nursing Station, Vanuavatu Nursing Station, Lomaloma Hospital and Mualevu Nursing Station on Vanuabalavu Island.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Western Division health infrastructure development, renovations has commenced at the Raiwaqa Nursing Station in the Province of Navosa, Bukuya Health Centre, Momi Nursing Station, Tavua Hospital, Nadi Hospital, fencing project at Nagatagata and Nadarivatu health facilities, sewer line upgrade for Balevuto and Nailaga, Ba, and quarters for the SDMO in Ba. Similarly, the Ministry has planned renovation works and fencing of Viwa Nursing Station and Somosomo Nursing Station in the Yasawa Group.

For the Northern Division, maintenance work has also been scheduled for Lekutu Health Centre at Nakadrudru, Nakorovatu Health Centre in the *Tikina* of Wailevu, Wainikoro Health Centre, Visoqo Nursing Station in the *Tikina* of Namuka, Vunivutu Nursing Station in the *Tikina* of Nadogo and Kubulau Nursing Station in Bua for this calendar year.

For the Central Division, infrastructure development for Namara Nursing Station, Mokani Health Centre, Lomaivuna Nursing Quarters, Nuffield Health Centre in Tamavua, Vunidawa Subdivisional Hospital and Dawasamu Clinic extension as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition, the Ministry of Health has completed the purchase, installation and commissioning of new backup generators for various health facilities which include Wainibokasi Hospital, Nausori Health Centre, Baulevu Nursing Station, Namara Nursing Station, Lami Health Centre, Samabula Health Centre, Raiwaqa Health Centre and Nuffield Health Centre, as well as the Divisional Office in Tamavua. The budgetary allocation for this is \$1.5 million. This has been fully utilised, and these projects are ready in the Central Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also working closely with our development partners for their support and assistance towards infrastructure development. The New Zealand Ministry of Foreign

Affairs and Trade (MFAT) have undertaken and completed a number of refurbishments and upgrade works in the Central Division, such as the one at Galoa Nursing Station, Makoi Health Centre, Nausori Health Centre, Wainibokasi Hospital and the newly built Dogo Nursing Station in Tailevu. Sir, MFAT also refurbished Momi Nursing Station, as well as built a new quarters for the staff nurse, which will be opened shortly.

Sir, KOICA funded and the WHO implemented the Strengthening Health Adaptation Project (SHAPE) on the renovation of health facilities in the Central and Western Divisions. This project will cover necessary maintenance and repair at Naililili Nursing Station in Rewa, Nasoqo Nursing Station in the interior of Naitasiri, Navunikabi Nursing Station in the Province of Namosi, Nayavu Health Centre in Wainibuka and Verata Nursing Station in Tailevu.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the SHAPE project will undertake solarisation projects for health clinics and staff quarters in 17 health stations around the country which include Tukavesi Health Centre, Vuna Nursing Station, Nabouono Nursing Station in the Northern Division, Tuvuca Nursing Station, Talaulia Nursing Station and Lakeba Hospital in the Eastern Division, and Kese Health Centre and Vatulele Health Centre in the Western Division.

The Ministry is also working with UNICEF and the Ministry for Public Work for additional solarisation projects at targeted health facilities going towards renewable energy. The Ministry is not only focussed on maintenance work for small Health Centres, they are also working to upgrade sub-divisional and divisional hospitals that are under the public health sector.

The Ministry is working with the Public Works Department for large projects such as the refurbishment, electrical upgrade for Labasa Hospital, Navua Hospital, Tavua Hospital and Rakiraki Hospital, which have been budgeted for this financial year. Also, I am happy to inform that the four new elevators for CWM Hospital have arrived in the country, and the overseas-based installation engineers are expected into the country shortly to undertake the installation and commissioning work in the next few months.

Also, the new 128 Slice CT scan machine donated by JICA has arrived and has been installed at CWM Hospital. The machine is awaiting commissioning in a not too distant future. Another similar size CT scan has been purchased by the Ministry and is now positioned at Labasa Hospital. Once the electrical upgrade work for Labasa Hospital has been completed, the CT scan for the Northern Division will also be commissioned then.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, work on the construction and installation of medical incinerator is ongoing at the landfill in Naboro. The medical incinerator was funded by the World Bank as part of the COVID-19 pandemic response support and will serve the health facility in the Central Division. As alluded to by the honourable Minister for Health, yesterday the FJ\$14.5 million DFAT funding for CWMH Redevelopment Project is progressing well with a number of critical phases of the project already completed.

The honourable Prime Minister has launched the project for the Priority Infrastructure Planning (PIP) on 31st January this year, and the Australian Government has committed an additional FJ\$14.5 million for the essential upgrade work of the hospital while the master planning work for the new hospital continues. The PIP report will now guide the much-needed work that will be undertaken at CWM Hospital in the coming months while services at the Hospital will continue.

With the fleet of medical boats and vehicles, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also committed to upgrading and improving the fleet of vehicles and boats that are used for transportation of staff and patients at our various health facilities. In the last 12 months, the Ministry has provided new

medical boats and engines for Kavala Health Centre, Gau Health Centre and Lakeba Hospital in the Eastern Division, Visoqo Nursing Station in the *Tikina* of Namuka and Tawake Nursing Station towards Udu Point, Naililili Nursing Station in Rewa and Raviravi Nursing Station in the Central Division.

The Ministry plans to continue its efforts to upgrade its fleet of medical boats and also its ambulance services. The honourable Minister would like to record his sincere appreciation to the Ministry for Finance and Strategic Planning and National Development for the support in contracting private ambulances to complement the work of hospital-based ambulances. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also looking forward to the commissioning of six new ambulances donated by the Government of Japan to be distributed soon to our hospitals and health centres.

Digital health and modernising our health services also requires the Ministry to engage into the use of more digital and virtual space to improve our healthcare service delivery. The Ministry is implementing its Digital Health Strategy 2023-2027 and continues to work with our partners to improve integration and interoperability amongst the many information systems in use at the Ministry.

At the moment, 18 percent of our healthcare facilities have low bandwidth connection and 9 percent are yet to be connected to internet connectivity due to geographical challenges. The Ministry will pursue similar partnership to improve access to digital health in our rural and maritime health facilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in improving our essential medicine, His Excellency the President in his Address also pointed out ongoing effort to improve procurement of medicine that will result in better access to essential medicine for our patients. The Fiji Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Services (FPBS) have completed the rollout of the mSUPPLY inventory management system for medicine and medical products across our health facilities.

For the last 12 months, the experience gained and learnings are useful to improve the system. So far the average processing time for request of supplies from FPBS have been reduced from about one week to now only one and a half days to complete the process. The Ministry has also started facilitating the procurement process through using the mSUPPLY system. Initial attempts to show significant reduction in processing time, procurement of supplies from our overseas source, the Ministry will continue to progress this further.

In June 2024, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Warehouse Rua that was funded by the World Bank of approximately \$1.9 million was opened at Vatuwaqa and has now housed the biomedical equipment and consumables for the Central Division. Later this month, the Warehouse Tolu which is funded by JICA will be opened in Labasa in the Northern Division. This will ensure that medicine and medical supplies required by health facilities in the Northern Division are supplied from a nearby warehouse rather than waiting for supplies to come from the main warehouse in Suva. Establishing similar warehouse arrangement for the Western Division is in the radar for the Ministry of Health and Medical Services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we continue to work to improve the supply of medicine and medical supply for our health facility, it is equally important to understand access to supplies is also impacted by the global supply chain for these medical products. We, as a nation, must be on par with our planning on mitigating the supply chain challenges as we move on, Mr. Speaker.

Collaboration with other partners, the Ministry is also working diligently to collaborate and build enduring fruitful partnerships. We have established a Donor Coordination Unit under the Ministry and we are very grateful to our multitude of donors, partners, volunteers, friends and

patriotic organisations and individuals such as DFAT, MFAT, JICA, KOICA, USAID, Rotary, Fiji Red Cross, embassies, the High Commissioners of Australia, New Zealand, China, India, Korea and Japan and many non-government organisations, faith-based organisations, civil society organisations who support the Ministry in the delivery of health services to the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may continue, His Excellency also warned us against the danger of misinformation, division and rhetoric that erode the very fabric of our society. In this age of rapid communication, we must be mindful of the narratives we promote, ensuring that our discussions remain constructive, respectful and solution-driven instead of engaging in trolling, falsehood and divisive discourse. We must focus on dialogue that unite us rather than divide us; something that builds us rather than destroys us. As leaders, we must lead by example, fostering an environment where differences are set aside in pursuit of a greater goal -peace, growth and prosperity.

I will conclude now, Mr. Speaker. If I may, I wish to further express my sincere appreciation to His Excellency for his leadership, wisdom and dedication, and I wholeheartedly support the motion moved by the honourable Prime Minister before the House this afternoon. I thank you for the extra time.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services for stealing a few minutes after that, and also for introducing me to another new word today, “solarisation”, added to securitisation from yesterday. This morning, we had projectisation.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; I rise before this august House to commend His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji for his powerful opening Address to this Parliament. His Excellency's vision is clear. We must be bold in action, unified in purpose and unwavering in our commitment to building a prosperous Fiji. He also reminded us that true leadership demands foresight, resilience and service to the people.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways takes that charge seriously. We will act decisively to strengthen food security, empower farmers and drive economic transformation. The Ministry will not stand on the sidelines and settle for mediocrity.

Building a stronger agriculture sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency reminded us that a strong economy must be built on a strong foundation, and that foundation includes:

- (1) diversifying the economy - expanding agriculture, tourism and digital innovation;
- (2) modernising infrastructure - upgrading roads, ports, and power systems to boost productivity; and
- (3) reforming laws - ensuring policies match the evolving aspirations of our people.

These are not just aspirations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are commitments.

The results speak for themselves. Over the past two years, Fiji's agricultural exports have surged from 15.8 percent growth in 2021-2022 to 20.1 percent in 2023-2024. Turmeric exports alone is projected to reach \$27.3 million this year, up from \$24.6 million and so is *kava* exports, as we speak, to over \$20 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we speak, a company called Island Magic that specialises in turmeric production and processing is actively pursuing the development of 100 acres of turmeric planting with plans to plant another 300 acres up in the Cuvu Hills in Nadroga. Farmers are producing. They

are selling, they are earning, and this Government is standing behind them every step of the way. Let me say this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that financial liberation for Fiji is in agriculture. It is a tangible goal that is strategically and revolutionary achievable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency challenged us to be proactive. The Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways accepts the challenge. We are investing in our farmers, we are protecting our land, and we are securing our future. We are reviving traditional crops. Cocoa and coffee production is back.

In places like Nasautoka in Wainibuka, we are building better nurseries, farm roads, and developing over 300 acres of land to plant thousands of new cocoa seedlings. We are also strengthening the beef sector in the Nadi and Navosa highlands, Saivou and Tailevu. We are improving pastures, controlling diseases and using advance breeding technology to develop the beef sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to speak in the vernacular to address our beef farmers.

Mutu cola vina na dau susu manumanu, susu bulumakau mai na colo - na yata kei Navosa. Kemutou mai Vunamoli, Uto, Nawaqadamu e na Tikina o Rukuruku ena yasana o Ba, o kemutou mai Vagadra, Nasovotava, Narewa e na Tikina o Nawaicoba ena yasana o Nadroga/Navosa. Cola vina muni ga kemutou mai Navosa i yata, na Tikina o Namataku, Nasikawa kei Noikoro.

Cola vina Master Peniona Masirewa. Vina valevu djina na gumatuatakinia koto na susu bulumakau me kana ke o Viji. Vina valevu.

The Ministry for Agriculture and Waterways is also boosting dairy production. We are upgrading farm infrastructure and ensuring better returns for our famers.

We are also expanding pork production, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Recently I opened the Waibogi Piggery in Sigatoka which is a 300 unit that will add 170 tonnes of pork annually to Fiji's food supply. Sir, I wish to acknowledge the two brothers, Ronald and Ritesh Sharma and their family in Yadua, Sigatoka, for their commitment to re-invest back into their country of birth, in this case investing in 300-sow unit piggery, making use of the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways Equity Grant Assistance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency made it clear that Fiji must be resilient in the phase of climate change and the Ministry takes that responsibility seriously.

In terms of Waterways and Flood Control, the Ministry is investing in the repairing of the existing waterways infrastructure which includes the repairing of weirs and the procuring of dredgers and excavators to help in the mitigation, to the point of prevention or flooding in most of our flood prone areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me talk about expanding rice production also. With rising global rice prices, Fiji must produce more of its own rice. The Ministry of Agriculture, through Government, is investing in irrigation, farm roads and land clearing to make this happen.

Fiji Rice expects a bumper crop of more than 2,000 tonnes this season, the largest that we have gone is 1,685 tonnes in 2021. With the \$1,000 a tonne price of paddy being the highest ever, I have been told by the Chairman of Fiji Rice that this is expected to be revised upwards.

Climate change is not waiting, and neither will we. We will redesign our floodgates, we will replace their infrastructure holding them together and we will invest in seawalls.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency reminded us that true progress is built on knowledge. That is why we are institutionalising agriculture research to ensure it remains innovative, efficient and relevant.

Additionally, over the next five years we will review 26 key agricultural laws, in partnership with UNFAO and the Fiji Law Reform Commission to modernise our legal framework. We are also reviewing six agricultural public enterprises to increase efficiency, reduce reliance on Government support, and improve service delivery. Progress is not accidental, it is intentional.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our farmers are producing more than ever, but production alone is not enough. We must connect them to the markets. The Agricultural Marketing Authority (AMA) has doubled its purchases from farmers, from \$200,000 worth of purchases to \$400,000 worth of purchases per month. The Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF) has been tasked to open new trade pathways, allowing more Fijian produce to reach international markets. That is just the beginning; more investments in market access, transport, and collection centres is coming.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency emphasised the need for inclusivity, and agriculture must work for everyone. We are helping small-scale farmers move to semi-commercial production. We are empowering women and youth through dedicated programmes. We are strengthening home gardening, community food security, and launching farm-to-school initiatives.

This week, we are hosting the National Women in Agriculture Symposium, a platform to recognise and support the women who are transforming our agricultural sector. At the same time, we are investing in value-adding and agribusiness models, ensuring farmers earn not just from raw produce, but from finished products.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency reminded us that agriculture is not just about food, it is about survival, it is about security, and it is about sovereignty. We must build a Fiji that can feed itself, export to the world, and stand strong against any challenge. This Ministry, under my leadership, will be bold, decisive and relentless in pursuit of this goal.

I thank His Excellency for his vision. I thank my dedicated team for their hard work, and I look forward to a productive Parliamentary session ahead. Congratulations, farmers! You have done well for Fiji. You have made sure that there is always food available for every one of us. Mr. Speaker, Sir, with that, I support the motion before the House.

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

The honourable Speaker of Parliament, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, in the gallery and those connected to Parliament this afternoon, *ni sa bula vinaka, namaste, assalamu alaykum* and *faiak se'ea*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me to speak and respond to His Excellency's most gracious Speech at the opening of the Parliament on Monday, 24th February, 2025. I thank His Excellency, the President, for a wonderful Address to Parliament on the importance of democracy,

human rights, and development. Also, that provides an opportunity for us to reflect on our collective vision for our beloved nation, the vision that is centred on progress, prosperity, unity, and most importantly drug consumption in Fiji, our youth. I would like to quote from His Excellency addressing us as Members of Parliament, and I quote:

“As a nation, we must walk together in unity, ensuring that no one is left behind in our quest for economic growth, national security, prosperity and sustainable development.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to focus the attention of this august House on the development works in all parts of Viti Levu, Vanua Levu, Rotuma and all small islands.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I want to express my sincere thanks to the Government for the ongoing efforts to improve the standard of living and for the development works being done across Fiji. These initiatives are truly appreciated.

While we are grateful for the progress made, I would also like to respectfully bring to the Government's attention that more development needs still exists in certain areas in Fiji. We believe that continued focus on these areas will further enhance the wellbeing of the people of our country. We are confident that with the Government's dedication, these necessary developments can be achieved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, I fully agree with His Excellency when he highlighted that as honourable Members of this august House, the immense responsibility that comes with representing the diverse voices and aspirations of the people. We must listen to the voice of the people who we represent. Everything we do in this House must be for the people, by the people and to the people.

Mr. Speaker, the need for our public servants to work hard and get in touch with the grassroots people and inform us as Members of Parliament the needs of the people on the ground.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all these points to serving my country and the people who voted us to this august House. I thank you for your indulgence and patience. May God bless Fiji and all Fijians.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and my fellow citizens; *mu sa cola vina* and warm greetings to you all.

At the outset, please, allow me to extend my heartfelt congratulations to His Excellency the President of Fiji on his election to the highest office in the land. His distinguished service as the former Speaker of the House, his vast experience, and his unwavering commitment to the people of Fiji, make him a most deserving choice for this esteemed position. We look forward to his guidance and wisdom as we collectively work towards a more prosperous and united Fiji.

Before I make my response, allow me, Sir, to congratulate the following:

- (1) Tamai Hellen – Mr. Tevita Rokovereni, for setting a good example to our young people pursuing the same profession in sports. With that, I thank the new Minister for Immigration and his staff for assisting Te with issues related to his passport.
- (2) Moreover, the leadership demonstrated by our honourable Prime Minister has not only paved the way for political clarity and entitlement but also exemplifies the value of bipartisanship and co-operation. I remain optimistic about what lies ahead as we continue to work together for the betterment of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is with great honour that I stand before this august House to deliver this parliamentary statement in response to the inspirational and visionary Address by His Excellency the President of Fiji at the opening of the 2025 Parliamentary Session. I share the sentiments of my colleagues on both sides of the House, that His Excellency's words remind us of our collective duty to shape a Fiji that is united in purpose, that is prosperous, inclusive and resilient.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to reiterate His Excellency's message in this august House on Monday, 24th February, 2025, in moving this motion, and I quote:

“Let us take a moment to recognise the resilience and strength of our people, and to pay tribute to our founding fathers, our past leaders and honourable Members who have served in this august House, laying the foundation upon which we stand today.”

I am pleading with every honourable Member of Parliament to work together in laying a better foundation for the future of this nation and its people. As the Minister for Youth and Sports, I reaffirm my Ministry's commitment to ensuring that our young people are at the heart of our national development agenda, and that sports remain a powerful tool for unity, empowerment and national progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's youth form the backbone of our nation, comprising of 40 percent of our population. The current figures indicate that approximately 70 percent of our population is under 40 years. This indicates that we have a very young population. Our young people are the drivers of innovation, the champions of change, and the architects of a future that is built on resilience, inclusivity and sustainable growth.

In his very own words, His Excellency the President said, 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, His Excellency's Address underscored the importance of equipping our youth with skills, knowledge and values to contribute meaningfully to national development. To that end, the Ministry for Youth and Sports has undertaken numerous initiatives to empower our youth across diverse sectors. Our focus remains on education, employment, leadership, entrepreneurship, digital transformation, climate action and social development. We are committed to ensuring that no young person is left behind.

The Ministry has made significant strides in empowering our youth by providing them with opportunities for skill development, leadership and employment. These programmes aim to instil resilience, responsibility and innovation among our young people, ensuring that they are empowered and prepared to lead Fiji into a progressive future. These programmes include:

(1) Expansion of Youth Training Centres

Over the past year, the Ministry has strengthened our Youth Training Centres to provide Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) to young people, particularly those who fall out through the cracks of the formal education system. The curriculum now includes leadership training, entrepreneurship, financial literacy, sustainable agriculture and life skills training.

(2) Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programmes for Street Youths

In line with our commitment to social inclusion, we have worked closely with stakeholders to develop rehabilitation and skills development programmes for street youths and marginalised young people. This initiative offers them pathways for employment, education and community engagement.

(3) Christmas on the Park Programme

The Ministry successfully implemented the Christmas on the Park Programme which provided outreach to around 160 street youths and children, ensuring that they felt included during the festive season, and received guidance on available youth development programmes as well as redirecting them towards rehabilitation platforms available.

(4) Implementation of Youth Festivals Across Provinces

The Ministry successfully organised youth festivals in Provinces such as Bua, Cakaudrove, Lau, Ba and Kadavu, and will continue across the 14 Provinces, with the intention to encourage young people to be responsible, resilient and productive members of their communities. These festivals have served as platforms for youth engagement, showcasing talent and promoting leadership and social responsibility.

(5) Conducting Mobile Skills Training Programmes

The Ministry has conducted mobile skills training across the nation, partnering with relevant stakeholders and providing essential skills such as small engine repair, basic cookery, customer service skills, IT skills, crop and livestock farming skills, beauty and massage therapy, caregiving, flower arrangement and others. These programmes are designed to enhance employability skills and create pathways to further education, ensuring that our young people are equipped with practical skills for economic independence.

(6) Professionalisation of Youth Work

The Ministry has embarked on the professionalisation of youth work in partnership with APTC. This initiative ensures that officers engaged in youth work are qualified and equipped to handle young people and their issues effectively, raising the standard of youth services and enhancing youth engagement outcomes.

(7) Hosting the Regional Senior Officials Meeting and the Pacific Ministers Youth Meeting

A significant milestone was the successful hosting of the Pacific Minister's Youth Meeting, where youths were involved with senior officials and Youth Ministers deliberating on key issues around the Pacific with the Pacific Youth Development Framework and the concept of "Casting the Net Anew". This initiative focuses on strengthening youth engagement and leadership across the Pacific, ensuring that our young people play an integral role shaping regional development policies.

(7) Leadership and Governance Training

To foster a new generation of leaders, we have enhanced our youth leadership development programmes focusing on governance, policy making and regional diplomacy. This aligns with the Pacific Youth Minister's meeting outcomes and ensures Fiji's youth are ready to engage in regional and global platforms.

(8) Establishment of Youth Club Cooperatives

In addition to the registration of youth clubs, we have also established the registered Youth Club Cooperatives, enabling young people to engage in collective entrepreneurship, resource-sharing and financial independence. These cooperatives provide a structured

platform for youth to collaborate on income-generating activities, fostering self-reliance and sustainable economic participation.

On our future plans for youth development, Sir, building on the achievements of past years, the Ministry will expand its outreach and introduce new initiatives to address the evolving needs of our young people. Our focus will be on fostering entrepreneurship, ensuring greater access to technology and equipping our young people with critical life and professional skills to navigate an increasingly complex world. Our plans include:

- (1) Expansion of Mobile Training Programmes
We will expand mobile skills training to reach more rural and maritime communities, providing training in technology, financial literacy, renewable energy, and small business management to enhance employment opportunities.
- (2) Strengthening Mental Health Support for Youth
We will work with stakeholders to establish youth-friendly mental health programmes that provide counselling, advocacy and awareness to support youth wellbeing.
- (3) Increase Investment in Digital Literacy
The Ministry will provide digital literacy programmes, ensuring young people are equipped with skills in cybersecurity, and e-commerce to thrive in the digital economy.
- (4) Youth Leadership and Civic Engagement
We will strengthen programmes that develop youth leadership in governance, peacebuilding and regional diplomacy to foster responsible citizenship and community engagement.
- (5) Community-Based Youth Empowerment Initiatives
The Ministry will continue expanding community-based programmes that provide mentorship, career guidance and practical skills to ensure holistic youth development.
- (6) National Youth Policy Evaluation
An evaluation of the National Youth Policy will be undertaken to ensure it aligns with emerging priorities and remains relevant to the needs of our youths.
- (7) Youth Entrepreneurship and Innovation Programmes
Recognizing the potential of our youth in driving economic growth, we will ensure that preliminary works on Youth Innovation and Entrepreneurship Hub to support start-ups, green businesses, and creative industries is enhanced, aligning with the Government's commitment to economic diversification.

Sports Development as a national priority, Mr. Speaker, sports is an essential component of national development, fostering unity, wellbeing, and national pride. The Ministry for Youth and Sports remains committed to advancing sports development at all levels, ensuring that athletes, coaches and sporting organisations have the necessary resources to excel.

Key Achievements in Sports Development, Mr. Speaker, sports in Fiji is more than just recreation, it is a unifying force that fosters national pride, social inclusion and economic growth. The Ministry for Youth and Sports is committed to ensuring that sports development is inclusive, sustainable, and contributes to the overall wellbeing of our communities. We recognise that investing in sports infrastructure, athlete development and governance reforms will pave the way for a more competitive and resilient sports industry in Fiji.

This year, for the first time after a long time, the Ministry is paying courtesy visits to our sporting organisations including FASANOC. It was a time of sharing information, sharing Government's vision for sports through the Ministry and listening to challenges of the respective sporting organisations. We also had a one-day planning session with Fiji Sports Council and Fiji National Sports Commission on possible areas of collaboration primarily to streamline processes and ensure effective service delivery in areas of sports development.

Through our collaboration with regional and international sports organisations, we continue to strengthen Fiji's standing as a hub for sports tourism, and a leader in athletic development in the Pacific. By leveraging sports for social and economic progress, we aim to provide opportunities for both elite athletes and grassroots participants to excel and contribute to national unity and development.

Sports play a crucial role in shaping the lives of our youth by instilling values of teamwork, discipline and perseverance. Beyond its recreational and entertainment value, sports have significant economic and health benefits. By providing structured pathways for young athletes, enhancing grassroots programmes and fostering professional sports governance, we aim to create an ecosystem where sporting excellence is nurtured, and participation is encouraged at all levels.

The Ministry will continue to focus on expanding access to quality sports facilities, enhancing athlete preparation programmes, and creating pathways for professional careers in sports. As we look ahead, our commitment to a stronger, more vibrant sports sector remains unwavering. Sports is an essential component of national development, fostering unity, wellbeing and national pride. The Ministry of Youth and Sports remains committed to advancing sports development at all levels, ensuring that athletes, coaches and sporting organisations have the necessary resources to excel.

Recognising the transformative power of sports, our Ministry has been proactive in creating pathways for both grassroots and elite-level athletes. Investment in infrastructure, training programmes and national policies has been key in ensuring that sports remain a vital part of Fiji's national identity. Further to the above, I am happy to also report on the following:

(1) New Board for the National Anti-Doping Organisation

A new Board has been proposed and finalised awaiting endorsement. This comes after the endorsement of the National Anti-Doping Act in October 2024, with the primary role to manage the National Anti-Doping Organisation (Drugs Free Sports Fiji), ensuring compliance with international standards and reinforcing Fiji's commitment to clean sports.

(2) Review of the Fiji National Sports Commission

The review exercise has commenced this month and should conclude in the next two months. Focus is on Fiji National Sports Commission, ensuring that its policies, programmes and operations align with the evolving needs of the sports sector with its delivery relevant and impactful.

(3) Investment in Sports Infrastructure

The Ministry has upgraded and developed new sports facilities in terms of hard courts and rural sports grounds to ensure accessible and high-quality infrastructure for athletes and communities across Fiji. This financial year, we have been tasked to complete three multi-

purpose courts across Fiji and upgrade ten rural sports grounds.

(4) Sports Tourism

In collaboration with Ministry of Tourism, Fiji has successfully hosted various regional and international tournaments, boosted sports tourism and strengthened our position as a hub for sporting excellence in the Pacific.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President's Address has set the tone for the work ahead. The Ministry of Youth and Sports stands ready to empower our youth, elevate sports development and contribute to a prosperous and unified Fiji. We reaffirm our commitment to transformational leadership, inclusivity, and resilience, ensuring that every young person and athlete has the opportunity to excel and contribute meaningfully to our nation.

Together, let us build a dynamic and thriving Fiji, where youth aspirations are realised and sports continue to inspire our national pride and unity. I would like to close by sharing the *Turaga Bale Na Tui Cakau*, His Excellency the President's own Cakaudrove idiom that was the theme of the Cakaudrove Provincial Multi-Ethnic Youth Festival late last year, and I quote: "*Ena vu'u ni siga ni saubogi; ni'ua.*" Meaning, for tomorrow; it is now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the work of laying a better foundation for our beloved nation and its people must start now. May God bless Fiji and her people.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, given the time of the day and for the purposes of complying with Standing Orders with respect to sitting time, 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, Sir, I move:

Under Standing Order 6, that so much of Standing Order 23(1) be 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 two more contributors to the response to His Excellency the President Address - honourable Agni Deo Singh and honourable Charan Jeath Singh and as per notification to the honourable Speaker, in terms of the Consideration of Bills, No. 5 in the Order Paper.

MR. SPEAKER.- The floor is now open for debate on the motion, if any.

There is none. I presume that the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament will forego his right of reply because there has been intervention from the floor.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Thank you, Sir.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, at this juncture we will now suspend the proceeding for a break and Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.07 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.42 p.m.

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

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians; *Mia'u bula re, assalam alaikum, sat sri akaal, namaste* and a very good afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the honourable Prime Minister and my colleagues in congratulating His Excellency on his recent appointment to the highest office of our land and his timely insights. Before I turn to updates from my portfolio, Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to commend His Excellency the President for his thought-provoking Address.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I express gratitude to His Excellency for his inspiring speech. His words lay a strong foundation for our work ahead, emphasising commitment to progress, unity and prosperity for all Fijians. His leadership guides us towards a brighter future, and we value his wisdom as we uphold democracy and strengthen our communities for a thriving Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency highlighted the Government's commitment to economic diversification and investor partnerships, calling for collaboration and resilience. He emphasised the strengthening of the labour market and social protections, and the role of mediation in promoting industrial harmony, business sustainability and economic prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency outlined the Coalition Government's goals for the upcoming year, focussing on modernising legislation to support economic growth. A key commitment is to reform Fiji's employment laws expeditiously. I commend His Excellency for prioritising labour market reforms, skills development and employment law reviews, which aim to modernise workers' rights and enhance productivity for a competitive economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reaffirm that my Ministry's role is to serve all Fijians seeking decent and sustainable employment. This is our commitment to continuous improvement for all Fijians, ensuring that no one is left behind. This reform modernises employment laws, enhances employment relations, and promotes economic prosperity. It reaffirms our commitment to fundamental workers' rights and a fair labour market for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the employment law review involved extensive dialogue with stakeholders, including employers and workers' representatives, and Government agencies. My Ministry has proposed two new employment bills for consideration by this august House, and these are:

- (1) Employment Relations (Amendment) Bill; and
- (2) Work Care Bill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Employment Relations Bill seeks to protect human rights in employment by safeguarding vulnerable workers, restoring and enhancing rights, and promoting gender inclusivity. It aims to align with ILO Conventions, improve dispute resolution, enforce mechanisms, and access to justice, at the same time, recognising the private sector's role in economic growth. The review will also address numerous breaches of the ILO Conventions ratified by Fiji. The work done in this respect, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by the Coalition Government in the past two years has been positively acknowledged by ILO, and we have regained our respect in this august body that has a membership of almost 180 States.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is about ensuring that Fijian workers enjoy the fundamental rights and protections they deserve while also providing employers with a clear legal framework within which to operate. The law is investor-friendly and is designed to attract future investments through fair terms and conditions of employment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, general statements have been made in this House that businesses are closing which is completely unfounded and mischievous. On the contrary, existing businesses are expanding and new ones are opening. Just need to look around, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the proposed Work Care Bill provides a no-fault compensation scheme for personal injury or death related to employment and school activities. Compensation will be managed by the Work Care Fund under the Ministry for Employment, ensuring efficient processing through a one-stop-shop system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, effective 1st June, 2024, my Ministry has taken over employment in school-accident case processing from the ACCF agent, Veritas Finance Private Limited saving the Government approximately \$1.2 million annually. The Ministry processed 381 cases in seven months, exceeding the ACCF's annual average of 222. This month, another \$561,000 will be paid out using up the entire \$6 million budget for the financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has implemented a historic wage adjustment increase, increasing Fiji's minimum wage by 25 percent and sectorial wages by 21 percent for this financial year. This is to improve the lives of vulnerable workers and their families, promote fairness in the labour market and enhance the national economic prosperity. While we cannot, Mr. Speaker Sir, control the price rise due to external factors, higher take-home pay will ease things for the ordinary workers and their families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the wage increase was implemented after considering consideration for both workers and businesses to thrive, especially small and medium enterprises. The Government introduced measures to help businesses adapt, aiming to enhance economic security, stimulate local demand and strengthen the Fijian economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was noted that it took the previous government some seven years to increase the national minimum wage from \$2.68 to \$4, an increase of \$1.32. The Coalition Government is increasing the minimum wage by \$1 in eight months. We also engaged local consultant to carry out the entire exercise at a much lower cost than the overseas based ones who were engaged in the past. The 10 sectorial wages councils are now in place and will regularly monitor and adjust wages periodically, and these councils are also privatised which means we have representatives from workers, employers and government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a key aspect of decent work is enabling workers to organise and negotiate collectively for their rights, ensuring that they have a significant influence on their employment terms and conditions. This is a fundamental right as per Conventions 87 and 98 ratified by Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was something that was not respected by the previous government despite continuous reminders by the ILO. Just for the record, they had stripped workers and trade unions off their fundamental rights, and of course, killed tri-partisan. I said just for the record, we must not forget history. Union leaders were arrested, detained, charged and brought to court, just to harass and instil fear in them and after a few years the charges were eventually withdrawn. They imposed fixed term contracts on civil servants and threatened them with termination if they spoke up. Thanks to the Coalition Government, this is now a thing of the past. Mr. Speaker, Sir, true democracy has been restored.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not at all blame the former Labour Ministers because they would have wanted things otherwise, but they did not have a say, unfortunately. The workplace can experience disagreements, but reforms are in place to ensure dialogue and dispute resolution. These encourage constructive discussions between employers and workers in consulting and collaborating with each other to effectively address employment challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are committed to eliminating all forms of discrimination in the workplace based on grounds such as race, gender, religion and disability. We firmly believe that everyone deserves an equal chance to contribute to our economy and society regardless of their background.

The establishment of the National Productivity Commission of Fiji is vital to enhancing productivity in Fiji and promoting business sustainability and competitiveness. It aims to improve efficiency, reduce wastage and foster innovation in key sectors like, agriculture, manufacturing and tourism. This initiative will support the Government's goals of economic growth, job creation and improved living standards, helping businesses adapt to regional and global challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry is adapting to global changes by collaborating with the ILO and the International Organization of Migration (IOM) to review Fiji's employment policy and develop a National Labour Mobility Policy. Our labour mobility programme such as PALM and RSE Schemes exemplify Fiji's economic diversification through bilateral agreements. Benefits include remittances, increased family income, growth of small enterprises and skills acquisition.

While acknowledging opportunities, we are also addressing challenges. For local employment, my Ministry is organising job fairs to bring together potential workers and employers. The past three events have been a resounding success, and the next one will be organised later this month. We also facilitate workplace attachments to unemployed young graduates to enhance their skills. Their remuneration is subsidised by the Government by 50 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the resolution of the 33-year strike at Vatukoula represents a significant milestone for the Coalition Government, effectively addressing an issue that had been raised by the International Labour Organization over three decades. This resolution not only corrects historical injustice but also reflects the Government's steadfast commitment to holding workers' rights with fairness, integrity and in line with international labour standards.

Similarly, the case of the former President of the Fijian Teachers' Association, Mr. Tevita Koroi, was terminated from his principal's post for raising the concerns of his members. This case, commonly known in the ILO as case number 2723, is known by heart by the senior staff in my Ministry because it kept on recurring for a number of years, and it is now being addressed by our Government. Mr. Koroi was a shining head of school, but just because he was the President of the Union, and he raised the concerns of his members, he was terminated on the spot. He had to go away to USA in search of a job and now he is getting ready to return.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry, in partnership with the Ministry of Trade, Co-operatives, SMEs and Communications has digitised an online OHS audit and inspection system to enhance business registration and inspection efficiency. This was supported through the amendment of the Health and Safety at Work (Training) Regulations 1997 and the Health and Safety at Work (General Workplace Conditions) Regulations 2003.

The benefit of streamlining OHS audits and inspections for national development include:

- reduced interaction between employers and OHS inspectors;
- speeding up business processes;
- increased efficiency through digital submissions;
- lowering transportation costs and saving time;
- quicker access to documents for applicants allowing businesses to commence operations without undue delay; and
- easier access to electronic copies for the Ministry for licence and certificate verification.

This is a step forward towards the ease of doing business.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the mediation service continues to play a critical role in promoting dialogue between workers and employers, resolving disputes, facilitating negotiations for fair terms, preventing industrial action and fostering respectful relationships for a stable labour market and improved national productivity. My Ministry encourages social partners to prioritise workers' welfare, while enhancing business productivity to attract more investor companies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have brought workers and employers' representatives together to the same table and we have now reduced the kind of animosity that actually had been existing in the last 14 years to 16 years. They are now able to sit at the table and amicably sort out their problems as far as possible.

His Excellency the President has called this House the House of Hope. He has called upon us to work together to realise the dreams of our people. This is a noble call on all of us as elected representatives of the people, we must team up to work together to achieve it. Our honourable Prime Minister is on record for inviting the Members of the Opposition in the past to work together.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think we have some with short memory on the other side.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- On more than one occasion, some Members of the Opposition have been to international conferences together with our delegations and have contributed constructively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the call made by His Excellency and yesterday after listening to honourable Naupoto, I also believed that there is a lot of goodwill in this House. I am sure we will be able to work together and heed the call of His Excellency and put our differences aside.

(Honourable Member interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Please, just give me a minute.

Honourable Member, you constantly interject? And asides are not in any way or form deemed to be proper in my view. Your constant interjection is essentially a rude interruption to the speaker and to the order and decorum of this House. So, you really must desist from this meaningless, senseless interruption. It does not add any value to our debate.

I am warning you, honourable Member, that in continuation of what I deem to be an unacceptable behaviour, I will get one of these yellow cards.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank all those honourable Members of the Opposition who have come up with very constructive contributions, suggestions and have said that they are prepared to work with us. I heard Members speak in this House yesterday and today and it makes me very happy to listen to some of those very constructive suggestions that they have made for the Government side.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before taking my seat, I also wish the best to our Christian brothers and sisters observing Lent, to our Muslim brothers and sisters fasting during this holy month of Ramadan and a very happy *Holi* to all the Hindu families. May God bless Fiji and all its people.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of this august House and, of course, ladies and gentlemen in the gallery; *namaste* and *sat sri akaal* to all of you. It is with great honour that I rise to speak in response to His Excellency the President's inspiring, visionary opening Address at the 2025 Session of Parliament. His Excellency has reminded us of the solemn duty to serve the integrity, to uphold inclusivity and drive our nation forward with purpose and resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's call for transformational leadership resonates deeply with the multi-ethnic affairs and the sugar industry. We recognise that the sugar industry is not just an economic driver but a pillar of our communities supporting thousands of livelihoods. In line with His Excellency's vision, the Government remains steadfast in ensuring that our sugarcane farmers receive the best possible returns and have a sustainable future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know I am the last speaker and there is no rush for us to go home. So, if you can allow me to extend my speech for another few hours, it will be better.

(Laughter)

Before I go on to my speech proper, I would like to make a few comments and observations about the honourable Members of the Opposition who have been attacking us. One of the things that I have seen was cheap political point-scoring. They kept on saying, "there is an increase of VAT", but they have not really dissected what the increase was about. There are 22 items which have zero VAT. As a supermarket operator, I will let you know what is happening on the supermarket floor.

There are three categories of customers. One who only buys the basic items, which makes up \$50 groceries and those are the basic items that these people are buying, because they cannot afford anything extra, and those items are VAT free. Then we have the second category of customers, who are with \$250 groceries shopping. They have the basic items, and they have some luxury items. Then we have a third category of customers who are buying groceries up to \$500, plus other things. So, we are not charging VAT to the people who are buying the basic items.

Now, why not should you, who are now collecting \$100,000 in salary cannot be charged VAT on the luxury items? We have to charge people according to what they spend. Do not keep talking about VAT increase. It has only increased on things that you can afford.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- The point is this. Do not fool the people of this country.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- You do not have a supermarket.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- I think you have got a corner shop, by the looks of it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is something I want the honourable Members of the Opposition to stop saying, that there is a VAT increase. There is no increase on the basic items.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as much as I want to speak on the sugar, but I have a lot of issues that I want to rebut the Opposition on what they have said about this side of the House. One of the things honourable Viam Pillay said that I will not be in this House anymore after the next election. He must know the numbers, I come with 5,600 votes and look at his record. In 2018, he only had 1,280 votes.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- That is what he said. I want to simply answer that. In 2022, he got 971 votes, so who is going to *lako i tuba? O ira ga na lako i tuba* in the next election.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must say that the sugar tonnage in this country has to go. Of course, it has gone up because of your government. I will tell you one thing, we are trying to increase the production. There are 14 to 15 different programmes that the Ministry of Sugar has done. You will be surprised to see a lot of increase in sugar production, especially in Vanua Levu because people are wanting to go back to farming. In the Western side, because of the commercialisation of the land, of course, we cannot stop them, but we are still trying to revive the sugar industry.

Currently, the sugar industry is occupying 75,000 hectares of land, and what we are producing per hectare is 47 tonnes. What we should actually produce is 75 tonnes per hectare. So, what we actually need is not 75,000 hectares, we only need 55,000 hectares of land to produce 4.2 million tonnes of cane. So, that is what the reform is all about.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a lot of mention about investor confidence falling. I tell you that if a person does not want to do something, he will make hundreds of reasons; that is not happening. I will give an example although I am not an investor, I am not directly involved in a business, but in the last two years my company has invested \$45 million in this country. I want to tell you and others to put your money where your mouth is. You do not have the money; you go out and beg.

Hypocrisy of the highest order in this House comes from the Opposition. What happened? Honourable Premila Kumar and others should know. When a motion came to increase the salary, the G17 opposed because they wanted to show the public....

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Point of Order.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Leader of the Opposition.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Standing Order 63, does not allow us to refer to any previous voting of Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- That is correct – Standing Order 63. Honourable Member, I uphold his Point of Order so you may not refer to that under Standing Order 63.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Thank you very much, I withdraw that.

On investor confidence again. There is a plot along Fletcher Road which is on a mortgagee sale by one of the banks. Apparently, 15 people bided for that property. If there was no investor confidence, why would they bid?

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- You were one of them?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- I am not one of them. If I was, so what is it to you?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I actually wanted to speak more on sugar, a lot of things have been said about sugar, but there are a few things I want to mention before I go on to multi-ethnic affairs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, little dollars is very dangerous. They have a very short memory of the last government of what Rakiraki Mill went through. Given the current state of FSC, we will require nearly half a billion dollars in the next five years to put a new plant and equipment. Repairs and maintenance will get to some resemblance of operational normalcy.

Under the watch of the FijiFirst Government, we lost nearly \$800 million to one project alone as they all slept on the job. This compounded by an outstanding \$75 million to the EXIM Bank of India which was added to at least \$25 million in interest cost.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- During Qarase's time.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- It was your time.

Because of their Government's incompetence, FSC is now facing one of the largest corporate claims in the history of Fiji, it is \$31 million, because of the Bainimarama Government's failure.

Sir, FSC is facing a similar employment claim of \$0.5 million against a legacy of their government and this is not all, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The truth is that FSC is bleeding left, right and centre and this is the very people responsible for this homicide.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me remind honourable Bala and honourable Viam Pillay, who were both based in Ba, that the estimate total loss of the industry through reckless mismanagement, naked wastages and daylight corruption is in excess of billion dollars. Under their own very eyes, they had seen the destruction of the industry and have not uttered a word against the destroyers of the Rarawai Mill performance and the cane production which decreased from 1.26 million tonnes down to 356,000 tonnes.

In Moto Sector alone, where the honourable Viam Pillay is the *sardar*, the claims represent that the crop has collapsed dramatically from 33,000 tonnes to 140,000 tonnes.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Who do we blame there? It is your sector, you are the *sardar*.

I will tell you one more thing honourable Viam Pillay, I have 10 farms in Labasa and I am going to produce 5,000 tonnes of cane. That is what I am going to do. I am simply saying, if there

is a will, there is a way. What I am saying is, the same people rattling here that the sugar industry has gone down, who else is to be blamed – 16 years of rule?

I am very sorry to see that people who do understand the simple English or Hindi for that matter, if you do not understand, I can say it in Hindi too. All these happened and they did nothing. Our team of committed employees, management, farmers, cane harvesters and transport workers, we are putting every ounce of our energy struggling, or vastly to deplete the resources, to revive the almost sacred industry. Yet, these ungrateful farmers and their members are promoting negativity and falsehood about the sugar industry in our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Parveen Bala said that I had given notice that farmers who were producing less should move out and I am still repeating that. We want serious farmers in this country. Producing 50 tonnes of cane does not take you anywhere. At least with 350 tonnes from your farm, an average of 30 tonnes per acre. Do not try to politicise things with the sugarcane farmers. We used to have one leader, now he is basically not in the Parliament, each time politics, politics, where did the industry end up? I am not politicising and if you are cane farmer then you will understand, honourable Premila Kumar. You know nothing, do not even have duruka, forget about cane.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am simply saying that we had promised Sugar Cane Growers Council election is going to happen. Look at the irony of it. When people wanted the Opposition to say, when is the election, we are in motion to have the election. Then we hear people say from the Opposition, “no do not hold elections.” What do you want? But we want democracy in every angle of this country.

Now coming back to the Rakiraki Mill, it is not a matchbox or matchbox project, it has got to be evaluated. We have the Food and Agriculture Organization which has presented a report – the sugar industry has to move forward. We are currently talking to some investors who are willing to come and setup the mill for us because FSC does not have the money and does not have the ability to rebuild itself. Please, have patience! It took us two years to establish the right people to come and talk to us.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH .- Look, I am telling you, that if you do not understand business, please move out of the House! Do something else!

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I really appreciate the presentation that honourable Rinesh Sharma made about the drugs problem in this country, and one thing you shared further that we should hang people or give them the death penalty.

My suggestion would be, let us flog them in public first, give them a bit of an idea of what matters and if they do not understand than we can go further. I tell you one thing, we have no right in our life to give anyone the death penalty. It is only God, because he brought you into this world and he will take you back.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Sharma?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Standing Order 62(1), and I quote, “When speaking a member must

not impute improper motives to any other member.” Just a clarification, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Thank you, honourable Minister. Just for clarity, I had mentioned about death penalty but not hanging people. It is something that needs to be considered. That is the only clarification.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, I take the point, although it is neither here nor there to be very frank.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will leave it there. I see that my time is coming up. I will just say a few things about why we have a shortage of labour on the farms.

We had cane cutters coming from the villages, they were not given proper accommodation, they were not give a proper place to stay, they were treated like slaves. Today, those cane cutters from the villages do not want to come back to harvest cane, they have their own prestige and their own livelihood. You treat them well, they will treat you well. This is the very reason we are losing our cane cutters and manual labourers. I will give you an example, I brought in eight Bangladeshi workers, together with them I have four *iTaukei* workers on my farm. We are paying them \$5.50 an hour which is much higher than the minimum wage rate.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Too much “I”.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- You should learn from me.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- You always talk about yourself, why not talk about the people?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Anyway, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am comfortable because I have told them the truth. The public of Fiji are seeing you, when each time you say that they are seeing us.

With those words, I support the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Minister for his contribution to the motion. He is the last speaker on the list of our speakers for today and we will continue with the Batting Order tomorrow.

Honourable Members, we will move on to the next Item in the Agenda.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

Under Standing Order 6(1):

- (a) that Standing Orders 92 and 6(5) are suspended so as to allow the honourable Prime Minister to proceed with the First Reading of the Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2025;
- (b) that Standing Orders 92 and 6(5) are suspended until the conclusion of the Third Reading and vote on the Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2025.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the motion as I have moved under Standing Order 6, that Standing Orders 92 and 6(5) be suspended in

order to allow the Government to table its first Bill on the proposed amendments to the Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is well understood that it is the prerogative of the Government of the day to introduce before this august House proposed amendments to the Constitution, pursuant to the provision of the Constitution, that provide an amendment process. Given that Standing Orders 92 and 6(5) limit the very essence of the amendments to the Constitution, it is prudent that the Standing Orders be suspended so that this initial step can occur.

Referring specifically to the Standing Order:

Standing Order 6(1) states that a Standing Order may be suspended in whole or part by leave of Parliament.

Standing Order 6(2) a motion to that effect will result in suspending of the Standing Order in whole or in part, et cetera.

Standing Order 6(4) Parliament grants leave on a suspension motion, the Standing Order concerned is suspended, provides necessary to carry out the objective (as I already mentioned for which the motion was moved) to avoid doubts.

Standing Order 6(5) suspension of any Standing Order does not permit the transaction of any business in breach of the Constitution or any other law.

That is Standing Order 6(1) to (5) and it is referring specifically to Standing Order 6(5) and suspending that in order for us to proceed with the motion, as I have mentioned to be introduced by the honourable Prime Minister.

In Standing Order 92(1), a Bill is out of order. That also refers to the provisions of the Constitution, particularly the ones which will be introduced referring to Chapter 11, which is also why we are moving this motion to suspend Standing Orders 92 and 6(5).

Sir, our intention is not to derail the process, but simply to allow an avenue for the introduction of proposed amendments according to the process outlined in Section 160 of the Constitution. I refer, in particular, to the constitutional provisions in Section 159 of the Constitution which refers to the amendment of the Constitution and also inter-related with the Standing Orders I have mentioned, in particular Section 159(2)(c), which is to repeal, infringe or diminish the effects of this chapter.

That is exactly the essence of the amendment the Government of the day is bringing forward because this will be extended further by the honourable Attorney-General. If you read it together, it would virtually make the amendments impossible and it is time for the Government of the day and also the Opposition to work together to really look into the issues regarding the Constitution and also matters which may be contradictory, or if you look at it in-depth, it is a threat and also undemocratic which is why we are bringing forward these suspension motions.

Even to the Opposition, I plead with them to support us in this motion. I believe that we are at a critical juncture in our history. We have been through various political upheavals in our nation. From the 1997 Constitution, we had moved through various constitutions from the 1987 military *coup*.

The honourable Prime Minister has referred regularly to that event and something which should not happen again in our country, and he has sincerely apologised to the nation and to our

various communities. It is to his credit that he accepted that the 1990 Constitution which was imposed by military *coup* at that time was not for the betterment of the nation. He initiated the Constitutional Review process at that time, not only through the Constitution Review Commission headed by Sir Paul Reeves, Mr. Tomasi Vakatora and Professor Brij Lal, which gave rise to the draft 1997 Constitution and which was discussed by a Joint Parliamentary Committee, then approved in Parliament.

It is time for us to move through that process again and this suspension motion is the beginning of that, for our understanding collectively as a Parliament, as Members of Parliament and as leaders at this critical juncture in our history. It is a suspension motion, but this is a critical first step. I am pleading with our Opposition to work with us in moving this forward.

If you look at the history of military *coups*, not only in Fiji but elsewhere, there is a cycle to it. A military *coup*, an imposed legal constitutional order and then a review, it goes back to the people who will formulate a constitution which is for the people by the people, which is the 1997 Constitution. Then that same cycle needs to be done for the 2006 *coup* led by our former Prime Minister, Mr. Bainimarama.

We need to re-look at the cycle. That *coup* resulted in the imposition of the 2013 Constitution. So that cycle needs to be completed as already done by the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Sitiveni Rabuka. We need to complete that cycle for *coup* leader Mr. Bainimarama. We need to take next step away from the imposed 2013 Constitution.

We know the negative events which happened in terms of that constitution. There was a draft produced by Professor Yash Ghai which was basically what was inputted or contributed by the people, but that was unfortunately done away with, and the 2013 Constitution appeared. My plea is that we complete the cycle which has already happened, resulting in the 1997 Constitution and we need to do it in terms of the 2006 *coup* to bring normalcy back to our nation towards a constitution which is by the people and for the people.

The other points I wanted to make is that it is the first step, but I would like to comment on the electoral provisions. The political environment has changed. In 2016, we had strong man politics so the formulation was based on that where one person who is able to gather thousands of votes. I believe the strong man political environment is no longer, we are in a more, I believe, amicable environment where we as leaders from both sides of the House are able to talk to understand and work together in order to proceed to a political segment which is for the betterment of the nation. This is the first step, the suspension motion, in order for us to move the amendment motion for the Constitution.

Section 53 of the Constitution, the provision is for one national constituency. As I had mentioned, that methodology is good for strong man politics which is no longer relevant. We have our various political groups now, political parties. I do not believe that the political environment will result in someone getting over hundred thousand votes and carrying the others in. So, it will be beneficial to all our aspiring politicians and our current Members of Parliament who might stand in the election to look at the review of that moving forward. Not only that, but it is impossible for an independent to get into Parliament because they will need a five percent threshold. This needs to be democratized as we move forward.

Those are just examples which we need to relook at in order to have a truly democratic nation as we move forward with opportunities for everyone, not only for members of strong political parties but also independents, women and youth. Honourable Members, this is the first step in order for us to move forward and in this light, we intend to fulfil what we have advocated for these past few

months, also not only that, but that is one of the grounds for which our people had put us into Parliament in order to review the political frameworks, constitution which had been imposed on the nation by a military *coup*. We need to get back and complete the cycle where there is a constitution by the people, for the people.

MR. SPEAKER.- Point of Order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 74(1)(a), where it says that any member may only rise on a Point of Order if there is an alleged breach of Standing Order or practices of Parliament. This is completely a breach, first of all, of the Standing Orders and also a breach of our Constitution. Mr. Speaker, if I may be permitted to make my proper submissions without any interjections. We are at a very critical crossroad in the country, I think it is best that everyone hears this, not just in this House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with all the issues that have been raised, this motion before the House to suspend the Standing Orders cannot be done, it cannot. You are working to try and amend the Constitution. There are provisions in the Constitution which allow it to be amended, but the Constitution itself, this very blue book, is the supreme law of the land. And in it, as mentioned by the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, Section 159(1)(c) states, "... forbids the repeal, infringe or diminish the effect of this Chapter."

What the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament is asking for is that the orders within the Standing Orders be suspended so this can actually take place. As a matter of fact, he spelled out that they want to deal with Chapter 11 and change Chapter 11 somewhat by putting that Bill before the House. It is forbidden by this Constitution, and I hope I am given the time to actually be heard on this. It is forbidden and it is clearly forbidden. There is no other English to actually understand this, Mr. Speaker.

No amendment to this Constitution may ever repeal, infringe or diminish the effect of Chapter 11, that is what the Constitution says. It does not say that you cannot amend the Constitution *per se*. There is a methodology that is provided for it. Now what is being asked for is that the very thing that is in the Constitution is contained in the Standing Orders in Standing Order 92 which he is asking for to be suspended, it is a Bill that will be out of order.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Koya, come to the crux of the matter. I have got what you are trying to get at.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, effectively, what I am saying is you cannot actually bring a Bill of this nature to Parliament and you cannot suspend the Standing Orders to actually facilitate that particular Bill because a suspension is actually dealing with that particular unlawful activity, which is contrary to the Constitution. This is a very, very critical moment in our history, Sir, and in our Parliament. I was hoping that they would not put this before you, Sir, because this is a grave danger that we are facing.

Sir, with the greatest of respect to the moans and groans, this is not a small matter. I think yourself, Sir, and a few others in the House will understand this more than anyone, how it needs to be dealt with. You can change the Constitution, you can sit down and have a conversation with the honourable Leader of the Opposition and the rest of us, there are methodologies provided for in the Constitution, but not the way it is being done. You cannot touch Chapter 11 of the Constitution, you cannot suspend to actually do something unlawful. that is why it is in here, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Koya, I have got the gist of your discussion altogether. Let me

say this, you, as a lawyer, will understand that Standing Orders is subsidiary to the Constitution. So, under the provision you are referring to, there is provision for the amendment. Chapter 11 says "Amendment to the Constitution". So, if there is a provision for the amendment of the Constitution, anything in the Standing Orders that prevents the amendment of the Constitution is *ultra vires*. Do you not agree? Unconstitutional?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- If I may, Sir, this small blue book is subservient to this.

MR. SPEAKER.- Correct.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I understand that 100 percent. You and I will not differ on that, we both know that, but this book actually says that you cannot repeal, infringement, or diminish the effect of this chapter. But the point here is, Sir, that they are trying to change Chapter 11. We, on this side of the House read English the same as they do. You cannot do that, Sir. It forbids it, it is forbidden to do so. However, there are provisions in Chapter 11 which allow for the amendment of the Constitution.

Many countries have done it, Sir, but follow the right procedure. The honourable Member before me, Sir, spoke about different parts of the world or different ways it can be amended, of course, it can. The actual formulas, we can argue about that later if does it come to that, Sir, but the point here is, this, which is a supreme law of the land, we all know that the Standing Orders is subservient to the Constitution and the Constitution itself forbids it, Sir.

Sir, because I stood up on a Point of Order, I ask you for a ruling proper and my instructions from the LOP that we try and get a ruling from you. I think in all fairness it will be good because we are at a very huge crossroad here. Very simply put, this forbids it.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will give my ruling. I have not yet elaborated on the provision of the Constitution which you are referring to - Section 1(1) versus sub-section (3). That will be in my ruling. For the time being, I will not agree to your Point of Order and the reason I will give later.

So, we will proceed with the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament's motion. In that regard, I recommend that I will open the motion to the floor for debate on the motion that is being moved by the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament. We will proceed, as I have directed. I would ask the Opposition if they would like to contribute to the debate on the motion.

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion to suspend Standing Order 6(5) and Standing Order 92. The purpose of the suspension, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to facilitate the introduction of a Bill to amend the 2013 Constitution. An introduction of a Bill *per se* is not an amendment. The relevant Standing Order offence both the letter and spirit of the Constitution as well as the fundamental values of democracy and freedom.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if read and interpreted literally, they would have the practical consequence of preventing any discussion whatsoever at all on any amendment of the Constitution especially Chapter 11. Such an interpretation is not only unreasonable. I believe that it is pedantic and perverse.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Section 3(1) of the Constitution states, and I quote:

"Any person interpreting or applying this Constitution must promote the spirit, purpose and objects of this Constitution as a whole, and the values that underlie a democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a compelling argument that can be mounted but Section 159(2)(c) of the Constitution is, itself, a derogation of the universal practice that a Constitution should be amenable to alteration, if and when, the people so decide or the people's representatives in a Parliament so decide.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my view, Section 159 of the Constitution strangles debate, and the corresponding Standing Orders strangle debate on amendments of the Constitution. My respectful view, Mr. Speaker, the Standing Orders quoted by the honourable Koya are *ultra vires* the Constitution. In his elementary, the supremacy of the Constitution trumps the Standing Orders.

Mr. Speaker, I support the motion of the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk to this particular issue. I think, as has been said, it is a very important issue that we are talking about here. It is very critical, and I think on our part, we all want to make things better for the country. Everyone wants to do that, but at the same time, when I was listening to the explanation by the honourable Attorney-General, he was talking about the Constitution being superior to the Standing Orders.

But the very provision that we are talking about in this Constitution forbids any amendment to it, so I do not get that argument. It is like a circular argument. Like you are saying this Constitution is superior to the Standing Orders, but the Constitution itself forbids any amendment to that particular provision of the Constitution of Section 159 which states the ways in which the Constitution itself can be changed. This is like a circular argument. You are trying to say that you cannot use something in an inferior document to change something, to do something that the superior document does not allow in the first place. How can that make sense? That does not make sense to me. I am not a lawyer, but it does not make sense to me.

When you use this argument, I will say this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the things that this country has lost, has been adherence to law and order, to justice *per se*. It is something that has disappeared. We try to uphold it, but it seems that it has shaken over the years, and if there is one fundamental principle, we on this side with the honourable Leader of the Opposition, we are committed to working in bipartisanship with Government. We have committed to do it, but there is one thing that you must do it with it. We must do it in a spirit that upholds the law because once we tinker with the law once, once you do it once, it becomes a precedent. Then what is it that is the most important thing? The law must be held. The Constitution is a supreme law. The supreme court is Parliament, that idea of the law being supreme, it must be upheld at all times. This is utterly critical for us.

This is the way I think about this. Yes, we want to move but the law must be the most important thing. How can we say that you are trying to suspend this, which is an inferior document, to change this, when this says it cannot be done in that particular way? That does not make sense to me. I cannot see how the logic in doing that. You had also tried to suspend parts of Standing Order 6. Standing Orders state that you can suspend Standing Orders, but "to avoid doubt, the suspension of any Standing Order does not permit the transaction of any business in breach of the Constitution or any other law." If we are going to do this, we are going to breach Section 159 and Section 160 of the Constitution.

I cannot see how it works, so I am trying to say this, this is from my heart, I would like change to happen. There are some things in the Constitution I do not like but it must be done with the law being held supreme. We must not tinker with that, because we have tinkered with things in the past, we have broken down the integrity of institutions in this country. When you tinker with the integrity

of institutions, the ramifications are hell for future generations. You have all seen that. What has happened to our institutions? You know what I am talking about - various institutions. Do not tinker with the institutions, do not tinker with the supremacy of the law and on that idea itself.

The honourable Attorney-General talked about how it needs to be amendable and, yes, there are provisions here that can be changed. I personally feel that some things should be changed in the Constitution, that is my personal belief, not the belief of all of us. But it must be done in a manner that does not denigrate or pull down the idea of the supremacy of the law. That is all that I have to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Usamate.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute towards the motion before the House and speak in full support of it. I hear the concerns made by honourable Members of Opposition and what the Constitution and Standing Orders state.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it is important to give perspective in terms of what other countries around the world have done and continue to do. Yes, there are countries around the world that have unamendable sections of their Constitution. For example, in Germany, there have amendments to human dignity and rule of law, however, separation of powers cannot be amended. In France, it prohibits amendments to change the republican form of Government. In India, the basic structured doctrine established by the Supreme Court, this cannot be changed. In Brazil, in Article 64, it declares that you cannot abolish key principles, like individual rights and separation of powers. In Tunisia, the 2014 Constitution includes a clause stating that even women's rights cannot be changed. In Italy, it prohibits changes to the republican form of Government, preventing a return to Monarchy. So, there are examples from around the world, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and honourable Members, where there are unamendable provisions of the Constitution.

Why are these clauses important? It protects democratic principles and prevents authoritarian takeovers. It safeguards fundamental rights and ensures stability and continuity. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are even countries that make amendments extremely difficult, requiring super majorities, referendums and multiple approvals. For example, in the United States of America, any amendment will require a two-thirds vote in Congress, and then of course a ratification of three-fourths of the State. Now, there are certain countries that do have a 75 percent majority requirement, but they are to specific and key provisions only in the Constitution that require this, such as fundamental rights and separation of powers.

There are entrenched sections, as I mentioned in certain countries in Africa and, of course, Fiji. Our 2013 Constitution requires the highest, in terms of 75 percent of Parliament and 75 percent of registered voters in a referendum. We are the only country in the world that requires in Section 159 that any change to the Constitution, not just key provisions, and this is the major difference. It states that any provision of this Constitution, subject to sub-section (2), needs to be amended in accordance with this chapter which the Opposition is opposing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have mentioned, if you look around the world and why only certain key provisions of the Constitution are unamendable by requiring a 75-majority vote in Parliament, not even a 75-majority vote by referendum, they are protecting fundamental rights, they are protecting separation of powers, and really those are the cornerstones of democracy. The difference with what is practised around the world, even in the US Constitution which requires only two-thirds of Congress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must note the difference here in terms of our Constitution. Currently, as it is, I submit that it is undemocratic to not allow the change of any provision of this Constitution, no matter how undemocratic it might be. What if the people of Fiji or Parliament would like to revert to constituency-based representation in terms of the elections? Is this allowed in our Constitution? Why should this not be changed, so there is better representation of our people? We constantly hear from Opposition that we are not ably representing our people across the country!

We heard honourable Shalen Kumar talk about the issues that he faces in Naitasiri. Why could we not revert to constituency-based elections, Mr. Speaker, Sir? If we do not allow the changes that bring about true democracy, as well as better representation of our people, then what is the use of this book to our people?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do need to put learnings and lessons from around the world and how it is practised. This Constitution and requiring any provision, goes through the 75 percent majority of Parliament as well as the 75 percent referendum from our people, is undemocratic. In order to allow provisions in the Constitution that affect our people, to do with our people in serving our people better, this should be allowed. As long as you do not touch on the fundamental basis of our democracy - the fundamental rights and separation of powers. There are certain key provisions we can make unamendable, but we should be able to change our Constitution. It is a living, breathing document. It belongs to the people.

If our people call for that constitutional change, let us give it to them! Let us consult our people and get their opinion on it, but to not allow this at all, is undemocratic, Mr. Speaker, Sir! It is not set in stone. We should allow our people to have their say on their Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before the House and I ask our honourable Members to, please, let us look at the practicality of not allowing any change to our Constitution. Let us look at the undemocratic nature of it. The people are not allowed to change their own Constitution, with such a high impractical and undemocratic threshold.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even in the 1997 Constitution, there were certain provisions that were entrenched. You required a majority of Parliament to be able to change them, but the 2013 Constitution changed it to a simple majority. It required a higher threshold in the 1997 Constitution, the changes to certain laws but it became a simple majority which is just 51 percent, in order to change them.

Even the 1997 Constitution had those provisions, so why are we not able to do it the other way? Why are we not able to let our people, as the majority, decide on that? The people are the majority, not the 55 of us who are sitting here in Parliament, it is the people! So, let us give it to the people to decide if they want to change the Constitution. This is the only way to do it!

We need to activate the process. So, please, honourable Members, if we want to uphold the rule of law and democracy, let us agree to this motion. Let us do so unanimously, so our people can see that we are prioritising them. It is not about what we talk about in here; it is not about what the previous Government did or what we did. It is what the people need.

The rule of law is on one hand, you can look at the letter of the law, you also need to look at the spirit of the law. The law is useless unless it is useful to our people, not us in here! Not what is politically convenient for us in here in trying to hold on to power, whether you are the majority or you are not the minority. We need to return that to our people, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Sir, I fully support the motion before the House.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the previous speakers before me. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think some of the things that had been said that needs to be clearly addressed is that this Constitution is not something that you cannot amend. What is being referred to, and what is before us right now, is a Suspension Motion under the Standing Orders, which the Standing Orders does not allow. But because of the supremacy of the Constitution, the actual Constitution does not allow the particular amendment that will be sought in the Bill that is actually being brought before the House, which this particular Suspension Motion will entertain.

It is actually very clear and very simple, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is not about, not being able to go to the people, to find out what needs to be changed. Just to put a historical perspective on it, in 43 years, we have had four Constitutions. Four Constitutions!

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- This is very relevant, honourable Minister. I will tell you why it is relevant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every single Constitution contained a provision. I see the honourable Prime Minister smiling at me, Sir. The 1987 one had the same thing, where you had to get a particular percentage to actually change the Constitution, and all of them. Sir, all of them, right up to the start when my father was involved in 1970, they all hovered around the same percentage. It was either two-thirds, it was also to do with the Great Council of Chiefs, it was also to do with how many people you actually had. It was two-thirds, if I remember correctly, in the 1997 one that you had in this House.

They are all laid down the procedures. So, the procedure here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the only difference, is that you take it out to a referendum, once it is being approved within the 75 percent of Parliament. Now, honourable Tabuya said, “it is the people’s”. Of course, it is! It should go back to the people. Of course, it will! But the will of the people sits here, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We can put things in very big perspective. It does not matter what you say, Sir, there are 200,000 odd voices on this side of the House, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- No longer!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It is not about no longer, their voices are still here!

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was hoping that this would not deteriorate in terms of the decorum, because this is an important historic thing for Fiji. We all understand it, there is a procedure to follow if you want to amend it.

Now, if there is a question from the other side saying, how else can we do it? There is a procedure, you need to be able to. You are speaking about a House of hope. You are speaking about bipartisanship in getting these things done. That is the spirit that we are actually trying to build. We currently do not even know what the amendments will be, that the Government is actually trying to seek with respect to the Constitution as a whole.

We all swore an oath on this book, Mr. Speaker, Sir, not to breach it. We will be breaching

it by actually doing this. We stand at crossroads in Fiji and on this particular day, if we allow this Suspension Motion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this motion, no amount of suspension allows Parliament to act contrary to the Constitution. One cannot approbate and reprobate in the same breath. I am sure you will understand us, you cannot do that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Parliament must follow the Constitution. We cannot act contrary to it. It is actually very simple, Sir, but at the same time, I will say to the honourable Prime Minister, it can be done. It is not something that cannot be done. You want to amend it, it can be done. There is a way to do it but not by acting contrary and not by setting aside the rules so that you can actually facilitate something that you want.

The best way, the best course for our entire country is to have a very clear discussion with everyone with respect to this and how we do it. There are many legal minds in this Chamber, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I am sure we can find a way to actually get this done if it needs to be done. But the Constitution itself prohibits the amendment of Chapter 11, and there is no getting around it. It is as simple as that. The Suspension Motion itself cannot be allowed.

In fact, that particular provision in Standing Order 92, Mr. Speaker, Sir, spells out the same thing that is in the Constitution. Standing Order 92 actually says that Parliament is forbidden from entertaining such a motion that deals with changing Chapter 11. Chapter 11, in its simplest form, is the process by which amendments can happen. Also, it has to do with the immunity provisions, et cetera. That is not going to be spoken about, and I am sure that is not going to be amended.

The point here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that in the spirit of where we sit, who we represent, and in the spirit of bipartisanship, this could be dealt with in a better fashion. I feel aggrieved that we are actually putting this before you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. With all the experience and knowledge and all that you possess, it is not fair even that we actually put it to you in such a position. But you will have to, one way or the other. That is your job.

We understand that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a legal practitioner, I know how difficult it is. But we cannot, I am sure that the honourable Leader of the Opposition has actually mentioned this to the honourable Prime Minister, we cannot do this in an unlawful manner, to try and facilitate something that needs to be done, and can be done, in some other form. The Suspension Motion itself cannot be allowed, should not be passed, and we will vote against it, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In terms of what happens in other jurisdictions around the world, we have had four Constitutions, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We have had *coups*, the United States has not. We have had *coups*, India has not. We have had *coups*, where many other countries have not. We are in a very different position with respect to where we stand, how we stand and how we move forward. The strictness of many things in here is relative to our history. I think that is very important for every single citizen to remember.

Like anything in this world, not everything is forever. Even us standing here is not forever. We do not have a lease on earth. So, there are things that may need to be amended to, but do it in the right fashion, Mr. Speaker, Sir. There is a way around it, it can be done and there is provision for it. But not by changing that particular provision itself, to make it even easier for any successive Government to come and change the Constitution willy-nilly, whenever they want.

This is why all of these provisions around the world are not easy to do. It is not impossible, but it is not easy to do. I shall say this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the acceptance of this book and the

Constitution itself, and the testament to that is the 2014 Election that brought us into this House. We had a huge kick-off with respect to who went into Government and who did not. That, in itself, was your referendum for this particular Constitution.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mumble if you will, but that is the truth.

Mr. Speaker, any referendum at the end of the day, it tells you what the general public want. As I have said, Sir, I am totally against this Suspension Motion. We will speak further if it is allowed, and if the Bill comes up but at the moment, that is my decision. Thank you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I listened very carefully to the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament when he moved the motion, the honourable Attorney-General, honourable Koya, honourable Usamate, honourable Tabuya and also, Sir, your response to the Point of Order by honourable Koya. I do not propose to go into the legal jargon and the legal language, but one of the things that we had said in the 2014 Election campaign, and I am speaking on behalf of the National Federation Party, that in our Manifesto in 2014, we had said very clearly that we will seek a review of the 2013 Constitution. Like the 1990 Constitution, it was imposed which we had an election in 1992, when the honourable Prime Minister became Prime Minister through an election. Again, the second time in 1994, overwhelmingly elected by the people, lead the country, and it was him who led this bipartisanship to amend that Constitution.

The 2013 Constitution itself, I do not want to get into the merits and demerits of what is in there, because I could talk for an hour about the flaws of the 2013 Constitution. But the Constitution making itself, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was a breach of the law at that time by the interim Government. They had two decrees which stipulated itself how the Constitution got to be formulated. Those laws were breached itself. For example, there was a provision for a Constituent Assembly, a Provision for the Commission to produce the report which was not accepted, so all that in terms of the legality of the making of the 2013 Constitution can still raise a lot of questions.

I listened very carefully to the learned Attorney-General and what I got from him was that the Suspension Motion itself, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not a breach of Section 159 of the Constitution. What it does is it allows a motion or Bill by the honourable Prime Minister to amend provisions of Chapter 11. That is my interpretation. So, the Bill goes to the second reading, third reading and the Parliament will have an opportunity to look at the votes whether we get 75 percent majority or not. So, the suspension motion itself is not a breach of Section 159 of the Constitution.

I know what honourable Koya was saying because the presentation of that Bill will start the process where we can look at how we can work through this. The Constitution Review Commission, which could be appointed after that, will go and look at the merits and demerits of what is in the Constitution, what needs to be changed. So, this motion and the Bill that the honourable Prime Minister is going to move is not saying what needs to be there, what needs to be changed and what needs to be replaced. That is a debate that will happen over a period of time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think that is what the Suspension Motion intends to do, but I leave it there, and I would say that you cannot, with all those points with respect to why Constitutions cannot be changed, provisions that cannot be changed, this is well known and trying the legislation, provisions in the 1970 Constitution, the 1990 Constitution, the 1997 Constitution, but just to add to some of the provisions in this Constitution, you know, the separation of powers from the executive to the legislature, provisions such as the appointment of the Constitutional Commission and all that. I mean, we could go on and on about what needs to be changed, but that is a debate for another day.

That is well down the line. The suspension is not breaching 159, that is what the Attorney-General was trying to say.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Stop meandering!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I believe him more than you, honourable Usamate.

(Laughter)

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to also offer my support for the motion that is before the House this afternoon. I agree with honourable Koya, this is a very important discussion that we are having and we need to have. At some point, I think all 55 Members of this Parliament are going to have to accept that this Constitution does not reflect the will of the people and the voice of the people.

I think that much, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can glean, if not from anything else, from the recent ruling of the Supreme Court in April of last year. I, the last couple of seconds, flipped open that decision. I think no one here needs that reminder, that this blue book, on the evidence in that Supreme Court sitting, established that it was the work of only a handful of officials, including the applicant in that intervener, Mr. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum. It is in the ruling, so it must have come, if it was in the ruling, it would have been presented as part of the affidavit. Uncontested, that is what it is.

Honourable Usamate is saying that it does not make sense. I am urging him, Mr. Speaker, Sir, make it make sense! This Suspension Motion that we are asking the House to agree to this afternoon, is to allow us to set a course and transition, allow the voices of the people to be produced in a book that they could call their Constitution. It must be a Constitution that people willingly give to themselves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Constitution is hereby established by whom? That is in the preamble! So, it was not given by the people to themselves, it was established to them. We are representatives of the people. There are people who voted for you, honourable Members, and their voices, in this opportunity, gets to be heard. I know that my colleague, honourable Koya, has spoken about the legalities. The lawyers can argue the legalities, of whether the Suspension Motion that has been introduced into the House by the Leader of the Government in Parliament seeks to repeal, infringe or diminish the Constitution.

By context, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what they are essentially saying is that we would agree to have amendments to the Constitution. Honourable Usamate said that there are some provisions of the Constitution that he does not agree with, and he wants changed. We all have, but Section 159 deals with how you get to do an amendment. If that is impossible, you will not get an amendment, it is as simple as that!

Section 159 is a two-tier process, first in the House, and second, outside of the House. Sir, 75 percent in here, which we are all trying to convince ourselves that we need to vote, and then 75 percent in a referendum.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my colleague, honourable Koya, has spoken about four Constitutions in this country since Independence, and all of them had thresholds. Of course, they did! But the difference between the thresholds in those Constitutions and this one is because those Constitutions had thresholds that were doable, this one does not! Where on earth would you get 75 or three quarter of the total number of registered voters to vote in a referendum? We do not even have 100 percent voters in an election!

I am urging you, honourable Members, to look beyond the latter of the law, that you look at the spirit of the law as the Attorney-General had earlier stated. Under girding Constitution, are constitutional ideals of democracy, human dignity and freedom.

I support the motion, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will have one more speaker.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the motion that is before the House and I also support the statements as alluded to by honourable Minister for Lands, on the basis of the argument that this Constitution was the work of only a few people and it was not enacted into law. It was not enacted by any Parliament, but was imposed by a few people, as observed by the Supreme Court. That is the basis of what the motion is asking, and the motion is asking for a suspension.

As you have rightly said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for us to suspend the very high bar that is in this Constitution, that was imposed, which even prohibits it being taken to the people. The motion that will come after this, is how that particular requirement in Section 159 will be taken to the people. The process is set out in the Standing Orders of Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Standing Orders 85 after first reading, and Standing Orders 86 for second reading, where we will then go into the debate of the principle and merits of the Bill that is yet to be tabled.

At that point, we can give our arguments that have been alluded to by the honourable Koya and honourable Members. However, what is important to note is what Standing Order 85 and 86 talks about, where a particular Committee can be appointed through Standing Order 129, or any other existing standing committee, where the people will be engaged and asked to give their views to the proposed amendments.

That is my observation and we should not interpret the law according to the latter of the law, but as legislators in this House, we are all legislators. We are here to make the law, in this House of people, in this House of Hope, that we have all been talking about. In here, we have the powers to make the law. This is one of the duties and the core functions that we have, and that is to see that we get this to the people, for the people to have their say because this is the House of the people.

So, I totally support the Suspension Motion, that this should be allowed, so as to allow us legislators to facilitate the process, where a proper enactment can be made, and people are involved. That will give some credibility to the Constitution that we are talking about.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, I thank the learned honourable Members who have contributed to this motion. I was sitting here, just reflecting on why we are in this House and what are we doing in this House. We call ourselves as legislators.

We are here Mr. Speaker, Sir, to make laws, and if we disagree with the laws, we change them. I think some of us are, sort of, pulling the cart before the horse. The honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament was merely asking that we set aside the Standing Orders to allow the honourable Prime Minister to discuss a Bill before the House. We are not breaching the Constitution, or allegedly. We are not! We are discussing the changes to the Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we want to call ourselves a House of Laws, surely on commonsense alone, we should be allowing this motion to pass because we need to change some of the issues in this Constitution. I think everyone has talked quite elegantly in terms of areas of concern, and that is for

another day. We will have ample opportunity for debate here, take it around Fiji for discussion, and hopefully come back with something that all of us can say that we own.

I certainly would like, Mr. Speaker, Sir, before God calls me home, to be able to say to my children and grandchildren that we did something good in this Parliament, that we actually were able to change this document because we all agree that this document was imposed on us. One of the words I used in my speech this week was, “two men ill-conceived document.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, consenting from this side of the House, we urge all honourable Members today, let us use some basic commonsense. Let us park aside the legalities for once. We all agree that this Constitution was imposed on us by two individuals, and we really need to change this Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on behalf of all honourable Members on this side of the House, we support the motion before the House. We are not breaching any Constitution at this stage, we are merely discussing the merits of the honourable Prime Minister's proposition, and we will have ample opportunity to debate in future the legality or not of this document.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I call on the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak on this motion, I just wish to explain why I could not uphold honourable Koya's Point of Order in that, we differ in the interpretation of Section 159(2)(c). You just have to read carefully what it says. It says that no amendments to this Constitution may ever repeal, infringe or diminish the effect of, not this Section, but of the Chapter.

So, what does the Chapter talk about? It talks about the amendments to the Constitution and that is why I think, in my humble view, that Section 160 can stand on its own without Section 159 because Section 160 provides procedures for the amendments to the Constitution, of which everyone is talking about - the percentage. But Section 159(2)(c) does not talk about Section 159, it talks about the whole of Chapter 11, that is why I, honourable Koya, differ and why I did not uphold your Point of Order on that issue.

So, we both agree that the Standing Orders are subordinate to the Constitution. We have no problems with that issue. With that clarification from my issuance of the answer to honourable Koya's Point of Order, I will now ask the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak on the motion.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in fact, I was going to rely on your ruling because there are disagreements on both sides of the House on the interpretation of Section 159. Let me just say a few things. I do agree with the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica, that we are legislators and we make laws in this House, but let us all be reminded as well that the law equally applies to all of us.

One of the principles of good governance is following the rule of law and that is one of the major concerns that we have from this side of the House. Everyone is listening, everyone is watching. Are we going to work within the ambits of the provisions that are already there in the law? That was our concern.

The other point that I want to raise as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course in the spirit of His Excellency's Address we have, you have heard it from this side, we want to work together but working together does not mean following blindly. This side of the House has a responsibility to keep the Government in check, and that we will not compromise.

For a sustainable and strong democracy in this country, and that is why we are raising the issues from inside as I have always reminded Government so often, that we have the right to govern, but we have a right to be listened to as well. So, the point that I was making is, working together does not mean following blindly. We have principles, we have values and ethos, and that is something that will help us as well in keeping the Government in check so that we ensure, that whatever is deliberated in this House is done in the best interest of the nation, and of course the people that we serve, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The comments about this Constitution does not reflect the will of the people. I wish to differ on that argument, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because there are people who are really concerned about the way forward from here. When government is talking about, perhaps because the information has not been there yet, Mr. Speaker, Sir. However, there are some people who have hope in this document. Their rights are protected in this document and that is the very group that we are representing. We have a responsibility to them.

To say that this does not reflect the will of the people, I tend to differ, Mr. Speaker, Sir because there are people who feel safe in this Constitution. Whatever amendments that we will make, let us ensure that the interests of all Fijians are taken care of.

The other point that I wish to raise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is I followed the statement very closely by the honourable Attorney-General yesterday. There was something that he mentioned yesterday that really worried me. This is what he stated, and I quote, “an imposed Constitution lacks legitimacy”, but we swore on oath on this Constitution, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

There are weaknesses, flaws, whatever we may call it but to have that statement from the Attorney-General, I find it irresponsible, Sir, because we still have to go through the process, should you allow it, to deliberate on the pros and cons of certain processes of the Constitution. Perhaps, those are the only issues I wish to raise but subject to your direction on the way forward, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P. D. KUMAR.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know what the motion is all about, it is about suspending Section 6 of the Standing Order and I am really, as a layman trying to read this book very clear to avoid doubt that Section 5 of it does not allow, but you are saying something else, your interpretation is here. I know he has, let me speak, let me speak...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It has already been discussed.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Who are you? You are not the Speaker, thank you!

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Professor Biman Prasad, is that a point of order?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Under what section?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And the point of order is....

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- What number, what number?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The Speaker has made the ruling, and you cannot argue on the ruling of the Speaker, that is very clear in the Standing Orders.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- What number, what number?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Check the number there!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- What number, what number?

MR. SPEAKER.- Maintenance of the Order, Standing Order 70. You may proceed, honourable Member.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am not questioning your decision, what I am saying, as a lay person, I am trying to understand all these. But, putting things into perspective today, when we are going to go through the shortcut process of suspending all these things and making changes, what chances are there that the next Government will come in and they follow the same precedent?

So, every time a new Government will come in, very easy, come here, suspend a section, change the Constitution the way you like it and move on with it. I mean, we have got democracies in this world where they have a tough provision so that it is not easy to change a Constitution. You know, it is not like something that you can change all the time, and I am quite surprised with the Attorney General, being the lawyer with high standing, for him to criticize the document itself, saying that in the US and in other countries they can change it. Yes, because they always had democracy, we do not! So, we have to tread carefully. After four *coups*, what do you expect?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Do you think citizens of this country will believe in a *coup* maker? No! So, let us tread carefully. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I conclude today's debate on the motion on suspending of the Standing Orders, noting honourable Usamate, yes he is right, it does not make sense. The whole thing does not make sense if you look at the provisions of the Standing Order and the Constitution. It does not make sense because it seems to contradict, and it also makes it virtually impossible to amend, which is really the problem. That is why we are asking for the suspension motion to move this forward.

In the provisions, there are opportunities there for the Government to work with Opposition, whether it is through the standing committee or a special committee, as we move forward. Also, just to conclude, we need to get back to reality. The reality is that we have not completed the *coup* cycle. A military coup happened in 2006, and that cycle needs to be completed, we have not done that.

The cycle, I have already explained, when there is a military *coup*, a constitutional legal order is imposed...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- And then we review it, through the people, by the people, so that stage has not been reached! Review by the people and for the people, because the current situation is an imposed constitutional legal order. So, we need to follow the cycle, and the next step is what we are suggesting, and that is very simple, and that is all we are asking for as a Government, that it is our responsibility to conclude that cycle.

We have been through upheavals of military coups and all that. Let us complete the cycle, let us get back to a constitutional legal order, which is not imposed by military coups, that is the objective here! In order to reach that, we will work closely with you, and suspension of the Standing Orders, there is provisions for that after this and we work together in a Standing Committee or a Special Committee.

Question put.

MR. SPEAKER.- There being opposition, Parliament will now vote.

Votes cast:

Ayes	-	41
Noes	-	13
Not voted	-	1

Motion agreed to.

BILLS – FIRST READING

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the purpose of Section 160 of the Constitution and pursuant to Standing Orders 93 and 84(1), I move:

That the Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 1 of 2025) be now read the first time.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hereby second the motion.

[A Bill for an Act to amend the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji (Bill No. 1/2025)]

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, in accordance with Standing Orders 93 and 84(1), the Bill has now been read a first time, the Bill will now be listed on the Order Paper and set down for second reading on a future sitting date.

Honourable Members, until such time that the honourable Prime Minister will give notice for the second reading, I encourage all honourable Members this time to peruse the Bill and prepare for the debate which will primarily focus on the principles and merits of the Bill. Thank you.

Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting today. It has been a long day, and I thank you all for your contributions. Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.51 p.m.