

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 13TH MARCH, 2025

[CORRECTED COPY]

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THURSDAY, 13TH 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 Youth and Sports and honourable V. Pillay.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 12th 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.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting and all those joining us in the gallery and those watching the live broadcast and the live streaming of today's proceedings from the comfort of your homes, and offices, through electronic devices. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

International Every Girl Wins Day

Honourable Members, today is International Every Girl Wins Day, celebrated annually on 13th March. It was established in 2019 by Every Girl Wins Institute to raise awareness about women's rights to freedom and equality, and to highlight the importance of supporting and recognising the achievements of girls worldwide, as well as to empower them to be inspired to take up leadership roles in their communities.

There is also the Thursdays in Black which is an ongoing global movement advocating for a world free from rape, violence and gender-based discrimination. It encourages individuals to wear black every Thursday as a symbol of solidarity with survivors and a call for justice. I do not think this request will pose any difficulties to the honourable Members.

The Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection actively promotes this campaign, recognising its role in raising awareness and driving conversations around gender-based violence (GBV). In this regard, I sincerely thank the honourable Minister for making us aware of such an important issue through merchandise, and I believe there will be a brief presentation to the honourable Members later during the break in the Big Committee Room.

SPEAKER'S RULING

Honourable Jone Usamate

Honourable Members, I will now deliver my ruling on the Point of Order raised by honourable Jone Usamate on Friday, 7th March, 2025. Following the adoption of the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament of Thursday, 6th March, 2025, honourable Jone Usamate raised a Point of Order under Standing Order 74(1)(a) and the honourable Member also cited Standing Order 80 as the specific provision which has been allegedly breached.

As I have already clarified in an earlier occasion that Standing Order 74(1)(a) is only an enabling provision, allowing a member to rise and for the Chair to recognise the member. The Member is then required to specify under Standing Order 74(1)(b) the relevant Standing Order which he or she alleges to have been breached. The Chair assumed that honourable Usamate, by referring to Standing Order 80, he was complying with Standing Order 74(1)(b), that is, the specific nature of the breach. Standing Order 80 is headed "personal explanation" and reads "A member may explain matters of personal nature with the permission of the Speaker. A personal explanation is not debatable."

On the plain reading of Standing Order 80, the Order specifically refers and applies to "matters of personal nature" to the Member raising the objection, and the alleged breach must refer directly to such matters. The Chair understands this to mean in the ordinary sense, as referring to the personal conduct of the honourable Member much as, of one's feelings of one's health, of one's financial, legal status, and the like.

In the setting of a public forum such as the Parliament, a Member rises and speaks not on his own behalf but on behalf of his or her constituents, and the words spoken and actions taken by the Member is generally on the constituents behalf, unless the issues involve personal conducts of the Member.

In the circumstances, on the Point of Order raised by honourable Usamate, it appears that the substance of the honourable Member's do not fall into the category of a personal explanation pertaining to his "personal conduct" since he was speaking not on his own behalf but for his constituents. I am fortified in this interpretation by the proviso to Standing Order 80, that states: "A personal explanation is not debatable". That is upon being raised by the honourable Member, the matter ends there. It infers the recognition of the right of privacy of the honourable Member. I am minded therefore, to dismiss honourable Usamate's Point of Order on this issue that Standing Order 80 is not relevant.

However, given that honourable Usamate had proceeded to elaborate on the matters raised in his Point of Order, I am obliged to scrutinise and rule on that. I now have had the opportunity to go over very carefully honourable Usamate's details of objection and in the main, the four matters that were raised:

- (1) that the Deputy Prime Minister and honourable Minister for Finance, honourable Usamate claimed, had stated that the previous Government had not in the last 16 years of its rule, build any additional classrooms in the Central Division.
- (2) that the honourable Prime Minister had conceded that Fiji was in the midst of a financial crisis, whereas the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance said the contrary, that there was no financial crisis.

- (3) that the Deputy Prime Minister and honourable Minister of Finance was reported in the media as saying that local government elections will take place in September or October this year, contrary, honourable Usamate said, to what the Minister responsible for Local Government had stated.
- (4) finally, honourable Usamate asserted that the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance had voted against the Fiji Development Bank (FDB) Guarantee in 2022.

As to the first ground of honourable Usamate's claim that honourable Professor Biman Prasad had stated that the previous Government had not in their last 16 years built any additional classrooms in the Central Division, I have re-read the *Daily Hansard* and the intervention by honourable Professor Biman Prasad, and I am satisfied that, as clarified by honourable Prasad, what he said was "in the last 16 years not a single additional classroom in the schools have been audited," according to the present Government's report prepared by the Australian Government. Quite clearly, the auditing of classrooms, is quite a separate matter from "building additional classrooms," as claimed by honourable Usamate to have been said by the honourable Professor Biman Prasad. This alleged breach cannot be sustained and is dismissed.

The second claim of breach was allegedly the denial by honourable Professor Biman Prasad of the statement reported to have been made by the honourable Prime Minister that Fiji was in the midst of a financial crisis. After honourable Professor Biman Prasad had pointed out that he had checked the *Daily Hansard* and there was no reference that the honourable PM had said such statement. Honourable Usamate after this clarification, agreed that it was possible that the report might not be correct, and he has apologised for it.

The third matter raised by honourable Usamate relates to the media report, which the honourable Member alluded to, alleging that the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance had stated that the local government elections will take place in September or October of this year, contrary, honourable Usamate added to the views of the Minister responsible for local government.

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister on his counter Point of Order confirmed that he had said something to that effect that "the election is likely to be around September and October" in which he claims to be a fair comment. The Chair agreed that it was only a view not an assertion of fact and falls under the "fair comment" non-actionable category of views. I accepted the Deputy Prime Minister's explanation and accordingly rule that the alleged breach cannot be sustained and is dismissed,

Finally, the last allegation made by honourable Usamate was that contrary to the Deputy Prime Minister honourable Professor Prasad's claim that he had supported the FDB Guarantee in 2022, when it came before Parliament, when in fact he had voted against it. In his response, honourable Professor Biman Prasad clarified that the *Daily Hansard* of 9th February, 2022 reported that the Guarantee was not voted but was unanimously agreed to. On the Chair's direction that if the clarification by honourable Deputy Prime Minister is correct, honourable Usamate would withdraw the allegation if he undertook to check the *Daily Hansard* and will withdraw the allegation of the honourable Deputy Prime Minister's clarification is correct.

Honourable Usamate returned to say that he has checked the relevant *Daily Hansard* of 9th February, 2022 and all it said was that the guarantee "was agreed to" and that he argued, is neither here nor there, that is, it does not say whether the Deputy Prime Minister had voted "yes" or "no".

With respect to honourable Usamate's argument of "aye" or "nay" is, in my view, semantics. The fact that the 2022 FDB Guarantee was passed and merely recorded as "agreed to" does not record

and identify who voted for the motion and who did not vote for it, does not lend any support whatsoever to any claims that Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, or any honourable Member of Parliament for that matter, had voted one way or the other on the motion.

In any event, surely if a Bill or Motion “was agreed to” also can mean that it was unanimously passed or passed by acclamation.

In the circumstances, the claim by honourable Usamate that the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance had voted “no” on the 2022 FDB Guarantee motion is not correct and I direct that the honourable Usamate formally withdraw the allegation the floor of this House.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the basis of what you expressed that it cannot be proven, I withdraw it.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Member. There remains an important matter which honourable Usamate had raised and related to the language used in this Chambers by honourable Members. There is a general requirement for moderation in parliamentary language. It is important that when Members are speaking or interjecting to observe certain standards of language and words used. It is not so much as to protect other Members, but more so to preserve the character of parliamentary debate and the decorum of this Chambers.

I ask honourable Members to observe the Chair’s direction in this important matter, and I will have no hesitation in requiring any language or words, when it is considered unparliamentary, especially when used in connection with other Members to be withdrawn.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Consolidated Review Report – Biosecurity Authority of Fiji 2011-2013 Annual Reports

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, hereby submits to Parliament the Review Report of the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji 2011-2013 Annual Reports.

The Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF) was established under the Biosecurity Act of 2008, transitioning from the Quarantine and Inspection Department to a statutory body. The period 2011-2013 marked its formative years, during which BAF focussed on protecting Fiji’s biodiversity, preventing biodiversity risks, and facilitating international trade.

Despite challenges with system modernisation, Mr. Speaker, financial reporting and public perception, BAF implemented key projects, improved service delivery and developed strategic partnerships locally and internationally.

This Report outlines BAF’s achievements, financial progress and ongoing commitment to safeguarding Fiji’s economy, environment and public health. The Report captures the various activities reported within the two reporting periods from 2011 to 2013. As part of our responsibilities under Standing Order 110, the Committee undertook site visits to BAF installations in the Central, Western and Northern Divisions, where we engaged with local stakeholders and observed firsthand the challenges faced in these Divisions. During these visits, several key concerns were highlighted, ranging from resource limitations to operational inefficiencies and specific regional issues that need attention.

Our Report thoroughly documents these concerns, providing a detailed analysis on each issue and offering actionable recommendations aimed at improving the situation. Mr. Speaker, these recommendations are designed to address the identified gaps, improve service delivery and enhance the overall effectiveness of the operations in these Divisions.

I would like to take time, Sir, to thank the BAF for compiling and submitting its Annual Reports for the years 2011 to 2013, and I also want to express my gratitude to the Board Chairman, Mr. Waibuta, the Acting CEO, Mr. Suren Pratap, and the entire BAF Team for their support in making our site visits very productive and very helpful in the writing of our Report.

I would also like to thank the other Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence for compiling this bipartisan report, and I thank our Secretariat for their support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on behalf of the Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs and Defence, I submit this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion, without notice, that a debate on the content of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed.

Consolidated Review Report - Republic of Fiji Military Forces 2019-2022 Annual Reports

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, hereby submits to Parliament the Consolidated Review Report of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces 2019 to 2022 Annual Reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee called for a face-to-face public submission from the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) on 28th January 2025. This session was broadcast live on the Parliament *Facebook* page and aired on the Walesi Parliament Channel. This was followed by site visits to RFMF installations in the Central, Western and Northern Divisions from the 10th February to 15th February, 2025, and we actually tried to save money by doubling up on the RFMF and the BAF site visits.

The 2013 Constitution provides the key functional roles of the RFMF in terms of protecting Fiji and Fijians at all times by employing the latest technology and determining its defence strategies to address emerging security threats and working with the international community to reduce conflict and forge peaceful solutions, in volatile regions around the world. The RFMF, as part of its core role to effectively respond to threats, acquires accurate information and effectively processes it through a functional chain of command.

The Report captures the trends in the various activities reported in the reporting period, Sir. The Committee has provided a series of recommendations aimed at strengthening the RFMF and the

Republic of Fiji Navy (RFN), focussing on improving public relations, enhancing workforce development, addressing human rights concerns, and increasing maritime security capabilities. These recommendations, Sir, emphasise the need for better transparency, stronger oversight, enhanced training, and increasing resources to address national security challenges and to help improve operational effectiveness.

I, therefore, wish to extend our thanks to the Commander RFMF and his Team for their unwavering support during the review of the Annual Reports. The Committee acknowledges the great work already undertaken and encourages continued efforts to enhance the RFMF's public image and accountability.

On that note, I thank the honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence for helping to compile this bipartisan Report and I also acknowledge the secretariat for their invaluable support.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, I submit this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion, without notice, that a debate on the content of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

Question out.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, at this juncture, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Chairperson and Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence for their outstanding dedication and tireless efforts in completing all their Committee work.

Your commitment and ability to work collaboratively and efficiently is a testament to your unwavering sense of duty to our Parliament, and most importantly, to our people we serve. This achievement is not merely the conclusion of tasks, but the reflection of your commitment through democracy and good governance. I thank you, once again.

Review Report – 2018-2019 AG's Follow Up Reports for High Risk Ministries and Departments

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the review being conducted by the Standing Committee on Public Accounts follows the Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji on the financial statements for the follow-up of 2018-2019 Auditor-General's Reports for High Risk Ministries and Departments. This Report was referred to the Committee on 19th April, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Report covers the outcome of follow-up audits by the Office of the Auditor-General (OAG), carried out during the audit of the 2023-2024 Agency Financial Statements, with the view of improving performance and enhance accountability of public sector entities.

The following Ministries and Departments were covered or treated as High Risk Ministries and Departments.

- (1) Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and National Disaster Management;
- (2) Republic of Fiji Military Forces;
- (3) Fiji Police Force;
- (4) Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation;
- (5) Ministry of Agriculture;
- (6) Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport;
- (7) Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts and Higher Education Institutions; and
- (9) Ministry of Health and Medical Services.

They were declared and treated as high risk Ministries due to factors such as:

- large year end transactions;
- high budgetary funding;
- being implementing agencies for government policies;
- extremely complex transactions or specialised nature of operations; and
- most of them have continuous lack of good internal control practices.

In the audit of 2018 and 2019 accounts, the OAG reported on significant matters and deficiencies identified and provided recommendations. This include control weaknesses which could cause or is causing severe disruptions to the process, or on the ability of a Ministry and Department to achieve process objectives and comply with relevant legislation.

As a result, the summary, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the 2018 audit recommendations, only 81 percent of the recommendations were fully implemented, 14 percent were partially implemented, and 5 percent were not implemented at all.

For the 2019 audit recommendations, only 72 percent of the recommendations were implemented, 24 percent were partially implemented, and 4 percent were not implemented at all.

However, after the Committee's consultation with the respective eight Ministries and Departments in 2024-2025, it has been confirmed that these two agencies have shown progress in their implementation, while some that had issues back from 2018 and 2019 had not been resolved, and some that had been resolved, reoccurred later on in the years.

I would encourage the respective responsible Ministers of these high risk Ministries to undertake necessary action to fully implement the remaining recommendations with their Permanent Secretaries, as the Committee noted in its review that some Ministries and Departments have not been regularly updated on the status of the implementation of recommendations by their Accounting Heads as required.

From the eight high risk Ministries and Departments, we noted that two have fully implemented all the recommendations and those are the Ministry of Women Children and Poverty Alleviation and the Ministry of Agriculture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to extend my appreciation to all the honourable Members of the Committee who were part of the successful compilation of this bipartisan Report, namely;

- (1) Honourable Sakiusa Tubuna;
- (2) Honourable Jovesa Vocea;

- (3) Honourable Alvick Maharaj;
- (4) Honourable Hem Chand; and
- (5) Honourable Naisa Tuinaceva.

With those comments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I table this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion, without notice, that the debate on the content of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Review Report – Ministry of Forestry 2022-2023 Annual Report

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Chairman of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, it is my privilege to present the review of the Ministry of Forestry's Annual Report for the fiscal year 2022-2023. This Report reflects the Ministry's unwavering commitment to sustainable forest management, conservation and the promotion of biodiversity in Fiji.

Throughout the year, the Ministry has undertaken significant initiatives aimed at preserving our natural resources for future generations. These efforts include the implementation of reforestation programmes, the enforcement of sustainable logging practices, and the enhancement of protected areas. The Ministry's dedication to these initiatives is commendable and aligns with our national goals of environment sustainability and climate resilience.

The Report also highlights the challenges faced by the Ministry, including the impacts of climate change, illegal logging activities, and the need for increased funding and resources. Despite these obstacles, the Ministry has made remarkable progress in addressing these issues through collaborative efforts with local communities, international partners and other Government agencies.

Here are a few major achievements of the Ministry of Forestry in Fiji for 2022-2023 period, along with their respective percentage rates:

(1) Tree Planting Initiative

In the 2022-2023 financial year, approximately 4.8 million seedlings were planted, encompassing native species, pine, mahogany, teak, sandalwood, mangroves and fruit trees. Since the programme's initiation in January 2019, over 19.1 million trees have been planted across more than 17,200 hectares, achieving more than 60 percent of the 30 million tree targeted ahead of schedule.

(2) Budget Increase

The Ministry achieved a 28 percent increase in its budget, rising from \$13.8 million in the revised 2021-2022 Budget to \$17.7 million for 2022-2023.

(3) Export Revenue

The Ministry facilitated the highest export revenue in 10 years, contributing significantly to Fiji's economy. These achievements highlight the Ministry's dedication to environmental sustainability and economic growth.

In conclusion, the Ministry of Forestry's Annual Report for 2022-2023 demonstrates a steadfast commitment to the preservation and sustainable use of Fiji's forest resources.

The Standing Committee on Natural Resources acknowledges the Ministry's achievements and encourages continued efforts to ensure the long-term health and vitality of our forests.

I wish to express my appreciation to the Executives and staff of the Ministry of Forestry for their effort and dedication.

At this juncture, I would like to take this opportunity to extend my gratitude to the honourable Members, who have contributed to the development of this bipartisan Report. Special thanks goes to honourable Taito Rokomatu, the former Deputy Chairperson; honourable Sachida Nand, Deputy Chairperson; honourable Ratu Isikeli Tuiwailevu; honourable Kalaveti Ravu; honourable Vijay Nath; honourable Jovesa Vocea; and honourable Alipate Tuicolo, Alternate Members, for their valuable input and dedication in producing this Report.

I commend this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion, without notice, that a debate on the content of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Consolidated Review Report – Water Authority of Fiji
January-July 2018 and 2018-2019 Annual Reports

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, I am pleased to present the Committee's Consolidated Report of the two Annual Reports for Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) that covers the period of January to July 2018 and 2018-2019. Through these Annual Reports, we gained valuable insights into the various activities and achievements of the Authority during the review period.

As part of our ongoing commitment to promoting transparency and accountability in the management of public resources, the Committee has undertaken a thorough examination of WAF's performance during this period.

The WAF plays a vital role in ensuring the delivery of safe, reliable and sustainable water and wastewater services to the people of Fiji. In the face of significant challenges, including climate change, rapid urbanisation and the need for the infrastructure upgrades, WAF had made notable strides in its effort to meet the growing demand of water services across the country.

Throughout our review, the Committee focused on assessing the Authority's operational effectiveness, financial management, and progress towards meeting its strategic objectives. Our scrutiny included visits to WAF's operational areas in various divisions of Fiji, where we engaged with both, staff and local communities, to understand the impacts of WAF's initiatives firsthand.

While acknowledging the achievements made by WAF, the Committee has also identified areas for improvement. The Committee believes that with continued focus on efficiency, innovation and sustainable practices, WAF can strengthen its role as a key pillar in Fiji's development.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend WAF for its commitment to its vision and mission, and I hope that this Report will serve as a constructive contribution to its ongoing efforts to provide safe, accessible, and sustainable water services to all Fijians.

I take this opportunity to thank honourable Sachida Nand, Deputy Chairperson; honourable Taito Rokomatu, former Deputy Chairperson; honourable Ratu Isikeli Tuiwailevu; honourable Kalaveti Ravu; honourable Virendra Lal, Alternate Member, for the compilation of this bipartisan Report.

I commend this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion, without notice, that a debate on the content of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Review Report - Ministry of Justice 2018-2022 Annual Reports

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 38(2), the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights, as of May last year, was referred the Ministry of Justice Annual Reports for 2018-2019, 2019-2020, 2020-2021 and 2021-2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Justice is responsible for maintaining official records and delivering services through its main legal registries. This is done through the Office of the

Administrator General, Office of the Registrar of Titles, Registrar of Companies, Births Deaths and Marriage Office and the Office of the Official Receiver.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also imperative to note that these are the first ever Annual Reports presented by the Ministry to this august House and given these circumstances, the Committee thoroughly deliberated on the Reports and identified key issues throughout the reported years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some main areas of discussion includes the:

- digitisation projects of legal registries implemented by the Ministry;
- possible decentralisation of 'land title and deeds' in other parts of Fiji;
- challenges faced by the Ministry with late registration of births and deaths by the public;
- status of the birth registration mobile application and its impact throughout 2018 to 2022;
- existing archaic legislations that guide the operation of the Ministry;
- absence of gender analysis and Sustainable Development Goal achievement in the reported years; and
- low achievement on registration of births from 2016 to 2021 with respect to Civil Registration and Vital Statistics.

Mr. Speaker, these issues were compiled and sent for clarification to the Ministry, which eventually formed the basis of our findings and recommendations as stipulated in the Committee's Review Report.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, I would like to acknowledge the Members and Alternate Members of the Committee for their deliberations and input in the development of this Report. With the findings the Committee has identified during its review, I would also like to commend the Ministry of Justice in presenting their Annual Reports to Parliament, which not only fulfill the Committee's oversight role, but also ensuring that checks and balance are intact within our governance system.

On behalf of the Committee, Mr. Speaker, I hereby commend the contents of the Review Report on the Ministry of Justice Annual Reports 2018 to 2022 to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121 (5), I hereby move:

A motion, without notice, that a debate on the content of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now suspend the sitting for our tea break. The Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.19 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.10 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before we proceed to the next item, please, join me in extending a warm welcome to Mr. Joshua Hager and his delegation.

(Acclamation)

They are the South Texas Sojourners from Texas, USA. We welcome you to the Fijian Parliament this morning, and we wish you well during the course of your stay here in Fiji.

Please, also join me in welcoming, Mr. Andrew Young, a former Clerk of Parliament from our twinning with the Parliament of Victoria.

(Acclamation)

He is now consultant with UNDP, and he is here to see our Parliament on procedural matters. You are welcome to Fiji and to Parliament.

Honourable Members, please, take note that there will be five Bills that will be debated and voted upon, whilst the fifth Bill will be moved under Standing Order 51.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC FILMS (AMENDMENT) BILL 2025

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr Speaker, pursuant to a resolution of Parliament on Thursday, 6th March 2025, I move:

That the Cinematographic Films (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 02/2025), be debated, voted upon and be passed.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, be reminded that the debate on this Bill is limited to 1.5 hours, and your speaking time allocations will be displayed on the wall.

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, the Amendment Bill before Parliament introduces some key elements or amendments to the film classification system under the Cinematographic Films Act 1971. These changes are important for improving access to films, while upholding proper viewing standards for movie goers and the Film Industry in Fiji.

For decades, Mr. Speaker, cinemas have been an integral part of our communities, bringing families and friends together to share in the joy of storytelling through film.

In 2019, Mr. Speaker, the Film Board reviewed its classification approach and opted for stricter adherence to the provisions of the Act. While the decision at that time was made in good faith and with good intentions, it resulted, however, in the unintended removal of the Parental Guidance (PG) rating, and the effect of that was to significantly restrict some films from accessibility to younger audiences.

Prior to this, the PG rating allowed children between the ages of six years to 12 years, to watch films when accompanied and supervised by a parent or a guardian. This system gave families the freedom to enjoy varieties of genre, including action, adventure, fantasy and comedy, and at the same time ensuring that children had appropriate guidance when needed.

Without this classification of PG rating, Mr. Speaker, many films that would otherwise have been rated PG are instead given a restricted R13 classification, effectively preventing children from under the age of 13 years from watching them, even when accompanied by a responsible adult, parent or guardian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the amendments before Parliament this morning are not simply about reinstating the PG rating, they are about ensuring that families have the ability to make informed decisions about their children's entertainment and what they are able to watch at the movie theatres.

The digital age, Mr. Speaker, has transformed the way we utilise the media, as well as movies. Unlike in the past, where cinemas were the primary source of film content, in this day and age, children have access to movies at their fingertips through streamlining platforms and, of course, the online media.

In this situation, it is even more important for parents to play an active role in guiding their children's viewing experiences. And by introducing the PG classification under section 13 of the Act, we are able to give parents that responsibility, while at the same time, ensuring that children have access to age-appropriate content in a way that is supervised and structured. This amendment, Mr. Speaker, ensures that families are, once again, able to have the opportunity to enjoy a broad range of films together as a family.

In addition to reinstating the PG rating, the Bill amends section 2 of the primary legislation or the Act, redefining an adult as a person above the age of 18 years. The change is important and will provide standardised legal definition of a child or an adult. It ensures that film classification and exhibition guidelines are clear and consistently applied.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, amendments to Regulation 2 of the Cinematographic Films and Classification Regulations of 1972, will ensure a smooth transition to the new classification system, preventing any administrative challenges for industry stakeholders. The changes reaffirm our commitment to modernising the legislation, and to making it more relevant to contemporary needs and requirements. The amendment, Mr. Speaker, will revitalise the cinema industry and ensure the joy of going to movies remains accessible to every Fijian family. Mr. Speaker, with that background, I respectfully commend this Bill to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now have the list of speakers. I am advised by the Secretary-General that given the total number of speakers who will intervene, each speaker is allowed 10 minutes for his or her delivery.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I give my contribution on this Bill, I would just like to make a comment that I made a comment during my speech on the Bill to change the Constitution that there were different versions of Quran available as well, I think some of my Islam brother they called and asked me to state there is only one version of Quran. So, if anyone is offended by my statement, I would like to apologise to them and I do believe that they are observing fasting during this Ramadan period and I wish them all the best. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, with regards to the Bill No. 2 of 2025, I was going through the background of the Bill itself as to why it needs to be changed, et cetera. My first question and clarification to the honourable Attorney-General would be that there is a formation of film control board now and most of these films that are made in different counties come with a rating. So, are those ratings going to be superseded by the Film Control Board that is going to be set in Fiji? All countries have their own film control boards and they put a rating there. So, is this going to work out for them and how the cinemas are going to address this, knowing that there might be two different ratings for a particular

cinemas are going to address this, knowing that there might be two different ratings for a particular movie, especially in cinemas?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been looking at Bills for a number of years now, but this was something interesting. To my surprise, when I was reading the background in Clause 1, 1.3 and 1.4 states, and I would like to actually read this out, I quote:

“1.3 The Cinematographic Films (Amendment) Bill 2025 (‘Bill’) therefore seeks to amend the Act to address changes to film classification. The absence of a Parental Guidance (‘PG’) rating has limited access for children aged 6 to 12 years to films suitable for their viewing and has affected business for the cinema industry.

1.4 The amendment proposes to introduce the PG rating to accommodate this age group, restore audience access and support the cinema industry.”

Are we changing the Bill just to support a particular business here, or a business industry?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have gone to a length to discuss about moral values, ethics and what is actually happening in the families. If we look at our society today, are we trying to form a stereotype society or are we trying to open up our families to talk about issues that were taboo for a number of years?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just for background information, while we went out on public consultation, gathering submissions on the Registration of Sex Offenders Bill, 90 percent of the offenders were known to the victims, like an uncle or family friend or someone. But in here, when we are actually restricting the age or increasing the adult age from 16 years to 18 years, to my knowledge, we are trying to create another stereotype society whereby we cannot talk about these things openly within our family. You are not allowed to sit and watch with your family.

Unless and until we talk openly to our children, and this was one of the submissions from a 13 year old girl who told us at that point in time that her father is busy drinking grog and her mother is too busy doing household chores and no one at home ever told her the difference between a good touch and a bad touch. Once our own family members who we trust do not tell us, we tend to believe someone else who is willing to tell us, someone from outside of our home or family.

Why does this happen? It is because of the stereotype setting that we have in the family. I know our culture does not allow that but if we look at the number of teenage pregnancies happening in Fiji, it is a concern. Why is this happening? Because we are not willing to talk openly to our children, what is a good touch or what is a bad touch. How should people behave with you? If you are actually experiencing a bad touch, what you need to do? It is high time that we need to talk about it. This would have been one of the reasons why we brought the age category down from 18 to 16, at least to safeguard certain portions of the teenage group so, that they can openly sit and see this kind of things with the family, and there can be open discussions. We should not be restricting! Teenage pregnancy is an issue, and we all are facing it!

We are actually bringing parental guidance now. How will the cinema industry ensure, that the person getting a child to watch movies in the cinema is actually a guardian or a parent? Do we have any regulations to regulate that? Is there any checkbox that needs to be ticked before we actually sell a ticket to a stranger accompanied by a child in the cinema? What if that particular person has lured a small child to a movie just for some sexual pleasure? We all know what is happening in the cinemas! All the seats are always booked.

People that tend to go and enjoy themselves in the cinemas, it is not as easy or just staying in the age category. Are we actually putting our business values over our social and moral values? It is important that we need to think about this, and I think it is very important that this particular Bill at least needs to go to the Committee for a proper scrutiny.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Hogwash!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes, when we talk about morals with the family it is hogwash! It might be for you, but for us, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- This is the level of intervention that is coming from the Government! When you are talking about...

(Chorus of interjection)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- ... an issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is affecting us at the moment. I just say that teenage pregnancy is an issue at the moment in this country, it is! The number of children who are getting sexually harassed by the general public, whom they know are from the teenage category, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We need to protect them.

As I have said, how are we going to check the person who is actually accompanying a child does not have any other interior motive? As I have said, this is the first time we are seeing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the background information that we are putting business before social and moral values, and maybe this is one of the reasons, we just heard the news this morning that one of the cinema owners is supporting the amendment to the Constitution. Now we are debating a Bill here.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- This is simple, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one plus one equals to two. There is nothing missing in that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge that we send this particular Bill to the Committee for the Committee to scrutinise and bring a report back to Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

I had just advised honourable Members this morning on parliamentary behaviour. Please, observe decorum in the Chamber.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would also like to stand to contribute to the changes proposed in the Cinematography Films Act 1971, a law that has served Fiji for five decades and must now be modernised to reflect the realities of our digital era.

There is a need to shift the age restrictions for movie viewing from 16 to 18, to protect children from potentially harmful content by ensuring that they are not exposed to mature themes and depictions before they are deemed emotionally and physically ready.

Technology has changed the way we create access and consume media. Streaming services, social media platforms, and on-demand content have removed traditional barriers exposing our people, including our children, women, and the most vulnerable to an overwhelming volume of information, entertainment, and potential harm. Without a thought, children are accessing rated content and often because parents are not aware, they are sending their children to movies to some rated content.

Mr. Speaker, we are faced with huge challenge of our children exposed to this content without supervision. We need to ensure our parents know what their children are going to be exposed to, so PG rating is extremely important. Mr. Speaker, sadly we are seeing increasing exposure of children to rated content at a young age. They start exploring the content they watch. We are seeing increasing reports of children sexually abusing other children. This comes from early exposure to such content.

We are also seeing reports of children using pornographic materials and somewhere along the way, we have stopped protecting our children from harmful content. Clearer guidelines will ensure that all media platforms operating in Fiji comply with ethical standards. To answer, honourable Maharaj, we do not need cinema to teach our children about good touch, bad touch or about sexuality. These subjects need to be discussed at parental level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, five out of six children are getting abused. This is reported. Many parents themselves have suffered abuse, and it is passed down through generations. At the moment, our Ministry is working on developing a parenting app for children, so we can prepare parents to be able to know how to work with their children on some of the positive parenting that, honourable Maharaj talked about.

We have also seen that there is a high level of children who go through abuse, but they have not necessarily had the right kind of counselling and therapy. And unfortunately, once they go through abuse, they try it on others. We have just completed training of 20 Counsellors and with this, another 15 is going through this training this week who are therapists using sports, art and music to be able to work with children who have gone through abuse or who have suffered exposure and need support.

So, there are actually active steps being taken to deal with what, honourable Maharaj, is saying. We are talking here about the Act. The current Act does not fully regulate or provide parental guidance. This will place our children at risk of exposure to violence, explicit material and harmful stereotypes. So, amending this Act, will allow for updated classification standards to ensure age-appropriate content and information to guardians and parents, that is all. By amending the Act, we will protect our children from exposure to harmful content, allow us to amend the definition of adult by deleting 16 years and substituting 18 years, so it now reads as a person above the age of 18.

I urge this Parliament to support the necessary amendments to ensure that our legal framework meets the demand of today's digital world. We must act with urgency to safeguard the well-being of our children and protect the next generation. May we build a stronger Fiji collectively, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity to talk about this Bill. I find it difficult to say this word, the Cinema Film Bill. There are issues in the Bill that I think that we support. I mean, the definition of an adult from 16 to 18 is something that is in the Interpretation Act. The same sort of definitions we have in the Employment Relations Act, when we talk about child labour and those sorts of things. So, it is good that we have the same definitions right across all of the legislation that we have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has been pointed out by the honourable Attorney-General that this PGA rating will allow children to look at films under the age of 13, when accompanied by an adult, parent or guardian. I think one of the issues that has been pointed out by the Minister for Women and Children, there is a lot of concern about what children see and how it affects them, and this is something of concern to all of us.

One of the things that we think about, when a child of a certain age goes into a cinema or a movie that probably has certain parts, which is not good for the child's development, you can never be sure too about some of the people that they go in with. They might be guardians in name. Some of the biggest abusers that we have for children, has been their family members, has been their neighbours, sometimes, has been the people that are heads of the churches. I know it is a difficult thing to be able to manage, but this definition of going with a parent or guardian makes it alright, there is so much room for things to go wrong there.

Now, I understand also that one of the problems that we have in Fiji now, when you go in boats, when you go in buses, they show movies, there is no control over those things. Children watch everything that is played, you go on the ferries, it is shown, the buses – the movies are shown, so this one is just restricting it to the cinemas. There is a need perhaps, to look at what we can do about all those other things. The other things that are impacting the children, and I really think the issue that has been raised by the honourable Maharaj about this notation that we have, this also makes it easier for the companies that run the cinemas to be able to get a bit more profit.

That is a bit of a danger signal, and I think on that basis alone, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we really need to consider this sort of thing to be thoroughly looked at by the representatives of the people themselves. We should be taking it back to people through the Committees, discussing it at length, and then coming back.

I can understand where the Attorney-General is coming from, but from my part, a bit uncomfortable with the fact that this is being done, that possibly at the expense of children sometimes, but also if it is just done to pander it to the dictates of the business sector, I have a worry about that, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is my concern! I think it will be better if this thing is taken back, moved to the Committee, let them talk to the general public, let them talk about it, and then bring it back to this House. Let the representatives of the people do their own examination and consult the people of this country.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the Act to amend the Cinematographic Films Amendment Act 2025. The Act of 1971 provides the legal framework for film exhibition in Fiji, ensuring films are screened safely and respectfully. It establishes the Film Control Board, responsible for licencing film exhibitors and determining whether films can be publicly shown, with designated censors, reviewing content to ensure compliance with established guidelines. The Film Control Board is established under this Act, and they are appointed by the honourable Attorney-General.

The work of the Film Control Board, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is actually to set standards, look at the films, and these are done on a weekly or day-to-day basis. So, what the other side, honourable Maharaj has suggested, these are works that are done by the Board. As far as I am aware, in my humble opinion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the minor amendments here does not warrant this matter to be referred to the Committee.

The Act lacks a parental guidance, PG rating, which restricted access for children aged 6 to 12 years to age-appropriate films. This gap has not only limited viewing options for young audiences, but has also negatively impacted the cinema industry business, as already being shared by the two previous honourable Members.

To address this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Cinematography Films (Amendment) Bill 2025 seeks to introduce a PG rating, allowing children in age groups to watch suitable films under parental guidance, while ensuring continued compliance with content regulations. In addition to the introduction of the PG rating, the Bill also seeks to strengthen protection for minors, and this is very important. Clause 2 of the Bill amends Section 2 of the Act by redefining adult, replacing the age threshold of 16 years with 18 years, possibly an adult is now legally recognised as a person above the age of 18 years.

This amendment aligns Fiji's film classification laws with international standards and other national legislation, where adulthood is commonly defined as 18 years and above. Raising the age threshold ensures that minors are better protected from exposure to content that may not be suitable for their emotional and psychological development, and it promotes consistency across laws governing age-based restrictions.

Mr Speaker, Sir, clause 3 of the Bill modernises the Fiji's film classification system by amending Section 13 of the Act to introduce a parental guidance category. This amendment allows children to watch films that may contain mild content, provided they are accompanied by an adult, parent or guardian. Additionally, clause 3 updates section references in line with this change and introduces a new provision in subsection 3, which explicitly prohibits unaccompanied children under 13 from viewing PG-rated films.

Mr Speaker, this amendment is essential for several reasons:

- (1) It fills the gap in the existing classification system. There has never been an amendment since it was introduced, so in the end, honourable Members from the other side of the House, should be grateful for what this Government has done. We have a legal and moral obligation to do so for our children, where here the lack of PG rating and unnecessary restrictions gives children access to age-inappropriate entertainment.
- (2) It empowers parents and guardians to make informed decisions on their children's movie choices, while ensuring that young viewers receive appropriate guidance; and
- (3) It benefits the Cinema industry by expanding its audience base without compromising content regulations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Maharaj should not be linking this Bill to anyone out there who has made a public opinion about the Constitution. I believe the comment regarding, I am sure he was making reference to Mr. Div Damodar, is inappropriate and irrelevant. It appears to me, honourable Maharaj is probably making reference to theatres in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, like in Ajanta and Lilac but now we have modern cinemas where there is appropriate security, and it is a place where families go for family time. Long gone are those times where you can sneak in with anyone and do whatever business you want to do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under this amendment, Fiji rated films are classified as suitable for children under the age of 13, provided they are accompanied by an adult, parent or guardian. This change, and again, is necessary to ensure consistency and clarity within Fiji's Film classification framework. By explicitly defining the PG category, the amendments aligns with the classification regulations with the updated provisions within the Act, ensuring that the film exhibitors, parents and audiences clearly understand the new rating system. Additionally, it reinforces parental responsibility in determining suitable content for children, while explaining access for age-appropriate films. At this juncture, I declare my support for the Cinematographic Films (Amendment) Bill 2025.

HON. V. LAL. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, today I gather to deliberate on the amendment to this significant Cinematographic Films Act of 1971. This proposed Bill seeks to raise the minimum age for entry to certain films from 16 years to 18 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the world of cinema is a powerful medium that can influence thoughts, emotions and behaviours. While it offers immense educational and entertainment value, it also has the potential to expose young minds to mature themes, that they may not be ready to process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the most common form of sexual violence in Fiji, is child sexual abuse primarily of girls and some boys under the age of 18 years. Gender-based violence is commonly experienced by women and girls across their lifetime and 16 percent of adult women have reported to being sexually abused, before the age of 15 years with patterns of violence cascading into adulthood.

From 2017 to 2022, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions reported that 94 percent of rape survivors were women with 68 percent of cases involving girls under the age of 18 years. Triangulating this information are high court reports from 2016 to 2022, indicating that 64 percent of survivors from rape cases decided upon by the court, involving girls under 17 years. Some 55 percent of women report that their children have witnessed violence, which reinforces that violence is a normal acceptable behaviour.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is well known that women and girls vastly under-report violence against themselves for a variety of reasons, including, the fear of further discrimination, fear of retaliation, fear of violence towards themselves or their children, families lack knowledge or access to available services, lack of age gender, disability, appropriate services and shame among other factors.

In a 2010 to 2011 Violence Against Women and Girls Prevalence Survey in Fiji, some 45,452 women or 70 percent of respondents reported experiencing violence, yet in 2016, there were only 3,358 reported cases of domestic violence, rape or sexual assault to the police. Taken altogether, this represents 7 percent of women who experienced violence reporting it, highlighting that this issue of violence against women and girls seen through reporting in the justice, police and social services sectors, is a fraction of reality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this information on hand, I totally agree with my colleagues on this side of the House that more needs to be done about this Bill, and this Bill should be referred to a Standing Committee.

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to, first of all, thank the honourable Members of the Opposition who have spoken on this, for their thoughtful remarks. The first matter that I would wish to raise is what honourable Maharaj mentioned. Yes, I do recognise that movies which are imported from overseas, sometimes have classification guidelines themselves. But those guidelines, are merely suggestions from the distributors of the films.

Fiji of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a sovereign country and we do have a Film Control Board that has this discretion to make judgments, to make discernments and to make decisions about the kind of classification that is appropriate to this community, and to this society and to this country. So, the suggestion that there are tensions between what the distributors have and what we might decide for ourselves, as a country, is with respect misguided.

Secondly, there was a suggestion that by promoting this Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is somehow pandering to a segment of business. With respect again, that suggestion is far-fetched and misconceived. The primary purpose of the Bill is to introduce an element of Parental

Guidance so that parents and guardians, when accompanied by, and with children of their families, are able to go to the movies as a family. This means, that parents and guardians in their wisdom are able to make an informed decision about whether children should accompany them to a particular movie.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is not a police state. We cannot legislate every possible aspect and detail of people's lives. There is no intention, for example, to have invasions of privacy at every cinema door with a policeman or a security officer vigorously checking the identity of the person, relative to the adult or the child who is attending a movie theatre. If one were to follow honourable Alvick Maharaj's arguments to their conclusion, that is where we would end up.

As I have mentioned, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is a free and democratic country, we respect the judgements, the discernments and the wisdom of parents and guardians to decide for themselves as a family if and when they would like their children to accompany them to a movie.

I would accept, however, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the comments and observations by honourable Usamate. Yes, there are gaps on videos in buses and ferries, the Gounder ferries to Kadavu and Nabouwalu, et cetera, they are watching all kinds of movies, but I am hastened to add, Sir, the Cinematographic Films Act 1971 which is now quite antiquated was legislated at a time when we did not have videos, we did not have mobile phones. So, in a sense, the legislation itself has been overtaken because the world has moved on and children themselves are able to access videos from phones, et cetera, entirely without supervision.

But what this legislation proposes to do, Mr. Speaker, is, as I have mentioned, reintroduce the parental guidance rating, and allow children, when probably supervised by parents and guardians, to accompany an adult to a movie or film of their choice. This is a technical amendment.

The other point I would wish to make, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that somehow, there has been, on the Opposition side, an attempt to correlate the parental guidance rating with the incidents of sexual crime and domestic violence. Again, with respect, Sir, that is an exaggeration and demonstrates a lack of understanding of what the Bill proposes to achieve.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Votes cast:

Ayes	-	36
Noes	-	11
Not voted	-	7
Abstained	-	1

Motion agreed to.

[Cinematographic Film (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 02/2025) moved under Standing Order 51, read a third time and passed. (Act. No. of 2025)]

LAND TRANSPORT (AMENDMENT) BILL 2025

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the Resolution of Parliament on Thursday, 6th March 2025, I move:

That the Land Transport (Amendment) Bill 2025 be debated, voted upon and be passed.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, be reminded that the debate on this Bill is limited to one hour. Your speaking time allocations will be displayed on the wall.

HON. RO. F. Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I already alluded to, road safety remains a matter of concern. Between January to December 2024, Fiji recorded a total of 54 road fatalities, marking a reduction from the 78 fatalities in 2023.

While this is encouraging, it is a concern that approximately 20 percent of these fatalities in 2024 were linked to speeding and careless driving by provisional licence holders. This figure only represents fatalities, and the actual number of road accidents involving provisional licence holders is significantly higher.

Also, the Traffic Infringement Notices (TINs) issued to provisional licence holders has raised serious concerns with this category of licence holders. Between January 2021 and 31st December, 2024, a total 60,643 TINs were issued, averaging 17,100 per annum.

The Bill, as I have already mentioned earlier, one of the key amendments to the draft pertains to section 57(2) of the Land Transport Act 1998, which currently states, and I quote:

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

To facilitate, Sir, the proposed amendment seeks to replace the word “shall” with “may” in the section 57(2) of the Land Transport Act 1998. This modification will provide the legal flexibility required to introduce and enforce the P1 and P2 licensing stages and provide more leeway for the LTA in terms of those in this category, who have continuously infringed. It will ensure that the system is properly aligned with legislative requirements and promoting a culture of safe driving.

Sir, the Government remains committed to modernising Fiji’s transport sector and it is important that proper strategic plans are put in place, which is why we are, as part of this, also looking into the National Transport Sector Masterplan and the Transport Decarbonisation Implementation Strategy, which will encompass not only some of the factors that I have mentioned in terms of licensing but also having a clear strategic pathway moving forward.

Sir, in terms of the overall situation, as I have mentioned, some positive trends which I have alluded to and will be elaborated more by the Assistant Minister, sets a strong foundation for achieving the targets outlined in our National Development Plan 2025-2029, which aims to reduce road fatalities by 50 percent from 2025-2029. The progress made thus far is a testament to the effectiveness of our strategic interventions and collective efforts in safeguarding lives on our roads.

The LTA has formulated a strategic framework for key projects and programmes for fiscal year 2023-2024 and a capital budget of \$4.8million has been allocated for this period to support initiatives, focus on improving efficiencies, safety and sustainability. These projects include the establishment and completion of the new LTA express office in Martintar, weighbridges, and the Nadi Office which has an increased volume of traffic in the last five years and aims to accommodate up to 80 customers at a time. This will also include the upgrading of the Labasa Office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have mentioned, the achievements of LTA objectives and, of course, with the LTA (Amendment) Bill 2025, it will provide more flexibility, as we move forward, in terms of the issuance of provisional licences and, of course, on national road safety in general. Thank you, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- There are five speakers altogether on my list and each speaker will speak for eight minutes.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Land Transport (Amendment) Bill 2025 that is before Parliament.

At the outset, I wish to say that this amendment is not just a legislation, it is about saving lives on our roads. It is about upholding the rights to life as enshrined under Section 8 of our Constitution, and it is also about ensuring that Fijians can commute safely, whether they are motorists, passengers or pedestrians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current Provisional Driver's Licence System was introduced to curb road accidents, to give new drivers enough time to climatise with an experienced driver accompanying them.

A visible indication of a Provisional Licence holder is the 'P' label shown on the rear windscreens of most vehicles, for motorists and other members of the public to be aware that the driver has just been recently issued with a driver licence. However, the LTA has concluded that this system is not as effective as initially intended.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have heard from the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport, stating some disturbing figures. But allow me, Sir, to repeat some of those figures just to help honourable Members of this august Parliament, having a better understanding on why the amendment is important to every Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, statistics have proven this, that from 2022 to 2024, 36,871 Provisional Driver Licences were issued. In 2023, 6,201 traffic infringement bookings were made for Provisional Licence holders, increasing sharply to 15,485 bookings in 2024. In just two months of 2025, we have already seen 3,846 bookings, totalling 25,532 bookings over this three-year period, a 150 percent increase since 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with speeding leading the cause of deaths on our roads, a total of 2,857 Provisional Licence holders were booked for over-speeding offences in 2023 alone. That number jumped to 7,661 bookings in 2024, with 2,238 bookings already recorded this year. In a tragic turn from 2022 to 2023, 15 Provisional Licence holders were responsible for the death of eight passengers and seven pedestrians. Four Provisional Licence holders also lost their lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is evident that the current provisional driving system needs to be overhauled. It is failing and in a mess. Also, the gaps in the system allows habitual offenders to progress to full licence, essentially giving them a licence to continue violating laws right to the point of causing deaths on our roads. These drivers, mostly young and new, are known to be the most reckless and dangerous on our roads. In this regard, what is needed is more time for Provisional Licence holders to gain experience, develop safe driving skills and build a greater awareness of road safety.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the new system proposes a two-step Provisional Licence structure - P1 and P2. This system will give new drivers enough time to grow, gain experience, develop good driving

habits and become conscious of road safety. To progress to P2 will mean a clean driving record at P1.

Furthermore, with a total of three years for P phases, this should be enough to grow a road safety mindset on drivers, mould behaviours and produce law-abiding attitude for drivers in the provisional category. It allows to prove they are worthy to receive permanent licences.

Mr. Speaker, another key element in this new system is a strict monitoring of provisional licence holders, who will face a three-month penalty for any traffic infringement committed, extending their provisional period to another three months. When another three months, if they commit another offence and after three strikes, they will lose their provisional licence and may have to start again as learners. The goal is simple, only the best and safe drivers should be entrusted with driving on our roads.

Mr. Speaker, driving is a vital skill for our workforce, but it is essential to remember that with this skill, comes the heavy responsibility - the safety of others. A driver's licence is not a right, it is a privilege and with that privilege comes the responsibility to protect human lives.

In closing, I wish to pay tribute to those who have lost their lives on our roads. In the last five years, 258 Fijians have died in road accidents. Government has set ambitious goal of reducing road fatalities by 50 percent in 2025. This proposed amendment to the Provisional Licence System will go a long way in achieving that goal and, mostly, in saving lives on our roads. I fully support the Bill to amend the Land Transport Act.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak in favour of the Bill to amend the Land Transport Act 1998. This amendment is not just a legislative necessity but a crucial step towards enhancing the safety, efficiency and sustainability of our transportation system.

Every life lost on our roads is a tragedy that we can and must prevent. Records show majority of the road accidents occur primarily due to speeding, driver fatigue and improper overtaking. These behavioural issues highlight the need for improved education and enforcement, strengthening driver education, imposing stricter penalties for repeat offenders and utilising technology input to enhance road safety.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, each life lost is not just a statistic, it represents a family shattered, a community in grief and the broader impact on society. The LTA continues to urge all road users to take immediate and conscious action to reduce deaths on our roads. The latest fatalities serve as a reminder of the importance of heeding road safety advisories. Every driver, pedestrian and passenger should prioritise safety and strictly adhere to road safety guidelines.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the consequences of neglecting these crucial measures are devastating and can be prevented with collective responsibility. The LTA remains resolute in its commitment to ensure that every life on our roads is secure. To contribute to a safer road environment, everyone needs to adhere to road safety rules, regulations and standards. Whether you are a driver, pedestrian or passenger, safety remains the top priority.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is imperative to stay within speed limits, refrain from drink driving, buckle up and wear your seat belt, take the necessary rest to avoid fatigue, be alert, cautious and exercise courtesy on our roads. The decision to prioritise safety is not just a personal choice but a responsibility we owe to our families, friends and fellow citizens. Road safety is a shared commitment that spans across drivers, passengers and pedestrians alike. Every individual plays a pivotal role in creating a secure road environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, motor vehicle accidents remain an ongoing battle for the Land Transport Authority (LTA) and the Fiji Police Force. Yesterday, while speaking on the ACCF's 2020 Annual Report, 335 applications for motor vehicle accidents, with \$7.16 million was reported to be paid out in compensation. The main causes of motor vehicle accidents were speeding, drunk driving, dangerous driving, careless driving, driver fatigue, hit and run and pedestrian at fault.

One of the critical issues that needs to be addressed, Mr. Speaker Sir, is vehicle defects as well. Cars with one headlight, bent out taillights and other defects pose a significant danger to other drivers as they mislead the size of the vehicle. The LTA must enforce stricter vehicle inspection regulations, to ensure that all vehicles on the road are safe and compliant with safety standards.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, drivers need to be educated on the importance of driving with their headlights on, in foggy conditions and at dusk and dawn, to ensure visibility to other drivers. Reckless driving and speeding are also major concerns that need to be addressed. This comes down to the maturity of the driver, and it is essential to implement comprehensive driver education programmes to promote responsible driving behaviours.

In line with our commitment to environmental sustainability, the amendments include provision to encourage the use of eco-friendly vehicles. By offering incentives for electric and hybrid vehicles, we can reduce our carbon footprint and contribute to global efforts to combat climate change. This is a forward-thinking approach that aligns with our national and international environmental goals.

The amendments also focus on improving the public transport system. By streamlining the licencing process for public service vehicles and ensuring better regulation, we can provide our citizens with a more reliable and efficient public transport system. This will not only ease traffic congestion but also make public transport a more attractive option for daily commuters.

The Bill proposes to enhance the powers and capabilities of LTA. By providing LTA with the necessary tools and resources, we can ensure better enforcement of traffic laws and more effective management of our transport infrastructure.

A stronger LTA means a more organised and safer transport system for all. Improving our transport system has significant economic benefits. Efficient transport reduces travel time and costs, which can boost productivity and economic growth. Moreover, a safer transport system can reduce the economic burden of road accidents, which includes medical costs, loss of productivity and damage to property.

Honourable Members, the amendments to the Land Transport Act 1998 are a necessary and timely intervention. They reflect our commitment to creating a safer, more sustainable and efficient transport system for all Fijians. I urge you all to support this Bill and join me in making our roads safer and our transport system more efficient. Mr. Speaker, Sir, by collectively following road safety guidelines, we can ensure a secure and enjoyable environment for all.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to address this House on the matters of the Land Transport (Amendment) Bill 2025. While the amendment offers flexibility and aims to foster a safe driving culture, I would like to highlight a significant concern that we must address to truly achieve improved road safety.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current driver education system in our country is a glaring gap. The absence of night driving training in driving schools. Our driving schools focus solely on daytime driving lessons, neglecting the crucial aspects of night driving. This deficiency has serious

implications for road safety as drivers are ill-prepared to handle the unique challenges and hazards associated with night driving.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we are all aware, driving at night presents distinct challenges, including reduced visibility, difficulty in judging distances, and increased risk of encountering impaired drivers. Many of our drivers lack the necessary experience and understanding of these challenges, making them vulnerable to accidents and traffic infringements during nighttime. The absence of night driving training leaves them unprepared, unprepared and unequipped to navigate the roads safely after dark.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I draw a parallel to the training provided in flying schools. When aspiring pilots undergo training to obtain their pilot's licence, they are required to complete night flying sessions. This ensures that they gain first-hand experience and a deep understanding of flying in night conditions. The logic behind the requirement is clear - pilots must be fully prepared for all possible scenarios they may encounter in their career. Similarly, our drivers should be equally prepared for the realities of night driving.

The recent analysis of Class 2 Provisional drivers' licence holders in Fiji from August 2021 to October 2024 revealed critical insights into traffic infringements and accidents. A total of 49,087 traffic infringements were recorded, peaking in 2022, followed by a decline in subsequent years, indicating potential improvements in compliance.

Monthly averages showed a steady decrease from 2,915 traffic infringements in late 2021 to 487 in 2024. While 27 road accidents were documented from 2018 to 2023, primarily due to speeding, driver fatigue, and improper overtaking, these behavioural issues highlighted the need for improved education and enforcement. Strengthening driver education, imposing stricter penalties for repeat offenders, and utilising technology could enhance road safety.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I propose that we integrate night driving training into the curriculum of driving schools across the country. This will ensure that our drivers are well equipped with the necessary skills, and knowledge to handle nighttime driving conditions confidently and safely. By doing so, we will not only reduce the number of accidents and traffic infringements but also create a culture of responsible and well-informed drivers.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, driving school instructors should be adequately trained to teach night driving techniques and safety measures. This will require updating the instructor training programmes, ensuring that they are well-versed in the intricacies of night driving. Collaboration with experts in road safety and driver education can help develop comprehensive training modules that will address the unique challenge of night driving.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the implementation of night driving training will require a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including LTA, driving schools and the government. We must allocate the necessary resources and support to ensure that driving schools have the capacity to deliver effective night driving training. Additionally, we must raise awareness among drivers about the importance of being prepared for night driving and encourage them to seek opportunities for additional training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another crucial aspect we must consider is the role of parents in teaching their children to drive. Currently, only driving school instructors are allowed to teach driving, and their primary concern often revolves around payments and ensuring students graduate. However, parents have a vested interest in their children's safety and well-being. No parent wants their child to have an accident, and they are more likely to emphasise safe driving practises responsible behaviour on the road.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allowing parents to teach their children to drive will not only provide a more personalised and attention-learning experience, but also foster a stronger sense of sensibility and accountability. Parents can instil important values and habits that driving school instructors may overlook. By involving parents in driver education process, we can create a more comprehensive and effective system that prioritises safety and prepares young drivers for the challenges they will face on the road.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Land Transport (Amendment) Bill 2025 aims to foster a safe driving culture through the discretionary powers given to LTA, we must not overlook the critical aspect of comprehensive driver education. Integrating night driving training into the curriculum of driving schools and allowing parents to teach their children to drive will address the current gaps and equip our drivers with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate night time conditions safely. By taking these steps, we will enhance road safety, reduce accidents and traffic infringements and ultimately create a culture of responsible and well-informed drivers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge this House to consider the importance of night driving training and parental involvement in driver education. With that, I hope that further amendments of the Land Transport Authority Act will be tabled in this House that will address many other needed issues in LTA that need to be modernised and make our road safer. With that, I support the motion.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand to make contribution to the Bill before the House. Road safety is a matter of utmost importance, the one that touches every single one of us and every family across the country. The safety of our roads, the reduction of accidents, the preservation of lives and the promotion of safety of our roads, the reduction of accidents, the preservation of life and the promotion of responsible driving are issues that demand our attention.

It is with a deep sense of responsibility that I lend my support to the Land Transport (Amendment) Bill 2025. This amendment, if enacted, will enhance the safety and integrity of our nation's road system and pave the way for a more responsible and accountable driving culture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have all witnessed first-hand the tragic consequence of road accidents. Every accident represents a family impacted. We need to look no further than the sovereign statistics of our traffic infringements and accidents that have been recorded in recent years to realise that we have a long road ahead in the journey of making our road safer.

From August 2021 to October 2024, an alarming 49,000 traffic infringements were recorded. While there has been a decline in the monthly averages now, the fact remains that this is a persistent problem that affects not only those directly involved but the entire nation. While this decline may reflect some improvements, it is clear that our road safety challenges still remains.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these numbers are the representation of tragic and sometimes preventable hazards of possible loss of life. These are the results of irresponsible driving and reflects the gap in our education enforcement, and in some cases the licensing process itself. This is why the Land Transport (Amendment) Bill 2025 is so vital. The Bill seeks to grant discretionary powers to Land Transport Authority in issuing a full licence, giving it the ability to determine whether an individual is truly ready to take the responsibility of full licensing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not just discussing a simple regulatory change, we are discussing the potential transforming of how we approach road safety in our country. The fundamental benefit of this Bill is that we will contribute to road safety for all of us, by allowing Land Transport Authority greater discretionary in the issuance of full licence. We are giving the Authority the ability to make informed and more well thought decisions about who truly is ready to become a full licensed driver.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is additional layout scrutiny which will help prevent inexperienced or irresponsible drivers from gaining full driving privilege before they are adequately prepared to navigate the challenges of our roads.

At the heart of Land Transport (Amendment) Bill 2025 is the desire to foster a culture of responsible driving. Road safety is not simply about laws and regulations. It is about changing attitudes and behaviours. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill will allow us to strengthen our driver education, make it clear that driving is not a right but a responsibility.

With this amendment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will encourage provisional drivers to take their training more seriously and adhere to the traffic laws. It will also help them to understand the impact of their actions behind the wheel. This shift in mindset is crucial in creating long-term change in our driving culture. Each accident represents not just a number but a devastating loss. Families mourn, communities are impacted and we as a society bear the cost of these preventable prejudice. Through these proposed amendments, we aim to reduce the number of accidents caused by reckless driving, speeding and fatigue. These behaviours are often indicative of lack of maturity or preparedness behind the wheel.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, public safety is one of the pillars of this nation, the proposed amendment of the Land Transport Act will contribute significantly to improving the safety of our roads. The graduated licensing system and the additional discretion given to Land Transport Authority in issuing full licence will serve to make our roads safer for everyone. This is inclusive of the driver, the pedestrian, other drivers and other road users.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the long-term benefits of safe roads will extend beyond accident prevention. Safer driving habits will lead to fewer accidents, fewer accidents will lead to fewer injuries, fewer injuries sustained will lead to less stress on our health care system. Our nation will be better protected from the economic burden that our road accidents impose.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to look at countries where similar reforms have been implemented and the positive outcomes that follow. In Australia, several States had adopted a graduating licensing system that includes probationary period after which drivers are subject to further testing before being granted full driving licence. This system has contributed to a steady decline in road fatalities, particularly amongst young drivers. The results speak for themselves. In New South Wales, there has been a significant reduction in fatalities among young drivers since the implementation of these reforms. In New Zealand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a restricted driver license system requires drivers to complete an advanced training before gaining full access to all driving privileges. This graduated system leads to decreasing pressures involving young drivers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Land Transport (Amendment) Bill 2025 is a crucial step forward in our mission to make Fiji roads safe for everyone. Through this Bill, we can reduce accidents, save lives, encourage responsible driving, and enhance public safety. This evidence is clear, and the benefits are undeniable. We have the opportunity to build a future where our families are not touched by prejudice, where our roads are a place of safety, and where responsible drivers lead the way. We can make a difference, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we must. Let us not waste our opportunity. Let us all support this Bill for the safety and well-being of all Fijians.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, at this point, we will suspend proceedings for lunch. Before we do, I remind the House Committee Members of their meeting at the Small Committee Room straight after this. Parliament is suspended and will resume at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.28 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.35 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will proceed from where we left our lunch recess. We have one more speaker on the Bill before the House.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, Members of Parliament and Assistant Ministers, thank you very much for giving me the floor. Whilst I support the Bill and any measures that have been put into place with respect to road safety, there are some other issues and some things that I need to mention, maybe the Minister responsible will take heed of, and I have had a chat also with the honourable Assistant Minister on this.

Mr. Speaker, the statistics that have been provided by the honourable Assistant Minister this morning and that which is part of the actual explanatory note refers to the Class 2 Provisional Drivers. The problem is that road safety is not just about Class 2 Provisional Drivers. We only have to look at what has been done around the world in the road safety part of everyone's LTA where we have to seriously look at the whole legislation. As you would very well know, Sir, changing the law to allow the LTA to have the power to actually say yay or nay to a particular person's right to have a licence full is not enough. I think it is actually a little bit dangerous also when we allow the discretion to go back to LTA.

The idea thing would be and to look at holistically, it is not just provisional drivers that cause the nasty statistics that we see in Fiji. I can actually say that I myself am a statistic. I had a very nasty entanglement together with another vehicle with someone who was a driver of a heavy goods vehicle. I am talking about semi-trailer. By the grace of God, I still stand here today, my family and I.

It was something that made me realise that we need to strengthen the laws so that these drivers, especially those that possess licences for heavy good vehicles, possess licences where they are Public Service Vehicles drivers, we have all seen it on the road. Again, from another perspective, Sir, I am the only one in the House, I think, that no just drives vehicle but also rides motorcycles. I have lost quite a few friends because of road accidents with respect to motorcycles.

That education programme needs to be raised to another level. The punishment, there are many ways that you can actually do this. What we are doing here is, we are saying that we are giving this discretionary power to the LTA to say that someone with respect to a provisional licenced driver, LTA will be allowed to say yay or nay depending on what they have actually done. It is not just them, Sir. We need to say that if you are a provisional driver and you have committed three offences, it is automatic. Not even the LTA gets to decide.

The law says that you do not have a right to get a full licence if whether it is a parking ticket or a speeding fine; two offences, you are gone! Public Service Vehicle drivers, three offences, you lose your PSV for the next three years to five years or whatever the term that you think is actually fit. That creates an environment where every single driver becomes compliant. I wanted to just relay an example, Sir, I happened to be in a taxi one day in Singapore. I was running late to go to a meeting, the taxi driver abruptly stopped when their lights turned orange. We all know you can actually go through orange, so long as it is not late. When I asked him, "why did you stop?" He said, "Wooh, Sir, tomorrow morning I will lose my right to actually drive a taxi."

So, what it does, as you very well-know, Sir, that it is a massive deterrent when you have that kind of punishment. I say that we allow all sorts of freedoms, but we must make sure that we have strong enough laws to ensure that those statistics that we have and that we look at nowadays are reduced to such an extent that we are actually at a comfortably level. It should be zero, some of our

roads need upgrading, we all know that. They are not built for semi-trailers and trucks and high-powered to be driven the way they do in most other developed countries.

I have seen lives, massive trucks barreling down Nasese along this new particular road where we have got a lot of traffic in terms of people that ride bikes and walk in the morning. Before doing all of that, the LTA should say, “okay we need to strengthen our laws, we need to look at that from a very holistic perspective, say what can we do to make this better?” The best way is to make the law so that it is a massive deterrent to anyone. I am not just talking about provisional driver’s licence holders. I am talking about PSV holders, I am talking about heavy good vehicles people, we all see it on the road – buses and taxis.

I remember the former Police Commissioner, he also had a nasty turn because the taxi driver decided he would just change lanes and do a U turn, he ran into an accident because he was on his motorcycle. I have a mate who actually lost his life, he was on a motorcycle going home, taxi for a \$5 fare decided to swap three lanes and end up on the other one and took someone’s life.

These are incidents that need to be talked about, need to be spoken of and need to be seriously looked at by the LTA in terms of the legislations. I agree with what is happening, Sir, but I urge the honourable Minister to maybe get a think-tank together to actually ensure that we put enough laws.

Doing this piecemeal is not going to help, we must make a decision on this. Our statistics in terms of road fatalities, our statistics in terms of traffic accidents is to

(Technical glitch, resulting in disruption to audio and recording system)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I have been advised that we are currently experiencing some technical difficulties that is preventing us from proceeding effectively with our session. In light of this, I hereby adjourn this session of Parliament for 15 minutes to allow our IT team to rectify the issues.

The Parliament adjourned at 2.42 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 3.09 pm.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think the sound system is now working, but we will have the technicians come in at tea break to have a thorough check on the system.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will not speak for long, given that a lot of time has been taken. I would just like to thank the honourable Members for their contribution in terms of Bill three of 2025 Act to amend the Land Transport Act of 1998. I would like to the honourable Members from both sides of the House, particularly from the Opposition, as this is a good start in terms of bilateral relationships, and I believe that we will achieve more as we move forward together in our various sectors of cooperation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the honourable Members commented on issues that are already being dealt with by LTA, and I note those moving forward, in terms of improvements such as, more effectively addressing vehicle defects in terms of inspection. There were some comments about high beam at night, which is totally right and there seems to be a lot of drivers who are unaware of those and the impact of the drivers facing them.

In terms of competencies and driving behaviours, I believe it is really true that knowledge does not mean that you have maturity and wisdom, which I believe is an issue with drivers in Fiji. They do have the knowledge of the rules and regulations et cetera, they have passed the driving test! We are trying to address this various stages of competencies in terms of the provisional licences, but at the end of the day, wisdom and maturity of drivers which is an issue, and I believe that this is something that we need to address as we move forward in terms of the driving behaviours in Fiji.

There were also some issues raised on electronic vehicles, regulations and infrastructure, driving schools, and I did not want to joke about it, but there was some comparisons between night flying and driving at night which is something that we could look into. Parents teaching children to drive has been happening in Fiji but to formalise this, could create issues in terms of trying to incorporate it into the formal driving school set up or curriculum, given the issue of conflict of interest.

I do support the suggestion made by honourable Koya on the overall review in terms of the LTA Act and Regulations which we will definitely be looking at, in terms of overall deterrence. With those words, I thank all the honourable Members for their contributions, and I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Land Transport (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Bill No. 03/2025) moved under Standing Order 51, read a third time and passed. (Act. No. of 2025)]

ACCESS TO BUSINESS FUNDING BILL 2024

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Friday 3rd October, 2024 and communication from Mr. Speaker, on Friday 6th December, 2024, I move:

That the Access to Business Funding Bill 2024 (Bill No. 18/2024), be debated, voted upon and be passed.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please take note that there is no time limitation for the debate on this Bill.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, Cabinet Ministers and honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, and the people of Fiji; *Bula vinaka* and a warm welcome to you all. I rise to introduce the Access to Business Funding Bill, which has been comprehensively vetted by the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill has come a long way. It was first discussed in 2015, it had a gestation period up to 2023, and this side of the House is in the process of enacting the Bill. The Bill, from our side of the House, will serve as a testament to the People's Coalition Government and the national Government's unity commitment to address the challenges in the MSME sector in our country, particularly in the area of access to finance.

By introducing this new alternative financing mechanism, we will continue to unlock the potential in the MSME sector. This will accelerate innovation, foster growth of new and emerging industries and spark creative minds. Ultimately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it empowers the people of Fiji to seize opportunities and become entrepreneurs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the objective of this Bill is very clear. It is to enhance and provide alternative access to business funding for our MSMEs to achieve the Government's plan for a vibrant and sustainable MSME ecosystem. As we all know in this august House, and we widely accept, the MSMEs are an essential part of our economic development, yet they often face significant hurdles when trying to secure financing necessary to start, grow and sustain their businesses. High borrowing costs and stringent collateral requirements frequently place constraints on financial support.

The Reserve Bank of Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, highlights that the MSMEs in Fiji face a significant funding gap of approximately \$2.2 billion. If you think about it, therein lies an opportunity in terms of financing. The Bill seeks to address part of this critical shortfall by introducing innovative, regulated methods of capital raising, such as:

- (1) Small offers;
- (2) Equity;
- (3) Crowd funding; and
- (4) Peer-to-peer lending.

As we embark on creating a vibrant pathway with this Bill, let us remember the saying, "when a village thrives, the whole land flourishes. From the village, and prosperity spreads to all." This powerful message encapsulates the essence of our focus. When we support entrepreneurs, we support the prosperity of our nation. The Bill will introduce new forms of capital raising, which is either through equity or debt, in a regulated manner.

Small offers: This is a simple and very efficient way for companies to raise funds without the hefty costs of disclosure, compliance that comes with public companies. Instead of reaching out to the general public, businesses can focus on a smaller group of investors who already know and trust them. This might include friends, family members, loyal customers, suppliers or others within their close business network. By targeting this familiar audience, companies can streamline their fundraising process while strengthening relationships with those who believe in their vision. This is well covered in Part 2 of the Bill.

I will cite an offshore example Mr. Speaker, Sir, because we do not have any examples in Fiji yet, but hopefully in the near future we can share some local examples. In a bold move to bring sustainable fashion to the forefront a United Kingdom based designer embarked on an ambitious project to launch a new eco-friendly clothing line. However, the journey required significant funding for production.

To overcome this hurdle, the designer turned to a trusted network of friends, family and local supporters to raise the necessary capital. The designer successfully raised £100,000 from 25 investors including family, friends and close friends, and an early handful of brand enthusiasts who believe in the designer's vision.

As we all know, Fiji is a home to many talented designers who often require capital, financial support to grow and sustain their businesses. Through the Small Offer funding regime, Mr. Speaker, Sir, MSMEs can raise essential capital by leveraging personal networks, presenting compelling business features and marketing their ventures effectively. This approach provides an accessible alternative to traditional financing models or methods, enabling entrepreneurs to unlock new opportunities for growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other financing mechanisms is equity and debt crowd funding. For equity crowd funding, this will involve large groups of people who contribute money towards a campaign to fund a project or business, in return for rewards. A good offshore example for equity crowd funding is an entrepreneur called Brianne West, who founded Sorbet in 2012 with a vision to create the most sustainable cosmetics company.

This is in New Zealand from her kitchen in Christchurch, she developed cruelty free ethically sourced products with compostable packaging. The response was overwhelming, leading to a successful crowd funding campaign in 2015 that branded Sorbet as Ethique, funding a global expansion. By 2017 Ethique sought further investment to expand globally and enhance product development.

Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Ethique is a global brand selling to over 22 countries and preventing millions of plastic bottles from entering landfills. Brianne West's dedication to sustainability has made Ethique a leader in inspiring others with the impact of how one person can help the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in reflecting on this in terms of the local environment, the easiest example is a product called Nama Fiji that is slowly taking the world by storm, and in the years to come I am pretty sure it will be one of the global brands that Fiji will be proud of. It is a cosmetic company run out of the Western Division supplied from the Yasawas, the *nama* or sea grapes, it has great potential, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Debt crowd funding, also known as peer-to-peer learning, this is when entities raise funds through debt which is facilitated through a licence intermediary. This occurs when lenders or individuals are willing to lend their funds to business proposals and earn an interest when loans are repaid. Equity funding and peer-to-peer learning, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is adequately covered under Part 3, Clause 17 and 18 of this Bill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to complete the cycle and in terms of an example of peer-to-peer learning, is a company called Denheath Corporation Limited, again another New Zealand, Canterbury based, gourmet dessert maker, who raised over \$300,000 through an intermediary called "pledge me" in 2016, supported by 70 investors. The funds enabled facility upgrades, new equipment, increase production capacity and the creation of local jobs.

Known for their high quality cheesecakes and sustainable practices, Denheath's campaign highlighted the power of community baking. The success has strengthened their business and deepen connections with customers and investors. This crowd funding achievement has showcased how the New Zealanders or the Kiwis can unite to support innovative local businesses, driving growth while staying true to their values.

Denheath's story is a testament to the impact of community driven fundraising, Mr. Speaker, Sir. These examples in New Zealand can sort of be related in the Fiji terms as the power of *solesolevaki*. Fiji is always known for its strong sense of community which has led to the prevalence of community-based projects and funding mechanisms. These cultural practices underscore the significant entrepreneurial potential within corporative businesses, presenting opportunities to establish formalised systems of innovative financing mechanisms.

While the processes may have taken longer than anticipated, it underscores the significance of this Bill. We can take confidence in the thorough consultations conducted not only by the Working Group, which actually started the consultation, but also the work by the Standing Committee. Their diligent efforts and collaboration has ensured that the Bill is well informed and reflective of the needs of our MSMEs. As we move forward, we are hopeful for a similar implementation that will pave the way for success.

Today, we will be enabling our businesses, both new and established, to innovate, grow and actively contribute to our economy. When our entrepreneurs succeed, we all succeed as a nation. They are the job creators, and innovators that uplift our communities. Mr. Speaker, Sir, by facilitating access to funding, we recognise and support their resilience and unwavering dedication.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this moment to acknowledge the diligent efforts of the Standing Committee. Your hard work and commitment to this Bill serves as a beacon to change and progress. As we move forward, let us embrace the opportunities that this Bill presents. Together we can cultivate an environment where dreams are transformed into reality, where our entrepreneurs are empowered to build a prosperous future for themselves and for all Fijians.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, despite my saying that there are no time limitations of the debate, I am now advised by the Secretary-General that it is in fact 20 minutes limit on each intervention. Please observe the time limits, although I am happy to allow reasonable excesses, given my early undertaking.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr Speaker, Sir, thank you for this opportunity to speak on a very important Bill. I stand here to support the motion moved by the honourable Minister for Trade. I am very much in agreement with this Bill because it is going to open the doors for more funding mechanisms for the MSMEs.

To me, this Bill is a game-changer for MSMEs in Fiji, and this Bill is about giving our small businesses, the backbone of our economy, the financial support they need to grow, create jobs and drive innovation. I agree with the honourable Minister that the work on this Bill started years ago, with a detailed study to understand the funding challenges faced by MSMEs in Fiji. By 2019, the Bill was ready, and at that time I was the Minister for Trade, so I am very much aware of this Bill.

But then COVID-19 came, and the pandemic delayed the wider public consultations we needed, pushing everything back until mid-2022. I think people tend to forget that we had COVID from 2020 right till 2022, and the borders only opened in December 2021. Schools opened for the first time in the first week of January 2022. So obviously, there was a lot more to do rather than to

look at the Bills, and the Bills were set aside because the focus was on other things at that time, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

This Bill actually addresses the demand and supply of funds needed by MSMEs. As the honourable Minister highlighted, MSMEs in Fiji need about \$2.2 billion in funding, but only half a billion is available from traditional sources like banks and credit institutions. That means thousands of small businesses have been struggling, not because they lack potential, but because they lack access to capital.

Mr Speaker, Sir, during the times of crisis, whether it was cyclones or the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bainimarama Government took decisive action to support MSMEs. We provided direct grants, waived stalls and licensing fees, introduced incentives for businesses to hire first-time employees, lowered interest rates and made 10 percent equity funding available to MSMEs to aid in post-COVID recovery. So, you can see that MSMEs have been assisted not only through the banks, but also by the Government. But the challenge here is, for how long and how much can the Government make funds available for MSMEs? There was a need to look at alternative mechanisms of raising more funds for MSMEs.

Mr Speaker, Sir, we all know that small businesses are the driving force of our economy. But right now, securing funding is one of the biggest obstacles. And when we went out for our public consultation, we heard stories from the MSMEs, which is pretty well known to all of us, that when you do not have collateral, it is very hard to get funding from the traditional institution. So, I just mentioned that the banks and credit institutions, they have very strict requirements.

So, if you do not have collateral, you are simply stuck! What can you do? And if you go for the unsecured loan to start your business, maybe a micro-business, small business, the interest rates are sky high! With 15 percent or 20 percent interest rate. So, it is not feasible for them to really start the business. So, these barriers are holding businesses back. And for those starting a business or trying to expand, things become really, really difficult. So without capital, they cannot innovate, they cannot hire more people, or they can grow their business, and when small businesses struggle, it simply means our economy also struggles. We cannot keep doing the same thing and expect different results. If we are serious about supporting our entrepreneurs, we need to give them real solutions and this Bill provides that real solution.

The Bill lays out a clear framework for alternative ways to raise funds, and we have heard from the honourable Minister the three ways of raising funds. It allows individual investors and businesses to buy shares in a business or lend money for debt financing. And in return, they earn interest. All these happens in a very safe regulated environment.

The three ways of raising funds- personal offers, which was very well explained by the honourable Minister. We already experienced this in an unregulated fashion in a household setting, in a family setting. When someone needs money, they borrow from their family; that is unregulated. What happens in that situation if the other person is not able to pay the money back, there is bad blood within the family. And sometimes the family members in dire necessity, they turn them down. But in this setting, they will be able to explore and provide their funding with some level of confidence and assurance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for personal offers, investors and individuals can directly support businesses they believe in, and in return they can have shares or earn interest on the amount loaned. Crowd funding, where businesses can raise capital from a wide pool of supporters for equity in the business. And peer-to-peer lending is mainly connecting lenders and borrowers through an intermediary or what we call a middleman for debt securities. So, these mechanisms necessitate amendments to the

Companies Act, providing MSMEs with diversified options to secure financing and bridge the existing funding gap.

In Australia, they did not come up with a separate legislation. What they did was, they amended the Companies Act and incorporated some of these mechanisms, whereas in Fiji's situation, we have created a separate legislation to deal with these three options. That created a bit of complication for MSMEs to really understand the Bill because they said that they had to make reference to the Companies Act and this Bill. So, there was some level of confusion. And that was also raised by the MSME Council. But the good thing is, MSME Council has offered to work with the Ministry for Trade and Reserve Bank of Fiji in the awareness campaign and educating the MSMEs how they can use this piece of legislation to progress in business. That was a very good offer from some of these institutions that we met.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, more choices actually mean more opportunities, and more opportunities mean a stronger economy. So, this Bill gives them the financial tools to succeed. Concerns were raised, as I mentioned one of the concerns was that they had to do referencing to Companies Act and that made this legislation a bit complicated, but the stakeholders, the ones we consulted, they emphasised that the legislation is too complicated and call for clearer language and awareness campaign.

We all understand when it comes to a Bill that deals with business, it has to be in a business language jargon. It will get complicated. However, the solution here, is as I said earlier on, MSME Council and other institutions including Ministry for Trade will be doing a lot more awareness and training to the small businesses. I understand that that will take away the concerns from MSME because more education and awareness will take place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to acknowledge the Permanent Secretary and his team from the Ministry for Trade. They worked tirelessly on this particular Bill back and forth with ADB and other stakeholders, and when they were able to come up with a first draft with that enthusiasm, unfortunately, because of COVID, they could not continue. However, we saw the same level of enthusiasm when they met us several times to take us through this Bill and clarify some of the concerns that we had. They handled the matter so well and they always made their staff available whenever we needed them, to the extent that even the honourable Minister made himself available where he attended two of our Standing Committee Meetings which we really appreciate because that was the place where we could iron out issues and come up with a Bill that even our side, we have no reservation, we support the Bill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also want to thank the Solicitor-General's Office, particularly the Deputy Solicitor-General. He also made himself available and assisted us with this Bill, and the staff from Reserve Bank of Fiji. Besides that, MSME Council, SPBD, Biosecurity Authority of Fiji, and the various Chamber of Commerce offices based around the country, they also participated during our public consultation and shared their viewpoints, and they were all in favour of this Bill. That was the beauty of this Bill. They all agreed, they wanted to go ahead with this Bill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to raise a particular issue, because I know that when this Bill was first introduced in Parliament, we were given just a month to finish off our consultation and present it in Parliament. However, the Standing Committee for Economic Affairs faced some roadblocks during that time, especially with the delays in getting approval for public consultations and advertisements to inform the public from Parliament. The reason was simply because there was a transition phase where there was a change in the Speakers. Obviously, timely response could not come to us, and that caused the delay.

I would like to thank you honourable Speaker, for your timely response to whatever request we put across. We appreciate that, because it only helps the Standing Committee to proceed with their work. I wanted to thank you most sincerely on behalf of our Standing Committee for facilitating the request that we sent in a very timely manner.

I also would like to mention here that with the Standing Committee for Economic Affairs, unfortunately, we do not have all the representatives on the Committee, and that is another reason why we are not able to move with some of the work. At any given time, there are just three Members. If one cannot make it, then we do not have a quorum. The key problem is that we need Government representatives on the Standing Committee for Economic Affairs so that we can run with our work and if that can be facilitated by the Government, we will greatly appreciate it. Sometimes, even if we are not well, we still come for the Standing Committee meeting, because we know if we do not, then the Bills will not come here, and the honourable Minister for Trade will be very upset with us. We do not want to upset him, we want to proceed with the work, so we try our level best to do what we can.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these were some of the challenges we faced, and the honourable Minister already said that this Bill went through the first round of consultation by the Ministry for Trade and its stakeholders, and then of course, the second round of consultation was with the Standing Committee for Economic Affairs. We were quite surprised when we went out during our consultation that people were not aware of this Bill. So double consultation or two levels of consultation is good, because it gives an opportunity for the stakeholders to really understand the content of the Bill, and when it comes to implementation, things will be much better for the Ministry and for all other stakeholders.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support this Bill, because it means supporting innovation, supporting growth, and supporting the hardworking entrepreneurs who are the backbone of this country.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the Access to Business Funding Bill 2024. This Bill will give the opportunity to SMEs, especially micro businesses that do not have the ability to access loans and funding from the normal financial institutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was a member of the consultation team, even though on and off, as I was replaced by honourable Bia, and then moved back when the G-9 moved across to join Government. I am one of the see-saw members. The initial discussion with the public proved to be quite confusing. Confusing, as a fact, that the Committee Members were not well briefed by the agencies that were involved in the initial brief to the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs.

However, during the consultation, the Committee was able to gain clarity through discussions with various ministries and the agency. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the background to the Bill is well covered in the explanatory note section. The honourable Members have alluded to the honourable Minister and honourable Premila have alluded to this.

What I wanted to highlight is, this Bill has a direct connection to the Fiji Development Bank (FDB), as they have been providing this support all these years, and I would like to thank the Fiji Development Bank for the support that they have provided to SMEs. Mr. Speaker, Sir, FDB plays a critical role in financing the small businesses, but the Bank also struggles to make a profit at the end of a financial year. The Standing Committee for Economic Affairs had found that FDB, over the years, had struggled with the provision of funding and keeping a positive return on their bottom line.

I wish to provide figures highlight by FDB in the reports that we had examined. Sir, FDB's financial position is critical in the service of debt by MSMEs. In 2022, the total loan portfolio for FDB was \$629 million, and their net profit was a mere \$1.79 million, a mere 0.0028 percent. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, compared to normal commercial banks, I would never think that they will be still in existence in the financial world. The non-performing loans of FDB amounted to \$152.3 million or 6.55 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the process of our consultations, we were able to meet MSMEs Council to gauge their view on funding provided by FDB. The Council mainly requested for consistent small business owners and operators of MSMEs. As expected, they were very critical of Fiji Development Bank, but the Committee was able to arrange a meeting through the Chairman, between the two agencies - FDB and the MSME Council. I am hopeful that they will be able to iron out and FDB assist the MSMEs in this relationship.

A study carried out in 2015, I think that has already been alluded to by honourable Deputy Prime Minister and honourable Premila Kumar identified a financial gap that exists where businesses need, especially small, medium and micro. There was also a lack of formalisation or regulation of venture capital for private investors for SMEs, which meant potential funding was not easily made available to SMEs.

As alluded to by the two previous speakers, the Bill seeks to reduce the financing gap and proposes new measures for raising capital either through equity or debt in a regulated manner. Small financial regimes and small offers of equity approved around peer-to-peer lending. Studies have identified a financing gap that exists in Fiji's financial institutions which the honourable Deputy Prime Minister has alluded to, it is about \$2 billion that could be created to fund businesses. However, this cannot be funded by the normal banking agency because of their strict conditions and the issues of liability and security.

This gap means that the existing financial institution cannot cover these loans due to the conditions outlined in their banking or financial policies. Every year, Parliament provides a guarantee to Fiji Development Bank with the understanding that medium, small and micro businesses would be assisted. I want to briefly explain two funding regimes that I think is important to explain:

- (1) Small Offers; and
- (2) Crowd funding

Small Offers is a financing regime that issues equity securities, a partnership that must convert into a private company. Once this conversion is complete, the country can offer equity securities to interested members. As honourable Premila has already alluded to, this basically is happening around our families and within our friends in the business community. The maximum amount that can be financed through this is \$2 million.

The other one is crowd funding, but this needs formalisation and intermediaries, who we can say are brokers, but brokers have to be licensed by the Reserve Bank of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the impact of the Access to Funding Bill should be monitored to gauge its success and carry out corrective initiatives early in the process. I am saying this as the Bill will depend on human interactions and the trust must exist between different sections of our communities, especially those who have surplus funds and the struggling sections in our midst. The success of this Bill depends on goodwill and trust.

The Bill needs a social stability between the different communities in Fiji. Again, I plead with the Government to provide the basic platform and adherence to rule of law and adherence to good governance. Our people will trust each other if they trust their government. Transparency and accountability are so important for our people to have confidence to start businesses as they want a guarantee on the return of their investment. This is a general statement that I am making, and I hope it is taken in that light.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill is a bridge necessary for micro-businesses to move to medium and further to small businesses. This Bill should be the very best way for our people to become successful in business ventures. I support the Access to Business Funding Bill that is before Parliament.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to talk on Bill No. 18 of 2024 that is being discussed this afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you are aware that MSMEs face significant challenges in accessing digital finance due to lack of proven revenue streams, credit history and collateral as has been explained by other speakers this afternoon. The current option for them is informal borrowing from their extended families and relatives. They rely on their personal networks and informal arrangements based on relationships and trust.

Like other Pacific countries, a strong sense of community also exists and as being alluded to by honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica, the community-based projects such as *solesolevaki* are quite common, and these financing arrangements could benefit from a structural framework such as the one that we have. As such, there exists an opportunity for alternative financing mechanism to bridging the gap in accessing finance for MSMEs while complementing existing reforms and initiatives that the Fiji Government, RBF and other key stakeholders could continue to undertake to develop the MSME sector in this country.

As being alluded to by the previous speakers, the financing gap has been identified of approximately \$2 billion. We hope that this Bill will facilitate another process so that MSMEs could access more financing.

Based on the recent available data, MSMEs accounted for 82.4 percent of all the enterprises, with micro enterprises comprising 89.7 percent for all MSMEs, small enterprises with 23.2 percent and medium enterprises around 37 percent. MSMEs have approximately 21,000 employees, which is 28 percent of the labour force.

In Fiji, while MSMEs make up 95 percent of all the businesses, less than 20 percent have access to any credit from existing lending institutions. This has already been identified through the funding gap of \$2 billion. In the recent financial services demand survey, only 8.9 percent of the respondents were borrowing from financial sources, such as banks, credit institutions, credit unions, finance companies and microfinance institutions.

Informal sources to access credit are still preferred as they are quick, reliable and offer repayment terms. Self-employed Fijians with access to formal financial services are still saving at home and borrowing from informal sources like friends and family or hire purchase. In addition, accessibility to financial services in terms of cost and distance continues to be a major barrier, while women-led MSMEs also face considerable challenges. As being alluded to by the previous speakers, the existing financial legislation does not allow for this sort of new financing regime, which is being promoted through this Act.

The provisions of the Companies Act 2015, which detail the fundraising regimes do not provide alternative funding mechanisms suitable for MSMEs, including debt crowd funding in its current form. The Companies Act requires any company seeking to raise funds from the public to be a public company and issues a prospectus as the mid-funding instrument and documentation. This incurs high transaction costs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2016 Asian Development Bank, the Private Sector Development Initiative diagnostic study identified four limitations of the Companies Act which is currently been addressed through this Bill:

- (1) Definition of offer to the public;
- (2) Prohibition on Private Company from offerings securities to the public;
- (3) An offer of securities can all be made under a prospectors and the exemption on offer to be made to the public without risk; and
- (4) prospectors are still too cumbersome for the MSME itself.

To date, you know various countries have taken various approaches to address similar constraints within their respective fundraising regimes, specifically Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America have introduced their legislation to provide the framework for alternative financing sources. While countries such as China, Malaysia and the United Kingdom issued their regulations or guidelines under the legislation. Its various regulatory approaches reflect the characteristics of its financial systems as well as the needs of the local markets and investors in order to address the cumbersome compliance caused, imposed due to the way security laws that have been historically designed.

As been alluded to, the Bill has two major financing origins. The first one, is Small Offers. It refers to means that allow small businesses who are the offeror, a private companies under the Companies Act 2015 to raise a limited amount of debt from the five types of investors without the need for onerous and costly disclosures such their prospectors as required by the Companies Act of 2015.

These investors include high income earners and those that have links with the offeror in some way. Such offers cannot be advertised in public, remitting the size and the breadth of the offering provides appropriate investor and protection.

And of course, you know the second way of financing their regime is crowd funding, that has been alluded to by most of the previous honourable Members. Crowd funding provides a way for MSMEs to raise money on an online platform operated by a licence intermediary. Therefore, the basic types of crowd funding platform includes:

- (1) Donation base;
- (2) Reward base;
- (3) Debt base also known peer-to-peer; and
- (4) Equity crowd funding.

Under this Bill, small businesses can offer equity or shares in return for investors contribution over a platform provided by an approved intermediary, which has to be authorised by the Reserve Bank of Fiji. On the other hand, peer-to-peer enables investors to lend small amounts to businesses on similar platforms that facilitate matching of lenders and borrowers.

I think there is a considerable amount of potential to use this type funding regime, crowd funding in Fiji particularly for the *iTaukei* community. We have noted that substantial amount of

funds have been sent from the Fijian diaspora overseas, almost \$1 billion every year. And perhaps, maybe crowd funding could be a way to leverage financing, particularly in a village setup. Where the village has a co-operative, establish of a business, then we can try and leverage the funding from the remittance that has been sent from overseas.

Most of the remittances sent now are being used for other things. Perhaps, this could be directed to businesses particularly in the rural areas, which could reinvigorate the agriculture sector, particularly for businesses in the rural areas. I think this funding regime, particularly crowd funding has enormous potential that can catalyse MSMEs and of course the agriculture sector in rural areas. To pilot this, the Coalition Government is seriously exploring piloting crowd funding on a new project that we are developing in Vanua Levu.

This will be to try to pilot these small enterprises, particularly in some of the villages in Vanua Levu, and to source the funding from overseas. Perhaps maybe in Vuniwai Village, that is the Leader of the Opposition's village so that we can try to mobilise the people in overseas and they can contribute to the cooperative or the businesses that are not being established in those villages. That will be launched by the honourable Prime Minister in August, and we hope to establish this.

We are not just here to look at the studies, to read from the ADB, but to try and implement these sorts of initiatives, so that by the end of this year we should have this project. We will pilot this, so that the remittances are being used to capitalise agriculture and rural development in the rural areas of Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I would like to thank everyone that has contributed, particularly the members of the Economic Affairs Standing Committee, honourable Kumar, honourable Semi Koroilavesau, honourable Alikia Bia and others who have gone on the weekends in Taveuni. We have covered most of the rural areas, trying to solicit the comments from the people, but the majority of the people that we talked to are very favourable to this Bill. They are totally very supportive, and they believe that the Bill will address some of the issues that have been faced by the rural communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill helps MSME's to raise equity capital, with fewer disclosure requirements, promotes alternative financing options through intermediaries, and supports capital formation. It is particularly beneficial for MSMEs, enhancing their ability to grow, create employment opportunities, and contribute to economic growth. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the Bill.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think this is a convenient time for the House to take our afternoon tea break. But before we do, and given the time of day, we will now address the suspension motion. And for the purposes of complying with the Standing Orders and with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the Leader of the Government of the Parliament, the honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau to move the suspension motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we still have number five on the Order Paper – Sugar Industry (Amendment) Bill, Accountability and Transparency Commission Bill and, of course, the motion in the Schedule regarding the Savusavu Town Council.

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

Since there is none, honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, would you like to reply?

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 4.10 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.53 p.m.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE ACCESS TO BUSINESS FUNDING BILL 2025

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will try to keep it short. Of course, we do support the Bill, given its importance and it will create that impact in our economy which will solve a lot of our socio-economic issues. By way of context as alluded to, by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, the Bill was drafted way back in 2015, but I know that the discussions were done well before that, because as Government was investing more, despite the counter arguments from the other side, as Government was investing more in terms of private sector investment to create the environment. There is a need for us to create that environment, so that there can be more growth, which is badly needed for our economy. This is one of the reasons why this was considered back then.

For me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my first experience of MSME's was the Northern Development Programme in Vanua Levu, because you have no choice as Commissioner, you are the Chairman of the Committee that looks after that fund. The impact in Vanua Levu was significant. A lot of households, a lot of communities and a lot of entrepreneurs benefitted from this Northern Development Programme, and for me that was my first experience, and since then, I have been a strong believer and advocate of MSME's.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would go straight into some of my own observations, and I stand to be corrected, but I will raise it, for the sake of coming up with very effective policies or legislations which is something that is needed in the country. I will go straight to Section 6 of the Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which is on Small Offers. I noted in Section 6 and in Section 8(3) as well, that the limit of investors is 48 and does not breach the \$2 million in total collection. And, of course for the 48 investors involved in the small package, the limit also given is \$20,000.

Just a quick work on the figures that I have given, 48 investors with a limit of \$20,000 brings the total amount to around \$960,000, there is still a gap between the \$960,000 and the \$2 million. Why limit the number to 48 investors, with the ceiling of \$20,000, so long as it does not exceed \$2 million? Every dollar counts and is important to aid small operators! So, that is just an observation, as I saw in Section 6, and of course Section 8(3) as well of the Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The other observation that I have, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on section 7(b), regarding Personal Offers, has an annual gross income of at least \$100,000 for each persons or in two most recently completed income tax returns before the making of the offer. Again, I would raise the question, can that threshold be lowered? So that it can also allow or give the opportunity for other individuals to also invest, as laid out in section 7(b), Mr. Speaker, Sir. It will open more opportunities for more local participation and for those living abroad as well.

My other issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is on the innovativeness of the policy itself. I just want to relay this and maybe the honourable Minister for Finance can clarify this issue. We have this problem with the European Union (EU) whereby we have been blacklisted because of some taxation laws. We are trying to come up with innovative packages to try and help grow our economy, but then, on the other hand, we are under that watch list or that blacklist by the European Union, because of the fears of, such as money laundering, supporting or financing terrorists. I know that the intermediaries are regulated. I just want to raise this question, because as we are trying to innovate, as we want to expand as a developing country, but then it is these other things that has been imposed on us by the developed countries.

We have had that European Union experience, which I wish to share because this is another innovative way, because of the fears like where is the source of the funding coming from, whether the intermediaries will be able to track down the process in which the money that is coming in, is not from the black economy, it is not from the others that are regulated. I am talking specifically in terms of security issues when it is related to transnational crime, and the typical example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the issue that we had with the European Union.

The last issue that I wish to raise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wish to bring to the attention of the Government as well. This is good, the Bill and hopefully the implementation will come. This is about supporting them, but the question that I have is about protecting them as well, during times of disaster. Mr. Speaker, Sir, learning from the experience of the past, I personally can attest to this, because most of the businesses that closed post disasters, were micro and small enterprises.

One, because they cannot afford the big insurance premiums. Secondly, because of the high risks involved as well, they are not able to recover. I know that there are issues about parametric insurance policies, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but I wish to raise it to the attention of the Government, if it can be considered seriously, because as much as we want to make them grow, as much as we want to support them and come up with these innovative ideas, but from the experiences of the past, we also need to have some level of protection for them when it comes to post disaster periods.

We can read the Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) reports from previous disasters. It talks about economic losses, and it talks about economic damages. Damages is different from losses. So, these are the issues, that were highlighted in those reports. I hope that we can learn from the past, because a lot of times we just plan for peacetime scenarios. I hope that we will also plan for worst case scenarios.

We have to come up as well with alternatives. We have to come up with contingencies, because loss of these businesses, means loss of employment for most of our people. Loss of these businesses means also loss of foreign dollars, for those who are involved in exports, and most importantly, the role that they create within the communities that they are in. There is a lot of dependence on them, Mr Speaker, Sir, and these are just some of the issues that I wish to raise to Government as we are considering the Bill that is before us, and of course we do support the Bill.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me right at the outset say, this is actually being supported, and I think it is very important too. I know the origins of this particular Bill stems from around, I think, 2015 when the talks began with the ADB et cetera, and I am very grateful to the honourable Minister for Trade for bringing this to fruition now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the world over, everyone knows that the MSME sector is developing countries and developed countries engine for growth. We are moving into a new realm, with respect to what is being put before us today, into what was previously just the domain of financial institutions and banks. The banks are sometimes very restrictive especially here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and in different times that we have had troubled times, in times of hurricanes and COVID-19, and all that we have had. So, this is an area we can actually look forward to and what it does, also Mr. Speaker, Sir, it creates an environment around the MSME sector, and it gives them belief for those that are the funders and also the recipients of course.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot has been said before, and I totally agree with. One of the things that is very important, and I hope the Ministry of Finance will look at this particular sector and this Bill when the Budget comes around because it may be an area where you can incentivise people to invest in this particular sector. I am talking about the people who will now ask the question: I am going to put this much in? How much am I going to be taxed? Should I be taxed?

Accountants will think of ways of doing it, but there may be some creative ways that the Ministry of Finance can actually look at it and say, well if you invest in this sector, you will get a tax relief of X, Y, or Z. It is something that we can look at in terms of trying to generate more in the MSME sector or in the people who are actually funding it. So, it creates a positive environment, certainly a whole lot of positivity when you look at it.

A word of caution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also, I think mentioned by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, with respect to money laundering whether it has been done internally or if we are looking at a later date, we look at maybe our diaspora et cetera, that will get funding in all of this, and how it can be done. So, the legal framework around this is very important. It needs to be strong! It needs to be protective! Not only to be protective to those that are involved in it, but protective to our country as a whole especially in light of the fact that we have got the European Union et cetera, like the honourable Leader of the Opposition had pointed out that will put us into a different bracket.

We already got blacklisted for no reason whatsoever, and I find it very difficult to still understand that but be that what it may. We need to speak to our missions to see what can be done with respect to maybe finding a way where our diaspora can get involved in this, overseas. I know it is not part of it now, but it is something that can be looked forward to, then the regulations also need to be very strong around it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of other things that most of the MSME find is, that if you have a bureaucratic approach to actually accessing this or getting this done is they find it too difficult to do it and they do not do it. So, we need to make sure that we take the bureaucracy out of making this accessible or getting this off the ground so that MSMEs can become greater companies.

We have a lot of MSMEs, a lot of big companies in Fiji that have become conglomerates, and they all started as MSMEs. So, we can look forward to a new economic climate with respect to this, the foundations of our economy are growing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on a daily basis. We also need to look as to how it can be done entirely in the digital space. This is a brand new toy that the honourable Minister of Trade can actually play with and find out what are the best practices around the world with respect to this.

One of the other things also Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know the Bill is going to be passed because it is totally being supported. One of the most important things to do after the Bill is passed, and I know the Ministry would have been involved in some consultations and education. It requires a continuous education of the general public and those that are involved in the MSME sector to ensure that they are savvy, to ensure that they know how it is going to operate, ensure that they know that they actually getting this done and are legally doing it properly.

It is not just that, our accountants and our lawyers also need to be educated on how it is works. It is not easy, I know it is not easy to do. It is a difficult task. It has taken a bit of time to get it to the Parliament's floor and I take my hat off to the Ministry, Sir and all those who have worked on it. As I said it is something that began in 2015 with the assistance of the ADB, and congratulations to the Ministry of Trade Sir, on getting it to this stage, and to the Minister for putting it to the floor. Those are the words of caution that I would put on it Sir. So, to the Attorney-General, please ensure that we have a regulatory framework around it, that is understandable. This is a new thing altogether, the banks have their own, this is a need to also be looked at, so it strengthens, so it is viable and doable. Because this Mr. Speaker, is our engine for growth and we have some great young companies and we have so many things we want to do in terms of diversification and this will only assist our Fijians that are involved in the MSME sector, Mr. Speaker.

With those few words, Sir, I support the Bill, and I agree with the comments from all the other earlier speakers and also from the honourable Minister.

HON. PROF. B. C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I want to thank all the honourable Members who have spoken, before from the Opposition side and their support for the Bill notwithstanding the complaints from honourable Kumar, but she always complains anyway.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill was drafted by legal experts from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and of course vetted by the Office of Solicitor-General, and I want to thank the ADB for that. This is also part of our Fiji Growth and Resilience Developing Financing programme with the World Bank and the objective Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to promote private sector-led growth which also helps us to unlock budgetary support to the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to acknowledge the commendable work done by the Chairperson and members of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs. I also want to commend the Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Manoa Kamikamica, and his team, for the great effort, towards the formulation of this Bill and the collaborations that we have had with the ADB, Reserve Bank of Fiji, Office of the Solicitor-General and other stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, the honourable members talk about the importance for the economic significance and economic contribution of small and medium enterprises. Globally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it represents about 70 percent of the jobs that are created in developing countries, it is even as higher as 80 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, MSMEs also globally contribute about 50 percent of GDP. And if you look at any country in the world Mr. Speaker, Sir, MSMEs are very significant. And if you look at our own history of big businesses, you will see that they grew, they started as MSMEs, and with the innovation and the support by Governments over the years, many of them have grown into big businesses.

I think this Bill and as I said, this is the commendable work by the Government, by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica and his team to bring this Bill because as he said quite rightly when he presented the Bill, that the funding gap this Bill is expected to fill which he identified is almost \$2.2 billion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill, simply introduces two new regimes for MSMEs to access capital in limited amounts, while allowing investors to invest relatively small amounts. These new regimes Mr. Speaker, Sir, offer a solution to the issue of accessing finance for the MSMEs sector in Fiji.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, the proposed legislation would supplement and consequently amend Part 26 of the Companies Act 2015 to create more financing options through this new two regimes - the small offers and crowd funding.

The Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has provisions to protect investors by ensuring that these capital-raising activities operate in a regulated environment with a licensing regime and under the supervision and oversight of the RBF, so, it is a very important aspect.

Other than that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, most of the speakers have talked about the Bill itself and the benefits. As the honourable Deputy Prime Minister said, when he moved the motion, expanding the alternative financing opportunities will increase MSMEs' contribution to economic growth, achieve socio-economic goals, enhance opportunities for women-owned and women-led MSMEs, and supporting progress towards gender-parity in access to finance in Fiji.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, raised an important issue and he talked about the blacklisting of Fiji by the EU (European Union). This blacklisting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, came about in 2019. Since we have come into Government, we have made significant progress to join the global tax forums. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are making progress, particularly on Base Erosion and Profit-Shifting Frameworks (BEPSs). We have actually now joined BEPS, and we are implementing its four minimum standards, which FRCS is working with ADB and EU. So, that is the progress we are making.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the big issue, contrary to what the honourable Leader of the Opposition said, it is not so much about money laundering. In fact, the big issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the EU has, as a contentious issue, is this idea of export income deduction. For example, a 60 percent export income deduction or export proceeds tax deduction, which means that we do not tax 60 percent of the proceeds that are exported. For agriculture and fisheries, it is 90 percent. It means we do not tax 90 percent of the proceeds if you are exporting fisheries or agricultural products. Apart from that, there is no major issue.

In fact, we have made this point time and again, honourable Leader of the Opposition, to the EU, that this is not something that in our view should be of concern to the EU. Because even if you have companies from the European Union coming to Fiji and exporting under the incentives that we have, it will apply to them as well. We have made some progress also in other sectors and so it is not anything to do with money laundering.

However, being on the blacklist, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a reputational issue as well. As I said, we were blacklisted in 2019. Since we have come into Government, we have been working very hard to convince the European Union. As I have said, we have made progress, we have joined BEPS, we have done the work to join the global tax forum, we are working on the EU. They forget that we were listed under their government. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to allay the fears of the honourable Leader of the Opposition, it is not about money laundering; it is about the incentives that we are offering to our exporters.

You can shake your head as much as you want, honourable Usamate, but the fact is that we were blacklisted into 2019, and it is this Government that is trying to remove Fiji from that blacklist. So, be thankful that we are doing. Do not complain too much.

Coming back to the Access to Funding Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I said, it is commendable that we have been able to bring this Bill to Parliament and we have the support of the Opposition. Again, I thank the, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, and his team for bringing this Bill and we look forward to the passing of this Bill today.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, thank you very much for giving me the opportunity in the right of reply. Firstly, I would like to place on record my gratitude and thanks to the Ministry of Trade, the Permanent Secretary, and the hard-working team that put this Bill together. I discovered that this was a Bill that had not been acted on and that we inherited. But I will explain that a bit more, Mr. Speaker.

I would also like to thank the chair of the Committee and also the Members for staying with us. I know I had actually requested in the House to get one month of airtime on the Bill, but due to logistics, it went into an extra month. But I think in the end, Mr. Speaker, the whole effort was worthwhile, and I think what we have come up with something that we can all be proud of, not only in terms of the Ministry and the Committee, but I think this whole House.

Mr. Speakers, Sir, I thought I just pick up some of the comments that were made by the

various contributors, particularly on the other side in terms of the issues.

The 48 number, Mr. Speaker, in the small offers relates to the limitation that is in the Companies Act. If you go above 50, you become a public offering. So, I think we have kept it below that threshold to not breach the Companies Act. And in terms of the \$20,000, I think that is really there just to protect the retail investors. You are talking about those that are not experienced in the investment field. So, the limitation is there more just to protect the investors themselves.

In terms of the Reserve Bank of Fiji concerns over money laundering, Mr. Speaker, I think it is a valid point. But I think the fact that this whole arrangement is under a regulated regime managed by the Reserve Bank of Fiji should give us a lot of confidence. In other words, they will actually be vetting all the intermediaries and all the players that are in the actual funding ecosystem.

So, there will be a lot of scrutiny that will happen before anyone is allowed to participate. So, that in itself should provide scrutiny. And of course, if some of the banks wish to be intermediaries, if anything, that will just enhance the overall scrutiny when it comes to this funding mechanism.

I did take note of the issue around insurance. And yes, that is probably something that needs to be looked at more broadly. But certainly, in terms of parametric insurance, that at least it actually provides some form of relief, particularly for our farmers in terms of unreasonable weather events. In fact, you do not need to have a cyclone to trigger the parametric insurance. There are parameters that actually trigger the payments and that goes back into their bank accounts, so things like some of the excessive weather conditions like with rain and all that. There are some mechanisms in place, but certainly going forward, we can actually deal with that.

In terms of tax incentives, I am sure honourable Koya was listening when I was whispering to the Minister for Finance. We did talk about perhaps some incentives for this program and particularly for the investment side. That is something that we shall certainly explore and of course with like anything, education and awareness is very important and with the honourable Koya's contribution about awareness, we will certainly do our best to get awareness out. Maybe we will do some infographics in all languages so that we can try and see a good update in the actual initiative over the next few months.

Mr. Speaker, before I sit down, I just thought I would just paint a picture in terms of where the Government of national unity is headed in terms of this Bill. This Bill is part of an ongoing process. This side of the House is very committed to the MSME and cooperative sector and because of that, what we have endeavoured to do, and we will continue to do, is try and develop a very comprehensive ecosystem to actually build up the MSME sector.

Mr. Speaker, by that, I mean there are various players within the MSME ecosystem, if you like. You have the business owners, the entrepreneurs. You have the financiers, the banks. You have the business advisors et cetera. Since we came into office, I have seen an explosion of the types of needs that are required in the ecosystem, and I believe that comes from a government that is being consistent, stable, and sending the right signals to the country. I will just share some examples. Before FDB used to be pretty much the MSME bank and beyond that, there was not much.

Right now, Mr. Speaker, as we speak, apart from FDP, we have Merchant Finance. They now have a Vanua product and a Marama product, which is now starting to lend money into the entrepreneur sector. HFC Bank, our national bank effectively has started developing products using very smart credit guarantee structures, which actually brings down the cost of borrowing. For those of you who have not seen HFC, particularly those listening, there are some interesting products in the SME sector there.

The ANZ and Westpac Banks have also been involved. They particularly do a lot of good work in financial literacy training. BSP has a programme that they do every year. I think they train up to 50 entrepreneurs every year and investing in that. Then we have a lot of funding that is now coming from the donors, Mr. Speaker. There is the Fiji Entrepreneur Engine (FEE). It was set up during the previous Government and we have continued that. It is a very effective accelerator, incubator programme, Mr. Speaker. When we got in, it was only based in Suva. We have moved that to the West and this year, I think we will move it to the North. So, if you like, let us say at least 60 entrepreneurs every year are being trained across Fiji in that programme. The programme is assisted by the Ministry, Reserve Bank of Fiji, iTaukei Trust Fund, and a few others, so that is another initiative.

Also, UNDP has started a programme. It is an accelerator programme. They provide funding as well and for particularly environmentally sustainable projects. We recently launched a FAO initiative, which is more particularly focused on agribusiness, and we will accelerate that programme this year, because there is a lot happening there.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, at 9 o'clock this morning, I launched another initiative by the Asian Development Bank, called the ADB Frontier Initiative. It actually looks at those small businesses that need to just get that little bit of funding push to become bigger businesses. The funding in that area is between US\$50,000 to US\$200,000 per applicant or successful applicant. That is obviously based on due diligence, looking at their financials and their projections. But this is the type of work that is evolving out in the ecosystem.

That is quite apart from the very good work that is happening in the Ministry for Agriculture, Ministry for iTaukei Affairs and the Ministry for Rural Development, all targeting small-to-medium enterprises and trying to really transform and boost the economy. So, I guess, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in closing, I would like to say a couple of things. Firstly, by passing the Bill today, Fiji will be the first country in the Pacific to have a legislative framework in place to facilitate capital-raising investment transactions targeted at MSMEs. So, we are in a bit of history here today.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if there is any doubt, particularly in the country, about what this Government is doing, then I would like to say this, not to pick on the Opposite side, but just to express the commitment that you are starting to see from our side of the House. The Bills got discussed in 2015, till about 2019, they were still discussing the Bills. Mr Speaker, Sir, I got to discover that this Bill was floating around in October 2023. From October 2023 to now, we are going to pass the Bill in this House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this, if anything, demonstrates the commitment and the political will that is coming from the People's Coalition, and that is why we are now becoming the Government of national unity in this country. With that said, I again would like to acknowledge all the hard work that has gone into this from the Committee and also from the Ministry. I would like to thank all the contributors here today. As I have said to this House, you are all participating in a bit of history today, we should be all proud of ourselves. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Bill reported without amendment, read a third time and passed. (Act No. of 2024)]

SUGAR INDUSTRY (AMENDMENT) BILL 2024

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on 31st December, 2024, I move:

That the Sugar Industry (Amendment) Bill 2024 be debated, voted upon and passed.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members please be reminded that the debate on the Bill is limited to one hour. Your speaking time allocations will be displayed on the wall.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, Members of the Opposition and everyone listening to the parliamentary proceedings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this afternoon I was talking to my leader of Government Business in Parliament, and he was punishing me today. He put me on the last order just to avoid me from going home early. Anyway, I still respect my leader.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I stand before this august House to speak on the Sugar Industry Amendment Bill 23 of 2024, this august House has approved the motion to amend the Sugar Industry Act on 5th of December, and the Bill was referred to the Standing Committee of Justice Law and Human Rights to conduct their own consultations, analyse the Bill and report back to Parliament this week.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this opportunity to sincerely thank the Chair, the Members of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights for conducting a comprehensive public consultations from 27th January to 4th February 2025, in the West and North with the relevant stakeholders, particularly the sugarcane growers, and compiling a report tabled together with the findings, which was at Parliament on Tuesday this week. I also commend all those who participated in the consultations, including those that provided written and oral submissions. I also thank the Standing Committee for providing an opportunity to my Ministry, including industry institutions to make submissions on the Bill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill is straightforward and basically seeks an approval for the amendment and reinstatement of certain clauses of the Sugar Industry Act that was repealed by the first Government to abolish the elections of the Sugar Cane Growers Council. The amendment of the Act, this Bill will bring several benefits, including the following:

- (a) Provision to facilitate the reinstatement of the process of elections of members of the Sugar Cane Growers Council;
- (b) Provision to allow farmers to resolve their grievances and issues to the Council that will be appointed through a democratic process;
- (c) Provision of sugarcane growers to voice their own concerns without the interference from the Government;
- (d) Provision to enhance harmony against the sugarcane growers;
- (e) Restore respect for the growers and enhance commitment and boost their confidence in the industry; and
- (f) Enhanced productivity and increased overall cane production by efficiency of resolving conflicts and challenges faced by the farmers related to their farms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sugar cane growers have been facing various challenges, including shortage of labour for the cane cultivation and harvesting. High cost of production, adverse impact of climate change and amongst other issues. The cane production has significantly declined from 3.2 million tonnes in 2006, to merely 1.3 million tonnes in 2023.

My Ministry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has deployed various support for the farmers to encourage and motivate them to continue sugar cane farming and assist in the sustainability of the industry. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the biggest concerns of the growers is that they have not being able to freely speak nor were they openly able to voice their concerns raised with existing councillors of the Sugarcane Growers Council. This is largely due to the fear and the perception that these councillors were appointed by the Government and are representing the Government instead of the farmers. In fact, most of the farmers have informed me that they are not even aware who is representing them in the Council.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the previous Government had abolished the election of the Sugar Cane Growers' Council in 2009, and the Council was left without any Board from 2009 to 2014. The Council was activated from 2015, after the Act was amended to allow the Minister to appoint the Councillors. Farmers are made to run around to find solutions affecting them on a daily basis and not actively given the opportunity to make decisions on the matters affecting them. This has not only affected the farmers psychologically, but diluted their voices with political interference, especially from the Government, preventing them from having a full say on the improvement of cane production. This is one of the major contributors of the decline of sugarcane production.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted earlier, the growers are facing high costs of production. While clauses 51, 52, and 53 of the Sugar Cane Industry principal Act requires the Council to raise levies to meet the administrative expenses of the Council and the Board of Directors, including to meeting costs of the special and capital projects. The Ministry has been providing an annual budget since 2015 for the Sugar Cane Growers' Council to fund their administrative costs. In the 2024-2025 Budget, the Ministry had allocated a total of \$800,000 for the Sugar Cane Growers' Council to meet the administrative costs and an additional \$200,000 has been provided to meet the costs of the Growers' Council Election to be held this year.

Mr Speaker, Sir, we are all aware that sugarcane farmers are the backbone of the country and have contributed immensely towards the nation's building over the many years. However, the cost of production has increased manifold over the past decade. Considering the financial difficulties of farmers, the Ministry is requesting the Government through this august Parliament to consider continuing to provide particular support to the Sugar Cane Growers' Council to meet the administrative costs for the next five years. This will ease some burden on the farmers, and allow the the farmers sufficient time to adjust to the levy deductions.

Mr Speaker, Sir, based on some justification, I strongly support the reinstatement of the Growers' Election and the Sugar Industry Act (Amendment) Bill that proposes to amend with the reinsertion of clauses 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40, 43, 46, 47, 48 and 129 that generally provides rights to the votes at election. The candidate eligibility, general election for a member of the Council, and filling of vacancies in the Council, provision of elections, provision of district and sector committees, Board of Council, its function and making regulations.

Mr Speaker, Sir, in summary, the Bill, once passed and proposed amendments are effective, it will allow elections to be conducted every four years under the supervision of the Industrial Commissioner. The credible election will minimise the cost of conducting elections and allow efficient and effective services delivery to the elected Councillors and to the growers. Once this Bill is passed, the farmers across the three sectors will give the opportunity to elect their Councillors and

select the best candidates to serve their Council.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, upon the conclusion of this election, the Board of Council, comprising of eight members per district will appoint and serve the Council. The Council will appoint the sector committees and it shall also include the female farmers for the purpose of assisting the Council. With such a setup, there will be better coordination between Board members with the fellow Councillors in the District and sector level, resolving issues with the farmers in a timely manner. The Councillors, both in the sector and district level, will keep checks and balances on cane planting, harvesting, transportation, mill operations and hold everyone accountable to ensure the best services are provided to the farmers, hence the need to amend this Sugar Industry (Amendment) Bill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I resume to my seat, there are just two small minor amendments that I will propose, that will not change the entire Bill itself. So, I will do that on the Committee level.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, you referring to some minor amendments to the Bill? Can you elaborate on those amendments for the purposes of our Members who may wish to contribute. Whilst the honourable Minister is finding his notes, I can inform Members of the precedence both Westminster as well as in our Parliament allows oral amendments to be made at the third reading of any Bill, so long as the amendments are not substantial. So, that is why I am asking Honourable Minister, if can you elaborate on the Bill, on the amendments you are suggesting.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this refers to 34(a) where a person is unable to contest elections. What we are doing, is that we are simply trying to delete a particular sentence, and it says it is an elected representative of any cane producers association, they cannot protest. What we are saying is that we leave it open. They can contest, as long as they are a cane farmer.

Of course, the second one, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that the Chairman, I am referring to 46(3), and I quote: “the Chairperson and the Vice-Chairperson must be elected by the members of the Board.” But we are simply saying if we can just replace the word “Board” with the word “Council.”

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I open the floor to the speakers, I would just like to go over the amendments which has been suggested by the honourable Minister. There are two amendments which he is suggesting and that is deletion of Section 34(A)(1)(d), and he has given the reason for that and the other amendment is the new Section 46 that appears on the Bill under Clause 9, Section 46(3). The last part of subsection 3 says that the Chairperson and the Vice-Chairperson must be elected by, defer and delete directors from amongst the members of the Board and replace them with the Council. So, the new section 46(3) will read, “the Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson must be elected by the Council.”

You now have the oral amendments which have been added to the Bill. I now invite the Members for the debate on the Bill. I have a list of speakers and each speaker is allowed seven minutes to speak.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to briefly contribute on the debate that is before us. It is good that the honourable Minister has admitted now that he normally leaves Parliament sitting before it ends.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not know whether any serious thought was given when this Bill was drafted. It is not a straight-out Bill and I will give reasons. The first time when we had the Sugar Cane Growers’ Council election, that was sometimes in 1992. At that time, we had a 38 member Council and around 22,000 registered growers. Today, we have around 11,000 registered growers but we are again proposing for a 38 member council. So, we need to see whether it is fair considering

the reduction in registered cane growers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to raise my concern on the Councillors per sector. For example, I will give some breakdowns. In Ba, in one sector there is about 756 growers, that is Koronubu Sector. And in another sector, namely Rarawai Sector has got 298 growers. Does it make sense? So, I would like to request the honourable Minister to consider this. In Drasa, Lautoka district, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have 733 registered growers and in Saweni Sector we have 256 growers.

That is why Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would have thought, that this is the right time to do the right thing and to merge some of these sectors so that there is a fair representation and also the reduction on the Councils. Because 38 was considered determined back in 1992, when we had around 22,000 registered growers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am also told, that only 260 some people participated in the consultation throughout the country, out of these 10,000 or 11,000 growers that we have.

I am also told that there was no consultation done in all sectors. Farmers are telling us that they were not aware of the consultation taking place at their districts. I do not blame the Committee, but there is some disconnect! And that is why this thing has happened. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no indication that there will be an increase in growers, and maybe, let us not rush into it! Maybe this is the right time to fix all these problems!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the honourable Minister has referred to some changes. It was on my list, but it is good that he has got it, but there is again 46.5, the Chief Executive of the Council must convene a district meeting of the council

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Why have a council and a district?

HON. P.K BALA.- It is the Councillors who elect, and then you go and convene a meeting to elect the District Director! So, if that can be looked into as well. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I strongly recommend that we should go back to the farmers.

(Hon. Members interject)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Why do you want to have a 38-member council?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I mentioned earlier on, the time when it was brought up to bring about the Sugarcane Growers Council, that was back in 1992. In 1992, that number was determined, now the number of growers has reduced and that is why I am suggesting that this be taken back to the Committee for a wider consultation on this subject matter.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I obviously rise strongly in full support of the Sugar Industry (Amendment) Bill 2025. A Bill that restores democracy, accountability and fairness in the governance of our sugar industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill is a necessary corrective action to the damage that was caused by the previous Government's decision, to strip the growers of their democratic rights to elect their representatives to the Sugarcane Growers Council. By allowing the Minister to directly appoint members to the Council, they effectively silenced the very people, whose livelihoods depend on this industry. I would hasten to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that actually resulted in the type of volumes that we are now seeing in terms of production. This has also happened in another industry, which we will talk about on another day, the dairy industry, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

This Government will not stand by and allow the Sugar Industry to be governed by political convenience. We are restoring the rights of growers to elect their own representatives! Mr. Speaker, Sir, under Bill, each sector will elect their own representatives to the Council ensuring a fair and democratic governance structure. The Council will no longer be a rubber stamp for political decisions! It will be a genuine advocate for the needs of the farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in actual fact, this Bill is just one part of the Coalition Government's broader commitment to revitalising the sugar industry. We must be honest about the challenges we face. The Fiji Sugar Corporation recorded a staggering \$23 million loss in 2023. If you take the accumulated losses from 2006 to 2022, it amounts to \$542.2 million in losses, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The industry continues to struggle across the supply chain. These problems were ignored by the previous Government which relied on subsidies and short-term measures, rather than tackling the structural issues that have held this industry back for such a long time.

The Ministry of Sugar and the Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister's Office, in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has undertaken a comprehensive review of the industry, identifying key reforms necessary for its long-term sustainability. The FAO report provides a roadmap for transforming the Sugar Industry just beyond sugar production. It highlights the need for greater diversification, value adding processing and perhaps renewable energy integration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is committed to implementing these recommendations to modernise the industry and ensure that it remains competitive. It is about politic will, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The sugar industry must evolve. Around the world, the major sugar producing nations have adapted, while Fiji remained stagnant due to the previous Government. Mauritius generates 15 percent of its electricity from sugar bagasse. Brazil produces and exports billions of litres of ethanol, and Thailand has incorporated agri-tech solutions to increase yield and reduce costs.

Fiji cannot afford to be left behind, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This Government of national unity is taking decisive steps with these reforms. We are exploring ways to integrate ethanol and biofuel production, enhance sugar-based renewable energy, and introduce agricultural techniques to improve yields.

(Honourable Bala interjects)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Listen, listen! FAO makes it clear! The future of the sugar industry lies not, in just producing sugar, but in leveraging sugarcane for energy, industrial use, and high-value exports. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the previous Government failed to act. Let us be clear! They ignored the financial warning signs at FSC, neglected infrastructure development, and left the farmers without a proper voice for decision-making.

This Government is taking a different path. We are restoring grower representation, strengthening industry governance, and implementing broader reforms necessary for a sustainable future. The harsh reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir, or the harsh truth is, the previous Government was sleeping on the job! This Bill is a crucial first step, but it must be followed by further industry-wide transformation. The Coalition Government has the political will to act where others have failed! We will not allow this industry to collapse, nor will we allow it to remain trapped in outdated, loss-making models.

This is about securing the future of the sugar industry and the livelihoods of thousands of Fijians! Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend this Bill to the House and urge all honourable Members to support this passage. True industry reform begins with restoring democracy, ensuring accountability,

and driving economic transformation.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to make a small submission in regard to the Bill that is before the House. From my part, I wish to acknowledge, firstly, the honourable Minister for Sugar and sitting in the public gallery, the CEO and General Manager for the Sugar Cane Growers Council. I acknowledge their presence, because they have been helping the Committee during our consultations throughout Fiji. I thank them very much for that.

With respect to the Bill that is before the House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a nutshell, as alluded to by the honourable Minister for Sugar, it is all about the re-introduction of the elections that was previously there in the 1984 Principal Act, amended and removed in the 2015 amendment. This Bill seeks to reinstate that. For the last couple of days, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been talking about democracy, hearing the voices of the people, and this Bill, in my opinion, seeks to reintroduce that.

The voice of the farmers, with the return of this Bill and the return of the Sugar Cane Growers Council elections, the farmers will have their own representation. Fair representation, transparency and accountability within the sugar industry. Elections allow the farmers to choose their own representatives, ensuring that the Sugar Cane Growers Council reflects their interests at heart.

It will promote and prevent Government or corporate control over the Sugar Cane Growers Council. It will strengthen the trust in the sugar industry. The elected leaders are more likely to push for more fair cane prices, improve payment terms and better farming support. The elections, ensure that Sugar Cane Growers Council remains independent and with respect to the amendments that has just been proposed by the honourable Minister, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome those amendments, and we thank the honourable Minister for those amendments.

In a nutshell, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not wish to speak for too much. A lot has been said. Returning democracy, returning the rights of the farmers, having a voice for them to speak, having a forum for them to speak. Most of these farmers, they have no formal representation. With the 2015 amendment, when all of that was appointed through the Minister, some of them do not even know who is representing them. With the reintroduction of the Sugar Cane Growers Council, they will have their own representatives at the sector level, and through the sector level, they will appoint who will rise up to become members in the board, in the council. With that Mr. Speaker, Sir, the farmers will have a voice, all the way, right to the top and for that, I support the Bill that is before the House.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate before the House. I was honoured and privileged to be part of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights that went for consultations in the sugarcane belt areas of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not that we do not support the Bill, but I have some serious concerns and my concern is the number of growers attending the consultation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, altogether there were 16 consultations. In Sigatoka, Cuvu Police Post and J. Singh Temple, in Nadi FSC Navo, Mr. Rashmi's Residence in Nadi, and the Sugarcane Growers Council Lautoka, Hidas Residence, in Ba Arun Sharma's residence, Rarawai Temple. In Tavua there is one consultation at Tavua College. In Rakiraki Nanuku Community Hall, Mr. Josie Raj's Building in Rakiraki Town, in Navolau, Naba One Village Hall. In Labasa Town there is one consultation in FSC Vanua and in Wainikoro, Wainikoro Sector Office and in Seaqqa there were two consultations, Seaqqa Police Bure and Solevu Primary School.

Mr. Speaker, altogether there are 38 sectors in Fiji and each sector will elect one councillor and it is very alarming that only 260 growers attended these consultations. Part of the reason, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is when we went on the consultation, I was very fortunate that the Chair gave me the

opportunity to open the consultation but when the Chair asked those growers if they understood why they were there, they said they thought that they were there for some issues affecting the sugar industry.

So, the proper information was not disseminated to the farmers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and then we have 33 sectors. I cannot understand why consultation was not done in each of the sectors. For example, I attended Waiqe sector, the only consultation was done in Labasa Town and for the farmers, if there is an urgent business then they come to town. If it was done in Waiqili Sector office then farmers as far as Coquru, Nasealevu, Nabekavu, Nakama would have come there, but there was only one consultation.

In Wainikoro Sector, it is very far from Labasa and there was only one consultation there. The farmers in Nanuku Community Hall and George Shiu Raj building those who attended there and Wainikoro, they outrightly rejected the Bill. So, my point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not a fair representation, only 260 farmers! And, if you calculate per percentage is 0.02 percent! You understand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in all consultation not 10,000 or 12,000 farmers would come, but at least 1,000 farmers would be there if consultations would have been done in each and every sector.

I do not know where the missing link was, why the information was not released to the farmers. Parliament has done its job, but I think on the ground people were really not aware. In some of the places, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the farmer, the growers said where is the Bill? We want to see the Bill! So, probably if there could have been a fair representation. Anything democratic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will support, but I think the fair representation was not there.

Only 260 farmers and many of them did not have any idea about this Bill. Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 34(a)-candidate eligibility where the Minister has made an amendment. Initially it was 34(a) Part one (c): “A person is eligible to contest an election if the person is not an elected representative of any Cane Producers Association.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the ground, there are only three submissions, that said that, no they do not want this! But I think majority of the growers said they do not want it to stay like this because there will be a clash of interest. For example, if a representative of the Sugarcane Producers Association, say for example Lautoka Cane Producers Association, and a delegate of Lautoka Cane Producers Association is also elected as a Councillor. So, if there is an issue about the fair trade, then there will always be a conflict of interest. That particular member will serve who? They will serve the producers association or serve the growers council?

So, that was the sentiment that was echoed on the ground, only three submissions Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Government is on record in saying that this is a government that listens to the people and I urge the Government to give more time! There should be a second round of consultation in each sector so that we can have a fair submission, then you can have our support!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just state this very early, and in no uncertain terms, that this Bill is about completely ending the enslavement of cane growers of this country.

This Government, under this Prime Minister started this task when we came into office. The first step, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was to ensure that the minimum granted price of \$85.00 was met. Something that the previous Government shortchanged the growers by almost \$40 million. In 2023, for the 2022 season, growers were paid over \$91.00 per tonne of sugarcane, more than \$6.00 above the granted price of \$85.00. In 2024, for the 2023 season, growers received the highest payment over \$105.00 per tonne which is more than \$20.00 above the granted price of \$85.00.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill cements the democratisation of the Sugar Cane Growers Council, which was dissolved in 2009! And Mr. Speaker, Sir, very briefly, I do not have much time, it is important to remind the people of this country the history.

The Sugar Industry Act of 1984, Mr. Speaker, Sir, gave voice to the farmers. The then Prime Minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, the then Leader of the Opposition and NFP Leader, the late S. M. Koya demonstrated that kind of leadership. They started with 111 member Sugar Cane Growers Council, then Mr. Speaker, Sir, was changed later to 38 members, one councillor per sector. Elections were held every 3 years - 1992, 1995, 1998, 2001, 2004. But the elections scheduled for 2007 never happened. And in January 2007, via Decree No. 1 of 2007, the then Sugar Cane Growers Council, CEO Jagannath Sami was forcibly removed from the office under their revered leader, Frank Bainimarama!

The interim regime cabinet which had taken office, appointed the Leader of the Fiji Labour Party as Minister for Finance. The Act was tinkered with. Nominated councillors were removed. A new Chair and Vice Chair were elected and a new CEO was appointed. The Interim Cabinet, again based on the recommendation by the Interim Minister for Sugar and Labour Party Leader, differed the Sugar Cane Growers Council indefinitely. Devious scheme to make cane growers powerless and the Sugarcane Growers Council toothless. In 2009, the Council was dissolved. In August 2015, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Act was amended by the FijiFirst Government in Parliament, to completely remove all provisions for elections.

So, this is the history, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and today, I am hearing from honourable Joseph Nand, honourable Bala, they are talking about consultations. The farmers do not need consultations! They need the Growers Council!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They need the Growers Council! They need the elections! That is the consultation that they will do! They want to elect their representatives so that their voice is heard! That is what they want to do, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is exactly what this Government is trying to do.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The other point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and this is the continuation of the leadership that the honourable Prime Minister provided in 1998 when we had the worst drought. The then Leader of the NFP, Justice Jai Ram Reddy, and Mr. Sitiveni Rabuka, they provided the highest and the best Crop Rehabilitation Programme in 1998 which re-established the Sugar Industry to its glory days.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason why we as a government are bringing the Sugar Cane Growers' Council, because when there was a Sugar Cane Growers' Council, there was communication, there was sharing of knowledge, people were coming together, a farmer from Labasa would meet a farmer from Rakiraki, would meet a farmer from Sigatoka. There was this camaraderie, sharing of knowledge, making sure that they work together.

The two honourable Members on the other side, whom they have talked about consultation, they have to admit, they have to be a bit honest, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that it is this Government that is giving the voice back to the farmers. It is this Government, that is now making sure that the industry

is re-looked at. So this idea, and they have talked about consultation, farmers not coming. For 16 years, they shut the farmers up!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They did not allow the CEOs of the Growers Council. Now they can talk about the industry, they can go and see the farmers. This is what they did, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we have to be honest. I am asking the honourable Opposition Members to admit that the disaster was created by their leaders, who are not here today.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They have abandoned them! And they have ran away!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order! Point of Order, honourable Koya.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Point of Order in respect to Standing Orders 60(1) with respect to relevance. Mr. Speaker, Sir, you have asked us to obtain some kind of decorum in the House and continue to be relevant with respect to what is before us. I ask you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the honourable Minister for Finance, has now veered off course completely and derailed himself, by talking about the past and what actually happened.

What is before him, is a very simple Sugar Industry (Amendment) Bill. He has gone on and started talking about leaders from the past, et cetera and all that kind of stuff, giving us a historical lesson, which may differ from what we think about. I ask you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you could please ask him, to stick to the actual Bill before the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- I take your point, honourable Koya and I would ask the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, to please keep on track as far as this Bill is concerned.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Precisely, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill is about restoring the Sugar Cane Growers' Council, which was destroyed under dictatorship, unilaterally and this Government is bringing this Bill to Parliament to restore that Sugar Cane Growers Council.

MR. SPEAKER.- Point of Order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, once again, Standing Order 60(1). First of all, he is factually incorrect. He is talking about a dictatorship. This was a properly elected Government prior to this. They should stick to the facts! Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, he is delving into the irrelevant. Please, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Koya. I ask the honourable Minister to please stick to the motion. Again, second time! Please continue.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. All I am saying is that the Growers Council was...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Here he goes again!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.-...removed in 2009, that is a fact! And that was done under the military Government. That is a fact! And this Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is bringing a Bill to Parliament to restore and bring back that Sugarcane Growers Council that was removed unilaterally

in 2009. I urge all the honourable Members to support this Bill. This is restoring and, of course, correcting what happened in the past. And this is good for the farmers, this is good for the country, and good for the economy.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we actually, and I have this report in hand, where we had this consultations and we had five members that went throughout the country to consult the farmers. And, of course, we see the Honourable Jone Usamate and honourable Faiyaz Koya standing there. There is no retention on this Report. Which means you have the Opposition and who also have accepted this in totality. How many more consultation you want? First, in the last two years, they are saying, when is the election? Now, when the election is going to happen, do not hold elections!

(Laughter)

My God! Come to your true senses, man! Now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the last thing I want to do is lie in this Parliament. Now, honourable Bala, just said, in 1992, there was 38 Councillors. It is an absolute lie! There were 111 Councillors in 1992. But then, of course, dropped down to 38. But there is a joke about this, 111 Councillors.

(Hon. P.K. Bala interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Listen to me! There was 111 councillors, and one of the councillors happened to be the late honourable Raman Singh, a grower's councillor. And he was on the 111-member council. Now, in the same year, we had a Parliament of 52 members. So, the late honourable Shree Ramlu, who was also a member of Parliament, he said, honourable Singh, we are sitting in 52 Member Parliament, and Raman Singh said, what 52? We are sitting in 111! So, I think, they took that figure out and said, drop it down to 38. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last two years, there was no strike. The cane harvesting went very smoothly. And I guarantee you, there will be no strike in future as well, because farmers are fed up with strikes. Go and see my farm!

Now, we are going far away from the previous and old style of sugar industry. We want to see the modernisation of this industry, mechanisation of this industry and this is where the honourable Prime Minister and the Coalition Government is putting a lot of efforts and a lot of policies to see that the sugar industry comes back to its former glory!

Now, reducing the number from 38 down to whatever is suggested by honourable Bala, we wanted to receive one councillor per sector who can be full time there with the FSC, and the entire industry stakeholders to see that we encourage the farmers who are not producing to come back to the farm. So, what I am saying is, reducing is not a solution.

Finally, honourable Joseph Nand said that there were not many members attending. I will tell you one thing. If a baby does not have milk, then he cries, then the mother has to feed the baby. Here, the farmers were given \$105 a tonne, and they are more than satisfied! That is why they say, "look, we are getting a good price, we have no issues, you are giving us all incentives." Therefore, the industry is going to be revived under this Government. With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I totally commend and support this Bill to be passed.

Question put.

Votes cast:

Ayes	-	33
Noes	-	1
Not Voted	-	10

Abstained - 11

Motion agreed.

[A Bill for an Act to amend the Sugar Industry Act 1984 passed and enacted by Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No. of 2025)]

ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY COMMISSION BILL 2025

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

That the –

- (a) Accountability and Transparency Commission Bill (Bill No. 6 of 2025), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill be referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights;
- (d) Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights must table a report in its April sitting of Parliament; and
- (e) Upon presentation of the report on the Bill by the Standing Committee, that the Bill be debated and voted on by Parliament at its April sitting and that, I, as the Member moving this motion be granted a Right of Reply.

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

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, given the lateness of the hour, I propose to be brief. The Accountability and Transparency Commission is established by Section 121 of the Constitution. The proposed Bill seeks to operationalise the Accountability and Transparency Commission together with the Code of Conduct Bill and the Access to Information Bill. This new law, when enacted, will lead to an overall strengthening of institutional governance in this country.

Mr. Speaker, the Bill is long overdue, in fact 12 years. It is a serious demonstration of this Government's commitment not only to promoting but strengthening good governance. The Commission will bring about greater accountability in Government. In the Government's Fiji National Development Plan 2025-2029 and Vision 2050, I refer this honourable House to page 184 of this particular report which states, and I quote:

“The Government also aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Accountability and Transparency Commission is intended to give effect to this aspect of the Government's National Development Plan. It is a reflection of SDG16 developed by the United Nations and which Fiji accepts. I commend this Bill to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- I know with the lateness of the hour, the two Whips have agreed that we continue with the debate until adjournment, so I will open the floor now for any intervention from honourable Members.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we welcome the Bill that has come. I think ideally for us, it could have been a longer period of time, but the fact that it is coming is an opportunity for the Committee to be able to look into it. It is something we appreciate. We hope for a longer time,

but I think we accept it along those lines.

MR. SPEAKER.- Are there any further interventions from the floor? I see none.

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have no further comments at this point, and I welcome the opportunity for the Committee to conduct a review and perusal of the draft Bill.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – SAVUSAVU TOWN COUNCIL 2011-2013 ANNUAL REPORTS

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report of the Savusavu Town Council 2011-2013 Annual Reports which was tabled on 5th December, 2024.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the municipal councils in Fiji are legislated under the Local Government Act of 1972 and municipal councils provide overall policy direction to maintain and improve the quality of services and facilities for their ratepayers.

The Special Administrator chairs and teams of each municipal council have been tasked with reforming their council administration's into forward thinking and agile organisations focused on customer service. Each of our cities and towns are unique in their quality of lifestyle and range of investment opportunities. And over time, each council will be guided by a community plan and local economic development strategy.

The Savusavu Town Council at the time of reporting, served an estimated population of 6,000 people in the greater Savusavu area and is responsible for the provision and maintenance of a wide range of services to its ratepayers and residents. The report we are talking about, Sir, captures the various activities reported in the three Annual Reports from 2011-2013.

Given the number of years that have lapsed since these years, the Committee makes no assessment on the efficiency or otherwise of the Savusavu Town Council except to say how grateful we are to the council for the information and data that are presented in these annual reports. The Committee is of the view that a consistent reporting structure would greatly assist in a fair analysis of the report and urges the Ministry for Housing and Local Government to work in collaboration with relevant town councils to identify a standard reporting template for use in all future annual reports. I thank the Savusavu Town Council for compiling and submitting these Annual Reports and I support the motion before the House.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make a short contribution to the motion that is before the House, that is, the Consolidated Review Report of Savusavu Town Council Annual Reports 2011 to 2013.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this opportunity to thank the Chairman of the Committee and Members for the extension review of the report. I would like to also turn my attention to the township

of Savusavu, the capital of my part of Fiji. It is a very small town, has a port of entry, has an airport, a few hotels with more to come according to the tourism development plan and some new roads to be constructed very soon to make travel around the island more comfortable. It is a growing township and I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the old pioneer families of Savusavu that have developed the building blocks that built this town to what it is today – the Gulabdas family, Chhaganlal, Anderson Fong, Hazelman's, Whippy's, Whiteside's, Fenton's, Lepper's, Powell's, Marimutu's and Smith's and of course the family of Brij Lal, father of Sant Lal, father of the honourable Ketan Lal.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would be a remiss of me not to acknowledge the traditional chiefs whose foresight and generosity allowed for the establishment of this township, *Na Turaga Na Tui Nasavusavu, Tui Yaro, Tui Nakama, Tui Wailevu* and the Cakaudrove overlord *Turaga Bale Na Tui Cakau*. The decision of these pioneers and the chiefs laid the foundation of what Savusavu is today, and we thank the Administrators and those that have been responsible for the administration of the town for their report that has been brought before the Committee and is being debated tonight.

Once a vital hub for trade ship, this town has evolved into a thriving tourist destination, seamlessly blending its rich history with modern attraction. Mr. Speaker, Sir, one day I was in town, I saw some young boys waving to an American on the other side of the street. They were calling out, "Hey, Robert, *bula*." Robert said, "Hey, *bula*." I came along and asked the boys, "You know that man?" They said, "Yes." "What's his name?" They said, "Robert." "Robert, what?" They said, "No, just Robert." I said, "Boys, that is Robert Redford." "Oh, okay, hey Robert." That was in Savusavu, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Laughter)

The site of Savusavu's township is natural, beautiful, given by the One that created the land. At one stage, Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the Interim Government in 1987, we were approached to offer a piece of Savusavu for a deposed President who was running away from his country. Unfortunately, my President at the time in the Interim Government was not very keen to have that runaway President, so we did not have him, otherwise we would have had his son serving as President in one of our neighbouring countries now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are really looking forward to the development of Savusavu into a Blue Town model and looking forward to the contribution of the honourable Minister of Tourism with the support, of course, of the honourable Minister of Finance. I have some figures, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the Ministry for Finance about the figures and that will also be available to the honourable Members, probably in the report. However, it has been having some difficulties, like all the other towns about rate collections and infrastructure development, but we are very grateful that things are moving and there are more attractive things on the horizon.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute very briefly on the motion before the House. I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence for the Report. I have noted that the Committee has come up with some very good findings. Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the findings of the Committee is that there is no consistency in the reporting that is used by the Council.

The Committee has recommended that the Ministry for Housing and Local Government work in collaboration with relevant town councils to identify a standard reporting. I agree with the Committee's recommendation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry for Local Government needs to standardise certain operational procedures for all municipal councils, starting with a standard accounting software to be utilised by all 18 Councils. For small Councils like Savusavu, it may not be cost effective. Therefore, if the Ministry for Local Government can assist small councils like Savusavu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, high staff turnover is another challenge faced by almost all the councils in Fiji. High staff turnover has many impact on Councils, such as reduced productivity, increased recruitment costs, strain on staff and human resource department, reduced workforce stability, et cetera. I know that staff retention is not an easy task, but job evaluation for Council workers can assist in retaining staff. Job evaluation will ensure that a fair and adequate wage system is established in any organisation for providing proper wages to the workers. I am aware that the Ministry of Local Government is doing some work on the Job Evaluation Exercise, and I urge the Ministry for Local Government to expedite on the Job Evaluation Exercise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Savusavu Town Council serves an estimated population of 6,000 in the greater Savusavu area and it is responsible for the provision of maintenance of a wide range of services to its ratepayers, residents and also tourists. Savusavu which is well known as the hidden paradise of Fiji, is a tourist attraction town. In Savusavu, people mostly come as tourists to the town. The Council has to ensure that good services are provided to ratepayers as well as visitors to Savusavu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a few months ago, it was highlighted in the media that a significant number of issues that remained unresolved. It ranged from faded signs of pedestrian crossings, the damaged street lights, inadequate public services to poor state of walkways and roads and there were other issues which were highlighted in the media. I hope the authorities concerned will address the issues urgently, if it has not been addressed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, issues of this nature causes inconvenience to the residents and the tourists. It should be addressed without delay so that ratepayers of Savusavu and other tourists are provided with better services. I support the motion.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the Consolidated Review Report of the Savusavu Town Council 2011-2013 Annual Reports. I would also like to acknowledge the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, its Chairman and Members for its deliberations. Given the 13-year lapse since updating the reports, I also acknowledge the challenges in executing their tasks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please allow me to acknowledge the great responsibility town councils have in all aspects of our people, in socio-economic development. In the case of Savusavu Town Council as has been shared, it serves an estimated population of 6,000 in the greater Savusavu area. And if you look at the three major provinces of Bua, Macuata and Cakaudrove, you are looking at 136,000 people. However, they also serve thousands of visitors to Fiji. And I know that in 2012, the Savusavu Town Council's slogan was to be "A fast developing tourist hotspot, the hidden paradise, the up North."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when there is increased economic development in towns and cities, they begin to thrive. It is a collective task, one that we all share. I am pleased to share that through the Na Vualiku Project, led by the Ministry for Tourism and Civil Aviation, we have embarked on several activities in Vanua Levu including Savusavu Town. And we see this work as supplementing the functions of the Council to directly benefit residents, taxpayers, visitors, investors and the greater people of the North.

As I have said in this august House, the crux of the Navualiku Project is to mobilise investments, infrastructure and in social services to create a more enabling business environment for future investments. We are at Phase 1, valued at \$61.5 million in U.S. currency. In this financial year, the project has been allocated an estimated FJ\$30.6 million a year and is jointly being executed by the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, Fiji Roads Authority and Fiji Airports.

- (1) We are first undertaking a Strategic Environment and Social Assessment (SESA) to look at all the environmental and social risks and impacts that could be expected with the implementation of the Integrated Tourism Master Plan. So, from the outset, we will be incorporating environmental and social considerations as the early stages of decision making into the policies, plans and programmes.
- (2) In parallel with SESA, we are now preparing an Integrated Tourism Master Plan. This will be an important framework, Mr. Speaker, that will give us a 25-year forecast for tourism growth to Vanua Levu and Taveuni. It will also include baseline and scenario forecasts that can tell us the investments and financing needed to cater for future demands. This work will commence by April 2025.
- (3) We have also begun to work for a MSMEs pilot program. This involves mapping out tourism MSMEs, understanding their specific needs, then designing a pilot programme.
- (4) Together with the National Trust of Fiji, we are progressing work on the design of the Waisali Forest Reserve Vista Centre tracks, et cetera.
- (5) We are working with our partners on their solar panel installations, bettering public buildings such as the municipal council buildings in Labasa and Savusavu, and the Savusavu market. The project is also exploring other bankable options for harnessing Vanua Levu's abundant renewable energy and a possible expansion of the distribution network.

Mr. Speaker, looking at some of the larger infrastructure investments, through Water Authority of Fiji, we are working on a wastewater investment strategy for Savusavu in line with the Water Sector Strategy for 2050. Our partners, Fiji Roads Authority, have also commenced work on the design phase of the Labasa-Savusavu Link Scenic Road before civil works begin. Mr. Speaker, Sir, to quantify, this does not involve major reconstruction, instead, we are making investments such as rest stops and safety installations to make the journey between the two towns more pleasant and safer.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to our airports, I said earlier that international airports will be in the future. However, what this project will support is investments at both Savusavu and Labasa to build safety and security regulations and short-term demand. You would have seen that work has begun on the new terminal at Labasa Airport under Fiji Airports capital projects to replace the Adi Laisa Terminal, which has served for 51 years. The Na Vualiku Project, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will supplement these efforts. Fiji Airports has begun works on the design of further upgrades at both Labasa and Savusavu airports. This includes investments such as pavement, construction, tower connectivity and new terminal for Savusavu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Savusavu, to be prepared to receive more visitors, they need to get the essentials rights. Waste management has been a longstanding issue for Fiji. With our partners, they are working on options to study, to access, to assess the best waste management solution. It could be a new central landfill, or decentralised options, transfer stations, et cetera. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we

remain hopeful that there will be continued investment in Vanua Levu. We can support the work of the Savusavu Town Council and more importantly, make a more meaningful impact for our people.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the motion before this august House. I must first thank the Chairman, along with the Committee Members for the review of the Consolidated Report of the Savusavu Town Council Annual Reports for the years 2011- 2013. I also acknowledge that there are seven honourable Members here who highly regard Savusavu, including our honourable Prime Minister as their home or even as their own town.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the lapse of 13 years, there were not many recommendations that were put forward by the Committee, and that is understandable. One of the issues is the inconsistency in the reporting template that was used. The Ministry of Local Government is now currently designing a method that will be used across all municipalities to ensure that there is a standard reporting template when it comes to annual reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the delay in the preparation of annual reports by most municipalities is caused by the absence of good governance with the previous administration. This was absolutely poor governance. It is also a reflection of poor management and weak monitoring for the Ministry in the past years. There was no dedicated department in the Ministry to monitor the audit, affairs and some of the things that are actually affecting our councils. Some of the reasons, Mr. Speaker, Sir, why the Local Government Election is important to be brought back, this will ensure that newly elected councillors are more accountable in managing the resources and affairs of their respective councils.

In the current financial year, the Ministry has established an Audit and Compliance Unit that is independently undertaking internal audits of all the councils around the country, and they have audited five municipal councils today, as well as conducted special audits. They have audited five municipal councils to-date as well as conducted special audits for two councils.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Office of the Auditor-General currently holds financials for Savusavu Town Council for the Financial Years of 2021-2022, while the Council is currently compiling financials for 2022-2023 as well as 2023-2024 financial years. This demonstrates our commitment to restoring financial order and ensuring proper governance, something that was surely lacking in the previous administration.

I would like to thank the Special Administrators, management and staff of Savusavu Town Council for providing essential services to the people of Savusavu. Savusavu is a fast-growing town that has seen a growth in the establishment of new businesses with the likes of the new Nawi Island Resort, located across Savusavu Town. It has become an attraction, not only to locals but also to international visitors to Savusavu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the great infrastructural challenges faced by Savusavu Town is inadequate parking spaces in the main town area, something that the council, special administrators and management of Savusavu Town Council are currently working on, looking for adequate spaces to accommodate the increased number of commuters as well as traffic around Savusavu Town.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also very important to note the Blue Town initiative, something that was endorsed by Cabinet in June 2024 – National Blue Framework and Savusavu was selected as a pilot location for this initiative. This initiative supports our Coalition Government, a broader Navualiku Programme which aims to promote sustainable development in the Northern Division. The Ministry in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme has secured an expert to develop

the framework. Work is set to begin in the next four to eight weeks, setting the foundation for a greener, more sustainable future for all Fijian towns. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the motion before the House.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to say thank you very much to all the contributors to the debate before the House this evening.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting today. I thank you all for your contributions. I am reminded of a popular saying with my people, whose sole means of livelihood is copra. It goes, *sa mai cava tale e dua tale na siga ni vili niu* - another day of gathering coconuts, signifying to my people toil and labour has ended. So, until tomorrow, honourable Members, Parliament is adjourned to 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.58 p.m.