

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 2ND DECEMBER, 2021

[CORRECTED COPY]

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THURSDAY, 2ND DECEMBER, 2021

The Parliament met at 9.52 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable M.D. Bulitavu; honourable S.S. Kirpal; honourable Ratu S. Matanitobua and honourable Adi L. Qionibaravi.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 1st December, 2021, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting of Parliament. I also welcome all those watching the live broadcast and the live streaming of today's proceedings from the comfort of their homes, offices and electronic gadgets. Thank you for taking an interest in your Parliament.

Standing in Solidarity - Victims and Survivors of Violence

Honourable Members, I wish to thank you for standing in solidarity with victims and survivors of violence, and calling for a world without rape and gender-based violence. At this juncture, I wish to acknowledge the efforts of the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation in continuing to raise awareness on these important issues.

Ministry of Health and Medical Services

In the same breadth, I also wish to thank the Ministry of Health and Medical Services Team, as well as the Diabetes Team, for the awareness programmes yesterday.

Fijian Elections Office

Finally, I also acknowledge the Fijian Elections Office Team, who will still be here in Parliament until tomorrow to provide voter registration services.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS

The following Reports were tabled by the honourable Ministers responsible in accordance with Standing Order 38(1), and referred to the relevant Standing Committee for deliberation in accordance with Standing Order 38(2):

Standing Committee on Natural Resources

1. Ministry of Forestry – Annual Report 2017-2018 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 80 of 2021*)
2. Ministry of Forestry – Annual Report 2018-2019 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 81 of 2021*)
3. Ministry of Agriculture – August 1st 2016 to July 31st 2017 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 88 of 2021*)
4. Ministry of Agriculture – August 1st 2017 to July 31st 2018 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 95 of 2021*)

Standing Committee on Economic Affairs

1. Fiji Revenue and Customs Service – 1st August 2017 to 31st July 2018 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 260 of 2020*)
2. Fiji Meat Industry Board – Annual Report 2015 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 283 of 2020*)
3. Fiji Meat Industry Board – Annual Report 2016 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 284 of 2020*)
4. Fiji Meat Industry Board – Annual Report 2017 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 285 of 2020*)
5. Reserve Bank of Fiji – August 2020 – July 2021 Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 23 of 2021*)
6. Reserve Bank of Fiji Insurance – Annual Report 2020 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 22 of 2021*)
7. Fiji Development Bank – 2020 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 108 of 2021*)

Standing Committee on Social Affairs

1. Fiji Ports Corporation Limited – Annual Report 2018 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 58 of 2021*)
2. Fiji Ports Corporation Limited – Annual Report 2019 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 51 of 2021*)
3. Fiji National Sports Commission – August 2019 to July 2020 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 18 of 2021*)
4. Fiji National Provident Fund – Annual Report 2021 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 52 of 2021*)

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

1. Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – 2019-2020 Audit report on Statutory Authorities, Independent Body and Commissions (*Parliamentary Paper No. 104 of 2021*)
2. Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – 2019-2020 Audit Report on Municipal Councils (*Parliamentary Paper No. 105 of 2021*)
3. Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – Performance Audit on the Licensing and Monitoring of River Gravel and Sand Extractions (*Parliamentary Paper No. 106 of 2021*)
4. Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – Performance Audit on the Monitoring of Implementation of the Sugarcane Development and Farmers Assistance Programme (*Parliamentary Paper No. 107 of 2021*)

5. Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – Remaining 2019 Audit Report on General Administration, Social Services, Economic Services and Infrastructure Services Sectors (*Parliamentary Paper No. 109 of 2021*)

Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights

1. Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – 2019-2020 Audit report on Statutory Authorities, Independent Body and Commissions (*Parliamentary Paper No. 104 of 2021*)
2. Ministry of Civil Service – Annual Report 2016 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 62 of 2021*)
3. Ministry of Civil Service – Annual Report 2016-2017 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 63 of 2021*)
4. Ministry of Civil Service – Annual Report 2017-2018 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 64 of 2021*)
5. Ministry of Civil Service – Annual Report 2018-2019 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 65 of 2021*)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, take note that the First Quarter Appropriation Statement – Actual Expenditure from 1st August 2021-31st October 2021 is for honourable Members' information and will not be referred to any Standing Committee.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT

HON. P.W. VOSANIBOLA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to contribute to the motion before Parliament.

First and foremost, I wish to congratulate His Excellency the President for the appointment bestowed on him as Head of State for a term of three years. I wish him good health and pray that the God Almighty grants His Excellency and the First Lady, the serenity, courage and wisdom at the highest office of the land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would be failing in my duty if I do not acknowledge the contributions of our former President, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote, and I thank him for his services to Fiji. I wish him and the former First Lady a happy and joyful retirement.

Sir, as it is required by parliamentary tradition, I sincerely thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address on the occasion of the Opening of the New Session of Parliament on 22nd November, 2021. Sir, history has revealed that His Excellency is a descendant of one of the signatories to the 1874 Deed of Cession in Levuka, thus the Government and Opposition's presidential nominees signified the respect people still have for Fiji's chiefly system.

Sir, our President holds the highest office in the land and, therefore, the nation looks up to him, including the chiefs, the religious leaders and all Fijians, including the young people. A Presidential Address must be prepared in totality, including the Government's plans and development agenda for the year and to enhance confidence, peace, comfort and hope to the entire nation.

Sir, whilst analysing the opening Address prepared for His Excellency, it focusses on seven items:

1. New Fiji democracy;
2. COVID-19 pandemic;
3. Climate change and ocean;

4. COP26 meeting;
5. Tourism;
6. Legislative agenda; and
7. General Election.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to discuss further on a few of the contents of the opening Address by His Excellency the President. On the new Fiji democracy and, as highlighted by His Excellency the President on page 3 of the *Daily Hansard* of Monday, 22nd November, 2021, and I quote:

“Fiji’s global star is rising, our modernising economy sits at the cusp of recovery and the old style of politics has no place in this new Fiji.”

Sir, to me, that is a very interesting statement made by His Excellency the President and his timely call to reject the old style politics.

What is the old style politics? Was His Excellency attributing to the British divide and rule philosophy or was he referring to the politics of 1970 to 1987, which saw the best years of our independence with a truly unprecedented growth, or was he referring to the era of *coups* in which the most destructive one has been the one in 2006?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I remind and request this House that we should not undermine but appreciate and acknowledge past Governments, its leadership and development. May I compare the old politics and the Fiji new politics and highlight a few significant achievements made:

1. The period of the old politics from 1970 to 2006, Fiji had the highest economic growth for the 10-year period from 1971 to 1980. The highest growth rate ever achieved was during the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara’s era with more than 30 per cent annual growth, while during former Prime Minister Rabuka’s era, the highest growth rate hovered around 9 per cent in 1998.
2. Employment in public and private sector are fully secured and the employees performed duties with passion, pride and satisfaction right up to their retirement age.
3. Due to secured employment for the workers, bank loans for housing and other needs for the employees are more accessible and affordable.
4. The Government in the 1900s engaged on national cost of living adjustment exercise annually which provides a fair cost of living to the people and also a backdated payment of workers salary and pay rise.
5. The Government respects workers’ rights and the right to collective bargaining and freedom of expression.
6. The Government smartly acquires external loan for capital projects and from 1970 to 2006, our debt level was at \$2.4 billion within a period of 36 years and from 1970 to 2006, our debt level was at \$2.4 billion within a period of 36 years.
7. Our projects are well-spoken, designed and implemented within the approved funds and completed within the required timeframe.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the Fiji new democracy period from 2007 till today, some achievements I need to mention are:

1. Sealing of the 70 kilometre Nabouwalu-Dreketi Highway.
2. New Keiyasi Subdivisional Hospital.
3. Provision of financial assistance to eligible Fijians affected by the impact of COVID-19 pandemic.
4. Improved Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) power supply coverage throughout the country.
5. Improved communication and connectivity in the country.
6. Stagnant economic growth and consumption drive.
7. Creating and widening of economic disparity and unfeasible development of economic sectors.
8. Burdening the people of Fiji with more credit and public debt topped up with high interest rates, when now the total accumulative debt from 2007 to 2021 is approximately around \$9 billion, which is just within the period of 14 years.
9. Extravagant high cost of living creating less purchasing power for our people.
10. Failing miserably to expand our existing industries or establishing new industries to create employment for our labour force.
11. Curtailing workers' rights; the right to collective bargaining and freedom of expression.
12. Insecure employment for employees in the public and private sector.
13. Allowing gross exploitation of our natural resources and pristine environment.
14. Compromising the independence of bodies which are critical to accountability, transparency, maintenance of law and order in securing the rights of the people.

That is the reality and contrast between old politics and the new Fiji politics.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the bell has rung for our final lap of the parliamentary marathon which began on 26th November, 2018, and it is wise to take stock and mention some of the undone ongoing promises and incomplete projects by the Government which are:

1. Lautoka Court Complex;
2. Vunidawa Sports Stadium;
3. Waila City Housing;
4. Waciwaci Primary School relocation;
5. Barefoot College;
6. Ba Hospital;
7. Rotuma Hospital;
8. Nasinu Waste Transfer Centre;
9. Valelevu Sports Stadium;
10. Nabouwalu Town re-development;
11. Fiji National University (FNU) Labasa Complex;
12. Nausori Hospital;
13. Colonial War Memorial (CWM) Hospital Maternity Unit; and
14. FNU Veterinary Complex at Koronivia.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, that is the reality and image of the new Fiji democracy, FijiFirst Government and its leadership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the COVID-19 pandemic, there are very critical and important lessons learnt from the preventive and curative intervention exercise during the second wave which must be taken into account and addressed immediately, to take care of the assumed third wave transmission of the coronavirus.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, countries in Europe, South America and Africa are having their third and even fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we are too far from these countries but the threat of

a third wave is real, if we relax and abandon the public health measures to protect us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has declared the new coronavirus variant as a virus of concern and named it "Omicron", with a large number of mutations and increased reinfection risk. Australia has recorded cases of the new Omicron COVID-19 variant and we are expecting most Australians to visit our shores during the upcoming festive season. I request the Government to be more vigilant and make wise decision on allowing international visitors coming from red list countries.

Mr. Speaker Sir, our health facilities require an urgent improvement, therefore, it is necessary that more resources should be directed to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. Also, ensuring sufficient supplies of medicine and drugs, necessary health equipment and the provision of the support services for the health sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on our vaccination coverage and as expressed by His Excellency on page 3 of the *Daily Hansard* of Monday, 22nd November, 2021, and I quote:

"After two full years of weathering the pandemic, I commend the nation of the of the vaccination effort that has revealed a light at the end of the tunnel."

Sir, let us not sit on our laurels but let us continue to monitor and manage the risks ahead of us and be aware that king COVID-19 with its new variant will be around and with us next year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our challenge is to remove the mindset of complacency that has crept in and remove thoughts that we may not catch the new variant and we may not also get a third wave. We must be alert and be prepared for a third wave and the new variant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as reported by the Permanent Secretary for Health, Dr. Fong, this morning that we currently have COVID-19 positive travellers from African states before we knew about the Omicron COVID-19 variant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the issue of climate change, I wish to extend my sincere gratitude to His Excellency as being one of Fiji's fierce defenders of the ocean and he is at the forefront of the effort to combat and adapt to climate change and the protection of our ocean and environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted by His Excellency the President on page 4 of the *Daily Hansard* of Monday, 22nd November, 2021, and I quote:

"We must keep our sights focused on the greatest challenge that is before us and which lies ahead of us - that of climate change. I have seen over the course of my life what the climate and oceans crisis is causing now in Fiji."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think no one can quarrel or beg to differ with His Excellency the President when he shares his personal experiences and draws home the point on the impending threats by climate change and the need to mitigate the threats.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 1971, Pope Paul the Sixth referred to ecological concerns about the planet. Earth as tragic consequences of unchecked human activity saying, and I quote:

"Due to an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation."

Therefore, humans and human activities have been responsible for climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in human life or tradition, when we create damage or sinful actions to anyone, we normally seek forgiveness with repent mindset to the affected person or creator. We have damaged the planet with sinful activities to the environment and its biodiversity and we are experiencing climate change and environment degradation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, so far, I have not heard a single word from COP meetings, participants, even world leaders and groups to refer this issue to the Creator, the Almighty God, whilst we are physically mitigating and trying to solve the problems and as Christians, we believe and as written in the *Holy Bible* in the Book of Genesis 1: 1 and I quote: "In the beginning, God created heavens and the earth" And in the Books of Psalm 24:1: "The earth and everything on it belong to the Lord. The world and its people belong to him".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are discussions on coal and fossil fuels, 1.5 degrees of carbon emission, rising sea level, ocean pollution, coral bleaching, \$100 billion of climate fund and many others. Again, the book of Isaiah 24: 6 says, and I quote:

"The earth wilts away; its mighty leaders melt to nothing. The earth is polluted because its people disobey the laws of God, breaking their agreement that was to last forever. The earth is under a curse; its people are dying out because of their sins."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji and all Fijians need to be humbled and seek forgiveness to the Creator therefore, a spiritual solution is relevant to this problem for a global or a Fiji spiritual revolution and let us all repent to God Almighty through a national fasting and praying towards restoring Fiji from the effects of climate change and he has provide us a beacon of hope as written in II Chronicles 7: 14: "If my own people will humbly pray and turn back to me and stop sinning, then I will answer them from heaven. I will forgive them and heal their land."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I request the Government to engage and mobilise our religious organisation and leaders and seriously adhere to this call and even declare a spiritual revolution program at the same time while we continue to physically mitigate on this global climatic catastrophe.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted by His Excellency the President, I quote: "The recovery of our tourism sector and of our economy will not be measured in months but in years." That being so, Sir, while we continue to search for answers in tourism to rebuild in the post-COVID-19 period, there is another safe and viable alternative therefore, more serious efforts be implemented on the development of resource-based sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the economic or resource-based sectors such as agriculture, forestry and fisheries, we remain steadfast in our quest in advocating the rights, interests and aspirations of resource owners. There is a dire need to bail out our economic sectors and empowering our economy to generate the maximum revenue we need and the jobs we want to create.

Sir, Fiji used to be agriculturally or naturally resource-based in regards to its economy which seem to have been taken over in the emphasis by tourism. While we support tourism in creating employment, increased foreign exchange by the use of natural sun, the sand, sea and smiles, we should never neglect developments of our land in agriculture and forestry and also fisheries and value-adding through manufacturing.

Sir, on the Government legislative agenda as highlighted by His Excellency, I quote: "... and to support our march towards a modern and caring Fiji, the government will put forward 17 bills for

consideration in this legislative session.” Sir, our main role and responsibility in this august House is to debate the national affairs and pass laws, and the government is so popular and famous in moving and passing laws through Standing Order 51.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Trues-up!

HON. P.W. VOSANIBOLA.- And out of the 17 bills before Parliament, I request the government to refer bills for enactment especially the Child Care and Protection Bill, Landlord and Tenant Bill and the Industrial Hemp Bill to the relevant standing committees for further public consultation. We need to hear the views of the members of the public on the scrutinising of bills prior to enactment.

Sir, on the General Elections 2022 as highlighted by His Excellency the President I quote: “Voters deserve better. Elections are their opportunity to choose who is best to lead them.” I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the staff of the Fijian Elections Office for carrying out voter registration and provision of valid voting cards to the Members of Parliament and staff this week.

Sir, the 2014 and 2018 voter cards have expired, thus require all eligible voters to visit the centre and upgrade their voter cards bearing same names as on birth certificates. Our eligible married Fijian women voters have two optional windows towards the upgrading of their voter card:

1. To use or remain using their husbands' names they are required to submit applications for registration of change of names and declaration forms to the Registrar General's Births, deaths and Marriages Office.
2. For married women opting to use their birth registration names, they are required to submit their birth certificates to the centre to upgrade their voter cards.

Sir, as Members of Parliament, it is also our entire duty to advocate these very important issues to the members of the public which shall enhance voting eligibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note, I sincerely request the Fijian Elections Office for a thorough voter registration exercise, right to the furthest village or settlement in Fiji and leaving no eligible voter behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we embark into our final year of parliamentary journey, I request the Government to look into the following issues in the Lomaiviti Province:

1. The communication connectivity requires better coverage, specifically on the use of mobile phones and internet appliances. On the Island of Koro which includes the Villages of Namacu, Nakodu, Sinuvaca, Mudu and also in the *Tikina o Cawa* and on the Island of Ovalau, the Villages of Visoto, Nacobo and Nukutocia. Also, the Islands of Moturiki, Gau, Nairai and Batiki are still facing low or no coverage of communication connectivity.
2. The Government to seriously review and improve the current programme on road upgrading and improvements on islands in the maritime.
3. Levuka is one of the gazetted port of entry and there is an urgent need to reconstruct the damaged Levuka Wharf and also the submerged lighthouse at the Natubari Passage which provides navigational assistance to vessels for disembarking at the Levuka Wharf.
4. As verbally informed by the honourable Minister for Education, Arts, Heritage and Local Government, I hope that the laying of the foundation of the new Levuka Market will be carried out in January 2022.

5. The commencement of the Solar Farms Project in Bureta, Ovalau, and the provision of assistance on the construction of church building which can be used as a disaster evacuation centre in which the building plans and specifications were approved by the Ministry of Rural Development and Disaster Management as for the Naiviteitei Methodist Church in Ovalau.
6. Due to the rising sea water level and foreshore erosion, I request the Government for construction of nature-based seawall or any other approved type to the affected villages in the Lomaiviti Group and especially to the villages of Rukuruku, Taviya, Vatukalo, Toki and Vuma in Ovalau Island.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank you for your indulgence and may I wish you, Sir, and all honourable Members of Parliament and Parliament staff a spiritually blessed Christmas and a Prosperous New Year. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, Members of Parliament and the people of Fiji: I rise to support the motion by the Prime Minister to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this time also to express my condolences to the honourable Bilitavu for the loss of his father, and wish him and his family God's peace in their time of sorrow. I also wish the honourable Adi Litia Qionibaravi a speedy and full recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the former President for his sterling service over his historic six year tenure as our Head of State. Our first President not to have been a high chief of Fiji and not an *iTaukei*; but he has proven from his service that he was the right choice for that high office. He has been a true patriot, a true son of Fiji and I thank him for his many years of service to the people of Fiji and to the world.

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- I thank him not only for being a great national leader but also for other things that he has done: by being the champion in the battle against NCDs, for being an advocate of physical activity and a living walking example of a person who farms the land. Many of those who have worked in the State House during his tenure have become much fitter from the early morning walks and the physical activities that he led. Many have benefitted from his teaching on how to plant and look after food crops. So he has left an indelible imprint on the lives of many in this country at many different levels.

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- Congratulations also to Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, *Taukei Bolatagane* for his appointment as our Head of State. His appointment has been particularly apt as he brings into play his own experiences from being a farmer, a soldier, a villager, a director of companies, a businessman and a traditional leader. He has shown that he deserve this position by virtue of merit. He is a high chief, he has however been appointed as President on the basis of merit because of his experiences, his wisdom ...

HON. O. NAIQAMU.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- ... knowledge and achievements over the years.

HON. O. NAIQAMU.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Merit is something that this government advocates in all walks of life and in the service of this nation. He is a family man; a good example for this family; a champion of the oceans and of the environment, a person really needed in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been quite astounded at the actual disrespect that has been shown by some of the comments of Members of the Opposition towards His Excellency the President. Some of them have mouthed their appreciation of his Address and in the very next breath, belittled his comments, they belittled him and his high office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am the son of a single mother with my biological father hailing from Naivaka in Bua. My mother is from Nasaqalau in Lakeba and I am *Vola ni Kawa Bula* to Lakeba because I am the son of a single mother. But most of my life, I have been bred and lived in Kalabu Naitasiri, so I am also a *kai* Naitasiri. But I was raised by my stepfather, my second father, through my childhood years, who looked after me to manhood and he hails from Dravuwalu in Kadavu, but his families are originally from Nasasa, Nadogo in Macuata. So as I listen to these things, the comments that are made with my Bua and Macuata background, I have been overwhelmed with pride in Ratu Wiliame's ascension to being appointed as Head of State. I wish the old man who raised me and passed away in 2017 would have been around to witness his appointment. He would have been bursting with happiness and pride.

All over Vanua Levu, there has been an outpouring of well-wishes and pride in his appointment - expressions of appreciation for the election and the appointment of the *iTaukei Bolatagane* to the highest office in the land. The lights of *Bolatagane* had been turned on. *Siga damu tu a vanua* has been the call from all across the *vanua* of *Caumatalevu*.

I find it immensely distasteful, therefore, when I hear disrespectful comments made about the *Tugara na Tui* Macuata. Such disrespect has come from those who, in this Parliament, have repeatedly purported to uphold respect accorded to chiefs. They thanked him for his most gracious Address and then, Sir, in the same breadth they belittled him. This is two-faced forked tongue speaking, absolutely despicable and disgraceful! On that note, I appreciate honourable Bulitavu for supporting his high chief of Vanua Levu in ascending to this role.

His Excellency the President's Address has been on point and right on target. He has highlighted the important issues that are critical right now and which in turn are national priorities for this Government and this country. He has asked us to focus on the collective good, not only on the good of a few, or not only on our personal good, but that of every Fijian, those who live today and those that will follow us: our children and grandchildren; your children and your grandchildren. He has told us that he has committed to preserving and strengthening democracy. He has stressed the need to restore Fiji economically and highlighted how critical climate change and the oceans are. Everyone single one of these issues is a key priority, and it is a key priority right now for this Government and it will remain our key priority into the future.

His Address has been a sharp reminder of why we are here. His words have been timely and need to penetrate deep into our minds, especially all of us that are leaders in this Chambers. He has talked about the need to protect and strengthen our democracy. How do we do this? We need to ensure that those forces that destroyed democracy in this country in the past do not do so again and that they do not destroy what we have built so far.

This week, our soldiers have departed for the Solomon Islands to assist in the restoration of normalcy in that country. Like all of us in this Parliament, I pray that normalcy would be returned to the Solomon Islands as quickly as possible. This latest eruption in the Solomon Islands seems to be related to the decisions on whether to be aligned to Taiwan or China, but it seems also to be aligned to things that have happened in their past - events that led to the establishment of the Regional Assistance Mission in the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) years ago.

We have seen the reports this week of Chinese families being attacked and losing all that they have built up over the years that they have been in the Solomon Islands. As I saw this report, I thought about my good friend Josefa Tuamoto, who recently passed away and who spent a number of years in the Solomon Islands assisting in building up their tourism industry. I hope that the work he did there, together with his colleagues in the Solomon Islands, to build up their tourism sector will not have gone to waste, given these recent events.

We have had similar history in this country. We have had the events of 1987 and 2000 where the politics of ethnicity and religion brought about the loss of democracy and economic turmoil. This is what we need to battle in order to maintain our democracy. This is what we need to control in order to strengthen our democracy and our future. The events of 2006 were the beginnings of rectifying the forces that led to problems in the past, that is what 2006 stands for.

The honourable Seruiratu has laid out in his speech yesterday what the approach has been. It has been a long painstaking process. The year 2006 allowed for concerted efforts to fix these issues once and for all. It was focused on addressing the underlying forces that have led to the problems in this country. The division amongst the races and amongst religions, we cannot allow this to tear us apart. Our problems were institutional and systemic. They have had to be addressed systematically and by rectifying institutions.

The 2013 Constitution has laid that foundation. The 2013 Constitution has addressed this in a number of fundamental ways - equality of citizenship to all citizens; socioeconomic rights for all to address the inequalities in our nation.

Inequality, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not an ethnic issue. It is about different clusters of people - what they have access to and what they do not have access to. Poverty is not limited to any ethnic group or any religious group - it transcends these boundaries. Should our focus on addressing poverty change because of any particular ethnic group, being the one suffering from poverty more than other? No, we focus on all who are in poverty equally, irrespective of who they are. That is what the FijiFirst Government stands for.

Over the years, all Governments have tried to address inequalities but no Government has addressed it to the extent that the Bainimarama-led Government and the FijiFirst have done so. Changes in taxation systems - raising the minimum level of salary at which taxation starts. Today, no one earning less than \$30,000 gets taxed; all that money they use for their own families.

The massive rise, the immense humongous increase in the budget that has been given to the Ministry of Social Welfare, Women and Poverty - new and raised benefits including pensions for the elderly. People who used to wait for people to come and help them now they get money every month to look after their own needs.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Subsidised bus fares - this has given a heightened level of freedom - a feeling of self-worth for thousands in this country.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Be realistic!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Benefits from *iTaukei* land payments are now spread equally amongst all *iTaukei* landowners. This past week, we have seen photographs in the papers of people turning 18 years old and there is money that is available for them. That is battling inequality, and that is what we are talking about.

Subsidised water and electricity, no school fees and no bus fares. Earlier this week, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they were talking about this Government giving freebies. If you are a family that is not earning much and you are getting free water, that is not a freebie. That is a leg up, that is a hand up to help you and it is a way of addressing inequality. Subsidising electricity for those who do not have much income is not a freebie - that is helping them. Paying for their school fees is not a freebie - it is helping them and eliminating the inequalities that is happening in this country.

Massive investments to protect women and children in terms of our laws that this Government, under this Prime Minister, has pushed very strongly. Commitment to supplying clean and safe water to all and electricity for all without contributions from those that need it. Electricity for the people up in Monasavu - even though they are providing electricity, they never got it but under this Government they got it. When the Nadarivatu power came on, the people in that area were also provided electricity. It is a commitment to everyone in this country.

The protection of all *iTaukei* land rights for the first time ever has this been completely enshrined in the Constitution at a level never seen before. A way of electing our representatives that minimise our focus on ethnicities and geographical representation. These two things have been the cause of problems in the past. When we elect, we focus only on our own ethnicity it leads to problems. When we focus only on the people that live in our geographical areas, eventually it leads to problems. That is what this Constitution has tried to put a stop to because we need to battle the things that led to our problems in the past.

The 2013 Constitution has also put in place new institutions that focus on eliminating corruption. FICAC has been put in place to get rid of corruption, to address it, but still it is work in progress. But political parties need to address this also, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The FijiFirst Party has asked its members to resign if they have done something that is unethical, or if they have been accused of something; that is what this Party does. We ask them to resign - to leave if they have been put into those situations.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- This is a marked contrast to representatives of some other parties, whose Members are accused of the same thing and are still in this Parliament. What does that tell us, Mr. Speaker, Sir, about what different parties and their leadership hold dear? Actions speak. Actions scream. They yell out and say the words, "Here, look at me - this is what is important to me, this is what is important to our party."

Our political system encourages all politicians to not just focus on one ethnic or one geographical area because if you continue down that path, you will start emphasising differences rather than what brings us together - differences rather than commonalities. Our system is designed to bring people together, it is designed to ensure proportionality so that the party that wins the most votes gets the most seats in Parliament, to ensure that people's wish of who to lead them becomes a reality. If we focus on our divisions, we get into trouble, and our past tells us that. Such divisions have been manifest also in places, like Solomon Islands, Rwanda, Serbia, Croatia, all of those countries - Fiji must never go down that path. We must put a stop to it. Our political system encourages us to minimise emphasis on our differences, whilst at the same time not giving up on what is important to each of our ethnic groupings.

Already this week, we have seen the honourable Tuisawau get on his sunset clause bus, he is ramping up the engines once more. The scare tactics of ethnicity have started again. This week also on social media, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have seen allegations made about Muslims in Fiji taking over the country. Prior to previous Elections, we saw social media posts about Government Building (this one)

having a similar dome to Muslim temples – scaremongering happening, even though that building was built by the British ages ago.

This happens before every election – it happened during Butadroka's time, it happened 50 years ago, 40 years ago, 30 years ago and 20 years ago, as was spoken by a Member of Parliament earlier this week. It has happened over the past two Elections. It shows groups trying to use this to gather support. In the last Elections, we were told that Kadavu had been sold, that Fiji's soil in Vanua Levu had been sold to the Chinese. We know that these things are ridiculous, that they are absurd, but not the people out there reading all this stuff – they believe it. And that is what is dangerous, that people believe these things.

Some people believe that vaccines were full of 666 and that led to a whole host of people not getting vaccinated. Many of them changed their mind after they realised that they would not get their \$360, unless they were vaccinated. Some here today in Parliament got into Parliament by pandering and aiding to this kind of rhetoric in the past; to gain votes. His Excellency the President is telling us not to do that – put the country's needs before your own desire to win votes, putting the long-term interests of this country first is what he has asked us to do.

Those kinds of lies spread on social media have the potential to lead to the kind of conflict that destroys democracies and destroys economies and the collective future of our people. One case in point is all the hullabaloo about Bill No. 17. We have had the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs team going out, correcting all the misconceptions and when people realised what the truth was, they thanked the people who were giving that information.

Such things may seem minor, but they are dangerous. And I keep saying this – never forget what happened in Rwanda. In a very short time, it became ethnic violence; that is something that we must never have in this country. Everything that the Bainimarama-led Government and the FijiFirst Government has done, has been designed to address this and to make sure that this scourge or cancer does not rear its ugly head again in this country, and our electoral system is designed to address that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have listened with great alarm on some of the attacks that have made on the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Attorney-General and the delegation that went to Glasgow to be part of COP26. I shudder literally and thought to myself, 'are these sentiments they are expressing real or are they just a normal kind of negativity one has come to expect from this inept, blind, rudderless opposition? What would become of us if such people were leading this country?' We would have a group of inept leaders who sat here in Fiji, twiddling their thumbs and biting their fingernails while the natural world was being destroyed.

Climate change is the scourge of our time. No matter what we do in Fiji, we will be living within the kind of world that the climate allows us to live in. Science has proven that this changing climate is manmade, just as science proved that vaccines could help us control COVID-19. Out of our experience these past weeks, we have seen tourists coming back to the country and it has proven and shown that the vaccines work, that science works in this regard.

We know that unless we can get the big emitters to change what they are doing, we in the Pacific are doomed. We have to do this for our children and our grandchildren, for your children and your grandchildren. Leaders lead, leaders pinpoint what needs to be done and they do it. No matter how uncomfortable it is, no matter how difficult it is, they sally forth, they energise those around them to do the same. Leaders go to where the battle is and they do battle there, they do not sit around doing nothing. They do not just talk, they sally forth and do battle.

Our Prime Minister went forth to Glasgow to give it his very best shot. Being at the Conference of Parties (COP) is not a holiday, it is a non-stop affair, non-stop whirlwind of constantly trying to convince other nations to give up on things to save the Pacific. It is a battle to get the needs of the Pacific agreed to by the world; that requires physical presence because a lot of the meetings are done on the fly, strategies need to change midstream as events and developments unfold. It is exhausting and non-stop to try and influence the agreements that the world makes, because to have not done so would have been the hallmark of a defeatist and this is what these Opposition Members have called for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to sit around not doing anything while the climate is being destroyed is criminal and cowardly to say the least. The honourable Kuridrani stated that the climate change is not a priority - not a priority - I beg to differ. Villages are sinking, sea levels are rising, reefs are being killed off, oceans are warming and saltwater is getting into our water tables. Life itself is under threat. Climate change is leading to more severe flooding, fires, massive cyclones - all having a major impact on life. This is the challenge of our time. Rather than condemning the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Attorney-General, we need to thank them for going forth to fight for our future, fight for our children's future, fight for the Pacific future and our grandchildren's future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency has pointed out that we need to choose who is best to lead us. We need to ask, the people of Fiji need to ask, who has the sound philosophy and the politics that creates stability, that builds confidence, that ensures equal treatment and equal opportunity? What is the vision of the group that wants to lead this country? What ideas and plans do they bring? How will they finance their socio-economic policies and legislative ambition? What choices do we have? SODELPA is a choice - a party that has been eaten away from within; eaten away from within, not from without. Destroyed from within.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I feel for the leader of SODELPA. He has been stabbed in the back by his own Party members and the very people who sit with him in Parliament.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- But the question is, is this the kind of party that we need to lead this country?

HON. P.K. BALA.- No.

HON. J. USAMATE.- If they are backstabbing each other now, what will they do if they ever get into power?

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Stabbed in the back and stabbed from the front.

(Laughter)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other option that they have also is the National People's Alliance, led by a former Prime Minister, who started us on the road to *coups*, under whose watch, repugnant and rampant corruption reigned, that saw to the demise of our very own National Bank of Fiji. Every now and then on the other side of the Chamber, they talk about the entrenched clauses in the old Constitution; the entrenched clauses that was supposed to protect the *iTaukei*.

Every now and then they bring this up, they bring this up again and again. They were supposed to have preserved the iTaukei but it was while these entrenched provisions in the Constitution was still in place, then Sitiveni Rabuka led a *coup*. He led a *coup* that was supposed to be for the iTaukei interests when the so-called clauses were still in place. Whose interest was being served? That is a question that I ask.

The leader of the Party also showed up at the QEB after the attempted takeover of the RFMF Camp that sought the murder of our current Prime Minister, who was also the then Commander of the RFMF. The question is, why was he there? What did he know? What was he doing? Is that the kind of leadership that we need?

The third option that we seem to have, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the National Federation Party. The National Federation Party is a party that steeped in history. The NFP of A.D. Patel, Siddiq Koya and Jai Ram Reddy was steeped in history, but not this NFP.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Yes.

HON. J. USAMATE.- This NFP is nothing close to that NFP; nothing close at all.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Very far!

HON. J. USAMATE.- And then there is the FijiFirst Party led by a team that has put together a 20-year Plan, mapping out Fiji's future over the next 20 years with a 5-Year Plan; a well set out vision. A party that is united, a party that is focussed, that has proven itself as putting people first, led by a leader whose vision has never changed, who has been fearless, who is committed and decisive. A leader who has had a special place in his heart and always makes time for women and children and that is why today, as we are looking at the 16 Day of Activism, I tell you this is the Prime Minister who has lived and breathed that. Everywhere that he goes in the rural communities, he always pays special attention to the women and children of this country. He made sure that we have the laws in place to protect women and children.

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is the choice we have in this country. Who fixed the bill? Who would you choose? There is only one choice – this Prime Minister and the FijiFirst Government.

HON. MEMEBRS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will speak about the things the Ministry does are self-evident. As I got off the vehicle this morning in Parliament, I looked across, I saw the *Sekoula* in full bloom. When *Sekoula* blooms, you know that Christmas is around the corner. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish all the honourable Members on the other side the very best for this Christmas Season, to you and your family, Sir, to all of us and to the people of Fiji, Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note, we will take a break and Parliament will resume in half-an-hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.58 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.33 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- We will now continue with the debate.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Mr. Speaker and honourable Members, I take this opportunity to congratulate the former FijiFirst Party president and now Fiji's President, His Excellency, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere for his appointment to the highest office. It is indeed symbolic to have a direct descendant of one of the chiefs that signed the Deed of Cession in 1874 to be our youngest and sixth President.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you have heard the honourable Members on this side of the House repeatedly echoing the words of the honourable Prime Minister where he said back in 2006 that our chiefs are to go and drink home brew under the mango tree. This FijiFirst Government has accorded the paramount chief of Macuata as our nation's President and recently, the FijiFirst Party had appointed *Marama na Taukei Naua* now as their Party president, such is the irony of hypocrisy, when those words were spoken back in 2006, they did not reflect the decisions made today?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I sat in my corner and I listened attentively to His Excellency's speech and what follows are my observations of the many trying months that we have now encountered together as a nation and as they relate to what His Excellency expounded. His Excellency spoke on some key points that I agree with - issues on serving national interest, stability and prosperity, public participation, democracy and climate change.

However, all those words will be hollow if we do not take heed and implement them. It is important that we practice what we preach, failing which our people will call us liars and some of us have already been correctly labelled as such and that will be our legacy. Our sweet, smooth speeches are useless when we are not accountable to the promises that we make to those who voted us in here. People are not fooled anymore. They do not have to rely on *Fijivillage*, *Fiji Times*, *Fiji Sun*, *Fiji TV* and Communications Fiji Limited (CFL). They are watching us live on Parliament TV. They read and listen to the quality of our speeches. They know when our speeches are written for us and when we are parroting words, not of our own.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Trues-up!

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- They see what is happening around them and they see the false promises and double standards that we play. We do not need to convince each other in here. It is the people of Fiji that we have to convince more so for this Government, you have made a lot of promise with many yet to be fulfilled.

I am hearing a lot of self-praising by this FijiFirst Government. I really do not know what for, for we still have thousands of people who are unemployed and are worried about where their next meal will come from and it is quite shameful that we have to entertain such forms of arrogant vainglories in this august House.

This COVID-19 pandemic has claimed many lives, Mr. Speaker. As of Wednesday, 1st December, we have had 697 COVID-19 deaths and an additional 605 COVID-19 positive deaths of patients who had serious medical conditions before contracting COVID-19. We have lost a total of 1,302 to this pandemic alone.

Mr. Speaker, we have had civil servants and employees from the private sector lose their jobs because they refused to be vaccinated. We have people who are still without jobs as their place of business has permanently closed down. We have children, many secondary school students who have opted out of school due to this pandemic and the uncertainty that it has brought with it. We have

employees who are still on reduced pay and trying to make ends meet and here we have MPs from that side of the House congratulating each other for a job well done. We ought to be ashamed of ourselves, this is not the time for any vainglory.

In late October this year, the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS) sent home about 53 employees. Their contracts have expired and obviously, their employer is not obliged to offer any redundancy package. This week, another 60 employees were sent home - voluntary redundancy, and staff were offered \$4,000, one week payment for every year of service and any annual leave owing. Those staff members have worked for years at FRCS and the package offered to them is pittance. Come 20th December, five days away from Christmas, FRCS will impose compulsory redundancy on another 100 of its employees, so when you are all praising yourselves for the work that you are all paid for by the taxpayers, just remember the 200-plus FRCS employees who will be having a bleak Christmas with their families this year.

Mr. Speaker, where is the infamous 15-year unprecedented economic growth but the way we treat our people does not reflect economic growth that is boasted about endlessly in this august House. You know what concerns me, Sir, is that FRCS is the sole collector of Government's revenue. When staff are made redundant and others are put on short-term, three months contract, it sends a signal to the ordinary person that our revenue collection will further decrease. When our revenue decreases, everyone in this august House should be worried, especially when Parliament is our only source of income.

Mr. Speaker, if anyone deserves the praise, it is our frontliners - the doctors, the nurses, the medical staff and team, the police, the military, the Fiji Red Cross, Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises & Development (FRIEND), the Solo Mums NGO and other NGOs and individuals here and abroad, who have come forward to assist our people during this COVID-19 pandemic. I also praise our tourism industry which welcomed our tourists yesterday after a lull of 20 months.

Tourism is the backbone of our economy and it is in everyone's interest that we welcome back our visitors to Fiji. It has been a tough 2020-2021 Year for everyone and whilst we are keen on welcoming everyone back to our shores, let us not be too complacent, we simply cannot afford another third wave and further lockdowns.

HON. MEMBER.- *Tukuna vua, tukuna vua.*

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Vaccinate.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- I agree, that is why all honourable Members in this august House have been vaccinated, honourable Member.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- You should understand.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have all heard of the new COVID variant Omicron. It has already reached Australia and it is only a matter of when, when it will reach Fiji. I can only pray that it stays away from our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not out of the hoods yet, our nation's economic status is in the red and the FijiFirst Government is on life support assisted by other nations and foreign notes. Just last week on 23rd November, 2021, the New Zealand Government pledged an additional \$40 million New Zealand currency imported support. In May this year (2021) the New Zealand Government also offered a grant contribution of New Zealand \$40 million, imported support to this government in response to their economic crisis caused by the COVID pandemic. So when we are praising anyone, just make sure we are praising and directing credit to whom and where it is truly due. Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the

FijiFirst Government's success in choking these foreign governments to assist them and deliver on their many unfulfilled promises.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency spoke on national interest and best interest. I will speak on Fiji Airways. In His Address, His Excellency the President mentioned on page 3, sixth paragraph of the *Daily Hansard* of Monday, 22nd November, 2021, and I quote:

“... you must all strive to serve the national interest; the best interest of all Fijians - all men, women and children and those yet to be born.”

It would be fair to state that the Fiji Airways' Board and the honourable Prime Minister weigh down on their priority list the best interest of the sacking of 750 Fiji Airways employees without any redundancy package whatsoever. When I compared what New Zealand Airways and Qantas did for their staff it is equitable, the great length they took to financially assist their employees. This is what I see as best interest in the manner that they took care of their people.

We all knew that it was inevitable that all global airlines would impose redundancies on their employees given the global COVID pandemic but the manner in which Fiji Airways and this government treated the sacking of these airline employees was appalling and disgraceful. Here we had a 40 plus delegation that flew all the way across the world to Glasgow to address the world on climate issues and yet, this Government could not even drive up for three hours to Nadi to inform these workers that something inevitable was going to happen that they were going to be made redundant.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Where is the dialogue that is constantly harped on in this House? Again, I remind this FijiFirst Government that 40 per cent of your votes came from the West. They did not forget your Party in the 2018 General Elections and I am certain that they will not forget those that were there for them during this pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know about the USP saga. The FijiFirst Government has withheld down issues \$20.7 million grant to USP for this financial year. I question whether they are truly withholding the grant or whether the grant allocation does exist at all given that we are now completely relying on foreign government grants and foreign loans. I would go with the latter and I truly believe that there was never any grant money to give to USP in the first place. I am reminded of the wise old quote that says: “You cannot give what you do not have.”

The USP is an institution of learning for our children and by withholding that grant only our children will suffer. Fijians make up approximately 80 per cent of USP's workforce they too will suffer. I commend Dr. Ahluwalia and his team for being resilient and competing against internationally-renowned universities during these challenging times. By withholding this grant money, this Government's selfish act is certainly not in the best interest of our children. Their actions are seen as petty and personal and this goes against His Excellency's Address when he said, and I quote:

“We should not suffer the politics of pettiness and personalisation or exist in some perpetual state of political antagonism”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now address the issue on the Ministry of Education. If there is a profession that seems to be under attack this year, it is our school teachers. Whilst I agree that teachers need to

upskill and upgrade themselves, you simply cannot compare substitute experience with the qualification of a fresh Degree holder who has never worked before.

The Ministry seems to hold the view that only those with the Bachelor's Degree will teach our children better. Many of us sitting in this august Parliament were taught by teachers who did not have a Bachelor's degree.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Bachelor's Degree, teaching experience.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Thank you, honourable Member.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, has the Ministry assessed student qualification of academics by a diploma holder versus a degree holder? Qualification is only one aspect to determine a salary raise and promotion, but if an individual lacks the competency and passion to teach, empower and enrich a student's learning, then that piece of paper is meaningless to the child. I request the honourable Minister for Education and the Ministry to tread carefully with this.

Our children have already suffered under this pandemic, as most did not get time to access through their worksheets. We have parents who have lost their jobs, therefore, could not afford a laptop or a computer, to enable their child to have access to e-learning. A lot of major and drastic changes are happening in our children's lives and it has, indeed, been a challenging year, and getting rid of familiar writing and familiar faces, only worsens the child as they are barely managing to cope with.

Now we have issues on Board membership representation. When I see gender, ethnicity and inequality in some of our Boards, I have to again ask whether what we are doing is in the best interest of all Fijians. Let us not be fooled. We can preach about merit, but if equal ethnicity representation is not present, it triggers animosity amongst our people. I recall at one stage seeing the WAF Board having an old male and an old indo-Fijian composition at one stage. Yes, I wholeheartedly agree that we need to get away from the politics of race, but this Government keeps dragging us back into the 1900s colonial era, where ethnic balance was not taken into account during Board appointments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all read in the media about the removal of the entire Housing Authority Board around October this year. This Board is appointed by the Minister responsible for Public Enterprises, honourable Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum. I have never known an occasion in my entire professional life where the entire Board was removed all at once unless, of course, there was a *coup*. Surely, they had done something so unjustly wrong. We would have heard of the investigations and the like, but nothing has come up against any of these Board members. What concerns me is the manner in which the honourable Minister can easily dismiss an entire Board for whatever reason, and replace them completely. Such is the risk for Board members who serve under this Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current Acting Board Chairperson of FRCS is a registered tax agent. I question, how can this person serve her clients who have tax issues with FRCS in the same institution to which she is the chairperson? I ask, whose best interest does she represent? Any child can see that this is a clear conflict of interest. The honourable Minister for Economy had voiced their past years' Board, and I implore him to do what is right and remove that Acting Chairperson from the Board and appoint someone else. I also call upon the Acting Board Chairperson to do the honourable thing and resign from the Board, as she is in a position of a conflict of interest, which is not in the nation's interest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent resignation of Suresh Chandra as the Chairperson of the Electoral Commission, came as a shock to many. In fact, I was shocked that he was even appointed, more so, when he did not have a practicing certificate for the past two years. This is a constitutional appointment. Surely, due diligence and reference checks would have revealed that prior to his appointment, he did not have a,

b and c. It seems that there are two different benchmarks on such appointments; one that is supposedly in the best interest of all Fijians and another, in the best interest of a few.

What concerns me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that these few posts that I have highlighted have a common denominator, the honourable Attorney-General. If this is the standard that this FijiFirst Government is setting foundation, then truly their interpretation of democracy is a farce. Remember what Ben Ryan said, I quote: "The standard you walk past is the standard you become." This is the standard that this Government will be known for when dealing with Boards and their appointees.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, surely when honourable Members on the Government side would have seen what the honourable Attorney-General is doing with regards to these Boards, they would have questioned his intentions and attempt to set him right. Perhaps, the honourable Attorney-General does not know any better. I am mindful of the Word of God to the Prophet Ezekiel, you read it for yourself, especially Chapter 3: 19-21 which states that when you know someone is doing something wrong, set them straight, failing which we are all equally responsible for the damage or wrong that they have done.

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency mentioned in his Address on Monday, 22nd November, 2021 on Page 3, third paragraph, and I quote:

"... the democracy created under our Fijian Constitution will wither with our complacency, but comes alive with public participation, as it does with values and principles."

Mr. Speaker, there was clear complacency by this Government when they failed to seek the public participation in the controversial Bill No. 17. I know and this Government knows that no consultation or prior public participation was done with the landowners prior to the passing of this Bill. Even the TLTB Board was caught off-guard. I had mentioned in my Budget response that if the consultation was done it may have been in their favour. To add insult to injury, they went ahead and appointed the *Marama Taukei Naua* as their Party President. I pray that her appointment is not guises in apology for this Government's insensitive approach when they passed Bill No.17.

I also sent a friendly warning to the Western Chiefs, to not be used by this Government or any political party. The worst is the backbone of our economy. You have the resources to empower, enrich and educate yourselves and your people can do this without any political support from any party. Stop being used and truly employ yourselves with your God-given resources.

Mr. Speaker, while the FijiFirst Government was in Glasgow, a peaceful march was organised by the Colombian Society of the Roman Catholic Church. They marched with their banners supporting the reduction of carbon emission to end global warming. Unfortunately, this march was stopped by the Police. It make no sense whatsoever why they were stopped other than a minor administrative issue. This march has posed no threat, had no political affiliation and more peaceful people. The problem with this Government is that, every march which involves public participation is seen as a threat to them. It does not make sense after all that they were marchingly voted into power by the majority of the people.

Mr. Speaker, I wholeheartedly agree with His Excellency when he mentioned that we should not suffer the politics of pettiness and personalisation. I cannot say that we are all professionals here because at times the conduct of our Members of Parliament on both sides of the House does not reflect the expected decorum of this august House. Put aside our differences, the least, we can do is to be decent and respectful towards each other. There is indeed no room for personal and biting attacks.

The honourable Prime Minister shared similar sentiments in his speech that we should not criticise each other on the fact and stay within the bounds of decency. Yet, immediately thereafter, personal

attacks came from the honourable Dr. Mahendra Reddy. I expected better from the honourable Member. Name-calling a woman does not make one a better man.

Mr. Speaker, we should not be quick to attack the media for they hold us accountable and they ask questions on behalf and for the people. Do not be quick to cast them aside, lest one day you will need them to hear your side of the story when you are no longer sitting in power.

Mr. Speaker, some media organisations are the propagated mouthpiece of the FijiFirst government. Their stories speak of biasness and prejudices and one has to wonder whether these are the work of our journalists or that of some political coward who hides behind these news organisations.

His Excellency said, and I quote: "Our nation is home to a people who want stability and prosperity ..." I came through and witnessed all three major *coups* of 1987, 2000 and 2006. I am still young and I know that we had *coup*. While some of us here conveniently missed mentioning the 2006 *coup* we cannot change history, a *coup* is a *coup*.

Our nation is soaked down with *coups*. It brings nothing but instability and this is filled by political opportunists, individuals and business people who have their own self-interest at heart over the interest of the nation.

As long as our Constitution has military clauses that protect these leaders, I fear that my children and their children will always will be with the knowledge that the answer of getting rid of democratically-elected government is through the barrel of the gun and not through the polls.

Mr. Speaker, the sacking of the former Solicitor-General at 11.00 p.m. on the eve of the departure of the former President was a low blow. We also note the sacking of the former Government Statistician who was escorted out of his office like a common criminal. What wrong did the young professional man do? Absolutely nothing! His crime revealing the truth that the majority of our people live below the poverty line and that majority are iTaukei Christians. To the FijiFirst Government, if you are internally dismissing an employee, that is your prerogative but do so under the laws that we have all passed in here and accord natural justice and procedural fairness.

His Excellency made reference to this caring and compassionate Government in the payment of unemployment benefits. Let us give credit when it is due. While I commend the \$360 being given to our people, I would not call this Government as compassionate while the \$360 was paid out to vaccinated persons only. Let us not forget that this Government labelled us all as Fijians but they are the ones that segregated our nation between the vaccinated and non-vaccinated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday, we welcomed our first international visitors (this is my conclusion) after a period of 20 months. I commend the combined effort of our Government, the tourism industry and their staff in getting ready to welcome back our visitors to Fiji. I watched the videos of the arrival of our tourists at Nadi Airport - it was emotional and I commend everyone that showcased the Fiji *Bula* welcome.

If anything, these past few months has been a humbling experience for me and I believe for many of us as well. It taught us many lessons, the lessons of living within our means, saving for a rainy day, helping our neighbours, appreciating secured employment, working together, being graceful, resilience of our people and the lesson to diversify and not rely on one income.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are 22 days away from Christmas, it has been a challenging year for everyone. When we celebrate Christmas this year let us not forget that those that have suffered loss through this pandemic. Let us be mindful and not be boisterous in our celebration as we are not out of the

woods yet. Let us pray for healing throughout our land and prosperity for all. Let us pray for good leaders and an improved leadership as we head into the New Year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish you, your staff the honourable Members and everyone in this Parliament a blessed and merry Christmas.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, the honourable Members of Parliament - *ni sa bula vinaka* and good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to first congratulate and acknowledge His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere and thank him for his most gracious and inspiring Address. This is a high chief who has been appointed as the President our country based on merit. His meritorious to be appointed as our President. He is a high chief that values everyone in his province, loves everyone irrespective of ethnicity, race and religion. He is also a champion of both the green planet and the blue planet and he has worked his way through many areas including being on the board of many important organisations in which he has played a pivotal role. He leads by example and he has done it on the footsteps of his brother the former *Turaga na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Aisea Katonivere - that is his appointment.

I want us all to understand that by questioning his appointment, you the Members of this Parliament are questioning his meritorious appointment; questioning his respect from his *vanua*; insulting his *vanua*; insulting the people of *Caumatalevu*; and insulting the people of Vanua Levu. If you are truly *iTaukei* on the other side you would not have done that and if I were you, I would be very embarrassed to go to Labasa. He reminded us in his principle that we are a democratic nation, creating opportunities and empowering our people, and he has seen the difference between the genuine democracy we share today and the systems that fell short of delivering true equality for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency has declared as a matter of fact, the privileges that equal citizenry has provided for every Fijian. As I speak, there are many nations across the world that struggle with equal citizenry including first world countries. This honourable Prime Minister, despite the many criticisms, forged ahead and ensured that we have a democratic Constitution that our children who are blind to ethnicity, blind to religion and blind to social class, can grow up and foster their innocence and solidify our quest to be the way the world should be. The words of President Mandela is so apt,

“It is not our diversity which divides us; it is not our ethnicity, or religion or culture that divides us. Since we have achieved our freedom, there can only be one division amongst us; between those who cherish democracy and those who do not.”

If we sit in this august Parliament and we choose to divide ourselves based on ethnicity and religion, then we do not cherish our democracy. I urge all of us in Parliament to defend our democracy and our Constitution, which we all show allegiance to.

HON. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Because if you do not believe in that Constitution, do the honourable thing – stand up, get out, take your bags - out!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- (Inaudible)

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Wait, Honourable Tabuya, your time is done.

His Excellency the President also spoke at length about climate change - the legal framework we have in place and more importantly the need to encourage large emitting countries to commit to saving our planet now. I take this time to extend my most sincere gratitude to the honourable Prime Minister, Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama for his unparalleled leadership in our fight against climate change...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- ... and also welcome him back and his delegation from the 26th Conference of the Parties in Glasgow.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- *Vinaka* Doc.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- President John F. Kennedy said, and I quote:

“Never before has man had such capacity to control his own environment, to end thirst and hunger, to conquer poverty and disease, to banish illiteracy and massive human misery. We have the power to make this the best generation of mankind in the history of the world - or to make it the last.”

Those words ring true in relation to climate change. There are countries like Kiribati, for example, and Tuvalu who are saying that this might be the last generation that is able to enjoy what their land and sea is able to offer them. That is why it is incumbent of us and the honourable Prime Minister as Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum to continue to champion the very existence of our generations to come.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Hear, hear!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Fiji's first Prime Minister, the late *Turaga Bale Na Tui Nayau*, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara while opening the Pacific Vision Festival in Auckland, New Zealand in 1999 said, and I quote:

“But my friends, my brothers and sisters of the Pacific, we know who we are. We carry in our hearts the knowledge that we are bearers of a proud legacy that surely marks us as a people of strength and courage and will. We have survived in our aquatic continent through many centuries.”

His Excellency the President last week set the tone that our nation desires to preserve, conserve, not only our forests, not only our land but also our oceans. We believe in both the green and a blue planet. Mr. Speaker, our oceans define us. There are no doubts that our oceans are the best source of nutrition and I can go and on – Vitamins A, D, selenium, zinc, iodine and iron are contained in fish and also mega oil. In Asian and Nordic countries where seafood is a dominant cuisine, the life expectancy of both men and women is four to seven years longer than in western countries. And seaweed is rich in Vitamins A, C, E and K.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand also here to thank the whole of government approach and support during the past 20 months of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. It is obviously *solesolevaki* - ‘together we can’ surely rings true. I convey our Ministry's gratitude to every driver, data entry clerk, provincial administrator, teacher, civil servant and volunteers who joined us on the frontline. I would like to say *vinaka vakalevu* and thank you - your gallant efforts have allowed us to enjoy 90 per cent being fully vaccinated and the arrival of the plane yesterday. It was an amazing sight. I shudder at what some of the Members on the other side have been talking about - selling Fiji Airways, diversifying, eating Fiji Airways.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday I saw our people from the west smiling, shouting and really just embracing our visitors as they come back into the country. I thank everyone who was involved in this.

At this juncture, I would like to update Parliament on what we know of this Omicron (B.1.1.529 variant). Even though it was first identified in South Africa, the Technical Advisory Group on Virus Evolution has named it Omicron. We acknowledge the South African Government for the prompt manner in which they have shared what they know of the virus, with all of us. There is currently not enough information to suggest that the symptoms are different from what we have with the Delta Variant and the original variant. What we do know so far is that the virus is transmitted easily and the infections are mild, especially amongst those who are fully vaccinated.

Again, I urge all of us. Honourable Bulanauca, you have to tell everyone in Bua that they must be fully vaccinated because being fully vaccinated protects us and we know that. For testing and confirmation of the infection, we also know that the current RT-PCR that we have, is able to pick up the virus.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the situation is fluid. There are obviously some areas of uncertainty but the next few days and weeks will be critical. I am also very thankful that the tourism industry, working with the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport and also with the Ministry of Health has set forth the mechanisms by which we will ensure that people who are visiting us come forward in a safe manner and return in a safe manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at a global level at the World Health Assembly recently, I delivered our national and also regional Western Pacific Statement calling for WHO to prepare and agree to a Pandemic Prevention Preparedness and Response Treaty under the WHO Constitution. Sir, it is important that this crucial step is done so that global health is addressed and the direct impact on our people's protection from epidemics and pandemics is also strategized.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to ensure that WHO remains at the centre of global health systems, preserving its mandate and also that of member state countries, in protecting our populations from health crisis. Because it is very certain that we live in a global community and that we share knowledge as quickly as we can. We share best practise and we share resources such as vaccines.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while dealing with COVID-19 global pandemic, we are also mindful of other diseases and outbreaks that may occur and we continue to leverage our resources and invest in local health systems to be able to keep on improving things such as basic immunisation. As we are aware, recently we have had two cases of measles in Serua in which our Ministry of Health is working with WHO and we have also begun the supplementary immunisation for those children in that area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there continues to be work done by the Ministry of Health, working with rural water, working with the Commissioners in (Water, Air Pollution, Sanitation and Health) WASH areas, sanitation for all. Likewise, we value sanitation and its development priorities, as is in Section 35 of our Constitution as a socio-economic right in our Bill of Rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was up in Noikoro in Navosa recently and I would like to thank the villagers for working with us to ensure that every house in Noikoro actually had adequate sanitation by the time the programme was completed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have come in leaps and bounds and as one of the last speakers in this session in responding to His Excellency the President, I sit and I watch, we were supposed to debate His

Excellency the President's gracious speech but, Mr. Speaker, we went away from there, especially our colleagues on the other side and I want to reiterate what the honourable Usamate said. SODELPA is divided. The Vice-President has resigned ...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Do not worry about it.

HON. P.B. KUMAR.- Who is responsible?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- The leader is alone.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- And honourable Waqanika asked us why we picked the *Marama Na Taukei Naua*. Mr. Speaker, whoever the honourable Prime Minister and the party leadership wishes to be the president of our Party, that is our prerogative. Your party leadership is your prerogative.

Honourable Waqanika questioned why we picked the *Marama Na Taukei Naua*. She is a lady. A chief in her own right. She is merited to be our president. We are very proud of her. They are proud of Ratu Epenisa, that is your party leader or party president. They are proud of him. You chose him. Be proud of him. We are proud of *Marama Na Taukei Naua*. She is our party president. Your party president is Ratu Epenisa. Please be proud of your party president. We are proud of our party president.

Mr. Speaker, please do not question us on appointing our party president. On this day, we are wearing black to commemorate the 16 Days of Activism of Violence Against Women and you questioned the merit of our party president, the *Marama Na Taukei Naua*. She is a lady and a chief in her own right. You got it all wrong. Mr. Speaker, they got it wrong.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Give it to them!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Secondly, the NFP or I was looking through this *Hansard*, Mr. Speaker, I wanted to see any plan, any strategic plan, there was none. Hardly any. All it was, was complain and complain and complain and complain. This is a far cry from the previous, as we know the steeply rich in history National Federation Party.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Far cry! And as I speak, I do not see the honourable leader here, the honourable Qereqeretabua. This is typical of them. They just speak and they run. Speak and they run. This is not how we do politics.

HON. P.B. KUMAR.- Tell them!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- This is not how we treat this august House. We give and we take. They can only give, they cannot take. I wish the cameras will go to them as I have to say how empty it is on the other side. Mr. Speaker, no strategic vision. No strategic vision, honourable Tikoduadua.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Tell them, tell them!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- And Mr. Speaker, the reason why I raised this is this. Whoever SODELPA chooses next to be their party leader, please have some courtesy, as honourable Members to support that person. Have some courtesy. And, please, honourable Members from the NFP, when you come to this august House, come with a plan because I want to make it very clear that with these

challenging times that we faced, the honourable Prime Minister has led us, this ship safely through the storm and we are able to sit here and enjoy the privileges we have because we have a good captain. A captain who can weather the storm, a captain who does not run away after only a few months in Parliament and a captain who does know he is not alone because we support him. We are beside him and I sincerely hope, Mr. Speaker, that we will all return after the Christmas and New Year as better Members of this august House.

Mr. Speaker, on that note, I would like to wish you, our honourable colleagues on the other side, the honourable Prime Minister and my honourable colleagues on this side a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. If it is by any chance you are travelling through the Lau group, I would be happy to say that Moala would be happy to have you over and enjoy Christmas, or if you are travelling up in Naitasiri, you are more than happy also to come and visit us up in Naitasiri.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now go virtual to Dubai and I call on the Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport, the honourable Faiaz Koya.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians; thank you for giving me this opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Address by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere.

Firstly, I wish to warmly congratulate His Excellency on his gracious appointment. I also thank His Excellency for his words of inspiration and for setting the vision for the Fijian Government to achieve. I wholeheartedly support His Excellency's Address and echo with the same sentiments in realising the values and principles built for our nation under the 2013 Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also take this opportunity to thank and say a big *vinaka vakalevu* to His Excellency's predecessor, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote. He served as Fiji's President for two terms and through his term, he led us as a noble statesman in making a better Fiji for all and to ensure that no Fijian is left behind. Thank you, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President in his opening Address rightly pointed out the urgent need to keep the flame of our young democracy alive and even for those yet to be born. Sir, the FijiFirst Government has been fuelling the flame of our democracy since the day we were elected into office through the vision and the foresight of our honourable Prime Minister.

We have created equal citizenry and opportunities for all Fijians. A feat never achieved since our independence. From the principle of one person, one vote, we have made it a priority to create equal economic opportunities for all including the most vulnerable in society. We look beyond creed and build systems on fair and merit-based distribution of our social benefits. Our motto is 'leave no Fijian behind' and we have never deviated.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, never before has any Government considered all Fijian citizens as equals, assistance and support was previously based on 'who you know and who you are'. Those with access to the economic and social means continued to benefit, rich became richer and the disadvantaged were left to their peril. Access to quality education, was based on the premise of superiority and race, marginalising the vulnerable, rural and maritime Fijians.

Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I am very proud to say this, we have a literacy rate of 97 per cent and each and every Fijian child has equal access to education. It was the FijiFirst Government that gave

confidence to micro and small businesses. It is this Government that uplifted the informal and low income livelihoods, bridging the gap between the higher and the low income earners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when you conceptualise democracy, it goes beyond these four walls. It takes shape in how to serve our people, it is how we care for the sick, how we protect the vulnerable and the opportunities to economic participation we provide, and we do so, through our laws and programmes.

I share the sentiments of His Excellency the President, that building the right institution matters. We gave our youth the wings to fly. Today, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMES) are being recognised for their contributions to the Fijian economy. Our MSMEs and youth are able to tap into Government facilities, such as the Young Entrepreneurship Scheme, the National Export Strategy, the Integrated Human Resources Development Programme amongst others. These Fijians have secured for their future and that of their families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I had said earlier, we have continued to support our MSMEs through our grass root livelihood programmes, that cautiously impacts and have them in the state of readiness for the opening of the economy. We have developed MSMEs pre-COVID-19, supported during the COVID-19 era and will continue to support them in a post-COVID-19 era. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have invested over a hundred million dollars in our MSMEs. If that is not called inclusive growth of the nation, then I do not know what it is.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition speaks on unfinished projects and they go often on the tangent of their own, but they have always left out the important fact that we have COVID-19, such as the many severe and destructive cyclones that Fiji has faced since 2016. *TC Winston* devastated lives and livelihoods, which meant re-direction of funds to support those who needed it most. Following these ferocities, we are facing the biggest global phenomena ever, which is COVID-19. If a household income is reduced by 50 per cent, their expenses reduce.

Similarly, income for this household, called Government, is earned mainly through collection of taxes and tariffs. When there are global shocks, such as, COVID-19, there are repercussions that everyone faces. It is the same when an industry that earns 40 per cent of the income for the household, comes to a complete dead stop. However, we have continued to provide support for education and continued to empower Fijians. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the simplest way I can explain what the pandemic has done to the Fijian economy. I hope the economists on the other side of Parliament would try using the simple ideas to explain economic concepts to their colleagues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday, after two years, we opened our borders to 44 travel partner countries. Our first commercial flight touched down and it was a heartfelt moment for all Fijians. A moment we longed for and a moment of hope for our road to recovery. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are doing so with the highest most informed health measures. What this means is, we will accept only fully vaccinated visitors who present negative results. We are where we are today because we perceived and set a vision for the long term, and I want to thank, and I am being specific, the team led by the Permanent Secretary for Commerce, Mr. Shaheen Ali, and the Director for Economics and Tourism, Kartik Pratap, together with the entire team for strategising our path forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have worked day in and out to ensure that protocols were in place and that we are ready. Just a few days ago, Fiji got added to Singapore's vaccinated travel lane programme. Our health professionals, our national leaders and frontliners have led us to a place that gives our travel partners the confidence for reciprocity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our priority remains the safety and wellbeing of Fijians and visitors alike. Our careful approach to border risk management for the last two years now means getting thousands of Fijians

back to work, whilst, opening our border safely. Over the next two months we anticipate 80,000 tourists to our shores who will stay on average six days in Fiji and there is a saying that goes “everyday each of us faces difference between how we want things to be and how they really are but what makes us succeed or fail is how we will respond to those differences”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our best shot was the Public Private Partnership (PPP). For all the Members of the other side of the House have come out strongly with words of caution and despair, I want to acknowledge if not remind them on the work of our health experts and the COVID-19 Risk Mitigation Taskforce (CRMT).

Our protocols from the very beginning have been based on robust indicators, indicators that inform us of vaccination coverage of any new variance of testing and reporting this then determines to what extent we escalate our protocols. This is not something we thought of only when Omicron variant was detected. It was out of necessity because the ultimate goal is to get Fijians back to work.

In an ideal world we would not take any risk and remain shut to the world but no country can afford to do that, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Even if they are the most developed of economies, if we delay our reopening for another three weeks as suggested by some of the reckless Opposition statements what happens when there is another variant which is not unlike, do we then keep our borders shut and Fijians out of work? For the Opposition that demand otherwise is unconscionable because you are denying every Fijian who lost their job, their source of livelihood.

With the reopening of the tourism industry comes commitment to safety under the CFCE Programme we now have over 700 registered businesses across Fiji, hotels and tour operators to taxis and restaurants. Everyone has learned to adapt the best possible health and safety measures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our focus should be in the future and to end so that we future-proof ourselves. We can spend every waking moment playing the blame game but that will get us nowhere because, no country, absolutely no country has been spared.

Through the partnerships we have forged, we are amongst the most highly vaccinated countries but despite having the best shield, we will not let our guards down. To advocate adherence to COVID safe measures we have recruited an additional 14 COVID Safe Ambassadors in our CSA programme with more to be recruited in the coming weeks.

The Ministry of Commerce Trade, Tourism and Transport has also formed an inter-agency taskforce with the Fiji Police Force, Ministry of Health and Medical Services, Fijian Competition, Consumer Commission (FCCC) and the respective Municipal Councils to ensure that COVID safe measures are implemented. For months the CSAs have been guiding the business community on the specific rules and protocols to assist in adherence. They have also started enforcing spot fines that are mandated under the Public Health Regulations. Mr. Speaker, Sir, our health measures, coupled with behavioural acceptance to COVID-19 will remain the priority.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of transportation especially by sea, this has been a critical link for the maritime islands, main islands and markets. During the pandemic, the Ministry ensured there was minimal disruption to services to the outer and maritime islands. Government Shipping Services, *MV Veivueti* and *MV Cagivou*, were used for emergency evacuation transporting medical personnel and supply of essential goods and services to maritime islands that no Fijian is left behind.

One of the greatest challenges through the pandemic was being separated from our loved ones. Put this into perspective, Mr. Speaker, Sir, between April and November 2021, we received over 30,000

repatriation requests. There was a whole of government approach to reunite families and ensure Fijians who were able to go to their jobs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President spoke passionately on Fiji's efforts both, the domestic efforts and international efforts, to combat climate change impacts our most imminent threat. If global leaders lack the will to make serious commitments to climate efforts, we the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) will continue to suffer. Fiji has been actively participating at the regional and international level on climate change and decarbonisation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the shipping sector, Fiji is committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions from international and domestic shipping by, at least, 50 per cent by 2050. Just last week, Fiji and the Pacific joined the Maritime Environment Protection Committee Meeting at the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and to put into action the promises that were made in Glasgow, the consensus to review the International Maritime Organization Green House Gas (IMO GHG) initial strategy and the consideration of a basket of measures were some of the things that were discussed. We are working towards healthier oceans and a blue economy, something very dear to His Excellency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, money is absolutely important to the public sector, that is an absolute given. When it comes to a matter of literal exponential prior access, you do all you can to fight for justice. We must ensure that our voices are heard. If we are to sit quietly and let the degradation of the environment and our oceans continue, we are not doing justice to our future generation. So to all those on the other side of the House who dare to even say anything negative about our visit to COP26, please, take a look at COP26. We announced Fiji will be launching the first Blue Bond in the Pacific by 2022 to get us on a steady cause to a sustainable blue economy and decarbonise shipping services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, almost 200 nations agreed to limit global temperature to 1.5 degrees centigrade, if they are to remain committed to what we pledged and for the first time, oceans have been included in the climate negotiations. All of these through no small feat but our Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Gavoka stated on Monday that they will improve ease of doing business and that there is excessive regulation and ministries are territorial. What he failed to acknowledge is that the FijiFirst Government inherited a failed system - a system where agencies did not understand their role and why they provided approvals, a system where approvals for businesses or buildings were given again based on who you know. We continued to remove this unnecessary bureaucratic corrupted bias processes. What has been bought in by law and regulation is to ensure the protection of national interests, protection of land, protection of the environment, protection of sectors - Fijian MSMEs, while at the same time facilitating investment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition time and time again failed to at the very least acknowledge the reforms that have been undertaken to improve doing business to Fiji. We have removed unnecessary requirements for starting a business and streamline construction permits and processes for the first time information related to doing business is on the single online portal with digitalisation of process now underway.

There are reasons for changes in institutions. The Director of Town & Country Planning (DTCP) has been merged with the Ministry to allow for cross-sectorial support. This will ensure that the reforms of legal framework and digitalisation of processes are done keeping in mind growth of business strategic planning of towns and cities. We are also reviewing and modernising the Town Planning Act and Sub-Division of Land Act concurrently to be on par with best international standards of practices. The Ministry is also in the process of amending the Town Planning general provisions for schemes and areas as announced in the Budget of 2021-2022. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is being done to introduce flexibility in

town planning assessment criteria by setting acceptable minimum building setbacks density and lot size requirements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition, we will be in a better position to carry out timely facilitation of major building, land development and investment projects that will greatly benefit the building in construction sector in particular. I also want to request honourable Gavoka to stop sensationalising matters - the issue that he raised about Maui Bay is not as dramatic as honourable Gavoka makes it, and since the matter is in court, we do not want to dwell on that but to say that we are aware and we are working within the law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, allow me to reiterate we are at a remodelling stage whereby we are not only need to rehabilitate the key industries but also reconfigure our efforts and resources towards improving doing business, approval processes and attuning it to best international practices to allow Fiji to become an easy, accessible and much desired business destination that it should be.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to wish everyone a merry Christmas and a happy New Year.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Minister for taking the time in your busy schedule to participate virtually in the debate. Your colleagues in the House and the members of the Secretariat wish you and your team well while representing Fiji.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand to thank His Excellency for his most gracious Address. I will focus on a number of issues that His Excellency raised, a number of which, of course, has been very aptly elucidated by the Members from this side of this Chambers. I would like to do what I call a fact check in respect of what has been raised.

I will start off first with genuine democracy in the 2013 Constitution. Mr. Speaker, Sir, under this Constitution under the leadership of our Prime Minister, the FijiFirst Government has actually ushered an unprecedented era of equity and genuine democracy built on the strong foundations of our Constitution. Never before were the rights of all Fijians, including all ethnic backgrounds being so deeply protected through a very comprehensive Bill of Rights which includes the socio-economic rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have, of course, had the forays by the Opposition, always putting an ethnic tinge. They talk about the 1997 Constitution and they are elected under the 2013 Constitution. The 1997 Constitution, Sir, as we all know had divided the nation along ethnic lines or racial lines giving preferential treatment to a handful of elite. For example (honourable Tabuya you would be interested in this), we had communal seats and let me remind Members of Parliament, the 23 communal seats reserved for the iTaukei people, only six were actually for what we call 'urban iTaukei people' even though nearly 50 per cent of iTaukei now live in urban areas they would have had under the 1997 Constitution only six of the seats out of the 23.

Similarly, as I have pointed out before, the gerrymandering that took place, even under the iTaukei seats, the province of Nadroga which had 19,000 voters could elect only one person. The province of Namosi which had 3,000 voters could elect one person. Deemed to be illegal in many countries you cannot have 19,000 people electing one person and 3,000 people electing one person. That means the weight of the vote, value of the people in Namosi is almost five times more than the people of Nadroga, there are many other examples to it. Only the province of Cakaudrove, Tailevu and Ba could elect two people, all the other provinces could elect only one person. These are the things they do not tell this Parliament, they do not tell the Fijian people. Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, it was utterly racist, it was along ethnic lines, it was built on the racist Constitution. The 1990 Constitution which everyone knows, was ushered in at midnight without any consultations and formed the basis of the 1997 Constitution.

I would like to also therefore question what do they mean when they talk about democracy. It is a bit like those people who supported the 1987 *coup*, who wrote articles and said, “democracy is a foreign flower in Fiji” and we should not have democracy to justify the events of 1987. Today, we have the same kind of thinking, whether because they are not in control, they are not in power, they are now saying that this democracy is not working for them.

Let us go back to the 1997 Constitution. Some of them talked about the Yash Ghai Constitution which actually said we could have same sex marriage in Fiji. They do not talk about that. They need to go back to their constituencies and tell them, honourable Bulanauca. You stood here and harped on about the Yash Ghai Constitution, it talks about same sex marriage go and tell that to your constituency.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have gone on about how they will win the next Elections. I quoted something, I found out from the *Daily Hansard* the honourable Leader of SODELPA had said after the 2018 Elections results: “As I have said this morning, once the Opposition decides to call as FijiFirst its toast, you have not got a hope as a political party, you have not got a hope. You might as well go home. Mr. Speaker, there is no way they can continue winning the Elections.”

I had said to him in response, I quote:

“Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have been selected, there has been a barrage of attacks on the honourable Prime Minister and I think the honourable Members are riding high on what I call the ‘SLR glamour train.’ Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka, and that glamour train, I am telling you, the shine is wearing off really quickly, and guess what? The shine has gone completely.”

I remember after the results of the last elections, some of our supporters were somewhat despondent about the results saying that it was such a narrow margin. I said to them that God works in mysterious ways and I tell you why - because today, the past one week has been a perfect example of how you have demonstrated to all the Fijians citizens, in particular those who had voted for you, your ineptitude, inability to run an effective government and I tell you honourable Gavoka, you said that we will be toast in the next election. We will, God willing, be the toast of the town in the next elections - that is precisely what is going to happen.

Since then, they have disintegrated and even though this cabal of people are sitting here, honourable Gavoka has been slapped from the left, right, from the back but not from the front. You need to do that.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- The reason why I raise this and I am not interested in the shenanigans of the Party. All I am trying to say...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Don't worry about him.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- You need to do that. I am not interested in the shenanigans of the party, all I wanted to say....

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- See the reaction actually hits them hard in the heart.

The reason I am only raising this is because they cannot govern themselves in Opposition, how can they govern themselves in Government? Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Lalabalavu spoke about debt. The debt to GDP was 56 per cent in 2010. It was brought down to 45.8 per cent by 2015, pre-Cyclone Winston. However, the sensitivity through national disasters brought about by climate change has required significant financing in the aftermath of cyclones. Twelve major cyclones since *TC Winston*, 13 including *TC Winston*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after *TC Winston* alone, we had to borrow and spend additional \$500 million for reconstruction of schools, public buildings and homes. Then we had hundreds of millions of dollars spent on reconstruction works required after *TC Keni*, *Josie* and many other disasters. These disasters are not cheap in particular when they need to “Build Back Better”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, then we had a pandemic - a once in a hundred year event that caused a significant blow to Government revenue with tax collision declining by 50 per cent overnight. The Government has made a conscious decision to borrow more as did all other countries. Some of them, of course, have engaged in quantitative easing - we had to borrow more to sustain public expenditure to ensure roads, bridges, hospitals continue to run, to ensure civil servants are paid, free education continues, to ensure that we continue rebuild and support social welfare recipients, to ensure that we provide income support to those who have lost jobs.

The NFP was bringing some motion about using \$50 million or \$80 million. We provided \$500 million direct and indirectly. We are paying over \$100 million every year on social welfare, we have assisted 3,200 Fijians to own their first homes - 190 Fijians in this financial year alone with another 100 still waiting approval. The funds have actually finished, but there were so many people who want to build and buy their first home. Unfortunately, honourable Waqanika, who is not here, went on about the Housing Authority Board. I had a meeting with the Housing Authority Board, we talked about it and they gladly resigned from the Board. No one was fired overnight.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in fact the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), IDA, JICA and other bilateral partners, all supported our response to the crisis because they knew this was the appropriate response. That is why they lend to us and most of these debts are concessional debt.

We are getting loans to the World Bank International Development Association (IDA) at 40 year terms, 10 year grace period, zero per cent interest rate - never zero from the World Bank and 0.75 per cent service charge. Technically, these loans have a 57 grant element given a significant concession. With JICA lending to us at 0.01 per cent interest rate and the ADB has just approved Fiji to be eligible for its concessional resources.

When we go and talk about climate change, when the honourable Prime Minister goes and participates in international fora, these are the things we talk about and because of this, because of the discourse, because of highlighting our vulnerability, we are now getting concessional financing from ADB. We got concessional financing from the World Bank.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we have borrowed, we are borrowing at extremely concessional terms. We have over \$700 million in concessional debt so it is not right to compare this debt to debt borrowed at market rates. Mr. Speaker, Sir, all this noise about debt rising to \$8 billion has to be carefully assessed and you take a more sophisticated approach, more nuanced approach, more intellectual approach, which obviously the Opposition lacks, even the so-called professor.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact of the matter is this. If we were financially mismanaging our economy as they claim, if we were doing all the wrong things, if we were not adhering to the Financial Management Act - these people would not lend to us.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- If we were not doing this, Australia and New Zealand for the first time, has given us direct budget support. Unheard of!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Unheard of in Fijian history - direct budget support. We have had to jump through hoops and loops to adapt to different financial measures. And the point they miss is this, if we are borrowing to build now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the future generations do not have to borrow to build then. If we are undergrounding the cable now from Nadi Airport to Martintar, they do not have to put the cable underground. If we are building a four-lane road now which will cost far less than building in 20 years' time, we are saving money. Honourable Tikoduadua, you know this.

Another point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that, debt to GDP ratio has also increased to over 80 per cent of GDP because the nominal GDP has contracted substantially. In other words, if your GDP value has gone down from \$11 billion to \$9 billion, obviously your debt to GDP ratio will increase. It is basic maths. It is like saying, if someone has \$100 and you borrowed \$20, your debt to GDP ratio is 20 per cent. If someone has \$500 and you borrow \$50, even though it is double the amount of the \$20, your debt to GDP ratio is 10 per cent. But if you have \$500, it drops down and you simply borrow \$50, obviously it will increase. Very basic!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is why the whole strategy, as the honourable Prime Minister announced months ago, the focus on vaccination was to ensure that we open up our economy. If you open up your economy, now when you have 35 to 40 per cent of your entire economy dependent on tourism then obviously you will be able to get your economy back up running, so the strategy was to get vaccinated and we did that. We are one of the first few countries in the world where 90 per cent of the adult population have been fully vaccinated. We have from the Opposition, honourable Bulanauca saying do not get vaccinated. Honourable Gavoka is saying, get vaccinated. Can you imagine if they were in government?

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

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- What would have happened? The Fijian population would have got mixed messages - we have had people quoting from the *Bible*, we have people justifying do not get vaccinated, other people making all sorts of comments. What is required is strategic leadership and strategic direction, which is provided.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reality of the matter is that, as I have always said, we now have the 15 to 17 year olds getting vaccinated. We have 102,000 to 105,000 Fijians falling between the age category of 12 to 17, one-ninth of the population. We are targeting them too. We are building a safer environment, safer medical and health environment for them too, including all the tourists who will come to Fiji.

Fact check three, Mr. Speaker, Sir; the leader of SODELPA on the one hand was complaining about debt and immediately goes on about his pie in the sky promise to write off TELS debt, to make tertiary education completely free and to remove VAT. That would further diminish government revenues. Let me use some statistics, Mr. Speaker. But before I do that, in the next sentence he complained and said, why does he have to now? Under the law, tell us how his policies will be funded.

He says, while he wants to make his promises without any costing at all, he goes on full defensive about why political parties should provide details on their policy proposals as required now under the Financial Management Act and the Electoral Act. It is because you cannot fool the people, you cannot go and say 'send all your children for free education at the university' - he is not going to tell them how he is going to fund it. Let me tell you how much it is going to cost you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, SODELPA's proposal to waiver the TELS debt will mean Government will write off \$600 million and incur a further \$200 million every year to fund tertiary students. Forget the free education from early childhood to Year 13, this is just tertiary education. And if he removes VAT altogether, we are going to lose \$700 million in revenue a year. Even if you were to remove VAT on some of the basic items, we will lose \$100 million. Where will he get the money from?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Legalise marijuana.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Sell Nadroga!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- We have said in the past that VAT zero-rating creates distortion. In particular if you do not have an administrative system that can monitor it well. This is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we put in place the VAT monitoring system. It became a legal requirement that every supermarket and store must have a VAT monitoring system. Some of it, we have put on hold because of this particular economic situation. But once you have all of the systems in place, Mr. Speaker, Sir, then you can look at how you can perhaps get VAT away from some of these basic items. And that is what we intend to do but you need to be on a solid financial basis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Professor Prasad, unfortunately, again he is not here, but he talks about removing the \$0.20 per litre tax on fuel without a word about how much will be lost in government revenue? And how would they compensate for it? Are they going to borrow more? Are they going to increase any tax? Will they increase personal tax? When the honourable Prime Minister was made Prime Minister, if you earn \$8,400 a year more than that you paid tax. We made \$8,800 the following year then we said if you earn less than \$16,000 you do not pay tax. Then we said if you earn less than \$30,000 you do not pay tax, corporate tax is 20 per cent. So if they are going to do this, does that mean they will increase personal income tax? Does that mean they will increase company tax? What will they do? Will they impose some other tax? Will they bring in STT? Will they increase ECAL? No, word on that and I would say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, integrity void.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, we have a 5 years and 20 years National Development Plan which obviously we have to revise in respect of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have delivered over 50 national budgets which clearly outlined our vision, policies and inclusive philosophies. We now have a medium term debt strategy.

This Government has delivered on climate change - we have developed a robust National Climate Change Policy; we have developed a National Adaptation Plan for Fiji to guide climate resilience; we have developed the low emissions development strategy that will guide Fiji towards a low carbon future by 2050; and we have also developed a National Ocean Policy that is designed to accelerate Fiji's Blue Economy aspirations. What have the Opposition delivered apart from hyperbolic criticism? They have nothing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, apart from hollow promises.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It is your job.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- They say it is our job, but if you go to a democracy like Australia and New Zealand, ...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It is your job.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- ...the Opposition has the intellectual capacity to actually develop those things. The Opposition has the political and administrative will to say, 'Look, they have developed this policy, they consulted a lot of people, we will adopt that also.' But they are so politically egotistical that they will not do that, they just simply will not do that.

HON. MEMBER.- Very poor.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- You do not listen!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu went to great lengths talking about the economy and said that 'economic growth has been erratic and below potential of 5 per cent - annually due to dictatorial management, corruption and misuse of power.' Mr. Speaker, Sir, obviously his speech writer does not know what he is talking about and it is probably Mr. Pita Wise, too. Economic growth has not averaged 5 per cent or above in any decade...

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Very poor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- ...since independence. It has always been below potential rate of 5 per cent, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the highest average growth rate was in the 1970s at 4.8 per cent after development works post-independence, while the second highest was the last decade from 2010 to 2019 at 3.3 per cent. The historical growth has, indeed, been very erratic, reflective of small economic base, natural disasters, as well as global and local geo-political events, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

However, in the last decade, for the first time, we had nine years of consecutive growth. That is what we keep on talking about, it is the consecutive growth. No point saying, 'oh, in 1989 there was 9 per cent growth.' But what happened the years before that? What happened in the years after that? Consistency is the key. Australia has grown for about 20 years, the growth rate was 1 per cent, 1.5 per cent and 2 per cent, but they have grown nonetheless. They do not understand that. In order to be able to build confidence to have GDP growth, you need to have consistency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the statistics are here but in the interest of time, I am not going to go through that. Prior to the pandemic, the last official unemployment rate published by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics for 2017 was 4.5 per cent, which had declined considerably from the previous survey in 2010 and 2011, when the unemployment rate was 7.1 per cent. So, obviously, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if it was not for the pandemic, the unemployment rate could have improved even further.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they also talked about the \$5 minimum wage. Obviously, they are not considering what situation we are in. If I could remind Parliament, it was the Bainimarama-led Government that brought in the National Minimum Wage for unskilled workers. We never had that. There was a minimum wage for the 10 sectorial divisions and since then, there has been two reviews.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- I would like all the small businesses, the mums and dads who employ one or two people, the mechanics, the lady who is selling handicrafts, may be employing two people, to hear what the honourable Tabuya is saying. In this pandemic, for the past two years, they have not had a source of living. They are now, because of this pandemic, starting to re-engage people. And you tell them, 'let us start paying \$5.' You tell them, 'pay the full FNPF 10 per cent.' What do you think they will do?

I had the privilege, and thank you for allowing me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday I was in Nadi when the first tourists came. You should have seen the look of euphoria, not just on the faces of the people who worked at the hotel industry, but in their eyes. The lady who worked for Rentokil cleaning the toilets at Nadi Airport has come back to work. The taxi driver, the tour manager, the staff and the people lined up the streets to the hotels from trees waving at them, because they know it is not just about people who work directly in the hotel industry, but people who actually have a living off the hotel industry. So the airport workers who are now coming to work, have money in their pockets, so they go and buy boiled *ivi* from the lady who sells boiled *ivi* outside the airport, the lady who sells *roti* parcels and the people in the market. So, it is actually an entire ecosystem that is built around the tourism sector. Obviously, we have been diversifying economy.

If you look at the statistics, the diversification of Fijian economy was not as great as it is today. Nonetheless, we have to be dependent on this tourism sector. We need to diversify, we will continue to diversify, but in the meantime, we have to recognise the fact that these people need to be able to carry on with their living and the small businesses need to be supported. We are giving \$200 million allocation in the budget, they get interest free loans, do not do any principal payments for the first two years. The Government is paying for their interest component, so that they can get up on their feet. And these people are saying, 'do it now,' because they think it is not for an economic basis, because they think there are some votes in it. In the same way, honourable Gavoka suddenly has become Johnny-Come-Lately, the great advocate for squatters.

Where were they before this? He has probably done a tour of the Nausori-Suva corridor and seen the squatters. This man here, honourable Nawaikula, is a lot to blame for it. There are a lot of people from Labasa there but they have now suddenly decided, 'okay, there are votes in it.' This is the only Government under this Prime Minister that is now regularising squatter areas, giving 99 year leases, and suddenly they want to become the great advocates of squatters. He even went to the extent of saying people who are living in *vakavanua* arrangement, without consent, should be getting electricity. He said, 'Oh, they should be connected to the electricity.' *Areh!* The land is owned by someone who has to consent to, but this is all short-term gain.

Honourable Kuridrani went on his diatribe against me. I mean, he does that and has got nothing of substance to say. But the only thing I want to highlight to him, Mr. Speaker, there are more important issues than climate change. His village is getting a seawall. His village funded by the ministry is getting the seawall and that is directly because of climate change. But just to show this man's integrity I had one of his relatives calling me a few months ago and said, Attorney-General, you know my relative his using his car to go and get people in the next village to sign up to Rabuka's Party.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- I got the text. Mr. Speaker, Sir, and he said to me, can he be reported him to the Supervisor of Elections and I said, "No".

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- I am not the driver.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- I know you are not the driver but it was your car. I said, if you want you can report him to SODELPA

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.-Mr. Speaker, these are the kind of shenanigans that is going on. I have got a lot to say but I would like to finish off, Mr. Speaker, in the interest of time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one point I would like to make we have seen in the past three weeks and I have said this continuously in Parliament that Members on the other side breakout into the vernacular. What we have said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that this Parliament is for everyone. This Parliament when we says for everyone it should be understood by everyone. It continuously they do that without even translating. Why? Because they are trying to appeal to a particular segment. When they make those comments most of the people obviously some of the people will speak with the itaukei language understand it, the others do not you alienate them.

I have never, once I said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I use the word, *are*, and honourable Tabuya, oh! It is good to see his exercising his mother tongue. *Areh!* It is actually what we call a *lingua franca* - it is an exclamation. In the same way we say, *oilei, isa, vinaka* everyone in Fiji understands that and we can say that. That is what you call the *lingua franca*. But when you break out and you do not understand in the way and I never done this but I am going to do it today.

If I say all of the Opposition *bina pendi ke lota*. You see they are laughing. You do not understand. It is so alienating. This is the first and only time I am going to say this.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- No, I am telling you. I qualified myself and this is the first and only time I am going to do it. Just to demonstrate a point. I am going to translate it now. *Bina pendi ke lota* basically means, *lota* is a vessel that holds water and if it does not have a base it moves around all the time. It cannot stay in one place like you guys. You do not have one direction, one policy. In some instances *bina pendi ke lota* can also mean *liu muri*, that, is what it means.

My point is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, like I said this is the first time I am going to say this and only time but the only reason I said that is that all of them the one who understood the language they laughed. You did not because you do not understand it. Can you imagine the next time when you do that when other people do not understand how they feel. That is my point. Translation does not do it, honourable Bulanauca. You have no credibility. You are the man who stood in the streets of Suva advocating for racism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to break it quickly to highlight one last point, the attack on honourable Selai Adimaitoga by the *Fiji Times* when she called out the *Fiji Times*. What will it demonstrated and *Fiji Times* came on a defensive. They said you know we are independent we do not do it, et cetera. The main point that they fail to mention in their response as honourable Adimaitoga highlighted, she highlighted how *Fiji Times* deliberately said that the military was the cause of the issue on vaccination because of the military and they said, IDA said that and IDA actually came back and corrected them. When honourable Selai Adimaitoga highlighted that, when *Fiji Times* responded to her, they did not post that at all and this is the kind of obfuscation that is going on, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I want to highlight because we are going to election next year to see the close quarter relationships, on record Munro Leys are the lawyers to NFP they no longer are. They are still the personal lawyers for honourable Prasad and his wife because they have written letter which I have seen. Munro Leys are the

lawyers for *Fiji Times*. Mahendra Patel has run away from the law, he is hiding in Sydney a Bench Warrant is out for him. His interest is in *Fiji Times* directly or indirectly. What we have said previously, if you are a media organization, if you have a particular political position, there is nothing wrong with that. FOX has a position in supporting Trump, everyone knows that, you watch FOX, you know they support Trump. If *Fiji Times* has a political over the editorial position, so be it but state it, do not hide behind the so-called "we are independent." The same thing with *Fiji Village*, do not do that.

There is a post on NFP Website and it says and I quote, "one organisation state owned...." This is about a journalist who went to COP and has been provided more than \$80 million in grants was the fact that both are heavily funded by tax payers through grants and advertising as well. Were they selected by people in the diplomatic mission or was it based on government's recommendation? We had nothing to do with it, no diplomatic mission highlighted and I have here a text message from the Editor of FBC, Mr. Indra Singh he said and I quote, "he rang up honourable Prasad, he did not answer then he called Mr. Kamal Iyer of NFP and informed him that this was wrong, but he said to date, nothing has been done." honourable Tikoduadua, you are the only one here, please look at this.

It says the trip was not funded by government or the British High Commission, it was through Asia Broadcasting Union (ABU), Mr. Speaker, Sir. This is the type of shenanigans that are taking place, they come here and pontificate about this Government not being transparent, about us not telling the truth but that is what they are doing, they are so desperate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just highlight one last thing because they have gone on about COP. The undermining of Fiji's participating in COP26, particularly by Members of the Opposition, just a taste of blatant bitterness and division and also I think that is a political game for them, despite the honourable Prime Minister informing them numerous time. Please, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you can allow me to explain once again that not a single tax payer dollar was spent on Fiji's COP26 participation.

Mr. Speaker, COP26 expenditure was paid by the donors to the Climate Action Trust Fund. These donor funds were specifically given for Fiji's participation at COP26 and we used it just for that. In particular European Union, Norway, Germany, United Nations Capital Development Fund, United Nations Framework on Conventional Climate Change (UNFCCC), Women's Environment and Development Organisation funded a couple of the ladies who went and have supported Fiji's COP26 participation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now they forget that the COP26 related expenses will be audited and tabled in Parliament, as part of the Annual Audited Report of the Climate Action Trust Fund. This has been the norm for all COP related expenditures since COP23. It is mandated by the Climate Action Trust Fund Act, if you read the Act, it says we have to present it to Parliament. This Parliament has already debated on two such reports, the Committee has already done that, yet the Opposition chose to stir public dissatisfaction against of course, the participation again downplaying climate Change, it is quite shameful.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, more details according to the COP26 provisional list of participants, out of the 196 countries that registered to attend COP in Glasgow, there were 96 other countries that had a larger delegation than Fiji of which, 62 were developing countries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Maldives which has a population of 540,542 people, took 56 delegates. Seychelles which has an even smaller population of 99,000 people, took 53 delegates. Comoros, a low developing country in Africa with a population of 869,000, took 50 delegates. Congo - 373 participants, Uganda, Gabon, Australia, of course, has the largest delegation, Nepal, Mauritania in the West Indies, if you put them altogether, a larger delegation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me give you a breakdown, from our delegation side of the 47 people registered under the Fijian Delegation Provisional Register List published by UNFCCC, 40 travelled while the rest remained in Fiji so we have people sitting here participating but they are registered as delegates. From the 47, 40 participated, out of the 40 that travelled, seven were Non-Governmental personnel who had their own funding.

If they did a breakdown and they were honest about it, because they wanted to get accreditation under some country so we gave them accreditation. Seven were from the Pacific Islands Forum, Commerce Secretariat and the World Wildlife Fund - seven of them from there. Of the 33 Government Officials, five were from the Fijian Mission in United Kingdom. They were already there, they worked there, they came from London to Glasgow and one from the Fijian Mission who is our Ambassador who came from New York and two already; one in UK and one from USA, already there. So 25 officials were part of the travelling Team from Fiji. This is the true story.

They never failed to ascertain that they went to the media. I saw honourable Prasad making statement, then the British High Commissioner came and made a statement. We saw from Glasgow saying 'I wish Fiji had a larger delegation' or 'delegation is good' then they retracted, 'oh, we want accountability'. Then they got some NGOs to give them, they said 'oh this NGO is speaking the truth'. But what about the issues they elucidated? Honourable Tuisawau during morning and afternoon tea time we talked about it. How we have different groups negotiating and the average age of the Team that travelled participated between the ages of 25 and 35.

I say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what they have done is actually given a huge insult to our young delegation because these young delegation are developing their expertise in the next five to ten years they will be able to further our interest at the COPs. If you look at the delegation of other countries, they have been negotiating for the past ten to fifteen years, same team. They know each word, each phrase, line by line and we are trying to build capacity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I wanted to make very quickly was, in the COP 26, it was one of the most successful multilateral climate engagement for Fiji since COP 23, the President and Prime Minister of course had high level engagements sufficient number of Fijians negotiating in the negotiating room put Fiji amongst the powerhouse of the countries fighting for the climate and Paris Agreement Rule Book to be finalised.

We participated in over 50 high level negotiations, this is apart from the negotiating room - bilaterals and events, let alone the countless hours spent by our young but diligently negotiated in a closed door technical negotiation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we signed an agreement with the Australian Government called the Indo-Pacific Carbon Offsets Scheme. Fiji will be among the first countries in the world to benefit from the Australian \$60 million available under this programme to develop a Carbon Offset Scheme between Fiji and Australia.

Basically what this means, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that Fijian resource owners and investors in renewable energy initiatives, both domestic and foreign can generate carbon units that can be sold to Australian companies at an attractive price. This creates strong incentive for sustainable climate action here in Fiji that builds natural resources intact and attracts investment and renewable energy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Qereqeretabua, I think she was advised by the people when they were representing them, they obviously misguided her. Fiji's REDD+ market arrangement in collaboration with the World Bank are up to 2024. Until then, Fiji will be in an arranged market arrangement that will ensure a guaranteed carbon market price for Fijian forest owners and build carbon

monitoring reporting and verification capacity of Fijian authorities. Post 2024, of course, which is just two years down the track, Fiji's REDD+ participants will be able to engage in carbon trading in an open market with the confidence and experience to the World Bank programme like a pilot programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, she should also know that Fiji's REDD+ programme has a benefit-sharing plan that has been thoroughly vetted by the World Bank Environment and social safeguard criteria. Every resource owner in the REDD+ will get an equitable share of profits from the carbon trading.

The other point that they also forgot to mention is that REDD+ trading schemes do not include mangrove resources, seagrasses and other blue carbon as well as renewable energy projects where people can immediately participate in the carbon market through Article 6 of the Paris Agreement. We managed to lobby Australia to increase its Climate Finance Commitment; AUS\$500 million for the Pacific and South East Asia.

Fiji is currently co-chairing with United Kingdom, a special body known as the Taskforce or a nexus to Climate Finance, which is developed to a robust set of principles and recommendations to have climate vulnerable countries, better access climate finance.

Fiji is one of the first five countries in the world to test how this approach that United Kingdom has pledged £100 million (pounds) for this initiative. Fiji will now actively work with the Government of the UK to get a large chunk of the money pledged. Apart from Fiji, there is Rwanda, Jamaica, Uganda and Bhutan. There are four other countries that have been selected under this programme and will get accelerated financing under this particular programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir and of course oceans we have talked about how oceans have now been included Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also promoted at COP26 the launch of our first blue bonds. We are now working with the Prince Charles-led the Sustainable Market Initiative. His Royal Highness the Prince Charles of Wales that put together financiers, insurers, et cetera, to be able to ensure that we get attractive rates, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as far as the blue bonds are concerned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a lot that can be said but I am cognisant of what has happened in terms of the time but, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to say that we have supported a number of people in these past two years. It is great to see the light at the end of the tunnel. We of course still have to be cognisant about the fact that there are still some Fijians who are yet to be vaccinated. The Ministry of Health is trying to reach out to them. We urge all the other Fijians who are vaccinated but their family members or communities that they know are not vaccinated, please get vaccinated, it is in your best interest, please let us get our children vaccinated because we need to carry on with our lives, we need to be able to build up our economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Last but not the least, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank His Excellency for his most gracious speech. Obviously there is a lot that can be said. I have had the pleasure of having interaction with His Excellency the President in his role when he served as a director of a number of boards. I would like to thank him for his participation in that in a number of public enterprises and we obviously are blessed to have a leader like him who obviously has been appointed on his own accord, on his own merit because he has the manna, he has the credibility, he has the ability to stand up in his self to be able to represent us on the global stage, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and also domestically.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to wish him and his good wife all the best and I would like to wish everybody in this House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a very merry Christmas and a happy and a prosperous New Year.

MR. SPEAKER.- What is this point of order?

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Standing Order 80 and 81 on Explanation and Misunderstanding particularly on vaccinations. Honourable Minister for Economy stated that I oppose vaccination. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not oppose vaccination.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- *Areh!* You are on record.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- I had been vaccinated for polio. I had been vaccinated for measles. Those are tested vaccines. What I am opposing are untested vaccines and secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the forced way - the process that they are making, it is not voluntary. My point is 'voluntary'. You need to fully explain to the people, to the client what is in the vaccine and what are the effects thereof? If you take the double dose will you still get it, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

MR. SPEAKER.- You have made your point of order. You have made your point of order, take a seat. Honourable Bulanauca, it is common knowledge that you opposed it, it is common knowledge, I know. I know the point that you are making. I understand that but the thing is: that was the perception that people had that you kept on going about it and you did not take any precautions to try and prevent them from saying that. You just carried on with the day.

I knew the point that you were trying to make but before I give the floor to the right of reply, honourable Members, I just want to talk about administration of time amongst all Members because you do not work on administration of time for your presentations. Now, this side of the House has got more minutes available and this side of the House has got more minutes available but you do not administer the thing. I do my work here on what time has been used and what time has not been used, I put a minus and plus and I take it off. The thing is, administer your time and you can make use of the debate. He was using the time that was left over from other speakers and I have used that when others have gone beyond their time.

The only group that make use of their time and sometimes they do it over board is the NFP. They all speak up to their time limit or sometimes they go over and you have 20 minutes each - all of you. But there are always people who only speak for nine minutes instead of 20 minutes. So there is always this access left but I will not hold you for lunch. We will have the right of reply for His Excellency's most gracious Address tomorrow.

Honourable Members, this afternoon after lunch, we will go to the next Agenda Item. So on that note, we adjourn for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.21 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 3.36 p.m.

FIJI INSTITUTE OF CHARTERED ACCOUNTANTS BILL 2021

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to resolution of Parliament on Friday, 22nd October, 2021, I move:

That the Fiji Institute of Chartered Accountants Bill 2021 (Bill No. 35/2021) be debated, voted upon and be passed.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I remind that pursuant to the resolution of Parliament, the debate will be limited to an hour. I now call on the honourable Attorney-General to speak on his motion.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the interest of time, because I know some of the honourable Members do want to speak, when we had introduced this Bill, we had highlighted the fact that this Bill has gone through a number of consultations, even prior to it being tabled in Parliament and with the Fiji Institute of Accountants (FIA), in fact, for a couple of years. They also had consultations with their own members. Subsequently, when this matter was referred to the Committee itself, the Committee had the opportunity to also seek submissions and representations from members of the public, predominantly the accountants.

Some changes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we can see, the marked up Bill has been made through discussions and because of the discussions that the Committee had we, in fact, have no issues with those amendments that have been made. Indeed, the FIA have also provided endorsement to those changes that have been made.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill, of course, tries to bring the FIA into the 21st century. It also does provide a more transparent basis of the discipline matters that can be referred to FIA, unlike the lawyers, they are still going to have predominantly peer review. As we have said in Parliament previously, we would like to eventually bring a number of professions, including accountants, engineers, et cetera, to an independent body that can assess claims or any complaints that have been made against the members of the profession. Until such time, however, a bit more independent process has been suggested which has been accepted by the FIA.

It also does provide that the Act needs to be reviewed, at least, within the next three years, which is demonstrative of the fact that some of the accountants as we know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will now be able to participate and earn a living by setting up their own accounting practices, for example, certifying on financial statements, et cetera. This will be of great assistance, even indeed to the banks who may, in particular, in the Micro-Small and Medium Enterprise (MSME) space, will require some form of professional input when people who make loan applications and when they submit their accounts or cash flows and Profit and Loss Statements that there is some professional who has actually signed off on it. So, a number of accountants will now be able to earn a living from that perspective.

Auditing, of course, will still continue to be limited to those who meet the criteria but, again, as discussed with some Members of Parliament that in the next three years, we are hoping that those who currently will now be allowed once this Bill gets passed to be able to certify financial accounts, they would be able to reach that particular level of standard and, indeed, meet the international standards of compliance with external auditing and will be able to come into that space. So, again, they get a lot more

work and we are able to ensure that a lot more people are able to provide their services within the Fijian economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those remarks, I would like to urge all Members to support this particular Bill, and look forward to any comments that may be made.

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

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise on behalf of the Members of the Opposition in support of the Bill and I also request the Government for some improvements, please.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to the Fiji Institute of Accountants Bill 2021, I wish to re-direct us to the statements of the honourable Prime Minister at the 39th Annual Congress of Accountants in 2011 where he stated that the regulation environment of the accounting practices had not been fundamentally reviewed for almost three decades, and that, in Fiji the sole responsibility of producing and issuing accounting standards rests with the Fiji Institute of Accountants. So whilst the FIA is charged with awarding professional membership to accountants and auditors, at the same time it is also responsible for setting accounting standards and regulating conduct of its members.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, right from 2011, it is evident that the honourable Prime Minister in that statement knew that our people in the accounting and auditing sectors had to be promoted and supported to be able to extend and grow our own two pool of professionals and aspire to establishing big local firms that can extend our services to export to other countries in the region and even internationally.

Over the last many decades, Fiji's accounting and auditing world have been really influenced by global corporations whose subsidiary companies operate here in Fiji. They take the lead in professional accounting services, work and the crumbs have been left to the small local companies who have not had the kind of capital and structure that could allow them to compete against this big global firms like KPMG, Ernst and Young, PricewaterhouseCoopers and BDO.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it can be argued that these firms set standards and are internationally competitive and so using their services would mean your company is getting global certifications. Nothing wrong with that. Fiji is about establishing strong local brands; Fiji made products, Fiji established firms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the explanatory notes of the Bill before this Parliament, point 1.4 states that the inclusion of new categories of membership to the institute. More persons will be able to practice in the accounting profession. It further states that this democratisation of accounting services in Fiji will allow individuals to setup accounting firms of their own without unnecessary restrictions which would also create a level playing field and create businesses and employment opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the repeal of the Fiji Institute of Accountants Act 1971 as stated in the clause 52 of the Bill, I would be very happy to see that the subsidiary rules known as the "Fiji Institute of Accountants Rule 1998" will also be non-existent likewise. The amendment is applauded because the rules in a subsidiary law has kept many graduate chartered accountants and auditors from functioning and operating in their professions as certified public practicing accountants. Just like graduate lawyers who go through the PDLP process and are being certified by the Legal Practitioners Unit to operate after a few years of mentoring by a mentor.

There is one glitch, however, there was a part of the amended Act that I almost missed and this was the interpretation section where it was described that a certificate of limited public practitioners does not include providing of external auditing services. The very next line then states that the CPP means a certificate issued by the council authorising the person named in the certificate to offer his or her services

as an accountant to the public. It is clear there are two categories that the council will have to determine when applicants come before them. It would have been good if the criteria for allowing or disallowing these applicants were very clear. To leave this to the council when in fact both certificates are for accountants who hold accounting qualifications is not only confusing but can lead to further excuses not to allow those applying to obtain the full certificate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it must be noted that to be an auditor, there is no other degree other than an Accounting Degree or a Bachelor of Commerce, for instance. There are limited jobs available for straight forward accounting jobs and these are mostly undertaken by graduates with less than five years' experience. The real work for those wishing to go solo or setup firms will be in auditing. I do hope that this is an area that can be cleaned up by relevant subsidiary laws that do not limit unnecessarily opportunities for those that have engaged in the audit field.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note that the new Bill will see the council members doing the work of determining who gets to receive accreditation to public practice and operate firms, et cetera. The democracy in this is good and I just wonder whether it would have been in government's interest to have on the council someone from the Auditor-General's Office perhaps the Auditor-General himself to chair the council or co-chair or even be a panel just so that we keep in line with government practices where it ensures the playing field is not unduly influenced by the superpowers who tend to have a hold over such regulatory functions, if not properly monitored.

This Bill in its current form does not deem the Office of the Auditor-General or the position of the Auditor-General to be a certified public practice as highlighted in clause 40. Even the Auditor-General has even made a suggestion that the Auditor-General's position is to be deemed CPP and the explanations that they have included in their submission, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by virtue of the position of the Auditor-General he or she is registered a CPP. Therefore, those who work under the Auditor-General's Office, if they meet the requirement, should be eligible for CPP or Chartered Accountant in Public Practice (CAPP) and the current regulation does not allow for Office of the Auditor General to be classified as a CPP, which unfairly disadvantages staff of the Office of the Auditor General from obtaining a CPP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sure each aspiring chartered accountant and auditor in this country will be inspired by the deregulating of this field. On that note, I do not expect any ridiculous laws that existed for instance the Fiji Institute of Accountants 1998 rules to still exist. The rule that required people first work under an accounting firm for not less than three years with acceptable practical experience in the office of the chartered accountants in public after becoming a full member of the institute, as one of the pre-requisite to getting a public practising certificate.

I would agree, however, that the rules of the Legal Practitioners Units for lawyers makes sense - that graduate lawyers must operate under a senior to ensure guidance for at least two years before the High Court. Such rules make sense and the Fiji Institute of Accountant should instead see that those rules allow for people to actually find jobs in our otherwise limited markets.

In the past Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you got a job in the big international firms as I have mentioned earlier, that operate in Fiji, then you are very lucky because they pay well and look after their staff well. Other firms are not as fortunate and obviously because they are small, local firms who have not been provided with the kind of support to become well established businesses. Automatically, young graduates with families look for accounting jobs, for example, in Government Commercial Companies, other commercial companies, statutory authorities, et cetera, or the Office of the Auditor General for instance, where remuneration is very good.

People like me Mr. Speaker, Sir, were limited from getting our practising certificate to operate as a public practise simply because of the 1998 FIA Rule 6 which required us to have worked in a chartered accounting firm as I have mentioned. Those laws, sadly or contradictory to our Constitution which gives people under the Bill of Rights, the right to fair employment opportunities.

Likewise, the law contradicted fair trading under the Commerce Commission Act Part 6 and Part 7 for example, that should encourage competition and allows for better affordable services and an offer of choice. Therefore, I trust as professionals moving forward, that the Fiji Institute of Accountant's counsel will ensure that there are no self-interest at any time in the way they conduct themselves and process applications from those who wish to become CPPs, in the interest of running their own practises. Because in doing so, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are robbing people of the right to live and perform to their best. We are also robbing a great nation from establishing some great investments and entrepreneurs who will in turn become employment providers for this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is refreshing to see that Fiji is moving with time and is now allowing its people to not be limited by archaic rules that do not make sense in the bigger sense of things, where practise and exposure should be determinants rather than unworkable restraining policies or laws. Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I suggest that Government encourages a submission of the organisation's financial statements who do receive government grants, government monies to be prepared and cleared by professional chartered accountants as per Section 16.1 of the proposed FIA Bill.

I have noted Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I have also highlighted in previous Parliament sessions that school grants being submitted to the Ministry of Education are just being passed by anyone with some financial literacy not registered as chartered accountants. Likewise for sporting bodies or some Non-Olympic sporting bodies who receive grants from the National Sports Commission, the reporting back process is always a challenge because of limited resources in terms of capability and capacity within the sporting body organisations.

These practices can mean a lot of anomalies and leakages, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that are occurring in government financial management. With these changes in the Bill, schools et cetera, need to be encouraged to practice firm financial practices. And on that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I look forward to this Bill bringing about more local accounting and auditing firms and I thank those that have taken the time to bring about these much-awaited changes.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to make a short contribution in support of the Bill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been long associated with musical groups, NGOs and religious groups where we have often seen that when they provide their final accounts, it is in shambles. They do not have an understanding on what final accounts are. They do not have an understanding of the accounting cycle. They do not know what it means to have audited accounts and because of that, donations or donors are reluctant to give them money and they are not able to generate or raise income. They cannot get loans because they do not have proper final accounts and their members lose confidence in them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are not able to have accounts because they are not able to access the service of accountants because it has been monopolised by a selected group of big accounting firms. With the opening up of the market, young graduates coming out of universities will be allowed to undertake the preparation of final accounts for those NGOs, social groups, et cetera. We will have an increase in accountability. The management of those NGOs or social groups will know where they stand in terms of financial viability. They will know how they are doing and they will be able to undertake corrective measures. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is remarkable in terms of ensuring that we give support to these small

and micro enterprises, NGOs and civil society groups to grow, and to be able to understand their financial strengths better.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have seen school committees. I used to be a member of a school social group and when schools would present their accounts, they would say it is an audited account - they had no idea that it was not really an audited account because it was not audited by an auditor. The accountant who prepared the final accounts signed off saying that the accounts were proper, but there has to be a separation of duty. Sir, from day one, source documents were not kept properly to draw up proper accounts because they did not have access to a qualified or proper accountant - now they will be guided by an affordable accountant from day one.

Honourable Radrodro mentioned including the Office of the Auditor-General. Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all these young accountants need to be trained on the entire accounting cycle. They should know how to prepare proper accounts in the real world before they can become auditors and then start auditing. This is now the first step in terms of developing a large cadre of qualified accountants who understand the final accounts, right from the source documents - ledger, trial balance, trading, profit and loss and balance sheet. This is an amazing opportunity now that young accountants can become members of this profession, be practicing accountants and be given a chance.

I know for a long time that young accountants were hiding behind tax agent status to prepare accounts for some of these smaller companies. But these accounts were not accepted, unfortunately, by lending agents like banks, et cetera, and they were struggling to attract finance - donors were not able to accept their proposals because they did not have final accounts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was long overdue, I want to thank the Minister for Economy for opening up this small monopoly there. I support this Bill and I am saying that all the accounting graduates coming out of the three universities will be delighted to hear that they no longer have to go to the big accounting firms but they will be able to get the basic status and then start practising.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the three year period the Minister for Economy has said that they are looking to revise this - FNU offers a Trade Diploma in Accounting and in the academic sense these are accounting technicians. They could also be given (at that particular point in time) a provisional status because the Trade Diploma in Accounting are actual technicians - they deal with the accounting cycle basically from source document right to the balance sheet. I am so excited to note that this Bill will get through and thanks to the mover of the motion.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, like my colleague here honourable Aseri Radrodro, I support this Bill. But I just want to labour the point that, in fact some of the amendments to this Bill, particularly section 54 and the others, are actually very good examples of what we have been calling law making.

Imagine, if this Bill moved under Standing Order 51 was debated that week and voted; it did not go to the Standing Committee; the Committee did not go around the country and had a second chance of talking to people - we would not have had some very, very important amendments particularly the amendment to allow a review of the Act every three years. It is an important point that we have been labouring and I do not want to repeat a lot of what my colleague has said.

I think when presenting the Bill, the honourable Attorney-General did explain the benefits of this Bill so we do not have to repeat all that, but I just wanted to make the point in supporting this Bill, even if sometimes the amendments may appear to be very, very small. We can benefit from opening this up for consultation for a second or third time before we enact a law. This is a very good example but before I conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wanted to respond to honourable Usamate this morning.

He talked about NFP's history and he is right, Mr. Speaker, Sir - NFP is indeed steeped in history - a history of struggle, justice, equality and democracy. He is a "Johnny-come-lately" and his entry into politics was through dictatorship - someday when he is actually booted out of that, he will realise what he is steeped in.

The other point that I want to respond to him, he talked about Rwanda, he talked about Solomon Islands - again they are going against their own Prime Minister who started on a very good note, when he talked about ethical conduct, ethical politics. Here, this man again threatens the country - well, if FijiFirst is not there you are going to see Rwanda and Solomon Islands - that is what you are implying.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I never said that.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- So stop that, please.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Let us stick to the issues, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I wanted to remind him, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we stick to ideas, we stick to issues not threats.

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 Parliament to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed in today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are on the last agenda item, the Consideration of Bills, thus the request to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today in order to complete the remaining Bills that are before Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate. Is there anyone wishing to take the floor? No one wishing to take the floor. Honourable Leader of the Government, do you have anything further to add?

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- No, thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE FIJI INSTITUTE OF CHARTERED ACCOUNTANTS BILL 2021

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to give a small contribution with regards to the Bill that we have scrutinised.

The Fiji Institute of Chartered Accountants Bill, 2021 is a good piece of legislation. As advised yesterday, the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights had recommended 19 changes to be made to the Bill, which it had tabled, as well as the Committee's Report on the Bill. The Bill will address the restrictive nature of the current accountancy framework and environment, and enable more qualified accountants to be able to provide accounting services.

The Bill will introduce new categories that recognises accountants and their qualifications. Some of these new categories introduced by the Bills are:

- Accounting technicians;
- Associate accountants;
- Chartered accountants with Limited Public Practices; and
- Honorary status granted to long serving members of the Institute.

As noted by the Committee during the review of the Bill, accounting firms only exist and are situated in the main cities like, Suva, Lautoka and a very few towns like Nadi and Labasa. So this will allow all district to actually have an accounting firms. As per clarification, Mr. Speaker, Sir, clause 40 of the Bill is that the Office of the Auditor General is only exempted from clause 37 to 39, which has basically nothing to do with them being the mentors or being CPP or CAs. So, it is not that the Office of the Auditor-General is exempted from the Bill, other things also apply. During the round table discussion, FIA has also informed that this is something that is administrative in nature governed by the rules and regulations of FIA, and they have given the mandate to the Committee as well that they will definitely look into this, and respond accordingly. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish not to add anything, except to say that we are supporting this Bill. It will be good. I can only refer to what is happening to the legal profession. In the legal profession annually, we are required to be audited, we are required to obtain our Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice (GDLP) points and there has been an improvement in our performances. I hope that this will also extend to the teachers so that instead of criticising teachers, you give them training annually so that they can get their annual points and you issue their licences annually and that will be a great improvement.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the honourable Attorney-General to speak in reply.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think we all in agreement with the fundamentals of this Bill that is being presented to the Parliament. I would like to thank all the Members for giving their support. Just a couple of points of clarification, honourable Radrodro raised the issue about the rules, of course, can obfuscate this - the spirit or why we brought out about this new Bill in Parliament. We are currently working with the Fiji Institute of Accountants (FIA) on the rules, to make sure it follows the spirit or the intention of this new Bill and that will need to be put into practice. So those rules are actually being revamp.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would be a miss of me not to actually thank Glenys Andrews from the Solicitor-General's Office, who actually has been working on this Bill for the past two years or so, together with the various Presidents of FIA who have come and gone. It is very interesting and I do not know how many of you have noticed, but if you look at the council of FIA, now a council can be

appointed for three years. Previously, there was a very funny rule that you had to be appointed for only one year and there is no doubt that it became a kind of a revolving door for the big firms to appoint people on to their council, et cetera. Sometimes, they would have representation from a small firm but nonetheless, they have balance of power if you like.

Just for the Members information, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and just to highlight on issues that were raised by honourable Radrodro, what if there is actually a requirement for full Certificate of Public Practice (CPP) to be registered, audited except the Auditor-General who is deemed by auditor of virtue of his position. This should be provided for under the Companies Act and if we look at section 40, as the DPP and his lawyers, many people do not realise that they do not actually have to get a Practising Certificate. The world stood outside, in the same way the Auditor-General have stood outside of the fraternity. It says here, "Public officers" - section 40 says sections 37 and 39 do not apply to the Auditor-General and 37 and 39 is actually about accountancy appointments to be held by Accountants.

A person must not hold an appointment under any written law an Auditor Accountant unless he/she is already registered as a member under this Act. But, if you are the Auditor-General and you have worked for the Auditor-General, as provided under 40, you can hold yourself as an Accountant. That is the difference because there are always a statutory provision.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point is, as per the FIA rules and current practice in Fiji, accounting services include auditing. Therefore, the definition of CPP and the definition of CLPP only differ in the provision of external auditing services. The point that was raised by honourable Dr. Mahendra Reddy and some of the others like honourable Aseri Radrodro raised about supporting organisations when they need to file their accounts with Fiji Sports Commission or the Minister for Education regarding funding - any Tom, Dick and Harry will sign them off. Now, because you have more people who can actually sign off financial accounts, actually- you will be opening it up.

Therefore, the Sports Commission or the Minister for Education can say, "I only want people who are qualified to do so." Previously, there were only a small group of people, the fees were exorbitant which they could not afford. Therefore, very quickly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we now also have recognition of what we call Accounting Technicians. For example, people who are working as Accounts Clerks for twenty to twenty-five years, they are far more experienced from the ones that have just come out of universities. There is recognition of them now.

We now also have, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Certificate of Limited Public Practice (CLPP) means that the certificate issued by the Council, in accordance with the rules of the Institute, authorizing the person named with the certificate to offer his/her services as an Accountant to the public, excluding the provision of external auditing services. Certificate of Public Practice (CPP) means certificate issued by the Council in accordance with the rules of the Institute authorizing the person named with the certificate to offer his/her services as an Accountant to the public.

A Chartered Accountant means a person who certifies the requirements and registrations of Chartered Accountant under this Act. Chartered Accountant in Limited Public Practice means a Chartered Accountant who is the holder of a Certificate in Limited Public Practice. And then you have the Chartered Accountant in Public Practice means a Chartered Accountant with the holder of a Certificate of Public Practice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this has obviously brought about a number of changes. The reason this Bill was also brought under 51, honourable Prasad and we did know that the Institute of Accountants had some provision in here. This is why we said we send it to the Committee. A number of the Bills are brought under 51 with the extensive amendments or consultations that have been done and yet the Parliament is

armed with the ability to be able to make an amendments too. So, I do not think there is any kind of distraction from 51 itself.

The last one I would like to make is again to reiterate that the three year provisioning is there essentially, Mr. Speaker, constantly be able to review these laws, is fast changing and there is no doubt. As we remarked in Parliament in the Parliamentary Session from 2014-2018, that there has been a handful of Accountants in Fiji who kind of rule the roost and we know which accounting firms they are. A number of legal firms are linked with them also and they rule the roost.

If we see the provision under this particular Bill, Accountants can now actually advertise. Before there is a restriction. As Honourable Aseri Radrodro was saying, people can set up their business, they can actually advertise and say “look, I live in Sigatoka and I offer these services.”

So, all we know, sporting organisations, the different groups can go to them, the schools can go to him or her, for some reason in Rakiraki. In this way, we will also be able to spread their accounting services, accountants themselves can actually now go on and set up a Practice in those places. Because most of the small towns do not have the services offered to them. So, it is, as I had mentioned in the introduction on this Bill, a democratisation of the accounting profession.

What was really interesting also, Mr. Speaker, is that, I was told by one of the big accounting firm just a few weeks ago, there is a shortage of Accountants in Australia. So, we will find Australia will entice our qualified Accountants to go to Australia. And as we know, a lot of the Accountants in Fiji actually have CPA qualifications. They go and get their CPA qualifications which is recognised in Australia.

We will see a huge shift in the accounting profession either the Accountants in Fiji will stay and get paid higher salaries or some of them will migrate, so we need to be able to ensure that we get as many people as possible to be able to, not just set up their practices but obviously, be able to offer services to many Fijians who may actually like it. It is very interesting to know what is going to happen in the accounting profession in the next couple of years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those remarks, I would like to recommend and thank all Members for supporting this Bill. I think this will be a new era in the accounting profession. I think there is also a see change. I would also like to thank the current President, who is not a member of any accounting profession but actually works for FNPF, Mr. Pravinesh Singh, who has been very instrumental in trying to get all the accounting firms, accountants - to provide their comments and push this particular Bill through with us. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge all Members, to vote for this Bill.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Fiji Institute of Chartered Accountants Bill 2021 (Bill No. 35/2021) moved under Standing Order 51 was passed and enacted by Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No..... of 2021)]

CUSTOMS TARIFF (AMENDMENT) (NO. 3) BILL 2021

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Monday, 29th November, 2021, I move:

That the Customs Tariff (Amendment) (No. 3) Bill 2021 (Bill No. 36/2021) be debated, voted upon and be passed.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I remind you that pursuant to the resolution of Parliament, debate will be limited to one hour.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, in the interest of time I will be brief. Essentially this Act (Customs Tariff Act) contains the harmonised system of what you call Nomenclature. This system is contained at length within Schedule 2 to the Act and is reflected as Tariff Items and Concession Codes.

As a member of the World Customs Organisation (WCO), Fiji is obligated to update its Customs Tariff Schedule in accordance with the amendments to the Harmonised System (HS) approved by the WCO. Essentially, what it means is that, these codes say, for example (Members have it in front of them on page 15), if you are going to import live horses, asses, mules and hinnies, its code number is 0101. If you are going to import live swine, code number is 0103, live sheep and goat, code number is 0104. This code system is across the world so this has been harmonised by the WCO and we have to adopt it. It is not part of the Act itself but it is part of the Schedule to the Act.

So, when our Customs people actually liaise with other Customs agencies, everyone is speaking the same language and essentially, that is what it is. We are obligated to do so as member of WCO and our law needs to reflect that, Sir, and this is what it is simply all about.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, on the Opposition side, do not have any issues with this particular Bill, as it is to comply with all Customs organisations requirements. However, since we are talking about Customs, there are two issues that I want to raise which deal with human welfare and they are directly linked to either duty levels imposed through this legislation, or in the implementation of this voluminous document to ensure compliance and revenue collection in accordance with its provision.

First, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the issue of duty levels, while the Harmonised System (HS) Nomenclature has been realigned to WCO standards, the duty level remains unchanged, and in the current climate of fuel prices hitting the roof, this needs to be looked at immediately.

Before lunch I was mocked by the honourable Attorney-General, I heard him speaking and he was suggesting it. But I asked the honourable Attorney-General to provide the people of Fiji with a better solution, instead of bragging about payouts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said before, Government must show compassion and fulfil its obligatory social responsibility by immediately removing the 20 cents per litre extra duty on fuel imposed from 1st April, 2020. The extra fuel tax is now having a crippling effect due to the escalating price of fuel, following the latest hike from yesterday - motor spirit, diesel, premix, kerosene and cooking gas prices have risen extremely high and it is, as I have said, having a crippling effect on the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you will remember that on 26th March, 2020, while delivering the COVID-19 Response Budget, the honourable Minister for Economy justified the imposition of the 20 cents per litre tax and he actually said that because the world prices was going down so low, even with the imposition of the 20 cents tax, people will still pay a lower price. He then stated that despite the imposition of the additional tax, as I have said before, people will not be affected but that, I think, has now evaporated, Mr. Speaker.

Now, that the world fuel price has risen contributing to this extra increase in price locally, it is only fair that that 20 cents that was imposed at that time in 2020, be immediately removed and as we

have been saying, I think, Mr. Speaker, it is very important to understand that it is the duty of any government to pass on the benefits of any price reduction to the people as part of its social obligation.

For 20 months now, this Government has extracted extra revenue by imposing duty on low fuel price. Therefore, people have never actually benefitted from the global decrease in the fuel price. The latest hikes make fuel prices exorbitant and unaffordable, especially in an economically depressed climate. It has a flow on effect, and will also increase delivery of services and cost of doing business which directly or indirectly are reliant on fuel and gas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I remember raising this when the honourable Minister was in Singapore and he essentially said that we should make a submission to the Budget, and seeking relief for the ordinary people in this particular circumstances is not too much to ask for. I think it is time that Government must do the right thing by the people and remove this 20 cents per litre extra tax which is becoming a financial burden.

The other point that we need to understand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a thing called oil or fuel inflation. Fuel is like blood in the body, almost similar to what is fuel in the economy because when the fuel prices rise, the cost of everything, I mean, people transporting goods from one point to the other have to pay for extra costs. And these are all being reflected in the cost of living and people cannot understand why. I know there are supply chain issues, global issues, but these are things that we can address at home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think there is also a need to look at how duties are calculated to cushion the rising cost of living to freight charges. I am told that the current duty and VAT is calculated on Cost, Insurance and Freight (CIF). If it is calculated on freight on board, then both the payable duty and VAT will come down.

Mr. Speaker, the 20 cents per litre extra duty was supposed to be a temporary measure, as stated by the honourable Attorney-General at that time when fuel prices were low. Now they are rising, I think we need to consider that.

I think it is important for people to understand; why does the Government want that 20 cents? I mean, we understand that Government has shortage of funds or revenue. When the honourable Minister for Economy talks about budget support, you get the budget support. It is obvious, yes, never in the history that we have got budget support, but never in the history have we had such financial crisis. So if our donors are actually giving us budget support, they know we are struggling in our budget and we thank them as well.

It is not necessarily that they have confidence in the Government's management of the economy and their finance, they know that you need the money and they are responding to the needs and social welfare of the people.

(Inaudible interjection)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is the fact, that is the truth. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is inhumane to rip financial misery on the people in this difficult times.

The other point that I wanted to make, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that, staff of Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS) are besieged, working under a cloud of fear and uncertainty after random and enforced voluntary redundancies to reduce the FRCS workforce by over 230 employees. How can staff working under such uncertainty be expected to enforce the provisions of the Act? The staff are confused as to who is in charge of FRCS after not being given clear signals on why the purge is happening.

Last year, 83 frontline border staff mainly Customs Officers were made redundant. Government hid behind 'it's the act of God' definition of the COVID-19 pandemic and tried to use of closure of borders to justify the layoffs, and FRCS is recruiting officers on frontline border staff following the reopening of the borders. Are they recruiting the same people? Do they have experienced people?

Given the importance of ensuring that our borders are not porous, we need experienced people. We cannot understand why the FRCS Board and the CEO are on a warpath and the reason they gave is that, it is digitisation. I cannot understand if all the end-to-end process would be completed without people being there. They talk about economic problems. What is the real issue? Why are staff put under such difficult conditions of uncertainty and told to leave? This is a fundamental question that this Government needs to answer.

Who at FRCS are responsible for decisions to cut the pieces of the livelihood of staff, whether the:

- FRCS CEO has told staff in a briefing session that the directors who report to the CEO and come under her control are responsible for identifying staff members to be sent home and that she does not know anything;
- two of the directors responsible have not had any experience in dealing with human resource;
- the appointments acting or otherwise are based on merit;
- one of the directors, while employed by FRCS as Chief Customs Officer based in Suva had a letter of complaint against him sent to the then FRCS CEO in June 2018, alleging demeaning behaviour of threatening, ridiculing and intimidating staff;
- the FRCS Board and its Chairperson have sanctioned the enforced redundancy?

Those are, Mr. Speaker, fundamental questions and I hope the honourable Attorney-General would be able to answer that.

Before I sit down, Mr. Speaker, let me implore on the Government, again, that the 20 cents per litre on fuel tax that was imposed in 2020 was done with a reason, as explained by the honourable Attorney-General that the world prices were going low and even with the low prices and even with the 20 cents tax per litre, the consumers will still pay a lower price. That is not the case anymore, Mr. Speaker, so it is time to get rid of the 20 cents per litre tax.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Very, very briefly, Mr. Speaker, we support this Bill for the basic reason that it will enable compliance by Fiji to the World Customs Organisation (WCO) standard that is universal and for those reasons, this is necessary for the ongoing work in this area.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not know whether the honourable Member has actually looked at it in close detail, but some of the coding has actually changed. Just to give you an understanding of it, there is new structural changes to this coding, for example, novel tobacco and nicotine products now have a specific breakdown under Chapter 24, to differentiate it from traditional tobacco products. The breakdown includes products intended for inhalation without combustion, reconstituted tobacco, nicotine replacement therapies for oral and transdermal application.

Textile garments and other articles incorporating chemical or electronic components for additional functionality will now be classified under section 11 of the textiles and textile articles. For example, flood panel, display modules whether or not incorporating touch sensitive screens will now form part of Chapter 85, electrical machinery equipment, similarly electrical and electronic waste and scrap will be added to this chapter for ease of identification and that is a new area.

We are currently developing some business incubators in respect of how we are going to treat waste. Everyone in Fiji now use mobile phones, people use personal computers, laptops, some of it gets thrown away. They have chemicals in them. How are we going to treat them? How are we going to process them if we are going to export them to other countries for further recycling or how will they be treated?

So a lot of issues we need to put in place, for example, unmanned aircraft commonly known as drones, will now have a separate classification in Chapter 88, aircrafts, spacecrafts and parts thereof. This, of course, will exclude toys designed solely for amusement purposes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to honourable Professor Prasad's comments, we did not mock him as he says. He tends to be quite Bollywood-ish as I have said before, he needs to get less theatrical. We are not bragging about any payments, we are simply stating facts. We have paid out \$500 million, they did bring a motion to say, "Assist people to \$50 million or \$80 million." What we were saying is that we have done more than that.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- (Inaudible)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Please, you were not here and as usual in his absence, he always gets the facts wrong.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they also forget things that we are subsidising electricity cost and subsidising water cost. Again, you would expect that a person who is involved with economics or economy would know also that when we present to Parliament a budget, we have our expenditure and we have our revenue source. It is a very basic fundamental understanding of governance.

HON. MEMBER.- Very poor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we are, for example, let us all going buying for votes as what he wants to do. If we all say, "let us take away the 20 cents". It immediately puts a \$56 million hold in revenue collection.

Parliament has approved the appropriation. We have to stick to the appropriation. If we are going to remove a \$56 million revenue, suddenly certain things have to be cut off. We have to come back to Parliament for that approval....

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- (Inaudible)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Again, he does not understand.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- (Inaudible)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- If I could, please, try and educate you again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if he reads the Budget documents, he would see that

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What suits you.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.-... in the Budget, we had actually forecasted budget support because we had discussions with our development partners. There are many countries that are in far worse

trouble than we are to which Australia and New Zealand give assistance to and other countries, but they have not given them budget support; that is the point. He thinks that budget support comes along, he knows that, he is being intellectually disingenuous.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor, very poor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Budget support is never given unless you meet certain criteria. This is why it has never been given to Fiji before; that is the point.

Normally when governments did not meet the financial criteria, management skillsets and the laws, et cetera, they would give funding directly for a particular project. They do not send it through your budget, that is the difference, and he knows that. He is misleading Parliament.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I'm not misleading Parliament.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact of the matter is, yes, I did say when we introduced the 20 cents that that 20 cents is not going to make a difference because the price of fuel was significantly very low. Obviously, the world price of fuel has gone up, no one had predicted it. In the same way, no one had predicted the pandemic. So, obviously, we need to respond to that and we will respond to it at the appropriate time. As I also said when we presented the budget for this year's Budget is that, if there is a need, we will do a revision of the Budget.

They do not want tourists to come. We are now seeing tourists coming. There have been over 200,000 bookings, Mr. Speaker, Sir, spread from now until October 2022. If we get a big chunk of those tourists and most of the hotels are booked from Christmas, some of them are a bit slow now, but from Christmas, they pick up until January. If we have that number of tourists coming in, obviously our revenue will increase, we will go beyond what we had budgeted as revenue. So from that perspective, it gives us surplus.

When you have a surplus, then you have a lot more room for manoeuvring. When you are able to manoeuvre, you can then be able to say, "Okay, this thing is now a bit expensive, we can reduce that" or "this is somewhere else that we can direct the money to". We will have to come back to Parliament for that, and that is what we intend to do if the occasion arises, but we have to assess it. We do not do things just overnight because he wants to go and sit down with a group of people and say, "This Government is really bad. If I were there, I would bring it down by 20 cents."

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- (Inaudible)

HON. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- That is precisely what he is doing, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Making laws and doing appropriations is very different, again, he knows that. That is so stupendously stupid to say that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that they also have not highlighted and he kind of acknowledged it slightly, supply chains are increasing. If you read the articles, even the past few weeks, the cost of freight globally is going up, and there is no doubt, it will have an impact on the cost of items that we import from overseas. We have absolutely no control over it. Similarly, with the price of fuels, we absolutely have no control over it.

Yesterday, on my way to Nadi, I had a lady who actually texted me, I do not want to say her name. She said to me, "You people have put up the price of fuel, you should not do this, how will I send my daughter to school, I will not vote for you and I will tell others not to vote for you." I have got the text message here. I called up the lady, I have never met her before, and I explained to her that we do not

control the prices. She said, “Yes, but despite that.” I said, “Your daughter who is going to school, you do not pay her school fees, we pay her school fees. If she is taking the bus, if you are a low income earner, we pay for her bus fare, you need to be to understand that.” She said, “Well, someone told me you can increase the hourly wages.” I said, “There are literally over a hundred thousand people who have lost their jobs, we want them to go back to their jobs first.” She said, “Yes, I acknowledge that, but never mind.”

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Yes, NFP.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point is that, you have a discussion with them, we try and explain to members of the public. I am actually concerned that politicians like, honourable Professor Prasad and others, are going around, offering them simplistic solutions, not explaining to them how we need to look at the economy, what are the various factors, denominators and contributors to how the economy is run. That unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is what has happened.

He went on about the FRCS Board, et cetera. I mean, what kind of qualifications that previous FRCS Board members have? You know, many of them who were appointed, absolutely had no contribution whatsoever. We also know about the corruption that took place in FRCS. The review of the staff is being done by the Board at the moment.

Honourable Waqanika used to work for FRCS. She should tell us about the shenanigans that went on when she was there. I do not want to delve too much into that, you know what I am talking about.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- No, I don't.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Well, obviously, you have amnesia.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact of the matter is that, we are currently reviewing all of these factors. We are looking at the changes in the economy, the global economy, how will it have an impact on us, what can we do within the revenue that we can raise. Of course, the next three or four months will be extremely crucial in respect of assessing - in fact, as I had mentioned, do we present an alternative budget or not, and how do we actually position that budget?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Members for supporting this particular Bill. As I have said, of course, we see now that most of these Bills are very simple. Honourable Professor Prasad, in his absence, always comes back and tries to raise other issues completely unrelated to the Bill. But honourable Nawaikula, thank you for your support of this Bill and for the very short statement which is very enlightening. I hope it is a new passage of time that we are seeing now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge all the honourable Members to support this Bill.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Customs Tariff (Amendment)(No.3) Bill 2021 (Bill No. 36/2021) moved under Standing Order 51 was passed and enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji (Act No. of 2021)]

HOTELS AND GUEST HOUSES (AMENDMENT) BILL 2021

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Monday, 29th, November, 2021, I move:

That the Hotels and Guest Houses (Amendment) Bill 2021 (Bill No. 37/2021), be debated, voted upon and be passed.

HON. LT.COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I remind that pursuant to the resolution of Parliament, debate will be limited to one hour. I now call upon the Attorney- General to speak on his motion.

HON. A. AYED-KHAIYUM.- Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the interest of time, I will be extremely brief. As we know, we provided a number of incentives, in particular to the tourism sector, to ensure that they are able to compete with those from outside of Fiji, in particular, within the region and the greater region which includes the Asia Pacific Region, Sir.

Again, to make things easier for them, what we are proposing in this particular Bill, and I hope that all honourable Members of this Parliament will support it, is that instead of the Hotel Licensing Board being able to only give a licence for one year, that hotels, nine months before the expiry of their licence, have to go and submit all the documents all the time. It is not only a question of cost but also a question of convenience and, of course, certainty. So, the amendment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we can see in the Bill itself, allows the Hotel Licensing Board and the applicant to get a hotel licence up to five years.

The current law itself, Mr. Speaker, Sir, obviously gives the Hotel Licensing Board the ability to receive any complaints in the period of five years, they have the ability to, of course, go and look at the premises themselves should they feel that something is amiss. It says, “up to five years”, therefore, it means an operator may come along and say, “Look I am a small operator, I only want it for three years.” Someone may say up to five years, so it is their choice. So we are giving them a choice. A lot of people we know would opt for five years.

In respect of the fees itself, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fees is not stated in the Act itself but it is part of the regulations, and we are currently looking at how we can have a more robust system in terms of the fees for hotel licensing.

With those introductory remarks, I would like to ask honourable Members to support the Bill.

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

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just before I go into that, I just want to correct something that the honourable Dr. Mahendra Reddy had objected to and that was in regard to the work at the Nadroga/Navosa Project in Sigatoka. What I was trying to say was that, we were ready to start on 1st November after all the work had been done to the satisfaction of the other agencies, which is quite detailed and taxing. It was just that on the last week just before we were going to start, this clerk at Sigatoka Town Council said we also do an EIA. So, I was not blaming the Department of Environment, it was just the way that they gave us this requirement when we were ready to go.

Honourable Dr. Reddy, I was not trying to blame the Department of Environment, you have come through, hopefully you will get something tomorrow, it was just the disconnected manner that the other agencies had processed our application. That is something that we really need to look into Mr. Speaker, Sir, so hopefully, we get the approval tomorrow. It was not pointing the finger at the Department of

Environment, it was more the (I think) Town and Country Planning - let them do an EIA also after all the work we had done. So, please, correction there, honourable Dr. Reddy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I could also just touch on the credibility factor, as highlighted by the honourable Attorney-General, that we are getting all this supporting budget because of the credibility of the FijiFirst Government. Other Governments in the past did a good job too and they were credible. It is not just because of FijiFirst.

There is a situation that you need to realise, Mr. Speaker, is that, there is what we call, the 'China factor'. The two big countries - Australia and New Zealand, are now concerned about China coming into the Pacific and that is why they are giving us the kind of support we never used to have before. So, it is not because FijiFirst are managing the books better than before, it is just that dynamics have changed in this part of the world. They want to keep China out of the Pacific, so they will give most of what we want. It is a policy known as 'strategic denial' for Australia and New Zealand to keep China out, hence the level of support we are seeing today. So, it will be wrong for FijiFirst to claim that they are so efficient, that is why they are getting all the support.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- That is disrespect to our development partners – total disrespect!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Do not make claims that are unfounded, we also know the story. It is not because you are super-efficient, it is the way things are today. Australia and New Zealand will do their utmost to keep China out of the Pacific, so we will be seeing a lot of support from them. That is the reality of it. It is not because you are efficient. We have had better Governments in the past, please, let us always remember that, honestly.

MR. SPEAKER.- Stick to the motion.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Stick to the motion.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Stick to the motion.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can we just have one Speaker in this Parliament, please

(Laughter)

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- There is only one Speaker.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Stick to the motion.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the hotels - this yearly review or yearly application, I believe, goes back to the period when tourism was just starting out. I was just sharing with my colleagues in the Party that there was a time, I think in the 1960s or 1970s, when there were guesthouses all over Suva, guest houses all over Fiji.

I think there was a concern that the standards were not really there, and that is why they had to bring in this kind of regulations, to make sure that they check on them on a regular basis which was yearly. I know for those of us who managed the hotels linked to global chains, there was no fear of that, but I think the concern there was that, a lot of the small operators were abusing the system.

There was a case during my time in tourism, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when American investors built properties in Rakiraki and they would collect the payment in America. People would come to Fiji and say that they are tourists but there was no money coming into Fiji because they were paid back in America and they occupied properties. They would stay for weeks, for months in their homes here in Fiji. That was one area that was really very concerning to us, and we managed to put some regulations to stop that. That is an indication of why they had this yearly kind of review to regulate this kind of activities.

As a former hotelier, I would welcome doing it every five years. I think we still need to be mindful that there can be abuse of the system and in the process, compromise the level or standard of our accommodation sector in Fiji. Yes, we understand where we are going and we understand that this will help with the operators, but the quality of the Fiji product needs to be utmost in our mind, Mr. Speaker.

It was wonderful seeing the arrival of people coming into Fiji yesterday. Those happy faces should be assured of quality in their accommodation and this is one way of ensuring that the accommodation quality is maintained at a consistent level. While we appreciate what you are trying to do - I know that we have harped about the ease of doing business - let us always remember that there was a reason for doing this and if we are going this way, let us make sure that we respond very quickly when something amiss comes out in the Tourism Industry. If someone is not offering the standard that we promised, or if we compromise the reputation of our product, then we must act very quickly to correct things. We need to caution the Government to also be in a position to respond quickly to a situation that can easily damage our reputation.

Mr. Speaker, today, we live in a global economy - information age, and one mistake can quickly reach out to every corner of the world. If something in Fiji is wrong, there is a danger there, so let us do this but be careful of what the repercussions could be if we are not vigilant in the way we maintain our standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wish there could have been a bit more dialogue on this.

(Laughter)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Have you checked the Hotel Association?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- (Inaudible)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Have you checked with the native land people, the repercussions on the lease?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- They've got a proper lease.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can you occasionally wave the yellow card and throw someone out.

(Chorus of laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- I have got the red card.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- We are talking about the biggest segment in a tourism offering which is the accommodation sector, so when you talk on accommodation, you must take time to have dialogue on this in the ways that can give us a lot of comfort about this, Mr. Speaker. So really, we just wish that we could take this back and let us have more dialogue on this.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to make a short response to the Bill before the House. However, before I actually respond, I would just like to respond to some of the accusations made against me in this House.

First, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to my OB, honourable Jone Usamate, he misled the House by saying that I said that climate change is not important. In my speech, I said, “I do not believe this is”

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- You did.

HON. MEMBER.- You said it was not a priority.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Yes! Priority and importance are two different things.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. MEMBER.- What is the priority?

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Sir, although it is important, the priority is revitalising the economy and disaster preparedness - that is more important.

Regarding climate change, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I consider the climate change adaptation and mitigation process to be very important. My village is the only village in Fiji that has a village-based NGO called *Kai ni Cola* which was basically established for climate mitigation and adaptation. How many of them have done that in their village - champions of climate change. How many of them? Because of our effort, I thank the honourable Minister for recognising our hard work, our programmes and that was how we got the seawall approved. So, you have to work and I want to correct my OB for saying that.

The second accusation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Attorney-General accused me of using my car for the promotion of another party. Sir, he should understand that we live in the village and he knows about the *kerekere* syndrome that we face. You cannot deny your relatives what they want but maybe they come and ask for my car for a different reason and I gave my car - I am not the driver, I am not the driver! I can assure this Parliament and I can assure the Attorney-General, that I will go back to my village, investigate the issue and report the matter to the police.

(Laughter)

Regarding the Bill before the House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the Bill as stated by the honourable Minister for Economy on the ground that it will provide opportunities for our local entrepreneurs to invest into the tourism industry which is basically dominated by overseas investors. But I give two recommendations to the other side of Parliament - if they can consider reintroducing the special loans scheme with the FDB so that our local entrepreneurs can have that advantage. We all understand that we are cash poor but we have the resources. If they are talking about a level playing-field, you have to refer back to the special loans schemes to assist indigenous people to become players on a level playing-field with other overseas investors, otherwise it will not work. That is why we are saying we need to promote our local investors, investing our local resources. This is good but they need to do that.

My second recommendation is the monitoring. At the moment, if you can go down to the Coral Coast and ask the landowners, the resource owners, most of these hoteliers are not honouring their lease agreement. There have been arrears in payments and iTLTB knows that. I ask the Minister for Economy if they can monitor that and to consider those two recommendations – to reintroduce those schemes to help our local business people and have a better monitoring service. Thank you, Sir.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The position from this side of the House has been stated by my colleagues that we will support this enactment. I would like to indicate some concerns in relations to it which we should bear in mind and watch out for.

Mr. Speaker, the amendment seeks to extend the time for the review of the licence from one year to five years. Now, if we look at the enactment, we ask ourselves first, why the legislators at the time selected one year. That would be clear when looking at the Act.

This Act, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was passed in 1973. So, in 1973 when Parliament sat in their wisdom, they did not select five, they selected one. The powers of this Licensing Board, if you look at that, are contained in section 4, which tells us what the Licensing Board will look out for, before they grant a licence or a renewal for someone who is operating a hotel or guesthouse. These are the things that they look for which are the conditions that they will look to or take into account or take into consideration before they give you a one-year licence or after that one year, renewable for another year.

Firstly, it says, “no licence has been granted or renewed by the Board, unless it is satisfied that the Manager is of good character and a fit and proper person to run and conduct a hotel and that the hotel or any part of it will not run as a disorderly house or for illegal or immoral purposes”.

Secondly, that the premises are reasonably suitable in all respects for use as a hotel (and it goes on) and it will take into account the manner in which the hotel has been run and conducted, structurally maintained during any period prior to the date of renewal. Further down, it says that it will be reviewable for one year. That was a responsibility, and we ask ourselves, why were they doing that?

I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the answer is because they were concerned for standard. They wanted this industry of hotel and guesthouses to be of the highest standard so that in every year, they will not only look at the structure, but also look at the conduct - what has been done for. I think that was good, Fiji now relies and depends a lot on the hotel industry. It is very important that the standards are met and are kept very, very high.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was in the West last week. I usually go to Gateway Hotel in Nadi but with the income of tourism, it went right up, so I was forced to go to the others. You can see the differences, in some of these other hotels you walk in and the foul smell. The concern there is that, with the tourists coming in, we want standards to be in compliance for every hotel. They must fulfil the same standards.

That is the reason why they were forced for one year, every year so that they ensure that those high standards are kept and this was in 1973, nearly 50 years ago. And here we are now with the technology and everything, the only reason that the Government has stated for changing this is in Explanation 2:

“The process for applying is time consuming and create administrative and a duty difficulties with today’s technology”

I disagree with that with today’s technology and the concern and the area that I wish for us to look out for is that, this might reduce the standards in the hotel. That is my contribution to this Bill. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to perhaps, respond very quickly. Honourable Nawaikula, thank you for reading out the basis on which the licence is actually granted but also more so section 6 says ‘suspension and cancellation of licences – when during the currency of the licence, it appears or it made to appear to the Board that either:

- a. a hotel or any part of the hotel is being run or conducted an improper manner or for illegal or immoral purposes or
- b. a hotel or any part thereof is or has become unsuitable for use as hotel, the Board may either order the manager of the hotel to carry out some remedies or cancel the licence.

It does not have anything, honourable Gavoka, to do with revenue and where the revenue is made. The Hotel Licensing Board has got nothing to do with revenue. What you have raised, honourable Gavoka is actually a very pertinent issue. In fact, you may recall in this Parliament, we talked about how FRCS is now trying to track that revenue.

And there are still, even with some of the larger hotels, the revenue in fact, some of it is actually booked offshore, because the chain of hotels can do more of that. The revenue is booked offshore and people simply just turn up here. That is all the work that FRCS has been doing to ensure that even though it is owned by a foreign company 100 per cent, the revenue must come into Fiji, and then the money is actually repatriated or send back to where ever the actual principal office is. The hoteliers in fact, has been asking for this for quite some time.

Honourable Nawaikula talked about how it has been traced since 1973 or 1975 and the technology has changed significantly. But also in 1973 or 1975, we did not have a high standard of Occupational, Health and Safety (OHS), which the hotels has to comply with in any case and a separate piece of legislation. Occupational, Health and Safety is now a very much part and parcel of all the hotels. We did not have a National Fire Authority in a way that we do have now. It is also a compliance requirement, so all those requirements will still need to be met. In other words, the high standards will be maintained.

Honourable Kuridrani, in fact, had stated about how it should help smaller local hotels. Yes, it will help them. If someone is operating some eco-tourism within a five *bures* on some island, imagine them having every year, from the Yasawas, to file this annual licensing application. It is very difficult for them. For the big boys and girls it is okay, but not for someone who may be operating a small resort in Bua, for them to come and do this on an annual basis, it is very difficult for them. This is precisely why the reason we are doing it. It gives people certainty. When they go to their banks, when they apply for loans, they will say, "I have my annual licence for five years." The banks know alright, this person can operate.

Honourable Gavoka said that we should defer this and did we consult the landowners? If you have a hotel that is operating, obviously, they cannot operate as a hotel, without a lease. There is no provision in the law under the lease that says when you apply for an annual hotel licence, you must consult TLTB. No, it does not say that. So you see, again, another administrative problem he wants to create.

On the same token, they all talk about ease of doing business. He complained about the EIA, municipal council, and here we are trying to ease things for us, in particular, Fijian businesses to make it easier for them to encourage local businesses. Someone can put up about five *bures*, 10 *bures*, eco-park, eco-tourism, walk out in the interior of Viti Levu, Bukuya and all those places, we are trying to encourage through the Ministry of Tourism to set up some *bures* in the interior, because that is another feature of Fiji that is not highlighted very much. We all got sun, sand and the beach. So, these things will help them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I really do not have much more to comment on that, but to those people who have some form of fear, thereby giving a five year licence suddenly these people will be able to run a mark, nor they cannot. As I had highlighted, the Board will see as to who has the licences. The Board can anytime go and do an inspection and anyone can actually complain. Honourable Nawaikula goes to a hotel and he believes some funny business is going on, he can go and complain immediately to the Board, and they will immediately investigate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again I thank all the honourable Members for contributing to this, and urge them and I would like to also encourage all the hoteliers that please, with the passing of this Bill, you will now be able to have another feature which makes things easier for you, please apply. We also have, as you have seen in the Bill, there is a transitional provision which is clause 2(5B), it says should anyone at this point in time have already made the application, they will be subject to the new law as it passes. So thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Hotels and Guest Houses (Amendment) Bill 2021 (Bill No. 37/2021) moved under Standing Order 51 was passed and enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji (Act No. of 2021)]

MEDICINAL PRODUCTS (AMENDMENT) (NO.2) BILL 2021

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of the Parliament on Monday, 29th November, 2021, I move:

That the Medicinal Products (Amendment)(No.2) Bill 2021 (Bill No. 38/2021), be debated, voted upon and be passed.

HON. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I wish to remind you that pursuant to the resolution of Parliament, the debate will be limited to one hour.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted in the introduction of this Bill on Monday, this amendment essentially seeks to give the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services to allow for the importation of certain medicinal products. Product poisoned or devised other than the specifying products. Using the opinion of the Minister, Mr. Speaker, Sir, say for general use which is specified in the regulation under this Act. Essentially, this gives the Minister, the powers to make regulations, to allow certain products and as I highlighted, Sir, that we need to do this urgently, in particular and in relation to COVID-19.

The issue at hand, is that, there are currently COVID testing kits available in the open market, they are available from various produces and manufacturers. We need to get as many of those into the market and get many importers as possible who can actually import these products, as long as, Mr. Speaker, Sir, those products are the ones that are listed by the honourable Minister through this regulations.

The Permanent Secretary for Health has already provided the list of all those companies and brands from which we can buy from. The point, as highlighted also, Mr. Speaker, on Monday, is that, at this point in time, one of the major costs involved in tourists coming to Fiji is the Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) testing they will need to do. For example, a tourist family of four leaving Australia, they had to do a PCR test, it can cost up to a couple of hundred dollars in Australia, I do not know the exact rate in Australia but most certainly in Fiji, when they come to Fiji in the first twenty-four to forty-eight hours, they will have to do a rapid test.

At this point in time, I see most of the hotels are charging \$40 for rapid test. So, for a family of four, that is, \$160. Before they return to Australia, for instance to Sydney, there is a requirement in

Australian that they should do a PCR test also. The PCR test, as we know, is far more sophisticated and therefore, it costs a lot more than the rapid test. So if it is costing \$250, that is a thousand dollar for four people. What the Ministry of Health is currently doing and the Solicitor-General's Office is working with them, is to be able to open up this market, to allow as many doctors, surgeries, outlets, labs, allowed private sector investors in this space who can actually perform this thing - who actually have the qualified technicians who will be employed by them and to be able to provide these services to the hotels and tourists.

As we know, the more players we have in the market, we will then be able to bring down the cost, so Fiji becomes attractive. We have heard that some other countries have significantly reduced their costs. In fact, just two nights ago, I was browsing and looking at all the products that are being made available to Australian tourists.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you saw the rates that are, for example, offered by countries like Vietnam at Five Star Hotels, we will fall off our chairs. Travel to Vietnam and back, staying at Five Star Hotel and then having three or four whole day meals will be provided by the hotel Free Of Charge (FOC) just to get a share of the market, slightly less than AU\$2,000 for couples.

The hotels rate are significantly low. Of course, if testing can be thrown into that, then people become extremely price sensitive. We have to compete a lot more, so that we, as a country, need to see where the cost barriers are. Where are the places we can actually bring down the cost?

The passing of this Bill and the allowance for the Minister to make exceptions for the importation of these products will mean many pharmacies, doctor surgeries and laboratories can open up which will ease the burden also on the public health system. As the honourable Minister highlighted today, honourable NFP Members missed this, I saw on their fences that they had those people who died from COVID-19 unfortunately as it may but that is to the neglect of other people who would have died from, for example, other NCDs, cardiovascular issues, diabetes, et cetera.

The Ministry of Health needs to divert its resources towards that. This is one area where the private sector can participate to ease the burden of being able to provide competitive pricing and we also become attractive as a tourist destination. This is the rationale behind this amendment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we urge Parliament to support this amendment.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Attorney-General. I now give the floor to the honourable Dr. Lalabalavu.

HON. DR. RATU. A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion before this august House on the proposed amendment to the Medicinal Products Act of 2011.

According to the Medicinal Products Act 2011:

- “5. (1) The Board shall consist of 12 members appointed by the Minister.
- (a) the chairperson;
 - (b) the deputy chairperson;
 - (c) Government Analyst or his or her nominee;
 - (d) 2 persons who shall be registered pharmacists and who shall be nominated by the Fiji Pharmaceutical Society, one of whom with experience in retail pharmacy services and the other with the experience in the private sector;
 - (e) 2 persons who shall be representatives of the School of Medicine with qualifications or experience in pharmacology and who shall be nominated by

- the Dean or the College of Medicine and Nursing and Health Sciences, of the one person shall be a representative of the Fiji Medical Association;
- (g) one person who shall be representative of the Fiji College of General Practitioners; and
 - (h) 3 persons with an interest in medicine, law, pharmaceutical industry or consumer affairs.”

Sir, I believe these requirements were put into place as a check and balance and to ensure transparency and accountability so that we acquire quality and the right medicinal product that is of acceptable standard for the people of Fiji.

The amendment will seek to align the provisions in section 35 of the Act so that the Minister is also empowered to make exemptions in relation to the import, manufacture or export of products in particular to make the importation of COVID-related equipment easily available at affordable prices. The question is, what is the implication of these changes?

Sir, the importation, manufacturing and export of medical products require an expert opinion and approval of a regulatory authority in order to ensure quality and standards are not compromised to protect public health and safety.

Medical products should be managed or controlled with much consideration in ensuring quality and safety before they can be reviewed to be made affordable. Therefore, an independent evaluation is needed to review and make recommendations to the board and Minister on any issues related to the medical products. If you make exemptions then you are likely to compromise standards and requirement outlined in the Act.

Some standard products are not safe for public use and consumed and therefore it is crucial that comprehensive evaluation is done before it is approved in terms of imported, manufactured or exported. SARS COVID pandemic highlighted the need to develop and maintain robust, efficient and resilient processes response to unpredictable and catastrophic scenarios. We do recognise the need for the importation of COVID-19 related equipment to be made easily accessible and at an affordable prices but the bottom line is that approved of any medical product should be linked to overall public health system and public health safety issue should always be paramount.

The Minister should always seek expert opinion from his or her board because that is why we have a Medicinal Product Board and the Fiji Medicinal Regulatory Authority to perform this role on behalf of the Minister without making irrational and unjustified exemptions.

Tendering process should be adhered to with the government policy and with public health safety being paramount. Coronavirus disease, COVID-19 emergency authorisations and full authorisation for medical devices by credited approving bodies such as WHO and FDA be the only medical products for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a lot of reservations of these amendments for this basic reasons people's lives matter they should be transparent and accountable in the purchase or production of medical products. Discretionary power opens windows for favouring with a particular or number of suppliers which may lead to inferior quality of supplies which is not accepted. Whilst we agree on timely medicine supply at compassionate prices, the bottom line is this must be above board and in the interest of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we support the amendment with reservation. Thank you very much.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the comments made by the honourable Dr. Ratu Atonio Lalabalavu. The current Act, the Fiji Pharmacy Medicines Act 2011 (Medicinal Products Act 2011) is a contemporary Act. The previous Act was the Pharmacy and Poisons Act Cap 115 was the name and certainly again back in the days in which the previous Act and also the one in 2011 was done there was a lot of alignment still happening within the pharmaceutical space.

Currently as we speak as a country that abides by a lot of the regulations or the guidelines of WHO especially throughout the COVID-19 pandemic we have seen that we do not have to repeat the extensive comprehensive mechanisms by which some of these testings for example have been done some of the medicines have been approved and we can be able to utilise that to our advantage by aligning ourselves to those guidelines.

For example, for the Rapid Diagnostic (RD) Antigen Test, we know for sure that 25 have been approved by WHO and we have 83 that have been approved by TGA which is the Therapeutic Guidelines or the Australian Regulatory Authority and they have gone through this in detail. So you can imagine that being able to do it for us it will take an extensive period of time to be able to do the same. We do not necessarily have to do so and we have been doing it throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other concern that is there is in terms of what is thought to be the misuse of this exemption and I can assure the honourable Member that the other legal frameworks that exist within the Ministry of Health, for example, the Public Health Act, the Elite Health Practitioners Act in which the lab scientists are being able to be classified and identified and actually accredited to be able to do the test. These will all come in also and form an umbrella basis in protection around what they seem to be the concern about a misuse. So to make it very clear, we are not going to be just agreeing to any particular test. That test has to meet the WHO EU well. That test, for example, the 83 have been approved already through Australia through Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). So we are just using that approval process and meeting our approval process and being able to utilise that so that we can be able to have more testing available.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also an opportunity that the honourable Attorney-General has talked about. We have lab scientists that are available so this is an opportunity for them to be able to be taken on from a company or a business that goes into this space and they can be able to find work. There is also opportunities for private practitioners to be able to extend their services beyond just seeing patients, being able also to offer the testing because they are able to use one of these 100 tests that are readily available which have been approved by WHO and also Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before the House, I support the amendment to the Bill. It will certainly help in terms of ensuring that we have extensive accredited testing available but also in terms of supporting those who may want to venture and especially general practitioners that the honourable Member is also one of the general practitioner who would understand that they would also want to venture into this being able to provide Rapid Diagnostic (RD) Antigen Testing readily available at their doorstep. I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as usual in his zeal to ride roughshod over the democratic norms by his standard of practice of invoking Order 51, which I talked about earlier, the honourable Attorney-General has either through his own doing or the actions of the Bill drafters has given rise to many questions about the real intention of this proposed legislation. I think we need to bring this out and we will have some questions for the honourable Attorney-General for which he should be able to answer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, why take out a gazette on a Sunday to try and legitimise the introduction of this Bill along with two others. As I said, surely the Attorney-General did not just wake up from his slumber,

he definitely knew that the borders were opening on December 1st to welcome tourists and it is extremely important therefore, as he said, to deregulate COVID-19 testing to ensure reduction in charge for such tests.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we know that he did not wake up from his slumber on Sunday and advised the office and the Parliamentary Secretariat that he was introducing this Bill as well as two others. The honourable Members of Parliament did not know the contents of the Bill but we accept your Ruling that it is our role to make and pass laws.

In my view and in fact, it was a pre-meditated Act like all of us, he also knew, as I have said before, the borders would open on 1st December. It shows that Government does not have plans, the honourable Minister talks about plan but I think this legislation itself, simple as it maybe, raises a lot of questions. We have been asked to make and pass this law (and as I said earlier) even if it is a simple amendment, we need time to relook at this and in some sense these sort of Bills under Standing Order 51 is again example of the deceitful nature of this Government to try and fast-track legislation with the minimal time for the scrutiny of the Bill. It is a deceitful way to make laws, so in the case of this Bill, the honourable Attorney-General's explanation while tabling the legislation on Monday as well as the intent of the Bill contained in the Schedule are both contradictory. They both say something and yet the intent is entirely different.

On Monday, the honourable Attorney-General told us, in this case, the Minister for Health the minister responsible was given powers to bypass the Medicinal Products Board to allow more businesses to storage, distribution or sale of COVID-19 testing products particularly PCR or rapid test equipment. The honourable Attorney-General said that the Minister cannot make an exemption in relation to the import, manufacture or export of products. Then he contradicted himself, Mr. Speaker, by saying and I quote:

“The honourable Minister for Health does not want to actually go through this process where the Medicinal Board has then to say, ‘you have to get a licence et cetera’, he wants to allow for those rapid tests and those brands to come into Fiji as soon as possible.”

Mr. Speaker, the Bill has similar contradiction, section 35(1) of the principal legislation that:

“... this Bill seeks to amend, states no person shall import, manufacture or export any product without a licence issued by the board.”

The amendment inserts “after the board”, section 35(1) it says, and I quote:

“... except a medicinal product, poison or devise or other specified product which in the opinion of the Minister is safe for general use and which is specified by regulations made under this Act.”

Mr. Speaker, the question is, how can therefore both Attorney-General and the Bill's explanatory note say that the Minister does not have the powers to grant import licences when he himself said on Monday that the intention of the amendment is to basically bypass provision for a licence and for the Minister to allow for products to come into Fiji as soon as possible.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- How is that a contradiction? You do not know what you are talking about.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Even for argument sake, the honourable Attorney-General's statement to allow products into Fiji does not mean importing them, Mr. Speaker. The explanatory notes

of the Bill in my view are a mistake and he can clarify that. Does it mean that COVID products like COVID-19 rapid testing machines and equipment have arrived or imported into the country without a licence from the Board will now be approved or used by the Minister? How and why was it imported? If it was imported in the first place, are they approved by the WHO?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Yes.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Because only three months ago, WHO said only three brands of rapid testing equipment are available.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Tell them!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You answer that question whether there are only those three brands or is that equipment recognised by Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) of Australia will be imported or are already in the country? These are questions that we need to ask. Worse still, Mr. Speaker, does this amendment not empower the Minister to go beyond only COVID-19 testing equipment? I know you emphasised COVID-19 testing equipment to authorised procurement, storage and sale of medicine without licence from the Board.

Mr. Speaker, what is the Fiji Medicinal Products Board? This is another example of Government trying to centralise every decision-making. Section 5 of the principal legislation establishes a 12-member Board appointed by the Minister namely:

1. The Permanent Secretary of Health, who shall be the chairperson.
2. Chief Pharmacist, who shall be the deputy chairperson.
3. Government analyst, or his or her nominee.
4. Two persons who shall be registered pharmacists and who shall be nominated by the Fiji Pharmaceutical Society, one of whom with experience in retail pharmacy services and the other with experience in the private sector.
5. Two persons who shall be representatives of the School of Medicine with qualifications or experience in pharmacology, who shall be nominated by the Dean of the College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Services of the Fiji National University.
6. One person who shall be the representative of the Fiji Medical Association.
7. One person who shall be a representative of the College of General Practitioners.
8. Three persons with an interest in medicine, law, pharmaceutical industry or consumer affairs.

Mr. Speaker, without doubt, it appears to be a very, very qualified Board. So, why the need to bypass such a qualified Board? Does the Board exist? Are the people appointed or has the Board been not functional? Does the Government think that the process of obtaining a licence is too bureaucratic? These are valid questions, Mr. Speaker and these questions would have been asked if the Bill had actually gone for some discussion. So why was not such an amendment made?

Another question that people are asking because shortage of medicine, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a big issue and this Minister keeps asking about plans. His Ministry has been a complete disaster in terms of the availability of medicine. So if that was the case, why was this not amended five years ago? It was done in 2016 and the research was published in 2017. That shortage of medicine was caused and they listed the reasons why there was a shortage of medicine in Fiji especially in the health centres and hospitals. It says that it was caused by political and bureaucratic bungling, lack of funding, poor systems and logistics plus some patient causes resulting in supply imbalance, so those were the reasons.

These had a serious impact and the Minister knows on the health of our people, but every time we have raised this issue, every time we have asked for an inquiry into the health services, every time we have asked why there is shortage of basic medicine, there has been no answers from this Government and from the Minister himself. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, again I want to ask the question, why the amendment now in this form? Why can we not get the Board to work, if there is a Board there already. We are not fooled by the explanation of bringing down the cost of COVID test, yes, we all agree, I mean that is understood.

HON. MEMBER.- (Inaudible)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The question that we want to ask is, whether this legislation itself is going to raise loop holes and issues that can have other implications. So, I want to ask the honourable Attorney-General these five questions:

1. Is this amendment similar to the recent legislation on sale of shares pre-2011 being exempted for capital gains tax by helping certain businesses rollout the COVID testing equipment, what they have already imported or will import without having to obtain a licences?

HON. MEMBER.- We cannot import now.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- These are questions that people who have looked at this legislation in the last two days are asking.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Which people?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is on behalf of the people.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Which people?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I do not have to tell you that. You find out who they are?

2. Is it designed to assist a particular pharmaceutical importer operating a chain of pharmacy with close links to the ruling party?
3. Is it to help a particular businessman establish a COVID testing facility at Nadi Airport?
4. Is it to camouflage illegal importation of prohibited medicinal products by the owner of a pharmacy chain allegedly involved in controversial dealings?
5. Is it part of a greater scheme to hide the conversion of importation of illegal medicinal products into drugs because that has been the allegations made?

We know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that illicit drugs is a huge problem right now in the country. In relation to Question 5, I want to ask the honourable Attorney-General to inform Parliament whether the owner of one large warehouse and pharmaceutical chain is actually wanted by INTERPOL.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Pharmaceutical chain is wanted by INTERPOL and whether he is left the country? For the reasons I have outlined, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I would be happy to hear the answers to these questions because as I said, it is very important. I do not say that the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services is going to engage in some bad dealings but the fundamental problem...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... with this Government is centralising. When something goes wrong out there, the obvious solution to the problem is centralise the decision. Local Government, for example, they did not renew the administrators

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- There are no administrators so all the decisions are now centralised to the Permanent Secretary or the Minister.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It creates more red tape. People call you, people call me and I know. The honourable Minister for Health knows in fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, two days ago I had to run after him and actually plead with the Minister about a case in Nadi. This woman is desperate because her husband, she claims, is going to die if they do not have access to angiogram. I had to go to the honourable Minister to actually plead with him to tell us exactly whether the angiogram is working. It does not give me any pleasure to come here and say we do not have this, we do not have that. People are ringing us.

To his credit, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Attorney-General, whenever I send him a message or something about a problem, he actually responded, and I appreciate that. I know there are a lot of other Ministers who do not respond.

HON. MEMBERS.- Who, who?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I do not want to name them now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the questions I am raising are actually on behalf of the people. I know honourable Ministers get calls too, but we get calls 24 hours as well. It is our responsibility. The honourable Attorney-General is asking who was asking about these Bills, but there are a lot of people, as soon as Bills come out, there are stakeholders who ask these questions.

I think it is important for us to raise those issues in this Parliament and get the honourable Ministers to respond to it. So it is not casting any kind of aspersion on the integrity of individuals or honourable Ministers, but all we are saying is, these are the questions that people are asking us. That is why I do not think we can support this Bill, given all these uncertainties and the questions that people are raising. Maybe this Bill should go for another week's discussion. Let the Committee talk to some of these people who are talking to us, and then we can have some more sensible discussion, and identify the problem why the Board and the system are not working. This is a very fundamental question in law making.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to add onto honourable Lalabalavu's statement. I confirm the position that he has taken and raise a few concerns in relation to this amendment. Primarily to that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is about quality and standard. I sincerely believe that by passing this Bill we would be sacrificing quality and standard. This Bill is asking us to amend section 35 of Medicinal Products Act of 2011. If you look at this Act, firstly, the purpose of this Act as defined within that legislation is:

“... to protect the health and safety of the public by regulating medicinal product devices, poisons and similar products in accordance with the national medicinal products policy; and

...to provide for the regulation of the import, manufacture, export, supply, sale, advertising, promotion of medicinal products, devices and poisons which are of acceptable quality, safety and efficacy.”

In a nutshell, the whole purpose of this law is about maintaining quality and standard. If we ask ourselves, what are those medicinal products? Those are defined within the legislation and it says: “substance or products not being instrument, apparatus or ...”

Very wide. We have been told here that the reason for this amendment is the test kits. It has been an encumbrance in relation to COVID, but the amendment will be wide. It will not only be limited to the test kits of COVID.

If you come back to section 35, Mr. Speaker, it talks about the licensing requirement - why? Because this needs to be scrutinised. There are three things there. It talks about storage; distribution; manufacture and preparation; and import and export.

Import and export which is covered in section 35(1) has no exemption. But section 35(2) in relation to storage and distribution, there is exemption. In relation to manufacture and preparation of products, there is exemption so very clearly, the intention of this legislation is that, in relation to imports and exports of medicinal products, all those should be licensed. The only exception in here is in relation to storage, distribution and preparation and there must be a very good reason for that Mr. Speaker, Sir.

It means that for everything that is coming into Fiji under import and export, come under the definition of medicinal product, should be licensed because that is covered under Section 36. Mr. Speaker, Sir, section 36 goes through a few things - once licensed, you will be scrutinised, you will be monitored to ensure quality and standard. This is the thing that we are trying to go without, by this legislation. The honourable Minister for Health had stated, “Why should we licence it when one of those is already recognised by WHO?”, and he said, 25.

But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we ask ourselves, why not establish a licensing board because WHO still has to scrutinise and monitor it, to ensure that it applies to local standards? That is the risk that we should be careful of, that is the risk that we are putting ourselves into by passing this legislation. We are sacrificing standards in relation to things that are being imported so there will now be things listed under the regulation, passed by the Minister, which will not require licensing of imports and no longer be subjected to monitoring and scrutiny, and by that we will be sacrificing standards. That is the concern.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no doubt the COVID-19 pandemic has, of course, presented to us a number of situations and scenarios that we never anticipated. No country in the world did anticipate that and obviously, a lot of countries have taken ‘out-of-the-box’ measures to be able to deal with the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have had a number of challenges regarding that, for example, right from vaccination rejection; people not wanting to take the vaccine; and a lot of people have come up with religious justifications for not taking it. Honourable Bulanauca talks about it not being tested, and he talks about triple six. We had other people who for example, objected to it, like have the quarantine areas. My friend from the Coral Coast sent me a message, sometimes back in June and he said:

“Opposition MP Inosi Kuridrani was moving around all the villages along the Coral Coast and encouraging them to sign a petition to stop Blue West Villas in Maui Bay from becoming a quarantine centre. I believe he has made arrangements with the Fiji Times to come around at 10.00 a.m. to 11.00 a.m., to take photos of villagers in front of their villages, with their placards and protest on the same issue. He has made numerous calls to the villages

in regards to this. FijiFirst supporters believe this is more for his political gain and mileage than anything else. Please keep this confidential.”

This is just one of the examples, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of the type of road blockages we face.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, similarly we have had to, for example, respond both economically in respect to providing unemployment benefits. We have had enormous pressure of course on the health system, nurses, doctors, people doing double shift, triple shift, the military providing food during lockdown, and a whole series of events. We have made various laws under the Public Health Regulations; we have had laws regarding wearing of masks; about the number of people that can sit in the minibus and taxis; taxi drivers and minibus drivers have had to make sacrifices, omnibus drivers (the large buses) - those people had to have 50 per cent and regulations were made.

Highly irregular - what would be considered irregular laws and amendments and regulations were made as a response to COVID-19. Everywhere in the world, they have done that. We have had a no job no job policy which people have debunked, but today we are in a position as a direct result of that, as a direct result of requiring vaccination to get the \$360 - we have a 90 per cent vaccinated population of adults.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this particular provision is in alignment with that ability to react to a situation so that we can reposition ourselves. Honourable Prasad went on saying that we were sleeping on the job, et cetera, and that we should have anticipated that. The Medicinal Board did not allow or allowed limited licencing for this. In the same way I remember that there is a council that approves opticians and optometrists that can come and operate in Fiji. There is an NGO in Ba (I forget the name) funded by Vinod Patel and some of the others – Ba Vision.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have seen professors from the University of Hawaii and other places come and perform cataract surgery within 15 minutes and people wearing sunglasses and within two days they regain their eye sight – professors. And the Opticians and Optometrists Council or whatever said that they cannot operate because they have to understudy under someone in Fiji for three months to six months. This is how ridiculous it became when you have a council that becomes a law unto itself. We would have had a professor who now would have understudied someone in Fiji with five years experiences.

We amended the law, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so that those people with skill-sets could actually apply directly and bypass the Council - we have to do that. In a similar fashion, we are doing this today purely for the motivation that the Minister for Health, whose regulations will actually be published in the Gazette for anyone to see, to know exactly which products will actually be exempted from getting a licence without having to go through the council. It is not going to be done in his room in some hidden place. It is not going to be given in the middle of the night - hey, you can go and buy this – it is gazetted.

Honourable Prasad is full of conspiracy theories - conspiracy theories and controversy come in to this Parliament to try and obfuscate matters. Mr. Speaker, Sir, he has in fact delved into precisely, what the NFP Member has said. Honourable Qereqeretabua says in her *Facebook* post:

“In my opinion what Fiji needs is a wholesale change and for this to happen the change must start with who is running this country and how. Unfortunately the reality is that as long as the Minister for Economy runs this country, the politics of pettiness and personalisation will continue to be a blight on our nation.”

This is the calibre of leaders - precisely what her leader did, she is accusing us of doing. She accused honourable Reddy of misogyny when her leader called Jyoti Pratibha doing skirt-journalism. Not a word from her. He is on record....

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- (Inaudible)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can equally term what she has said about me as misandry. Misandry means the hate of men. Misogyny is the hate of women. What is going on? Let us focus on the issues. He asked me questions. Is this for people who are funding FijiFirst? Is this for someone who is wanted by INTERPOL? Ask honourable Seruiratu who is wanted by INTERPOL. I do not know who is wanted by INTERPOL. He made that information, if they are wanted by INTERPOL talk to honourable Seruiratu - he is the Minister for Defence and Policing.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are the Attorney-General.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Exactly! If there is any repatriation required it will come to us through the Mutual Assistance of Crimes Act. Nothing has come to us but INTERPOL does have a relationship with the Ministry of Defence and Policing. Where have we gone from? From an amendment to this Act, to the Health Minister to get WHO approved testing kits, PCR to INTERPOL to allow for the importation of illicit drugs. These drugs were actually as I said – they will be gazetted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again I say - he says is it to affect some chain of pharmacies, nothing. Someone willing to open up something - no. We have said precisely that we want as many people as possible to open up. We have had discussions with Ministry of Health and Medical Services with the Permanent Secretaries open it up otherwise it becomes an FCCC issue. They complain about monopolies but we are trying to get rid of monopolies.

We want someone to be able to go and invest in Vanua Levu, in Savusavu, Taveuni, Korovou, Ba, Tavua, Rakiraki – everywhere, and the only way we would be able to do that is if you remove monopolistic positions. He should know that this will create jobs. Already it is creating jobs - hotels now are required to do rapid testing, hotels are now going and hiring lab technicians and nurses. Most hotels now have in-house nurses. It is creating jobs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we obviously did not that the Medicinal Board was going to take this position. They seem to imply that if the Minister appoints a board, he is controlling them, they are puppets. No, under the law once a Board is appointed, the Board is independent. They fail to understand that. It is more of a reflection of what they would do, God forbid if they ever were on a board or in government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I cannot understand what concoction he came up with. He was saying well, you know they cannot import they cannot manufacture but this board can do this. The law is quite clear, if I can read it. It says under section 35, and I quote: “No person shall import, manufacture or export any product without a licence issued by the Board.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the amendment which is the continuation of a new section 35(1) now says, and I quote:

“after “Board” by inserting “, except a medicinal product, poison or device or other specified product which in the opinion of the Minister, is safe for general use and which is specified by regulations made under this Act”.

The next sub-section which honourable Nawaikula correctly actually read 35(2), and I quote: “... store, distribute, sell or offer for sale...” without licence by the board, except the Minister has a leeway which he can specify.

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the next one is that no person can store or sell any product without any licence except the product which is in the opinion of the Minister say for general use. He has got all of that, but the only provision or power that he does not have is the import and export of it. We will be focused more on the import aspect of it so I cannot understand what he is going on about.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I said the check and balance over here is that we have actually drafted the regulations. So, the moment this Bill gets passed the Minister will make his regulation, it will get published overnight and you will be able to see exactly what products he is saying you can import. So tomorrow, if honourable Prasad feels his political career is coming to an end he can actually go and start a business. He can start importing COVID-19 rapid tests. It is open to anyone as long as you have qualified people to run it. We know you have lots of money, you can do that - properties in New Zealand perhaps.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact of the matter is that this is precisely the rationale behind this amendment and the safeguard is whatever regulation that the Minister makes, obviously will be approved by Cabinet and will be published as a Gazette. I urge all Members Mr. Speaker, Sir, to take a very visionary view in respect of this and not be hampered by conspiracy theories and, please, support this Bill.

Question put.

Motion agreed.

[Medicinal Products (Amendment)(No. 2) Bill 2021 (Bill No. 38/2021) moved under Standing Order 51 was passed and enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No.....)]

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members that brings us to the end of today's sitting. I thank you for your forbearance and cooperation. It has been a long day.

Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.09 p.m.