

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 8TH JULY, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 8TH JULY, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.35 a.m. pursuant to notice.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All honourable Members were present.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 28th June, 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- 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. I also welcome those joining us in the gallery and those watching the live proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for your interest in this week's National Budget debate.

His Excellency the Australian High Commissioner

Honourable Members, it will be remiss of me if I do not acknowledge the Australian High Commissioner, His Excellency Ewen McDonald. Thank you for joining us this morning, Your Excellency.

Time Allocation on Debate

For the information of honourable Members, the Business Committee, in its meeting on Wednesday, 26th June, 2024, and in addition to the Communications on Friday, 28th June, 2024, had unanimously agreed to the following:

- (1) The Shadow Minister for Finance (honourable Leader of the Opposition), in delivering the response to the Budget Address, will speak for the same amount of time as the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance in delivering the National Budget Address.
- (2) All remaining Government Members will have up to 10 minutes to respond to the Budget Address, with the exception of the honourable and learned Attorney-General, who will have 20 minutes as he will be delivering his Maiden Speech.
- (3) All remaining Opposition Members will have up to 15 minutes to respond to the Budget Address.

- (4) Parliament will sit extended hours, likely into the evening, and Parliament will also take limited breaks including lunch and dinner.
- (5) In the event, business for any given day is concluded earlier, that business may be brought forward accordingly.

Thank you, honourable Members. We will now proceed to the next item on the Order Paper.

Honourable Members, I have been advised that there are no Bills for consideration for today. Honourable Premila Kumar is smiling. Thank you and will move on.

I now call upon the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to move the second reading of the Appropriation Bill. The floor is yours, Sir.

DEBATE ON THE 2024-2025 APPROPRIATION BILL 2024

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That the Bill for an Act to appropriate a sum of Three Billion Nine Hundred and Fifty-Five Million, Eight Hundred and Nineteen Thousand, Four Hundred and Seventy-Nine Dollars, for the ordinary services of Government for the year ending 31st July, 2025, be read a second time.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all look forward to the honourable Leader of the Opposition's response to the Budget, so I will not add anything at this stage. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.— Thank you. There is no invention in the wind on your sail, honourable Leader of the Opposition. The floor is now open for debate, and we will first hear the response from the Shadow Minister for Finance, after which we will continue with the order of the Speakers as listed on the Order Paper.

I now call upon the Shadow Minister for Finance and Leader of the Opposition, to deliver his response to the National Budget. The floor is yours, Sir.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the public in the gallery and those listening in via livestream; *ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me this opportunity to thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for his Budget Address. I also thank the Senior Civil Servants and, indeed, all who had contributed during the Budget consultations, for their efforts and input into the Budget. Putting together a National Budget is no easy feat, therefore, the hard work of all those involved in its formulation must be commended.

By the way, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this opportunity to congratulate the new Attorney-General, honourable Graham Leung, for his appointment, and I wish him the very best in his tenure in office.

I acknowledge Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Budget reflects attempts to respond to public concerns. By incorporating new measures alongside continued support for existing initiatives, I can visualise the efforts by Government to force economic growth, improve public services and enhance the welfare of Fijians. But is it enough, Mr. Speaker, Sir? This is the question that we, the citizens of our beloved Fiji, will ask ourselves, moving forward. In light of the many challenges that confront us as a nation and as a people, I will expound on this later.

The plaudits that had followed the Budget announcement on Friday, 28th June, 2024 by the honourable Minister maybe premature, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I say this because more often than not, budgets are viewed as achievements in themselves. They are not.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, national budgets are ordinary aspirations. They are estimates of government's expenditure and revenue for a fiscal year. They are planning tools that projects government's intentions for an annual period. What is important is how those intentions and aspirations impact communities and citizens when delivered. This should be the ultimate aim of all budgets.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are issues in the budget process that ought to be reviewed, to ensure that the intentions of the budget are fully realised. Our Budgets, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have always been output orientated. I know this, having been a Civil Servant myself. Once the budgetary allocated funds have been utilised, there ends the budget process. Whatever happens to the project that has been funded through a budgetary provision after its delivery, is the least of anyone's worries.

Sad to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the performance of Government agencies and senior management within those agencies are measured by their efficiency in the utilisation of funds, which is the delivery of outputs, not on the impact of those outputs, which can be measured some years down the line.

When a farm road has been constructed through the Ministry of Agriculture's Farm Roads Programme, the intention is for farmers to have easy access to their farm, to services, and to the markets to enhance the production capacities of farmers and, indeed, to raise their income levels. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as it is, the budget process and the work of the budget implementing agency terminates when the road has been constructed.

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when a boat and engine is delivered as part of the Ministry of Rural Development's Shelf-Help Programme to support a fishing venture, the role of Government ceases when a boat and engine have been delivered. This is the sad reality we have at hand. There is very little focus on the outcome, or the impact of the funds utilised for certain projects in our current budgetary system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our budgetary system now needs to transition from an output to an outcome focus. This will call for strong budgetary and project implementation and monitoring systems at national level and within respective agencies. I would like to come up with two suggestions, Sir:

- (1) That the system of monitoring utilised by the past Government through the Implementation Co-ordinating Unit (ICU), that was commonly referred to as the Monitoring Unit, to monitor both, the output and outcome of the Budget implementation at national level be revisited. This should be the responsibility of the National Planning Office. Mr. Speaker, Sir, probably, you would be aware that this was in the Office of the Prime Minister a few years back. Now, that we have the Ministry of Strategic Planning under the Minister for Finance, it would be appropriate that this role, if considered by Government, can be given

back to the Ministry of Strategic Planning.

- (2) The other suggestion that I want to make this morning, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the role of parliamentary Committees in the oversight and scrutiny of the budget process. Parliament plays a very important role. As you are aware from the recent visits and, of course, with the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU), the Parliament is not only responsible for legislative work but also in terms of the allocation of funding and approval and, most importantly, the scrutiny and oversight of the implementation of taxpayers' funds. Probably, this is something that is already in consideration under your leadership, Sir, and I would strongly recommend that this be considered seriously.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will ensure the efficient and proper utilisation of the budget and eliminate wastage of public funds. Sir, allow me to raise this point which I have noted in the current Budget Address and in previous budget and parliamentary addresses too. Often governments use the excuse of the perceived weaknesses of the past governments to justify their inability to deliver services and, of course, their promises to the people. This budget was no exception.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this has got to stop - it is loathsome. No government comes into power blindfolded. All governments come into power with the full appreciation of the status of existing governance in any particular country, and a lot of their promises to the people, especially prior to the election, were made with the full comprehension of these realities.

The Budget Address which we just had, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was particularly bad with a list of issues titled, "what we have inherited". Issues which the honourable Minister for Finance states as the uncomfortable facts that they had walked into.

Were they forced to walk into these issues? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir! In fact, they campaigned vigorously in the lead up to the General Election so that they can get into power. Now, that they are at the helm, they have suddenly realised that they have bitten off much more than they can chew. It does not work that way, unfortunately, Sir. Can I correct the misconception, particularly about the economy prior to COVID-19?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji recorded its strongest period of GDP growth...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Negative growth in 2019.

HON. I. SERUIRATU.- ...in the decade leading up to COVID-19, underpinned by rising productivity and investments, improved political stability and a booming tourism sector. Can I repeat that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because this is important for every Fijian to know?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us talk facts when we deal with the economy. I have stated that Fiji recorded its strongest period of GDP growth since achieving Independence 1970 in the decade leading up to COVID-19, underpinned by rising productivity and investment, improved political stability and a booming tourism sector.

However, the shocks of COVID-19 and a series of natural disasters - *TC Harold*, *TC Yasa* and *TC Winston* in 2016 have been devastating for Fiji's economy, bringing widespread production, disruptions and job losses. I hope we can agree to that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The increasing frequency of these weather events, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has also complicated Fiji's economic development strategies and plans. Fiji's real GDP decline by 15.2 percent in 2020 and is estimated to have contracted a further 4.0 percent in 2021, with the long-term ramifications of

of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy yet to be fully seen, Sir.

On fiscal policy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his Budget Speech, the honourable Minister for Finance stated that when they came into Government, they inherited a large public debt and a chaotic fiscal situation. This is nonsense, Mr. Speaker!

Let us refer to the data on record. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is Government data. It talks about the year, way back to 1980, until present. The revenue for each year, the expenditure, the overall balance, the balance as a percentage of GDP, the debt, the debt as a percentage of GDP, the debt to GDP ratio, and the list goes on, Sir.

Prior to 2012, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our debt to GDP ratio hovered at around 50 percent. Let me go back from the period 2006 to 2012. This is debt to GDP ratio. In 2006, 53.8 percent; in 2007, 50.3 percent; in 2008, 51.4 percent; in 2009, 55.8 percent; in 2010, 56.2 percent; in 2011, 52.7 percent and in 2012, 51.6 percent. As I have stated, debt to GDP ratio hovered around the 50 percent mark during that period.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, between 2013 and 2019, our ratio was below 50 percent, coming down to as low as 43 percent in 2015.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Yes.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Go through the books.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- This is the Ministry's books, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Laughter)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Let me go through it. I have talked about the period from 2006 to 2012; 2013, 49.7 percent; 2014, 44.5 percent; 2015, 43 percent; 2016, 44.6 percent; 2017, 43.5 percent; 2018, 45.8 percent; and in 2019, 49 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me also say on record that the period from 2016 to 2019 was very interesting. Why? Because of *TC Winston*. While Government kept on with Government programmes as normal, at the same time, we were focusing on building back better - the recovery, and that also contributed to the gradual increase, again, post-2016. This is 43.5 percent in 2016-2017, then 45.8 percent, then 49 percent and then in 2019, 2020 and 2021, 62 percent, 84 percent and 90.6 percent.

The honourable Minister loves to focus on the 2021 and 2022 period, and everyone in the world, including all Governments, have to loan in order to survive and Fiji is not an exception.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We know what happened to the tourism industry, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Our GDP was badly affected, and this is why we have these figures, and these are facts, and everyone should know. These are the facts, and for the honourable Minister for Finance to insinuate otherwise, is misleading.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Hogwash!

(Laughter)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I will keep this and then I will come back to it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on infrastructure and social transformation, the nine years of contained debt to GDP ratio and consecutive economic growth, facilitated the massive investment in infrastructure that we were able to make. Those were real infrastructure investments rather than maintenance, Sir, and together, with the support that we provided to our national airline provided the impetus that enabled us to recover quickly from the effects of COVID-19.

The slow and steady growth put in place by the previous Government led to huge transformations in this country. It led to a vast explosion of infrastructural development that drove growth and continues to do so today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the private sector is benefiting today from most of the infrastructure development that was done during those years. If we read the Joint Economic and Trade Survey Report by Australia and New Zealand, it talks about the level of investment at that time. It was around almost 25 percent.

But where is the level of investment today? Very, very low, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but we need to create that environment through infrastructure development and that is why our CAPEX to OPEX ratio is so important. I will come back to that, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, the assistance that we provided to the vulnerable within our communities through welfare assistance to the elderly, support to school children and women, among other things, which Government is continuing was groundbreaking, to say the least. Those empowerment programmes have freed the shackles that bound the less fortunate in this country, opening the opportunities for all, and has led to where we are now, where there are more females graduating out of our Universities than males.

I will talk about some structural vulnerabilities, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to give context to my delivery this morning before I focus on the Budget itself. The shocks emanating from the effects of climate change and global events, such as the economic slowdown and COVID-19, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have also exacerbated some of Fiji's long standing structural vulnerabilities, including the economy being vulnerable to repeated climate-related shocks, its lack of sectoral diversification and sluggish private sector job growth, particularly among youth and women. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the later part of my submission, I will be talking more about this sectoral diversification which we expected more from the Minister to be part of his delivery. Why am I saying this, Sir, is that it is important because this problem needs to be addressed to prepare us well for future shocks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sectoral diversification imperative stems largely from the vulnerability of Fiji's tourism to global shocks in travel demand, as the COVID-19 pandemic has painfully illustrated, as well as growing threats to its natural tourism assets from climate change. I am thankful, Sir, that the new framework has been launched and we congratulate the honourable Minister and thank the Government for that. The painful lessons of the past should, therefore, be a guide to our future development planning and aspiration, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Now, I come to the Budget, but let me talk first about the National Development Plan (NDP). There has been much talk about the NDP. In an ideal scenario, the NDP should inform the budget. But we are now here, and there is still no sight of the NDP.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Coming soon.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- How soon is soon?

I beg to question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the rationale for developing a new NDP when we already have one in existence. To save the cost of the formulation of a brand new document, Government could have opted to review the current one, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Trade Policy Framework is still current and still utilised by the current Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So, quite a new development plan.

In any case, Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to digress to the current Budget. I must thank the honourable Minister for Finance and Government for the ongoing concessions, including School Bus Fare Scheme and Back to School Grants, welfare assistance to the elderly, free water and electricity to low income earners and other concessions granted to the vulnerable within our communities but they are not new, Mr. Speaker, Sir. These are welcome relief to most families in Fiji, and which also acknowledges the vision of the previous Government when putting in place these programmes.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increased investments in the education and health sectors are acknowledged with much appreciation. But I know that honourable Members from this side will also talk and raise their concerns about the utilisation of the funds. Sir, it is one thing to get the budget, but what is important is how those taxpayers' funds are well utilised.

During the Fiji Institute of Chartered Accountants Congress, I spoke briefly about Strategic Pragmatism, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and this is where the leadership of Government and the Executives must work together, particularly the political leadership and the Permanent Secretaries and those within the Ministries. We must be strategic in our thinking, but we must be pragmatic in our implementation. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, most honourable Members from this side of Parliament will raise their concerns about the implementation. Funds are not utilised according to the purposes in which they were given in the Budget.

The Vatakoula Assistance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is acknowledged and this is long overdue. They have suffered enough and for Government to announce the assistance, it did bring closure to their sufferings which have persisted for some decades, and for which a good number of them have not lived to see this day. I know the efforts that were taken in the previous Government to try and resolve this issue. It was an issue between the mining company and, of course, the striking workers, but I hope that this case must not be taken as a precedent for the future.

In such cases, the responsibilities of the employer and Government must be clearly defined. As I have stated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are thankful for the assistance, but I hope that this will not be taken as a precedent for the future.

Budget Deficit: On the gist of the Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government should be concerned that our spending continues to race ahead of revenue collections. Government spending in 2024-2025 will exceed revenue by \$639 million that is equal to 4.5 percent of GDP. Adding debt repayments of another \$345 million means that the gross deficit will approach \$1 billion or 7.0 percent of GDP. This is rather high and contrary to Government's promises of bringing down Government debt.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, against the actual revenue of \$2.7 billion in the 2022-2023 period, and a revised revenue forecast of \$3.4 billion for 2023-2024 (I know that we are coming now towards the end of July), the honourable Minister for Finance is projecting revenue for 2024-2025 to be \$3.7 billion - an increase of almost \$1 billion from the 2022-2023 period. I think this is somewhat too optimistic, but I wish him well, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Realistically, if Government is not able to reach its revenue forecast for 2024-2025, the shortfall will add to the Budget deficit, which will mean that we will be looking at a much larger budget deficit.

With the assumption, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Budget deficit will be funded domestically largely from the savings of workers that is housed within the Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF), this will push inflation higher and create pressures on the current account of the balance of payments. The inflationary pressures will lead the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) to lift interest rates, while pressure on the balance of payments will deplete foreign reserves that, in turn, risks a devaluation of the Fiji dollar.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, families in Fiji are already feeling the brunt of the rise in prices on basic food items, such as food and clothing. Any further increases in prices and/or interest rates will only add to the pain that the public is under.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am amused that the honourable Minister for Finance, while in Opposition, was always keen on highlighting the nominal value of our debt. Now, that he is in the driver's seat, he has shifted, and is referring to debt as a percentage of GDP.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Debt to GDP ratio.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Oh, very poor!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Hogwash!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The public need to know the real figures, honourable Minister. The reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that while the debt to GDP ratio is decreasing towards 78 percent, the nominal debt is at a record high of \$10.9 billion from the \$9 million that they inherited.

Let me justify what I have just stated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the...

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is not what you campaigned on.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order! No running commentaries, please.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- "The begging-bowl government" by Professor Biman Prasad on 21st December, 2021, stated and I quote, "Fiji is drowning in debt. By the middle of next year, when it is expected to reach \$9 billion, every Fiji citizen will be carrying \$10,000 of it".

(Laughter)

That per-capita allocation was not included in your Speech, honourable Minister, you deliberately left that out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me comment on the Capital to Operating Mix. Whilst assistance and concession to the public are welcomed, Government must always ensure that there is an equitable balance in the manner with which public funds are managed. A good example, Sir, is the Operating to Capital mix in the current Budget which stands at 73:27 ratio, which is 73 percent for Operating and 27 percent for Capital Expenditure, when the preferred mix ratio is 2:1, that is, 66.6 percent for Operating and 33.3 percent towards Capital Expenditure preferably, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I raise this because, again, in his Speech, the honourable Minister stated, "unlike in the past when the government borrowed to fund its operations with nothing much to show after the borrowed money

was spent”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the previous Government allocated more in terms of Capital Expenditure and, of course, we were not short of our Operating Expenditure, and we did not borrow for that purpose but, mostly, for development purposes and that is why CAPEX is so important.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government must look at innovative ways to reduce the bloated blatant Operating Expenditure and increase the Capital Expenditure allocation. Increase in Capital Expenditure allocation leads to investments, which should translate to job creation, thus creating employment opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge that debt as a ratio of GDP has fallen largely due to the recovery of the economy in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. While public debt continues to increase, GDP in 2024 had recovered all the 20 percent ground that was lost at the height of the pandemic in 2021 from the level in 2019. This recovery in GDP alone is responsible for the fall of debt as a proportion of GDP by 13 percent.

To be more specific, Mr. Speaker, Sir, debt as a share of GDP, peaked at 91.5 percent in 2021 when GDP itself was 20 percent below the level in 2019. By mid-2024, GDP had recovered to the level in 2019 that would, on its own, bring down the debt to GDP ratio to 78.5 percent, or roughly equal to the figure of 78 percent quoted in the Minister’s Budget Speech. In other words, all the decline in debt as a share of GDP has been due to economic recovery. The Coalition Government cannot take credit for this since the rebound in tourist arrivals was due to the foundations put in place by the previous Government. Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government seems to have ditched the target of bringing debt down to 60 percent of GDP in a decade as was proposed by the Fiscal Review Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for far too long, our people have been inundated with Government handouts. The focus now should be on ‘help out’ rather than ‘hand out’, as budgetary subsidies and concessions will be difficult to unwind or sustain.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you would know that we never, during our term in Government, referred to these as hand-outs but it was for leg up. It was not to buy their votes, something that the Government used to blame us for in the previous Budgets. But my point here, Sir, is about shifting from such assistance to economically empowering our people - creation of job opportunities, financially independent, et cetera. I know that we are not going to have immediate results, but the efforts must be taken for us to move towards this direction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, experiences both in and beyond Fiji, show that subsidies, once provided, are nearly impossible to withdraw. This is because political constituencies form around the subsidies, and they often demand increases over time.

Interest Subsidies: Mr. Speaker, Sir, however, Sir, interest of subsidies for certain enterprises create room for access to the public purse by the well-off and better connected. Such subsidies will only encourage greater risk-taking, a problem of moral hazard by the subsidised, leading to losses for the taxpayer. Tilting of the business environment for a favoured group using subsidies will encourage corruption, entice the better connected to feed off the public purse, and divert resources from public services. In sum, these actions are inimical to growth of the private sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Private Sector Support: It is unfortunate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that while it is recognised that the private sector is the engine of growth, the Budget has done little in lowering the costs of doing

business in Fiji. The private sector needs policies stability, a competitive environment and a level playing field for all entrepreneurs.

While a long list of projects underway are announced in the Budget, little was mentioned about reducing red-tapism, including more expedited processing of investment proposals.

Labour Mobility: Mr. Speaker, Sir, the expansion of enterprise will continue to be negated by the acute shortage of workers confronting Fiji. A total of 34,000 Fijians emigrated in the period 2022-2023, which is equal to some 4.0 percent of the population and a lot more of the total pool of skills available in the economy. People are moving places for work or to play rugby is normal, but the large spike in emigration over the past 18 months is unusual, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government must develop a programme to mitigate vacuums in the workforce that have resulted from the departure of professional and highly skilled manpower. This must be an ongoing process, as it is to be expected that our trained workers will continue to be enticed by better pay and better working conditions, and generally, a better life overseas.

On the same token, we acknowledge that migrant workers from Fiji play a large part in the unprecedented large receipts of remittances, which is helping boost our economy. The balance of payments and the stock of foreign exchange reserves could have been in a serious position if not for the large and growing volume of remittances being received. The economy gains without cost when an unemployed worker leaves for foreign employment, remitting the savings home. This is different, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when a Fijian employed at home leaves for overseas employment, where the gain in income to the migrant is the difference in wages for the worker abroad verses at home.

Stemming outflow of skills due to higher wages abroad can only be mitigated by providing better paying jobs at home. The Budget hardly speaks to the challenge of lifting employment at home. But if people are 'voting with their feet' against the instability of our political environment, then some introspection is required. In this regard, the Government has work to do in restoring and inspiring the confidence of the people to make them elect to stay at home.

In the interim, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government must look at innovative ways as a 'stop gap' to addressing the issue of labour shortage in this country. I would suggest that Government provide more flexibility in allowing migrant workers to work in Fiji. With that, 'knowledge transfer' arrangements must be part of the plan, to ensure that our workforce gains from the knowledge of those migrant workers recruited to work here.

We have seen what can be done with innovativeness and knowledge through Grace Roads. They have shown us much that can be done in a very short time. They established themselves, innovate, diversify and expand in a very short period of time. With knowledge, and the will to grow, Fiji can do that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but we will need assistance in the meantime.

Jobs and Wages: Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, must create good jobs and good paying jobs for all at home. Workers at the bottom rungs of the employment ladder deserve a living wage. The lift in minimum wages is welcome, but many workers are of the view that the 50 cents increase is far short of compensating them for the significant increases in prices for basic goods, food items and services.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to by the Governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji some days ago, pay increases must be accompanied with a lift in productivity, if inflationary pressures are to be contained. The increases in wages within the Public Service that was announced will now get transmitted to the wider economy. This, in turn, has the potential to trigger a wage price spiral.

Climate Change: Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is rather unfortunate that despite our past efforts to champion climate change mitigation and adaptation, the Budget gave close to no prominence at all to our climate change issues, especially investments required to build resilience to the adverse effects of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many Fijians are exposed to the adverse effects of climate change. Some are already facing rising sea levels, storm surges and encroaching salinity. It is only a matter of time before we are struck again by our major natural disaster.

The Budget has largely ignored the plight of many Fijians vulnerable to climate change, with some already forced to move residences due to the rising in sea and warming oceans, with the latest figure indicating that 42 villages from around Fiji should now be relocated.

I raise this issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because in our role as a legislators, parliaments are not only well-placed to scrutinise how Governments are responding to national and international climate change issues, but also can hold their executives to account over their actions or lack thereof.

A few budget takeaways, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Civil Service. The pay rise for our civil servants is well deserved. It must be noted that contrary to claims by some, the previous Government also raised the pay levels of civil servants in 2015.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It's a long time!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

From 3 percent to around 79 percent for some of the workers. That is on record in the Ministry of Finance.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Seven years.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Civil Service pay increase announcement has left more questions than answers. Whilst the increase in pay for Government Wage Earners is clear, civil servants are still at a loss with the manner with which their raise was announced. This has led to assumptions, some of which are rather negative, some are even raising the question if their salary increase will indeed amount to the 7 percent to 10 percent as announced. Anyway, while the salary raise is welcomed, the bloated size of our Civil Service should be a cause of concern.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the total strength of 42,000 civil servants for a small nation like ours, at a cost of \$1.2 billion is not sustainable. Comparatively, New Zealand with a population of over five million, has 65,000 civil servants. This means that Fiji civil servant to population ratio is 1:22, while New Zealand has its at 1:77. This is a huge disparity. I agree that we cannot compare ourselves to a developed country like New Zealand, but we can at least aspire to emulate their level of performance. The solution lies in developing a highly skilled and a well-paid workforce. The Government should be investing in capacity building and training in the Civil Service to enhance productivity. It is about doing more with less.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Once we have reached the desired skill level, we can gradually reduce the size of the Civil Service to a more sustainable level. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the large size of our Civil Service could also be a case of productive workers remaining unproductive. This is a leadership issue, and not one for the workers. What it means is that the workers must be supported,

trained, provided the right training, that is, equipped and led effectively to be able to fully utilise their potentials and become as productive as they can be.

On the same token, investments in Information Technology must be pursued in earnest if we are honest in our commitment to reducing the size of our Civil Service. Information Technology reduces cost while enhancing efficiency and accessibility. Let me thank the Government as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the plans to introduce a medical insurance scheme for civil servants. This is welcomed, but there is an issue that I would like to raise. If Government could consider setting aside funds to cover funeral expenses of civil servants, who unfortunately pass away while in the service. With the non-existence of such facility, *reguregu* and related funeral cost is often borne by their colleagues out of their own goodwill in the respective Departments and Ministries.

Water Authority Corporatisation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst the water concession granted to low income earners is welcomed, I am concerned with the ambiguity surrounding the proposed corporatisation of Water Authority of Fiji. If I am not wrong, the corporatisation in the service sector equates to user pay. The depleted state of our infrastructure requires this type of arrangement to generate income to help improve services in this sector, but only those in the high income brackets should pay for this service. The low income earners should be spared the grief of having to fork out additional funds from their pockets to cover additional costs of water usage. The six-month period given to the corporatisation programme is tight. If corporatisation were to eventuate, ample time must be given to those who will have to pay to adjust and acclimatise to any rises in cost of water and sewerage services.

On health services, the increase in the budget for the health sector is acknowledged, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but it is quite apparent from the latest reports that the budgetary provisions alone is insufficient to raise the standard of infrastructure and services within our health services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can do two things:

- (1) The Budget must focus on preventative care and public health rather than curative care. In doing that, the cost reductions from providing services to the already sick could be channelled to infrastructure upgrades and training for our health personnel.
- (2) The privilege in society should pay or considered to pay for health services.

On Infrastructure Development, I note with appreciation the budgetary allocation for infrastructure development. Improved infrastructure facilitates better connectivity and attract foreign investment, but, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as for the previous year, much of the budget allocation marked for infrastructure development was channelled to maintaining existing facilities. It ought to be noted that while maintenance works is necessary, it does not in any way contribute to GDP growth hence the need for investments in new infrastructure to boost GDP growth.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is noted that no emphasis at all is placed on the improvement of our port facilities. This can be a lost opportunity if not addressed now. I am aware, Sir, that some discussions are taking place between some foreign shipping agencies and local shipping partners to use Fiji as a transshipment hub for the Pacific, but the limited capacity of our ports is inhibiting those discussions.

To enhance trade and economic growth, port development should become a priority for Government. A concerted effort to expand the country's infrastructure is essential to supporting the private sector investment and the expansion of primary sector activities that is required for economic growth and stability.

On Affordable Housing for Low Income Earners, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the plan to provide affordable housing for our low income earners is commendable. The question that we should be asking ourselves in planning such initiatives is how affordable is affordable for our low income earners, a lot of whom are teetering on the fringes of poverty.

We have had experiences, Mr. Speaker, Sir, where Housing Schemes planned for low income earners were snatched by the rich within our communities due largely to the inability of those for whom the housing estate were earmarked for to buy lots in these estates, and now built on those estates are large rental castles which have become a taut wire in the horizon for our low income earners.

I bring this to Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to provoke Government with all its good intentions to be innovative in developing such programmes and hopefully to build ringfences around those programmes ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- ... to ensure that the benefits are reaped by only those that the programme were intended for.

On FNPF Dividends, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the efforts of the management and the staff of FNPF must be commended for their tremendous effort in achieving a record of 8 percent for the FNPF members for their past financial year. It is our hope and the hope of all members of FNPF and their families that the interest level attained in the past year will continue into the years to come. After all, for most of the working population, their FNPF savings are the only source of sustenance for them and their families after their working life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am continually intrigued by how FNPF dividends are divided amongst its members. I am of the view that pensioners whilst they may not be active members, are members nevertheless and should be considered in the annual distribution of FNPF dividends. Their pension funds retained by FNPF are invested and in that sense, pensioners remain as active members hence they should be included in the distribution of the FNPF annual dividends.

On a few national issues, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Governance and Stability, the Government must demonstrate to the people that it is a force united in its efforts to move Fiji forward. However, the recent media reports of disunity within Government is creating insecurity and is counter to progress.

On the matter of Governance, the Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, needs to be more transparent and forthcoming with information so that there can be meaningful participation by Fijians in the process of governance, including the budget process, and in the most critical matters affecting them as citizens. This is a general observation, and I am sure, I am by no means the only Fijian to hold this view.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government must also exercise greater transparency and accountability in the implementation of the budget. Clearer mechanisms must be put in place to prevent mismanagement of funds and eliminate corrupt practices. Regular audits and public disclosure of financial information can help this build trust, enhance stability and ensure efficient use of resources.

On the Rising Cost of Living, the continued rise in the cost of living, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is something that Government should be concerned about. In April this year, our inflation rate - the rate at which the prices of goods and service has increased rose to 7.1 percent, which according to newspaper reports was the highest observed in the last 10 years.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Ongoing inflation causes prices to continue to increase, and due to the accumulative nature of inflation, it is fundamentally important for Government to ensure that inflation is contained. It has been noted that the rise in prices has been due in large to the VAT increases introduced in the previous years' budget. The Government must note that once the prices of goods increase, it will be very difficult to reverse the price hike. The reluctance of Government to reduce VAT from 15 percent to 9 percent in the current budget to help relieve citizens from the high cost of living is a concern.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this demonstrates Governments' lack of compassion for the underprivileged within our communities. When prices increase, the losers will always be the poor, as they will become poorer, while the rich get richer. An American journalist Mr. Charles M. Blow once said and I quote, "One does not have to operate with great malice to do great harm. The absence of empathy and understanding are sufficient.". This is exactly the case here.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Poverty Levels, Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the Bureau of Statistics' Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) for 2019-2020 period was around 29 percent of Fijians live under the national poverty line, but the honourable Minister used to argue that this was supposed to be 15 percent, but this was downgraded by the World Bank to 24.1 percent. I still have not heard him in Parliament to talk about the official figure whether he has finally accepted that or not, but Mr. Speaker, Sir, we look forward to the next HIES report. The latest reports indicate that our attempts and poverty reduction have stagnated due to economic and social vulnerabilities. The nation has been unable to continuously drive economic growth and deliver on development and poverty targets.

As a developing nation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has obstacle to overcome on its path to poverty reduction putting our 2030 Sustainability Goals at risk. A strong economic growth is essential and with a forecasted slowdown in the tourism industry, a revitalisation of the primary industries sectors, and the provision of policy support to emerging sectors should be a priority for Government.

Drug Abuse, the high levels of drug use and peddling in the country is alarming, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Drugs usage and abuse inflict immeasurable harm on public health and safety, and threatens the economy, and the peaceful development and functioning of societies. And the segment of our society most susceptible to drug use are our youth, the future of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must find answers to this plague now. Whilst Government has taken steps to address this through the formulation of the Counter Narcotics Strategy 2023-2028, the setting up of the Narcotics Bureau and Drug Rehabilitation Facilities, there is still much that can be done at community level to support Government's high level efforts. The Government must develop, as part of its efforts to counter drug usage, educational and awareness framework that is built into community networks and programmes to ensure there is consistent messaging to, and within communities on the negative impacts of drug usage and abuse, at all levels. The recent report of a 14-year old being admitted to a mental hospital as a result of drug abuse drives home the point of the dire level of drug abuse Fiji is in. The Government must act now, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

On open access to the World Wide Web, the proper use of the internet is good and has many advantages, especially for educational and health purposes. On the downside, however, its use for ulterior motives is extremely detrimental to society. As of June this year, there are reports stating that over 626 terabytes of internet traffic were used to view pornographic material in the second quarter of 2024 alone. According to newspaper reports, this volume is equivalent to the amount of data stored in 100 million books. Further as quoted in *The Fiji Times* of 23rd November, 2023, that adult content and pornographic sites is among the 10 most used data traffic in the country. This is frightening, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I acknowledge the Government's efforts to curb this problem with the establishment by Cabinet of an Anti-Porn Task Force. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a race against time, and viewing of adult sites by the vulnerable within our communities leads to the breakdown of the very fabric and values that bind us as families and as a community. If China can place caveats on certain internet and social networking sites, I am sure we can do the same. Of course, there are ways to by-pass these blockades, but we can at least try to limit their use.

Welfare assistance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Budget addresses various economic sectors, there is a need for a more comprehensive approach to social welfare. Enhancing social welfare programmes for the most vulnerable populations, including the elderly, disabled, and low-income families is essential to ensure inclusive growth and reduce inequality. The current allocation for social welfare programmes needs to be carefully monitored to ensure it reaches those in need.

On investments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the continuous enhancements and investment in infrastructure, the growth in the tourism industry, supported by our business-friendly tax structure are key essentials for attracting inward investments to Fiji. The Government must work hard to provide the policy and regulatory environment that will make it even more attractive for all industries other than services and tourism, to invest in Fiji. It must be noted as well, that while the pipeline projects look promising, investment activity is slow paced. This must be rectified. Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, most of the investments that are currently in place, of course, are for the tourism sector as well. We appreciate that because of the limitations that we have in terms of spaces, but of course, I have talked sectoral divestment – this is something that we need to consider seriously.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge that the largest portion of the budget goes to education and skills development. I recognise as well, the Government's desire to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools. However, we ought to understand the reasons for the prevalence of unemployment in Fiji, and for the significant losses through the brain-drain to other countries. Some self-examination is required to ensure that we have an education system, at all levels that addresses the skills and knowledge needs within our workforce. Fiji needs skills that not only ensures that our people are able to enter the workforce, but also skills that can propel them to assume leadership roles within the various industries in Fiji. This must be the focus of our education system.

Employment Creation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, sectors with potential to generate high numbers of quality jobs must be at the heart of Fiji's rebuilding and long-term development efforts, especially those offering opportunities to women and youth. Women are a growing majority in higher education, but female labour force participation is considerably lower than for males, a gap which is wider in Fiji than in other Pacific Island countries.

On Emigration Reforms as I have mentioned earlier, the need for migrant workers to work in Fiji is imminent, we need to change our policies to attract emigrant with the qualifications and

skill- sets required to support growth in Fiji.

On Law Reform, the honourable Attorney-General, Sir, it is obvious that many of our laws are archaic and ambiguous and are negating growth. These laws such as, if I may name two, Pharmaceutical and Quarantine Laws needs to be reformed immediately to support innovation and progress.

Climate Resilience, Mr. Speaker, Sir, strengthening economic and climate resilience is the ability to recover from a disruption. In the context of economic development, economic resilience aims to better prepare regions or countries to anticipate, withstand and bounce back from any type of shock, disruption or stress it may experience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the limited resources we have against the so many competing sectoral priorities, Fiji must invest in programmes to strengthen its economic and climate resilience. The lessons learned from the pandemic and the recent climate-induced disasters have taught us that low resilience to economic shocks, climate change and natural disasters is also a feature of many of Fiji's sectors such as agriculture, housing and fisheries and must be bolstered both to preserve the jobs and incomes in these sectors and to reduce the fiscal burdens of economic relief and reconstruction after every major disruptive event.

A key component of building this economic resilience, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the economic empowerment of the people. This involves the process of enhancing individuals' economic status, including income generation, employment opportunities and financial independence.

The Pacific Economic Hub, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government must leverage Fiji's potential as an economic hub in the Pacific region. Parallel to developing sector that will contribute to increased economic diversification and resilience in Fiji as an island nation, must also prioritise sectors and reforms that can expand its external market and leverage its geographical centrality in the Pacific to become an economic hub for the Pacific Island countries and potentially for the broader Asia-Pacific region.

I have already quoted the Fiji-Australia Joint Economic and Trade Study (JETS) Report in 2019 and it had explored this opportunity stating that Fiji has developed comparative advantage in maritime transport infrastructure to serve the region as an entrepot, based on its central location within the region and its deep-water ports in Suva and Lautoka.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Growing the Economy, there are opportunities for growth. I am intrigued that this years' Budget appears to be not very different from last years. The honourable Minister has already stated that there will be no surprises, but when there are no surprises, it becomes boring and predictable. Quite apart from the capital developments within the tourism sector, there is very little else in the Budget to support existing programmes and generate new industries with potentially good income to leverage our nation's economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot continue to do the same things and expect to get a different result, and that is the problem with this Budget. We must seriously start looking at alternative economies. Can we continue to focus on tourism and sugar and be able to be successful? Yes, maybe, but our growth will remain at 2 percent to 3 percent yearly.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- 16 years.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We need to start looking at an alternative source of economy and an alternative source of income for the people. The opportunity is within our primary industry sectors,

Mr. Speaker, Sir, remains underutilised and more attention must be given to it to grow to create employment, improve the livelihoods of the people and support the nation's economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Forestry and Fisheries, the Forestry and Fisheries are two main key sectors where there is real potential to support national economy in the medium to long term. While the forest industry contributes approximately \$554 million annually in terms of ecosystem services, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it only accounts for 0.3 percent of the nations' GDP. Additionally, current figures indicate a decrease in exports for the sector while imports are increasing. This is a disparity that should be a cause of concern for Government.

The Fisheries sector in Fiji makes an extremely important contribution to the lives of many Fijians. The sector is a large employer generating over 9,100 jobs and annual consumption of fresh fish is estimated at over 44 kilogrammes per capita. With investments the performance of this sector should improve significantly.

In the Fisheries sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would rather focus on those not participating in the already well-established industries within the sector, like the tuna industry, for example. Our collective interest and the focus of planning and policy interventions are to be on the empowerment of those not involved in commercial fishing activities.

I would strongly recommend, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that more attention is given to commercial seaweed farming, aquaculture and BDM. Improvement in these commodities in the Fisheries sector will contribute significantly to the participation of more of these so-called unproductive population in meaningful economic activities, including income generation, employment opportunities and financial independence.

On the Sugar Industry, I am grateful, Sir, for the support offered to the sugar industry. While its performance has been on the decline, it remains the third largest contributor to export earnings and supports the livelihood of close to 200,000 Fijians. The sugar industry will undoubtedly continue to play an import role in Fiji's economic growth and development in the foreseeable future, hence should continue to be supported.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I understand that the Economic Affairs Committee already have plans for the setting up of a special committee to review the performance of Fiji's sugar industry. This is appreciated, Sir, and we look forward to the Committee's findings and recommendations with much anticipation.

The Non-Sugar Agriculture sector contributes around 7 percent to GDP. With approximately 500,000 hectares of arable land available for agricultural purposes in Fiji, the potential for the sector is immense. This is where real opportunity lies for all Fijian, especially within our peri-urban and rural communities to grow and to participate in our capitalist economy.

The Non-Sugar Agriculture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, sustains around one-third of Fiji's population engaging in subsistence farming cultivating traditional fruits, vegetables and root crops. Of this output, a limited quantity enters the domestic market while very little is exported. However, at the same time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while there are huge potentials to gradually raise the levels of production and graduate some of these farmers from subsistence to semi-commercial or even commercial farming levels, targeting the export markets, there is even better opportunities for expansion of domestic agriculture by satisfying the tourism market within Fiji itself. This will mean producing higher quality products and more reliable supplies. Mr. Speaker, Sir, given a strategy of meeting the food needs of tourists in Fiji, the agriculture sector would have to step up in terms of quality and consistency of supply.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we acknowledge the efforts of the Ministry of Agriculture, it is high time that we demand more from them. But to be able to elevate its performance to a higher level, the Government and key partners must create the environment for them by providing all the necessary support needed to make the sector realize its full potential. This is not only in terms of budgetary support, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the Ministry's programmes, but more importantly on public sector investment and supported by the private sector to improve agri-logistics in this country. As I have stated earlier, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot continue to do the same things and expect to get a different result, and if we as a nation are really serious about raising the sector's contribution to GDP, now is the time to show that new level of commitment.

Driven by demand, organised production in the four major geographic Divisions, good market access supported by an efficient agri-logistics system and networks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will play a critical role in enabling Fiji's capacity for large commercial agriculture and presents new areas for both, public and private sector participation.

Outsourcing Services, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot has been discussed about our outsourcing services particularly we acknowledge the efforts in the Kalabu Tax Free Zone and probably the focus now should not only be on the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) but of course to make use of the skills that we have in Fiji, we would strongly recommend the shift to Knowledge Processing Outsourcing (KPO). This will give the opportunity for our accountants, our lawyers, our technical people, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to get employment and of course contribute significantly to our growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us learn from the success of the BPO and the KPOs in the Philippines. What is stopping Fiji from following suit and of course in the ICT Sector, this is another industry that could be exploited to advance our economic growth, and which would be critical to support the BPO industry.

Likewise on Medical Tourism, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we acknowledge the rise in the number of private hospitals in Fiji, this provides yet another opportunity where Fiji could enhance its niche market for Medical Tourism. Medical Tourism is often associated with people from lesser developed countries travelling to more advanced countries to receive high medical care and with the exponential rise in cost of healthcare services in developed countries, there has been a reversal of trend where people from developed countries are now travelling to lesser developed countries to receive high quality treatment at such lower costs. This is where the opportunity lies for Fiji but that will require extensive Government support, upskilling of our health professionals, and infrastructural upgrades for Fiji to benefit fully from Medical Tourism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, and of course, the Audio-Visual Industry, with so much potential for employment creation and to support economic growth, this appears to continue to be downtrodden and of course, Fiji is becoming one of the most sought-after production locations in the world. It makes good business sense to shoot in Fiji and for Fiji filmmakers to take advantage of the beautiful diverse locations and the best incentives in the world; the 20 percent film tax rebate. The very reasonable wage rates, the diversity of our cultures, our high literacy levels together with technological advancements in Fiji, should be added inducements for filmmakers to choose Fiji as a filming location and the onus is on the Government to create the business environment to entice filmmakers to Fiji.

In conclusion Mr. Speaker, Sir, ordinary Fijians are feeling the pressure of price rises, unemployment, deteriorating access to public services, and the intensifying effects of climate change. These are the very people who voted us into Parliament and are providing us the revenues for the budget. They expect better value from their money. Many Fijians, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are struggling to put food on the table, provide shelter to their families, and lack confidence in Government to protect

them from the proliferation of illicit drugs and criminal activity. Most are worried about the quality of education, healthcare and utilities. These are legitimate concerns, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is not only the job of the Government to address those issues. It is our collective responsibility as members of Parliament to attend to the needs of the people of our beloved country. Unfortunately, this budget falls short of the expectations of the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, more could have been done to reduce inflation, improve access to basic services, and most of all improve access to secure and create jobs, better paying jobs. Government has a responsibility to improve the livelihoods of our people. It is time that they begin to deliver on those responsibilities. Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his Budget Address, the honourable Minister for Finance stated that the core issue for economic security and stability is trust.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, he also stated that on the big and contentious issues which confront us, building long term national consensus is critical. Those words not only caught my attention, but its deep meaning still resonates within me, given the critical juncture or the crossroads we are currently at in our journey as an independent democratic country. I hope that these words are not merely hot air, but a genuine commitment to freeing us from the ills of the past and building a Fiji that we can all be proud of. The starting point is to move forward with the efforts to unite us as Fijians. Our unity as a people and as a nation should take precedence over all other efforts aimed at building national consensus, and I would urge the Government, through the honourable Prime Minister to kindly consider it as a national priority.

This year's Budget theme of *Stability, Security and Sustainability* is, therefore, not a mere coincidence, but is relevant both economically and politically for Fiji now, tomorrow and always. On the basis of all that I have said, it is unfortunate that I do not have enough confidence in the presentation by the honourable Minister for Finance to give this Budget my unreserved support and approval. I thank you for your indulgence, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thought they were not going to bring me the little bench for only 10 minutes.

There have been many calls for a Budget for the people. I congratulate the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for doing that. This is a Budget for the people. I also thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his contribution to the debate this morning on behalf of the Opposition as the Shadow Minister for Finance. I believe that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister has delivered the Budget for the people. I have with me a 40-page print-out of the speech by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister. It is an outstanding blueprint for progress in the coming year, extending the initial effort that we started last year.

Every page of the new Budget is devoted in one form or another to the people, to their overall welfare and needs, to the betterment of their families, to improving services to them, defeating poverty, opening up opportunities for prosperity, protecting their environment and overcoming the other challenges that we all face. It is all here. The several hundred pages of support documents are also dedicated to getting things right for the people. Some of the language is officialese in tone and the statistics are not very easy to follow, but the intent follows the same path as the Budget - how life in Fiji can be improved so that the people attain as much happiness and prosperity as possible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government's responsibility is to lay the platform and foundation for the people to build for themselves a healthy, happy and prosperous life. As the old adage goes, "You can take horses to water, but you cannot make them drink." A village in Nadroga asked the Alliance Government to assist them with some farming implements when they were adjusting from sugarcane

to food crop farming. While presenting the implements, the late Dr. Kuruisaqila asked the villagers; *“Muju kua ga ni kerevia vua na Viagwane na PM, na Jui Nayau, me lama i lovonía, hamakinia, cavusia, me qei vajubunia na kemutu tavioka!”* Ma! Please, do not ask the Government to come and plant your cassava.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the bare figures in the Budget often hide the larger human impact. For instance, I looked at the section about electricity subsidies and free water for households on low income, the electricity initiative involves \$10 million divided among 55,000 households (about \$181.80 per household). The benefits, therefore, will be widely felt. Similarly, the Free Water Project for around 40,000 households will reach many individuals (about \$200 per household) and equal to the Back to School Grant per child.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the huge increase in the Social Welfare budget last year to \$200 million continues in the new budget to bring relief to approximately 100,000 people. There are many other examples of financial support to make daily living a little easier for those in need (about \$2,000 per Social Welfare Beneficiary).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the new National Development Plan (NDP) for charting Fiji’s way ahead for the next five years is officially the People’s Plan. It will complement the budgets going forward. About 20,000 citizens took part in consultations prior to its drafting. So, there should be no doubt about our commitment to doing right by the people.

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

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- I warned during the elections that the obstacles we would face in office were formidable. And so, it has proved. But that is what we signed up for, we are not deterred. We have had our setbacks and made errors. That happens with all governments. When I survey the economic, social and political landscape in its entirety, I see the profile and vision of a new Fiji, the country of our dreams. I will not have time to talk in detail about that today, but I am confident that we together can get there. I can just say Fiji has been wounded, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but those wounds can be healed. We can do this together, all of us, starting here in this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji are awakening to a compelling truth, although we are divided by language, customs and traditions, we nonetheless share something that binds us, something that should make us brothers, sisters and neighbours. We belong to Fiji. These islands are home to all of us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, touching briefly on the foreign affairs aspect of my portfolios, we now have diplomatic relations with more than 182 countries. Those relationships and how we manage them are of vital importance and I will mention something about that soon. Just recently there were claims that we were falling down on the job. This came amidst all the ups and downs of democracy, attendant controversies and robust exchanges of opinions.

Characteristics of democracies, I am not aware of any democratic government that does not face accusations or allegations of incompetence or poor management. I remind Parliament again that during the elections in 2022, I anticipated an incoming government would face enormous difficulties and challenges, loaded with frustrations, and it would take time to get things right. There is no way in the world we could overcome these in the first 18 months in office. However, I can say with confidence, we are steadily getting a grip on the virtual reconstruction of the country. I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for accepting that challenge that we together can do that reconstruction job. Perhaps we need to be more effective in communicating that to the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I plan to share with Parliament a list of what I see as just some of the Government successes because of the speech time limitation, I will not be able to address these, but hopefully some of my colleagues will take over part of that task.

I briefly share with you now the story of the project that will transform Vanua Levu. We pushed hard to achieve agreement with development partners that would enable us to proceed. Complex negotiations with the World Bank produced confirmed funding of approximately \$302.6 million over 10 years. In a related initiative, the Government of the People's Republic of China agreed to provide \$300 million for road upgrading. That was a success of our diplomacy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we thank China for its willingness to support us.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) may finance rehabilitation of bridges and jetties. The broad scope of the plan will improve virtually all the islands' infrastructure. We expect that at least 60,000 Fijians, particularly women, will benefit from the new jobs and there will be a substantial boost to farming. Protection of natural resources will be central, especially through 30 locally managed Marine Protected Areas. It is estimated that with private sector investment coming in, the total volume of finance will increase to about \$1 billion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for many months I have been pursuing a unique project, I call it the "Ocean of Peace". It does not have a direct bearing on this year's Budget, but it is nonetheless of huge importance for our country and the Pacific Island Forum countries.

It is essentially a mission to promote peace, not only as a virtue in itself but a source of prosperity in our region and a symbol of hope in a world teetering on the edge of calamity. I have raised in a number of local speeches including one last week at the Kadavu Provincial Council meeting. When I am ready, I intend to make a full address on this peace project calling for broad support for the initiative.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I feel duty-bound to call for the Parliamentary Members to become part of a Parliamentary Keep Fit Project. It is important for the nation to set an example of maintaining good health and basic fitness.

When the young nurses told me that I was obese few months ago, I felt very bad; that was at 104 kilogrammes, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So, I started work on it, now even at 98 kilogrammes, still I am obese or at least overweight and I encourage all of us to participate on Wednesday afternoon with our civil servants.

I am assuming that you, my colleagues, will be very eager to join in and I intend to raise the matter with the Business House Committee.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you very much, honourable Prime Minister, for that invite to participate in the reduction of weight, et cetera. Just before I adjourn Parliament for tea, I would like to acknowledge once more some of the faces who are familiar to us who are sitting in the gallery.

On my right up on the first bench, these are some of our colleagues from Vanuatu. You are most welcome to Parliament. Further on my left, we have Mr. Semi Leweniqila, a lawyer who has come back to Fiji from the United States of America and to his right is Mr. Simone Rasova, former Member of Parliament including the former Assistant Minister for Sports, Mr. Rajesh Singh, and a well-known figure in the SODELPA Party, Ms. Faith Grace. I now intend to adjourn Parliament for morning tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 11.14 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.49 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, there has been a slight change on the Batting Order. I have just received a request from the honourable Government Whip that immediately after this, the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services will speak and then to be followed by honourable Bala. That is what we are going to be taking now.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Thank you for this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; before I go on to my Speech proper, I would like to address some of the issues that was raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition with regard to the Primary Healthcare approach. Yes, the Ministry is making that a priority - primary healthcare, in terms of sustainable financing for health.

The Ministry is aware that the way forward is through prevention, which is still better than cure and, therefore, we are prioritising our primary healthcare through allocation in last year's as well as this financial year's budget, together with our development partners. You would have seen that most of the developments by one of our development partners mostly centred in the province of Tailevu, Sir. As we speak, the end of the month and the beginning of next month, we will be commissioning the new Dogo Health Facility, still in Tailevu, and thereafter in Vunitogoloa, the province of Ra.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver the Ministry of Health and Medical Services' full support for the 2024-2025 National Budget that was presented before this august Parliament on Friday, 28th June, 2024. I wish to commend the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics and his Ministry staff, who have worked tirelessly to deliver a visionary and pragmatic Budget that economically empowers Fijians, while promoting good health and wellbeing for the Fijian population.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the proposed increase in salaries of civil servants and the increase in minimum wage to \$5.00 are clear indications of the Coalition Government's commitment towards workers in the country. The resolution of the world record three-decade old dispute with the 368 Vatukoula gold miners has to be among the top and memorable highlights of this Budget - a truly historic event that will be remembered in the annals of Fijian history for many generations to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services has been allocated \$540 million for the next financial year, of which \$90 million has been specifically allocated for the Private Public Partnership (PPP) with the Lautoka and Ba Hospitals. The allocation is adequate for the Ministry's need, and will allow the Ministry to effectively deliver health programmes and achieve favourable outcomes in the health service through:

- (a) the upgrading and improvement of healthcare facilities and health services support systems;
- (b) strengthening and building our human resource for health;
- (c) establishing innovative and collaborative partnerships for a resilient health system;
- (d) transforming our Primary Healthcare approach to achieve Universal Health Coverage for our people; and
- (e) instilling the culture of wellness that empowers our communities to live a long, healthy and productive life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$12 million has been allocated for capital projects and maintenance work which will focus on our prioritised projects such as the:

- (a) interior works at Labasa Hospital;
- (b) refurbishment of Savusavu Health Facility, and
- (c) construction of a new Rehabilitation Centre in Tamavua. This is a four-year project sponsored by KOICA.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry also welcomes the allocation of \$3.8million for minor works which represents an increase of \$0.8million from the current year and will allow our Divisional Teams to promptly work on much needed repairs and minor renovations for our health facilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in talking about access to medicine, medical products and biomedical equipment, the allocation of \$96 million for drugs and medical equipment, which is an increase of \$4 million from this financial year will be managed by the Fiji Pharmaceutical & Biomedical Services (FPBS). Sir, \$15 million is provided for the procurement of biomedical equipment, and the availability of high quality, well-maintained and fully functional medical equipment that ensures effective delivery of health services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, there has been a significant improvement in the procurement and logistics management system at the Ministry of Health. Our electronic stock inventory management system called mSUPPLY has been rolled out fully to 234 health facilities, including:

- Dental Departments, Laboratory Departments and Operating Theatres at CWMH Hospital and Labasa Hospital;
- Subdivisional Hospitals at Nadi, Sigatoka and Nabouwalu in Bua;
- rural-based health facilities, such as Cicia and Lakeba in the Lau Group, Qamea and Bouma in Taveuni, Kioa and Saqani, Lekutu and Kubulau in the Northern Division.

At these facilities, our staff can now use either a tablet or desktop computer to place their orders and monitor their inventory. Ongoing use will lead to further improvement and strengthening of this important system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's new budget is highlighted by the establishment of two new cost centres to better align our health programmes and build more efficiently and accountability in our implementation process.

Family Health: As a new cost centre in the Ministry, this has been allocated \$3 million in the new financial year. The allocation will facilitate and further strengthen the Ministry's programmes pertaining to:

- (1) Maternal and Child Health; and
- (2) Sexual Reproductive Health and Gender.

Under the Division, the budgetary allocation will enable the effective implementation of the Ministry's:

- (1) Expanded Programme Immunization (EPI) and the Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes;

- (2) Cervical Cancer Prevention Programme and the National Action Plan on Gender Based Violence Against Women and Girls; and
- (3) begin the roll out of our HIV Surge Strategy under the HIV and AIDS Prevention and Control Programme with an allocation of \$200,000.

Wellness and NCD: Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Division is our second new cost centre with its own budget of \$1.9 million. Tackling Fiji's highest disease burden of NCD, the allocation will assist the Division to deliver and evaluate, amongst other things, the:

- (1) NCD Prevention and Control Programme and the Mental Health and Suicidal Prevention activities with an allocation of \$600,000;
- (2) National Food and Nutrition Security Programme and Oral Health Promotion; and
- (3) Rheumatic Heart Disease Prevention and Control Programme with an allocation of \$200,000.

The Division will also complete the much-awaited STEPS Survey with the support of our partners and the Fiji Bureau of Statistics in the next financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$2.48 million has been allocated to the Health Protection Division of the Ministry in the new financial year. With this allocation, the Ministry will address acute threats to public health from communicable diseases, environmental hazards and health emergencies.

The Health Protection Division will work closely with our Divisional Health Teams to:

- (1) respond to outbreaks of leptospirosis, typhoid, dengue fever and diarrhoeal disease around the country;
- (2) carry out Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) project activities for schools, healthcare facilities and communities;
- (3) conduct responsibilities as the Competent Authority for Food Safety; and
- (4) implement our mosquito control strategic plan and operational research to support vector control.

In the coming financial year, the Division will work to:

- (1) strengthen our tobacco control enforcement and quarantine and port health service roles;
- (2) finalise our Health National Adaptation Plan for Climate Change and Health; and
- (3) prepare well for the international re-certification for the Fiji Emergency Medical Team (FEMAT) by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also to note that in the coming financial year, there is allocation within the Ministry for the review of our legislations. As alluded to by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, there is a much needed review of certain legislations within the Ministry of Health which I believe are outdated and needs to be updated to be in the context of the current setting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to conclude by affirming my full support for this Budget, and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services is ready to forge on and roll out its programmes and plans, laying out the platform for a secure healthy future for our people. *Vinaka vakalevu*, Sir. God bless Fiji and I thank you.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am not that well today, but I will do justice for the time that has been allocated to me.

The honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Government Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and friends; at the outset, I would like to congratulate the appointment of the new honourable Attorney-General, as well as the new honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forests.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I extend my gratitude to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for presenting the Budget. However, I must express my profound reservations regarding the lack of policy directions embedded within this Budget, in particular, there are glaring omissions of counter measures to tackle inflation and escalating cost of living, which impacts the daily lives of ordinary Fijians.

There are no measures, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to offset the rising cost of living that the Budget chooses to ignore. This includes lack of specific tax and duty reductions to cushion this impact beyond the lame excuse that prices will continue to rise because of rising cost of production.

That is not an answer, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the problems faced by ordinary Fijians who want real action to make their lives easier. That is a classroom answer that does not warrant any space in the national dialogue when it comes to economic and finance matters, and ways and means of making the lives of those who are struggling to put food on the table better. Surely, Sir, our people deserve better.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must acknowledge that the increase in debt, increase in expenditure and slow economic growth are alarming indicators of our current path. As a country, we need to ask ourselves, where are we heading? What are the solutions? Recently, the honourable Prime Minister had proposed a government of national unity or a bipartisan approach, but what is the common ground, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

For the past two years, we have witnessed drama after drama, instead of action. The people of Fiji are suffering because the country is not progressing. No matter how much funds are allocated to Ministries, or how good policies are introduced, none of these will work without political stability. We need to resolve and work towards that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am told that funds have been approved by lending agencies, but the investors are hesitant to invest because they do not feel secure because of their lack of confidence in the Government. This is after my talks with the businesspeople. We do meet, and they have said that banks have approved their loan, but they are not prepared to start their construction, so we need to see the solution to that.

The Government lacks direction and has lost its way due to shortsighted decisions on many fronts, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We are losing our best and brightest Fijians because they see the discrimination and lack of secure progressive future for themselves and their children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the way forward requires real unity on the ground, and not just the use of multiracial card during special events, like the Giriti celebrations.

(Hon. L.D. Tabuya interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- I am coming to you, honourable Tabuya, just wait.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget lacks positive growth because it is rooted in backward looking and negative thinking. What else can we expect from my good friend, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, when in almost every speech and you must have heard, Mr.

Speaker, Sir, that when he delivers, he just plays the blame game - that the previous Government did this, the previous Government did that. Stop it my friend, you will be a good man!

Let me remind him, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the previous Government was delivering on the ground and not just big talk.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.K. BALA.- The people of Fiji have experienced and had an open debate on Churchill Park and Govind Park. I am putting a challenge today, I have been hearing this from the last two years and today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I challenge the Government for an open debate on Govind Park and the swimming pool. What is this nonsense? Now, that you are in Government, go and do it, that is your job!

The people of Fiji have experienced what it means to have an 'all talk no action' Government in the past 18 months. Sadly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji will continue to suffer, as they await relief from the cost of living pressures, compounded by the lack of action to provide that needed relief.

The people of Fiji were expecting this Budget to offer them the relief. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they were wrong. The people are watching and listening, and they are concluding that this is a Coalition Government by the Coalition and for the Coalition, and none of this inspires confidence in our country's future.

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics has criticised the Ba Hospital and Lautoka Hospital Projects - a Private Public Partnership (PPP). Mr. Speaker, Sir, he should have also explained the service provided for that money, the lives saved through heart surgeries and interventions, as well as the high-end care equipment.

I am told, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that around 170 Fijians have had successful heart surgeries. Imagine if that service was not provided here...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Paid for by the Government.

HON. P.K. BALA.- You will have your turn to respond, do not worry.

... families would have been paying to go to India, New Zealand or Australia.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is very interesting. Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics explain to the people of Fiji, what was the healthcare level and the cost before the Aspen partnership because he did mention around \$10 million to \$12 million per month? So, when Aspen was not there, what was the cost to the Ministry of Health? That needs to be told, so that we can balance and justify whether it is really a bad or a good decision that was taken at that time.

Can he explain why the health service delivery is more than three times better than what it was since Aspen has taken over, Mr. Speaker, Sir? The honourable Minister must understand that quality healthcare is more important than making the books look good. I want to share this because we are in the Standing Committee and we did a tour. The Ba Hospital is supposed to be a District Hospital but now, people are treating that as a Divisional Hospital so people right from Rakiraki and Tavua all come to Ba Hospital. That is something good about Ba Hospital.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I ask the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics about the understanding between the Indian Government and the Fijian Government on the construction of the new state-of-the-art hospital in Suva. Is it true that the Indian Government asked the Fijian Government to pay off the FSC loan before giving the new grant for the new hospital?

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

HON. P.K. BALA.- Alright, if it is nonsense, then let it be nonsense, but the truth will come out one day.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You're talking nonsense.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Yes, but the truth will come out one day.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Ask them!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is concerning that this Budget was formulated with minimal open and transparent consultation, relying heavily on the in-house fiscal advisors.

The Fiscal Review Committee advised the Permanent Secretary to be disconnected from the realities faced by our people, offering solutions that will push more Fijians into poverty. Their reliance on a narrow set of advisors who may not fully understand the ground reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is evident. It shows the lack of respect for the principles of inclusive governance and, furthermore, the exclusion of key stakeholders, such as industry leaders and community representatives from this consultation only makes

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They all came. You don't know.

HON. P.K. BALA.- How many consultations did you do in Ba, Lautoka and Nadi?

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- I apologise for the running commentaries, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it makes it lively.

MR. SPEAKER.- I like your line where you said, if it is nonsense let it be nonsense.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Laughter)

On the minimum wage implementation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the lag in the implementation of minimum wage with a nominal increase to \$4.50 in August 2024, and an additional 50 cents in April 2025, is deeply troubling. The slow approach, coupled with a low starting point, will result in little relief against the backdrop of the continuous inflation and rising living cost.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the previous Government initiated and completed the wage review, and addressed issues of inequality, and redressed sectors that needed better rewards for labour. This Government's continuous about-turns on the key promise reflects a profound disconnect from their electoral commitments.

The difference between promise and actual implementation is not just a matter of poor planning, it is a breach of trust with the people of Fiji who place their faith in this promise during the Elections. In the next nine months before the \$5 minimum wage is awarded, the poor people will suffer, as they are suffering now, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Once they reach April 2025, they will find that, that extra \$1 per hour does not even extend enough to meet their extra cost of living reflected in the basic groceries in their basket. Many of our poor will reduce to poor healthy choices, Sir, if any, adding to our productivity issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the removal of benefits and the imposition of additional taxes in charitable and sporting organisations shows the lack of empathy and understanding of the critical role these organisations play in our society. This fiscal policy appears to be designed to enrich the already wealthy while the burden of these measures falls on the poor and the vulnerable. The rich corporations and high-end businesses continue to receive favourable treatment, which only widens the gap between the rich and the poor. My time is up, Sir?

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes.

HON. P.K. BALA.- So, I have got five pages left. I will give it to the media.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank you very much.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thought you were going to lay it on the table, now you are giving it straight to the media.

HON. P.K. BALA.- No, I knew you will not allow me to.

(Laughter)

HON. A.B.V.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen and members of the public tuning in live on Parliament's *Facebook* page via the *Walesi* platform; *ni sa yadra vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is with great pleasure that I rise to deliver my response to the 2024-2025 National Budget that was delivered on Friday, 28th June, 2024. Firstly, I would like to thank my heavenly father, the mighty God I serve for his guidance, strength and wisdom. I would also like to thank the honourable Prime Minister for entrusting me with the ministerial portfolio for Fisheries and Forests, the first time a woman has ever been appointed to this position.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation for his leadership and guidance and all the staff of the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation. To my predecessor, honourable Kalaveti Ravu, thank you for your service to the people and assisting the people and the stakeholders of both the Fisheries and Forests sectors.

To my family and supporters, thank you for journeying with me. *Vei kemuni na kaiciqu, kei na wekaqu, au va yadra ika yani ena nomuni vei dela ni yavu va 'uraga. Sa veisau beka na noqui u'u, noqu valenivolavola, ia se dua ikaga nai varau ni veiqaravi, au nui'aka ni se dei iko ga na ikina gana.*"

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the words of the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance that this Budget is to ensure that we remain committed and focused on positively impacting

the lives of our teachers, our farmers, our rural communities, our people with disabilities, our taxi drivers, our nurses and every person in Fiji by the way we manage our money and set out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the comments made by the honourable Leader of the Opposition for the Fisheries and the Forestry sectors and I would like to applaud the Coalition Government for its foresight and support to resourced-based sectors. Both the Ministry of Fisheries and Forests have been provided an increased budget of \$25.3 million and \$31.4 million respectively.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of \$744,918 has been allocated to the Offshore Fisheries Management Division to support its Monitoring, Control and Surveillance (MCS) systems in combatting the illegal, unregulated, unreported fishing phenomenon in Fiji's offshore sector. Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is grateful to be hosting this year's Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) 21st Annual Session where 550 participants from across the globe will be converging in Suva to engage in considerations around the region's tuna stocks and its development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$837,666 has been allocated for Fisheries Research Development to support the work currently being undertaken in terms of species identification for commercial development, region wide species stock assessments and species development along life cycles.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the technical services, \$123,024 has been allocated to allow for the purchasing of technical equipment that will assist with maintenance and repair works of the Ministry's technical equipment noting that there are 23 ice plants, 32 service centres and 43 institutional quarters across the four divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of Aquaculture Development, \$1.9 million has been allocated to cater for the provision of technical equipment to support the staff and further supplement the development of capital construction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of projects that are under "R", a total of \$150,000 is being provided for the upgrades of the Lautoka, Sigatoka and Ba Fisheries Stations, \$500,000 is being provided for Coastal Fisheries Development, \$700,000 is to support the Aquaculture Association Development Aspirations and \$400,000 is to increase support to the Food Security Programme (FSP).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for projects that are not under "R", \$400,000 is provided to cater to the increase in solar panels at the Makogai Research Station, \$100,000 to support Fisheries Research and Conservation; \$230,000 to support the Cawaro Ice Plant; and \$100,000 for the initial preparatory works for Natewa Fisheries Station and Natovi Fisheries Station.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$350,000 to increase the support provided to farmers engaging in commercial brackishwater fisheries and \$170,000 towards seaweed development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Forestry welcomes the allocation of \$31.4 million for the 2024 – 2025 financial year, an increase of more than 40 percent from the previous financial year. The Ministry will continue to address the issues of degraded forests through our forest and ecosystem restoration programme with an allocation of \$2.5 million in the next financial year. The funding will strengthen and support our efforts on the reforestation of degraded landscapes, forest conservation and the reforestation of native and exotic species.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will contribute to forest cover whilst contributing to our emissions reduction programme and Fiji's international commitments in combating climate change. The allocation will also support the establishment of nursery, purchase of seedlings, plantation establishment and provide further incentive payments to communities engaging in the reforestation project.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reforestation activities also support our programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation programme also known as REDD-Plus and its long-standing working arrangements with the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF).

The Ministry welcomes the allocation of \$1.2 million for this project, an increase of 44 percent from the previous year to support the Readiness Phase of Carbon Trading to be implemented throughout Viti Levu, Vanua Levu and Taveuni, across 10 provinces, 20 districts and targeting 117 villages and lay the strategy of operationalising the Look North Policy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will continue to expand pine projects to ensure socio-economic benefits of the Forestry sector including rehabilitation, rebuilding and economic development which is now extended to our maritime communities. Recently, a jetty in Muani, Kadavu was constructed through the support of the Ministry to enable the subsidised transport of logs. The increase of allocation for maritime pine development and the commercial maritime pine subsidy from \$1.9 million to more than \$2.8 million will allow the Ministry to continue its efforts in extending the maritime project to additional islands in the Lomaiviti Group and Lakeba.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our vision to support our economy and provide opportunities to resource owners through the development of Public-Private-Partnership (PPP), the Ministry welcomes the allocation of \$450,000, an increase of more than 100 percent.

The Ministry will focus on upgrading of Colo-i-Suva Forest Parks, establishment of new community forest parks and upgrading of existing community forest parks. The successful operations of Colo-i-Suva serves as a model for the establishment of other community parks to benefit resource owners and to generate related economic activities.

The Ministry will continue with Phase 2 operations for Lutu and Nadarivatu Community Forest Parks established in the current financial year and in the next financial year and will support the Look North Policy through targeting the upgrading of the existing Lavena Community Park in Taveuni as well as looking into unlocking the potential of developing the province of Bua through this initiatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will also extend the establishment of community forest parks into the Nadi district through converting natural resources into sightseeing opportunities for tourists and local visitors benefitting landowners, generating employment, boosting economic growth and further contributing to GDP growth.

The Ministry also acknowledges the potential that exists in our cottage and small enterprise sector. The development of Cottage Industries in Fiji remains a priority for the Ministry to enhance landowner involvement in the sector. The budgetary allocation for the Forest Subsidy Programme of \$200,000 will provide financial support for new and existing small cottage industries. Funds will be utilised to procure woodworking machines and equipment to support youths, women and community-based businesses who will, in turn, contribute to the growth of the sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry welcomes the new allocation of \$1.1 million for the full upgrade of the Timber Industry Training Workshop and purchase of technical equipment to improve

trainings for cottage industry, monitoring, control and surveillance for harvesting and logging.

Mr. Speaker, Community Development Training will continue in the next financial year for house construction, chainsaw training and portable sawmill training and work attachments facilitated by the Ministry through our Timber Industry Training Centre (TITC).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will continue to support the plantation sector both the Fiji Pine Limited in accessing pines from Maritime Pine Schemes woodlots and Fiji Hardwood Corporation Limited to support their certification process as well as restructure for improved governance and more landowner engagement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Landowner Trusts for both of these companies, Fiji Pine Trust Extension and Fiji Mahogany Trust will receive a grant of \$1.7 million and \$0.5 million respectively. This will allow landowner training and development to generate revenue from their resources through the Trust. Mr Speaker, Sir, with that being said, I commend and support the 2024-2025 Budget and I thank you for the opportunity to speak.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I hope you have taken note of the lights and flashes when you are under two minutes. This is just to help guide you manage your time when you are on the floor.

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition and respective honourable Members of Parliament. Mr. Speaker, Sir, please allow me to speak briefly in *iTaukei*.

MR. SPEAKER.- Vinaka.

HON. A. BIA.- *Ni sa bula vinaka na Turaga na Speaker ni Bose Lawa ni noda vanua, Liuliu ni noda Matanitu, Prime Minister ni noda vanua kei keda kece sara na Mata Vaturi ka digitaki ena loma saka ni noda Bose Lawa. Taumada au taura na gauna vinaka ogo meu rokovi na vanua kei ira na taukei ni vanua, kau vakabula saka tale tikoga yani ki na vei turaga bale, marama bale ena yasana e tinikava ni noda vanua. Duidui vanua eda dui sema tiko mai kina, raitio yaloyalo, Walesi se veitabana duidui ni mona livaliva, nuitaki ni makare saka tiko yani na domo ni veiqaravi mai na loma ni Bose Lawa. Keimami sa niutaka na nomuni Mata Vakaturi ni ko ni na ciqoma na matata ni veika keimami via cauraka me baleta na noda i tuvatuva vaka-i-lavo.*

Turaga Speaker, au sega sara ni kena dau ena veika vaka fika, se kena dau ena kena vakadeuci se vakadikevi na noda i tuvatuva vai lavo, io, au via vosa tikoga ena so na ulutaga kau nanuma ni yaco tiko kina na noqu kila kei na veika e rawa ni kauta mai na toso ki liu kina noda vanua. Dina ni tu na veika eda gadreva ka da nanamaki kina vakalewe ni vuvale, lewe ni vanua, se vakai lawalawa vakacakacaka, ia sa ka bibi me da nanuma deivaki ni Matanitu ena ceguva ga na veika e rawa ni cakava se vakayacora.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make my contribution on the recent Budget that was delivered by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance. Firstly, we must give credit where credit is due and at the outset, thanking Government for the pay rise allocated to the civil servants and ordinary Fijian workers. Most importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, an issue that has grappled the Vatukoula gold miners for over a decade, now about 368 mining workers and families have shared tears of joy about the decision to pay out the Vatukoula strike settlement.

Mr. Speaker, one of the most welcoming news to all workers who are members of the FNPF was the increase on the return on investment from 7 percent to 8 percent. This will increase every

member retirement fund through the power of compounding interest, not only this, but the increase will also improve the General Accounts assistance eligibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, on behalf of all the Melanesian communities around Fiji, I would like to thank the Government as well for approving the celebration of a Melanesian Day that will be held in Suva later this year and this has never been done before. I thank the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs for again confirming that to fellow Melanesians community members in Navutu, Lautoka over the weekend. This is a start towards the right direction and certainly brings a new lease of life to us, Melanesians, as we continue to cry for justice and equality towards all Melanesian descendants living in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking about reforms and incentives brought by Government through Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF), it is disheartening to inform this august Parliament, that majority of us Melanesians living in our Melanesian settlements cannot apply for their own money to improve their living condition in some of the communities they live in.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many were turned away from FNPF and having to hide their tears, just to be told that they cannot access their funds because the land they reside in is not theirs and they cannot access their eligibility to even improve their living standard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge Government if a leeway can be given or may be, some sort of consent to allow them to access their funds such as their housing eligibility, to raise their standard of living and empower them economically. We have close to 40 communities around Fiji and wherever we live, we have called it as our *Koro* (village), and we have hold our Melanesian Communities close to our heart.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I bring your attention to an issue that is highlighted by the media last year that 75 percent of *iTaukei* are living in poverty. I wanted to hear during the Budget Address as to how Government will tackle this issue and, at the same time, empower the indigenous owners of this land to get them away from poverty, or even introduce schemes that will empower indigenous Fijians.

Kevaka era na sega ni qaravi vakavinaka na i taukei ni vanua kei na vei Turaga Bale kei na Marama Bale ni yasana e 14 ni noda vanua, ena sukusukura tikoga na gaunisala eda muria, ka na baya tikoga na noda vei qaravi.

I understand that an SME funding has been allocated, but I felt that Government should have allocated more, given the increase in the interest of forming cooperatives from rural communities and rural villages around Fiji. Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the cooperative idea, it enhances the idea of venturing into business, but we do it in a more traditional way of *solesolevaki*, where all members have a fair share of the profit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I turn your attention to an area that I am so passionate about and, that is, sports. I do understand that majority of our athletes are young people, but I always believe that sports should be standalone on its own, given the growth and the economic return it can project to our economy.

From my observation, when clinic and awareness is done regarding any sports, there is age limitation and sometimes it caters only for the youth. With sports, this should not be the case. Sports awareness and clinic should not be limited to any age group and sports development should be done across all levels of society.

With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, I would like to thank the Chairman of the Nasinu Town Council, Mr. Felix Magnus, for his vision and innovation in partnering with Nasinu Volleyball to pilot a model that can revive the sport of volleyball and take it to greater heights.

Now speaking of this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I call on the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports to seek more dialogue with the Fiji Sports Commission as to how they can reach the very heart of our rural communities through sports development and empowerment. I do understand that there have been talks by Government to review the Fiji Sports Commission and this is in terms of funding as well, however, I want to question as to why review an organisation that has been very effective, and they closely monitor and scrutinize every sporting body that do receive funding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the minority sports fund is what I was more interested about during the Budget Address and how minor sports can be best developed to compete at the highest level. Most of minority sports do access funding from the Fiji Sports Commission and through the Office of the Prime Minister, should have more access to these funding, given the extent of work they do and the accountability and transparency of demanding acquittals from various minor sporting bodies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have noted a decrease in funding for sports ground in the rural areas. A lot of the rugby teams in the Skipper Cup competition and various *Vanua* teams in the B Division do not have an official ground on their own. This allocation should increase, given the rapid growth of the game of rugby in our rural areas with both, our Fijian Drua and Fijiana Drua, performing exceptionally well at the Super Rugby Competition.

Mr. Speaker, we need to invest more on this, and we cannot develop our local players to the standard that is required at international level, if the lack of standard playground continues to be a major concern.

Mr. Speaker, with the Budget being delivered with a lot of bold promises and assurance, now the hardest part is how Government, and in this case, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics will deliver to the people of Fiji.

We are here to serve for the best interest for all Fijians and most importantly, be the change that they wanted. And if this demand some independent Opposition Members like me to assist and support the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister to govern the people of Fiji, then I am more than happy and willing to do so.

However, Mr. Speaker, that will not stop us, as independent Members supporting the honourable Prime Minister, to address something we feel may be detrimental to the people of Fiji. The bottom line is, we are here for the people, we are bounded by the people and no matter what it takes, we need to put our body on the line for the sake of ensuring that the voices of the people are heard in this august Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, to conclude, I have already mentioned this in Parliament and, please, allow me to say this again, if not us, then who, if not now, then when? We, as Members of Parliament, need to show the people of Fiji that we must take action now and not to wait for someone else, rather than being considered as a bystander which will make us part of the problem and not bringing any solution to issues concerning the people of Fiji. *Vinaka Vakalevu* and God Bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka vakalevu*, honourable Bia, for your contribution. I now call upon the honourable and learned Attorney-General to make his Maiden Speech. The floor is yours, Sir.

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, my fellow citizens; I wish to pay my respects to the traditional landowners of the land upon which this Parliament sits. *Vakaturaga saka ena vanua vakaturaga o Nadonumai, vei ira na Gone Turaga na Roko Tui Suva.*

I wish to thank and congratulate the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for his Budget Address, and wish to comment briefly on the allocation for the Office of the Attorney-General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the allocation to the Office of the Attorney-General and in particular, to the different entities that come under my ministerial portfolio. They have all had significant increases. The increases, though come with increased responsibilities and deliverables, I have stressed to my staff, Mr. Speaker, that the general public expects us to work harder and to deliver more. Money to run the Government does not come easily. It comes from the taxpayers of this country to whom we are all accountable.

I want, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to briefly comment on my role as the Attorney-General of Fiji. I come to this role unhindered by membership of any political party. It allows me a degree of independence, unavailable to an Attorney-General who is an elected Member of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it affords me the opportunity to speak with greater candour and objectivity. I will try to use that privilege wisely and respectfully at all times.

I see my role as the Attorney-General to give the best legal advice to Cabinet and the Government, consistent with the laws of Fiji. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not my role to do what is politically expedient or convenient.

I view the unique role of the Attorney-General as a fundamental pillar of the rule of law in this country. In its simplest formulation, the rule of law ensures that no one, including the elected Government of the day, or any public official, is above the law. The rule of law, Mr. Speaker, Sir, does not mean rule by law. Rule of law does not mean rule by law.

The recent conviction of a former president in one of the most powerful countries in the world for falsifying business records, is an important reminder that be you ever so high, the law is above you. It is a lesson that we, in this country, could well bear in mind.

The rule of law, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the foundation of our system of government. There is not one set of laws for the powerful and another for the powerless; one for the rich, and one for the poor; depending on one's race, or ethnicity, or religion. Sir, the rule of law ensures that executive power is not exercised arbitrarily. The rule of law will promote a peaceful country and build more effective and accountable institutions at all levels.

The Attorney-General, as the guardian of the rule of law, is tasked with upholding the public interest. It is my intention to discharge my constitutional duty apolitically. I am not a politician. First and foremost, I am a lawyer.

Through the Solicitor-General, my responsibility extends to broad oversight of civil litigation, by or against the State. The State is supposed to be the model litigant. Mr. Speaker, Sir, put simply,

it means that Government lawyers must first obey the law and abide by the ethical obligations which apply to all legal practitioners. They must act fairly at all times and with complete propriety, and in accordance with the highest professional standards.

It is part of my duty to promote respect for the law in all Government affairs. Mr. Speaker, Sir, under our system of law, as a member of the Cabinet, I am collectively responsible and accountable to this Parliament.

I want, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to mention some matters that form part of my vision as Attorney-General.

On the Code of Conduct, the requirement of a Code of Conduct for leaders, including the honourable Ministers and Members of Parliament is contained in Section 149 of the Constitution.

The Code of Conduct Bill 2016 (Bill No. 22 of 2016) was first introduced in Parliament in April 2016 and read for the first time on that date. It was later read for the second time in late April 2016.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill was referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights. Whilst still under review in that Standing Committee, Parliament was dissolved, in which case, the Bill lapsed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has a constitutional obligation to give effect to Section 149. Codes of Conduct already exist in the public service and in many private companies.

As far back as 1996, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Reeves Commission, whose work led to the adoption of the 1997 Constitution had recommended that the Constitution should have an Integrity Code, which is similar to a Code of Conduct. This was to ensure, Mr. Speaker, that national leaders did not use their offices for personal gain.

A Code of Conduct forms an important part of the integrity system of Government. It will encourage ethical conduct, reduce risks to the integrity of Government, and the Parliament, as the paramount political institution, and enable it to perform its functions more effectively. This will help to enhance transparency and public accountability of our leaders, strengthening the public's trust in Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I, therefore, intend to seek Cabinet's approval to commence work on the drafting of legislation to implement a Code of Conduct with a view to its early introduction in this Parliament.

On the Freedom of Information, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Information Act was passed as far back as 2018. Regrettably, however, it has not commenced. The delay in implementing the Information Act is unfortunate. It is my intention to go to Cabinet as soon as possible and seek its support to give effect to this law.

Public access to government-held information is important. It allows individuals to better understand the role of Government and the decisions that are being made on their behalf. When our citizens are informed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government can be held accountable for its actions and policies.

Once the Act is in force, it will allow access to information to improve the lives of the people, making available to them information relating to education, healthcare, and other public services.

The right to know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is central for upholding other basic human rights, for promoting transparency, justice and development. It underpins and strengthens our democracy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I intend to seek the endorsement of Cabinet to proceed with the implementation of this law as soon as practicable.

On the Legal Aid Commission, Mr. Speaker, this year marks the 26th year of the Legal Aid Commission's establishment. The Commission plays a pivotal role in the administration of justice. It provides a range of legal services to those who would, otherwise, be left without help. It helps to ensure equal justice, particularly for the poorest and the most vulnerable in our community.

In some respects, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Legal Aid Commission has become the victim of its own success. This has resulted in the workload of the Commission lawyers increasing, and this has required additional funding.

But we have to recognise that there will come a time where the Commission must accept that there are limits to its continued expansion. There are budgetary constraints and demands for resources from other departments. It might be an opportune time to review the guidelines and means testing for legal aid to stem the flow of cases and applications for assistance. From its original intention of dealing with family law issues and representing accused in criminal trials, it is now drafting wills and dealing with estate matters from the public.

While I recognise that this is about accessing justice, this has led to an expansion of legal services from its original purpose. It may be time to reconsider what the core service of the Legal Aid Commission should be.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully accept that access to justice should not just be for the rich and the powerful, it should be for everyone. A society that values liberty and justice for all must ensure that our citizens, especially the poorest, are able to have access to legal aid.

Human Rights & Anti-Discrimination Commission (HRADC), Mr. Speaker, Sir, is an independent constitutional body established under the Constitution. Its job is to monitor, protect and promote the human rights of all. The Commission opened its first-ever regional office in Lautoka in March this year. The Lautoka office, Mr. Speaker, means that people in the West and the surrounding areas are able to access its services. I understand there are plans for other regional offices around Fiji.

The Commission presently has a staff of 12 and it has a Complaints and Awareness Section with only two persons per team. This is not enough to handle complaints from throughout Fiji. Between 2022 to April 2024, the Complaints Section received more than 800 complaints. I have already started discussions with the Director of that Commission and others to explore how the capacity and staffing of the Commission might be strengthened. It is my intention in the coming months to work closely with the Commission and to give it as much support as is needed to ensure that Fiji has a national human rights institution which is effective and credible. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am committed to working with the Commission so that it meets minimum international standards, founded on pluralism, independence and effectiveness.

The Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC), Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a constitutional body set up to receive, investigate and prosecute various crimes, including bribery and corruption. FICAC is independent in the performance of its functions and is not subject to the control or the direction of any person or authority. By law, FICAC is required to provide updates and advise the Attorney-General on matters relating to its functions and responsibilities. That is as far as it goes.

However, my office does not have any legal powers to tell FICAC what to do. One might ask then, so who is FICAC answerable to? Broadly speaking, Mr. Speaker, Sir, FICAC is answerable to the law and to the people of this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a functioning and effective FICAC needs strong and experienced leadership. I am pleased to say, the position of Commissioner of FICAC has been recently advertised and it is my hope that the position can be filled as soon as possible. There is much unfinished business before FICAC. Individuals responsible for stealing from the public purse in the recent past must be held accountable for past wrongdoing and crime. The public interest demands this. If the anecdotal evidence is to be believed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has been serious dipping into public funds in the past, some of it in possible breach of the law. Those responsible must face the full brunt of the law. With the recent budgetary allocation to the Commission, they have the resources to deliver what the public and the law expects of them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FICAC has cases going back as far as 2014. I was told by their staff that it was hard to get confirmed dates of hearing in court. There were part heard matters before the courts, and many FICAC cases were stuck in the long criminal lists awaiting their turn. There may be a need to restore a dedicated "corruption court", and I intend to liaise closely with stakeholders in order to consider this justification for it, if any.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, corruption and poor governance are security challenges which undermine democracy, the rule of law and economic development. The FICAC must carry out their duties fearlessly however difficult or inconvenient and go where the facts and the evidence takes them. This will go some way to restoring trust in government, but FICAC must never again be used as a weapon to remove or punish the Government's political opponents. That would be an abuse of power and unacceptable. Fiji is not a police or totalitarian state. There can be no returning to the dark days of tyranny where agents of the state were routinely sent to the homes of people who disagreed with the government.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- On Law Reform Commission, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have heard respectfully the comments of the honourable Leader of the Opposition with respect to law reform. I look forward to working with the members of the Government and the Opposition to identify laws that need review.

Law reform, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is vital to the legal system and the country. Fiji's laws must keep abreast with the changing social, economic, legal and political developments in the country and outside it. Globalization and the rapid pace of technological innovation will require a change of mindset and possibly laws. It will affect the way we do business.

Artificial Intelligence, cybercrime, money laundering, new trading agreements and climate change means that Fiji must be ready to deal with new and emerging problems. Many of Fiji's laws were inherited from when Fiji was a British colony. Many are outdated and often written in a language and style better suited to that era. Some laws are unclear, complicated and difficult to understand. Laws should be clear and predictable. I hasten to say that we cannot cure all the ills in our country by passing more and more laws. Too many laws can add to more bureaucracy and more bottlenecks to development. What is sorely needed is greater and more effective law enforcement of existing laws.

In early discussions I have had with the Commissioner Director, I have suggested that consideration be given to appointing part time Commissioners to spearhead particular reviews on

special law reform issues. Reform and development of the laws of Fiji will help achieve coherent and accessible laws that reflect the heritage and aspirations of the diverse communities that comprise our country. In consultation with my colleagues in the Cabinet, I intend to work closely with the Law Reform Commission and prioritize laws that need urgent introduction, review or amendment.

On Accountability and Transparency Commission, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I strongly believe that the setting up of the Accountability and Transparency Commission is crucial and overdue and I intend to make every effort to put in place the legislative measures to enable the Commission to be established. This will be a further step towards promoting good governance, reducing corruption and building trust among our people.

The Commission will bring about greater accountability in government. It will help to ensure that public officials are held accountable, leading to fairer treatment of people. When people can see how decisions are made and how funds are allocated and spent, it will strengthen their confidence in government and our democratic institutions. The Commission, when established will contribute to good governance which is reflected in Fiji's National Development Plan and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

On Judiciary, Mr. Speaker, Sir, an independent impartial honest and competent Judiciary is essential to upholding the rule of law, to bring about public confidence and dispensing justice. The Judiciary has a vital role in upholding the rule of law, a role which is respected by this Government. Government, seen broadly, is at its most effective when this respect is mirrored both ways. I do mention, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my lengthy speech that the courts have suffered delays in the delivery of judgements and rulings. Long delays are a sign of stress in the system and that things are not working as they should. People start losing confidence in the legal system and the courts when disputes take too long to resolve.

The judges are aware of the problem of delays in the courts. An efficient judicial system is crucial to attracting new foreign investment into the country. It is vital in ensuring social and economic progress. I am pleased to say that the Civil Division Rules Committee comprising a number of senior judges and magistrates has just completed its work on how legislation and rules governing the courts might be amended to bring about greater efficiency. The whole system, however, may need a complete overhaul to streamline and simplify court proceedings and processes.

In 1994, the Government commissioned a review into the workings of the courts. That was over 30 years ago. Sir, David Beattie's Inquiry into the courts was duly tabled as a parliamentary paper. A follow up review may be necessary. Alternate dispute resolution, arbitration and mediation are some options which should also be explored to reduce some of the pressures on the court system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am a strong supporter of localisation in the Judiciary. However, localisation must not be an end itself, and should never come at the expense of compromising on competence, integrity and maturity. Carefully selected expatriate judicial officers have the advantage of minimal or no ties to the country. Ideally, there should be a good mix of locals and expatriate judges. The latter can play a big role in mentoring young judicial officers. I am pleased to note that at the level of Supreme Court and Court of Appeal, this is already happening. Perhaps it can extend to the High Court as well.

In a small country such as Fiji, having outsiders with no local links to preside over controversial cases, especially with political overtones can be reassuring. I would like to see more judicial appointments drawn from the private bar, and not confined to Government lawyers only. This is standard practice in other places such as New Zealand and Australia.

Mr. Speaker, in 2021, assessors in criminal trials were abolished. It had been part of our criminal justice system for over 100 years. Fiji's history has shown that the system worked. The value of the assessor system is that it provided an important check and balance on judges sitting alone. I believe it introduced a greater element of fairness in criminal trials. In my view, the removal of assessors has resulted in an important safeguard and oversight in criminal trials being lost. I intend consulting relevant stakeholders, including the judiciary on whether assessors in criminal trials in High Court should be restored.

Nationhood, Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, with your indulgence as this is my maiden speech, I just wish to conclude with some comments on nationhood. For better or worse, circumstances and history have brought together the various people who call Fiji home. It is the duty and responsibility of every citizen of this country to break down the barriers that have kept the different races in silos for far too long. It will require that we teach today's youth to be tolerant, open-minded and concerned about each other's past, and considerate of each other's heritage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, fifty years after Independence, our sense of nationhood remains underdeveloped. We need a renewed understanding and commitment to nationhood. We often talk about citizens' rights. However, we should also talk about citizens' responsibilities. The two go hand in hand. This requires, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a commitment to realising that we are one people with a common destiny.

Our multi-ethnic fabric is a cause for celebration, and we are richer for it. Irrespective of race or religion, our diverse communities have many shared values, including a strong commitment to family, children and the aged. With goodwill, tolerance and understanding, we can build a stronger and more prosperous Fiji and our country will be better for it. The process will be challenging, but it is our duty as citizens to try. We cannot postpone or delay this sacred duty of together, building our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the future of our country lies in all our hands. It must not be hijacked by insular politicians bent on division and sowing the seeds of distrust. This has set us back and has come at great cost, in both human and financial terms. Despite all its trials and political upheavals, Fiji is still a beautiful country and as the honourable Prime Minister mentioned this morning, it is our home, it is your home, it is my home. For all its faults and frailties, Fiji remains a country full of promise and hope, underpinned by the enduring goodwill of our people that has survived the political shocks which at times, have driven us close to the abyss. Achieving full nationhood will not be achieved overnight, but by steady incremental steps, and it will require leadership, statesmanship and courage.

I truly believe that the failure to attain a real sense of nationhood will impede our national development. If we do not work hard to develop a sense of community at the national level, we will possess neither the energy nor the force to pool together our resources to realise our common vision and shared goals. The simple truth is that we need each other. As the honourable Prime Minister said, we can do this together.

Mr. Speaker, our love of Fiji is central to achieving national unity, social cohesion and people-centred development. Nationhood in its ideal state will bring with it the promise of healing our ethnically fragmented national psyche. Our problems must be resolved through reasoned debate in an atmosphere of civility and respect. Honourable Members of Parliament must set the example because our people will take their cue from our leaders.

Let us not be so easily discouraged or distracted by the noise generated by some politicians and their sponsors. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe as a country that our best days are ahead of us. I want

to refer to a popular musician, Apakuki Nalawa. You will excuse me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I speak in vernacular. In the lyrics of his later song, Kuki as he is known sings:

“Isa noqu Viti, o cei beka me na liutaka; na noda kalougata sa tu voli ga e ligada, taura matua na nona vosa, ka mo na cakacaka taka, ni sai koya oqori na sala kina me bula ko Viti ni mataka.”

In other words, he is saying, “With great leadership, comes great responsibilities. Who will lead us to a better Fiji? Who will set a great example for the younger generation to follow? The power is in your hands, our leaders.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is my fervent prayer that I will approach the responsibilities that come with my office with a heart of a servant. It is my solemn pledge today that I will discharge my constitutional duties without fear or favour, malice or ill will and that I will at all times respect the rule of law and do what is right by the people of this country. May God bless Fiji.

(Acclamation)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Attorney-General, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise today to deliver my response to the 2024-2025 National Budget that was delivered on the 28th June, 2024 by the honourable Minister for Finance.

This is my 11th Budget response, Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2014 and out of the previous Budget that I have responded to back in 2021, I had supported the Government on a Budget being a Member of the Opposition. But this occasion is totally different, Sir, I am rising today as an Independent Member of Parliament, and it is public knowledge now that we have pledged our support to the honourable Prime Minister.

Listening to the debate this week, Mr. Speaker, Sir, plus the observation, it will be a very hard transition given some of the deliberations coming from this side of Parliament, given we have to transit or in transition from being a member of a political party to become Independent Members of Parliament. So that political party thinking as somewhat entrenched in us given the very unique situation we are in. As you very well understand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, given that there are also grey areas in the 2013 Constitution plus our Standing Orders, probably this particular situation will make us think deeply on how we have to improve the laws to accommodate such unique situations that we are in.

Before, I move further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank you for your wisdom and also your decision in the past few months that has enabled us, most of the Members on this side of Parliament, 17 of us to keep our seats and not vacate our seats. We thank you for your confidence in us, given that our party that has been deregistered, had abandoned us by trying to terminate us, but I thank you that you were able to hear our side of the story and also with the decision that you concluded from the various legal opinions that you have sought, you came with that particular decision for us to continue as Members of Parliament, not vacating our seats. Also, the situation that led to that is very well known, given that I was also part of the Emoluments Committee that was tasked by this Parliament to prove back the motion that was very much a controversy in the last sitting of Parliament.

I also thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition and the 16 of us who actually voted for the motion for trusting the process and participating in the process. As the honourable Leader of the

Opposition had publicly said, that its integrity that we had to participate in the process. Whether you have voted for the motion or not, and whether you have abstained or not, come 1st August, 2024, it will be effective. I think we will all be part of the benefits of that particular motion. Some of us chose not to vote, some of us abstained and some of us deliberately stayed out of the Chambers to evade the vote, but again, most of us voted according to the process that we participated in.

Moving forward, I have already said what I have said to thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and the Budget and the expectations of the people, I thank the Government for establishing the Economic Summit Committee. A few weeks ago, the Chairperson of that Economic Summit Committee also expressed some of the views where the Government can improve its performance, especially, in service delivery and in other areas where that particular Committee sees that Government is lacking behind. It is a good set up, given that it becomes a mirror to the Government to improve its performance, especially in service delivery.

I would also like to acknowledge what the honourable Prime Minister had said in opening the Kadavu Provincial Council Meeting. He spoke in *iTaukei*, especially to the Government officials in the province, given they are the people who will be implementing all these programmes. The Budget needs to be with the civil servants who are at the divisional level and also in various Government Ministries as they are fully aware of what has been announced and passed to help them move in the communities and make people understand what the programmes are, where the forms will be available, and to assist the *turaga ni koro, mata ni tikina* and the various community leaders who make up the development committees of our various divisions.

On the Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are pleased to hear, and also thank the Permanent Secretary for Finance, Mr. Shiri Gounder. We hear this morning there are plenty arguments on economics and figures, but the very same people who had made the budget with the previous Government are the very same people who have done this budget. They will be the ones who will know very well what is the financial standing and the policy advice they had given to the honourable Minister for Finance that has allowed them to make the budget that is before us. We thank them for the hard work, most of them have not slept for nights probably in trying to put up the Estimates plus the Consequential Bill with the team from FRCS. That will be reflected in the various changes in the Budget announced.

We are pleased to hear that the economy is recovering, given that the previous Government had put in an Economic Recovery Plan, and the Coalition Government has continued it. We are pleased to hear from the Supplement of the Budget that the GDP is surpassing pre-pandemic levels in 2023 and Fiji's economic recovery is one of the fastest amongst the other tourism based dependent countries. That is due to the bold and decisive decision by the previous administration.

I also thank the current honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Minister for Finance and the Coalition Government for carrying that forward. That is for Fiji and not for a particular political party, it is for the people moving forward. We are also pleased to hear that the Government will be launching a National Development Plan for 2025 to 2029 and also a vision to 2050. I heard this morning from the honourable Leader of the Opposition that the Budget has been announced without a National Development Plan. But, again, it is never too late, given even in the previous Government, the NDP came in 2017 when it was launched in Bonn, Germany in COP 23. Even that was three years after the 2014 General Election. So, we are never late. We cannot say that there is no plan because they also had in the past where the NDP came even three years later.

The focus of the Budget, as I have already said, needs to focus on the 2030 SDGs on reduction of poverty, education, healthcare, affordable housing, empowering women and protection of children, people with disabilities, plus other 17 goals that are there in the UN SDGs.

Whenever a Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, moves to give our report on whether Government is achieving these Goals, this is other areas where we always see where the Government has put the money into achieving these Goals. We have seen the continuation of previous programmes and the continuing programmes, the bus fare assistance, health assistance, pension schemes, are all areas that are targeting the goals and now we are faring with the SDGs. We see that continuing pattern in the Budget that we have today.

Also, I would like to thank the Government for the increase of minimum wage. There is plenty public reactions, but it is a balancing act, given that the employers' situation need to be considered because employers are paying PAYE and also FNPF of their employees. Whether it is an increase whether of 50 cents or \$1, we thank the Government for doing that. We also hope that the Government will look into other areas where they can cushion the increase in the cost of living. Few of the honourable Members who have spoken previously have highlighted this.

On the Job Evaluation Exercise (JEE), I thank the Government for the JEE for Fiji Corrections Service and also the independent bodies, especially Parliament, given it came through our Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights as part of our recommendations.

Last week, we celebrated the Civil Service Day. Most of them were really happy and it is a double celebration, not only after a long time where they came together as Ministries and creating their bond, but they are also happy with the pay rise announced by the Government. It was long overdue, but we thank them for the commitment and hard work put towards in moving our country forward.

On Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF), Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to welcome the reinstatement of payments since 2011 for pensioners, and also the 8 percent that will be credited into individual members' account that was announced last week.

Also, the other thing that will be coming in the Consequential Bill that the honourable Minister for Finance had talked about where this particular Bill that will be part of the Consequential Bill will allow the partial or full transfer from a member's fund to another member, especially when we want to build onto the legacy of our children. These are some of the things that will improve future investment when investment comes.

On education assistance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are many education systems that are there and also the competency-based training. I thank the honourable Minister for the continuation of those programmes from pre-school right to tertiary level.

On the targeted approaches for indigenous businesses, I would like to thank the Government for the programme to assist indigenous businesses, especially in tax free zones, where they will not be paying taxes. That will be a big boost for indigenous businesses, especially the existing ones.

In addition, moving from the first business to diversify in trying to invest in other areas, I would like to also thank the Government for the removal of interest free loan that will be available through the facilities that will be helping us.

My plea also to the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs, given that provincial companies and *tikina* companies that are in operation for the last 25 years where they have even paid the principal amount, if Government can also waive those debts so that we can then benefit from the two policies that have been announced. That will be very great, moving forward, especially in encouraging indigenous businesses and empowering the indigenous people economically.

For public works, water, road and infrastructure, electricity and energy in the rural areas, it will be the duty of all Civil Servants to tell them how this assistance will be coming and probably the honourable Minister for Public Works, Transport and Meteorological Services will list down the areas that will be of focus in this financial year that we have.

On the Ministry of Agriculture allocation for Farm Mechanisation and also Farm Access Road, the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways is leading the way. In creating farm road access, that will empower our farmers in the rural areas. Sometimes you have to walk for hours, some without horses, to bring their produced to a particular area so that they can sell them. So, these are some of the areas of focus.

But, again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the theme of the Budget is an economically stable, secure and sustainable Fiji and from what I have spoken so far about and also the outline that is already there, I would say that the Budget meets the requirement that will achieve the SDGs. a

Before I conclude, I would like to thank on behalf of the *Vanua* leaders, the allowances that they are receiving which is really helpful in their *vanua* and church obligations, given the amount of 'oga' that we cannot evade. But this particular allowance has helped our *Turaga ni Yavusa* and the *Turaga ni Mataqali*.

Also, I welcome the Review of the iTaukei and Fisheries Commission and the implementation of the GCC implementation team, plus implementation of the UNDRIP.

Also, the *iTaukei* resource owners support and development fund that will be there. The Native Reserves Commission, its establishment plus the inquiry that can be done to address some of the long-standing land injustices, plus the resettlement committee that can be established, plus an inquiry probably led by a Judge or Magistrate to hear these historical injustices.

Just before I take my seat, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I see that I have only about 18 seconds left, the Budget has progressively addressed, moving towards achieving the various SDGs that I have already said. It will increase domestic consumption and spending, it will allow more investment in growing the economy, it gives space and options for the people to economically empower themselves in order to cushion the cost of living, but there could be other things that could be done to improve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those words, I fully support the 2024-2025 National Budget. *Vinaka vakalevu*.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise today, in this august Parliament, to lend my full support to the 2024-2025 National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, the Fijian economy has recovered strongly from the pandemic, with fiscal deficit and debt to GDP ratio continuing to decline but remain at elevated levels. The monetary policy has remained accommodative, although the Reserve Bank of Fiji has begun tightening up on liquidity. In addition, the Coalition Government is developing a programme of growth, and enhancing reforms which is articulated in the new National Development Plan (NDP).

Mr. Speaker Sir, the 2024-2025 Budget theme focuses on an "*Economically Stable, Secure and Sustainable Fiji*". I am of the firm belief that this new Budget is set amidst a backdrop of renewed confidence and optimism and is befitting for an economy that has struggled to persist its way through uncertainties due to the previous Government's excessive expenditure and inability to inclusively

perceive impending development issues.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget supports Government's commitments in bridging the development inequalities existing between the rural and urban areas. Our rural people have long been marginalised, with limited access to essential services, infrastructure and economic opportunities.

Recognising and unlocking the wealth of resources, cultural heritage and human potential existing in our rural communities remains our priority. As we focus on these, aligning our efforts with the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is imperative to ensure our progress is inclusive, sustainable and transformative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am delighted to note that Government has prioritised initiatives that focusses on expanding the rural economy by investing in rural infrastructure, enhancing economic opportunities, empowering individuals and communities, as well as addressing climate change issues.

With an increase of \$8.8 million from the 2023-2024 Budget, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management is now allocated a budget of \$37.9 million. This substantial investment demonstrates Government's commitment to progress with developing resilient rural communities as part of SDG 11.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the People's Coalition Government firmly believes that enhancing access to the main road networks for rural communities helps integrate them more effectively into our national economy and overall progresses as a nation. I note with great appreciation the allocation of \$354.8 million to the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) for the ongoing construction and maintenance of roads, upgrading and replacement of bridges and jetties and the upgrading of rural roads. The Ministry also acknowledges the allocation of an additional \$5 million to the Ministry of Public Works for the maintenance and upgrade of rural roads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation of \$3 million towards the Ministry's Rural and Outer Island (ROI) Development Programme provides the Ministry with the funding opportunity to invest in such infrastructure. Through the allocation of \$2.5 million allocated for the ROI Programme in the 2023-2024 Budget, the Ministry was able to implement a total of 50 projects across the country, focusing on three main sectors, including Agriculture, Fisheries and the Forestry Sectors.

Access is key to the development of these sectors for farmers, markets, women, children, senior citizens and those with special needs. The two areas of support that were provided for the Agriculture Sector include assistance for livestock farming and the construction of more than 103 kilometres of rural farm roads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, access to clean and safe drinking water is a basic human right. I wish to express my gratitude for the allocation of the sum of \$5.7 million to the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources, to provide around 1,700 boreholes across the country - 1,000 in Viti Levu, 500 in Vanua Levu and 200 in our maritime islands, ensuring access to safe and clean water for all Fijians and contributing to sustainable development and community wellbeing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in aligning to our global commitment to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 on achieving clean water and sanitation, the Ministry remains dedicated to addressing high risk water and related infrastructure needs. We are grateful to the allocation of \$1 million, an increase of \$0.2 million from the current financial year, to achieve this initiative. Since the inception of the Programme in the 2021-2022 financial year, the Ministry has implemented more than 70 projects across our rural and maritime communities, totalling around \$1 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture remains the backbone of the rural economy. We continue to stress that our rural areas are resource rich, but majority are cash poor as we have been slow to appreciate the potential wealth and economic gains that we can derive from the sustainable use of our natural resources, especially in the Agriculture Sector. The Ministry welcomes the \$6 million increase in the budget of the Ministry of Agriculture to boost productivity in the sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, rural poverty remains a stark reality. It holds the key to transforming these communities and breaking the cycle of poverty. I must commend Government's investment in enhancing market access through allocating \$2.5 million to the Agriculture Marketing Authority (AMA). This investment will complement the assistance offered under the Ministry's ROI Programme, paving the way for an enabling environment to boost economic capabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, agricultural institutions play a critical role in supporting rural farmers. Institutions such as the Navuso Agriculture Technical Institute and the Tutu Training Centre have made immense contributions towards the growth of the agriculture sector. The total allocation of around \$3.3 million to these institutions is timely, as we strive to encourage and educate more young farmers to venture into commercial farming.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are a lot of untapped potentials in rural Fiji. I am pleased to note that the Coalition Government is committed to empowering our rural communities that support tourism; micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) through the setting up of a pilot Tourism MSME fund. Under this fund, the Government will provide assistance of up to \$15,000 to rural communities to assist in creating an enabling environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, youth unemployment remains a challenge, especially in the rural areas. Its transition from education to employment remains an obstacle for many of our rural youth. We, therefore, commend Government's efforts in bridging this gap through the provision of \$5 million in grant to the Pacific Polytech. This grant will enable the institution to offer technical training, equipping our children, especially those from rural and maritime communities, with skills and expertise needed to address Fiji's skills shortage. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these initiatives contribute to achieving targets associated with decent work and economic growth under SDG 8.

On Shipping Services, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry recognises the challenges present in accessing some of our remote maritime islands. Ensuring connectivity through the provision of reliable transportation services to the islands is critical to their development and economic growth. I acknowledge the allocation of \$1 million for the upgrading and enhancement of Government shipping services.

On Rural Housing Assistance Scheme, it remains a core commitment of the Coalition Government since taking office. We are delighted to inform this august Parliament that in the 2023-2024 financial year, the Ministry was able to implement more than 160 housing projects across the four Divisions. These projects included newly constructed houses, completion and extension works and retrofitting works, directly contributing to targets associated with SDG 11 of achieving sustainable cities and communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to personally thank every Fijian that applied via our online platform in this financial year. The Ministry was overwhelmed with the number of applications received via our online platform for the Rural Housing Assistance Programme. More than 6,500 online applications was received by our team.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are not merely numbers but a clear reflection of the neglect of the previous Government in addressing growing housing needs in our rural and maritime areas. However, as we progress together in this new era, we are working towards ensuring that the needs of our rural populace are met, maybe slowly, but surely.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation of another \$3 million in the 2023-2025 financial year for the Rural Housing Assistance Programme will enable the Ministry to continue meeting the housing needs of those in our rural and maritime communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must commend Government's efforts in ensuring that Civil Servants are provided with decent work standards through the promotion of healthy and safe working environments. With this, the Ministry acknowledges the budgetary allocation of \$1 million for the refurbishment of the Ministry's Headquarters, \$1.5 million for the renovation and upkeep of Government pool quarters and an additional \$0.5 million for upgrade works at the Vunisea Government Station in Kadavu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government recognises the invaluable contributions of Civil Servants in public service delivery, I wish to commend the increase in their salaries and wages as a strategic investment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, sorry, I had sprint through the final of that. The commitment's made with the Coalition Government in its 2024-2025 National Budget reflects the strong dedication to achieving the economic stability, security and sustainability for our nation. The initiatives set out for the Government collectively demonstrates our strategic approach to nurturing inclusive growth, raising living standards and paving the way for prosperous and stable future for all Fijians.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reiterate my support for the 2024-2025 Budget. *Vinaka saka vakalevu.*

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, it is 1.26 p.m. now and I intend to adjourn Parliament for lunch and we will resume at 2.30 p.m. We will then move straight to honourable Hem Chand in making his contribution. Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.28 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.36 p.m.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise to make my contribution to the Budget Estimates presented to Parliament by the honourable Minister for Finance on 28th June, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his words of wisdom which I fully support and wholeheartedly endorse the sentiments offered to promote economic growth and manage the affairs of the State prudently.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a Member of the Opposition and representative of my people, I intend to highlight some issues related to the policy measures announced through this Parliament on 28th June, 2024. The primary objective of the Government Budget is to create a comprehensive financial plan that supports economic growth and wellbeing of all its citizens while ensuring efficient and transparent use of public funds. It is rather unfortunate that the Coalition Government's 2024-2025 Budget offers hardly any innovative measures to address high cost of living for ordinary Fijians who are being pushed into poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in VAT rate from 9 percent to 15 percent last year is having a devastating effect on the poorest of the poor in our community. Fijians now have to dig deeper into their pockets to make ends meet. Many have the desire to buy essentials but lack the ability to do so.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government must seek alternative ways of raising revenue and growing the economy. They should stop extracting more revenue from the weakest in the society.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. H. CHAND.- The Coalition Government should come up with some new initiatives of growing the economy rather than punishing the poor Fijians with heavy VAT and corporate tax. This is an indication that the Coalition Government lacks critical thinking, creativity and originality, but is just rewording the successful policies designed and successfully implemented by the previous Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fijians know that this Government will consider VAT reduction in the next Budget as we come closer to the next election to address the high cost of living issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in the minimum wage from \$4 to \$5 an hour is not enough to cushion the high cost of living caused by VAT and corporate tax imposed by the Coalition Government last year. It only goes up by 50 cents from 1st August and another 50 cents from 1st April, 2025. Will the new \$4.50 minimum rate effective on 1st August bring any relief to ordinary people?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how was the new minimum wage determined? Where is the report of the Committee on the review of minimum wage? What was the Committee's minimum wage recommendation and on what basis they recommended \$5 an hour. Fijians want answers to these questions. The independent review came at the cost of taxpayers and the honourable Minister for Finance confirmed this during his Budget Address that minimum wage was set after a comprehensive review and consultations. The findings of the review committee should be publicly available. I want all our workers in the country to receive a fair and just minimum wage. I would like to suggest that the Government at least increase the minimum wage to \$5 an hour effective from 1st August and not wait for nine months.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Hear, hear!

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Finance confirmed in his Budget Speech a major pay rise for our civil servants.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You did not do it for 16 years.

HON. H. CHAND.- The salary increase for the Civil Service was eagerly anticipated by the civil servants. This pay rise ranges from 7 percent up to 20 percent depending on the salary bands. The proposed increase is far short of what the two-teacher unions were lobbying for. Salary increases sounds impressive, but the devil is in the details; 5,000 civil servants received a step increase earlier in the year. Mr. Speaker, Sir, to be specific, the step increase for about 5,000 civil servants was effective somewhere around March 2024. It is not clear how it was determined, which criteria were used to give a step increase earlier in the year.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are a former civil servant, you should know better.

HON. H. CHAND.- With this approach, instead of fostering equality, more inequality is created. There are about 38,000 civil servants and all should be treated fairly. Why two different effective dates? To be fair, all the civil servants pay increase should be backdated effective from 1st March, 2024.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Now you want more money?

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, teachers together with other civil servants received a pay rise in 2018, not 17 years ago. The average increase for teachers was 14.3 percent and those civil servants at headquarters of most Ministries had an average increase of 15.8 percent.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They are all very happy.

HON. H. CHAND.- Unfortunately, the two-teacher unions did not say anything about the 2018 pay rise for the teachers. How can they forget so easily and quickly when both the General Secretaries of FTA and FTU were teachers back then in 2018?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Selective.

HON. H. CHAND.- Many were thinking that there would be some relief in this budget for them but sadly it is not there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the \$200 Back to School support for our children from families with household income of less than \$50,000 is good, but I was hoping for an increase to offset the increase in the cost of living.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. H. CHAND.- Similar support was known as Inflation Mitigation Assistance for Children. This was introduced by the previous Government with the same purpose, that is, to buy school uniforms, bags, stationeries, shoes, lunch boxes and other essentials.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Don't lie.

HON. H. CHAND.- The objective is the same, but it has been renamed “Back to School Support”. I urge the Government to increase Back to School Support because cost of living pressures is far greater today than they were two years ago.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I noticed that allocations have been made to Pacific Polytech for skills development despite the Government having its own established TVET programme through its national university, FNU, which is a dual sector university. After careful analysis, I found that funding to higher education institutions decreased by \$12.6 million, that is about 12 percent, but the grant to Pacific Polytech increased from \$1 million to \$4 million; an increase by 400 percent.

There are many well established vocational and training institutions and these institutions have received small amounts compared to substantial funding given to Pacific Polytech. Why the huge increase in funding for Pacific Polytech? Is it a calculated move to reward Pacific Polytech? While awarding grants to institutions, did the honourable Minister for Finance consider and comply with the provisions in the Fiji Higher Education Commission Act? On what rationale did Fiji Higher Education Commission propose an increase of \$4 million to Pacific Polytech?

We are interested in the graduation data. How many students have graduated with Level 3, Level 4 and Level 5 qualifications as per Fiji Qualifications Framework, and how many of them have graduated with one day to one month of short courses? We are also interested in the employment data for those who have graduated from Pacific Polytech. What criteria is being used to allocate funds and how is the quality of what they deliver assessed? We need a thorough explanation on the unfair distribution of grants to higher education institutions. I urge the Government to reassess the grants to higher education institutions and do a fair distribution of grants.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government needs to provide a clear vision and a strategic roadmap that addresses the pressing issues of inflation, the cost of living and social inequality. Unfortunately, this Budget is on a shaky policy and fiscal grounds, leaving the people of Fiji unsure of where we are heading.

The theme of 2024-2025 National Budget is long term economic *Stability, Security and Sustainability* of Fiji, but the 2024-2025 National Budget has failed to inspire confidence needed to bring about sustainability and stability. This Budget will ensure that thousands are trapped in a cycle of poverty. This Budget has shown Fijians that the Government does not care for the people. The Budget falls short of the expectations of the people. Therefore, I do not support this Budget that is punishing the poor.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the media, and fellow Fijians, I would like to start by acknowledging the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister, his guidance over the 19 months has been invaluable in leading the Coalition Government in our achievements. I would also like to commend the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, the Permanent Secretary and the team for putting together another fair and focussed Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, tourism is the cornerstone of our economy. It is an industry that not only stimulates growth, but creates the most jobs, foreign exchange earnings and fostering infrastructure development.

Last year, we broke visitor record with 929,740 visitors contributing \$3.2 billion to the economy and we expect to surpass that record this year. The \$3.2 billion is spent not only in hotels and airlines but also food and beverage, tours, supermarkets, cruise, transport, retail, art, village

visits, communications, to name are few.

I say this quite often. When tourism does well so do other sectors and so does the economy and our people. We saw this with the FNPF, recently announcing a record interest rate of 8 percent for members, the highest in two decades.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- All by FijiFirst.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- That was made possible by factors such as FNPF large hotel portfolio. At the rate we are growing, tourism can bring in \$4.2 billion by 2027.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation has been allocated an increased budget of \$68.9 million for the 2024-2025 financial year. Firstly, the Budget will fund the implementation of Fiji's National Sustainable Tourism Framework 2024-2034. This Framework is a comprehensive policy designed to guide the tourism sector over the next decade with an overarching goal of transforming the sector to ensure a sustainable future.

We will focus on four goals:

- (1) Prosperous visitor economy;
- (2) Thriving and inclusive communities;
- (3) Visible and valued cultures; and
- (4) Healthy islands and oceans.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's commitment to sustainability is also evident in its support for the Vanua Levu Tourism Development Programmes. In its first phase, we will focus on improving access to essential services and infrastructure such as waste management and transport. By investing in these critical areas, we want our people of Vanua Levu to benefit too.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to draw special attention to a milestone in this Budget, the allocation of \$400,000 for the Pilot Tourism Micro and Small Enterprises Fund. This is the first time the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation has introduced such a grant. This initiative marks a significant departure from our usual operations ensuring the smallest of businesses too are part and parcel of and benefit from tourism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we make our best efforts to invest in the sector, we also need to market ourselves and our brand, "Fiji where happiness comes naturally". We have already seen very proudly; our brand in cities like Sydney and Beijing to Times Square in New York. This costs money, a lot of it. One thing we should not expect is that everyone knows Fiji. And just because it is doing well, it does not mean it will stay that way or that it does not need Government support.

I was at the Tourism Investment Summit last week where we spoke about how globally demand has surpassed pre-pandemic levels, but we can start expecting growth to slow down in pace. So, we must invest in the industry so that we reach potential visitors ahead of our competitors.

We are grateful for the additional \$5 million marketing budget to \$35 million. We could do with more and we know that it will be forthcoming when the need arises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to the tourism sector, this Budget also emphasises the importance of civil aviation in supporting our economic growth. The allocated funds will be utilised to enhance our aviation infrastructure and services which are crucial for both, domestic and international connectivity. By protecting the integrity of the aviation system, we must ensure that our safety and

security processes are intact and conform to international standards.

The International Civil Aviation Organisation conducts audits on the level of implementation by states on its safety and security oversight capabilities. Fiji's current rating is sitting at 76.3 percent which is above the global average of 69.4 percent. However, this is not to say we cannot do better.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, two of the critical elements in the audit process is the aircraft accident investigations and primary aviation legislations. In the new financial year, we will work on improving our standards in line with global best practices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our national airline, Fiji Airways, continues to soar to new heights, making Fiji more accessible. We are looking at new direct routes in the United States, as well as beyond, through codeshare agreements.

In line with our Aviation Policy, we appreciate the global shift and economic benefits of liberalisation and acknowledge that Open Skies could lead to economic benefits such as increased trade, investment and tourism. We are now evaluating opportunities for bilateral and multilateral Open Skies Air Services Agreements (ASAs) on a case-by-case basis.

As such, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to inform Parliament that our discussions with the United States (US) Government for an Open Skies air transport agreement is progressing positively. Such an agreement will open up the entire continental US, allowing Fiji Airways to operate direct services between Fiji and destinations such as Dallas, Chicago, Atlanta and Seattle.

Fiji Airways has more than 40 pending codeshares that will be activated with American Airlines, Alaska Airlines and Finnair. Activating these codeshares will provide more access and open more markets within the US, and more options to international markets via US, ultimately providing more passengers onto Fiji Airways and Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with more airline seats come the need for more hotel rooms and beds. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics announced a number of hotel investments, 10 of which are already in construction with two major refurbishments. This shows a great deal of confidence in the Fijian economy.

The Tourism Investment Summit held last week in Denarau attracted some 300 delegates globally and locally, the second held under the Coalition Government. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the quality of the delegates, many from global brands, was quite uplifting. It was the first time we have seen this type of interests from those wishing to build in Fiji.

In today's *Fiji Times*, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Jones Lang Laselle (a Global Real Estate Company) said that from investment perspective, just as it is from a tourism perspective, the world is looking at Fiji and wants to be here.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are extending the Short Life Investment Package tax holiday to investors, who acquire existing hotels and undertake renovations and refurbishments of more than \$50 million. This is welcome news to incentivize and accelerate investments in hotel capacity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are those that say that tourism gets away with too many concessions, but these concessions are invested back into the tourism products, ensuring quality and standards. We are confident of our tourism, because of the quality of our products, justifying the concessions extended to the tourism industry. As we know, for Fiji, tourism is 40 percent of GDP. That means,

it is very dear to us and to the livelihoods that depend on it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, tourism is everyone's business and by extension, responsibility. Ensuring their sustainability and growth is a responsibility we should all share.

In addition to budgetary support, we must also focus on fostering partnerships and collaborations with local communities, businesses and international stakeholders. The success of our tourism and aviation industries depends on the collective efforts of all these players.

Moreover, investment in human capital is essential. The tourism and aviation industries require skilled and knowledgeable workforce to deliver high-quality services. Therefore, part of our strategic focus, as delivered in this Budget, will be on education and training to equip our people with those skills needed to thrive in these sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, lastly, we must continue to innovate and adapt to changing market and consumer trends. The tourism and aviation landscapes are constantly evolving, and we must be proactive in our approach. This means leveraging technology, promoting sustainable tourism and aviation practices, and diversifying our tourism products to cater for different market segments.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Budget reflects our commitment to an economically stable, secure and sustainable Fiji. For these reasons, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the 2024-2025 National Budget. Thank you and God bless Fiji.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; my heartfelt greetings to you all and the people of Fiji. Before I start my speech proper, I would like to inform all my voters and supporters that I will continue to serve you all as an honourable Member of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak on the 2024-2025 Budget that was delivered by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics on 28th June, 2024. Before I do so, I wish to draw your attention to a significant development leading up to the final delivery of the Budget.

For the first time, Cabinet met a week before the delivery of the Budget to deliberate on the draft Budget. This allowed Ministers to understand their respective Ministry allocations, discuss it with the honourable Minister for Finance and the honourable Prime Minister, question the honourable Minister, scrutinise the policy stance taken by the honourable Minister to ensure it is a Government's policy stance and take ownership of the Budget and policy stance. This is a departure from past practices under the FijiFirst Government where Ministers only saw total allocations after the Estimates were printed, one hour before the delivery in Parliament with no discussion of the overall policy stance. I commend the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for setting a new norm of financial governance going forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot has been said about the Budget since its delivery. Some in the vocal minority have said, "It is bad, we are finished, we are dead, and it is taking us in the wrong direction". Some of the silent majority, whom I interact a lot with, have labelled this Budget as courageous, responsive, responsible, appropriate to the time we are in, intelligent and befitting a dynamic and forward-looking economist. It is crucial to acknowledge these diverse opinions and the concerns they raise, as it is through open and respectful dialogue that we can move forward as a nation. Each opinion, whether critical or supportive, is a valuable contribution to the discourse on our nation's future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to emphasise that there is no one correct or right budget. It is a matter of perspective and the ideological position we take. Are we leaning towards the left, or the right, or are we positioned around the centre in the political spectrum? We all have our opinions and each of our voices and our perspectives are crucial in shaping the future of our nation and its finances.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to examine the Budget, we need to first set out the broad parameters within which to examine the Budget, noting that we –

- are a developing country;
- have idle resources, in particular land;
- have the potential for tourism development;
- have a small but significant population living in squatters;
- are facing climate change challenges;
- have sizeable proportion of low-income households, destitutes and people with special needs; and
- have high debt levels and potential to jump-start growth in key sectors.

Noting the above, we ask the following questions:

- (1) Is the Budget supporting the critical growth sectors?
- (2) Are we supporting children in achieving their educational dreams?
- (3) Have we ensured that deficit and debt are reined with a plan to meet the international benchmark in the future?
- (4) Is our operating expenditure fully financed by operating revenue so that borrowings are only used for capital projects?
- (5) Overall, does the Budget strike a good balance between addressing the needs of the poor today, addressing the fundamentals, and providing a framework for a growth economy?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me now address these critical attributes of a reasonable and responsible National Budget. On supporting our critical growth sectors, like tourism, agriculture, forestry, fisheries and remittances, I am happy to note that except for remittances, this Budget very well supports all these sectors.

The Tourism Sector is in autopilot mode. The Budget provides a massive \$35 million for Tourism Marketing, an increase from \$22 million provided in the 2022-2023 Budget, with additional financial support for the Ministry of Tourism. I hope that that maybe increased by \$1.5 million once the Israel *dinaw* trip is paid by honourable Gavoka and the team. The rest is for the industry to ensure they differentiate their products, as we operate in a highly competitive market. We need to ensure we do not price ourselves out. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these things are not for the Budget, but for the industry to answer and address.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Primary Sector Ministries have received substantial increases in their budget. We are a small economy. Our comparative advantage lies in the primary sectors, such as Agriculture, Fisheries and Forests. The recent COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront how critical primary sectors are.

The substantial budgetary support for these sectors puts the ball in the court of respective Ministries, as well as the farmers, entrepreneurs and landowners who are engaged in these sectors. They must seize this opportunity to grow these sectors for themselves and in the national interest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are the growth-generating sectors, and the honourable Minister for Finance, being an economist, has sent a silent message to us all that these allocations are not really an

expenditure, but rather an investment to grow these sectors so that we can, indeed, have 6 percent to 8 percent real growth in the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to note that remittances are now a major source of foreign income in the country. In 2015, total remittances were \$494.2 million, which grew to \$1.26 billion in 2023. This is a major boost to foreign reserves and national income. The question that arises is, are we doing enough to protect and grow this sector?

I do not see much evidence of this in this Budget or in the honourable Minister for Finance's Speech, and I am sure the honourable Minister will think about it and develop some strategies going forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note the pursuit to raise the National Minimum Wage to \$5 in 2025. The raising of the National Minimum Wage is based on the wrong premise that it will help reduce poverty.

Raising the National Minimum Wage will be an unnecessary intervention in the operations of the market. We are destroying the business model of the private sector. The sustainable way to raise household income is to enhance their earning capacity by upskilling them so that the market offers them higher wages, noting higher productivity.

Raising wage rates without commensurate productivity increase will push inflation, as there will be no room for the business sector to absorb the rise due to no change in productivity.

On support for children's education, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has continued with free education policies of the FijiFirst Government, and I wish to thank them for doing so. They have further brought in scholarships in place of loans. I do hope that those who get a place in the University but have lower marks will also be considered for financial assistance, as some limited scholarships will deny these students to realise their dreams. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will closely watch developments in this area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, something that has bothered me for some time is the disparity in educational infrastructure between urban and rural schools, pushing parents to move their children to urban schools. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have not seen any firm commitment by the Government to provide additional funding to improve the learning environment of these schools, such as the renovation of ablution blocks, the construction of library rooms, teachers' quarters, computer labs and internet connectivity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I note the support from the Australian Government on this. This is one and a half years of Coalition Government rule, but no substantial resources have been provided and time is running out. I urge the Government to consider this seriously.

On support for squatter development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note that around 200 squatter settlements in Fiji need to be formalised urgently. These settlements are struggling to deal with issues such as waste disposal, sewage disposal, water and electricity connection.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget only provides an allocation of \$13.5 million for developing five squatter settlements which is 2.5 percent of the total squatter settlements. Sir, I suggest a 10-year squatter formalisation plan with 20 settlements formalised per year. This would require approximately \$54 million per year allocation to formalise 20 settlements outsourced to private contractors in a year. Now, that the estimates are out, I suggest that the Government seek assistance from development partners.

On operating expenditure, deficit and debt, Mr. Speaker, Sir, various commentators have said a lot about Government expenditure, deficit and debt. The honourable Minister for Finance is a highly accomplished economist in his field. If anyone understands better the relationship between large expenditures and deficits and large deficits and debts, it is him, but let me shed light on these economic terminologies that have a bearing on this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all, a careful examination of the Budget reveals that operating expenditure is covered by operating revenue. This implies that borrowings are not compromised when paying for operating expenditures.

Secondly, our deficit is within our limit of 4.8 percent of GDP. Thirdly, our debt level is 78 percent of GDP. This is way above the international benchmark of 40 percent of GDP. Everyone knows that the high debt level was arrived at during the COVID-19 era when revenue sources dried up, while the Government had to step in and assist the poor and needy while maintaining Civil Service SEG 1 and SEG 2 expenditures. Let us look ahead. How do we reduce the debt to GDP ratio?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no Diego Maradona magic hand can do this overnight. We need to rein in unproductive expenditures and push for high economic growth. Reining unproductive expenditure is the Government's job and we will continue to raise red flags when we see evidence contrary to this.

On growing the economy, it is the job of the private sector. Government's role is to create an enabling environment; ensure that law and order, security and required legislations are in place; the cost of doing business is reduced; Government bottlenecks are removed; and courts dispose of cases quickly so that businesses are not held up.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will watch these key Government roles so that we unblock growth. If we hold back growth, the debt to GDP ratio will continue to escalate, and we will be locked up in what economists call a 'low-growth-high debt' trap.

On the balance between growth and addressing distributional issues, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the last issue I wish to address is whether budget balances pursuing economic growth and addressing societal distributional problems. The Budget has provided for both.

However, respective honourable Ministers and the Executive arms now have to deliver. Service delivery in most of the Ministries is well below par. The data that I have been given by some civil servants reveal that expenditure utilisation rates in some Ministries are as low as 60 percent. If this is true and continues in 2024 to 2025, then this expenditure bundle will not mean much.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I implore all Permanent Secretaries and staff below them to put our ordinary people's priority as their priority and serve them diligently. Use the resources wisely to address their plight.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to ask the honourable Minister for Finance to set up a designated Budget Monitoring Team with a dedicated Desk Officer for each Ministry to assist in the fund utilisation in line with the Public Finance Management Act. I hope these resource bundles will help the poor and grow the economy.

Before I end my speech, I would like to congratulate the newly appointed Attorney-General, honourable Graham Leung, and we look forward to working with you.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and

fellow citizens; I rise in support of the 2024-2025 National Budget, a Budget which builds the foundation for an economically stable, secure and sustainable Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget reflects the deep commitment of the Coalition Government to foster inclusive growth and improve the lives of our people, including our farmers, teachers, nurses, other civil servants, our rural communities, our people with disabilities, our women, youth, elderly and our children who are the future of our country.

We are investing in our people and skill development, and we are ensuring that our civil servants are better paid so that we can recruit and retain good people. We are ensuring that our workers are paid a just and a fair minimum wage, and their rights are protected and promoted.

We are rebuilding our infrastructure and rescuing our public assets that have been left to deteriorate over the years. We are working on economic diversification and rural development where almost half of our population resides.

We are investing in strengthening our independent State institutions, to ensure better functioning of our democracy. We are investing in our Police Force to ensure that law and order is maintained.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are keeping our taxes stable and working on streamlining business approval to support our private sector. All these measures are critical for the overall development and the prosperity of our nation.

On fiscal sustainability, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a Budget that ensures that we continue to rebuild fiscal sustainability. The Coalition Government inherited a debt over 90 percent of GDP, therefore the decisive revenue reforms in the last budget and overall fiscal discipline, we have managed to bring down the debt level to around 78 percent of GDP and this is contrary to the statement by the honourable Leader of the Opposition through our deliberate policies.

This is a great achievement for us as a nation, Mr. Speaker, Sir. A 12 percent reduction in the debt to GDP ratio in less than two years. This political and national commitment to tackle our debt problem have been applauded by the international financial institutions like the IMF, World Bank, the credit rating agencies and all our development partners. In this Budget, we are keeping up with the momentum to ensure that our debt to GDP ratio continues a downward trajectory. This continuous reduction in the debt ratio is critical to rebuild fiscal buffers and ensure macro-economic stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to stay in this course, it will take some time before we can bring down the debt to GDP ratio to below 50 percent. Our economy must grow faster, and we need to maintain fiscal discipline if we want to reach the 50 percent debt to GDP ratio much sooner.

On our economic growth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are seeing some headwinds. The slowdown in some of our major trading partners, the challenges in our labour force and potential declining population and the natural tapering in growth after rapid economic rebound in the last two years is posing some challenges.

In this Budget fiscal stimulus that is being provided is aimed at mitigating some of these challenges. The good news is that growth remains positive, that means the economy is still growing although at a slightly slow rate of 2.8 percent. We need to increase this growth to 5 percent and there are over 2 billion of private sector investments in the pipeline and the Government is working on expediting these projects.

Some of these major investments in the hotels dealt with the rooms, inventory which has become a major bottleneck to take our tourism industry to the next level. We are also lining up some major public centre investment projects and working with some of our entities in increasing our capacity at our airports, renewable energy and our port infrastructure. There are some major commercial agricultural projects which will support economic diversification and food security. We are also seeing outsourcing industry expanding from the usual call centres to high value service like accounting services.

Mr. Speaker. Sir, we need a private sector to take the driving seat and Government to provide the enabling environment for the private sector investment to flourish. It is only through sustained private sector-led growth that we can create more and better paying jobs to improve our infrastructure and overall living standards.

On our cost of living, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our approach to cost of living is to raise income and the areas that are therefore put in place or initiatives put in place by the Government to raise income and some of these will be announced or probably shared by the respective Ministers.

One is such that on the Civil Service, Mr. Speaker, Sir, an independent, professional and well-equipped Civil Service is vital for effective service delivery. In this Budget, the Government has provided a major boost to the Civil Service with pay increases ranging from 7 percent up to 20 percent. This will inject \$85 million into the pockets of our civil servants. This pay rise has already uplifted the morale of the civil servants as this is a major pay rise since 2017. This is a great start, and the Government will continue to work with our Unions to ensure that we further improve employment conditions in the Civil Service.

There is the National Minimum Wage, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our people have welcomed the 25 percent increase in the National Minimum Wage from \$4 an hour to \$5 an hour. This is a major boost to the income level of our workers, and this will ensure that no one will earn less than around \$10,000 per year effective from 1st April, 2025. With higher income, we should expect productivity to rise as workers will feel motivated and work hard for their higher income.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on social protection on social wages, for those who are vulnerable, we had increased the Social Welfare Allowance in the last Budget. This increase has continued in this Budget with a total funding of around \$200 million. We are also continuing with other social wages like Subsidised Electricity, Free Water, Transport Assistance, Free Education and various other programmes to help the vulnerable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Public Accounts Committee with the Office of the Auditor-General, a funding of \$7 million has been provided to the Office of the Auditor-General. This is to ensure that they are well resourced and to keep the Government in check apart from clearing the backlog of audit which has been dragging for some time under the previous Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Finance has updated the Public Financial Management System (PFMS) which will go live on 1st August, 2024 and with that, we have established a new Strategic Planning Office within the Ministry which will beef-up project coordination delivery and support the overall development of projects for future funding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the office will also ensure that we monitor the implementation of the expenditures laid out in the Budget apart from the Ministries being on their feet to ensure that we are able to address so many challenges in every sector of the economy, so this will allay a concern raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition on implementation and monitoring of projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are the areas that we have spent or increased funds on including Education and TELS, Health and Medical Services and Drugs. To conclude the 2024-2025 Budget also provide a range of measures to strengthen our *iTaukei* institutions and bring about improvements in the lives of *iTaukei* including government commitment to promote and preserve *iTaukei* culture, custom, tradition and language apart from other cultural groups. The Government has increased allocation to the Ministry to \$39.4 million from \$38.6 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government will continue to provide support to the needs and has provided its support to the 14 provincial councils to cater for the cost of operation for its council which used to be funded through the *solu ni yasana* around \$7.3 million, iTaukei Affairs Board operating grant of around \$3.2 million, *Turaga ni Koro* Allowance monthly and *Vanua* Leadership Allowance and *Mata ni Tikina* Allowance will continue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through 2024-2025 Budget, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs has again been allocated \$2 million for Village Development and Transformation Programme and a further \$3 million for iTaukei resource owners support and development fund. All these will strengthen development empowerment and will support the overall development of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support this Budget.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for this opportunity to express my views on the Budget delivered by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Economic Planning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would call the Budget a budget of blaming, excuses and being economical on the truth.

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

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget itself did not spur any surprises or any innovative ideas to invigorate the economy and bring relief to Fijians. I intend to make some general comments on the budget presentation then dwell on resource-based sectors covering sugar, agriculture, fisheries and forestry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the formulation of a budget follows a regular pattern. Calculation of total expected revenue through taxation then distribution of revenue to various ministries and agencies to fund the various plans formulated by Government in that particular financial year. In this recent difficult economic outlook and challenges, the expenditures normally would be greater than revenue resulting in a budget deficit.

Fiji has never experienced any budget surplus in recent years. In recent times, the statement that the Government is paying off debt is not true, and we can see the loan portfolio of Government would not reduce but increase every year. That is normal Mr. Speaker, Sir, but let me repeat in this august Parliament that loan has not been repaid as the exercise is carried out is refinancing and moving loans to financial institutions that have better or lower interest rates.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- The principal amount will continue to grow and it will exceed \$11 billion compared to the \$10.8 billion when the Coalition took over in running of the Government in 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight the budget mix covering operating and capital expenditures. The trend is quite worrying, and it is budget for 2024-2025. The operating budget has increased to 72 percent, capital is around 28 percent. To compare the budgets of 2016 to 2019, the budget mix average 65 percent on operating and 35 percent for capital.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I can see the honourable Minister looking at me, but I am telling the truth. These distinct comparisons indicate the cost of running Government has dramatically increased from an average of 60 percent to over 70 percent of the total budget. In simple layman's term, the above figures indicate that the budget allocation is concentrated towards paying on the running of Government, reducing capital, an allocation to be spent on infrastructure development.

On economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to speak on the state of economy as contained in the Minister's speech. The Minister correctly highlighted that the economy returned to pre-pandemic level faster than expected. Our economy strongly rebounded in 2022 with the economy increasing by 20 percent. This was followed by a further 8.1 percent in 2023 and thanks to the previous Government. This also had a flow on effect on other sectors, fuelling increase in domestic expenditure and employment opportunities.

Tourism has been the mainstay of our economic development and continuously growing our economy. I am however disappointed in the increase of departure tax, \$175 this year and \$200 next year. This will be a big challenge going forward as increase in departure tax will not assist tourism but will increase the cost of holiday in Fiji. Therefore, tourists opting for cheaper holiday destination in Southeast Asia and reducing Fiji's income that were to be generated from tourism.

The Minister had highlighted another setback in the huge loss of skills that we had faced in the last few years. We are losing our trained people to Australia and New Zealand in this *Vuvale* Partnership and Seasonal Work Programmes. Government needs to concentrate in retraining people to upskill and replace these loss of skills. We cannot stop our people from looking towards greener pastures and we cannot blame them or discourage people for looking at better opportunities. If we want to retain them, then we need to create better conditions locally. The Government needs to create investment and must take the lead role in this and invest in infrastructure, as this will give a sense of confidence to the private sector.

Civil Servants need to be encouraged to improve and participate in creating good investment climate. We must not reinvent the wheels but improve the systems that are already in place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister highlighted and explained in detail the National Development Plan for the next 5 years and 20 years. Development plan is an ongoing exercise and Government needs to focus on what has been achieved and improve on those. The Government must provide an enabling environment with the right policies to ensure certainty, maintenance of rule of law and additionally independence of State institutions and the economic and political stability is most important to provide a stable platform for development.

The honourable Minister highlighted the importance of remittances and thanks to Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America for our people working abroad sending a total of \$1.25 billion last year, which was a major contribution to the economy. However, with that economic slowdown in Australia and New Zealand, the two years of strong rebound is going to be tested.

Fiscal Policy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to make a comment on fiscal policy. The 2024-2025

Budget is set on a total expenditure of \$4.552 billion and the revenue of \$3.917 billion, the fiscal deficit is set on \$635.5 million which is 4.5 percent of GDP. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the worrying issue in this Budget is the budget mix. The operating expenditure stands at 73.27 percent and 25 percent for capital. This, Mr Speaker, Sir, is very high and we are returning to the old traditional budget mixed of 80 percent operating and 20 percent capital which will stagnate the economy and provide nothing for expenditures on infrastructure developments.

On Valued Added Tax, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji were expecting a reductions from 15 percent to a lower and manageable level. While I understand the reason of maintaining the same level, a lot of Fijians do not.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note the increase in minimum wage to \$4.50 and later to \$5. The National Minimum Wages introduced in 2014 and gradually increased to \$4 by 2023. This increase, if not properly monitored, will close some small businesses unless they are initially assisted by the Government.

Resource-Based Sectors, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now wish to expand on my views on resource-based sectors which include sugar, agriculture, fisheries and forestry. I urge the Government to have a closer look at the four sectors above and make planned approach to revitalise the sectors so it can make better contributions to our national economy and provide employment to our rural communities. These will also assist in reduction of rural to urban drift, which is a contributing factor to poverty, unemployment and rise in crime. We need support from the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development for resettlement of our people back to our rural settings. We need support of our people in the Provincial Councils and other institutions to help the Government in this.

The Sugar Industry, with its present and heritage colonial structure needs to be reviewed and if required collapsed and rebuilt. The politicisation of the sugar industry must be removed as this has greatly contributed to the deteriorating performance of FSC and associated agency within the sugar industry. Sugarcane farmers must be encouraged to participate in alternative farming and diversify the activities within their farm holdings. They should be encouraged to expand to animal farming and mix-cropping to ensure greater contributions towards the agricultural products for export revenues and local consumption for food security.

Agriculture: Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture must be provided assistance for bankable projects involving landowning units who can become great producers of commodities that can be exported, assisting in national economy and provide employment to the members of landowning units. This exercise will greatly assist in the provision of food security and employment and encourage our people to continue to live and work in their local and rural settings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, value adding for SMEs can also be set up within these rural settings where they can form cooperatives and contribute towards those industries. I see huge work that has been carried out in the above area, but it needs capacity building, to ensure provision of markets and improve infrastructure development to assist in production and access to market sources.

Fisheries: Mr. Speaker, Sir, fisheries is concentrated around coastal and rural island communities where there is ample natural habitat for the various species to flourish. Provision of proper storage and efficient transportation to main source markets is greatly needed to be developed to enable the movement of these various commodities.

Research and funding are needed to enable new farming practices to be introduced to villages and settlements to participate in aquaculture and mariculture. There is a huge potential for

these products to be sourced as export, and to reduce imports of these commodities.

Local market is readily available if consistent supplies can be guaranteed for our international tourists that come to Fiji and stay in our various hotels and resorts. Concentration on high value species is a must to maximise return for export and local consumption.

Forestry: Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is an urgent need for Fiji to participate in reforestation nationally. This will be in line with international efforts on climate change mitigation.

These schemes will provide huge potential for employment in our rural areas. High value trees need to be planted so that returns can benefit the landowners and communities surrounding our rural villages and settlements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have highlighted the importance of Government in providing and bridging the gaps that exist between these four sectors which I have alluded to. Every institution, including the various Ministries, needs to be encouraged to work together and set a platform that will target outcomes for our people in our rural communities. I hope that this platform will encourage our people to return to their rural villages and settlements and discourage rural to urban drift.

Social Issues: Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to express my concern on crime rate, particularly on women and children. It is the responsibility of this august Parliament and its Members to protect all citizens and ensure that people feel safe within their communities.

It is reported that while releasing the statistics for June 2024, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecution stated that 15 people were charged with a total of 32 counts of sexual offences in June only, and prior to that, 39 people charged with a total of 113 counts of sexual offences in May. These numbers are alarming and should be brought to the attention of Parliament, particularly in finding the root causes and then deriving solutions.

I believe that a contributing factor to sexual crimes, among other reasons, is the early access and excessive use of mobile phones by children, which provides a window to the world through the internet and leads to the use of pornography - a window that the young minds of this nation are not ready for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at an age where children are still learning and adopting behaviour, I would strongly suggest that Government restrict the ownership and use, without supervision, of mobile phones and other gadgets, that have access to internet for children from ages one to 15. This will allow parents to use their time to build strong moral values within their children and equip them with the right mindset to overcome peer pressure and be able to make sensible independent decisions when surfing the internet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to commend the Government for settling the Vatukoula Gold Mine Union strikers, which has been outstanding for decades. I also wish to thank the Government for reinstating the pension for FNPF members that were called for previously.

I thank you for your indulgence, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, *Na Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau*, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, visitors in the gallery today; I rise to share my insights and support on the newly proposed

Budget presented by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics on 28th June, 2024. I also thank his Permanent Secretary, Mr. Shiri Gounder, and his team, for delivering on the Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget aims to raise incomes for everyone and improve the quality of life for our communities. The 2024-2025 Budget allocates \$106 million to the Ministry of Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications. This funding will fuel economic growth, support new film tax rebates, advance our digital initiatives, assist with the honourable Prime Minister's 'Look North' Development Programme under the World Bank and also the Chinese Government and, of course, continue to focus on the ease of doing business.

This Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will welcome investors to our shore and offer a world-class destination for businesses, such as Google, Starlink, and most recently, the Lindhurst Business Park in Kalabu.

Mr. Speaker Sir, when you look at the economic situation in Fiji, I am filled with great optimism. Whilst we do have a slowdown, as reported in the financial forecast by the honourable Minister for Finance, I would like to make this most important point.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a massive pipeline of investment on the way, particularly in the second half of this year, and should that come to light, we are expecting an uptake in the economy. And do not believe me, believe the ANZ Bank forecast, that is already talking about a 3.4 percent economic growth this year.

Mr. Speaker, international trade is the lifeblood of Fiji's economy. The Ministry has been negotiating for stronger and better trade terms for Fiji, and as the only Pacific Island in the 14 member Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, we have delivered some good benefits for our country.

Next on the horizon is the negotiations on PACER Plus this year, and we will also intend to bring forward the I Interim Economic Participation Agreement (IEPA) of the EU, which will open up market access into the European Union.

Mr. Speaker, I would just briefly like to touch on the investment's outset in Fiji. When I talked about the pipeline last year, we were looking at \$4.25 billion worth of investments. As of today, Sir, we are looking at 184 projects worth \$6.2 billion.

A big part of attracting billions of dollars of investment, Mr. Speaker, will be the Ease of Doing Business Project, which is a digital 'BusinessNOW FIJI' portal, which will act as a virtual one-stop platform for investors going forward. Investors, over time, will have a single platform, which will enable them to get services in Fiji and we expect to extend that to the general public.

We are launching the 'Starting a Business Solution' next month and then we will deal with one of the hardest or biggest issues in investment, which is Construction Permits approval, Mr. Speaker, and we hope to deliver by August next year. Should that be done, we will significantly make attempt in ease of doing business in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of our Economic Unit, the Ministry has been dedicated to diversifying the economy, redeveloping its architecture and trying to deliver on sustainable growth. The Cabinet's approval of the recent Policy Framework for Significant Investments will actually accelerate some of the big projects, particularly hotel projects that are in front of us.

The establishment of a Commercial Agriculture Taskforce, partnering with private sector investors, such as Fiji Water and FMF, will revitalise our industries and expand into other sectors, such as vanilla and cocoa, promoting economic diversification.

I would like to also make a point which I made the last time, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The three major institutional investors in Fiji which are FNPF, Fijian Holdings and BSP Life, are looking closely at diversifying into commercial agriculture, and hopefully, aquaculture. That is happening now, Mr. Speaker, and we are positioned for very good things in terms of diversifying the economy.

We are also advancing the medicinal cannabis industry exercise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and intend to bring the legislation forward.

In terms of the kava industry which the other side actually ignored, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are bringing forward the Kava Bill this year, which will not only improve the quality standards for kava but will ensure that our people start benefitting from this very promising industry.

Additionally, we are rejuvenating the Fijian Made brand and improving market access for local businesses. Fiji's participation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Expo 2025 in Osaka Japan which will attract 25 million visitors, will provide a platform to continue to promote our unique identity and attract investment.

We are also focusing on getting mahogany going, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We are looking at retirement villages. It needs legislation which we will bring forward to Parliament.

As I have mentioned also, the audio-visual industry has a lot of promises. Right now, there is an audio-visual company that has actually hired out a hotel in the West for two years. We are looking for a permanent place for them, and if they get a permanent place, it will transform the audio-visual industry in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In terms of MSMEs and co-operatives, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are over 50,000 businesses that are registered as Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises. The Ministry will continue to support economic diversification and growth through the \$3.6 million which has been budgeted for it.

What I would like to also emphasise, Sir, is that if we include the total budget for MSME support and co-operatives, it is a staggering \$120 million. That is the level of commitment that the Government has in that space.

In terms of co-operatives, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have, for the first time, tried to launch a \$400,000 capital grant to boost co-operatives and also focus on training.

In communications, we are, of course, developing a digital strategy that will take this country forward. I certainly believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the digitisation of Fiji and the Fiji Government lies at the basis of a transformative economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of standards, we are trying to raise standards in Fiji. We are currently reviewing the Acts that are currently under the Department for Standards, and we have received some money, which will be used to continue to improve the equipment of those standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I humbly believe that this Budget will be the catalyst for growth in Fiji. By investing in digital infrastructure, enhancing trade, empowering our local businesses and SMEs, ensuring food safety, we are setting the stage for sustainable development and prosperity. These initiatives, Mr. Speaker, will drive job creation, attract foreign investment, foster innovation across

all sectors and ensure that Fiji continues to hold its own in the global economy.

Our commitment to these transformative efforts will pave the way for a resilient and thriving future for all Fijians. Together, we will forge a legacy of progress and prosperity that will be felt for generations to come.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I support this Budget wholeheartedly.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, just let me remind you of the lights, it signifies something. So, let us try and be consistent with how we use our time and the warning that the lights give out.

I was planning to adjourn Parliament for tea, but I think we will just continue. I am sorry, honourable Koya.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, we have lights in the West, lights in the East, lights in the South, but we do not have lights in the North, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Our Northern Star.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, fellow Members of Parliament, first of all, let me congratulate the new Attorney-General, honourable Leung. Welcome to Parliament, Sir, and I wish you well in your stint as the Attorney-General.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today as an independent Member of the Opposition to address the 2024-2025 Budget. While the name of this Budget is an economically 'Stable, Secure and Sustainable Fiji', it is evident that this Government has fallen short of actually delivering on these promises.

My critique today, Mr. Speaker, will focus on the glaring deficiencies in this Budget, the lack of accountability and transparency and the urgent need for more inclusive and a forward-thinking approach, and also an urgent need for a lot of creativity.

Mr. Speaker, this Budget projects a net deficit of \$635.5 million or 4.5 percent of GDP, leading to a debt to GDP ratio of 77.8 percent by July 2025. Despite the Government's rhetoric about fiscal responsibility, we see increasing debt levels without corresponding investments in projects that will actually spur long-term goals and long-term growth. Where are the infrastructure developments that justify this debt? Two years have passed with no significant projects to actually show for it.

We understand, Sir, when they say that the debt is high but there is a reason for it, and I think that has been explained by many on this side of Parliament already. There is a reason why the debt level was that high, it was COVID. The figures have been spelt out this morning. What the entire population in Fiji wants to hear and wanted to hear is that you have moved on from blaming everything on the FijiFirst Government. We just wanted to hear about some creativity, about you making sure that the economy grew, but nothing came forward on this, Mr. Speaker.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Poor performance.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, everyone knows about the dependency on tourism. This Budget relies heavily on the tourism sector as the main driver of economic growth. We have been

hearing about diversification now for 18 months, but nothing in this Budget shows us that there has been some creativity regarding incentivising anything that is going to diversify. I have got some examples which I will tell you at a later stage, which my friend, who sits behind the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, he will agree there is a sector that needs to be tapped into, they have forgotten about it. I think he has been crying till he's blue in the face that he has not been listened to.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the pandemic shows us that the dangers of putting everything in one basket are there. This Budget offers no substantial incentives to stimulate growth in other vital sectors, such as agriculture or manufacturing or technology. There is a pipeline of investments, and the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications says that that pipeline is quite long, might be from Russia to here because it still has not arrived. We need a diversified economy to build some resilience.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- This Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is actually skidding in the same place it was 18 months ago. It is skidding with no clear plan for diversification, and instead of supporting the great efforts, a limited marketing budget for tourism. There is so much more that can be done, Sir. No new incentives or packages.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- We do not need incentives, we need to respect the private sector, that is it.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Of course, I do not disagree with you. You have not even incentivised the private sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the widening inequality and the burden on the poor, the current fiscal policies are widening the gap between the rich and the poor. Increases in fringe benefit tax and other indirect taxes will be passed on to the consumers, making everyday goods and services more expensive for the average Fijian.

This Government's policies are burdening ordinary citizens, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while benefiting a select few and it is actually very obvious. It falls short on tax collections, raising concerns about Government's effectiveness of the Government's revenue strategies and without robust revenue, the ability to fund essential services and support the vulnerable diminishes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what has this Government done for the poor and the working class? Teachers, feel undervalued and underpaid. There is a glaring lack of initiatives to retain the talent within the country, or to invest in human capital. No significant projects, no meaningful infrastructure development, no concrete plans to uplift the poor, have been proposed.

The Government's social protection measures, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are inadequate, leaving many vulnerable communities without the help they desperately need. I think one of the biggest reasons why the honourable Minister did not go right around the countryside because he knew the reaction he was actually going to get.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget also lacks some transparency and some accountability. There are allegations of financial benefits flowing to close associates and donors. This lack of

accountability is unacceptable. The Government must provide a clear and detailed account of how the public funds are being used.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget actually neglects critical sectors that are essential for long term economic growth. There is no substantial support for agriculture, a sector that can provide food security and livelihood for thousands of Fijians. The manufacturing sector which has potential to create jobs and reduce our reliance on imports is also overlooked. Additionally, the Government's fiscal management is poor, falling short of tax collections and failing to diversify revenue sources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst actually going through all of these, I decided that I have a quick read of some of the reports that were around, especially those from IMF and the World Bank's, the ANZ's that have just been mentioned. Of course, ANZ says good things. It says bullish, but there is a lot of caution in what you read, honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I understand also that in our own Budget Book, the honourable Minister has said that there is going to be a holistic review being undertaken to right-size the Civil Service and also to contain the public sector wage bill. Sir, that raises alarm bells, already it raises alarm bells for the public sector. What happens is, when you say such things or about to do some things, it will actually mean more migration. Our young and our educated young staff are suddenly going to say, "well, hang on, this is too unstable for me, I am out of here", and that is exactly what is happening, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to ask some questions that emanate from these reports that I read. Had we actually addressed the downside risks? No, we have not. There is an expected slowdown in tourism arrivals, have we addressed it? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Have we addressed the worsening skill labour shortages that everyone knows about? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Have we addressed the high immigration? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Have we addressed the high global commodity prices? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Have we actually got enough fiscal space? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Have we got an improved business climate? Go ask. Honourable Bala spelt it out this morning, go and ask the businesspeople. The answer is, no, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Have we stimulated private investment and boosted growth? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Have we addressed the climate change issues? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry is nodding his head. Wait till I tell you about sustainable aviation fuels, he has not even addressed you on it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all these questions as I said, they come from very valued reports which I know that the Ministry of Finance has actually looked at. Have we fostered diversification which is widely acknowledged and sorely needed? No, we have not, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Turn around and speak to the honourable Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, he will tell you the importance of sustainable aviation fuels and that involves our Sugar Industry and something that can take us to another level. Have you addressed it? No, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Have they actually incentivised the MSME Sector?

(Honourable Members interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Even their 16 year calculation is all wrong. The highest growth this country has ever had, came within those 16 years, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They are all wrong, they cannot do their math properly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the MSME Sector which is the engine for growth for any country has been

stifled for the last 18 months. Walk around the country and speak to the shopkeepers and they will tell you. Are we sufficiently geared for the potential headwinds that we are about to face? No, Mr. Speaker, we are not.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now for the great water hoodwink; this is important. In the last Budget, we allowed water bottling companies a tax free holiday or tax free incentive, et cetera, that were given right across the board for all the water companies. Guess what? Now, our local water companies are being hit with a 5 cents tax instead of a one cent. That is a 500 percent increase. Guess what? They gave with one hand, and they slapped them and brought them back and said, “no, you are going to actually pay this.” Hoodwinked, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is what they are actually saying.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Fire the Minister!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Just 12 months ago, all our local water bottling companies were happy with the tax free status that they were given. Guess what? They are no longer very happy. There have been very little incentives in the tourism industry, and you must realise it and put it into perspective. We can actually bring in a million and a half people into Fiji, but we do not have the rooms. You have to incentivise the industry so that we can build faster. How are we going to build faster when all the skilled labourers have actually gone?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, private investors look at all of these. So, what I am saying is, there are not enough rooms, and it will stifle our tourism development plans which I know the honourable Minister has worked very hard at. I am actually told by a very good authority that, yes, it will actually taper off. The tourism boom will actually taper off soon, but what are we doing to ensure that we make sure those shocks do not happen to us? We have actually done nothing. Too many projects are still in the pipeline, nothing off the ground.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Very poor!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, you had to beg the question, why? It is because confidence is not there. They have not shown any confidence in the last 18 months purely because of the instability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was going to say about the sugarcane industry. There is an actual gem in the making and, Sir, if I am not believed, ask the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation. He took me along with him, we both saw the same result, but no one listens to him. This is the Sugar Industry and the industry that can be for us, a major saviour, which is the sustainable aviation fuels industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to be ready for tomorrow, we are not. We need to ensure that our young people actually stay in this country and do us good, but are we? Not at all, Sir, we are losing them by the dozen. I think the numbers are now up to 70,000 people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reports that were mentioned earlier on, we are talking about ANZ Reports, Westpac Reports, IMF Reports, World Bank Reports, and as I have said, there are many things that I have just mentioned come out of those reports. You need to be reading them with caution. Of course, ANZ says there is going to be bullish growth, but they are actually very cautious about what they are saying.

There are certain industries that need to take off, but everything right now seems like it is sitting in the pipeline. There is going to be a slowdown in economic growth. We have a susceptibility also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to natural disasters, has that been factored in? I have not heard one word and

I do not think there is anything subject to correction by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics. I do not think there is anything in there that has actually looked at that.

Honourable Minister, I am not sure because you have the same people who used to do the budget for us, but where is the creativity? It is gone. Where is the innovation? It is gone. The only thing that changed is the leader of that particular place and I think that might be the net effect of what is actually happening. You need to start thinking outside the box.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, private sector growth will only happen if you incentivise. There is nothing there. Let this be a warning to the honourable Minister, Sir, if you do not start actually thinking outside the box, we will not get anywhere. We will be losing; we are losing, and we are losing on a daily basis. If you cannot create more jobs, then maybe you ought to leave that job and hand it over to someone else.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are doomed with respect to this Budget, I definitely do not support this particular Budget. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the time to deliver my response.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, you may note that the lights (I do not know what is happening). It is giving a wrong time; the lights are flashing but the time is four minutes. We are manually handling that now. We will continue.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise today in support of the Coalition Government's Budget for Financial Year 2024-2025. It certainly is a people's budget and I believe it is evidence of a government that has been working towards taking care of all its people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to touch on a few points raised in the Budget Address by the honourable Minister for Finance because they are important to me personally as a Parliamentarian but also to the Ministry I work in.

The first of these points is the need to rebuild trust in the Government. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I entered politics reluctantly, but I did so because in 2022 we were at a point where we could no longer trust the people who ruled us. The Government and all its resources were devoted entirely to the personal agendas of two people. If you were the enemy of those two people, you were a target. If you did not matter to those two people, you got nothing. If we were not going to vote for those two people, we got nothing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I saw with my own eyes the way the previous Government wasted resources during the COVID-19 crisis and the politicking and pettiness of leaders who refused to join hands with community organisations they did not like because they had criticised them. I was accused by the then Minister for Economy of using the resources of my organisation, FRIEND, only to help supporters of one political party when we are reaching out to all at the request of their Government officials. I wondered at the time why he did not use the resources of the Government to reach out to those in need.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are far from being a perfect Government. We have been criticised for many things. There are many things we can improve, but I hope that our people at least believe that, for all of our faults, we are a Government for all of the people. We have tried to right the wrongs of the past, to the Vatukoula gold miners, to the FNP pensioners. We do not do this for votes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do this because it is the right thing to do.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the cost of living is the people's biggest concern. We talk to the people, we read the opinion polls and the letters to the editor. We know people are struggling and we know that people find it hard to understand why we had to increase VAT. But I also understand that without the VAT increase, we could not pay for increased welfare allowances, we could not pay for a better healthcare, and we could not bring down the Government debt that stands in the way of the greater social spending that we need.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It didn't go down, it went up.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, on the cost of living issue we can only control prices so far. As the honourable Minister for Finance has said, we must focus on increasing incomes, so I welcome the increase in the minimum wage and the overdue increments for civil servants. The honourable Prime Minister earlier talked about the different social protection mechanisms. While our honourable Minister will discuss the depth, the overall impact of the new Budget and the Ministry's plan for the new financial year, I want to draw attention to the work undertaken for the people living with disabilities, older people and street dwellers. Once again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to return to the theme of trust in this Government. These are not things which are done for votes, but these are things that are done because they are the right things to do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the disability-specific budget lines for our Ministry estimated at \$31.9 million, an increase of \$4.6 million from this financial year. To ensure Government honours our commitment under the UN Convention, we continue to consult and engage with the different organisations representing people with disabilities. The Ministry would like to acknowledge the relevant specific disability budget lines sitting in six Government Ministries, and looking forward to working with these Ministries, with organisations for persons with disabilities and implementing the much-needed interventions for the inclusion and participation of people living with disabilities on an equal basis with others.

The main targets for our Disability Policy in the 2024-2025 Financial Year include passing of a new National Policy for Persons with Disabilities and consultations on the Marrakesh Treaty, which is a worldwide agreement to facilitate timely access to published works for persons who are blind or otherwise print material for those who are visually impaired. We want to strengthen our collaboration with the Government of Australia on pre-agreed activities with organisations for persons with disabilities, and relevant Government Ministries in making schools and hospitals more accessible and creating advocacy on the meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities. We also want to strengthen collaboration with the National Disaster Management Office in the areas of Early Warning Inclusive Systems and with Fiji Disabled People's Federation on the review of the Disaster Disability Toolkit among others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, discussing about older persons, I want to briefly address the issue of inclusion, protection, health and enabling environment for older persons. According to the Fiji Population Census in 2017, more than 10 percent of Fijians were aged 60 years or more, so more than 90,000 people. Many of them face issues such as poor physical access, health, disability, abuse and neglect. They need an advocacy and policy platform. In 2012, the National Council of Older Persons Act was approved and in 2013 the Council was appointed. However, no resources were allocated to help with the functioning of the Council. We are currently working on recruiting the relevant personnel to help in establishing the Council to perform the roles and responsibilities already determined.

We are also establishing District Committees for Older Persons. These Committees will create the inclusive platform and also champion the needs of older persons within the communities. This year, the Ministry carried out four Divisional consultations as well as a National General

Assembly for Older Persons. The discussions were centred on inclusion, protection, health and an enabling environment for older persons.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge the allocation of renovation budget for Vunirewa Bible School, which the Methodist Church of Fiji has kindly provided for the Government to use as a location for the much-needed Rehabilitation Centre for the vulnerable children living on our streets. The shelter will enable the children to be resocialised to accepted norms and receive much needed interventions before they enter into skills training and re-integrated back with families and communities. The Ministry is currently working with the civil society, faith-based organisations and relevant Government Ministries to help set up other facilities and programmes to ensure that interventions for the vulnerable children are relevant and holistic.

Mr. Speaker, finally, I want to speak about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This is a project to which I am personally deeply committed to. This Budget supports the setup of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission secretariat.

We have taken the first step. We are not rushing this, Mr. Speaker, Sir. To do this well, we must listen to our people and also learn the lessons from other countries and communities who have been through this experience.

We want the Commission to be a key foundation for the national unity and nation-building that is so critical for all of our futures, and I want to thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for acknowledging that.

So, Mr. Speaker, this is why I have many reasons to support this Budget. As the honourable Minister for Finance himself has said, it is not flashy, it is not laden with gimmicks, it is a solid and honest Budget that begins the long-term and often unseen work that must be done to help progress us as a people, as of different communities and as one nation.

I fully support and commend the Budget for the financial year 2024-2025. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the Budget Estimate delivered by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

Before that, I would like to express my disappointment with the reduction of speaking time from 20 minutes to 15 minutes, and the cut in Parliament Session from two weeks to one week.

In the last 18 months, speaking time and the number of speakers has been reduced on crucial motions. This is not a democracy, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This Parliament belongs to the people, and they deserve sufficient time for us to debate and scrutinise important issues affecting them.

(Hon. Prof. B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- You have the votes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget can be summed up in just three words -myopic, inequitable and neglectful. This Budget demonstrates how out of touch this Government is with the real needs of our people. This Budget is myopic because it heavily relies on the tourism sector. This short-sightedness leaves our nation vulnerable to global market conditions.

This Budget is inequitable. I expected fair distribution of wealth and resources, to reduce inequality between ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’. However, it neglects low wage workers and pensioners. Does the Government truly believe that a 50 cents increase per hour is enough to keep a roof over their head and put food on the table?

This Budget is neglectful, failing to tackle the exodus of skilled workers, stimulate private sector growth or address the high cost of living. These are the critical issues affecting our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last year, I cautioned the Government about the consequences of passing a budget relying on easy revenue by increasing duties and taxes. We have already seen clear signs of a troubled economy.

Since November 2023, our economic growth forecast has been revised downwards two times from an initial 3.8 percent to 2.8 percent. Inflation peaked at a 10-year high of 7.1 percent in April, slightly dropping to 5.8 percent in May, and it is anticipated that the inflation will be around 4.4 percent at the end of 2024, and with all these spending, we expect inflation to go up.

We also know that the forward booking for Fiji Airways is also slowing down, and this can be gauged with the number of advertisements that is coming out from Fiji Airways.

Except for gold and few commodities, other sectors are underperforming. Job advertisements are declining. New customer lending is sluggish, and imports of investment goods needed for businesses are decreasing.

Despite ample liquidity of \$1.9 billion and a low interest rate, investors are hesitant to borrow. Why? It is all about confidence, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The \$1.2 billion approved loan is not being uplifted and the promising pipeline from the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications remains slow moving.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Just keep watching, it’s coming.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, our economic growth is uncertain, but no effort was made in this Budget to address that. I have previously warned that any tax hike hurts consumers and businesses alike, by reducing purchasing power and investments.

We are seeing the negative impact in an already high-cost domestic environment, driven by high global prices, raising VAT was a misguided decision and maintaining it is neglectful.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a case to reduce VAT to promote consumer confidence and retail sales and I expected the honourable Minister for Finance to do that. The expected VAT revenue has not materialised, even with higher disposable income from remittances.

When VAT was 9 percent, we collected \$1 billion. Raising it to 15 percent only increased collection to \$1.3 billion, missing the target by \$200 million. This shows the VAT hike has not resulted in a revenue windfall. Reducing VAT could restore confidence, and consumers to buy and businesses to expand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, US President, Jimmy Carter, once said, and I quote, “The measure of a society is found in how they treat their weakest and most helpless citizens”. This sentiment highlights the Government’s duty and responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of our most vulnerable citizens.

In Opposition and throughout the campaign, this Government made the cost of living a key issue, promising to alleviate it, yet in their first Budget, they increased VAT to 15 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, food prices in Fiji remained higher than the pre-pandemic level, causing a constant pinch at the cash registers. Groceries, utilities, bus fares, fuel, gas, and even basic staples, like bread and butter, have also seen price hikes. How can we expect our people to thrive under such condition?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after COVID-19, the FijiFirst Government raised wages to \$4, reduced VAT to 9 percent and cut duties on 2,000 products to ease living cost. Now, that the pandemic is over and bus fares have gone up, the least this Government could have done was to restore pensioners' bus fares to \$40 per month.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has not upheld its many promises before the Election, and I want to remind the honourable Minister for Finance that he made grand promises to reduce Government expenditure in hundred days. It is 18 months now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and what did he say? Slashing Minister's salaries and allowances by 30 percent. Instead in just 18 months, the number of Ministers, salaries and allowance, and related costs, have increased, while our pensioners aged 60 years are denied Bus Fare Assistance. What a shame, Mr. Speaker, Sir!

He also promised ministerial motorcades and he will pool Government vehicles, particularly he was going to pool ministerial vehicles, cutting their use by 50 percent. However, the opposite has occurred. New vehicle purchases and leasing costs have surged. Just talk to the public and they will tell you that Government vehicles are seen dropping off civil servants after late night grog sessions, dropping children at school and, of course, visiting relatives and friends. Is that cost cutting?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he also said that he will stop holding government meetings and consultations at expensive hotels and resorts and use community halls at schools and religious institutions. Did that happen?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics held his first '*kala vata*' Economic Summit at the Grand Pacific Hotel. How can we expect other Ministers to cut back?

Following his lead, the Ministry of Agriculture used the same hotel, just to announce a new Drainage Board. That is how they waste money, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This is the betrayal of public trust.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government's big spending spree began with the first Budget, committing around \$9 billion in just two Budgets. New Departments and Ministries have added to the cost, and with all Coalition MPs now Ministers or Assistant Ministers in a country with 960,000 population, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what a shame!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at a time when our citizens are suffering under the crushing weight of the cost of living, I challenge the honourable Prime Minister, Sir, please, reduce the number of Ministers and Assistant Ministers and their travel expenses. Our people are tightening their belts, will the Government do the same? Honourable Prime Minister, this is the right time for you to do that.

(Laughter)

I also ask the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to stop treating taxpayers' money as their piggy bank and consider the common people's plight.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is time for this Government to show fiscal responsibility and compassion. The people of Fiji are not fooled by this Government's propaganda. They can see through the narrative being spun around freedom, consultation and high government debt, just to divert the attention from Government's poor performance and failures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government's narrative has lost its appeal to the public. The promised freedom has made our homes, streets and social media unsafe. The crime rate, including drug issues, has skyrocketed and the racial divide has deepened. The so-called newfound freedom has left Fijians living in fear both, at home and when out in public places. This is the stark reality of their governance.

Their commitment to consultation is also selective. Where was public input on the MPs' pay rise? Tell me, where was consultation on the MPs' pay rise? How much consultation was conducted before the Budget?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, not long ago, we heard from the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection on the absence of consultation when the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics unilaterally changed the Bus Fare Subsidy from a fixed \$25 a month to utilisation base, hurting the elderly and disabled. Where were the public, political parties or Cabinet consultation when it unilaterally increased payments to each political party with \$325,000, benefitting just two parties - NFP and SODELPA by \$240,000 and \$280,000 every year? Is this fair, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

Their repeated claim of genuine consultation is merely to create an image that they are listening to the people. Did they listen to the public on the cost of living, VAT reduction and poor service delivery?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government borrows more but builds less. Under this Government, the stock of debt will keep rising. We need new projects, not just infrastructure upgrades.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the only guarantee in this Budget is that they will end this financial year and the next with much debt, ignoring economic risk that will harm the people.

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics presented the Government's achievement in Budget Transparency Consultation and Building Foundations for Economic Growth in the last 18 months. It was all wishy-washy. Do these accomplishments really matter to low-income earners, homeowners battling termite infestation, farmers who want farm access road, fishermen who need ice, rural dwellers who want electricity, and market vendors who are trying to earn enough to support their family?

What matters to them, is whether the Government has delivered on its budget promises. This is how the public judges the performance of the Government. So, what is the Government's report card in the last 18 months? Let me tell you, honourable Minister for Finance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no work was undertaken for rural electrification for which \$4.1 million was allocated. Farmers were denied farm access road, only 30 percent of \$1.8 million was used, not a single cent used for the Rice Development Programme, \$3 million allocated for termite control being the flag bearers of termite control, only 24 percent was used, people are still waiting for assistance as termite problem escalates. From \$12 million allocation, only 39 percent was used for the hospitals to buy equipment. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is how they are running the show.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, I acknowledge the significant contributions of the former

Prime Minister, Mr. Josia Voreqe Bainimarama, a leader known for his courage, vision, passion and decisive actions, deeply connected with the people.

I will continue serving all Fijians as an Independent Member of Parliament, upholding values of meritocracy, diversity, equality, unity and modernity. To our voters, thank you for your continued support, despite this challenging times.

I also extend my sincere thanks to the Permanent Secretary and his team at the Ministry of Finance for their outstanding work in preparing the Budget documents.

Finally, before I take my sit, I also like to congratulate the new honourable Attorney-General and the honourable Minister for Fisheries. She is the first woman Minister to head Fisheries and Forests, something that she was entitled to be given from the beginning of the year. But I thank the honourable Prime Minister, at least, he woke up, and decided to give a portfolio to another lady. So, that makes two Ministers in Cabinet. The only change I would request, honourable Prime Minister, please, put these ladies in front, do not put them at the back. They are very closed the door and I am worried that one day, they will be out of the door. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka*, honourable Premila Kumar.

On the first line of your contribution, you did comment heavily on the expenses being incurred by Government and when I say 'Government', that includes Parliament as well, and especially on tours. I make it a point to include the Opposition as well for Parliamentary tours. So, hopefully, whilst you are so heated up with the shortness of time now being undertaken in having a Budget debate, there was quite a lot of heated contributions from the Oppositions as well, especially from the honourable Whip when he mentioned that the time allocated for us to speak keeps dwindling.

Well, I cannot do much. If the Head of Government, the honourable Prime Minister, decides for the betterment of the country to attend a very important meeting, it is our duty to see that we support him there.

At the same time, we did not take that with just lying down, et cetera, no! We did raise our issues, especially on the time for speeches to be made and especially the time that the hardworking Secretariat staff undertake when we have these lengthy meetings.

When you reach your homes and in the comforts of your bed, poor staff are still working here preparing the Chambers and everything, for the next day. The next day, like tomorrow, is another 25 Speakers, and you watch - by the time we take off from here or leave here, the poor members of the Secretariat will be hard slogging their way in cleaning up the Chambers and everything, right down to the Big Committee Room where we have our meals, to ensure it is spick and span, ready for the next day. And if we continue to do that, it will be really quite heavy on them.

I have lost two staff this year - one that used to work in this very Chamber's, cleaning, that was Lemeki, and the other one was my Personal Assistant. So, that is the remarks that I would like to counter because your colleagues did raise quite heated points during the Business Committee meeting. However, honourable Members, I cannot divulge what we have discussed in the Business Committee meeting. That stays there and it does not come here into this Chamber. But I am only raising this just to ensure that I highlight this with some perspective, that it was not easy.

When I asked the Government of the of the day for them to decide because that is what I am there for as Speaker, “You want to cut down the meeting time, you want to cut down the everything, let us hear it. Let us make a stand and see, do we agree?” I will only act on those kind of decisions being reached. I am sorry to be raising this, but I cannot just sit silently here.

HON. S. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Attorney-General, honourable Leader of the Opposition, my fellow honourable Members of the Opposition, esteemed guests and fellow citizens, a warm greeting to you all. Thank you for your interest in the Budget Debate 2024-2025.

I stand before you today as an Independent Member of Parliament united in a shared concern: the 2024–2025 Budget presented by the Coalition Government. While it speaks of optimism and promises, a closer look reveals shortcomings in addressing the core issues facing our nation and its people. Let me look deeper and understand how we can design a budget that truly serves all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget outlines a concerning level of borrowing - \$635.5 million, a hefty portion of our national income. While lower than past deficits, it remains high, especially considering our current economic climate. It is like a temporary fix for a deeper wound. The Government justifies this by needing to stimulate a sluggish economy and fund vital projects. But from what we are seeing, the economy is on a continued downward spiral. Investment in infrastructure that grows the GDP is what is needed.

In April this year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the inflation rate had soared to 7.1 percent and it stands at 6.7 percent as of last month. To paint a picture for the people of Fiji that the economy is doing well, but with a debt that is over \$10 billion, an inflation rate that is far too high, and a GDP growth rate that is on a downward spiral, we must ask the Coalition Government - What are we going to do that will put the brakes on the downward growth and start to stimulate the economy?

The Debt-to-GDP ratio is projected to decline to 77.8 percent by the end of July, 2025. While this might seem like progress, it is important to remember that this is still an alarmingly high figure. The Government's long-term goal is to bring this down to 60 percent by 2040.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not good enough. Our children and grandchildren will bear the brunt of this debt, especially with little in the way of economic stimulus and major infrastructure development that would be needed to grow the economy and help lessen the debt burden. The only way to bring down the debt-to-GDP ratio with the deficit being so high every year is to make sure that our GDP is growing faster. The post-COVID economic rebound has completed, and it is now time for the Government to find creative and innovative ways to ensure that our economy is growing every year.

Mr. Speaker. Sir, the allocation of funds also warrants closer examination. The Ministry of Finance is provided with a total budget of \$96.9 million, with an increased grant of \$55 million to the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service. While improving tax compliance is important, one must question whether this significant increase is the best use of our limited resources. Additionally, the allocation of \$8 million for the Government's Financial Management Information System (FMIS) raises questions about the prioritisation of spending.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget allocates \$169.6 million to the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF). National security is, undoubtedly, paramount, but does this allocation truly reflect the current need of our people? One might ask, is this increase necessary?

Many Fijians struggle with the rising living cost and unemployment, exacerbated by inflation and supply chain disruptions. Families face financial difficulties, and unemployment rates remain a pressing concern. Is the RFMF allocation proportionate to these urgent economic challenges faced by ordinary Fijians?

In Fiji recently almost every second day we hear of robbery, violence, murder, hike in drug cases forming headlines, perhaps mobilising the Budget to tackle these issues is more paramount than peacekeeping overseas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, equally crucial is the robust healthcare system, especially during a global health crisis. The Budget must prioritize adequate funding for hospitals, medical supplies and healthcare personnel. Does it adequately address healthcare infrastructure and pandemic preparedness, or does it favour defence spending disproportionately?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government's allocation of \$66 million for free education from early childhood to secondary school is a commendable step. I am happy that free education grant will continue despite the PS for Education talking about reintroducing school fees for urban schools to force families with low incomes to move their children to rural schools.

Just in May this year, it was revealed that 39 percent out of 90,000 or some 35,000 students dropped out of school between the Years 8 and 12. This is an alarming figure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we need to all come together in this august Parliament to work out a way that we can make school more enjoyable and bring this number down.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the systemic deficiencies plague our education sector. Insufficient facilities, overcrowded classrooms, outdated curriculum, and underpaid educators persist. Can we truly transform education with these modest efforts? The Back-to-School support of \$40 million, while positive, remains insufficient to tackle broader issues of poverty and inequality. Many families struggle to afford basic school supplies, uniforms and transportation. How can we effectively bridge this gap and ensure all children have a fair shot at education?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current Budget lacks a clear vision and strategic roadmap. It prioritizes short-term gains and appearances over addressing the underlying causes of our economic challenge. What we need is a budget that balances immediate needs with long-term sustainability. We need to live within our means and invest in long-term solutions, not burden future generations with crippling debts. Investments should prioritize education, healthcare and infrastructure, areas critical to national development.

What we need is a budget that promotes social justice, uplifting vulnerable communities is essential, eradicating poverty and ensuring equitable access to education and healthcare should be central tenets of the budget. Let us not forget those who struggle daily to make ends meet. What we need is a budget that outlines clear strategic priorities. How do we enhance economic resilience, promote innovation and create jobs? Let us move beyond promises and focus on actionable steps that build a stronger future for all Fijians.

In its current form, the Budget fails to meet the genuine needs of our populace. It is time for a budget that reflects fiscal prudence, social justice and strategic wisdom. Our nation deserves a budget that tackles our challenges head-on, invests in our future and uplifts all Fijians. We can only hope that in next year's Budget, creativity to address the woes of the people is addressed and that investment stimulus is given, thus allowing jobs to be created.

We need a Budget that will take care of every Fijian and will see our nation come out of the

economic downward spiral that we are witnessing today. We need a budget that has a plan to cover any debt that will come from the budget deficit and will help lower the debt-to-GDP ratio even further without tightening the grip on ordinary Fijian pockets.

As I conclude my response to the uncreative Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to ask the Coalition Government, why not lower the VAT from 15 percent to 10 percent? By reducing VAT on essential goods, the Government not only alleviates financial stress on the grassroots population, but also stimulates broader economic benefits, fostering a healthier and more dynamic economy from the ground up.

With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I end my speech and I just wonder if we will ever get a budget that will truly look after the people of Fiji. On the same note, I thank the Members of this august Parliament and the viewers for their time in listening to the 2024-2025 Budget Debate. I also take this time to thank the Permanent Secretary for Finance and his team for preparing the Budget book for 2024-2025. I congratulate honourable Alitia Bainivalu on her appointment as the Minister for Fisheries and Forests and I also congratulate the honourable Attorney-General on his appointment.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the public who are present in the gallery and those joining us through livestream, *ni bula vinaka* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise before this august Parliament to express my unwavering support to the second Coalition Government's National Budget for Financial Year 2024-2025, that was presented by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and the honourable Minister for Finance on 28th June, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the outset, I wish to thank some honourable Opposition Members for declaring their support towards this Budget. The reason I am saying this is because it is our Budget, so it is the Government's Budget, the Opposition Members' Budget, as well as the public's. I believe that at the end of the Budget Debate, all honourable Opposition Members are going to support this Budget.

I would like to commend, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the effort of the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and his team have taken in crafting a Budget that aims to provide an economically stable, secure and sustainable Fiji. This is the people's Budget and has been well received by the general public.

As the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance has highlighted in his Speech, our immediate focus is to get the basics right and address the day-to-day challenges of our people. We understand that the strength of our nation lies in the wellbeing of every Fijian. The Coalition Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, remains steadfast in its commitment to enhancing the education, health and infrastructure across Fiji, as reflected in the 2024-2025 National Budget.

I wish to emphasise the importance of education, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and recognising that our young people are the future of our nation and \$778 million has been allocated to provide our leaders of tomorrow with the resources to gain knowledge, skills and opportunities they need to succeed through the Back-to-School Support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the significant budget allocated to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, as well as the Ministry of Public Works, Transport and Meteorological Services is a

testament of the Coalition Government's efforts in prioritising the wellbeing of our people, as well as enhancing road networks, water supply systems that are crucial for sustainable economic growth and improve the living conditions nationwide. These investments underscore our commitment to building a healthier, more educated and a prosperous Fiji for all.

The Vatukoula Mine workers strike, Mr. Speaker, Sir, being the longest strike known, lasting for over three decades, has now been settled. It is a testament to the power of negotiation, compromise and working together with the Coalition Government towards a common goal, resulting in such a peaceful resolution. This Budget is dedicated to uplifting lives where it is most needed and building a foundation for a bright future for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to now speak on the Ministry of Housing's budgetary allocation of \$32.3 million for the coming financial year that will, undoubtedly, have a positive impact on the works that have been planned to be carried out.

Firstly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in the presence of informal settlements poses a significant challenges to urban development but this will not deter the Ministry of Housing continuing with its formalisation of the informal settlements programme which aims to enhance living conditions through infrastructure upgrades and provision of utility services for these communities.

I must also thank honourable Hem Chand for raising this issue on informal settlements. I think it is also very important, but our Coalition Government is committed to ensure that we continue with our upgrading programme so that people in informal settlements do have access to better living conditions and also better access to basic amenities and services.

A total of \$13.5 million has been allocated to the Ministry for the completion of four ongoing projects in Sakoca, Nasinu; Tavela, Nadi; Tore and Field 40 in Lautoka, and the commencement of capital works in Valequwayaya in Ba and Vunika in Labasa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have informal settlements that are also established on random spaces around urban centres, especially on land that are subject to potential development activities. The Coalition Government, through the Ministry of Housing, is exploring opportunities and working with Habitat for Humanity, Fiji National University and other stakeholders in identifying and acquiring greenfield or green space to develop and build communities for deserving residents that meet the criteria or are facing eviction. The budgetary allocation will assist the Ministry in working with Habitat for Humanity to commence a Greenfield Pilot Project and relocate families from Veidogo Settlement here in Suva.

On First Home Ownership, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first home transition will continue as allocated in the Budget in the coming financial year with an allocation of \$5.5 million. We plan to assist a total of 295 applicants through this Scheme.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry recognises the importance of supporting individuals living with disabilities. For the current financial year, \$300,000 had been allocated which will provide them with necessary accessibility and modifications, demonstrating our commitment towards the most vulnerable.

In addition, families that have lost their homes through financial difficulties and fire will continue to be assisted through the Fire Assistance Grant of up to \$5,000 per family or per applicant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Housing Authority and Public Rental Board (PRB) continue to play a

vital role in providing affordable and social housing to low and middle income earners throughout our country. The provision of \$2 million to assist Housing Authority for the development of its residential lots in Valelevu through the construction of the Veikoba Bridge will allow the residents' ease and safe movement on an upgraded access.

An allocated budget to cater for PRB subsidy and funding for capital works at Jittu Estate will benefit those who are financially disadvantaged, as well as those who want to have safe and secure dwellings for their family.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry recognises the change in dynamics on the need to renew the strategic framework for the housing sector, therefore, the Ministry has also completed a thorough and comprehensive review of the implementation of the 2011 National Housing Policy. This was carried out through the assistance of the New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The revised National Policy will create an environment to unite all stakeholders in the housing sector to work together under an improved legal framework.

The Ministry of Local Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been allocated a total of \$31.5 million in the next financial year. We are so fortunate that we have been given the allocation to assist the Ministry in the area of Sustainable Waste Management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the support from the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, the National Development Programme, and the Asian Development Bank, the Ministry will embark on a comprehensive workplan for a possible Western Division Landfill and a feasibility study with establishing Waste Management Authority which has been endorsed by Cabinet.

In addition, an allocation of \$2.1 million has been provided to assist small and medium Councils with garbage collection compacted trucks. These trucks are crucial for better service delivery to the residents, ensuring efficient waste collection and management.

On a new capital project, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also been allocated \$300,000 for the initial Nasau Park Upgrade in Levuka and this also will provide another additional income stream for the Levuka Town Council. Honourable Bala is saying something about the Local Government Elections, it is coming, honourable Bala, and unlike you, it is coming.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the ongoing capital project, in the coming fiscal year, we are committed to finalising two of Fiji's pivotal capital projects - the Lautoka Swimming Pool and the Ba Govind Park, at a budget of \$1.5 million underscores our determination to see these projects through to completion.

Thank you once again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me the opportunity and I offer my full support towards the Budget for the 2024-2025 financial year.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament now since we will be taking both the afternoon tea and dinner and will resume when the bell is sounded. The Parliament is now adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.57 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 6.22 p.m.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Ministers and Members of Cabinet, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, Independent Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; *bula vinaka, namaste, as-salamu alaykum* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand here deeply concerned about this Budget and I have a lot of reservations with regards to this booklet that is presented to us. Sir, it really shows how badly the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics is managing our economy. This Budget is not just flawed, it highlights the failures and his inability to lead our country wisely.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have already seen the need for change in the Attorney-General's role because of poor performance. It is clear, we need similar changes in our Minister for Finance leadership. This Budget is like a run-away bulldozer, threatening our economic stability and our future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has clearly put political games and incompetence above responsible financial management. Our nation deserves leaders who can build a stable future, not ones who will drive us into chaos.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget blatantly disregards the voices and the needs of the Fijian people. This Budget has seen nearly no contribution from the general population of Fiji in terms of face-to-face consultation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people were not consulted, their concerns were not addressed, and their hopes ignored. Yet, again, we see a government that operates in a bubble, disconnected from the realities on the ground.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I commend the hardworking Ministry staff and other civil servants for their efforts, I cannot extend the same gratitude to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics. The honourable Minister has failed to engage with the people, and as I have heard from many on the ground, who are deeply dissatisfied with his performance, and I hope that the honourable Prime Minister is hearing my comments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me begin by highlighting the voices of the people who were left out. In the past, ministers would go down to the people and conduct budget consultations in various locations, for example, at FNU, USP and other town hall meetings, ensuring that every Fijian had a say.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you fast-track to 2024, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics has forgotten the very people who voted for him and given his Party five seats in Parliament, and now part of that Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the questions on everyone's mind are:

- is the honourable Minister for Finance afraid of the people;
- is he so disconnected that he cannot face them and conduct budget consultations; and
- is he scared that the frustration of the people will be too much for him to handle?

The people are asking, and rightly so, whether the honourable Minister is avoiding accountability for the promises he made over the past eight years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget, void of public input, is a clear indication that this Government is afraid to face the truth and the needs of the Fijian people. It is a betrayal of trust and a gross neglect of duty. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me dissect this Budget at the core of the most pressing issue affecting the people of Fiji, which is the high cost of living. The burden on our citizens is immense, exacerbated by the 15 percent VAT and 25 percent corporate tax. To add insult to injury, businesses that strive to retain their employees by providing benefits are now further burdened with an increase in the fringe benefit tax.

To my *kai* from Savusavu and the honourable Prime Minister of Fiji, I urge him to reconsider his stance on the 15 percent VAT and 25 percent corporate tax. Reverting these taxes would ease the burden on countless families and businesses, especially in our Northern Islands and the islands around Fiji where the cost of freight drives prices even higher.

If we continue with these exorbitant taxes, the ripple effect on consumers will be devastating. Higher taxes on businesses mean higher prices for goods and services, making it harder for the average Fijian to make ends meet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not just a financial strain, it is an emotional and psychological burden on our people. This Budget fails to alleviate that burden and instead, exacerbates it, showing a lack of empathy and understanding from this Government.

Moving on, Mr. Speaker, Sir, education was the keystone issue that swayed many voters, especially students, to support this Coalition Government. They were promised free education, a promise that resonated deeply with young Fijians. However, once in power, the Government quickly changed its tune.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, without consulting students, they introduced a bond system that has disadvantaged many. Now, they have imposed a 50 percent extra penalty on students who wish to pay off their bond arrangements early and move overseas or other countries because of better job opportunities. This is a blatant betrayal of trust and a clear indication that this Government does not care about the future of our young generation. This Budget adds more financial burden on students, pushing their dreams further out of reach and placing their futures in jeopardy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government does not prioritise our youth agenda or their education, and this Budget reflects that cruel reality.

Mr. Speaker Sir, we had also expected an increase in student allowances which did not happen, recognising the significant impact of the current economic policies on the cost of living. The rise in taxes and inflation has made it increasingly challenging for students to sustain themselves. An increase in allowances is not merely a financial relief but a necessary adjustment to ensure that our students can continue their education without undue financial stress.

The additional funds would help students cover essential costs such as accommodation, food, transportation and educational materials, ensuring they can focus on their education and achieve their full potential.

Now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to unleash a shockwave concerning the minimum wage rate. On 21st April, 2024, it was reported that the Government had appointed consultants to review the National Minimum Wage and Sectoral Wages. These consultants were highly qualified individuals

from our esteemed Universities. However, the Fijian public has yet to see the independent consultant's report on minimum wage. I ask this question to honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, where are the recommendations and why has this crucial information been hidden from the public eye?

The people of Fiji demand transparency. This Government's failure to disclose the findings is a disservice to the public and a blatant breach of their promise of transparency. Without this information, Mr. Speaker, Sir, how can the public trust that this Government is acting in their best interest? This secrecy breeds distrust and further alienates the Government from the people it is supposed to serve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is essential to also recognise the delicate balance required to support both, our workforce and our businesses. The issue of increasing wages and taxes is one that requires careful consideration, particularly given the current economic climate.

Firstly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the need for higher wages, especially in light of the skills shortage and the tight labour market. But imposing higher wages or taxes by regulation could lead to unintended consequences, such as increased financial strain on these SMEs and businesses, potentially pushing some of them out of operation, which means closing down. Instead, we should focus on creating an environment where businesses can thrive and naturally offer higher wages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this can be achieved through policies that support SMEs' growth, such as tax incentives, access to affordable financing and investment in skills development and training programmes. While the intention behind increasing wages is commendable, the approach must be carefully considered to avoid adverse effects on our smaller businesses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this Budget, we also expected a revision of the nightclub hours back to its original timings, but that did not happen as well. Extending these hours would have a positive ripple effect across several industries, for instance, taxi drivers would see an increase in clientele, providing them with additional income during late hours. Nightclub owners would benefit from extended business hours, potentially leading to increased revenue and job creation within the nightlife industry.

Furthermore, numerous small vendors, such as those operating BBQ stalls and other food services rely on the night crowd for extra income. Extending hours would support these entrepreneurs, enhancing the local economy and fostering a vibrant nightlife culture that can attract tourists and boost tourism-related revenue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving on, it is evident to every Fijian that the state of our roadways is rapidly deteriorating, with potholes becoming a constant hazard for drivers. I hope the honourable Minister for Public Works, Transport and Meteorological Services is listening to this.

(Laughter)

HON. K.K. LAL.- This decline in road quality, not only jeopardizes the safety of our commuters, but also hampers economic activities, as transportation becomes less reliable and more costly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while some may argue for a decrease in the budget for the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), it is imperative that we consider this stance. Investing in our roads is not a luxury, it is a necessity, and I acknowledge the support by the Chinese Government towards the Vanua Levu Road Project, and also the Government for looking into these initiatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, properly maintained roads are the backbone of our economy, and that facilitates tourism, trade and daily commutes. By allocating sufficient funds to FRA, we ensure safer and more efficient travel for our citizens and support long-term growth and stability of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been highlighted today, and as per my research with regards to the Fiji National University (FNU), it is also concerning that FNU has been allocated around \$36 million this year, a significant decrease from last year's \$44 million.

Meanwhile, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a merely very small NGO which is newly established, named Polytech, has received an unprecedented \$5 million substantial increase in funding. Polytech, although new in the education sector, has raised questions amongst various alumni and academics from other Universities regarding the quality of programmes at Polytech, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and the graduates to be concerned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I ask this question to the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Minister for Education because I do not think the honourable Minister for Finance will answer this, but has the Government conducted any research or benchmarking with our established local universities before making such a substantial allocation to Polytech? If not, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is perplexing why such a hefty amount is given to a nascent organisation when our national university which has a proven track record is facing budget cuts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as per data, FNU TVET graduates supporting the industries in Fiji over the last five years from 2019 to 2023, according to FNU's data, they have trained people in the rural remote areas for around 32,282. So why are we decreasing their budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

We need to give more to our university. The reduction in funding for FNU will inevitably lead to cost-cutting measures (and I hope the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations is listening to this), adversely affecting service delivery. In the worst-case scenario, many people can lose their jobs at FNU, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Government must justify this decision, ensuring that our established universities are adequately supported to maintain their high standards of education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I end my Budget response, I wish to share some thoughts on the recent events on the deregistration of the FijiFirst Party. Politics is often seen as a ruthless game, one where numbers and betrayals can dominate. However, I believe that our true strength lies in the values instilled in us by our parents, our former political leaders and our elders in society, and these values are integrity, resilience and unwavering commitment to the service of Fijians.

During my time with FijiFirst, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had the privilege of learning a lot from my former leader and the former Attorney-General, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum. They taught me principles, ethics and loyalty, qualities that define us as leaders.

I thank them for the legacy they left behind, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Because of them, our nation has progressed this far as one of the fastest growing economy in the Pacific region and we are now in the big league, fighting issues which we champion such as climate change, et cetera.

For the longevity of any politician, Mr. Speaker, Sir, lies the decision that he or she makes during their term as a Parliamentarian, and it is important that we must always look forward to the future that is beyond 2026. Sir, one can take the easy road to political success, but one can take a principled route and gain that respect for his or her political journey.

As the youngest Parliamentarian in this Chamber, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am deeply committed

to continuing my service to the Fijian people as an Independent Member of Parliament. It is imperative that we remain steadfast in our work, upholding the principles and ethics we have always stood for and protect our 2013 Constitution.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- *Ni sa bula vinaka saka*, Sir. The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and fellow Members of Parliament; I extend to you all a very good evening, and also extend warm greetings and *bula vinaka* to Fijians who are tuning in to the Parliamentary proceedings tonight and to those present today in the public gallery.

I rise to deliver my response to the 2024-2025 National Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and to add my voice to the support for it. I also wish to take this time to thank all honourable Members who have spoken before me, including honourable Members from the other side, who supported or will support this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is now under a newly leadership, a leadership that listens, a leadership that is open, a leadership that is inclusive, truthful and a leadership that is transparent; one that dispels the glamorisation of our economy for its own sake. This is reflected in a Budget which puts our people as its centre, by deploying our very limited resources and marshalling our collective efforts as a journey that gives our people hope for the future.

To the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the global and regional context, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry, being Fiji's gateway to the world, will continue to embrace a spirit of collaboration but determined diplomacy in our international undertakings. This is to allow for an appropriate reset of relations, the advancement of global, regional and sub-regional aspirations, the protection of Fiji's interests, and the enhancement of our engagements.

To the Diplomatic Mission focus, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the move towards increasing Fiji's degree of economic and political cooperation among countries around the world, as part of our intent vis-à-vis, expanding our frontiers and diplomatic footprints globally, is an admirable gesture by the Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is deeply committed to its new diplomatic representation in Washington DC, in Malaysia and Papua New Guinea, and any other future localities to enhance relations, support economic, cultural, security and sports engagement, including the welfare of Fiji's diaspora communities in these countries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the groundwork at these Missions had to start a step back from where the previous Administration took the country. New strategies have been applied to provide a robust base to rebuild relations that demonstrate the values and principles that speak of us as a sovereign nation. Further, we are focused on realising the return on investment on these deployments. We are also mindful of our position and role within the Blue Pacific Continent and our responsibility to the region. The frequency and intensity of our engagements have increased substantially.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now wish to touch very briefly on Fiji's Foreign Policy. As announced by the honourable Prime Minister, the Ministry is guided by the pillars of sovereignty, security and prosperity.

The Ministry anticipates the finalisation and soon launch of Fiji's first Foreign Policy White Paper, which will set the framework and the pathway to advancing Fiji's strategic interests and goals. The Ministry further understands that this umbrella document will be anchored on a calculated direction which is grounded in our context, values and aspirations.

The Ministry wishes to acknowledge the support of the Australian Government Technical

Adviser, with expert input from our very own experienced and long-time international affairs and diplomacy personalities under the leadership of the Permanent Secretary of Foreign Affairs. We express our gratitude to all those who have shared their thoughts and experience in this project, and this includes the honourable Leader of the Opposition.

On to the Ministry's operations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with an allocation of \$43.8 million, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will prosecute our foreign policy goals, a mandate that demand agility and a learning organisation culture with streamlined systems and processes. This is supported by a *modus operandi* that also invests in building our capability, on our workforce, system and infrastructure. This also includes supporting our diplomats and, very importantly, the repairs of our properties abroad that are in a state of disrepair after years of neglect. After finishing with one property in New Zealand, we are now focusing on two others, three in the United Kingdom, two in Australia and one in Brussels. As we strive to deliver more, we will be frugal and calculated as we are very mindful of the limited resources available.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank and commend the good work of the Ministry of Finance team, in putting forth a Budget that is smart, under present circumstances, with an eye on the future. The Budget is building the confidence of our people and those who think about Fiji as a preferred tourism and investment destination, under the Coalition Government. Our foresight, unity as a government, and ability to listen, and importantly, hearing our people, is what this Budget has demonstrated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the Budget, but before I take my seat, I wish to wish a very happy birthday to honourable Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka. I know he wishes I did not do this, but I had to do it for my *turaga tauvu*. Happy birthday, Sir!

MR. SPEAKER.- A belated happy birthday to you, honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and those watching live through various digital devices, ladies and gentlemen, *ni sa bula vinaka*.

It is our duty as elected Members to demand honesty, integrity and a genuine commitment to the welfare of every member of our community. Regardless of origin or status we must hold the authority in question responsible for its actions. I advocate for strong accountability and transparency that is crucial to good governance and we ensure that the Budget represents the needs and goals of all Fijians.

Before I present my response on the Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this opportunity to inform the people of this nation that I will remain as an Independent Member of Parliament after the deregistration of the FijiFirst Party. I would like to continue with the values and principles of FijiFirst and serve all Fijians with the best of my abilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me acknowledge that there is no comparison to the legacy and the unparalleled contribution of the previous Government under the Prime Ministership of Mr. Voreqe Bainimarama. My humble gratitude and prayers to Mr. Bainimarama for good health and wellbeing. My heartfelt, thank you.

On the Budget, Sir, I take this opportunity to thank the Government for restoring the pension for the pensioners. Since the pension was reduced, a lot of pensioners were facing financial

difficulties since some of them were entirely dependent on their pension for survival. For some pensioners, the struggle has been long and traumatic. News of restoring pensions has brought relief to our senior citizens, and I commend the Government for that.

Also, resolving the infamous Vatukoula Mine Workers strike is another milestone for this Government. These workers were on strike for more than 30 years and the Coalition Government had the courage to settle their dispute. FijiFirst when in government tried to resolve this dispute but I am told the strikers then were asking for a million dollars each to reach a settlement. The Union leaders also played a part in not letting the matter settle then. Now, the strikers have agreed to be paid only \$25,000 each of which \$10,000 will be paid from this Budget and another \$15,000 from the next budget. Anyway, reaching an agreement with the strikers is commendable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Members of Parliament and fellow citizens, allow me today to voice a crucial issue that is raising serious concern. The Government's Budget 2024-2025 lacks transparency and accountability. Prior to the 2022 General Elections, the honourable Minister for Finance was talking about national debt and this was one of the tactics he used to manipulate people's emotions as to sway votes his way to win the elections.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. V. LAL.- After forming the Government, honourable Prasad forgot about the high debt and started borrowing himself and thus the national debt has now increased to more than \$10 billion. Sir, I am not against borrowing but one needs to justify how the borrowed money is utilised. We will be able to generate employment and create more economic activities if we invest in capital projects. If you look at the books, there are no capital investments. We are only investing in upgrading or maintenance of existing projects. None of the capital expenditure is public investment.

Our operating expenditure is increasing, it is quite extraordinary that instead of reducing debt, honourable Prasad is now increasing it. He, while in Opposition, had been the most vocal about the debt and we have been having nonstop propaganda from him about the national debt. No debt has been paid but it is refinanced with a higher interest rate. Those who know economics, know that debt will always increase unless we have a balanced budget or a surplus budget that is highly unlikely in our case.

As the Professor of Economics, honourable Prasad very well understands this, but he twisted figures around to suit his agenda at that time. He was talking about per capita debt and now he is talking about debt-to-GDP ratio. I want to tell him to stop fooling people. You can fool some people some time but not all the people, all the time. Once again, I stress the importance of openness in financial decision-making to ensure that resources are distributed efficiently and effectively. The Government to strive to elevate accountability and build an open and honest culture by giving clear and easily available information about how public monies are used.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again honourable Prasad was talking about increasing minimum wage to \$5 an hour prior to the elections. After forming the Government, he forgot about it and now after 18 months minimum wage goes up by 50 cents from 1st August this year and a further 50 cents from 1st April next year. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in minimum wage from \$4 to \$5 is totally inadequate compared to the enormous jump in cost of living brought about largely by imposing 15 percent VAT by this Government last year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot of incentives have been included in this Budget to better the lives of the civil servants, the pensioners, members of FNPF and many more but this Budget has nothing to meet the expectations of the ordinary Fijians for relief from the soaring cost of living. The hardship

and suffering of ordinary Fijians will continue unabated. The decision to increase VAT to 15 percent in the last Budget is a burden to everyone and is especially affecting those who do not have a regular income. There was a lot of expectation from the people that VAT will be reduced in this Budget, but this did not happen. Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot of such people are suffering in silence and are not able to provide decent meals for their families. I strongly urge the Government to reconsider the VAT rate to address the cost of living issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is nothing new or exciting in the Budget that an ordinary person would be proud of. The Budget does not offer any promise to our citizens instead asking them to pay a lot more for the same goods and services provided in the past. The Budget fails to adequately address ordinary people's need for food access, healthcare and workforce. There is nothing innovative in the Budget to make the economy grow, instead chose heavier borrowing to cushion the shortfalls. The Government's reliance on increased taxes and external borrowing is nothing but a revenue driven Budget thrust on the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I refer to honourable Prasad's 2024-25 Budget Speech, it is with great concern that I confront the current Minister of Finance's deceptive language on the Budget theme of *Stability, Security and Sustainability*. While these words may seem soothing, it is critical to examine the motives underlying such declarations. The argument focusing on stability, security, and sustainability eliminates the need for economic innovation, that can have an adverse effect to the holistic development of our nation. The emphasis on strengthening our economy's fundamentals should not be termed "unglamorous or boring", in simple words meaning uninteresting or dull, as honourable Prasad's language implies.

Addressing challenges such as rising Government debt and establishing sustainable economic practices are critical steps towards ensuring a prosperous future for all citizens. The statement made by the honourable Finance Minister that this Government is not one of "economic gimmicks" and emphasizes the importance of focusing on improving the fundamentals of the economy may sound reassuring at first. However, we must not overlook the potential disconnect between rhetoric and reality and defensive rhetoric used by the Government raises valid concerns about their transparency and accountability to the people we serve.

Upholding the values of equality and unity, as championed by the FijiFirst government should not be reduced to mere slogans but must be reflected in concrete actions and policies that benefit all members of society. The 2016 *TC Winston* and the COVID-19 challenges that the FijiFirst government has encountered, not even a fraction of this Government has constructively achieved in the 18 months in power in comparison to the accomplishment of the FijiFirst government. For example, the social welfare benefits to a substantial descent amount have been the FijiFirst government's noble initiative to combat poverty that has now become a serious issue in this country. Contrary to the professed values of inclusivity and unity exemplified by the previous FijiFirst government's motto as in "One people, one nation," it is disheartening to witness actions that do not align with these noble principles and their lack of a genuine commitment to an inclusive budget that benefits all citizens undermines the core foundation of equality and social cohesion.

I am not surprised that honourable Biman Prasad is unduly critical of the FijiFirst government under the leadership of Mr. Frank Bainimarama, Fiji's former Prime Minister. It is our duty as elected members of Parliament to demand honesty, integrity and a genuine commitment to the welfare of every member of our community. Above all, to honour and consider any admirable work that past leaders and individuals have accomplished for the citizens of our nation.

To mention are few, *TC Winston*, the second strongest storm on record hit Fiji on 19th February, 2016. The disaster claimed 44 lives and impacted 62 percent of the population. The total

damage and losses from *TC Winston* were projected to be \$1.42 billion which is comparable to 31 percent of GDP. It is based on a post-disaster needs assessment done by the Government and development partners. Then a worldwide epidemic strikes but, by 2022, the country was on the way to economic recovery and has been on track for economic growth. The challenges and unforeseen circumstances were not tackled with flowery rhetorical statements, but rather through action plans, policies, determination, patience and being responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive driven by a real desire to serve the people of our great nation.

How can the Government see the urgency to raise VAT to 15 percent and the need to outright waving the loan of 53,000 students. I refer to pages 47 to 48 of the Budget Address in which honourable Prasad's recent announcement regarding the waiver of loans for students enrolled in the Tertiary Education Loan Scheme (TELS) raises significant concerns about the economic viability and long-term sustainability of such a decision. While the gesture may appear generous on the surface, it is essential to critically assess the implication of this move on both the education sector and the economy as a whole.

While it is commendable to alleviate the financial burden on students by waiving their loans. It is crucial to unintended consequences of such a policy. By absolving students of their loan obligations. There is a risk of fostering a culture of dependency and entitlement, where individuals may not feel motivated to take responsibility of their education cost or contribute back to society. This could potentially hinder the development of a workforce that is invested in and permitted to the progress and prosperity of the nation. It is reported and noted in my reply to His Excellency the President's speech after the opening of Parliament this year. That there are many recent graduates and skilled workers migrating to other countries without giving to their own country underscores a pressing issue of brain drain and talent flight.

The Government must implement measures to encourage students to remain in Fiji and contribute their knowledge and skills to the local economy rather than seeking opportunities abroad. In responding to the issue of loan waivers in the upcoming Budget for the fiscal year 2024-2025, it is essential to strike a balance between supporting students in pursuing higher education and ensuring accountability and responsibility in loan repayment. Rather than outright waiving loans, the Government could explore alternative mechanisms such as income-contingent repayment schemes, extended grace periods, or targeted financial assistance based on merit and need. I want honourable Professor Prasad to realise that, together we discovered that a free market only thrives when there are rules to ensure competition and fair play.

While the efforts have been made by Governments to enhance the quality and relevance of tertiary education in Fiji to equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in today's competitive global landscape, the unemployed needs work to eliminate poverty, and this could involve creating attractive job prospects, providing avenues for career growth and development, and fostering a conducive environment for innovation.

Mr. Speaker Sir, what makes us exceptional - what makes us Fijian; it is our genuine love of our motherland and its people. Hence, let us prioritise prudent fiscal management, strategic investment in human capital, and effective governance and unity to steer our nation towards greater heights of success and prosperity and a united Fiji. May God bless Fiji.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Colleagues, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; *bula vinaka* and good evening to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am most humble to deliver my second Budget response as the Minister for Education in our Coalition Government. Firstly, I return all glory and honour to our good Lord for His grace and guidance over our nation and our lives allowing us to be here again and to respond to the Budget Address delivered by the honourable Minister for Finance a week ago.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the second last speaker for today, I would like to take this time to acknowledge the sterling effort and the work you continue to do in steering Fiji, steadily through our legislature in what will be remembered as a period whereby Fiji's political landscape has undergone major change following a period of confusion and chaos that could be catastrophic for all as has been witnessed in the last few weeks and months.

Your able leadership has assured stability in our economic environment and has sent a strong message to our investors and our business community that Fiji remains a vibrant democratic nation that will survive any domestic challenges it gets because it has a Coalition Government that is committed to bring about a united Fiji that engages in dialogue and peaceful development initiatives. *Vinaka saka vakalevu na rai yawa kei na loloma.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must now offer my support and endorse the Budget of 2024 – 2025. This Budget is not just a financial document, it is a visionary blueprint that underscore our Government's unwavering commitment to fostering a brighter future for our nation through transformative investments in education. In the 2024-2025 Budget, a total of \$784 million is allocated to the Education sector and of this \$627 million is designated to the Ministry of Education which includes \$90.7 million for the Higher Education Commission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, education is a pathway of progress and a bedrock of a thriving society. It is through education that we empower our children, unlock their potential and equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate the challenges of the ever-evolving world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education is focusing on teaching strategies that foster competency-based learning and skills needed for sustainable and resilient education emphasizing on Entrepreneurship (TVET) creative arts and physical education. The 2024-2025 Budget is a testament to our dedication to ensuring that every child regardless of their background has access to quality and inclusive education which is in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4.

We recognise that the foundation of a strong education system begins with Early Childhood Education (ECE). This Budget allocates significant resources to enhance early learning programmes, ensuring that our youngest children receive the best possible start in life.

The Coalition Government, with continued recognition of the importance of early childhood care, has increased the allocation for ECE by \$2.5 million to \$22.3 million in the 2024-2025 financial year, which I am certain our ECE teachers will appreciate.

Today, we commence a weeklong of ECE celebration with all the schools with the theme, "Igniting Creativity and Innovation in the Early Years". Investment in ECE means that this weeklong celebration is a platform for the Ministry, teachers, parents and relevant stakeholders to strengthen collaboration in early childhood holistic education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note that there is a significant net increase of \$25 million under SEG 1 for Teachers and under this allocation, \$16.8 million has been provided for primary education, whilst the secondary school has received \$14 million, while there is a decrease of \$5.6 million in the administration cadre.

This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will allow the Coalition Government to continue the work of re-engagement of School Chaplains under the cost-sharing arrangement with faith-based organisations and we intend to submit a Cabinet paper, proposing a salary package to be adopted and we shall prioritise this area of learning, given the prominent challenges that we will need as skillsets as occurring in schools nationwide in the fight against drug use, teenage pregnancies, truancy, bullying and other social challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it goes without saying that our teachers are one of the crucial partners of our education system. The budget includes substantial investments in professional development programmes, providing our educators with the tools and training they need to inspire and nurture our students effectively.

To create a learning environment, we are investing in the modernisation of school infrastructure that includes upgrading facilities, integrated advanced technologies and ensuring that our schools are safe, disaster risk resilience, inclusive and equipped for 21st century learning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we note that there is a significant decrease of \$271,000 in established staff salaries for the Assets Infrastructure Support Department, and this will require the Ministry of Education to tighten its belt with respect to monitoring and implementation of the projects underfoot and some of the strategies to adopt will be to revert teachers working in this section back to school and only use technical experts in this Department, given the responsibility of what used to be known as the Construction Implementation Unit in the relevant line Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this time, I would also like to convey my sincere appreciation to His Excellency the Australian High Commissioner, Mr. Ewen McDonald, and his team at the High Commission, for their kind support towards the education sector over the years. I also take this opportunity to acknowledge the New Zealand Government, the UNICEF, UNESCO, the Japanese Government, the World Bank and other development partners in their unwavering support.

There is an allocation of \$150.5 million in the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (TSLs) to fund 9,940 continuing students and 10,830 new students, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Most of the information in the additional handbook will be available in August 2024.

But I would just like to highlight, Mr. Speaker, Sir, about the Hardship Assistance Scheme which was introduced in the current financial year for the first time, to support private students with good academic performance but facing financial hardship or on private scheme arrangements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the entry requirement for onboarding will now be changed from 65 percent to 50 percent pass rate for students pursuing programme degree from Year 2. This scheme will be extended to TVET students at Diploma level.

The revised Hardship Assistance Scheme initiative to pay allowance of \$2,000 per student is also greatly appreciated. The application for this Scheme will be opened after the passing of the Budget, to provide immediate relief for the private students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we believe in the power of community and parental/guardian involvement in support for education. This Budget supports initiatives that encourage greater collaboration between schools, families and communities, creating a holistic support for our students.

I fully support the call by the honourable Prime Minister for engaging with our communities and that we need to work together for the common good of our nation whereby we move away from the old mentality of operating in silo.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will continue investing in the intellectual and moral development of our children to allow us to pursue the important goal of building a more educated, equitable and prosperous society. Let us come together to support these goals and ensure that our education system remains a beacon of hope and opportunity for generations to come.

Before I take my seat, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I thank you for your accommodation and allowance of the Ministry of Education visit to your beautiful island of Taveuni, to look at the various needs of schools. The saying that Taveuni is the garden island of Fiji is definitely true with its breathtaking environment, and for me as a first-time visitor, I was taken aback by the immense natural beauty of the place. On that note, I must consider that the Ministry of Education needs to build more secondary schools, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to accommodate the growing student population, for instance, in the *Tikina* of Wainikeli.

I was very impressed when I noted that we have, in the schools, fully enrolled with an average of about 200 students in these rural schools. This is encouraging but it is a testament to the healthy habits of the islanders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also made a plan before our good Lord for His guidance and blessings and wish the nation of Fiji the very best in the implementation of our 2024-2025 Budget Appropriation.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; I rise to deliver my response to the 2024-2025 National Budget.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I would like to applaud the Coalition Government for its carefully articulated and visionary Budget, which is sure to meet the needs of all who call this great land our home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to focus my statement on the forestry and fisheries resource sectors, which plays an essential role in rural and maritime development. The total allocated for the Ministry of Fisheries for 2024-2025 financial year is \$25.3 million, marking an overall increase of 19.7 percent from the previous fiscal year. This significant increase underscores the Government's dedication to enhancing the livelihoods and economic opportunities in our rural and maritime areas. This increase is welcomed, as it ensures that everyone is assisted. I note that there are plans to establish a new ice plant and station in Natovi and Natewa, with groundwork amounting to \$100,000. This will facilitate the much-needed ice services for the fishermen in those areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on behalf of the maritime communities, I welcome the increase of \$500,000 for the Coastal Fisheries Development component. This project is directed to benefit the communities in our maritime areas by providing much-needed awareness, upskilling, and equipping our local fishing communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also commend the budget of \$31.4 million for the Forestry Sector. I note the increase of \$2.1 million in the Maritime Pine Programme. This assistance, pioneered by the Coalition Government, will directly benefit the maritime communities that have invested in pine schemes over the years, and have yet to receive any benefits. These maritime pine schemes have been stagnant over the years, but this budget has initiated great interest in the pine maritime areas, as it has opened a pathway to ensure the efforts are rewarded.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also note the increase in the Fiji Pine Trust budget, receiving a total of \$1.7 million. This will be instrumental in raising awareness of maritime pine schemes in terms of harvesting, replanting and the operations of the Pine Trust in various islands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also note the allocation of \$2.5 million for the restoration of degraded forests. This budget is commendable, and I must thank the Coalition Government for redirecting the project initiatives to enhance the survival rates of planted trees through consistent monitoring and maintenance. This project will focus on degraded areas within the rural and maritime regions, promoting forest restoration and sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also acknowledge the budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Disaster Management, totalling \$38.69 million. The increase of \$8.8 million is directly aimed at self-help projects, Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridge projects and rural housing. This will also help to ensure that our people in the fisheries and forestry sector, living in the rural and maritime communities, have the access to the necessary infrastructure for development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the people of Fiji to make use of this opportunity. The Coalition Government is here to serve you. We believe that this Budget reflects our strategic approach to bolstering rural and maritime development, ensuring sustainable practices, and improving the livelihood of those who rely on our natural resources. The increased allocations and specific project funding underscore our commitment to progress and sustainability in these vital areas.

I urge all honourable Members to support this Budget as it is essential for the continued growth and development of our fisheries and forestry sectors, ensuring that we meet both, our economic and environmental goals.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka vakalevu*, honourable Ravu, for your contribution.

Honourable Members, thank you all for your preparations and hard work, especially in your contributions today. That brings us to the end of today's Batting Order, and we will continue with the list on the Batting Order tomorrow morning. As such, Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 7.18 p.m.