

# PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



## PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

### DAILY HANSARD

**THURSDAY, 12TH MARCH, 2026**

[CORRECTED COPY]

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## **THURSDAY, 12TH MARCH, 2026**

The Parliament met at 9.37 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

DEPUTY SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

### **PRESENT**

All Members were present, except the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation; the honourable Minister of Finance, Commerce and Business Development; the honourable Minister for Policing and Communications; the honourable Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Waterways; honourable P.D. Kumar; honourable V. Nath; honourable S.S. Kirpal and honourable H. Chand.

### **MINUTES**

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 11th March, 2026, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed.

### **COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE DEPUTY SPEAKER**

#### Welcome

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting and especially those of you sitting in the gallery. I welcome those of you who are watching this live broadcast and the live streaming of today's proceedings. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

I want to welcome, especially, the cohort of the UN Association Junior Diplomacy Programme, who have been here with us since Monday. Would you please rise - Siddharth and your team? Thank you.

#### Back-to-Office Report

Honourable Members, please, note that the Back-to-Office Report for the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians - Leaders Development Conference, which was held in New Zealand and which I attended, is available in the Library, for your perusal and reference.

#### Change in Standing Committee Membership

Honourable Members, the Office of the Speaker has received a notification from the honourable Government Whip on Standing Committee Membership change. Pursuant to Standing

Order 115(4), honourable Jese Saukuru will now replace honourable Shalen Kumar as a Member of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs. This change in membership is effective from Monday, 16<sup>th</sup> March, 2026. Honourable Shalen Kumar shall remain a substantive Member of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources.

I take this time to thank honourable Shalen Kumar for his dedication whilst a Member of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, and I also wish honourable Jese Saukuru the best in his appointment as a Member of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs.

#### Pinktober Donation

Honourable Members, whilst you make your way to tea later this morning, I want to remind you of the Pinktober Donation Box. Please, take your wallets with you when you go for tea this morning and staff will be on the opposite side of the exit, from the Chamber to the Police desk.

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

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, ladies, gentlemen and members of the public; His Excellency's Presidential Address reinforces the Government's commitment to national development, inclusive growth and stronger public service delivery. The vision outlined emphasises the importance of resilience and long-term planning, as Fiji prepares for future challenges. This guiding direction sets the tone for continued progress across all sectors.

Infrastructure development remains central to Fiji's economic and social advancement. Modern and reliable systems whether in transport, water, energy, ports or digital connectivity create jobs, reduce business costs and expand opportunities for all Fijians. Strengthening essential services also promotes fairness by ensuring rural, urban and maritime communities have equal access to vital amenities such as clean water, electricity, roads, health facilities and education.

As Fiji faces increasing climate risks, infrastructure resilience has become even more critical. Cyclones, floods, droughts demand stronger networks, upgraded coastal protections and climate-ready water and transport systems to safeguard communities. Guided by His Excellency's vision and national development plans, the Government will continue investing in resilient and inclusive infrastructure to secure Fiji's long-term wellbeing and prosperity.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in responding to His Excellency's Opening Address, I will outline some of the key service-delivery achievements of the Ministry over the past three financial years. I will also highlight the strategic plans in place to strengthen infrastructure development across the road and transport sector, water, energy and climate resilient infrastructure and the maintenance sectors. These improvements reflect our ongoing commitment to delivering efficient, reliable and sustainable services that support national development and improve wellbeing of all Fijians.

In the Water Sector, His Excellency's message speaks directly to an issue that lies at the very heart of our nation's wellbeing, the security of our water sources and access to water, which is for clean, safe and reliable water is not merely an infrastructure concern, it is a fundamental right of our people.

Over the past three financial years, the Water Authority of Fiji has played a central role in strengthening water security and improving service delivery across the nation. This period has been

one of recovery and investment, during which WAF reinforced its foundation, expanded its reach and positioned the water sector for long-term resilience.

During the 2022-2023 financial year, WAF delivered 3,308 new water connections and 204 wastewater connections, extending essential services to communities that had waited many years for inclusion. Major packaged water treatment plants were constructed significantly improving water supply reliability for tens of thousands of Fijians. Additional works in Sigatoka and Balevuto, such as the new reservoirs, network extensions and optimisation upgrades, further strengthened service delivery.

One of the landmark achievements was the launch of the Water Sector Strategy 2050 in April 2024 which is a visionary roadmap that sets Fiji's direction for water and wastewater services for the next three decades. This plan addresses climate vulnerability, ageing infrastructure and promotes circular economy principles. It aligns closely with the principles in the National Development Plan and supports the national vision for inclusive, climate-resilient development. It also reinforces Government's unwavering commitment to upholding every citizen's right to safe drinking water.

During the 2023-2024 financial year, 33 kilometres of pipeline extensions were completed, benefiting approximately 47,000 Fijians. This milestone demonstrates WAF's commitment and Government's commitment to connect more communities, extend the boundaries of service coverage and enhance the reliability of water supply.

The Korovuto-Veinuqa Upgrade and the Koronivia-Lokia Water Mains Project represent major investments within the Central Division, where 14 kilometres of pipelines were laid, improving water reliability of approximately 5,000 Fijians in rural settlements, schools and farming areas. The Koronivia-Lokia project, valued at \$17 million, has also benefited around 100,000 residents by enhancing pressure and distribution efficiency. These projects form part of the wider Rewa River Supply Scheme aimed at strengthening long term water security.

Additional major works included the Sawani-Viria Pipeline installation, which added 24 kilometres of new infrastructure. In Nadroga, Vusama and Navisabasaba Village Water Project provided 8.4 kilometre of new pipeline and reliable tap water for 130 households, lifting decades of hardship for families.

Madam, WAF also delivered 10 rural water projects, supplying safe water to 3,000 Fijians through new schemes, standpipes and household connections. While some of these projects received smaller populations, their impact on daily life has been transformative. For the financial year 2024-2025, WAF was allocated a total budget of \$259 million, comprising \$135 million for capital expenditure (CAPEX), where the CAPEX execution reached approximately 95 percent, which is a strong testament to fiscal discipline and performance efficiency. A total of 1,800 new water metres and 93 new wastewater meters were connected.

The Water Authority of Fiji delivered several major projects across the Northern and Western Divisions, including Nabouwalu Water costing \$5.4 million, now supplies 2 million litres of treated water to approximately 3,000 Fijians. The Malake Island Project installed a 3-kilometre submarine pipeline for \$1.1 million and giving clean water to 600-plus residents. In Nadi, the \$9.6 million Vareqe-Saru pipeline laid 5.5 kilometres of pipeline to improve water supply for 25,000 Fijians. These projects greatly improved supply reliability in both rural and urban communities.

Rural water access also improved significantly through nationwide programmes. Thirteen rural water projects costing \$2.5 million benefited 3,000 Fijians across villages, settlements and schools. A total of 31,000 Fijians were also assisted under the Free Water Allowance Scheme, and

in addition, WAF has introduced apprenticeships - 80 apprentices with 30 women and 56 men joined WAF under the structured apprenticeship partnership with FNU. This initiative addresses critical skill shortages and builds a gender inclusive workshop for the future.

Madam Deputy Speaker, WAF have installed generators at 14 pump stations and upgraded Rotuma supply systems to resolve long-standing water disruptions. The Non-Revenue Water (NRW) contract which targets leak reduction and system efficiency continues while a Job Evaluation Exercises to improve staff wages and allowances was also achieved.

The 2025-2026 financial year, the work continues in the Central Division, especially in Suva, affected by turbidity-related disruptions. The elevated Princess Road project includes an 11.7-kilometre pipeline, a new pump station and two 5-megalitre reservoirs to ensure 24/7 supply for areas such as Sakoca, Dokanaisuva and Tacirua continues. The groundbreaking has already been done and a complementary 20-megalitre Tamavua Modular Water Treatment Plant, valued at \$17 million, will support over 230,000 people in the Suva to Lami corridor, and parts of Nasinu. These investments will strengthen resilience, reduce service reduction and also ensure a secure and efficient supply. These are significant developments already in progress to address long standing Suva water issues.

Within the road sector, I also report that the Government's mandate is clear, to deliver safe and reliable climate resilient infrastructure. In 2024-2025, the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) deployed \$371 million in capital works.

More than 12.5 kilometres of surfacing were completed, in terms of mill and fill, rip and remake, and resealing. This was through the Suva area - Rewa Street, Princess Road, Laucala Bay Road, and works continue to ensure improved commute reliability. In Nadi, upgrades on the Nadi Main Street, Wailoaloa Road, and improvements in Labasa and Savusavu have revitalised commercial improvements.

Development has also reached beyond urban centres. Upgrades on Lakeba, Moala, Koro, Gau, Vanuabalavu, Rotuma, Cicia, and Matuku have progressed; some have been completed. This has improved market reach and also in terms of enabling students and medical emergencies.

The Tamavua-i-Wai Bridge, supported by a \$70 million JICA grant, demonstrates the power of strong partnerships with our development partners. We acknowledge and appreciate the Government of Japan in this initiative, and work continues with road alignment, traffic diversions, and the bridge itself. These adjustments will improve the road networks in the Central Division.

In addition, FRA delivered \$186 million in road maintenance, 31 kilometres of renewals were completed out of the annual 42-kilometre target with visible improvements in Navua, Nausori and along Princess Road. Drainage clearance is also a key factor, as you will note, in terms of the continuing issues regarding blocked drains. The \$30 million Rewa Vutia Road and bridge is moving into construction from May, following design and dredging preparations.

In the Western Division, a pragmatic strategy stabilised conditions through routine maintenance, and before ramping up renewals, works continue across Rakiraki, Lautoka, Nadi, Korotale, Malake Landing, Volivoli Circular Road, Ellington Wharf, Vuda Point, Lautoka Hospital, et cetera. New bus shelters continue to be constructed throughout the nation.

Despite resource pressure and adverse weather, the Northern and Eastern programmes are advancing with discipline. Vanuabalavu's 28-kilometre upgrade is 95 percent complete, Moala is fully complete, and other maritime areas continue to be improved. Solar lighting has also been

improved in some of our jetties - Vunisea, Naluvea, Kavala and at Koro, improving safety and supporting night operations. Tendering is underway for 15 new crossings across Central, Eastern, and Northern Divisions, with several scheduled for completion by August 2026.

The design for the \$300 million Vanua Levu China Road Project has been completed for final endorsement, soon to be followed by contractor bidding.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry and its agencies continue to face implementation challenges. Limitations in specialised technical human resources must be addressed to meet growing regulatory and operational demands. Budget constraints require discipline and prioritization, amid competing national needs.

International shipping delays, rising freight costs, and the realities of our widely dispersed island nation affect logistics and delivery, particularly to our various maritime communities. Procurement timelines, inter-agency coordination and the need to modernise legislative frameworks remain challenges which we will continue to work on.

To mitigate risk, we are intensifying partnerships with international organisations and development partners to supplement capacity and financing. Workforce development must continue to be a key factor and specialised technical training in order to maintain and build our local expertise. Fiji's 6,400 kilometres of roads, more than 1,400 bridges and 15,700 culverts face heavier axle loads, rising vehicle ownership and more extreme weather. These are the realities which we will continue to face.

The Semo Amcor culvert incident reminded us that the cost of inaction is disruption and a risk to life and livelihoods. Government will continue to respond and be forward-looking in its strategy.

The FRA's asset management system underpins prioritisation and transparent investment. With monitoring, evaluation and risk management to be strengthened, these are weaknesses which we progressively strive to address. A major milestone for the sector will be the completion of the National Transport Sector Master Plan. This will guide us as we move forward.

In the energy sector, the endorsement of the National Energy Policy 2023-2024 demonstrates Government's commitment to a resilient, efficient and sustainable energy future. The policy outlines three targets:

- (1) Ensuring electricity access for every Fijian by 2026;
- (2) Achieving 100 percent renewable electricity generation by 2036; and
- (3) Reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 36 percent by 2035.

The Government has made significant progress in strengthening the legislative foundations, as I had already mentioned, in terms of the comprehensive legislative and regulatory gap analysis. The study recommended the establishment of an Energy Investment Advisory Committee (EIAC) and the full review of the Act. Cabinet has endorsed these recommendations. The first EIAC meeting was in December 2025, which initiated the legislative review and coordination with various stakeholders.

Substantial achievements were made in improving electricity access. In 2024-2025, the Government invested around \$12.7 million to extend 50 grid schemes, benefiting approximately 1,200 households nationwide. In addition, a major investment of \$14 million supported the installation of 1,000 solar home systems, providing clean and reliable electricity to nearly 5,000

Fijians. The energy sector continues to face significant operational challenges that impact the timely delivery of projects, including global supply chains, accessing materials, and various other challenges as we move forward and attempt to address. These challenges collectively slow down project implementation and affect service delivery.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Government continues to prioritise electricity access. For 2025-2026, \$10 million has been committed to 29 new grid extension schemes to benefit approximately 951 homes nationwide, supporting installations and also for solar home systems, where \$2.5 million has been allocated. Progress continues to be made in this area.

The Fiji Rural Electrification Fund (FREF), a key initiative to attract private investment in renewable energy solutions, and this is backed by UNDP-supported funding agreement of \$91 million. Sir, FREF is now implementing Phase 1 which includes installing three solar hybrid systems in Yacata, Kioa and Yadrana. These systems are expected to be completed by December 2026, and scoping for additional 17 sites have been completed.

We are also currently implementing the Lakeba, Kadavu, and Rotuma (LAKARO) Project, signed at COP28. Fiji secured US\$2.5 million from the UAE and New Zealand to upgrade solar systems at Lakeba, Kadavu and Rotuma. This project will improve service delivery and reduce reliance on diesel fuel. The projects are expected to be completed and commissioned in approximately two months' time.

Partnerships with the Asian Development Bank continue to drive new renewable energy infrastructure. The Government secured US\$3 million through the Japan Fund for Prosperous and Resilient Asia and the Pacific (JFPR) for the rehabilitation of the Buca Hydro Power Project and installation of the 100-kilowatt solar mini-grid in Tiliva Village, Kadavu. Site preparation at Tiliva has been completed and work on the Buca Hydro access road will begin soon. The project is scheduled to commence in July 2026 and completed by 2027.

In addition, the Ministry continues to work progressively in terms of the Department of Building and Government Architects, working closely with other Ministries. The Architects Registration Bill was advanced to modernise professional standards and governance for architectural practise, and in association with this, the new building code is also formulated for progress.

Government is committed to revitalising PWD by building depots across Fiji and restoring its technical capacity. These depots will be resourced with modern plant, machinery, tools and skilled personnel. The Fiji Government has signed an agreement with the Government of Japan for a \$12.6 million grant for this purpose, and procurement is underway for heavy machinery, including excavators, dump trucks, graders, cane trucks and rollers.

A key forward looking initiative for our youths is the reintroduction of the PWD Apprenticeship Scheme (similar to WAF) which train young Fijians in carpentry, electrical, plumbing, et cetera. This will help assist in alleviating our skills gaps.

In conclusion, with a more strategic outlook in both infrastructure planning and financial strategy, we look ahead to a definitive and clear pipeline of projects to the year 2056 to satisfy our people's needs and private sector development as the engine of growth.

The Government is closely monitoring the Iran Gulf War and its impact on energy with close consultation with stakeholders and mitigation actions to alleviate, has been mapped out for implementation as per assessments, as the situation evolves. One must not create panic. A control, rational and incremental strategy is logical.

On TELS Debt Relief, in response to some of the issues raised by the Opposition, which they have opposed. My question is - why oppose assistance to our youth? We have assisted them to relieve them on their debt, but the Opposition continues to oppose that. The question our youth must ask, why is the Opposition opposing our debt relief? This is what will happen if they are elected into government, they will bring back the debt to our youths. So, please think about that before you continue to say that. You will continue to burden our youth with the TELS debt if you come into government.

In conclusion, honourable Ketan Lal, where is he? That is the question. Where is he? When he makes his speech, he stressed ....

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, can I ask you to just address the Chair?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Thank you.

Honourable Ketan Lal proposed that the nightclubs be re-opened to 5.00 a.m. This is the most irresponsible suggestion this Parliament has heard since Fiji became Independent; the most irresponsible. I am not sure why is he suggesting that, but I hope it is not with an ulterior motive because we already have issues with our youth in terms of HIV and drugs, and reopening the nightclubs to 5.00 a.m. will worsen the situation. So, I am asking, where is the logic? What is the rationale for a Member of Parliament to say that? It is totally irresponsible.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Time is up.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I am nearly finished.

The Opposition continues to bring cost of living as if Government has not done anything, it has done a lot. Have you managed to get a copy of this booklet? Please do read it - *Citizen's Guide to the National Budget*. Have you read it or not? That is what I wanted to ask. Please read it. Addressing the cost of living. The headline is clearly there, and it is all listed there – VAT reduced, fiscal and excise duty changes, special welfare and increase in monthly allowance, et cetera. So, Government has done a lot to address the cost of living.

The Opposition asks why do we need to review the Constitution and do we have to? Let me share the NGO Citizens Constitutional Forum Assessment after the President's assent of the 2013 Constitution on 6<sup>th</sup> September, 2023, where the CCF shared its overview of the Constitution making process:

- (a) Official period of submissions was too short to enable any real participation.
- (b) 1,093 written submissions received by the AG's Office was not publicised.
- (c) The version released on 22nd August, 2013 which went up for assent was different from the final version.
- (d) The December 2012 draft Constitution produced earlier by Professor Yash Ghai-led Constitutional Commission with 7,100 submissions was rejected by the Bainimarama Government and copies famously burnt.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, I am sorry, when are you going to round up? You have gone four minutes over your time.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- My apologies, I am finishing now. The 2013 Constitution does not satisfy basic minimum standards for Constitution making.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Sit down.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Let us work together as responsible leaders to follow this process, as we move forward. Madam Speaker, I support the motion by the honourable Prime Minister that this Parliament thanks His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I would like to remind you of the honourable Speaker's words to us on Monday - keeping the decorum of this Parliament also includes keeping to your time. If you wish to attack the other side, keep it within your 20 minutes. If you are speaking in your vernacular, keep it within your 20 minutes.

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU.- Madam Deputy Speaker of Parliament, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and my colleague Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the media and my fellow citizens of Fiji - *miau sa bula re!*

Madam Deputy Speaker, before I begin, I would like to pay my solemn tribute and respect to a great son of Cakaunitabua, whose life was tragically cut short whilst trying to protect the community he dutifully served. The late Police Constable 8012 Peniasi Racagi was a dedicated son of Fiji, who served in dignity, humility and a heart for his people. His passing and sacrifice resonates throughout the region and his legacy of courage and determination will never be forgotten by the people that he served, his colleagues within the Police Force and the entire Pacific policing family. Today, I stand in solidarity with his family, the *Vanua o Navakasiga* and Cakaunitabua and I urge that we hold the value that he lives by - honour, respect and service to all.

To the late Police Constable Peniasi Racagi, thank you for your dedicated service, commitment and sacrifice to the people of our beloved nation of Fiji. It is no doubt, that your devotion to the call of serving the people of Fiji will be remembered with deep respect and pride. *Miau qai gole ena vahacegu agane ni Cahauniabua.*

Madam Deputy Speaker, today, I rise to thank His Excellency the President for the gracious and far-reaching Address delivered at the State Opening of Parliament. His Excellency reminded us that our diversity is our strength and our unity is our purpose, and he called for integrity and responsible leadership across the sector of national life.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as Assistant Minister, I will focus on Culture, Heritage and Arts responsibilities of the *iTaukei* portfolio and how its work supports the national priorities outlined by His Excellency. The work is directly aligned with:

- (1) Pillar 1 (Economic Resilience) and the National Development Plan using culture and creative economy to drive sustainable growth; and
- (2) Pillar 2 (People Empowerment) which emphasises social cohesion, identity and inclusion through culture. It also intersects with the strategic development plan's cross-cutting focus on governance and accountability.

Culture is not peripheral to development. It is national infrastructure; it strengthens cohesion, protects young people, and builds dignity and belonging in community life.

Following recent portfolio realignments across Government, the coordination of cultural programmes is being strengthened as a whole-of-nation effort, working alongside national institutions and partners. At the same time, the Ministry and *iTaukei* Affairs continue to carry a clear responsibility for safeguarding *iTaukei* culture, heritage and arts. The Department of Culture,

Heritage and Arts has been moved to the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts, while iTaukei Affairs now retains its core mandate with the added focus on iTaukei Culture, Heritage and Arts. We will work closely with all relevant cultural agencies and departments so that Fiji advances one coherent national cultural direction, while ensuring *iTaukei* culture and heritage are protected with the depth, integrity and custodianship they require.

In 2025, the iTaukei Institute of Language and Culture continued community outreach at provincial cultural festivals and national language programmes. It facilitated national observances of International Day for the World's Indigenous Peoples and International Mother Language Day, reinforcing language preservation and cultural pride under Pillar 2 of the National Development Plan. They have also organised observance of the Mother Language Day for 2026 just last month.

Madam Deputy Speaker, allow me to say a few words in *iTaukei*.

*Na vosa e dua na ka e duidui kina mai vua e dua tale. Ni da vosataka tiko na noda vosa, ena totoo sara na kena kilai na vanua eda cavutu mai kina, sa sema sara kina na veiwekani.*

*Na vosa e waqawaqa ni noda itovo kei nai vakarau. Nikua sa vaka me dravuisiga na noda veidelaniyavu turaga ka dua na vuna levu ni sa dravuisiga vakakina na kena bulataki ni noda itovo, ivakarau kei na kena vakayagataki ni noda vosa dina, na isolisoli e vakasulumi keda kina na Kalou levu.*

*E vuqa era sa maduataka ka cakitaka na isolisoli talei qo, ka vakavuna na kena sa sega ni vakabibitaki ena noda veivuvale, veitikotiko, yavusa ena noda vanua. E sa vakadinadinataki ni vuqa na gone iTaukei era sega tu ni kila na vosa vaka Viti dina, eso era sega saraga ni kila na nodra vosa, sega ni da cakitaka rawa na vuana ka da sa sarava tu nikua ena noda vanua o Viti.*

*Na taro eda na rawa ni taroga, ivalavala ca li kevaka eda sega ni tuberi ira kina na noda kawa ena noda itovo vakabibi na noda vosa? Eda na tarogi beka kina mai lomalagi? Oqo e so na taro e dodonu meda na tarogi keda kina na tama, tina kei na veiwekani me rawa ni vueta na noda Viti ka vakabulabulataki na noda vosa kei na itovo.*

Madam Deputy Speaker, the completion of the Cultural Mapping Exercise (2005-2020) documented traditional knowledge across all 1,172 *iTaukei* villages. The ongoing Cultural Data Authentication Programme, now completed in six provinces and advancing in others, ensures that collected knowledge is verified by communities themselves. Verified data is entered into the *Sova ni Tukutuku* database, strengthening data governance.

The TILC's Cultural Revitalisation Programme has delivered dozens of workshops on traditional crafts, songs and protocols, and a new handicraft exhibition programme enables Radau (the Living Human Treasures) to showcase their skills. These initiatives advance our strategic goal of heritage preservation and community resilience, contributing to both Pillar 2 (Identity and Cohesion) and Pillar 1 (Economic Empowerment through Cultural Enterprise). Addressing remaining resources and digital infrastructure gaps will be vital for safeguarding this knowledge for future generations.

It is, perhaps, timely that we look at institutional strengthening and capacity building of the iTaukei Institute of Language and Culture, a body inspired by the Bose Levu Vakaturaga to move from a research and cataloguing institution to a more developed body that can safeguard our indigenous culture and language as may be encapsulated in legislation such as the Traditional Knowledge and Expressions of Culture Bill being developed by the Solicitor-General's Office with our Ministry.

Madam Deputy Speaker, culture shapes how communities relate, how children learn belonging and purpose, and how adults nurture the next generation. In the *iTaukei* context, culture is carried through the *vanua*, our language, our protocols, and the community obligations. When culture is weakened, we often see the consequences in social fragmentation and vulnerabilities. When culture is strong, it becomes a protective factor for our young people and a stabilising force for communities.

His Excellency also warned us about speed at which misinformation spreads and the emerging risks from misuse of artificial intelligence. He urged leaders and citizens to test what we share by asking, is it true, is it kind, and is it useful in our own language:

- *E dina?*
- *E vinaka?*
- *E yaga?*

That guidance is highly relevant for the cultural sector because today culture is transmitted, not only in ceremonies and classrooms, but also through what we amplify online, what we normalise in our conversations, and what we celebrate or say in public discourse.

Madam Speaker, in 2025, there was tangible progress in culture, heritage and arts. We advanced heritage protection work in Levuka and strengthened cooperation with partners including UNESCO, progressed the Fiji Museum refurbishment and conservation improvements, supported the launch of the Diploma in Vanua Leadership, and continued preparations for Fiji to host the 8th Melanesian Arts and Culture Festival in 2026. These steps strengthen cultural leadership and ensure that heritage is preserved and made accessible to our people and visitors. These achievements reinforce Pillar 2 by strengthening identity and leadership formation while also contributing to Pillar 1 through cultural tourism and heritage-based economic activity.

An inter-agency National Taskforce chaired by our Minister is progressing with the preparatory works including securing the necessary regulatory approvals, secure venues, and deliver the festival in November this year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, looking to the 2026 parliamentary year, my focus areas are clear. First, we will deliver a successful Melanesian Arts and Culture Festival that is culturally authentic, professionally managed, and beneficial to artists, communities, and Fiji's reputation. This flagship event reflects the intersection of Pillar 1's growth objectives and Pillar 2's cultural preservation mandate, ably led by our Ministry and affiliated *iTaukei* institutions.

Second, we will strengthen and safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage through documentation, cultural mapping and language work and by upskilling and better positioning the *iTaukei* Institute of Language and Culture (TILC) to deliver at higher standards and greater scale. It is an opportunity now that we have been given streamlined mandate to focus on *iTaukei* culture, heritage and arts for the TILC.

Third, we will strengthen new engagement through culture and the arts, responding to the sense of disaffection His Excellency and other national leaders have cautioned against.

Fourth, we will continue working across Government so that culture and heritage consideration are meaningfully embedded in national development planning, not treated as an afterthought. This mainstreaming of culture directly advances the National Development Plan's cross-cutting emphasis on integrated planning and inclusive development.

Madam Deputy Speaker, culture contributes directly to development. Cultural tourism is a major growth sector that supports livelihoods, promotes Fiji's story abroad, and helps strengthen resilience as we face climate and social pressures. Indigenous knowledge systems, including environmental stewardship practises, also strengthen community resilience in the face of climate change. These measures align with the NDP's cross-cutting commitment to environmental sustainability and climate resilience, ensuring that growth remains culturally grounded and responsible.

While culture strengthens identity and belonging, development within the *vanua* must also ensure that our people benefit from improved living standards and economic opportunities. Over the past three years, the Government has continued to strengthen support for *iTaukei* communities through programmes administered under the *iTaukei* Affairs portfolio. Through initiatives such as the Village Improvement Scheme, assistance has been provided to villages to improve sanitation, drainage, and community infrastructure, helping to uplift living standards and promote healthier village environments.

The Ministry has also continued to strengthen village governance, particularly through the support provided to the Turaga ni Koro and Mata ni Tikina who remain the important link between Government, the districts and villages. Strengthening this system ensures that government programmes and development initiatives reach the community more effectively.

Madam Deputy Speaker, allow me to say a few words in *iTaukei*.

*Na Valenivolavola ni Veitarogivanua kei na Wainiqoliqoli sa mai vakacavara na cakacaka ni veiqaravi ni vakadeitaki tutu vakavanua kei na veivakararamataki ena loma ni 14 na yasana ena noda vanua. E a tuvani nai tuvatuva ogo ena veitokoni kei na kauwai ni Bose Levu Vakaturaga me ra talevi na veidelaniyavu tabu vakaturaga e Viti, qaravi na veitalanoa kei na veivakararamataki, me vakatawani na veitutu vakavanua era sa mai lala tu ena dua na gauna balavu baleta ni ra sa na dei na noda veiliutaki vakavanua, eda na qai dei vakakina na kawa iTaukei. Na veiqaravi ni veitalevi ogo a tekivu e Rewa enai ka 19 ni Maji, 2024 ni bera ni mai coki nai coco ni veiqaravi ogo ena Yatu Lomaiviti enai ka 27 ni Vevenueri, 2026.*

*Au gadreva meu taura na gauna ogo meu na tauca na noqu vakavinavina levu vei ira nai Liuliu ni Veitarogivanua Vakacegu, na veiliutaki ena loma ni Valenivolavola ni Veitarogivanua kei ira nai vakaillesilesi ena kena qaravi na cakacaka bibi ogo, ena kena talevi ka butuki na vanua ena sasaga levu ni noda liutaki vakavinaka na kawa iTaukei ena noda veidelaniyavu tabu vakaturaga. Na veiqaravi bibi ogo eda rawa ni mai vakadinadinataka ena nodra mai vakatabui ka vakadeitaki sara kina vakavanua e vuqa na noda vei turaga bale e Viti.*

*Ia na veiqaravi ni Valenivolavola ogo, esa na tomani tikoga me vaka nai naki ni kena tauyavutaki me baleta na kena maroroi nai tukutuku me baleti keda na kawa iTaukei, tomani na nodra vakacurumi tiko na luveda kina i Vola ni Kawa Bula me ra okati kina nai itaukei ni qele, digovi ka maroroya inai yalayala ni noda qele kei na veika tale eso.*

*Ena veiqaravi ogo, e tiko saraga ena uto ni sasaga ni Matanitu Cokovatu ena nodra vukei na kawa iTaukei ena vuravura ni veivakatoroicaketaki kei na nodra maroroi na kawa iTaukei ena gauna bolebole e da lako curuma tiko ogo.*

[The Office of the *iTaukei* Lands and Fisheries Commission have just completed its service in confirming traditional titles and providing awareness across the 14 provinces of our country. This plan was established with the support and concern of the Great Council of Chiefs to review sacred chiefly foundations in Fiji. It involved facilitating discussions and

providing clarity to fill traditional positions that had remained vacant for a long time, because when our traditional leadership is secure, the *iTaukei* people will also be secure. This review service commenced in Rewa on 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2024, before the work was concluded in the Lomaiviti Group on 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2026.

I intend to take this moment to express my deepest gratitude to the former Chairman of the Commission, the current leadership of the *iTaukei* Lands and Fisheries Commission, and all the staff for carrying out this monumental task. This significant undertaking involved reviewing and visiting our lands in a great effort to ensure our people are well-led through our chiefly and noble households. We can now witness the fruits of this vital service through the formal consecration and traditional confirmation of many of our high chiefs across Fiji.

Furthermore, the services of this office will continue in accordance with the purpose for which it was established: to safeguard the records of the *iTaukei* people, to continue the registration of our children into the *Vola ni Kawa Bula* (VKB) so they are recognized as indigenous landowners, and to oversee and protect our land boundaries along with other related matters.

This initiative lies at the very core of the Coalition Government's efforts to empower the *iTaukei* people within a developing world, while ensuring the protection of our heritage during these challenging times we are currently facing.]

Madam Deputy Speaker, the advancement of *iTaukei* development is also supported through the important work of the financial and investment institutions associated with the *iTaukei* Affairs framework. The *iTaukei* Land Trust Board continues to play a vital role in unlocking the economic potential of *iTaukei* land. The Board administers approximately 91 percent of Fiji's land facilitating agriculture, residential, tourism and commercial leases that generate income for indigenous landowners. Each year, the Board distributes significant lease revenues to landowning units across the country, with annual distributions to landowners reaching nearly \$100 million, helping support education, housing and community development.

Through initiatives such as the *iTaukei* Development Fund facilitating landowners are able to access financial support for development and small businesses agriculture and transport services within their communities. These initiatives are designed to strengthen entrepreneurship and improve economic participation among *iTaukei* resource owners.

Madam Deputy Speaker, *iTaukei* Trust Fund Board also continues to empower indigenous communities through education, research, and development initiatives. The Board supports programmes that promote language preservation, traditional knowledge, youth engagement and economic opportunities for *iTaukei* communities.

In addition, the work of Fijian Holdings Limited (FHL) continues to strengthen indigenous participation in Fiji's corporate sector. Since its establishment, the company has played a major role in enabling *iTaukei* institutions, provinces and resource owners to participate in national investments across sectors such as finance, tourism, property and communications. Through its diversified investments and dividends, FHL continues to create long-term wealth for its shareholders and contributes to the broader goal of indigenous economic empowerment.

As we move forward, our responsibility is to ensure that development remains inclusive, culturally grounded, and sustainable. When the *vanua* is strong, Fiji is strong. When our communities prosper, our nation prospers. This is the vision that guides our work and the commitment we must continue to uphold.

Madam Deputy Speaker, allow me to say a few words in iTaukei.

*Ni bera ni'u na tinia, au na gadreva me'u na taura na gauna oqo me'u na cavuta na noqu vakavinavinaka ki na Matanitu Cokovata ena veivuke sa mai qarava rawa ena loma ni Yasana o Cakaunitabua. Sa vakavinavinakataki na veitabana ni matanitu duidui eso ena veika era sa mai vakayacora rawa e Bua:*

- *Ena kena dolavi na i kelekele ni basi kei na vale ni wawa vou e Nabouwalu.*
- *Na dolavi ni rara vou kei na kena vale ni vakaukauwa yago e Dama.*
- *Na kena tomani tiko na cakacaka ni wavulili e Bua-Lomanikoro.*
- *Na kena sa na mai tosoi tale na cakacaka ni kena tasili na gaunisala, sega walega e Bua, ka vaka kina e na Tikina ko Wailevu e Cakaudrove, kei na veivakatoroicaketaki tale eso.*

*Sa vakavinavinakataki talega na Tabacakacaka iTaukei ena kena tokoni na veivakatoroicaketaki ena vica na veikorokoro e Bua ena vuku ni tuvatuva ni Village Improvement Scheme (VIS). Au gadreva talega me'u na vakavinavinakataki Ratu Qativi Rob Cromb, 'qo e dua na luvei Bua ka sa veivuke sara vakalevu ena sasaga ni veivakatoroicaketaki kei na tiko vinaka ena loma ni Yasana o Bua. Era vakaitavitaki ira ena kena tokoni vakalevu na loma ni yasana ena:*

- *Kena soli na i yaya ni veiqaravi ena valenibula e Nabouwalu, na veivaleniwai era tu e Bua.*
- *Kena tara oti e rua na koronivuli ni Kindergarten, ka \$250,000 e dua, ka sa vakacagau tiko na cakacaka ena kena tara na koronivuli ni Kindergarten mai Lekutu,*
- *Nodra vukei na veisoqosoqo ni tabagone kei na marama ka vakauasivi ena nodra vuli na luvei Bua.*
- *Nodra veiqaravi e sa sega ni baleti Bua walega, ka sa baleti Viti talega ka ra sa vakila tu na kena yaga e dua nai wase levu ni noda lewenivanua era veiqaravi ka cakacaka tu ena Kalabu Tax Free Zone, ka ni vakacakacakataki ira tiko kina e 100 vakacaca na noda lewenivanua ena nodra kabani.*

[Before I conclude, I would like to take this moment to express my sincere gratitude to the Coalition Government for the assistance rendered within the Province of Bua. We acknowledge the various government departments for their achievements in Bua, from the opening of the new Bus Terminal and Waiting Lounge in Nabouwalu, the opening of the new sports field and gymnasium in Dama, the continuation of road works in Bua Lomanikoro, to the resumption of road sealing works—not only in Bua but also extending to the district of Wailevu in Cakaudrove—along with various other development initiatives." "We also express our gratitude to the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs for supporting development in several villages across Bua through the Village Improvement Scheme (VIS).

Furthermore, I wish to extend a special acknowledgment to Ratu Qativi Rob Cromb, a son of Bua who has contributed immensely to the development and well-being of our province. He has been deeply involved in supporting the district by donating essential equipment to the Nabouwalu Hospital and various health centers throughout Bua. His contributions include the completed construction of two Kindergartens valued at \$250,000 each, with work currently underway on another in Lekutu. His support extends to our Youth and Women's groups, and most importantly, to the education of the children of Bua. His service, however, reaches far beyond Bua to the rest of Fiji; many of our citizens feel the impact of his work through employment at the Kalabu Tax-Free Zone, where his company provides livelihoods for over 100 of our people."]

In closing, Madam Deputy Speaker, I reaffirm our commitment to safeguarding our heritage. I urge all stakeholders and citizens to join us in practical cultural stewardship.

On that note, Madam Deputy Speaker, I stand in support of His Excellency the President's most gracious Address at the opening of the 2026 session of Parliament. *Vinaka saka vakalevu.*

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Thank you very much, honourable Tuiwailevu, and I wish you and your Ministry all the best in the upcoming Melanesian Festival of Arts.

Honourable Members, we will now suspend proceedings for a break, and we will resume in half an hour but, please, take your wallets with you. The box is waiting for you as you exit the Chamber, and it is on the left-hand side. Parliamentary staff will be there to receive your very kind donations. We will resume in half an hour. Thank you, Honourable Members.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.29 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.06 a.m.

### **COMMUNICATION FROM THE DEPUTY SPEAKER**

Honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming a delegation from Vienna, Austria, by way of Canberra, Australia, led by the Non-Resident Ambassador to Fiji, Miss Elisabeth Koegler, and accompanied by Dr. Thomas Loidl, Head of the International Law Department at the Austrian Ministry for Europe and International Affairs.

(Acclamation)

Your Excellency, we warmly welcome you to Fiji and to our Parliament and thank you for joining us today.

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

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the Leader of Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise to respond to the Address by His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Fiji Islands. I will speak on the grounds of reforms, amendments and ideologies that can transform Fiji for the better, while holding Government accountable where necessary, for them to work on.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency the President stated that our diversity is our strength and our unity is our purpose. I believe that multiculturalism and the history of governance must be taught in our schools, so that our younger generations understand better how the three arms of the State work and this actually encourages a lot of the younger generations for a future in politics.

Now, according to the World Population Review Report, teacher salary is the highest in countries like Germany, Australia, the US and Canada, so it should be in Fiji, but pay alone is not enough, and I hope the honourable Minister is aware that some of the teachers are still waiting for their salary upgrades since 2023.

I hope the honourable Minister is aware that teacher burnout and exhaustion is due to the workload that they have, and thousands of parents are still waiting for their back-to-school assistance and top-up of their bus cards despite this being the sixth week of school.

On teacher safety, Madam Deputy Speaker, while Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child allows for strong child protection, we have witnessed cases of students punching teachers, and we must enact a robust teacher protection policy that includes legal safeguards and mandatory reporting.

Madam Deputy Speaker, speaking on the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Services (TSLS) — to the students, I have read your emails, and I have spoken to you over calls, I have seen your messages, and I agree that reforms need to be introduced to ensure that students do not have difficulties throughout their academic career.

I would like to respond to honourable Tuisawau, who spoke about the debt payoff. I think I asked the Government about when they say that TSLS is being paid off, yet students are in a bond. I think this is the biggest confusion on the other side of the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker, looking at the judiciary's efficiency and integrity, we must clear the

backlogs that choke our courts, and I call for the rise in pay of our lawyers at Legal Aid and also the staff at the Solicitor-General's Office, so our legal machinery works with speed and precision when it matters the most.

In terms of calling for amendments to some of the outdated laws. One of them is the amendment to the Small Claims Tribunal Act of 1991 to reflect modern needs and replace the current referee-led structures with qualified legal professionals. I also support the call for more aged care homes, and I also agree with the honourable Minister for Women for the amendment to the Family Law Act 2003 to further safeguard the rights and well-being of older persons.

Madam Deputy Speaker, last week, Saturday, I was headed to a meeting, and a 75-year-old lady called me. She was crying on the phone, and she said to me that her son got her to sign some documents for the renovation of the house, and when the house was renovated, her son kicked her out of the house. She was sitting at the Lautoka Bus Stand, and I was in Suva. I tried various means to get help to her, but after one hour, I could not reach out to her. So, if she is seeing this, please reach out to me. I am trying to reach out to you.

That is why Madam Deputy Speaker, the call for the amendment to the Family Law Act 2003 is critical, and we should move forward with it. No child should be in a position to take their parents out of their homes. We are also calling for stronger amendments and enforcement of the Protection of Animals Act 1957, and also the Review of the Mining Act, 1965.

While I believe that the process is in place, questions have been raised on the amount or number of containers of mineral-rich soil that has been exported out of Vatukoula Gold Mine without proper processing and valuation of these minerals, and I leave it to the Minister. Also, I would like to highlight in this House that one of the staff at Vatukoula Gold Mine got injured at work on 15th November, was admitted and has been transferred from Lautoka Hospital to Tavua Hospital and currently he is bedridden and I hope he gets the right compensation, support and care.

Madam Deputy Speaker, speaking on civil servants' stronger policies, safeguarding policies across Fiji's entire workforce is necessary. I came across a young intern who stated that her senior is harassing her, and I have yet to speak to the line Minister. We must ensure that our youth deserve protection, dignity, and safety in every ministry and workplace. Stronger policies must be put in place to stop bullying and harassment.

While I support our civil servants because many work tirelessly to deliver for the people of Fiji, I agree with the honourable Prime Minister's call for civil service reform and performance evaluation, and also the increase of their salaries and staffing to be improved to reduce exhaustion and burnout. While we want to evaluate the civil service and the executive, if civil servants are to be judged on performance, then why cannot Parliamentarians be judged on their performance? Why wait for four years? Why wait for four years? We must be willing to face accountability.

Public office, whether appointed or elected, must always answer to the people. If you talk about change, change begins with us, Parliamentarians. Talking about the health sector, we have seen that the India Speciality Hospital has taken them three years to approve a space for this hospital. Something that is given for free. We have the ADB funding. We have the funding from the Australian government, but still, look at the condition of CWM hospital, and the roof leaking is another story of poor oversight and work.

Madam Deputy Speaker, now, on a matter of accountability and taxpayer funds, I would like to draw my attention to the Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs. After 84 recipients were distributed, this support community grant. The initial call was for \$15,000. It was reduced to \$7,000, and then

the recipients were told to get a quotation of \$2000. I do not know what you will be able to achieve in \$2000.

I want to genuinely ask the honourable Minister, but he is not here, so I would generally like to ask the Government, are you genuinely helping people, or is this just because election is around the corner and you want to distribute it to as many people as you want? It is just a question, but actions speak louder than words.

Madam Deputy Speaker, again, I would like to quote someone from Labasa.

“Greetings to you, Mr. Sharma, as per our conversation, please be advised that the gas crematorium at Tuatua cemetery has been given a grant by Multi-Ethnic Affairs. The positioning of the deceased as per our Hindu scriptures, the head of the deceased should be placed pointing north. So, the newly installed cremator is now facing West.”

This letter was sent on 12th August 2025 about this issue, nothing was done by the Ministry, the Permanent Secretary or the Minister.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it was highlighted by the multi-ethnic facilitator that the project cost between half-a-million to \$1 million. According to my conversation with the Navua Self-Funded Committee project, this facility would cost half a million and now, Madam Deputy Speaker. This person states that we are very modestly and with great respect, request you to look into the matter and resolve this issue as our religious prestige is at stake. This needs to be investigated by the Government. I believe they have sent a letter to FICAC, I am not sure, but this was sent by Mr. Prakash. He has agreed to quote him.

Madam Speaker, the question is, if a half a million-dollar fund is being spent there, and the reason for the reduced grants to the communities, God knows how this Government is financing or funding their projects. Madam Deputy Speaker, on 4th November in this august Chambers, I asked the honourable Prime Minister...

(Honourable Members interjected)

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, on 4th November, 2025, I asked the honourable Prime Minister in this august House to change your Minister for Sugar, and I thank him for doing so. Also, I would like to remind this august House of the role of the Sugarcane Growers Council. Your role is to be the voice of the farmers and bring their plea to the Ministry.

Now, Madam Deputy Speaker, speaking on drugs, our youths deserve a future free from the grip of drugs. Our communities deserve protection who profit from the very destruction. I call for a 24/7 surveillance unit that unites our border and law enforcement agencies from Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF), Republic of Fiji Navy, RFMF, National Fire Authority, Fiji Police Force and FRCS to shut down the drug networks at the source and our gates. We must increase pay and human resources for our border control forces.

What I also propose, Madam Deputy Speaker, is that a certain percentage of the ratepayers' payment is made to their respective municipalities to install surveillance cameras at every street, all connected to the national 24/7 surveillance unit. This can be done in a span of 10 years to ensure that almost every street of Fiji has surveillance cameras.

Now, Madam Deputy Speaker, we all have in this august Chamber different views about how we want to tackle the drug issue, and this is my perspective. In my perspective, when a drug manufacturer sells drugs to just say 10,000 Fijians, that is ruining 10,000 lives, 10,000 dreams, hopes, 10,000 families, and this is destructive for Fiji's economy and future. Of course, we have seen the rise in HIV cases, 1,200 people have been diagnosed with HIV in the first half of 2025. Therefore, I propose legislation that imposes the death penalty for deliberate drug manufacturing as a clear deterrent.

To my colleagues in this legislative House, who are we afraid of, or who do we have to fear? My ideology is that if a legislation about death penalty for deliberate drug manufacturing comes in, we as any Government will take our resources, we take all the human capital to our borders and monitor them, while also people travelling to outer islands need to have their names on the ticket and also Government or these agencies can monitor the number of calls made to these outer islands. Scanners and K9 units at ports and jetties are critical.

The death penalty, Madam Deputy Speaker, is a law in China, Singapore, UAE and Malaysia, but the whole idea is for no one to ever go there. This should be a law that makes people afraid of manufacturing drugs in Fiji and Fiji should send a clear message to the transnational crimes that are happening in our EEZ, high seas and the global cartels as well.

Madam Speaker, now coming to Fiji's fiscal policies and sound economic policies under this Government. I was surprised to see the batting order, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I thought that the current Finance Minister would be speaking last or second last, but we see the former finance minister, former DPM on the list. All right.

Madam Speaker, as per the midterm fiscal strategy 2025, 2026, 2027, 2028, the Government has harped about the debt to GDP ratio, but instead by the end of this fiscal year, they have borrowed up to an estimated \$2.7 billion.

Contingent liabilities are with FSC and FDB are assessed to be high risk as stated at point 5, point 8, yet the Government has guaranteed to \$220 million for public money. Madam, Deputy Speaker, what I am asking for is transparency, as FDB must publish how much it lends to rural agriculture, village enterprises, MSMEs and how much it goes to corporate and foreign investors.

The appreciation of the US dollar will eventually place a larger burden on the Government finances. I want to ask if the honourable Minister for Employment is aware that over 80,000 people have left Fiji since 2022, because he read out the statistics yesterday, going back to 2016? I would urge him not to live in the past, and please read this current report. It says over 80,000 people have left Fiji since 2022, mostly for employment purposes, education, and permanent immigration. While some may return, it is likely that many will settle abroad eventually. Just to update the Government on the current statistics.

Madam, Deputy Speaker, research papers say that when you look at the four *coup d'etat* (the one that your Permanent Secretary does) Fiji has, it is stated that Fiji has lost an economic value up to \$5 billion to \$10 billion; loss of GDP, sectoral damage, increased poverty and debt, reduced investor confidence and of course reduced confidence with our bilateral and multilateral partners. The pandemic also wiped out one-third of our GDP.

What I would like to highlight in this Parliament is the call for commercial rents. Commercial rents are an escalating burden with no cap driving year-after-year increases that, together with possible rising utilities, possible EFL tariffs, can crush countless MSMEs. Madam, Deputy Speaker, we need to note that Fiji currently has about 85 MSMEs. I call for a thorough nationwide consultation

with MSMEs and Fiji Commerce Employees Federation with relevant Ministries. This approach restores confidence of current businesses, inspires new ones and protects jobs and boosts economic productivity.

Madam, Deputy Speaker, for any Government and any Minister for Finance, the businesses and MSMEs are the core engine of any nation. We talk about job evaluation, exercise, resourcing, staffing, and we all need funds, but the whole idea is to create wealth rather than shrinking entities and digging deeper into the pockets of ordinary Fijians.

Despite global commodity price volatility, supply chain disruption, and geopolitics that look at new trade and alliances between nations, I think it is the responsibility of any Government to strike a balance between fiscal prudence and macroeconomic stability, because a government's mandate is to collect revenue from businesses. They pay tax, salary, FNPF, rent on utilities and the goods and services and the tax imposed on them are paid by consumers.

I would like to respond to honourable Minister for Public Works, who said that nightclubs should not be open. The whole idea is not the nightclubs; it is about economic activity beyond 5 p.m. to 6 p.m. There can be Fijians throughout the entire sector who can benefit at night. When we boost safety and security, we drive the economy. It does not mean that after 10 p.m. or 11 p.m. you go to bed. Some people like to work at night, look at countries like Singapore. I am sure all of you have visited Singapore by now. That is the whole idea – economic activity, probably, which they really do not understand.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Hogwash!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Another hogwash over there.

Madam, Deputy Speaker, the interjections from the G11 really surprised me. Once they were against Government policies, and now they are supporting Government policies, so things can change overnight.

Regardless of global uncertainties, Government can reduce its domestic tax, and I hope they are aware of this. I would like to ask the Government, is there a lack of fiscal discipline, accountability, comprehensiveness, specificity, sustainability, transparency and value for money?

The Government, by the end of this fiscal year, would have collected about, or increased \$2.7 billion in loans, and in the last fiscal year had about over \$4 billion in revenue, but yet we see the seas of overtime for the medical professionals, teachers were waiting for upgrades, and so much more.

Before I thought that that would change, we saw a bit of reshuffling from the other end, but that is what the Government is pretty much known for - reshuffling Ministers. Yes, Madam Deputy Speaker, the two Deputy Prime Ministers in the history of Fiji are current Government Backbenchers. A very historic Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as the President stated that, as we move towards the election year, you, our leaders, carry even greater responsibility. When we choose leaders, we give them the responsibility of managing taxpayer funds. Leadership is beyond race, ethnicity, colour and background.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Order, honourable Members!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- One needs to be for the people, by the people, putting people first. I call for an educated society. Policies backed up by data and research and when we have an educated society, we have Fijians creating opportunities. We need a highly paid medical staff, teachers, lawyers, civil servants, and border control agencies instead of highly paid politicians.

I ask this House if they can reduce every MP salary by 20 percent. We need strong surveillance and safety to ensure businesses operate beyond 5.00 pm. to 6.00 p.m. Safety and security breed economic prosperity. When people move, our economy moves. Fiji needs to be promoted as one of the safest destinations, continuously to boost tourism despite global competition.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to conclude, I would like to put a point of caution out there with the amount of fake or misinformation out there, that's especially, I'll talk for all the Members of the House very quickly, that there's a lot of fake accounts which are interacting with people, have asking for information, asking for funds. There have been cases reported for both members of the sides of the House, and I urge the public not to interact with these fake accounts and verify before you do.

And on that note, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank His Excellency, the Speaker, you Madam Chair, as my Committee Chair, the Parliament Committee, the Secretariats, and the Leader of Opposition for trusting me and giving me this position, the responsibility, and the whole of Government, we have worked together on people's issues and I wish you all the best in this coming year. I wish this Parliament all the success, and may God continue to bless our beloved nation. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before we go to our next speaker, who is the Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade, I would just like to remind honourable Rinesh Sharma, perhaps, to refresh your memory and those of us in the House who were here on 9th August, 2019, to check your *Daily Hansard* and see what happened. I thank you for your suggestions, but honourable Tikoduadua was part of the melee that happened outside, and I think it would be helpful for us to remember things that have happened here.

Honourable Members, the 2026 Women in Agriculture Symposium was held at the Grand Pacific Hotel in Suva, bringing together women from across various agricultural sectors in the country. The event was part of a national effort to strengthen women's economic empowerment and enhance their participation across Fiji's primary industries.

Launched by the Ministry of Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry in collaboration with other key Ministries, the Symposium focused on closing gender gaps in access to land, finance, training, technology and markets. It featured policy dialogues, technical workshops, business pitch forums, exhibitions and field visits, showcasing women-led enterprises.

The Programme highlighted the crucial role women play in Fiji's food systems and climate-smart agriculture, emphasising that gender inclusive participation strengthens productivity and resilience. I would now like to ask you to welcome to your Parliament, ladies who have been taking part in the 2026 Women in Agriculture Symposium. Would you please stand up, ladies?

(Acclamation)

Thank you. Welcome to your Parliament and thank you for your service.

I now call on the Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade, for his response.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; I rise today to offer my warmest thanks to His Excellency the President for his gracious, thoughtful and deeply visionary Address at the opening of the 2026 Session of Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I stand here today, I do so with a profound sense of humility, having recently been entrusted by the honourable Prime Minister with the portfolio of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade. I am acutely aware of the weight of this responsibility.

I take up this mantle at an important turning point in our national life. His Excellency reminded us that unity must be consciously built through fair laws, inclusive policies and respectful leadership. As a new Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade, I pledge to this House that my leadership of Fiji's international relations will be defined by that very discipline, very inclusivity and a relentless focus on the wisdom of outcomes rather than the sharpness of debate.

Fiji has earned its place in the world through discipline, preparation, sacrifice and quiet resolve. Our representatives have spoken with clarity; they have listened with care and carried the weight of our nation with dignity and steadiness. Today, I wish to acknowledge the leaders, diplomats and public servants who have laid the foundations of Fiji's foreign service over the decades. Because of them, Fiji continues to punch above its weight at the negotiating tables of the world.

I also express my sincere gratitude to the staff of the Ministry for their warm welcome, their loyalty and exemplary service to the nation. I encourage each and every one of them to continue to work as one team, strive for excellence and to serve with integrity, humility, accountability and patriotism.

Madam Deputy Speaker, before I proceed further, allow me also to place on record the deep condolences of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade on the untimely passing of one of our own, Ms. Alisi Pulini. We thank the Almighty God for Alisi's life and for her service to the nation. Her passing has saddened our Ministry and family deeply.

Life is one of God's great mysteries. For some, it is long, for some it is brief, for some it is burdened by illness, for others it is cut short in ways we do not understand. In whatever span God assigns to us, what matters is whether we have lived faithfully, served well and honoured both, God and family. In that respect, Alisi's life was not lived in vain. We remember her with gratitude, we honour her service and we stand with her family and loved ones in this time of sorrow. May God grant them comfort and peace, and may Alisi rest in eternal peace.

I wish to inform this august House that my first official overseas engagement as Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade was to the Republic of Nauru, where I paid a courtesy call on His Excellency David Adeang, President of Nauru. Our relationship with Nauru spans more than five decades. It was built on the vision and leadership of President Hammer DeRoburt and Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, whose historic partnership established direct air links that continue to connect our peoples and economies today.

During our discussions, we reaffirmed our shared commitment to strengthening bilateral cooperation, particularly through enhanced air connectivity between our two countries. Increased flight frequency through Nadi and Nausori, supported by Pacific Fresh Airlink Initiative and the expansion of services by Air Nauru, will boost passenger and freight movements, stimulate trade, and improve access to fresh produce for Northern Pacific communities.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this inaugural visit underscored Fiji's commitment to practical Pacific-led cooperation, cooperation that creates jobs, strengthens food security, supports business growth and deepens regional unity. It signals clearly that under this Government, Fiji's foreign policy begins at home, in the Pacific.

Madam Deputy Speaker, last November, the responsibility for external trade was shifted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in recognition of the growing intersection between trade and diplomacy. That decision acknowledged the simple reality that in today's world, international relations are increasingly shaped by economic interests. Trade is not separate from foreign policy. It is one of its strongest drivers. External trade now returns to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We do so with a clear understanding of the critical role trade plays in shaping Fiji's future.

Trade is not an abstract policy matter, discussed only in offices and conferences. It affects the price of goods in our shops, the income of our farmers and fishers, the success of our manufacturers, the opportunities available to our exporters and the jobs available to our young people. It is one of the most important pillars of our national development. This return strengthens the link between diplomacy and economic opportunity. Our foreign policy engagements must increasingly be guided by trade priorities.

When we engage with our partners abroad. We must do so with a clear focus on securing market access, attracting investment, and addressing trade barriers and expanding opportunities for Fijian businesses. In today's global environment, economic interests are central to international relations, and trade must remain at the forefront of our diplomatic efforts.

Our strategic vision is therefore to position trade policy at the forefront of Fiji's international engagement. We will ensure that our diplomatic Missions are equipped with clear commercial objectives and trade intelligence feeds directly into foreign policy decisions, and that bilateral and multilateral dialogues advance concrete economic outcomes, whether negotiating access for our agricultural exports, advocating for fair fisheries disciplines, responding to new regulatory standards in international markets or pushing for investments in strategic sectors of our economy. Our foreign engagements must be grounded in economic strategy. Ultimately, our objective is clear: to use trade as a tool for resilience, growth and global market opportunity for all Fijians.

Madam Deputy Speaker, over the past years, the Ministry has worked tirelessly in reviewing and expanding Fiji's global footprint through the opening of new Missions and the re-opening of Missions that had been closed due to COVID-19. Most recent of these is the re-opening of Fiji's Embassy in Brussels, which was formally approved by Cabinet in November 2025. This forms part of a phased and strategic reopening to restore Fiji's diplomatic presence in Europe. The Brussels Mission was closed in 2021 due to post-COVID-19 austerity measures.

The Government has now determined that covering European Union affairs from Geneva was not the most efficient arrangement given the workload, the institutional complexity of the European Union and the importance of direct engagement. The embassy in Brussels will strengthen our diplomatic relations, trade and development ties with the European Union and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in the same spirit, the Coalition Government also envisions the reopening of Fiji's diplomatic Mission in Seoul, Republic of Korea, which had been closed during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fiji and Korea have enjoyed close relations for over four decades, and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) has been a very important development partner for Fiji, including

through major support such as the Fiji National Rehabilitation Centre project. The re-opening of the Seoul Mission will present immense opportunities considering Korea's position at the heart of Asia and the technical, developmental and economic cooperation that can be strengthened from that base.

In this regard, the ministry is working diligently to commence the formal processes necessary for the reopening of the Mission in close coordination with the government of the Republic of Korea, with the aim of progressing this in the next fiscal year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency correctly identified that we live in a time of profound economic volatility and geopolitical tension. For small island developing States like Fiji, these are not abstract concepts, they are lived realities that test our resilience daily and core to Fiji's foreign policy is a region within which we exist.

Strengthening integration, peace and solidarity within the Pacific is inextricably linked to Fiji's long-term aspirations for security and prosperity. That is why we have placed the Pacific at the front and centre of our foreign policy with the Pacific family first approach. Global disruptions have driven internal migration, urbanisation, and wider democratic shifts, creating pressures that demand bold and integrated responses.

As we navigate these complex geostrategic dynamics, our north star remains the Ocean of Peace. This vision, championed by honourable Prime Minister, is not idle language. It is a strategic doctrine for the Pacific. It is the assertion that our region must not become a theatre for the ambitions of others, but must remain a region defined by dialogue, peace, sovereignty, and mutual respect.

Madam Deputy Speaker, much of what I report on today reflects the milestones of the 2025-2026 Budget cycle. While I did not sit in this chair when those numbers were first debated, I spent my first weeks in office examining progress closely, and I can say to this House with confidence that the priorities set were not merely spoken about. They were pursued with seriousness. Last year, the Government allocated \$51 million to this Ministry, a 16 percent increase. Some questioned why. Today, the facts provide the answer.

Fiji was recently informed of the European Union's decision to remove Fiji from its list of non-cooperative jurisdictions for tax purposes. This did not happen by accident. It was a result of multisectoral collaboration and the demonstration of the Coalition Government's commitment to transparency, good governance, regulatory reform, and compliance with international standards. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade played its role in engaging with our international partners, helping communicate Fiji's reform efforts clearly and consistently, and ensuring that confidence in Fiji was restored where it mattered.

This is not merely a technical outcome, it is a vote of confidence in Fiji's reform agenda and a signal to the world that Fiji is serious about credibility, seriousness of purpose, and doing things properly. Our foreign service is therefore not merely symbolic. It is a drive of opportunity. Our missions abroad are not ornaments. They are economic outposts, working each day to secure technical partnerships to strengthen our industries, access to new markets for Fijian products, security arrangements and support for international standing, and scholarships and opportunities for our young people.

With the opening of the new embassy in Jerusalem last year, the modernising of our overseas infrastructure, and the undertaking of the first post-allowance review since 2005, the Government has shown that our diplomats deserve to be properly equipped and properly supported to serve. Support must come with expectation. The call is also on our diplomats to bring back the return on investment expected of them for the benefit of our taxpayers. This work is guided by a first-ever

foreign policy white paper, a blueprint that places sovereignty, security, and prosperity at the heart of Fiji's engagement with the world, anchored firmly in our commitment to an Ocean of Peace.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister in his capacity then, as Minister for Foreign Affairs had instructed the Ministry during his budget response to step out of the box, to go beyond the field, to open doors, to promote and protect our interests, and to ensure that where regional and global decisions are made, Fiji has a seat at the table and a voice that cannot be ignored. I am fully committed to delivering that intent with discipline and excellence. Our foreign policy is no longer only about representation; it is also about protection, it is about safeguarding Fiji's sovereignty, advancing our security and strengthening our prosperity in line with the foreign policy white paper launched on 23rd September 2024.

His Excellency's address calls Fiji to navigate an era of geopolitical tension, technological disruption, climate risk and economic volatility with maturity, discipline and unity. This reaffirmation of the Pacific as an ocean of peace and of Fiji's commitment to multilateralism and sovereignty underscores that sovereign policy is no longer peripheral to national development; it is central to it. The sentiments expressed also demand a stronger and more proactive intelligence-gathering capacity aligned directly to Fiji's national priorities.

In a world of shifting alliances and increasing strategic competition in the Pacific, Fiji must anticipate all that can happen. Diplomatic, economic, environmental, technological and security intelligence must better inform Cabinet decision-making, trade diversification, climate finance, negotiations, peacekeeping deployments and development partnerships.

Fiji has punched about its weight in peacekeeping for 48 years, and regarding the invitation from the Israeli and United States Governments for peacekeeping in Gaza, the Government is weighing the matter with the utmost seriousness. Any such mission must align with international law, national interest and the safety of our Disciplined Forces.

Multilateralism today faces great strain. The major powers contest institutions they once built. Rules are challenged, and consensus is hard to find. Yet, for small States like Fiji, multilateralism remains essential. Without multilateralism, the voices of small island States are drowned out, and without international law, power alone prevails, and without a rules-based order, the vulnerable are left exposed. Fiji, therefore, remains committed to principled multilateralism. We will continue to advocate for international law, a peaceful settlement of disputes, equitable development, climate justice and the sovereign equality of States.

A whole of government approach is, therefore, imperative. Foreign policy cannot reside solely in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It must be synchronised with finance, defence, trade, climate, agriculture, fisheries, digital transformation, immigration, labour and social protection. Domestic coordination mechanisms must mirror our external priorities, ensuring that while Fiji advocates abroad, resilience, sustainability, unity and fairness is integrated institutionally at home. Strategic coherence between domestic policy and foreign engagement will enable Fiji to continue to punch above its weight with clarity of purpose, safeguarding sovereignty, while advancing inclusive national development.

Madam, Deputy Speaker, Fiji deeply values the continued support of all our development partners, whose contributions have been instrumental in advancing our national development priorities. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade will continue to work closely with line Ministries and development partners to address social and developmental challenges. As we continue our recovery from global shocks, while confronting the rising cost of living and trying to ensure that economic growth translates into tangible improvements in household well-being, strategic

engagement in sectors such as agriculture, tourism, renewable energy, housing, health, education and emerging industries remains essential.

There has been increasing interest in the opening of resident diplomatic missions in Fiji. Canada and the Philippines have recently established resident diplomatic missions in Fiji, and Israel is earmarked to open in May later this year, the opening of Tonga's mission has recently been approved by Cabinet, and the United Arab Emirates currently has a scoping mission underway. This is not a sign of irrelevance; it is a sign of confidence. Confidence in Fiji, confidence in our stability, confidence in our strategic importance and confidence in the quality of our relations with the world.

Madam, Deputy Speaker, through our Foreign Missions, we deliver consular services which are critical not only for Fijian communities overseas, but which also create direct economic opportunities by enabling smoother mobility for business education, skills, employment and tourism. In this regard, the Ministry is working on the development of a diaspora policy to create a more structured and purposeful approach towards diaspora engagement.

Our diaspora is not merely a sentimental extension of Fiji abroad - it is an economic, intellectual and cultural force. It connects Fiji to opportunities, remittances, skills, influence, and to goodwill. The Ministry, therefore, remains committed to strengthening our engagement with our diaspora communities around the world in a more focused, coherent and productive way.

His Excellency the President was clear that as we move towards the general elections, elections must be a contest of ideas and vision, never a cause for division. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade is taking this mandate seriously. Through our Memorandum of Understanding with the Fijian Elections Office, we have to ensure that the democratic process is inclusive and accessible to our diaspora around the world. Our diplomatic missions, including our Pacific Mission through the Office of the Roving Ambassador, are committed to supporting processes such as overseas voter registration, electoral awareness, and making these services more accessible to Fijians abroad.

The intent is simple. By removing barriers for Fijians living overseas, we help ensure that every legitimate voice can be heard, that every Fijian receives reasonable services, regardless of geography. We are committed to a process that is transparent, trusted, orderly and efficient.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I have heard the comments from honourable Koya, who said that Fiji is like a car full of passengers, promised a better destination by this Coalition Government, only to be taken, in his words, "on a merry-go-round." It is a clever line, but clever lines are not always truthful lines. If the honourable Member wishes to use motoring analogies, then let us be honest with the people of Fiji.

The previous government was not taking Fiji on a merry-go-round; it was taking Fiji down a slippery slope - a slope of opaqueness, arrogance over centralisation, fear and the steady suffocation of dissent. So, compare that with what the people are enjoying today, there is a greater freedom to speak, greater room for criticism and greater confidence among international partners. So, no, Madam Deputy Speaker, Fiji is not a merry-go-round. Fiji is recovering its bearings, Fiji is regaining its voice, Fiji is re-opening doors that has been shut, and Fiji is rebuilding confidence that has been eroded.

In closing, I thank His Excellency for a forward looking and inspiring Address, Madam Deputy Speaker. The year 2026 presents both, challenges and opportunities, with clear leadership, national unity and steadfast commitment to our values. Fiji will continue to stand tall not only as a proud Pacific nation, but as a respected voice in the global community.

Madam Deputy Speaker, our strength abroad begins with our cohesion at home. A confident, stable and inclusive Fiji, enhances our credibility on the world stage, and I wish to end this section by returning to His Excellency's powerful words: "Our diversity is our strength, our unity is our purpose." Our commitment is to strengthen and build partnerships that support and improve the livelihoods of the people of our beloved nation. We will continue to uphold the highest standards of integrity, restraint and respect for our multicultural society and our partners.

I refer my Ministry's dedication to transparency, professionalism and service. We will modernise our diplomatic engagement, strengthen policy co-ordination across Government and ensure that our international commitments translate into tangible benefits for our people. We are committed to deepening Fiji's regional and global collaboration with a sharp focus on trade development, co-operation, and enduring diplomatic ties grounded in dialogue, respect and understanding, and a shared commitment to peace and prosperity.

Madam Deputy Speaker, honourable Members of Parliament, I am reminded of this profound principle that whatever you do, you do it all for the glory of God. These words remind us that public service is not merely an occupation, it is a calling, and when it comes to a calling, there are two truths that guide me.

First, God does not call the qualified, He qualifies the call in leadership whether in diplomacy, trade negotiation, or multilateral engagement. We are often confronted with challenges beyond our natural ability and resources. The global landscape is complex. Geopolitical tensions are real. Economic uncertainties test our resilience. Yet we are reminded that unless the Lord builds a house, the builders labour in vain. When we remain grounded in faith and integrity, we bear fruit. And when we rely solely on our strength, we falter. That dependence on God is not weakness; it is the foundation of true strength.

Second, instead of being merely critical, we must be creative. It is easy in public life to criticise, to point out shortcomings in international systems, in trade frameworks, or even within our own institutions, but criticism without contribution achieves very little. The most constructive response to global challenges is creativity, forging new partnerships, designing innovative trade pathways, strengthening regional cooperation and advancing policies that uplift our people. And as leaders we must be known for what we build and for what we oppose.

In Foreign Affairs, that means building bridges rather than walls. External Trade means creating opportunities rather than merely lamenting obstacles, so we are called not just to identify problems, but to solve them with vision, diligence and courage. Each of us in this Chamber has been entrusted with the responsibility for a season. Let us, therefore, carry out our duties with excellence, integrity and a spirit of collaboration. Let our diplomacy reflect our values. Let our trade relationships reflect fairness and mutual respect. Let our leadership reflect honour and let our service be worthy of both God and our country.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we commit ourselves to doing these things, for the glory of God will govern with humility, serve with purpose, and leave a legacy worthy of the trust given to us.

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen seated in the gallery and those tuning in from the comfort of their homes - *vina na cola* and a very good morning to you all.

Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for giving me the opportunity to respond and thank His Excellency the President, *Na Turaga Bale Na Tui Cakau*, Ratu Naiqama Tawakecolati Lalabalavu,

for his most gracious Address at the opening of the 2026 Session of Parliament.

First and foremost, I would like to thank the God Almighty for the gift of life and the strength bestowed upon me to be able to be here in the last year of this Parliamentary term. He has never failed me, and may His word continue to be the lamp unto my path.

Let me converse in my native dialect to greet the *tako*, the *lavo*, and fellow Fijians.

*Qi qulumia na gauna vina okwe, mequ va cola watji vo mutou cokho na tako na lavo, mutou lequ kuru, mutou lequ koicalevu, lequ maseki, lequ tauvu, mutou lequ dreu, i ledu viedeedela, i qwali, tovatova qei niko mutou i baravi qei niko mutou i viyanuyanu.*

*Vina valevu na yalo vina koto, yalo dina koto vo lemutu i tavi. Maroroi koto na savasava qei nia me teitei mata ni lemutu cola ni visiga na ledu vacola.*

Madam Deputy Speaker, at this juncture, I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we stand on today. Each *mataqali* must be acknowledged for giving up their land, so that you and I are able to stand on today.

*Ki na Vanua o Nadonumai, vua na Turaga na Tui Suva, kivei kemuni kece na lewe ni yavusa kei na mataqali ena Vanua ko Nadonumai, vinaka saka vakalevu na loloma kei na veiciqomi.*

Madam Deputy Speaker, reflecting on the shared national journey since Fiji was ceded 152 years ago, and 55 years since we gained Independence, I strongly agree, that as a nation, we must draw wisdom from our past, to honestly evaluate our present circumstances, and gain clarity for our future direction.

I concur with His Excellency the President when he stated that and I quote:

“As a nation, we are challenged to review not only how far we have come, but also how we collectively prepare for the decades ahead, how we safeguard our unity together and how we ensure that development is fair, inclusive and sustainable for all our people.”

As much as we wish to progress and move forward as a nation, the truth behind stories of the past, *daku ni kuila* period, must be revealed and shared. We cannot continue to hold back the truth. Once these truths are made known, it will bring relief and closure to many Fijians.

We serve a God that detests dishonesty, as lying is contrary to His nature, while valuing truthfulness and integrity. Perhaps, this could be the barrier to the progress of *iTaukei* people. Provincialism was introduced in Fiji as a key component of the British colonial policy of “indirect rule” following the 1975 Cession. It was structured through the establishment of the 14 administrative provinces, designed to organise indigenous Fijians.

Madam Deputy Speaker, provincialism undermines national indigenous unity, creating divisions between different provinces and clans, which weakens the broader indigenous (*iTaukei*) political voice. Provincialism encourages a political culture where people vote for leaders based on provincial, tribal, or chiefly ties rather than policy, contributing to political instability.

Madam Deputy Speaker, provincialism is indeed the biggest barrier to Fiji's progress. The way forward would be to encourage *iTaukei* people to do away with provincialism and trace their origin so that they may realise that their ties are not just within the provincial boundaries.

The modern-day reunion, referred to as *cara sala* is a traditional ceremony to renew and strengthen ties between families, clans, tribes and villages. I commend the *vanua, mataqali, yavusa* who have begun reuniting with their kinship.

Madam Deputy Speaker, every clan and tribe must be encouraged to trace their ties. Once people come to realize they are related, then unity amongst *iTaukei* will be achieved. Our ties signify the deep, often invisible connections that bind people together, acting as a foundation for relationships.

A multicultural society will only be achieved if Fijians of different ethnic backgrounds fully recognize the need to live harmoniously. Madam Deputy Speaker, Fiji is blessed that our society is made up of people from different ethnic backgrounds, with a vibrant blend of indigenous *iTaukei* of 56.8 percent and Indo-Fijians with 37.5 percent, with significant Europeans, Chinese, and other Pacific Islanders communities who call Fiji their home. Under Section 5 of the 2013 Constitution, it indicates that all citizens of Fiji shall be called Fijian, regardless of their ethnic background.”

Madam Deputy Speaker, as alluded to by His Excellency the President, Fiji's multicultural society is one of its greatest strengths, but unity does not arise automatically from diversity. Unity will only arise through love and acceptance, fair laws, inclusive policies, respectful leadership, and a shared commitment to the common good.

Madam Deputy Speaker, two weeks ago, I accompanied the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for site visits around Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. We visited sites that comes under Government ministries and agencies that the Committee is mandated to review, relating to social welfare, health, education and development.

One of these agencies was the Fiji Public Trustee Corporation Pte Limited (FPTCL). Speaking of multi-cultural society, the FPTCL is the custodian of Kioia Island. One hundred and ten Imatai or chiefs from Vaitupu, Tuvalu purchased the islands of Kioia in Fiji in 1946. The purchase was made for 3,000 Fijian pounds to address overpopulation on their home island. These chiefs and their successors hold the island in trust.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Kioia Island operates under a unique system combining Fijian legal jurisdiction with internal community self-governance. The island is governed by the Kioia Island Council, which handles local administration and development projects, with oversight from the Cakaudrove Provincial Administration. Kioia Island is one of the cleanliness place I have ever come across in Fiji. I must commend the Kioia Island Council for their outstanding work in the general upkeep of the island, governance and managing its community's affairs well.

A simple model of governance by the Kioia Island Council must be promoted and adopted by our rural and maritime communities. With the active role of the Kioia Island Council in managing its community affairs, I am pleading with the honourable Prime Minister to formally reinstate the island councils, in particular the Rabi Council of Leaders.

Madam Deputy Speaker, giving the people the opportunity to elect their own representative to the council will allow the council members to serve their communities, maintain law and order and facilitate local development projects. They will act as representatives, fostering unity, promoting safety and ensuring that essential services such as education and sanitation are managed effectively.

Media freedom and parliamentary debate are crucial interconnected pillars of democracy, where the words we use to talk about politics matter. Whether discussing the rise in societal issues, healthcare policy or community safety, the language we choose does not just express our feelings or

ideas, it actively shapes public understanding and political realities.

It is crucial to be both deliberate and conscious in a political conversation, especially when frustration or disappointment turns us into broad generalisation or inaccurate accusation. Madam Deputy Speaker, rhetoric, which is the art of effective or persuasive communication is not just about what we say, but how we say it. The words we choose, the tone we adopt, and the framing of our arguments have consequences. In politics, rhetoric can inform, inspire, and rally people to action, but it can also mislead, divide, or even undermine the very causes we care about.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I will reiterate what His Excellency has mentioned in his opening remarks, that history will judge this Parliament not by the sharpness of debate, but by the wisdom of its outcomes. The commencement of the review of the Constitution by Government, as announced by His Excellency the President is welcomed. This exercise must ensure the supreme law remains relevant, protects human rights, and strengthens democratic governance. Madam Deputy Speaker, we understand that this review will include modernising processes, enhancing accountability and the rule of law, updating legislation to match current societal needs and fostering national unity by addressing shared challenges.

Madam Deputy Speaker, with the engagement and meaningful public participation, transparency and dialogue, the voices of all Fijians across communities, generations and regions will be heard and respected. Therefore, I strongly support the Constitutional Amendment process which requires a high degree of consensus.

When the Fiji Truth and Reconciliation Commission Bill 2024 was debated in this august House, I had some reservations in supporting the Bill. I had wished that the Commission would not only focus on the modern political upheaval but include the biggest and devastating upheaval in Fiji's history known as the "Little War." Nevertheless, I understand that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission continues to work and promote understanding, healing and unity to those who have lived through turbulent events of 1987, 2006 and the aftermath.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as a devoted Christian, I plead with everyone who were affected by the upheaval to forgive and forget the past. One of those who was greatly affected by the turbulent events of the past was the late Adi Kuini Speed, a former leader of a Coalition Party, Deputy Prime Minister and widow of the late Prime Minister, Dr. Timoci Bavadra. Not only was I related to her, she was someone that I looked up to as a mentor, she was outspoken and had the qualities of a great leader.

In her final message to the people of Fiji from her sick bed in Canberra in 1994, two days before the seventh anniversary of the 1987 *coup*, she said and I quote: "God has spoken to me and told me to forgive everyone and forget about the events of 1987." She urged everyone else who had been hurt during the events of 1987 to follow suit. She went on to say, and I quote:

"It is my hope that I can play my part in building a Fiji that gives the world a new understanding of unconditional love and total forgiveness that Jesus Christ gave us."

Here is someone who has lived through the turbulent events of 1987 and 2000, and to know that she has forgave and forgot the past, is a great lesson for all honourable Members present here and our fellow Fijians.

Madam Deputy Speaker, true forgiveness rooted in divine grace is considered a supernatural act that originates from God, enabling believers to release bitterness and extend mercy to others just as they have been forgiven. It is about changing how you remember, allowing you to recall the event

without triggering pain, anger or bitterness. It is a command, not just a feeling that reflects God's character and requires relying on his strength to forgive the unforgivable.

Fiji's public enterprises provide key benefits like improved economic efficiency, reduced taxpayer burden and enhanced service delivery. As stated by His Excellency the President that public enterprises are central to our economic infrastructure, delivering essential services, driving investment and supporting inclusive growth.

Last week the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs visited the Fiji Rice Mill in Dreketi, and we were fortunate to have met with the CEO and his team, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways Northern Division officials and existing Vanua Levu rice farmers. It was indeed an eye-opening experience for me, and we thank your good office for allowing our Committee to conduct such a visit. Rice farming is a highly viable, profitable business in Fiji. With over 80 percent of rice imported, there is a large, guaranteed local market.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways must continue to support existing rice farmers and work towards increasing rice production and improving the livelihoods of farmers in the Northern Division. With that being said, I take this opportunity to thank the CEO of Fiji Rice and his staff for their hard work and for going the extra mile with limited resources to revive the rice industry. I would also like to thank the farmers from Vunimoli and Wailevu, Macuata; Dalomo farmers and Dalomo Village Youth; Lovo Village Youth, Bua; and Nabua Youth Rice Farmers in Navatu, Cakaudrove; for their hard work and contribution towards the industry.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we need more farmers, like the ones I have mentioned above. Their biggest challenge was getting more land to plant rice. Currently, they are engaging with nearby landowners under an informal agreement to utilise their land.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Manoa Nabiri, a youth from Nabua, mentioned that he used to be a *yaqona* farmer for four years. After his *yaqona* got stolen, he gave up on *yaqona* farming and thought to try out rice farming. According to him, he only wished, he had known about rice farming earlier. He is excited about rice farming and, hopefully, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways will assist him and his fellow youth rice farmers with the machinery.

Madam Deputy Speaker, if we plant more rice, exports will generally increase, provided the production increase exceeds domestic consumption demands. With the increase in production, it can

- allow for greater export values, potentially boosting the national economy;
- help reduce dependence on foreign imports, promoting self-sufficiency; and
- boost higher yields which can create jobs, boost local economies and increase income for farmers.

On tourism, Madam Deputy Speaker, we commend Tourism Fiji and its stakeholders in achieving a record-breaking year in 2025, welcoming 986,367 visitors, which surpassed the 2023 record of 929,740 and showed a 0.3 percent increase over 2024.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Fijian hospitality is a way of life. It is not learnt, but a gift from God. It is a globally renowned, deeply ingrained culture of warmth, friendliness, and genuine unconditional care for visitors.

Madam Deputy Speaker, hospitality is fundamentally driven by passion, transforming routine service into memorable and heartfelt experiences. It is viewed as a "calling" to make guests feel valued and cared for, rather than just a job.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Fijian people, are considered the core strength of the Fijian Tourism Industry. Therefore, I remind our youth who choose tourism as a career, that choosing a career in tourism requires a genuine passion for hospitality because the industry is fundamentally built on creating positive and memorable experiences for travellers.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while technical skills can be taught, a service-oriented mindset, characterised by empathy, passion for helping others, and a desire to make people feel comfortable, is the “heart” of the industry.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we welcome the tourism developments extended to other Divisions, such as the joint initiative, Na Vualiku Project, supported by the World Bank. The Na Vualiku Project will drive economic growth, contributing 40 percent to GDP, create thousands of jobs, and improve infrastructure like roads, water and airports.

Madam Deputy Speaker, these initiatives will promote sustainable, community-based tourism, empower woman entrepreneurs, and protect natural/cultural heritage.

On health and medical services, Madam Deputy Speaker, I commend the Ministry of Health and Medical Services for hosting the recent National Health Transformation Summit that was held in December 2025, and its outcome which will be focusing on prevention, primary healthcare, system resilience, and sustainable reform.

Madam Deputy Speaker, evidence suggest that the core of Fiji's health crisis, particularly the high prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), is a shift in dietary habits toward processed foods, rather than a total lack of healthy options. Madam, NCDs account for over 80 percent of all deaths in Fiji, driven by diets high in fat, sugar and salt.

Madam Deputy Speaker, focusing on prevention is the way forward for our nation. The preventative measures – such as screenings, vaccinations and lifestyle counselling, reduce disease incidence, mortality, and long-term costs by detecting issues early. They enhance the quality of life, prevent chronic condition progression, and empower patients to manage their health, reducing overall burden on our healthcare systems. Last week, whilst visiting a relative at CWM Hospital, I was deeply saddened seeing fellow Fijians going through a lot of pain.

Madam Deputy Speaker, a healthy population drives economic growth through higher productivity, fewer work absences, and lower healthcare costs, making physical and mental wellbeing a cornerstone of national prosperity. When we invest in public health, including preventative care and active lifestyles, it creates a resilient, capable workforce that fuels economic development.

On youth development, Madam Deputy Speaker, I commend the Government's commitment in supporting the development of our youth through inclusive initiatives, school-based programmes and community engagement, to foster character, leadership skills and civic responsibility among young people. This initiative focusses only on the development of the three core aspects of life, which is the physical, mental and social development, and that the Ministry continues to overlook the one very important aspect, which is the spiritual wellbeing of our youth. No amount of human effort can change the mindset of our youth. If we continue to neglect this aspect of life, we need to align our youth to Christ, which involves fostering a personal identity of Jesus, encouraging spiritual disciplines and engaging them in active ministry to cultivate a saving heart.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is sad to say that most active religious youth groups are not registered with the Ministry of Youth and Sports. What I also noted from previous years, that some

youth groups are just formed and registered to apply for funding or assistance from the Ministry of Youth and Sports. After receiving their assistance, they become inactive till to-date. For most of us who grew up and are actively involved in youth activities, our youth clubs did not need any government assistance to keep functioning. We were trained to be independent and raised funds to assist us.

Madam Deputy Speaker, when we have big camps with a camp fee of \$100 per youth, 5,000 youths will turn up to the camp. Any camp organised by the Adventist Church in the Western Division, I am proud to say that the biggest number of youth attending these big spiritual gatherings are from Nadroga/Navosa. The Western Division Easter Camp that was held at Nadarivatu last year, our youth from Navosa/Nadroga paid more than \$9,000 in camp fees. What I admire with youth from my district is that they may fall short of the glory of God most times, but when it comes to spiritual revival gatherings, they will never miss out in attending the event.

Madam Deputy Speaker, no amount of youth and sports development can stop societal issues faced by our youth today. Major spiritual revival is what a youth needs. When our youth align themselves to God, then the nation need not worry. The phrase, "youth, our leaders of tomorrow" often attributed to Nelson Mandela, emphasising that young people possess the energy, creativity and potential to shape the future. It is a call to empower youth through education, skills training and civic engagement, such as in Youth Parliaments and mentoring programmes. With all that is happening in our world today, I would say that God-fearing youth are leaders of tomorrow.

Fiji does not need social media youth leaders, someone who posts everything that he or she is doing to try and convince the public that he or she is doing something useful. We do not need those types of leaders. What Fiji needs today are God-fearing youth leaders. When our young generation are grounded in faith and moral principles, they are destined to guide society, churches and nations towards a righteous future. It emphasises that true leadership requires not only talent and energy, but also integrity and a sense of divine responsibility.

In October last year, the Navosa Rugby Union coach contacted everyone in the district to seek financial assistance. In just one day, we collected \$10,000, thanks to every Navosa supporter locally and abroad, who gave willingly towards a worthy cause.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Navosa Rugby Union Supporters' Association was formed and had only one task, that is, to fund the players' welfare, and that each player has to receive \$100 per week when they break camp, since majority of our players were unemployed. This fundraising drive went on every week during the Vanua Cup Challenge. Therefore, I would like to thank our President, Merewai Kalou, and the committee for this great initiative.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I challenge and encourage all provincial rugby unions and supporters, please, look after the welfare of your players. Most of these players sacrifice their time and resources to play for our provincial teams. Any donation towards their welfare is greatly welcomed and appreciated.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Fiji's unemployment rate is approximately 4.3 percent as of late 2023 to late 2024, according to reports from the Ministry of Finance. The two main types of unemployment in Fiji are voluntary unemployment and involuntary unemployment. Involuntary unemployment occurs when people want to work at prevailing wages but cannot find jobs, whereas the voluntary unemployment occurs when individuals choose not to work, often due to low wages rates, often prioritising leisure, education or searching for better opportunities over immediate employment, or just being lazy and avoid work or effort. Most of our unemployment youth today come under voluntary unemployment.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, are you about to finish?

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Yes, Madam.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Thank you.

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Madam Deputy Speaker, this is not caused by the lesser job opportunity, but many are focussing on their sporting careers and employers would not employ them on a part-time basis. These youth, if given the task to do, they will faithfully execute and complete the task, provided it is done out of their training or game times.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the other voluntary unemployed youth is called a work-shy youth. He or she is someone who is lazy, indolent and actively avoids work or effort. It is often used to criticise individuals perceived as unwilling to contribute to the society such as work-shy layabouts. Unfortunately, the National Employment Centre (NEC) cannot detect these youth. With the current recruitment policy of the Ministry, the work-shy youth easily get registered with NEC, who thinks that working abroad is like picnicking.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you have gone way over your time. I have been very patient, and I ask you to end your response now, please.

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Thank you for this opportunity and I wish every honourable Member and fellow Fijians good health and God's blessings in the final year of this parliamentary term.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Just a hint to honourable Members, saying "Madam Deputy Speaker" actually takes up one second and saying that repeatedly just adds more seconds into minutes into your speech. So, "Madam" is fine, "Deputy Speaker" is fine, or just cut that out next time I am sitting here.

I am happy to announce to the honourable Members of the Special Committee on the Sugar Industry of your meeting at the Small Committee Room immediately when we rise. Lunch will be served there for you.

Honourable Members, at this point, we will suspend proceedings for lunch. Parliament will resume at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.22 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.38 p.m.

(Mr. Speaker assumed his seat in the Chambers)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with our remaining speakers on His Excellency Address this afternoon. However, before we do, as usual, I am most thankful and grateful to the honourable Deputy Speaker for presiding over this morning's proceedings.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, our viewers who are joining us in the gallery and those who are watching the live streaming; I rise to support the motion moved by the honourable Prime Minister in thanking His Excellency the President, for the most gracious Address at the State Opening of Parliament on 16th February, 2026. I do so with deep sense of responsibility.

Our responsibility is shared by this Coalition Government to restore confidence in our democracy, strengthen our institutions and serve the people of Fiji with humility and determination. Today, Fiji continues a journey of renewal, a journey grounded in freedom, accountability and unity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most significant achievements of this Coalition Government has been the restoration of democratic freedom. For too long, our nation lived under a climate where voices were restrained and dissent was discouraged. However, democracy cannot breathe where fear exists. The greatest gift returned by this Government is the freedom of our people, freedom to speak, to question, and to participate in shaping the future of our nation.

Today, citizens express their views openly. Our media operates without intimidation. Civil society participates confidently in national dialogue. These freedoms are not small matter; they are the foundation of a healthy democracy.

Mr. Speaker, there was a time when many in this country hesitated to speak openly. Today, that fear has lifted, citizens debate freely, communities engage confidently, and democracy breathes again. That is the Fiji we believe in.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to address the matter of constitutional review. There is no constitutional crisis in Fiji. In fact, what we have is a constitutional rejection. What exists is a growing recognition across our country that the 2013 Constitution must evolve to reflect the true aspirations of our people.

The Constitution must belong to the people. It must reflect their values, traditions and democratic voice. As His Excellency rightly stated, this Government has begun the process of reviewing the Constitution, so that it reflects the lived realities of our nation. This process is not about division - it is about inclusion, and it is about ensuring that the supreme law of our nation carries the legitimacy and the ownership of the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency highlighted the need for strengthening traditional institutions. Fiji's strength lies not only in Government institutions, but also in our communities. Our traditional institutions, our faith communities and our village leadership structures have always been pillars of stability in our nation.

This Government understands that the real solutions to social challenges must come from within our communities. That is why we are working closely with faith leaders, community leaders and traditional authorities to address serious issues facing our society.

Issues such as drug abuse, HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancies, the erosion of social values affecting families and communities, and a few others, Government alone cannot solve these challenges. However, together with communities, churches and traditional leadership, we can strengthen the moral and social fabric of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency spoke on national values, faith and social cohesion. Development is not measured only by roads, bridges or buildings. True development is also measured by the values that guide our nation. This Government believes in a Fiji grounded in shared national values, values that promote unity, responsibility and respect.

We are proud to be a multiethnic and multi-faith society. Our diversity is not our weakness, it is our strength, and our future prosperity depends on our ability to continue living together with mutual respect, understanding and cooperation. This Government remains committed to strengthening social cohesion and building a Fiji where every citizen feels a sense of belonging.

Mr. Speaker, while restoring democratic freedoms and strengthening our institutions, this Government remains focused on the practical needs of our people. We are investing in infrastructure that connects communities and supports economic opportunity.

The honourable Minister for Public Works, Metereological Services and Transport, in his speech, has clearly highlighted the Ministry's enormous achievements and those in the plan yet to be materialised. As the Assistant Minister, I see first-hand the importance of this work.

Mr. Speaker, honourable Hem Chand mentioned that all he is hearing are grand announcements and ambitions projected to translate to inconvenience. I think he chooses not to see what is happening around him. The Government has done a lot. It has delivered and will continue to deliver.

Last year, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) was given a budget of around \$12 million for eight of its capital projects. The LTA has already completed, or in the process of completing all the eight projects, which includes -

- (1) system digitalisation;
- (2) restoration of the Labasa Office;
- (3) immutable backup system;
- (4) Sigatoka Weighbridge;
- (5) Nakasi Express Office;
- (6) procurement of portable speed cameras;
- (7) ANPR and CCTV; and the
- (8) Valelevu Automated Inspection Lane.

That is what you call 'deliver', that is what you call 'moving on with the job', and that is what you call 'achievement'.

Mr. Speaker, we said that we are going to –

- introduce an illicit drug test law for drivers to help in our fight against drugs, and to ensure safety on our roads - we are almost there.
- clear the Suva Harbour from derelict - we have already started the process. Right now, about 40 percent of those boats have been scuttled, scrapped or restored.
- increase fines to act as deterrent and save lives on our roads - we did it.

- enhance public transport services by both bringing back the taxi-based system and properly licence private vehicles doing passenger scuttling, especially those operating in the rural - right now, we are at the gazetting stage. There will be additional taxis on our roads to serve our semi and rural communities.
- address the road congestion in the Suva-Nausori, Lami-Suva, Nadi-Lautoka and Lautoka-Ba corridors - what we are witnessing now is traffic demand exceeds road capacity, resulting in slower speed, longer trip time and increase in regular queuing. It happens only in school days and certain hours of the day. We are working on that right now.

Someone asked a comprehensive plan. The honourable Minister for Public Works, Metereological Services and Transport, in this august House, explained the Government strategies to counter congestion.

Honourable Nath came out in the media talking about congestion, on what appears to be trying to educate Government on what to do. Mr. Speaker, the congestion problem has been there for more than 10 years, but nothing serious was done to address it. This Government has already started the work and will complete the task, because we understand the suffering commuters go through when caught up in traffic congestions.

We are currently engaged in the fifth phase of the plan here in the Central Division, and now we have decreased travelling time by 15 minutes to 25 minutes on the major routes. Mr. Speaker, more changes will be seen on the Nausori-Suva, the Lami-Suva and the Nadi-Lautoka main routes, as we target to reduce current travelling time by 50 percent.

Fiji's congestion challenges are not complex. It only happens during school days and only on the major towns and cities, so solutions should be considered around school time. The honourable Prime Minister has already mentioned about work-flexi hours. That is a huge push towards Government's effort to address congestion.

Mr. Speaker, Government remains firmly committed to building a safe, efficient and resilient land transport system that serves the needs of all Fijians. Through the LTA, we are implementing several key initiatives, aimed at enhancing enforcement, improving service delivery, and ensuring our transport systems are future ready.

Firstly, the Authority will establish a National Command Centre (NCC), that will function as a central hub for monitoring transport operations, managing enforcement data, and coordinating real-time response to incidents on our roads. To further enhance transparency, accountability and officer safety, the Authority will introduce body-worn cameras for Enforcement Officers.

The Authority is also prioritising the professional development of its vehicle examiners and driving examiners. Through enhanced training programmes, modern inspection tools and improved testing standards, it will ensure that vehicle inspections and driver assessments continue to uphold the highest level of road safety.

In anticipation of the transition towards cleaner transportation technologies, the Authority will introduce electric vehicle technical training and capacity-building programmes for our LTA Officers. These programmes will equip the LTA Officers and technical teams with the knowledge required to regulate and assess electric vehicles, as their presence grow within our transport system.

A key milestone in the Authority's transformation is the ongoing business process re-engineering initiative, which was launched in December 2025, with anticipation of future releases as part of the LTA digitalisation journey.

The Authority will also roll out the P1 and P2 provisional driver licence systems around June 2026, aiming to strengthen the graduated driver's licencing framework, and ensuring that new drivers gain the necessary experience before progressing to full licence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another significant development is the Public Transport Plan for the greater Suva area, which is supported by the World Bank under the Activate Public Transport Programme. This Plan will guide the modernisation and integration of public transport to create a more efficient, reliable and accessible system for commuters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government Shipping Service's (GSS) Franchise Scheme ensures essential maritime connectivity to remote islands. From 2023 to 2026, GSS's Franchise Scheme supported 340 trips, transporting 49,748 passengers and 13,258 tonnes of cargo, demonstrating its critical role in linking isolated communities with national services and markets. The Scheme will continue providing services to the people of Lau, Lomaiviti, Kadavu, Yasawa, Rotuma and the Northern maritime regions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF) has advanced maritime safety oversight and service delivery nationwide. To date, more than 4,000 vessels have been registered and over 13,000 seafarers certified and registered. The Authority processed more than 167,000 vessel clearances, conducted 126 Port State Control inspections, and intensified enforcement to uphold international safety standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, modern laws are essential to modern services. The Ministry has commenced the review of the Fiji Roads Authority Act 2012, Roads Act 1914, Maritime Transport Act 2013, and the Ship Registration Act 2013, to name a few. We are focused on moving Fiji forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in closing, I want to say that the people of Fiji expect leadership. They expect honesty, accountability, and commitment to the national interest.

This Coalition Government remains fully committed to that responsibility. We will continue to protect the freedoms of our people. We will continue to strengthen democratic institutions. We will continue to invest in infrastructure that supports growth and opportunity, and we will continue to work alongside communities, traditional leaders and faith organisations to build a stronger nation. Fiji is turning a new page, a page defined by transparency, respect for democratic institutions and a renewed partnership between government and the people.

Work of rebuilding trust has begun, and this Government remains committed to seeing it through. Fiji, as always, is resilient. Time and again, our people have demonstrated courage, unity and determination in the face of challenges and today, with renewed confidence, we continue the work of building a better future - a future grounded in democracy, a future built on unity, a future where every Fijian can look ahead with hope.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the motion before the House. *Vinaka saka vakalevu.*

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; a very good afternoon to you all and *Ni sa bula vinaka.*

Mr. Speaker, at the outset, I acknowledge the landowners of the land where we gather here this afternoon - the past, present and future landowners, *Na Vanua o Nadonumai – ki via Na Gone Turaga Na Tui Suva.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the motion that is before this House, thanking His Excellency for his most gracious Address in the opening of Parliament on 16th February, 2026.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 16th February 2026, we were reminded of who we are as a nation, our journey, our sovereignty and our collective responsibility, to protect what has been entrusted to us, as His Excellency rightly stated, and I quote: "Our national progress is grounded not only in policy and institutions, but in shared values, faith, compassion, respect and service."

His Excellency's words were thoughtful, measured and grounded in the lived realities of our people. They were not merely ceremonial remarks - they were called to action, a reminder of the responsibilities we carry, and the expectations of the citizens placed on us.

His Excellency spoke with clarity about the challenges before us, but also with confidence in our collective ability to overcome them. Today, Mr. Speaker, I wish to expand on some of the things that he highlighted, and to reaffirm our commitment to advancing the wellbeing of every Fijian.

Mr. Speaker, in his Address, His Excellency reminded the nation that our Constitution, as the supreme law of Fiji, must remain a living document. It must not be static, nor confined to the circumstances of the past. Instead, it must evolve, adapt and reflect the aspirations, values and lived realities of our people today.

Government has, therefore, commenced a responsible and principled review of the 2013 Constitution. This process, Mr. Speaker, began in this House and is not driven by politics, nor by narrow interests, but by the commitment of this Government to democratic constitutionalism, good governance and a respect for the rule of law.

His Excellency made it clear that constitutional governance must strengthen national unity, protect fundamental rights and uphold the sovereignty of the people of Fiji. Central to this review, Mr. Speaker, is the conviction that the Constitution belongs to the people, and so the people must be at the heart of its renewal. His Excellency emphasised that meaningful public participation will guide this process.

Government is committed to ensuring that the voices of all Fijians across communities, generations and regions are heard, respected and reflected in the outcomes. This will be achieved through structured consultations, expert engagement and transparent dialogue. The review will not be rushed, nor will it be conducted behind closed doors. Instead, it will be open, inclusive, and grounded in broad-based consensus. This approach is essential to reinforcing public confidence in the constitutional framework that underpins our democratic institutions.

His Excellency also reaffirmed that any constitutional amendment Bill, like all other Bills, will be made public and will undergo extensive consultations. There will be robust debates, public scrutiny, and opportunities for input before any proposal is tabled before this House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in advancing this process, Government remains guided by the national interest and by a shared determination to secure a constitutional order that supports peace, prosperity, and unity for present and future generations. This is not merely a legal exercise - it is a nation building endeavour. It is an opportunity to strengthen our democracy, deepen our unity, and ensure that the supreme law of our land truly reflects who we are and who we aspire to become.

His Excellency also highlighted the rising cost of living, driven by global shocks and economic pressures beyond our control. These pressures affect every Fijian - from market vendors and farmers to workers, students, and even retirees.

While we cannot control global events, we can control how we respond to them. The Coalition Government will ensure that our policies provide relief where it is most needed, protect vulnerable households, and strengthen resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji faces a complex and unstable global landscape marked by instability and widespread uncertainty. Across multiple regions, interconnected crisis poses significant threats to global, regional and national stability. Therefore, we must ensure that our capabilities and readiness are up to par.

The Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs' National Security Strategy 2025-2029 emphasises on the safeguarding of our maritime boundaries and preserving our natural resources within our EEZ, thus, strengthening maritime awareness, improving lift capacity, and maintaining operational readiness are practical necessities. This is not about prestige or display; it is about safeguarding our sovereignty. It is about ensuring that Fiji can act in its own interest, protect our people, and provide regional and global response as and when required.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji is a maritime nation. Our ocean space is vast and porous but precious to our daily lives. Therefore, our security begins at sea. The Republic of Fiji Military Forces' Naval Division continues its work quietly and consistently, patrolling our waters, supporting law enforcement, protecting our *iqoliqoli*, and working with our regional partners to strengthen our maritime domain awareness to address maritime illegal activities and emerging threats. Their dedication ensures that our waters remain safe, our sovereignty is respected, and that our communities can live sustainably through the sea.

To ensure our maritime resources are safeguarded, the Ministry is currently in the phase of developing Fiji's first ever Maritime Security Strategy. The Strategy represents a shift from *ad hoc* responses towards a coordinated whole of government and a whole of society approach to maritime security.

As rightly stated by His Excellency, structured partnerships can help mobilise resources. The Maritime Security Strategy is intended to provide clear direction, shared priorities and practical mechanisms for defence, law enforcement, border security, fisheries, customs, environmental protection and disaster response.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, maritime security is closely connected to disaster response. When disasters strike and our islands and maritime communities are cut off, it is our vessels and personnel who are first on the scene. Therefore, building stronger logistic networks, forward operating capabilities, and rapid deployment systems is no longer theoretical, but a requirement for operational effectiveness. It is a service in its purest form.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst the Pacific nations are navigating complex geo-strategic dynamics, the Ministry of Defence will continue to work closely with our Pacific neighbours in the spirit of cooperation, partnership and mutual respect.

We reaffirm our commitment to implementing the Pacific Vision of our region as the Ocean of Peace. This is not simply a statement, it is a principle that guides our engagement, our regional and global initiatives. Our partnerships strengthen interoperability, ensure shared security, and demonstrate the values that Fiji stands for.

I also wish to acknowledge and thank our peacekeepers, Mr. Speaker, who are currently serving or has returned from tour of duty overseas. Across the globe, they carry the flag of Fiji with professionalism, pride, discipline, and honour. As His Excellency rightfully stated, and I quote:

“Their contributions remind us that nationhood is sustained as much by character and service, as it is by institutions.”

Their service, Mr. Speaker, reflects the values that define our nation - courage, commitment, and respect for human dignity. They are a source of pride for all Fijians. Their commitment to maintaining peace, strengthening defence relationships and cooperation, not only enhances Fiji's global peacekeeping footprint, but showcasing our tradition, culture and values.

Mr. Speaker, we must also continue to support our veterans here at home. Their contribution to our nation does not end when their active service comes to an end. They are mentors, community leaders, and living examples of service. Supporting them is a responsibility we owe, not only as a nation, but as a government that respects sacrifice and service.

Mr. Speaker, our veterans have truly served our country with dedication, dignity and respect. These veterans, in recognition of their duty of service, have ensured stability, economic growth, and in building a better community and nation. Their key roles as veterans serves to promote discipline, support our current serving Fijian soldiers, and a supportive foundation of military service in ensuring national security and national resilience.

Mr. Speaker, as we approach an election year, I wish to reaffirm to this House, and most importantly to the people of Fiji, that the RFMF remains fully committed to the Constitution and civilian authority. Stability, discipline and respect for the rule of law are non-negotiable. Our commitment is unwavering, and our role is clear - to serve with integrity, professionalism and dedication.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, we are reminded by His Excellency's Address that Fiji's strength lies in its unity. Our diversity of cultures, languages, traditions and identities is not a weakness - it is a source of resilience and pride. He urged us to work together, across political lines, to build a Fiji that is stable. It means a shared purpose. It means putting the nation above personal or political interest.

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency's call for unity is timely. In a world marked by division and uncertainty, we must remain anchored in solidarity, respect, and cooperation for the betterment of our beloved country. On that note, Mr. Speaker, I, once again, thank His Excellency for his most gracious Address, and I thank you, Sir, for giving me this opportunity to speak on the motion by the honourable Prime Minister.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and citizens of Fiji; I rise to thank His Excellency, our President, *na Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau*, for his most gracious Address. There is very little in His Excellency's Address that I cannot agree with. The sentiments he has raised, the values, the aspirations, the plans and the legislative agenda, they are all relevant, Sir.

As Members of Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is our duty to this country and to God who placed us here, to speak frankly in this august House about the things that will help better the lives of our people. We, Members of Parliament, are all imperfect vessels, but we must strive to live up to our calling of serving God and Fiji in this Parliament, and it is from this context that I give my reply today. I will abide by the Socrates' sieve, as His Excellency the President has asked us to do, that is, to make sure that my words today are true- *e ka dina*, that they are good - *e ka vinaka*, and necessary or useful, *e ka yaga*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reviewed the performance achieved against the commitments made in His Excellency's Address in 2025, and my cursory analysis indicates that 34 percent of those commitments were completed, 62 percent were partially completed, and 4 percent were not completed. The 34 percent completed execution is not good enough.

Last year, the honourable Prime Minister moved a motion to thank His Excellency for his most gracious Address. Then his Government turns around and only fully delivers on 36 percent of those commitments. That is the height of disrespect to our Head of State. Almost everyone on the Government side is either a Minister, or an Assistant Minister, and I think only three or four, perhaps five, of Government Members of Parliament are not part of the executive. However, still, execution is incomplete.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition had suggested that a Parliamentary Select Committee be set up to monitor the performance of Government on critical matters, especially those raised by His Excellency. Given what I have just said, I think we really need to make sure that that committee comes into being, Sir.

His Excellency acknowledged the sovereignty of our people, and I thank him for that. Yes, Mr. Speaker, all of our people are sovereign, not just some of them, not just one ethnic group, not one religion, not one part of Fiji, but all of us. He reminded us that diversity is our strength, implying that if we get rid of that diversity, or minimise that diversity, we are shooting ourselves in the foot and eroding our strength.

The level of development of Fiji is far superior to almost all Pacific Island countries. A key reason for that has been the diversity we have and the different strengths that each community has brought to bear on developing Fiji, and we must maintain that diversity, Sir. I completely agree with His Excellency that unity is our purpose and that we must safeguard our unity by ensuring that development is fair, inclusive and equitably sustainable.

His Excellency reminded us that progress cannot be measured by growth alone, but on how well the benefits of development are shared evenly by us all. Indeed, he quoted the Household Income and Expenditure Survey that showed that hardships persist. A quarter of our population below the poverty line, a quarter just hovering above it, higher rural poverty, 18 percent youth unemployment – these are challenges that I understand cannot be dealt with overnight, but it is something that we need to address. The question is, how well are we already delivering on the values that His Excellency has articulated? How well do we live these values in the future? More importantly, Sir, how have those in power demonstrated behaviour that reflects those values?

On Tuesday, honourable Vocea questioned the loyalty of the Opposition to Fiji. I reassure him and Fiji that we, indeed, are the loyal Opposition. We are loyal to Fiji and to Fijians. We give recognition where it is due. We hold Government to account. We cooperate with Government when it is the right thing to do, and we point out without any fear and with objectivity the things that need to be said in this country to set things right.

His Excellency has intimated that Government's programme for 2026 will be based on three foundational principles of unity and diversity, sustainability and resilience, integrity and good governance. He also told us that Fiji stands at a defining moment – a moment where we must choose unity over division, progress over fear and a shared future over the old politics that kept us apart. He challenged us to rebuild trust, strengthen national cohesion and put the wellbeing of every Fijian at the centre of our decisions. That message speaks directly to the 150-year history that His Excellency also referred to.

When the British brought indentured labourers to Fiji, they created the system that kept our communities apart - *iTaukei* on one side and Indo-Fijians on the other. That separation was not cultural, it was not chosen, it was imposed, and for decades those divisions have shaped our politics, our institutions, and even our sense of identity.

However, Mr. Speaker, as His Excellency the President said, the time has come to move beyond the factors of our past. We cannot carry colonial divisions into a modern democracy. We cannot build a strong Fiji, while holding on to the structures designed to keep us weak. We are all Fijians.

Our Indo-Fijian brothers and sisters have helped build this nation with their labour, their enterprise and their resilience. Our Melanesian cousins, who were brought here by blackbirders have contributed to this country. All other ethnicities that call Fiji home, have contributed to our development. We, *iTaukei*, as custodians of the land, anchor this country with identity, heritage and belonging.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the era of dividing people for political gain must end. The era of weaponising differences in ethnicity and of fear-based politics must end. If we are serious about honouring His Excellency's call, that we must commit to laws and policies, then put the people first, not ethnicity first, not party first, not personal ambition first, but people first. A Fiji where every child, regardless of background, has equal opportunity. A Fiji where our diversity strengthened us. A Fiji where unity is not a slogan but a live reality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President has set the tone. Now, it is our responsibility to deliver. A united Fiji is not just possible, it is absolutely necessary, and it begins with the choices that we make in this House. Unity must be built through fair laws, inclusive policies, respectful leadership, and shared commitment to do good.

Yesterday, we heard from honourable Pillay, who talked about how the former Minister for Sugar would just argue with cane farmers and have no respect at all for their views. No respect there! That is just one example of such lack of respect for leadership.

For the last three weeks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were in Vanualevu and at every village, we were told in *iTaukei*, and I will speak in *iTaukei* here:

*“Vinaka vakalevu na siro mai.” Au qai kaya yani vei ira na lewenivanua, “Keitou sega ni siro yani, keitou cabe mai, baleta o keimami na nomuni Mata ena Boselawa, na neimami i tavi na qaravi kemuni na lewenivanua. Ko ni neimami madamada, neimami liuliu.”*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is when we know and remember that we are called to serve, that we will lead with respect for all citizens. Integrity and good governance strengthen trust in public institutions and public leadership, Sir. There are many good things that this Government has managed to achieve, and all the applaud is for the good that you have done. There have been many cases of solid integrity and good governance.

There are also bad governance examples that are very, very worrisome and that we must curtail, Sir. I will list a few of them, Sir, as follows:

- The Barbara Malimali appointment which was condemned by a Commission of Inquiry.
- The Barbara Malimali dismissal which was ruled unlawful by the High Court case.
- Prime Minister remaining in office, despite the constitutional breach, and yesterday, we learned that he is going to appeal the decision. I assume....

MR. SPEAKER.- And that is why you will not refer to it.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I will move on, Sir.

- Francis Pulewai – the resignation and allegations of interference. She made allegations of political interference in FICAC investigations.
- The politicisation of the Civil Service – sidekicks, cronies and failed candidates being employed, some in very senior roles.
- The PSC then abolishing contract appointments, introducing permanent tenure and extending retirement age to 60 years, thereby locking in political appointments.
- Fiji Corrections Service – the nepotism and abuse of the office, hiring of relatives, bypassing procedures, retaliatory demotions.
- Pacific Polytech - physical irregularities. The Director, Dr, Eci Naisele, actually stated that the grant provided to Pacific Polytech was without the Commission's approval and could be considered illegal as Pacific Polytech failed to meet accreditation standard, Sir.
- The decision not to pay Pacific Polytech the grant was a Board decision. Yet, Government decided to remove the Board Chair, who was basically working on the legal advice provided by the Solicitor-General's Office in September 2025, not to release the funds. Why was there a rush to remove the Chairperson a month before his term ended, although the decision had been taken by the Board itself? Were these all done just to facilitate the payment of \$7 million to Pacific Polytech?
- Fiji Sports Council issues, a brief rundown, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We had the issue happening in late February to March last year, the whistleblower raised concerns, no action by the Prime Minister. He did not seek information or intervene.
- April-December 2025, more insights from the whistleblower. FSC Board becomes aware. No corrective action is done.
- January 2026 - Sports Council investigates independent investigation. No response from the honourable Prime Minister.
- February 20<sup>th</sup> - No corrective action is done.
- January 2026 - FSC instigates independent investigation. No response from the honourable Prime Minister.
- February 2026 - Media raises many questions. PM refuses to comment.
- Early March 2026 – The whistle-blower information becomes public. It is published by MaiTV and Fiji Village News. No response by the Prime Minister. Six months later the Prime Minister dismisses honourable Jese Saukuru and orders the suspension of the Chief Executive officer (CEO). In this case, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the investigation will be carried out and it will take its course. In time, we will learn if the former Minister and CEO were at fault, but my issue is this ...

MR. SPEAKER.- A Point of Order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Yes, why the delay?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a Point of Order. I refer to Standing Order 62(3). The Member is referring to the conduct of another member and certainly in areas where he knows

himself, maybe he is not used to it as he is used to a Prime Minister that would put his nose and business in every Ministry.

It is not the way in this Government. The honourable Prime Minister is not the Minister for Youth, to direct or comment on the work of the Fiji Sports Council or its Board. That is the role of the Minister, and he is alleging or stating that the honourable Prime Minister should comment on that. I think he just needs to choose his words wisely in terms of the conduct of the Prime Minister and his jurisdiction in terms of the exercise of his powers and his authority. I think he needs to be corrected on that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Usamate, I have listened to honourable Tabuya's Point of Order. What is important for you is to refer to non-action, but not to specifically refer to what needed to be done. That is a slight variation of what we are talking about because you are trying to tell the Office holder, the shortcomings and that, I think, it is all right in respect of your description of the criticism of what is happening.

I will take that point. If you can, please, observe that direction, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- If governance and integrity is such a thing, why does Government delay investigating to find the truth? Why?

The current leadership of Fiji seems to have a persistent pattern of burying their heads in the sand, hoping that problems will go away. That is poor in decisive leadership that just pays lip service to the idea and value of integrity and governance. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is the abdication of leadership.

His Excellency has advised us that the Constitution is a living document and that it must evolve and reflect the aspirations, values and lived realities of our people, that it will be guided by the principles of democratic constitutionalism, good governance and respect for the rule of law. The end result must strengthen national unity, protect fundamental rights and uphold the sovereignty of the people of Fiji. The review must work to build broad-based consensus and reinforce public confidence in the constitutional framework that underpins our democratic institutions.

I expect, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Opposition will be consulted in the formulation of the Constitution (Amendment) Bill, and we look forward to an extensive consultation process with a robust public debate and input before it is tabled to Cabinet and to Parliament.

His Excellency also informed us of the Government's intention to review the Native Land Administration and *i Taukei* institutions, to ensure that they remain fit for purpose in a modern Fiji. Times have changed since these structures were put in place, and it is time that they are reviewed. Changes must be done in the best interest of the *iTaukei* and also be done in a manner that does not penalise or lead to negative impacts on other communities in our country.

His Excellency also brought up the concept that effective leadership for growth is strongest when traditional authority and Government operate in partnership. This is a very effective formula for development, and I agree with them on that.

I endorse the honourable Leader of the Opposition's sentiments that traditional leaders can act as conduits for Government programmes, ensuring that development initiatives are culturally sensitive, relevant and sustainable, so that their involvement can also be crucial in conflict resolution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the honourable Leader of the Opposition has highlighted, traditional

leadership has been based on customary ancestral and religious authority, and it carries a high degree of legitimacy, especially among *iTaukei*, that complements the legitimacy of Government itself. This synergy will help increase compliance with laws and Government policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I open my reply to His Excellency's most gracious Address by highlighting the poor execution by Government of the commitments that His Excellency had highlighted in his Address last year. His Excellency had called for good governance and this, in turn, requires good execution. I now wish to highlight some of the concerns that have risen recently in relation to that poor execution.

On 1st May, 2025, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government passed a motion that all taxis go back to their bases, but this has not been gazetted. So, taxis have not returned to bases. No execution, poor governance. A lot of electricity transformers are not performing because of overload. There are a lot of complaints about voltage dropping. The EFL is making money but cannot serve the people well. No execution, poor governance.

The Minister for Education talked about the opening of new schools all over the country, and I am sure that this has been welcomed by the people who live in the vicinity of those schools. Last week, we were in Karoko, Tunuloa, Cakaudrove. A Year 13 student of the Vatuvonu Adventist College, who rose up and told us that they were suffering because they did not have the specialist teachers for the subjects that they will be sitting for their Year 13 exams this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we are opening schools, do we have teachers? If we do not, that is no execution. That is very poor governance. In Valeni, Wailevu, Cakaudrove we are asked by the headmaster of the local school that secondary school teacher graduates should not be sent to primary schools because they just do not have what it takes, nor have they been trained to do so, and they have all kinds of problems.

This again is no execution, poor governance. In Navuniivi in Ra, four weeks ago, I was told that the last time that road was fixed was when I had been the Minister for Infrastructure and was asked to get it done because the carriers were being bogged down. This is poor execution of plans, a lack of equity in development, no execution, and poor governance.

The road to Korolevu in Navosa was in atrocious condition when we visited there five weeks ago, and the road to Nasau, Navakasiga in Bua, is horrendous. I think the part that went up to Naiviqiri must have been fixed because our Prime Minister was going there for the funeral last week. This is poor execution again. Inequity in development, no execution, poor governance.

Earlier this week, we were told that there are 96,000 tonnes of cane still standing, despite the former Minister promising that no stock of cane would go unharvested, no execution, poor governance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have tried to address the issues of poverty, of good governance, the importance of the Constitution and the rule of law and the importance of equity and unity, because I think these are critical issues that we must address. If you do not have these things in place, everything that we try to do will not happen. You cannot deliver.

One of the requests that I have received in terms of equity for small business, buses get concessions, but the taxi drivers and people who run taxis are also asking if they can also get fuel concessions especially as the price of fuel is about to go up.

Earlier this week we have a lot of talk about hypocrisy, hypocrisy this, hypocrisy that.

Honourable Sachida Nand had a go at the honourable Bala. I think it is important that he should also ask himself which door he came through to get into Parliament before he starts asking those of us who are still on this side. He should count himself lucky that he is here, because he only got in because someone left.

Honourable Niudamu, my very good friend, attacked honourable Bala and called upon him to join the Government. I have to inform him, he would not mind, there is no more Cabinet seats available, honourable Niudamu. So, if honourable Bala goes, there is no seat for him unless he becomes the Minister for footpaths and flowers.

(Laughter)

I find it immensely amusing that those who got into Parliament by being FijiFirst MPs now turn and bite the hand that got them there. No shame at all, no shame at all! Opportunists, just taking their lollipops and trying to make their new masters happy.

Honourable Tuisawau says that we are anti-youth and that we want them to be in debt. He forgets that under their system, they do another 50 percent additional penalty on top. Are you going to take that away?

Perhaps, when we win the election and honourable Inia Seruiratu becomes Prime Minister, we might consider doing that, Sir. Thank you very much, Sir, for the opportunity.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and all online TV viewers – *miau sa bula re*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first, I wish to begin by acknowledging His Excellency the President of this inspiring and thought-provoking Address to this august House. His foresight challenges us to remain steadfast in our service to the people of Fiji. His Excellency also reminded us of the remarkable journey of our beloved nation, which we have travelled in securing or upholding our sovereignty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, along this journey, we have endured moments of turmoil, and we continue to navigate trials and tribulations. Yes, Fiji has remained steadfast, resilient in spirit, united in purpose and unwavering in our commitment to progress. We strive to stand as an exemplary in our Pacific region, honouring our role as a hub of the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this journey has unfolded over more than a century. Today, as the leaders and citizens entrusted with our Fiji's future, we carry forward this legacy. We continue the walk of building and rebuilding, reconnecting our people, rebranding our identity and readjusting our sails so that we may reach our shared goal and realise our collective vision for a stronger, more prosperous Fiji for tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are in the midst of our policies to improve livelihood, the laws we enact to protect our citizens and the investment we pursue to drive development. I wish to ask this august House that the children of Fiji must remain at the centre of everything we do in this House. It is our duty to secure their future, safeguard their health, safety and well-being, so that one day we will look back and acknowledge our legacy, just as we honour the foresight of our forefathers today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members of this august House, I rise to emphasise that education is one of the most powerful platforms we can provide for our children. It equips them to be critical thinkers, patriotic citizens, respectful individuals, confident entrepreneurs, peaceful and

compassionate neighbours and resilient gold citizens of Fiji.

Through education, our citizens, including children, learn to value the richness of diversity and to collaborate in building, not dividing, our islands and our beloved Fiji. Our guiding legislation, frameworks and policy, including SDG 4, the National Development Plan 2025-2029 (Envisioned 2050) and the 2023 Denarau Declaration, underscore a shared commitment to ensuring equitable access to quality education for every child here in Fiji. Today, I rise to reaffirm this commitment and to advocate strongly for strengthening equity and access to education, particularly for the many children who reside beyond our urban centres.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, evidence continues to highlight the persistent challenges faced by rural and maritime schools. These include inadequate infrastructure, high operation costs, inconsistent access to essential services such as transportation, ICT, and electricity. These barriers widen the rural-urban divide, digitally, socially, and in learning outcomes for the future leaders of our Fiji. Therefore, development across our interior rural and maritime regions must remain a central pillar of national planning and priority setting. This is essential, given the entrenched educational inequities faced by this community and our responsibility as leaders to ensure no child is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with rising social concern, the data shared by the Substance Abuse Advisory Council of Fiji, the counselling arm of the Ministry of Education, revealed a deep and worrying trend. Drug-related cases in our schools increased to 3,143 in 2025, up from 3,041 in 2024. Alarming, this issue has now extended to primary schools, with some younger students reportedly being used as runners or mules for drug delivery. Such a development underscores the urgency of strengthening community resilience and access to safe, supportive educational environments in our homeland, here in Fiji.

As Assistant Minister for Education, I am encouraged that His Excellency the President has also highlighted, I quote:

“Special emphasis will be placed on empowering interior, rural and maritime economies so that development reaches every province and island.”

The nation's direction aligns strongly with our education sector's priority.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to talk in our *iTaukei* dialect.

*Sa vakavinavinakataka saka vakalevu na kena vakadrodroi tiko na veivakatorocaketaki ena taudaku ni koro lelevu, oqo e sema saka tiko vakadodonu kina sasaga ni tabana ni vuli sa vakaraitaki oti mai na veika sa rawa tiko ena gauna ni kua. Na nodra sa mai dolava na Minisita ni Vuli so na koronivuli torocake (secondary schools) ena yanuyanu o Mataku kei Totoya; Naweni Secondary School, Cakaudrove; Namuka Secondary School, Macuata; Wainikeli Secondary School, Taveuni; Nawaka Secondary School, Nadi; Naboro Junior Secondary School, Naitasiri kei Yasawa South Secondary School, Yasawa.*

[I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the ongoing development flowing into areas outside the major cities. This connects directly to the efforts of the education sector, as evidenced by what has been achieved today. The Minister for Education has recently opened several secondary schools: on the islands of Matuku and Totoya; Naweni Secondary School in Cakaudrove; Namuka Secondary School in Macuata; Wainikeli Secondary School in Taveuni; Nawaka Secondary School in Nadi; Naboro Junior Secondary School in Naitasiri; and Yasawa South Secondary School in the Yasawa Group.]

Mr. Speaker, Sir, students are vulnerable. The expanding development in our rural, remote and maritime region greatly enhanced access to schooling. Strengthening education close to home will also help to reduce rural-urban migration, enabling children to remain with their parents and families where they are safest and best supported.

A well-known African idiom says, 'it takes a village to raise a child', which becomes even more meaningful when parents, communities, the *vanua*, churches and other faith-based organisations work together to guide, protect and nurture our children. With our improved access to quality education, even the most remote communities can ensure that their children thrive in life.

Moreover, in our journey towards building a stronger and more inclusive Fiji, the role of education remains central. Today, I also reiterate in this august House the importance of inclusion in our mainstream classroom. Every child, regardless of background, ability or learning, needs to deserve the opportunity to learn alongside their peers. As per our data from 2025 - 2,296 students were registered on FEMIS as having some form of disability. Of these 2,296 students, 822 are girls, which is 37 percent of the 2,296 students. 1,119 are enrolled in special education schools, of which 47 percent are girls. Of the 2,296 students, 1,087 are in the 378 inclusive mainstream schools, both primary and secondary schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the data shared above, inclusive education is not simply an approach, it is a commitment of fairness, dignity and the belief that every child has potential. When our children learn together, they grow together. They learn respect, empathy, and collaboration – the value that strengthens our community and our nation.

In addition, we must recognise the truth that often hesitates to articulate, as not every child pursues white-collar pathways, and that is perfectly acceptable. Education is not a one-size-fits-all model. Across the world, it is widely acknowledged that academic pathways are just one of many avenues to success. Here in Fiji, our TVET sector stands as a powerful second-chance opportunity. A pathway with dignity, purpose, and real economic values. From carpentry to plumbing, from electrical work to mechanical trades, from tourism to agriculture, blue-collar professions often limitless opportunities for our children. They are the backbone of our labour force and the driving engine for national development.

Today, through various mobility and labour schemes, we see Fijians thrive overseas in skilled trades, increasing household income and contributing to our economy. These are opportunities that TVET empowers our young people to access.

The Denarau Declaration Thematic Area 5, on TVET, is creating waves with new programs, including mainstream TVET, opportunities piloted at 15 secondary schools, at Year 9 level in 2025, with an additional 5 schools this year.

Another program is the 'TVET First' piloted in the 4 girl schools in the Central Division, mainly ACS, Saint Joseph's Secondary, DAV Girls and Ballentine Memorial School. This is one initiative by the Education Ministry to nurture and empower our young girls, to venture into male-dominated areas, like mechanical engineering, carpentry, plumbing, to name a few.

This is all possible with the collaboration with the FNU, where the girls go to Samabula Campus, every Friday for hands-on experience. Mr. Speaker, Sir, for TVET to truly flourish, we must strengthen ownership and respect technical and vocational professions as families, as communities and as a nation. We must shift our mindset. TVET is not a fallback. It is a future. It is not a second-class pathway. It is a second chance gateway to success. At the heart of all, it is a shared responsibility.

The Malaysian Government will continue to invest meaningfully in ensuring that every child is in school, providing resources, policies and support to make education accessible to all. But for this investment to bear fruit, every family must take ownership of their child's education journey and it must be a priority.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, education is most successful when the home and school, work hand in hand. Parental encouragement, positive mindset, and believing in every child that they can succeed, makes a huge difference in our journey. So let us move forward together, committed to inclusion, proud of our TVET pathway, and united in ensuring that every child in every corner of Fiji is supported to achieve their full potential.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education continues to address teachers' workforce needs, through a structured, consistent and nationwide system of communication and monitoring across all schools in Fiji. Teacher vacancies are identified through several key mechanisms, including notification of leave as well as exit arising from resignations or death.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has taken proactive steps to ensure that classrooms across Fiji remain adequately staffed, particularly in areas experiencing the highest shortage. Recruitment has been fast-tracked through teachers' training institutions, enabling final year students to be deployed into highly demand areas, especially STEM subjects and primary education, while they completed their remaining studies.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has engaged retired teachers and increased the retirement age, now 60 for most teachers and 62 for those in STEM and special and inclusive education, to help retain experienced educators in our system. We have also reinstated structured interviews for Y13 students, aspiring to enter a teacher training program, strengthening the quality, preparedness and suitability of their future educators.

The Ministry continued to work closely with key partners such as the Fiji Teachers Registration Authority, the Higher Education Commission, Teachers Training Institution and the Tertiary Scholarship and Loan Scheme, to ensure stronger alignment between pre-service training, recruitment is on the pipeline and scholarship provision.

Plans are underway to streamline human resources service through a centralised HR hub, which will significantly improve efficiency in recruitment, posting and overall workforce management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, teacher retention remains a global challenge and Fiji is no exception, given the increasing mobility and migration of skilled professionals. Despite this, the Ministry has undertaken a comprehensive review of relevant policies to ensure fair and competitive remuneration.

In addition, we are exploring non-salary incentives and welfare-focused policies that support teachers' well-being, strengthening engagement and promoting long-term commitment to the teaching profession. Strengthening collaboration will ensure that our National Strategy aligns across the Ministry, fosters trust, leverages diverse expertise and maximises resource sharing. This unified approach will support and enhance the vision of the Ministry in nurturing lifelong learners, fostering innovation and ensuring equitable access to education while improving the overall quality of life, especially in rural, remote and maritime regions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand in this august House to call upon all honourable members, leaders and Ministers of our beloved Fiji to strengthen collaboration, coordination, , and synergising our efforts and let us continue to work together to ensure that every child, regardless of where he or she

lives, has the opportunity to learn, grow and succeed.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must steward our collective vision and commitment to ensure we drive greater efficiency, stimulate innovation and deliver stronger outcomes for our people. On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir of His Excellency the President and his most gracious speech, I fully support the motion before the House. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker. Sir, honourable Prime Minister, Leader of Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, members of Parliament and our fellow Fijians, *Ni sa bula vinaka!*

I rise to support the motion to thank His Excellency, the President, for his most gracious Address delivered at the State Opening of Parliament on 16th of February 2026. His Excellency's call for leadership grounded in unity, resilience and integrity, reminding this House that our people will judge us by outcomes, not rhetoric.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I commence, I wish to firstly acknowledge the traditional owner of this land, *Sa bula tiko vei na i tikotiko vakaturaga i Nadonumai. Ni bula saka na Turaga na Tui Suva.* The traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

My Assistant Minister has addressed the Culture, Heritage and Arts dimension of our portfolio. As he had noted, the Department of Culture, Heritage and Arts now sits with the Ministry of Public Enterprise, Multi-Ethnic Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts, ensuring integrated leadership on national cultural matters, while our ministry retains responsibility for iTaukei culture, heritage and arts.

The Ministry is also leading the preparations for the eighth Melanesian Arts and Culture Festival in 2026, building on cultural momentum already achieved. This work complements our broader mandate and reinforces whole of Government coordination under pillar two of the National Development Plan on People Empowerment and our Strategic Development Plan. In my contribution today, I will focus on our wider mandate, strengthening iTaukei governance and institutions protecting and utilising land and natural resources and advancing an indigenous development agenda aligned with national unity and inclusive growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency spoke directly about the enduring role of traditional institutions in shaping identity and social cohesion. He reminded us that effective national leadership is strongest when traditional authority and Government work in partnership. He also called for an integrated review of native land administrations and iTaukei institutions, so they remain fit for purpose in a modern Fiji. That is precisely the direction we are taking. In 2023, a major milestone was achieved with the restoration of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) and re-opening of *Vale Ni Bose* complex in 2025, restoring both a fiscal home and national symbol of iTaukei governance.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the task ahead is practical. Today, our chiefs and community leaders must guide responses to emerging national challenges, including the drug crisis and associated social and public health risks. Strong traditional leadership is not merely a reflection of the past. It continues to serve as frontline governance and the foundation of community protection. To support this leadership, the iTaukei Land and Fisheries Commission (TLFC) conducted 365 traditional governance training sessions and facilitated 422 informal title sittings. This effort strengthened social cohesion and reinforced the authority of customary institutions within the modern governance system.

The Ministry has also continued strengthening the institutional foundation that supports stability within the Vanua. Through the TLFC, we have improved processes that support the resolution of disputes concerning land ownership, fishing rights and customary chiefly positions, while enhancing the accessibility and integrity of key national registers. As of now, the TLFC has completed the work of preserving and digitising 164 VKB records out of the 555 books. We have also begun the process of digitally archiving all our records and uploading it into a secure cloud server. These efforts preserve indigenous knowledge while strengthening economic resilience and community empowerment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency reminds us that land and sea are Fiji's enduring strategic assets and that there is a shared responsibility to ensure these resources are activated productively and sustainably while honouring custodianship and intergenerational equity. Our Ministry approach is to translate aspirations into practical instruments. Through the TLFC, we have strengthened tenure security by accelerating their work in completing village boundary surveys, with 590 villages already surveyed and plotted in the GIS system.

In addition, two out of the four Mahogany leases surveyed were completed in Vanua Levu, representing 50 percent progress. These initiatives strengthen tenure security while empowering customary landowners.

A second key instrument is the iTaukei Resource Owners Support Fund, which has been strengthened into a more bankable financing mechanism developed with lending partners. Through this model, Government provides interest subsidy support to unlock large volumes of private lending, enabling resource owners to become entrepreneurs and investors rather than remaining solely as lessors. In 2025, these initiatives supported one provincial company and 17 *iTaukei* business companies, with the total approved principal lending of \$25.7 million, supported by \$1.7 million in Government interest subsidies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the Impact Invest Programme, Fijian Holdings Limited has also strengthened a strategic equity partnership with the landowners' trust. Joint ventures in Naitasiri, Cakaudrove, Tailevu and Rewa are supporting transformative development in renewable energy, agro processing, affordable housing, commercial complex and industrial warehousing.

Each initiative represents approximately \$14.24 million in equity investment, enabling greater landowner participation in the economy while unlocking the productive value of the land for sustainable and inclusive growth. These projects, currently ranging from design stage to approximately 70 percent completion, are already generating employment and supporting local enterprises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also recognise FHL's achievement in indigenous business infrastructure for the completion and commissioning of the 18-storey FHL tower, a major presence in the Suva commercial landscape and an emblem of long-term horizontal indigenous investment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to highlight several key initiatives undertaken by the iTaukei Land Trust Board to strengthen landowners' participation in economic development while fulfilling its statutory obligations under the iTaukei Land Trust Act and Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act.

The Board administers native land leases under the Act, which requires compensation for tenant improvement when leases expire and are not renewed. Recognising these obligations and the need to empower landowners, the Board approved the establishment of the iTaukei Wealth Fund in 2023.

In 2024, the Poundage Levy Structure was revised to 18 percent, allocating 8 percent for TLTB operations and 10 percent to the iTaukei Wealth Fund. This reform establishes a sustainable financing mechanism that both meets statutory obligations and creates new opportunities for economic growth. The iTaukei Wealth Fund provided compensation for tenant improvement when leases revert to landowners. Serving as equity for development, partnership and joint venture, finance land development and property investments, supporting entrepreneurial ventures of landowning units and funding specialised education policy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the iTaukei Development Fund facility commenced operation in 2024 to enable landowners to unlock the economic potential of their land. The facilities provide access to finance for agriculture development, business start-up and expansion, as well as land development and infrastructure. Eligibility requires applicants to be registered landowners in the *Vola ni Kawa Bula*. As of January 2026, the facility has approved 132 loans valued at \$5.5 million and received \$1.26 million in repayment, representing a recovery rate of 17.46 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the commercial subsidiary, Qelemaroroi Holdings Pte Limited, will become operational on 1st of April 2026. This company will serve as a strategic vehicle, allowing landowners to participate directly as equity partners in development projects on their own resources, ensuring that landowners benefit from the value created through their land. In addition, TLTB is implementing a new loan management system, which will significantly improve efficiency, accountability, and financial monitoring within the TDFF programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, inclusive development ultimately depends on the people, not only assets. Long-term empowerment also requires investment in education. Through the iTaukei Wealth Fund, TLTB has established a scholarship programme, supporting iTaukei students in specialised professional fields, including medicine, aviation, information technology, civil engineering, and business management. These initiatives invest directly in human capital, developing a new generation of professionals who will contribute to both national development and the future stewardship of landowners' interests. The first 15 scholarship recipients received their offer letter from the honourable Prime Minister on 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2026.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, tourism remains a critical sector where inclusion must be intentional. Official statistics confirm that visitor arrivals reached a record of 968,367 in 2025. A key policy question is, therefore, how tourism growth can benefit iTaukei communities in a fair and sustainable way. Last month, we have also launched the Fiji Indigenous Tourism Framework. The Fiji Indigenous Tourism Framework 2026-2036 represents an important step towards culturally grounded tourism development, where communities are not the participants, but leaders and primary beneficiaries. Our priority in 2026 is to operationalise this framework through clear standards, partnership, and practical support so that communities can develop viable enterprises while safeguarding what is shared within our culture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, strengthening institutions also requires legislative reform. The Right of Indigenous Peoples Bill 2025 has also passed its first and second reading and is currently undergoing parliamentary committee scrutiny and public consultation. In addition, amendments are being prepared to the iTaukei Affairs Tikina and Village Council Regulations 1996 in partnership with the Solicitor-General's Office.

These reforms aim to strengthen the village governance system so they can respond more effectively to modern challenges, including drug abuse and emerging social pressures. This reform from a broad iTaukei administration's programme encompasses the review of the Great Council of Chiefs, the TLFC, the iTaukei Affairs Board, the iTaukei Land Trust Board and the iTaukei Trust Funds Board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also acknowledge the continued work of the iTaukei Trust Fund, which plays an important role in advancing the education, economic empowerment and long-term development of iTaukei people across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Centre of Appropriate Technology and Development at Nadave continues to equip our young people, particularly from rural and maritime communities, with practical, technical and vocational skills that enable them to participate meaningfully in the modern economy. Likewise, the iTaukei Affairs Board continues to strengthen the *iTaukei* administration system, supporting provincial, the *tikina* and village governance structures that remain the backbone of our community leadership.

Together, these institutions reflect the spirit of *solesolevaki*, working collectively with the Government, the *vanua* and our people to advance the well-being and progress of the *iTaukei* people within the united Fiji. The Ministry stands ready to support national consultations on the proposed commercial use of marine areas, Commercial Use of Marine Areas (CUMA) Bill 2025, and the Rights of Indigenous People Bill, ensuring that the voice of our people are properly heard and reflected in the legislative process.

We are also currently preparing for the national celebrations of the Ratu Sukuna Day, which will take place during the week of 29<sup>th</sup> May, and I am pleased to announce that this year's commemorations will be hosted in the Western Division. Our priorities for 2026 are therefore clear. We will consolidate the operational capacity of the Great Council of Chiefs, strengthen land administrations and record systems, expand landowners' entrepreneurship financing, implement the indigenous tourism framework, and advance key legislative reform affecting village governance and indigenous rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank His Excellency, his Address and his call for unity, integrity and practical leadership. His Excellency reminds us of the *iTaukei* principle, I quote: "*Sai doko ni karikari*", leadership that reflects unity, responsibility and forward-looking actions. Our Ministry accepts that challenge. We remain committed to advancing the well-being of the *iTaukei* people within our united Fiji, and strengthening the partnership between Government and the *Vanua*, so that the development delivers real improvement in livelihood, services and opportunity for all.

I support the motion before the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, there are only three more speakers left for today, and one Bill under Standing Order 51. If I do not hear any objection, I intend to proceed to complete the list of speakers and on to the Bill without any recess. I hear no objection, in which case, given the hour, and for the purpose of complying with Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a suspension motion.

### SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you mentioned, we have a few speakers and the consideration of a Bill.

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

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

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

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and fellow Members of Parliament; I rise in support of the Prime Minister's motion that this Parliament thanks His Excellency, the President, for his most gracious speech at the opening of the 2026 Parliamentary session, setting a clear and principled direction for our country, one rooted in unity, resilience, economic transformation, and an unwavering commitment to the wellbeing of our people. As Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade, I wish to speak particularly to the global dimension of that vision.

In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, Fiji's voice continues to carry weight far beyond our shores. Our foreign policy remains grounded in peace, respect for international law, genuine partnership, and the protection of our sovereignty. We will continue to pursue a foreign policy that is independent, balanced, and guided first and foremost by the national interest of Fiji.

While the Minister, honourable Ditoka, has set our strategic direction, I am here to report on how we are operationalising those priorities, our bilateral partnerships, our trade agreements, and our diplomatic resources, to serve the everyday needs of the Fijian people.

Our bilateral relationships remain the foundation of Fiji's day-to-day diplomacy, and through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, we are working at strengthening key partnerships and international alliances. The Ministry continues to explore and negotiate partnership frameworks with various partners. Within the region, the review of development cooperation frameworks is ongoing, aimed at strengthening regional integration.

On Fiji's place in a changing world, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we live in an era of profound global transition, power dynamics are shifting, economic partnerships are evolving, regional institutions are adapting, and the rules-based international system is facing mounting pressure. In such an environment, small States must be strategic, consistent, and confident.

Fiji's foreign policy will remain anchored in the principles of sovereignty, mutual respect, non-alignment, and constructive engagement. We do not see ourselves as passive observers of global developments. We are active contributors. Our diplomacy is not reactive; it is deliberate.

Fiji's voice in international affairs has always been guided by our commitment to peace, dialogue, and respect for international law. The conflict in the Middle East reminds us of the devastating human cost when diplomacy fails. My hope is that the international community

redoubles its efforts to pursue de-escalation, humanitarian access, and a pathway to durable peace for all peoples of the region.

We will continue to pursue a balanced foreign policy, one that builds high-value partnerships across traditional and emerging partners alike. Our engagement is guided not by ideology, but by national interest under the Pillars set out in the Foreign Policy White Paper, which are Sovereignty, Security and Prosperity.

Fiji's credibility internationally stems from consistency and mutual respect. When we speak about climate change and advocacy, ocean protection, peacekeeping, or sustainable development, we do so with moral authority because these issues directly affect our people.

We pursue cooperation that promotes sustainable development and long-term resilience with the well-being and prosperity of our people at the heart of our negotiations.

On strengthening the Blue Pacific, Mr. Speaker, regionalism remains central to our foreign policy. Our Pacific identity is foundational. Our strength is amplified when we act collectively. In 2026, Fiji will work closely with our Pacific neighbours to deepen regional integration, to enhance collective bargaining power in global negotiations, and promote peace and security within our ocean continent. We will support initiatives that strengthen regional institutions, improve disaster preparedness coordination, and enhance connectivity, physical, digital, or economic.

The Blue Pacific narrative is not merely symbolic; it is strategic and further amplified by the Declaration of the Pacific is an Ocean of Peace. It reminds the world that our ocean unites us and gives us leverage. Through solidarity, Pacific States can shape outcomes rather than be shaped by them. His Excellency spoke of a wealthy nation. To achieve this, our external trade team is acting as a bridge between the Government and the private sector.

In late 2025, the people's Coalition Government made a policy decision to shift external trade from the Ministry of Industry and Trade to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, forming the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade. This restructuring integrates international trade policy and negotiations with diplomatic missions to enhance economic diplomacy, with the trade unit serving as the central coordinating body.

By nestling trade within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we are aligning our diplomatic missions to act as trade hubs, ensuring that every one of our diplomats is also an advocate for Fijian sugar, *yaqona*, processed fish products, packaged goods and tourism, to name a few.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this shift ensures a whole-of-government approach to aligning trade negotiations with foreign policy objectives, strengthening international trade ties and leveraging diplomatic missions for trade promotion, negotiation and the expansion of international markets and accessibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, foreign policy must deliver results that our people can see and feel. It must translate into jobs, opportunities and improved livelihoods, and evidence of this has already been covered in detail by every single Minister in their speeches thus far this week, from agriculture to health, from security to jobs to the environment and climate change.

In doing so, our overseas missions will actively pursue various initiatives like expanded market access for Fijian exports, new investment partnerships in sustainable sectors, trade and tourism, promotion and diversification, technical cooperation in agriculture, renewable energy and digital innovation and skills development partnerships for our youth, with the aim of sustainable

development and growth.

We will strengthen coordination between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade and other relevant line agencies to ensure that our external engagements align with national development priorities.

Investment must be responsible, transparent and aligned with our long-term goals. We welcome partnerships that respect local communities, uphold environmental standards and contribute to knowledge transfer, so climate change remains the defining challenge of our generation. For Fiji and other Pacific Island countries, this is not a distant threat. It is a daily reality. His Excellency Address, rightly emphasised resilience and sustainability as national imperatives. Our foreign policy will continue to place climate action at the forefront of our international advocacy.

In 2026, Fiji will continue to strengthen its advocacy in regional and multilateral forums, ensuring that the global community delivers on climate finance commitments, loss and damage mechanisms and adaptation support. This will include working closely with our Pacific neighbours under the Pacific Islands Forum Framework and advancing the collective priorities of our Blue Pacific continent.

At the same time, we will deepen strategic partnerships across Asia, the Americas, Europe, and when the time is right, the Middle East. Fiji's foreign policy is not about choosing sides, but it is about building bridges.

We welcome cooperation that promotes sustainable development, infrastructure resilience, digital connectivity, trade expansion and skills development for our people. Labour mobility and the diaspora engagement remain critical components of our international relations. Our citizens abroad are ambassadors of Fiji's values and culture. We will continue to ensure their welfare and well-being.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji remains committed to being a constructive and principled contributor to international peace and security. Our proud history of peacekeeping and multilateral engagement reflects our enduring belief that small States can make meaningful contributions to global stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the global governance architecture has been under a lot of strain over the recent past. Institutions established decades ago are now looking for mechanisms to adapt to contemporary realities. Yet multilateralism remains essential, as no single country can address complex issues like climate change, pandemics, transnational crime, or cyber threats all on its own. In today's day and age, cooperation is not an option; it is a necessity. Fiji will continue to advocate for reforms that gives small states a stronger voice and access to the decision-making processes. We support greater representation, transparency and accountability within international institutions.

Our team at headquarters, at Nadi Airport and in our Missions are committed to working diligently to ensure that Fiji's interests are protected and advanced in all relevant forums.

Sir, bilateral relations remain the cornerstone of our foreign relations, in particular the elevation in the socio-economic well-being of our people through infrastructure projects and sustainable development initiatives, coming to fruition through bilateral engagements. These bilateral engagements continue to strengthen with many of our valued development partners, including the expansion of our diplomatic footprint into new frontiers.

One of the key highlights anticipated this year will be the ground-breaking for the 100-Bed Super Specialty Hospital project with the Republic of India, and the Dobrelevu Regional Research

project with the Republic of Indonesia. The 100-Bed Super Specialty Hospital will be a significant elevation of Fiji's healthcare sector through the provision of specialized medical and cardiology services that will be accessed by ordinary Fijians and the Pacific region. With an estimated value of FJ\$200 million, the project will be another significant footprint in our bilateral relations with the Republic of India, and one that would greatly support our broader healthcare plan.

On the same note, the Dobuilevu Regional Research Center Project is major agriculture initiative, aimed at elevating farming capacity and providing access to agriculture research to Pacific Island countries. The project envisions the establishment of a regional training centre and demonstrated farming at the Dobuilevu Research Station. The Project will soon commence phase one which includes finalizing the technical and preparatory issues relating to the construction process. With an estimated value of FJ\$12 million for phase one, the Project will be a landmark collaboration between Fiji and Indonesia in the agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of promoting regional integration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade is working and collaborating strategically with the Embassy of France to coordinate thematic sector-based cooperation with its territories in the Pacific through an established Declaration of Intent (DOI) for development cooperation.

A high-level delegation from Wallis and Futuna completed a series of meetings with line ministries on their development interests exploring ways in which Fiji can help. The high-level delegation conducted meetings in Fiji from 23<sup>rd</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2026. The visit aligns very well with the regional component of Fiji's Vision 2050 and also the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific underscored by the Ocean of Peace, which is a regionally developed and owned instrument for building a resilient, peaceful and prosperous region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am committed to the "wisdom of outcomes". We are no longer silent observers; we are an active, disciplined, and operationally excellent foreign service that puts the interests of our people first.

Global economic recovery remains uneven. Climate impacts are intensifying. Technological change is accelerating and the year ahead will require discipline, co-operation, and foresight. But there is always opportunity in every challenge and Fiji has never been defined by its size. We are defined by our spirit, resilience, and determination.

Allow me to conclude by once again thanking His Excellency for his comprehensive and inspiring Address. The agenda for 2026 is ambitious. It calls for economic transformation, environmental stewardship, social cohesion and institutional strength. Foreign policy will be a vital instrument in achieving these goals. God bless our beloved Fiji.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and Members of Parliament, I want to begin by thanking His Excellency the President, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, for his gracious Address. His Excellency has set an extensive and elaborate agenda for the Government and indeed for our nation in years to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I speak on other aspects of the motion, let me join the honourable Prime Minister and the Minister for Environment in offering our thanks to Australia and so many other countries to allow Fiji to host the COP31 Pre-COP in October this year. This is an important statement of confidence in Fiji and Pacific's leadership on climate change. We are the world's most climate-vulnerable region. By hosting the Pre-COP in our nation, we will be able to speak directly to the international community about the scale of our challenges.

We must prepare well for this. This is an event of such huge importance. We will need to engage and work with our civil society. We will need to build new partnerships in support of our climate efforts. We will need to secure new and negotiated outcomes to secure the finance that is needed for building our resilience. We lend our full support and once again, I thank the honourable Prime Minister for his leadership and fellow members of the Pacific Islands Forum family for having this trust in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while opening the Fourth Term of Parliament, since the Coalition Government came into office on 24<sup>th</sup> December, 2022, His Excellency the President, while outlining various policies, need for transparency and accountability, constitutional reform, and for freedom and democracy to be protected at all times whilst effectively highlighting a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. This is exactly what our Government is all about, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Right at the outset, we were honest with the people. We said we will not be perfect, because no government in the world has, is and will be perfect. We said 39 months ago that we will be open to criticism because the fundamental freedoms we are restoring would provide a platform for people to criticise us, and of course, the criticisms sometimes turned into attacks that are full of venom because people do not have to fear of being arrested in the middle of the night or being persecuted or intimidated.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, even our harshest critics say this publicly that on any account, this Government is better than the one that we had before we came in.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And that says a lot, Mr. Speaker, Sir. In different times, a government would have suppressed the freedoms and used to camouflage their failures and failed policies, but not the Coalition Government. That is why there is boldness, there is fearlessness and there is open criticism of Government at any point, at any time.

His Excellency talked about unity, diversity, but Mr. Speaker, Sir, what he was also saying is that diversity, unity cannot be present and be promoted without a free environment. That is exactly what we have in this country now.

Mr. Speaker, one of the Members from the other side, remarked that honourable Kamikamica and I are now sitting as backbenchers. Let me remind him and others that I did not join politics in a party that was in government. I joined politics for a party that was in opposition, except for a brief moment that I was sitting on the front benches. I sat at the back for eight years and observed many of those who were sitting on the other side who were in government and their shenanigans and what they were saying then and what they are saying now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a backbencher, I can see them very well from here. The Opposition has taken pot shots at the honourable Prime Minister. In fact, under his leadership, the Coalition Government has reset the moral compass of governance and rule of law. We have done much more than what the previous government did in 16 years until December 2022.

I know honourable Usamate and honourable Maharaj's usual style, they go back to history - the contribution of Indo-Fijians and other races. However, let me remind them, the previous regime and government, for many years, did not allow Professor Brij Lal who was the pre-eminent historian

on the *Girmit*, on the history of Indo-Fijians in this country. It was this Prime Minister here, that within a few hours of taking office, he wrote to Dr. Padma Lal, the widow of well-known academic and true son of Fiji, informing her and the family that they were now free to come to Fiji, and she was able to bring Professor Lal's ashes and immerse it in his birthplace in Tabia, Labasa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, other big things were inclusivity and social cohesion that this Government did. Public holidays, for the first time in the history of this country, a *Girmit* Day is now celebrated as a public holiday and we were able to bring Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna Day, which was taken away by the previous government. When I was hearing the honourable Opposition Members, I was listening very carefully, it reminded me of the kind of politicians I call "grievance politicians." When you talk about grievance politicians, what they do is, they mobilise resentment, perceived injustice, even though it may not exist, anger, blame, using social media posts, et cetera. They thrive in highlighting conflict and sometimes they have their own conflict in the identity they want to choose in the delivery of issues that they want to pursue.

Let me also say that one other thing that we did is of very big significance and it enhances social cohesion and inclusivity. We re-introduced *vosa vaka-Viti* and Hindi as languages for debate in this Parliament, and I am very pleased that some of the honourable Members on the other side are able to talk in their own language, and we all like to do that every now and then. Let me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just recap because I heard a lot of them say what we did in the last three years. We did so many things and the honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers have quite eloquently talked about some of those but let me just repeat very quickly some of those.

We brought this very innovative programme of Back-to-School Support, which they claim was a FijiFirst idea. It was never there. That was a COVID-19 measure that they did during COVID. This is a new scheme. For the last three years, we have helped more than 200,000 students every year. I was in a village in the interior of Wainibuka, and the only thing they said to me was, "Thank you to your Government for bringing this scheme. Thousands of rural families have benefited from it."

I had someone talk about TELS. They said, "Oh, they brought scholarships and it is not good." They were opposing it. We took away the TELS loan scheme, wrote-off the burden of debt, and replaced it with a merit-based scholarship. For the first time in the history of this country, we have a merit-based scholarship and students coming out of schools, going into universities, institutes are now eligible for scholarships. All they have to do is sign a bond and they do not have to pay a single cent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was also listening to some of the issues raised about our fiscal policy and our economic management, and I was kind of amused at the way in which they were misrepresenting the facts. When we made a reform in our taxation system in 2023-2024 budget, and when we started collecting more revenue, they were not happy. When we were collecting that revenue and putting out \$700 million-\$800 million in the form of increased social welfare, support to agriculture, back to school support, full scholarships, they were not happy.

Then we borrowed to build large economic infrastructure - the tourism development project for ten years in Vanua Levu; borrowing to fix the water situation in the country; borrowing to build schools, hospitals, they complained about it. When we also grew the economy for three years, three consecutive years of good economic growth which led to the reduction in debt to GDP ratio from 90 percent to 79 percent, you know what they said, Mr. Speaker? They said, "do not talk about debt to GDP ratio." This is the level of debate that comes out from the honourable Opposition Members.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the only Government, if I recollect carefully, that has been able to put out a National Development Plan and Vision 2050, which actually says very clearly where do we want to go as a nation. The honourable Prime Minister talked about the vision to make Fiji a high-income country. It is only through pursuing that vision, which means that you need to have good economic growth, average of more than 5 percent, which means that you have got to build better economic infrastructure and you would then be able to provide jobs for a large number of people - decent jobs, decent wages. Again, for many years, minimum wage remained below \$4, below \$3. This is a Government, in three years, moved it to \$4 and then to \$5 and many of those families who were struggling to make ends meet are now enjoying the fruits of that decision by the Government.

The National Development Plan, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a document that would be used by future governments as well, because it says where we want to go. Honourable Ketan Lal is smiling, you do not want Fiji to become a high-income country. Then, they talk about governance. Honourable Usamate went big on governance. He was talking about Pacific Polytech, and I want to respond to that because, as Minister of Finance, I was responsible for the budgetary allocation for the whole of Government and all Ministries. Honourable Usamate knows that.

When we were debating the budget, they raised this question - honourable Maharaj, honourable Usamate and honourable Bala. I explained to them that the Fiji Higher Education Commission right now does not have a funding formula which they should and any budget allocation, there are budget allocations that have been done by the Ministry for Finance which were not requested by different ministries, but submissions were made directly to the Ministry for Finance. For the next budget, the honourable Minister of Finance has just called for submissions. There are many people who go and make submissions. They talk about legality and it is complete hogwash. There is nothing illegal about the allocation to Pacific Polytech and for all tertiary institutions.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. PROF .B.C. PRASAD.- Let me let me explain this, Mr. Speaker, Sir. He lied. He says that the Higher Education Commission did not request funding for Pacific Polytech. The Director of Higher Education Commission, through email, requested the Permanent Secretary and the Minister of Finance to consider budget allocation for Pacific Polytech.

The Solicitor-General has made it very clear; they are misinterpreting his opinion. He said Minister for Education under whom the Ministry's allocation goes, will decide and Pacific Polytech, like every other new institution, gets provisional registration and then they move towards a full registration. It does not stop them from accessing funding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have spent so much time attacking Pacific Polytech on social media. There are thousands of students and I dare say, 90 percent. The honourable Acting Attorney-General and many other Ministers have gone to their graduation, including the honourable Prime Minister. Sir, 95 percent of the students are iTaukei, otherwise who would have been accessing any educational institution, getting training, certificates, getting dignity and getting jobs!

HON. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the level of grievance politics and resentment that they want to create!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The honourable Minister for Education did the right thing by sacking the Chairman of the Higher Education Commission because it is the incompetence of, sometimes people in these institutions invite this kind of thing.

I will give you an example. The Sangam Institute of Nursing did not make a direct request for budget for nursing school in the first budget. The Chairman of the Board and others had a discussion with me as part of their submission, and we allocated additional funding to the Sangam Institute of Nursing, without the Nursing School Director directly writing to us, it was a discussion. We saw the need for more nurses to be trained and budget was allocated. The budget is presented in Parliament, it is debated, it goes to Committee of Supply, it gets voted and it was approved by Parliament and is a law.

The Higher Education Commission and those entities that are responsible for disbursing the grant will do the needful - grant agreement, Solicitor-General's advice whether they are compliant or not, that is their job. That is not my job as Minister of Finance. There are other grievance politicians outside who are jumping upside down about that as well.

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you could allow me one more minute.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I know they talked about the review of the Constitution. I will not pre-empt or even for a moment suggest that we should not be in a new constitution because Parliament at this stage, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is definitely not the forum or platform to air those views.

The key objective, and as highlighted by His Excellency the President is to take genuine ownership of this supreme law and this will happen through a genuine process of participation, consultation, and sometimes painstaking negotiation. The National Federation Party (NFP) as the oldest political party, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has seen through four constitutional processes.

No other political party in the history of our nation has lived through and survived the four constitutions. I dare say that we also have experience in constitution making. We made it our policy in the last three general elections for the 2013 Constitution to be changed. We have our views on the process, and this has been conveyed to the honourable Prime Minister, that is the right thing to do. The ultimate objective is to have a Constitution that has the will of the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will finish by quoting the late A.D. Patel in 1964. This is really a message to our friends in the Opposition:

“It is easy to be a ranting politician. It is difficult to be a statesman in a government to steer the ship clear of all rocks. A statesman has got to look at the next generation. A politician looks usually to the next election. If it ever comes to choosing between sacrificing my community and the interest of the country and sacrificing myself, I would rather sacrifice myself.”

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to once again thank His Excellency for his gracious Address and support the motion by the honourable Prime Minister to thank His Excellency.

MR. SPEAKER.- Our last batsman in cricket is called the tail end.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, Cabinet colleagues, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament - I will be observing all protocols.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 54 Members of Parliament have spoken in reply of His Excellency's most gracious Address. So, please, before I close the batting order for the day, allow me to tell you a story and also tell this story to my fellow parliamentarians. It is a story that has been shared by one of the most prolific storytelling Presidents of the United States, President Ronald Reagan. He told the story of a businesswoman who would meet an elderly man every morning without fail.

The man would be sitting selling pretzels in front of a building. Each morning, she would drop a quarter without taking a pretzel. She did this religiously every morning for years. On a particular cold misty morning, she dropped the usual 25 cents in front of the man and to her surprise, the man reached out and grabbed her hand. She said to the man, "I am sure you want to know why I have been so charitable to you, paying for the pretzels all these years and not taking one up to this day." The man looked up and said to the businesswoman, "No Madam, I just wanted to let you know that the pretzels now cost 35 cents."

Mr. Speaker, I have listened carefully to the speeches of the Opposition Members, and I am reminded of that pretzel seller. Persistent, present where he sits in the corner, but not grateful. Ungrateful for the quality of democracy they now enjoy in this Chamber. Democracy that allows them to sit in Opposition, not silenced, not sidelined, but seated, while Government repeatedly accommodates their request for bipartisan engagements – in Committees, in the House, again and again.

Let me ask them a fair question, Mr. Speaker, Sir - can they even imagine, even for a moment, if we choose to treat them now the way Members like the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka, honourable Professor Prasad were treated when they sat in Opposition? They do not have to imagine that, Sir. They are living the alternative now. They are living the proof that this Government is different.

Today, they operate in a much more receptive democracy, an absence of arrogance, a space where they can criticise the honourable Prime Minister openly, directly, personally and persistently, as we have witnessed throughout the week. He has absorbed all of it - every word, every attack, every speech designed not to enlighten but to provoke.

Guess what, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister is still here. He is still focussed, still leading because leadership is not about responding to every critique. It is about staying steady for every Fijian. All we have heard from the Opposition is about themselves. Their complaints, their list carefully curated or what they claim has not been done, what they have declared undoable and what they assert was never prioritised in three years.

It is the same three years that we have paid cane farmers record breaking payments per tonnage, not promises, payments. In those same three years, we have stabilized the economy. We have regained regional and international respect. We have enhanced trade and development partnership. The Prime Minister's Ocean of Peace is a Pacific language and will soon become the language of the world and yet they remain adamant. Three years is not enough; not enough for them and never enough.

They speak loudly about 15 percent VAT, very loudly, as though they discovered the very concept of taxation yesterday. They do not acknowledge conveniently that the very government they once supported, the government they joined, introduced the exact same percentage between January 2011 to December 2015; five years of 15 percent VAT. When it was reduced to 9 percent, it was done so with a colour of deception, because they added 10 percent of ECAL and another 6 percent of STT.

The result, some items attracted up to 25 percent tax, but we did not hear them complain then. We heard nothing because there would have been fired and not here today. Like the man selling pretzels, their voice only rise when they have announced an increase. They appreciate nothing of the texture of democracy they now enjoy – the vibrancy of our parliamentary sessions, the bipartisan journey that only this Coalition Government has been able to forge and deliver to Fiji. They take the space, they take the microphone, but they refuse to take responsibility for their record.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the world is shifting beneath our feet. We witness extraordinary global events, trade alignments happening overnight, not over years. Alliances once assumed permanent, now under question. New blocs forming, old certainties fall away. In such a moment, the small nation can feel adrift. Small nations can be tempted to wait and see which way the wind blows. But Fiji is not here to wait.

I rise to address this global current directly and trade positionings, the alliance shifts, the restructuring of international architecture and to integrate my observations with the most gracious speech delivered by His Excellency the President when he opened this Parliament. Because His Excellency spoke of resetting our nation and let me be clear; resetting Fiji cannot happen in isolation from resetting our place in the world. The two are the same task. We must understand the rupture that is now underway globally. We must name it clearly and we must act not as passive observers of history, but as authors of our own future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me be clear. The world has changed forever. The most recent of days, and in the most recent of hours, we have witnessed great power rivalry on full display. Big powers have tested the world's rules-based order at cost to the entire globe. Middle powers see this clearly. They are under no illusion about what world of 2026 and beyond has in store.

The question is not whether the old order will return. It will not. The question is whether middle powers will find their voices before the window closes. We must ask ourselves, Mr. Speaker. We must answer it honestly. What does a small island developing state do to cushion the impacts of these extraordinary global conflicts? Conflicts fought far from our shores, yet whose missiles land here in the form of higher prices. What system have we built to future-proof our citizens? To shield them from the inflation that crosses borders as easily as data?

From the rising cost of shipping, from oil and energy price hikes that are decided in distant capitals but paid for at every Fijian kitchen table. Because ultimately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is about what we put on the table. The price of food, the cost of feeding a family and if we cannot protect that, we cannot protect anything.

At the recent World Economic Summit at Davos, I saw something instructive. Countries meet on the margins. Draft trade and economic support agreements exchanged in corridors, not plenaries. New sciences were discussed. New frontiers – artificial intelligence, green energy, critical minerals - explored with the intensity of those who knew the race has already begun. Shipping ports, trade routes, new destinations identified, negotiators scurrying behind the photo-ops of their leaders, knocking down critical details of bilateral and multilateral draft agreements. Why? Because they realise what too many still refuse to say aloud; the world that provided safety at the end of 2025 is

not returning.

That reality, Mr. Speaker, is the same for us here at home. The Fiji we knew at the dusk of 2025 is not coming back. To look back is nostalgia, and nostalgia is no strategy. Looking back is something we cannot do. Looking back is something we must not do, because our people are not looking backwards. They are looking to us and they are waiting.

Mr. Speaker, that brings me to the question that must weigh on every member of this House. What will Fiji look like at the dawn of one of the world's most existential time or period? Because make no mistake - we are just entering that era. We are not observers on the sidelines. We cannot. We are walking into it, eyes open or closed, prepared or not. The choice of which is ours and so we must be brave; brave enough to confront the challenges this new era brings. Brave enough to name them clearly, and brave enough to act.

The dawn of 2026 must be a time of serious reflection. Reflections on Fiji as a nation of many people, many races and many creeds – united not just by blood alone, but by shared purpose and destiny, and from that reflection, a series of serious choices must be made - not optional choices, not choices we can postpone until the crisis is upon us - serious choices now.

Choices, Mr. Speaker, that is what this moment demands - the choice to –

- reset the direction of our country from top down, and from the Constitution to our communities.
- re-strategise our trade capacity to increase our export strength, to expand our partners to ASEAN, to the Middle East and beyond, because in a fractured world, Mr. Speaker, those who trade with a few, answer to a few but those who trade with many, answer to themselves.
- enter the era of commercial planting, to raise our own meat stock, to serve our own needs rather than rely on import that drain our foreign reserves and exports our dignity.

This year onwards, we have one choice, Mr. Speaker, to reset, innovate, invest, plant, raise stock or be poor as a nation. There is no other way, there is no waiting, and there are only choices.

We have a choice, Mr. Speaker, to revisit this nation's potential - to build new industries while we upgrade and renew our commitment to existing ones. New businesses and industries that will provide the funding needed for our infrastructure, our health, our roads and our schools because amidst all the global shocks, there is always opportunity. Fiji has something that the world craves - stability and peace. We have been mooted repeatedly, even as of last week, as the safest nation on earth in these times of global volatility.

This is not a slogan, Mr. Speaker. This is a strategic asset. That is a foundation upon which we can build. While the world is fixated between the power struggles of the East and the West, let us look within us. Here in the South, let us capitalise on our positioning, on our capability and our greatest resource, our location and our people. The world is searching for safe harbour. Let that harbour be found here.

Mr. Speaker, resetting our position means we must stop making excuses. For too long we have told ourselves that the brain drain is natural, that it is normal for our best and the brightest to seek opportunity overseas because they cannot find it here. That is not a fact of life - that is a failure of ambition. We must create opportunity here at home, not someday, not somewhere, here in Fiji for all of our citizens. Let me be direct. There is a single employer in our construction industry today

with over 600 foreign workers on its payroll. That is only one employer and there are many others - 600, Mr. Speaker, while our own people look for work elsewhere, we bring in workers from abroad. That is not a criticism for those workers - it is an indictment of our own national work ethic and attitude.

If we, as Fijians, have no desire to work, wait for Government handouts, if we cannot turn up to work on time and stay until the end, if we cannot turn up to work consistently for five days to six days, then we cannot complain when employers bring foreign workers, and that needs to stop. Put on the right attitude to work, stop the unproductive hours, stop excessive kava consumption that leads to weak productivity, work hard, have a vision, work that vision to work daily, it will come to you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us set aside the politics. Let us set aside the rhetoric. Let us ask a simple question, and this I imagine. What is stopping Rakiraki and what is stopping the province of Ra from becoming known as the pineapple or the guava capital of Fiji? Nothing. Now, allow us to just look at the maths. A single guava tree generates the same revenue in eight months that a kava plant takes four years to produce. Eight months versus four years. That is not just an opportunity, that is transformation.

I spoke to a farmer recently. He did not give me a briefing note. He did not offer me a policy proposal. He just looked at me. He plants white guavas and he says, "Fili, it is a no-brainer." He is right. The farmer knows what the spreadsheet shows. The only question that the farmer is asking is, if we in his House have the will to act on what is plainly in front of us. It is often said that Rakiraki has the tastiest pineapple in the country, though the good people of Seaqqa might respectfully disagree, but here is the point I wish to make.

When our bakers search for ingredients to bake an upside-down pineapple cake, more often than not, they reach for brands imported from across the globe. Mr. Speaker, just imagine that. Imagine that today every cane field in Ra was turned into a pineapple farm. Not a single row, every field. Imagine a pineapple processing industry rising in Ra, employing Fijians, producing for Fiji and exporting to the world, instead of standing in these Chamber arguing about why the Rakiraki Sugar Mill has not been built, we could be asking a different question. Is there a new industry that we can develop and open in Ra? Let us look at the upside.

Farmers could farm something new, something that earns revenue faster, something better - processed pineapple slices, processed pineapple rings, pineapple juice, products that to this very day we still import from abroad. We import what we could grow. We import what we could process, and we import what we could even export. That is not strategy, that is subsidy without return.

Re-imagining Fiji, we must look beyond what was, beyond the comfort of old industries, old arguments and old excuses, and fix our eyes on what should be and could be. What should be is a Ra Province, not known for what we failed them - the past administration, and even in this administration on promising a new sugar factory. We have the courage now to do and cause transformation.

We must pursue a future of self-reliance, where our own Fijian-grown products are not only on our shelves, but are also exported to the world. His Excellency identified that many families in the rural and maritime regions still face hardship to this day. I am pleased to note that our pineapples have recently been granted access to the New Zealand market, and we thank our New Zealand partners for their support under the Duavata Partnership. Now, with that door open, let us walk through it, and I would beg that we would capitalise on it in a very big way.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, resetting as a nation is not a slogan, it is a task that must be built from the ground up. It begins in infancy and carries through adulthood. It is a journey from being looked after to taking responsibility of looking after others. The values, the drive, and above all, the motivation that defines who we are as Fijians must be taught, not just in schools but also in our homes.

That is why reforming Fiji's education law is not merely important, it is essential. We must connect the dots now, from early childhood to primary, from secondary to tertiary and from classroom to the job market – this continuum cannot be left to chance. It is being addressed now deliberately by Ministry for Strategic Development, National Planning and Statistics, working under the direct oversight of the Prime Minister's Office.

At the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources, we recently launched a land rental recovery programme, not a policy review, not a discussion paper - a recovery. I am pleased to advise the House this afternoon that in just seven months, the Ministry has recovered \$13.6 million. That is not simply money recovered, that is also room created - rooms for our treasury to deliver public service where they are needed most, room for the Ministry for Finance to prioritize what matters - health, education, infrastructure. Every dollar recovered through this exercise is a dollar that can now serve the Fijian people.

In the third week of January 2026, I delivered my Ministerial Intent for the year to more than eighty senior management staff of my Ministry, gathered from across 10 offices across Fiji, not in a lengthy document, not in a distant memo but we stayed in a room for one entire day. We declared together in 2026 would be a year of heightened urgency, not business as usual, not incremental progress but heightened urgency. We agreed that this year would start fast, continue fast, and end fast. That requires energy, commitment, drive and purpose and I am prepared to lead it.

To the public, you do not have to speak to the honourable Ketan Lal, to talk to me via his *Facebook* post, I am available to talk to you and my staff are also prepared to talk to you. I expect my Ministry staff to be more vigilant in responding to stakeholder requests.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me report on progress, before I resume my seat, on the review of the State Lands Act 1945, which is completed. The review of the Land Use Act 2010 is completed. Both have been finished, both are now with the Fiji Law Reform Commission who are preparing the final report for Cabinet, alongside the draft Bill.

I thank Lady Rajjeli Tuivaga and her team at Fiji Law Reform Commission for their diligent work. When laws sit unchanged for decades, they do not age, they calcify. And calcified laws cannot serve a dynamic nation. We are not stopping there, Mr. Speaker.

This week, on Monday, 9th March, 2026, we launched the review of the Mining Act 1965 and the Quarries Act 1939. Let me repeat those years - 1965 and 1939. These are not just old laws. They are artifacts of a different Fiji, a different century, a different world. By now, the consultation team have visited Dawasamu, Nasinu, Nausori and today, as scheduled, they will be in Namosi.

I urge every Fijian with an interest, every landowner, every miner, every community member and every citizen, let your voice be heard in these platforms. These consultations are not just merely formalities. They are the foundation and the foundation laid without listening is a foundation that will crack. The world is changing fast. Our laws must change with it and we, in this Coalition Government are getting it done.

Mr. Speaker, I join the honourable Prime Minister is thanking his Excellency the President

for his most gracious Address. God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue tomorrow with the Right of Reply by the honourable Prime Minister.

Before we turn the page, permit me, if I may, to make some general observations as is permitted under my function pursuant to section 77(6)(b) and (d) of the Constitution. This goes to the quality of the debate of the House on His Excellency's Address.

There have been some outstanding contributions to the debate on the motion by the honourable Prime Minister, thanking His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address. There were some that were not. The difference between them, in my view, are, first, those that elevate their intervention to the same level as that of His Excellency's Address highlighting the roadmaps for Fiji as envisaged by the Government in terms of the policies and programmes for the future of the country. These interventions anchor their observations on these policies and objectives and even criticisms levelled, but they are also identified by individual events and cases. They illustrate the weaknesses or loopholes of the system or services provided. That might, in my view, is totally acceptable.

Then there are those that treat the opportunity to just pay lip service to the substance or contents of His Excellency's Address then proceed to go down the same road and treat the occasion as if it was another day in Parliament, and indulge themselves in the usual wish list of individual grievances which are out of context with the overall theme of the speech by His Excellency.

I would urge and plead to you all, Members of this Parliament, to bear my observation in mind and to lift your standard of debate next time in response to His Excellency the President's next Address to you.

### **FIJI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY (AMENDMENT) BILL 2026**

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the –

- (a) Fiji National University (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Bill No. 03/2026), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament; and
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Friday, 13th March, 2026, and that one hour be given to debate the Bill with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the harsh realities of the real world reinforce the need to develop more industry-aligned academic programmes and practical training frameworks that would guide our young people and our future leaders into a more resilient and competitive workforce.

The Fiji National University (FNU) is one of the leading top tier national universities that serve as a critical engine for national growth, bridging the gap between academic theory and

practical skills required by our industries. The core theme of the University's 2024 Annual Report, "Building Resilience and Sustainability with Excellence in Action", and I give credit for that to the honourable Minister for Education. It signifies the institution's strategic shift towards building a robust and future ready academic ecosystem that is capable of navigating the complexities of the ever-changing global economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is imperative that we continue to strengthen and build an economy that is not reactive, but proactive to meeting the diverse needs of young people as they transition from the whole academic studies into the dynamic demands of the professional world, and the unpredictable fluctuations of global externalities and unprecedented technological and climate driven shifts.

In the year 2024, under the eight colleges of the University, the total student headcount comprised approximately 26,738 students. This increase of 2,876 students from the year 2023 reflects the University's growing relevance and its expanding capacity to address the urgent and specialised needs of our economy.

The FNU is central to this transformative agenda. Without change, we cannot build an educational or equally supportive training framework that is capable of producing the adequate skill-sets necessary to thrive in an increasingly complex and competitive global environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the three pillars of our National Development Plan also reinforce the strategic move, ensuring that we are building confidence and stability into our national workforce, our economic foundations and the very aspirations of our future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure these national priorities are strategically aligned, relevant legislation and overarching policy regulations must be continuously refined to reflect these evolving needs and priorities. These changes are not purely administrative alignments but strategic ones that ensure our national vision remains coherent, sustainable and directly accountable to the needs of the people that we serve. Our people continue to be the centre of national decision making, ensuring that this esteemed august House is accountable to the citizens whose collective future we are tasked with shaping.

With human resources being our greatest asset, it is crucial that we proactively identify the existing gaps within our education, technical and workforce ecosystems to ensure that training pathways remain perfectly synchronized.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by deliberately aligning various colleges under the FNU and proactively identifying how these schools and colleges complement respective ministries and agencies, we are able to better understand the supply and demand chain and ensure that our academic outcomes are directly responsive to our national development priorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, such partnerships are essential given the magnitude of the socio-economic landscape and the rapid pace at which global changes have accelerated. The era of business operating in isolation is firmly behind us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the proposed Fiji National University (Amendment) Bill 2026 seeks to introduce legislative amendments to the Fiji National University Act 2009 to give effect to the reassignment of the Fiji National University from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics. The proposed amendment is intended to strengthen the coordination and linkage between our development priorities and critical sectors across the economy. Such sectors include, but are not limited to health, education, employment and infrastructure to name a few. The amendment to the Bill will strengthen the legal foundation necessary to ensure that all relevant Government processes are adequately aligned with the evolving

strategic mandate of the University and the broader development aspirations of our great nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the academic mission of the University will not be undermined or diluted through these amendments. These amendments give ease to the governance and accountability frameworks that protect that mission by ensuring that our dynamic integrity is not only upheld but is continuously reinforced against external pressures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the support of the honourable Minister for Education towards this initiative and reiterate that the Ministry of Education remains a critical partner towards this change, serving as a preliminary step into our nation's human capital development pipeline. I also commend the significant work undertaken by the University's Board, senior management and staff, who continue to elevate institutional integrity and academic quality to its highest standard for the benefit of all our students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Health, all the doctors and nurses who were in charge of at Children's Ward over the weekend and Thursday and Friday of last week. My great grandson came home very, very cheerful after four nights in the hospital. He was very well looked after and the whole family had a little cake to celebrate his discharge.

Thank you for this opportunity, and I commend this Bill for consideration by debate by this august House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. At the end of the debate, we will have the right of reply from the mover of the motion. Are there any interventions?

Since there are no interventions from Members, we will give the floor to the honourable Prime Minister.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope we will spend the night reading up the original Act and the amendment and its effect and align those to what His Excellency the President had said in his Opening Address and come back ready to debate tomorrow.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank all honourable Members for your contribution today and for your presence. That brings us to the end of today's sitting.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 5.24 p.m.