

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

WEDNESDAY, 11TH MARCH, 2026

[CORRECTED COPY]

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WEDNESDAY, 11TH MARCH, 2026

The Parliament met at 9.40 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the prayer

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade, the honourable Minister for Policing and Communications, honourable P.D. Kumar and honourable V. Nath.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Tuesday, 10th March, 2026, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

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

Voluntary Collection – Fiji Cancer Society Campaign

For the information of honourable Members, the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Fiji Group held a Pinktober Awareness Session in October last year. In that October event, the CWP Fiji Group invited all honourable Members to support the voluntary collection for the Fiji Cancer Society Campaign.

Honourable Members, I am once again pleading with all honourable Members to support this worthy cause with your kind donations before it is handed over to the Fiji Cancer Society this Friday. The donation box will be placed in the Big Committee Room from today to Friday. So, please, honourable Members, I encourage you to dig a bit deeper and contribute to the worthy cause.

Vaka Dialogue Forum

Honourable Members, I am also very pleased with the number of confirmations that will attend the Vaka Dialogue Forum next Monday. I thank the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and all the honourable Members who have confirmed, and I have a full list of names with me. I sincerely hope that the rest of the Members will attend, especially

those in the Standing Committee, given the important role of Parliament in shaping the policy and legislative frameworks in the areas that will be discussed. I will urge you, please, attend in numbers, and I will see most of you there.

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

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Cabinet and Members of Parliament – *mu sa cola vina*.

From Transition to Transformation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I praise God for this opportunity, and I rise today with gratitude and a deep sense of responsibility to respond to the gracious Address delivered at the State Opening of Parliament by His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Fiji - an Address that has reminded us of our shared national journey, our responsibilities in an election year and our collective duty to build a stronger, fairer and more resilient Fiji.

Against this backdrop and as the former Minister for Youth and Sports, I thank the honourable Prime Minister for giving me the opportunity to present to this august House a concise but comprehensive account of the transformation achieved by the Ministry since this Government assumed office on 24th December, 2022.

This has not been a period of routine administration - it has been a period of reform, renewal and strategic repositioning. Youth and sports have been elevated from peripheral social concerns into central pillars of national development, economic participation, social cohesion and regional leadership. What I present today is not merely a record of activities undertaken, but clear evidence of outcomes delivered for the people of Fiji.

On the Whole-of-Government Youth Empowerment Agenda, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the outset, while acknowledging that youth agenda cuts across education, health, employment, social protection and economic growth, it, therefore, requires the collective efforts of government Ministries, civil society and faith-based organisations, development partners and the private sector.

This Government made it clear that young people are a national resource to be empowered. This vision was embedded through the launch of the Fiji National Youth Policy 2023-2027, which now guides all youth investment across Government, placing employability, inclusion, leadership, development, wellbeing and entrepreneurship at the centre of national planning.

To modernise service delivery, the Ministry introduced the Online Youth Club Registration Dashboard, replacing manual systems, and improving transparency, accountability and youth participation, nationwide.

On Strategic Planning for Measurable National Impact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2022, the Ministry reviewed its 5 Year Strategic Plan to align programmes with labour market needs and national priorities, linking skills training to employment, entrepreneurship to income generation, sports participation to health outcomes and community programmes to resilience building. This ensured that initiatives delivered coordinated sustainable outcomes.

On Delivering Human Capital Development and Wellbeing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, human capital development remains a core focus. Given the increase in Sexual Transmitted Infection (STIs) and HIV/AIDS, the Ministry, through the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Programme, young people were equipped with essential wellbeing knowledge, while mobile skills and empowerment

training expanded annually through small engine repairs, screen printing, front office and customer service, cooking and baking, food and beverage, room service attendant, business skills, boat masters, tree felling and chainsaw maintenance, food security and food preservation, land use planning, cropping systems and Seeds of Success, to mention a few.

In 2022, outreach reached 871 youth through mobile programmes and 628 through empowerment training. This increased to 1,021 and 743 respectively in 2023, and further to 1,268 and 873 in 2024. These initiatives strengthened employability, enterprise participation and community engagement with many youth transitioning into productive livelihoods.

On Modernising Sports Governance for Excellence and Integrity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sports sector experienced equally significant reform. Government's approval of the National Anti-Doping Policy and the National Sports Recreation and Physical Activity Policy in 2023 modernised Fiji's sports governance framework, strengthening athlete protection, institutional accountability and international compliance.

This reform culminated in the development of the Anti-Doping Act in 2024, which established Drug-Free Sports Fiji as an independent national body. With that achievement, Fiji became the first Pacific Island nation to implement a fully independent anti-doping system, reinforcing our global reputation for ethical competition and professional sports management. Last month, the Chief Executive Officer for Drug-Free Sports Fiji was formally appointed, while their logo was officially launched during the Sports Conference last Saturday.

On Achieving Performance Outcomes on the Global Stage, Mr. Speaker, Sir, strategic investment in governance reform, infrastructure modernisation and athlete development has produced tangible performance outcomes for the nation. Fiji achieved a historic quarterfinal qualification at the Rugby World Cup, delivered strong medal performances at the Olympic and Pacific Games, and recorded international victories by the women's national cricket team, all of which demonstrated that sporting excellence is the direct result of deliberate planning, improved facilities, targeted funding and structured pathways.

Building on those achievements, the Ministry, together with the Fiji National Sports Commission and the Fiji Sports Council have commenced a preliminary work towards the establishment of the Fiji Institute of Sports, which will serve as a national centre of excellence to systematically identify, train and nurture elite athletes across multiple sporting disciplines, ensuring sustained international competitiveness for generations to come.

Sports have now evolved beyond recreation to become powerful engines of national pride, youth engagement, public health improvement, tourism growth and international recognition. On that note, Sir, for the first time ever, this Government has appointed Mr. Julian Vulakoro as Fiji's Sports Ambassador in France and Europe.

On Expanding Access to Modern Infrastructure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government invested substantially in upgrading and expanding sports infrastructure across the nation. Major refurbishments were undertaken at the Damodar City Aquatic Centre, upgrades were completed at the National Hockey Centre, the National Stadium track was modernised and new multi-purpose courts were constructed in communities across Fiji.

Integrated rural sports facilities were also developed in schools and villages, extending grassroots sports development into remote and interior areas. These facilities are not merely physical structures, they are platforms that foster youth engagement, strengthen community cohesion, promote healthy lifestyles and unlock sporting talent nationwide.

On Promoting Inclusion and Social Reintegration, Mr. Speaker, Sir, true national development must be inclusive, compassionate and responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable members of society. In that regard, the Ministry strengthened access to sports and youth programmes for persons living with disabilities through the allocation of dedicated sports grants, ensuring equitable participation and reinforcing Government's commitment to dignity and inclusion.

At the same time, the Ministry implemented targeted youth rehabilitation initiatives to address the growing number of youth living on the streets, particularly in urban centres. Through structured profiling exercises, more than 140 vulnerable youth were identified and engaged to develop reintegration pathways focused on family reunification, education access, skills training and psychosocial support.

While the complexity of social circumstances means that the success of such rehabilitation efforts cannot be measured solely by short-term outcomes and remains an ongoing challenge, the Youth Rehabilitation Programme, nonetheless, managed to successfully reintegrate a significant number of youth back into their families, communities, training programmes and positive social environments.

That approach was supported through community-based intervention platforms, such as the Easter on the Park Programme held on 30th March, 2025, and the Christmas on the Park Programme held on 19th December, 2024, which created safe spaces for engagement, counselling, referrals and empowerment opportunities. Together, these initiatives contributed to restoring dignity, strengthening social stability and reducing long-term vulnerability among participating youth, while also highlighting the need for continued multi-agency support and sustained investment in youth rehabilitation services.

On strengthening international and regional partnerships, Mr. Speaker, Sir, international cooperation expanded significantly during this period as the Ministry actively pursued strategic alliances to strengthen youth empowerment and sports development outcomes. Historic memoranda of understanding were signed with the –

- (1) Fiji Corrections Service to enhance rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for vulnerable youth;
- (2) Peace Corps Fiji to support community-based development initiatives; and
- (3) Cuba's National Institute of Sports to build national technical capacity in high-performance training and coaching.

Building on these foundations, the Ministry is now advancing formal partnership arrangements with Oita Prefecture and Fukuoka Prefecture of the Government of Japan, to further strengthen youth and sports development through technical expertise, infrastructure support, skills training, coaching exchanges and high-performance systems development.

In addition, co-operation agreements with Melanesian partners and emerging bilateral relationships with countries such as Argentina, United States of America and France have expanded opportunities for infrastructure investment, athlete development pathways and the hosting of regional and international sporting events.

On Leading the Pacific Youth Development Agenda, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji reasserted its regional leadership in youth development by successfully hosting the Pacific Youth Council General Assembly from 29th April to 3rd May, 2024, followed by the Pacific Senior Youth Officials Meeting from 13th to 15th August, 2024 and the Pacific Ministers for Youth Meeting from 4th to 5th December, 2024, the latter being the first such ministerial convening in over 11 years. These high-level

engagements directly informed the development of the new Pacific Youth Development Framework, a region-wide policy architecture designed to align youth empowerment efforts across Pacific Island Countries and Territories around shared priorities on education and employment pathways, health and wellbeing, climate resilience, cultural identity, digital connectivity, peace and security, and leadership and governance.

Through this coordinated regional process, seven priority thematic areas were formally endorsed alongside the establishment of a new regional accountability mechanism to track implementation and results. As a result, Fiji now plays a central influential role in shaping youth policy direction, coordination and measurable impact across the Pacific region, positioning our nation as the hub for youth development leadership in the Pacific.

On Community Engagement that Delivers Service and Opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, youth festivals evolved into service delivery platforms. Alongside Yasayasa Moala, festivals in Kadavu, Bua, Ba, Cakaudrove, Rotuma and Naitasiri engaged more than 10,000 youth, connecting them with training opportunities, enterprise support, sports development and health services.

The Ministry also introduced youth cooperatives as a new initiative, complemented by youth development grants to support individual and group entrepreneurial ventures, translating skills training into real economic opportunity. The impact of these initiatives extends well beyond the festivals themselves, as participating youth are integrated into ongoing programmes that strengthen employability, community cohesion and positive social behaviour.

On Developing Discipline, Leadership and Employability, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Youth Training Centres across Fiji were comprehensively revitalised through upgraded facilities, strengthened governance structures, and modernised training programmes designed to improve employability and correct the development among young people. This included the full refurbishment of Yavitu Youth Training Centre, which had suffered extensive cyclone damage in 2018.

Through dedicated Government funding and the professional execution of refurbishment works by the Public Works Department, the Facility was restored to full operational capacity, significantly improving infrastructure standards and creating a safe learning environment for trainees. I am pleased to inform this august House that the Yavitu Youth Training Centre was officially reopened for operations last Friday, after a lapse of nine years, with the presence of all the traditional chiefs of Kadavu, once again, serving as a vital skills development hub for the youth of Kadavu.

To ensure effective leadership and accountability, dedicated managers were appointed to oversee the operations of each of the five Youth Training Centres, professionalising management structures and strengthening programme coordination nationwide. In parallel, the Ministry undertook a comprehensive review of all Youth Training Centre programmes, in collaboration with the Fiji Higher Education Commission, to ensure compliance with national accreditation standards, thereby, enhancing the credibility, quality assurance and labour market relevance of qualifications delivered to trainees.

The first-ever cadet pass out parade held within the Republic of Fiji Military Forces Camp symbolised a new era of institutional collaboration, focused on instilling discipline, leadership, resilience and employability among youth participants. As a result of these integrated reforms, graduates now emerge, not only with practical training skills, but also with strengthened confidence, responsibility and a renewed sense of purpose, positioning them as productive contributors to Fiji's workforce and communities.

On Strengthening Democracy and Institutional Excellence, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Youth Council of Fiji was re-established in 2023, after a lapse of seven years, restoring a formal representative platform through which youth organisations and young people across the country can actively engage with Government on policy development, programme design and national youth priorities. Complementing this initiative, the Fiji Youth Parliament was also re-established in September 2025, strengthening youth participation in democratic processes and providing young leaders with practical exposure to legislative dialogue and national governance.

At the institutional level, reform under the Ministry's pursuit for excellence agenda aligned operations with the Fiji Business Excellence Awards Framework and internationally recognised quality and continuous improvement models. This strengthened governance systems, improved service standards and enhanced staff capability through Coursera Professional Development Programmes. These reforms were nationally recognised through the achievement in Business Excellence Award, affirming the Ministry's commitment to accountable, efficient and results-oriented public service.

In reflecting on the vision outlined by His Excellency the President in his gracious Address to this august House, this Government has sought to translate those national priorities into practical action within the youth and sports sector. We recognise that the full outcomes of many reforms may not be immediately visible, as meaningful social and economic transformation takes time to take root and mature. However, as programmes continue to be implemented, strengthened and gradually scale, in line with the national direction set by Government, we remain hopeful that the benefits will become increasingly evident in the lives of young people, communities and the nation as a whole.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Youth and Sports must reaffirm its commitment to continue working closely with stakeholders, communities and development partners, to further strengthen opportunities for young people and athletes, unlock their potential, and to ensure that progress achieved is sustained and expanded for the benefit of future generations.

Sir, I take this opportunity to thank the honourable Assistant Minister for Youth and Sports, and the big family at the Ministry of Youth and Sports for their dedication and support – we were one family. May God continue to bless our beloved Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before, I invite the next speaker, I refer to the honourable Member's reference to Julian Vulakoro, who is the Ministry's Special Envoy, as it were, stationed in Europe. I think he is based in France, and he was included in the London High Commissioner's briefing to my delegation upon our arrival. We had very interesting evenings in our discussions and exchange on the issue of Fiji sports and its future in Europe. I must say, I was easily impressed with his enthusiasm and the future plans to help our sportsmen and sportswomen who ply their trade in Europe, including the UK.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament - *ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good morning to you all.

I rise to thank His Excellency the President for his thoughtful Address to this nation. His words carried the weight of experience and the wisdom of a man who has served Fiji across many decades. His Excellency's Address also reminds us that the work of Parliament must always be guided by a higher purpose, wellbeing, unity and progress of our nation.

On putting people first, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I come to this House not as a politician first but as a Fijian. Like every Member here, I am a product of this nation, its schools, its communities, its

struggles and its hopes. My parents and grandparents, just like yours, worked the land, paid their taxes, raised their children, and I believe that Fiji would reward their labour with dignity and belonging.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, we are also reminded that our diversity is our strength and our unity must be our purpose. That belief is being tested today. The people of Fiji are watching us. They are watching with real concern about the developments happening in the country.

They see rise in crimes in their neighbourhoods, they see young people lost to drugs, they see families destroyed by violence, they see the cost of living eating away their wages, while the gap between the powerful and the ordinary grows wider everyday. They see us, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as their elected representatives and they ask, "are you working for us, or are you working for yourselves?" That question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, deserves an honest answer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me speak plainly about the condition of our nation and the state we are in - the crime wave affecting our communities and the drug crisis. I am not blaming anyone, but that is the reality on the ground. The HIV outbreak we are experiencing is a public health emergency. The economy is not delivering for ordinary Fijians. We hear about growth, but families do not feel it. Young people with qualifications cannot find work. Small businesses struggle to survive. The cost of everything - food, transport, medicine and school fees keep rising and we need to be ready for the increase in the price of fuel.

Beyond our shores, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the world grows more dangerously geopolitically. Tensions threaten the stability on which small nations like ours depend. Conflicts far away, like the recent attacks involving Iran and other countries, send shockwaves through our economy and remind us how vulnerable we are to force we cannot control. These challenges are not the fault of any one party or any one leader, they are the result of many factors, some within our control and many beyond, but they are our responsibility to address - all of us together.

On the question of trust, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must address with respect, and the state of public trust in our institutions. His Excellency the President spoke of integrity and good governance. These are noble words, and I do not doubt the sincerity with which they were offered. We see investigations after investigations with great promises and little results. Fijians draw their own conclusions. They conclude that the system is rigged, they conclude that power protects itself and they conclude that their voices do not matter and their faith in democracy is misplaced.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when people lose faith in the institutions meant to protect them, they do not become better citizens. They become disappointed, they withdraw or worse, they turn to other sources of authority - criminal networks, extremist voices, anyone who offers certainty that legitimate institutions have failed to provide. This is not speculation; this is what we see.

A lesson from the past, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am old enough to remember a time when Fiji faced challenges every bit as serious as those we face today. I remember the 1980s and 1990s when our nation was deeply divided, while the world celebrated the end of apartheid elsewhere. In those difficult years, one leader stood out for his vision of what Fiji could become, and he was the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. However, he understood something that seemed to have been forgotten in recent years, that in a nation as diverse as ours, the Westminster system of governance, with its government and opposition permanently at each other's back, can become a source of division rather than strength.

He argued publicly that Fiji's multiracial society required a different approach. He believed that a two-party system, or worse, a multi-party system built on ethnic lines, would inevitably deepen the divisions between our communities. He saw the danger of elections becoming ethnic census, of

politics reducing itself to which a group could outvote with the other group.

His solution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was a government of national unity. His vision was simple, but powerful. Instead of locking half the nation out of power after every election, bring the best talent from all communities into government; share responsibility; share the burden of hard decisions; and ensure that every Fijian, regardless of their background, could see their interests represented at the highest level.

This was not for him, a concession to political opponents, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was a plan for national survival. He understood that in a country as small and as vulnerable as ours, we cannot afford to waste talent in other political parties. We cannot afford to have people sitting on the sidelines waiting for government to fail. We need everyone pulling in the same direction.

On a Government of National Unity for today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe that late Ratu Mara's vision is more relevant today than ever before. I also recall our honourable Prime Minister making that call in 2024, two years back.

Look at the challenges I have outlined, Mr. Speaker, Sir; crime, drugs, violence, HIV, economic struggles, geopolitical uncertainty and erosion of public trust in our institutions. These are not the problems that can be solved by one party alone, nor are they problems that respond to point-scoring, they require the combined wisdom, experience, and effort of every capable person in this nation.

The Government of National Unity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, could bring together the best of the best - not the best of one party, but the best of all parties. It would ensure that talent is not wasted, and that good ideas are not rejected. Such a government would send an immediate signal to the Fijian people that we have heard your concerns, we understand your frustrations, and we are putting aside our differences to serve you.

Those who are making comments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are the ones who do not like these ideas.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- It would send a signal to investors that Fiji is stable, Fiji is united and Fiji is serious about solving its problems. It would send a signal to our Pacific neighbours and to the world, that we are not a nation divided against itself, we are a nation that knows how to come together when it matters most.

On addressing the objection, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know that some will object, just like one or two from the other side. They will say that democracy requires strong opposition. They will say that Government need to be held accountable, and that can only happen if there is a clear alternative waiting to take power.

I understand these arguments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are not without merit, but they assume that the alternative to a government of national unity is a functioning democracy with robust debate and healthy accountability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, accountability does not require permanent opposition, it requires transparency, independent institutions, a free press, and it requires citizens who are engaged and informed. A Government of National Unity would not eliminate these things. It would, in fact,

strengthen them by removing the incentive to use State institutions for their own advantage.

What would unity look like? Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me be clear about what I am proposing - I am not proposing that we abandon elections, I am not proposing that we suspend democracy, I am not proposing that we silence dissent or suppress legitimate debates, but what I am proposing is that we commit to a common programme for national recovery, and that we hold each other accountable to that programme, not through Opposition for its own sake, but through genuine collaboration and where necessary, honest disagreements resolved in good faith. I am proposing that we follow the example of other small diverse nations that face similar challenges and chose unity over division.

The cost of failing to unite, and what if we do not unite? What if we continue as we are with each party pursuing its own interest, with each elections deepening the divisions between our communities? The answer is written on the walls of every abandoned school, in the eyes of every young person who looks on to the future, and the statistics of every social indicator that points downwards. We will continue to stride. The crime will get worse. Drugs will claim more victims. The HIV crisis will spiral beyond control. Economy will fail, and when the next global shock hits and it will hit, we will face it divided, weakened and unprepared. Do we not want the future for our children? We do not want that type of future, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We do not want that future for any Fijian child.

A call to action, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I address my final words not with the Government alone, but to every honourable Member of this House and to every Fijian watching this proceeding. To the honourable Prime Minister, consider this proposal in the spirit in which it is offered, not as a tactic or as a manoeuvre, but as a genuine attempt to find a way forward. You have the power to initiate this change. You have the opportunity to be remembered as the leader who put the nation before party. We, the Opposition, are willing to engage for the betterment of our nation.

To the Fijian people, demand more from us. Hold us accountable, not just for our promises but for our willingness to work together. Tell your representatives that you are tired of divisions. Tell them that you want leaders who can sit at the same table and solve problems and not just score points.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I began by thanking His Excellency the President for his Address and I end by asking this House to consider carefully the state of our nation and the choice before us. We can continue as we are, with each Party pursuing its own interest, with each election deepening the division, with each crisis met by finger-pointing rather than action, or we can choose a different path. We can choose unity, we can choose to put the nation's interests above our own, we can choose to honour the vision of past leaders who understood that in Fiji our diversity is our strength, and the only way we are united in purpose.

The challenges before us are great, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but the resources we have, the talent, experience and the goodwill of our people are greater still. What we lack is not capacity, but the will to work together. Let us find that will. Let us put people first and politics last. Let us build the government of national unity that our nation needs and deserves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have deviated from what you have done, what that Minister has done, what they are doing, but a very short message to this House and the people of Fiji. However, before I take my seat, I want to thank the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management for assisting the flood victims with the provision of non-food items. I want to ask the honourable Minister to fast-track the assessment process so that food ration can be distributed to the flood victims, and I know he will do it.

My other appeal is to the honourable Minister for Local Government, if he can look into waiving the stall fees for market vendors because Ba, Tavua and Rakiraki vendors have been really affected. I know he will do it in consultation with the honourable Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may God bless our deliberations and may God bless the Republic of Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- I remind Members that each one of you is entitled to express your views, no matter how unacceptable or even repugnant it may seem to be. He is still exercising his right to say what he thinks and feels, and all the Chair is asking is to give him the courtesy to do so.

Looking at the time, honourable Members, we will now suspend proceedings for a break and Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.27 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.10 a.m.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members, and fellow Fijians watching through parliamentary Television, live streaming or listening to the radio today, a good morning, *ni sa yadra, ni sa bula vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to respond to the most gracious opening Address delivered by His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Fiji, at the commencement of this new session of Parliament in 2026. At the outset, allow me to join other honourable Members in conveying our sincere appreciation to His Excellency for his thoughtful, unifying and forward-looking Address. His message reminds us of who we are, as a nation, where we come from and where we must go together.

His Excellency's Address was not merely ceremonial, but was powerful, principled, and deeply grounded to the lived realities of ordinary Fijians, our farmers, our workers, our small business owners, young people and families striving for a better future tomorrow. He reminded us that 150 years ago, when our forefathers ceded Fiji, they called for a promotion of good governance, education, trade and industry. These goals remain just as relevant today as they were then.

However, His Excellency also reminded us that while our economy has expanded over time, the benefits of development have not always been equally shared. The Household Income and Expenditure Survey shows that approximately a quarter of our population live below poverty, while a significant proportion live just above it, facing constant hardships. These are not simply statistics, they represent real people in our communities, families working very hard everyday, parents providing for their children and young people wondering what opportunities the future will bring.

His Excellency reminded us that these realities require humility in leadership and resolve in policy making. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully agree.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his Address, His Excellency outlined three guiding principles that must shape the government policy and national development -

- (1) unity in diversity - ensuring that every citizen, regardless of background or location feels included in our national progress.
- (2) sustainability and resilience - protecting our people, our economy and our environment for future generations.
- (3) integrity and good governance - strengthening the trust in public institutions and leadership.

These principles guide the work of our Ministry.

Our focus is clear - to create an environment where every Fijian can participate in the economy and share its rewards through policy reforms, partnerships with stakeholders and strengthening key institutions. We are working to ensure that economic growth creates opportunities, supports decent work and protects vulnerable communities.

We are improving regulatory systems to investors, so investors and entrepreneurs can operate with certainty and efficiency. We are strengthening partnerships that attract private investment into priority sectors, particularly in rural, interior, and maritime areas. At the same time, we are engaging financial institutions to ensure that businesses across Fiji have the capital they need to grow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an important part of our effort is the role of the Fiji Investment Corporation Limited (FICL). This institution serves as a catalyst for investment by strategically deploying public capital to attract larger flows of private investment in priority sectors. Through targeted investments, FICL helps unlock opportunities for businesses that may otherwise struggle to secure financing.

It also supports the implementation of the Access to Business Funding Act 2025 by helping channel funds to small enterprises, cooperatives and businesses led by women and youth. In doing so, it contributes to improving governance and performance in selected State-Owned Enterprises, while strengthening transparency and accountability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the centre of our economic agenda are Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). These enterprises are the heartbeat of Fiji's economy. They are the market vendors, the village carpenters, the canteen owners, the small retailers, and the digital entrepreneurs building businesses from their homes. They represent the resilience and determination of our people. However, access to finance remains the single greatest challenge facing these businesses.

To address this, Government is implementing the Access to Business Funding Act 2025 in partnership with the Reserve Bank and other stakeholders. This legislation introduces alternative pathways to finance, including small-offer regime and the establishment of Fiji's first-licensed intermediary investment platform.

What that means in practical terms is that entrepreneurs who do not meet traditional banking requirements will now have new avenues to raise capital. A woman weaving mats in Savusavu, a farmer in the interior or a young entrepreneur in Labasa will have opportunities to access funding that was previously unavailable.

To support the success of these initiatives, the Ministry is also strengthening training programmes in financial literacy and business planning. We are working with business networks and financial institutions, including the Fiji Development Bank, to ensure that entrepreneurs receive the guidance and support they need to grow their business. His Excellency also emphasised the importance of empowering interior, rural, and maritime economies so that development reaches every province and island.

Our Ministry administers a range of programmes that support exporters, young entrepreneurs, rural communities and small businesses. These programmes aim to empower individuals to become job creators rather than job seekers.

In December last year, we launched Fiji's first 5 Year MSME Strategic Plan. This Plan sets ambitious targets of increasing MSME contribution to GDP to 40 percent by 2030. The strategy focusses on five key pillars:

- (1) Strengthening MSME data and policy development;
- (2) Improving coordination across support ecosystems;
- (3) Expanding market access;
- (4) Developing workforce skills; and
- (5) Increasing the overall economic contribution of MSMEs.

This Plan provides a clear roadmap for strengthening small business development across the country. As part of this work, the Ministry is developing an MSME service book that will consolidate all information on all Government services, grants and support programmes available to MSMEs. These resources will help entrepreneurs easily access the assistance available to them without navigating multiple agencies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency also spoke about the importance of ensuring that resource owners participate meaningfully in economic development. One of the most effective ways to achieve this is through the cooperative movement. Across all 14 Provinces, cooperatives provide a structure that allows communities to work together, pool resources and participate in value chains as partners rather than simply suppliers of raw materials.

Primary cooperatives bring producers together at the community level; secondary cooperatives provide processing capacity and collective bargaining power; and tertiary cooperatives create access to national and international markets. Through this structure, producers can move beyond simple selling raw goods to instead, participate in a value-added production and market access.

The Ministry is placing a particular focus on three drivers of cooperative development, that is, youth, women and technology. Young people bring innovation and digital literacy; women bring strong entrepreneurial leadership and community cohesion; and technology enables rural producers to connect with markets, access information and manage cooperative operations efficiently.

Fiji once had a very strong and vibrant cooperative sector that empowered our villages and rural communities. At one point, more than 2,000 cooperatives were operating across the country, providing livelihoods, supporting local enterprises, and promoting collective economic participation.

However, between 2006 and 2022, we witnessed a steady and alarming decline in this sector. The number of active cooperatives fell dramatically to fewer than 300. During the same period, the Department of Cooperatives itself was severely weakened. Staff numbers were reduced from 120 officers to fewer than 30.

The closure of the Cooperative Training Centre facility further removed the crucial pillar for education, governance and capacity building within the movement. These decisions did not occur in isolation. Together, they undermined the very foundation of Fiji's cooperative movement and contributed significantly to the decline of a sector that once played a central role in empowering our rural and grassroots communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are undertaking a comprehensive review of the Cooperatives Act 1996. This legislation was developed in a different economic environment. It has now evolved to reflect modern business practices and technological advances. The review will ensure that Fiji's cooperative sector remains relevant, competitive and capable of supporting inclusive economic growth. Alongside that, we are developing a national cooperative policy to strengthen the role of cooperatives as a sustainable business enterprise that generates economic growth for its members.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another important responsibility of the Ministry is to ensure fairness and integrity in everyday commercial transactions. Everyday, Fijians purchase fuel, groceries, produce and building materials. They must have confidence that when they pay for a litre of fuel or a kilogramme of produce, they receive exactly what they paid for.

Our Standards and Trade Measurement Officers conduct inspections of fuel pumps, weighing scales, and price displays across the country to ensure compliance with national standards. When irregularities are identified, enforcement action is taken to protect consumers. These efforts are particularly important for families living on limited income, who are most affected when transactions are unfair.

At the same time, our standards framework also supports producers and exporters. For Fijian producers to compete internationally, they must meet recognised quality standards. Our technical

officers work with rural producers, women's groups and cooperatives, to help them achieve the certifications required to supply to hotels, export overseas, and access high-value markets.

We are also working to align Fiji's standards with regional and international systems, helping to reduce barriers to trade and expand opportunities for our exporters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, improving the ease of doing business is another priority for the Ministry. His Excellency highlighted the importance of modernising Government services and regulatory systems. In response, we are advancing several digital transformation initiatives to achieve that.

The Start of Business Steps has now been operational for over a year. The online platform allows entrepreneurs to submit and track their business registration application digitally. It reduces paperwork, improves transparency and shortens approval times. For an entrepreneur in Rotuma or a young person starting a small business, this means they can register their business without travelling long distances or waiting in long queues.

We are also launching the Building Permit Approval System (BPAS). This system integrates approvals from multiple agencies into a single coordinated digital process, making it faster and easier for individuals and businesses to secure building permits.

These reforms align with international best practices and support Fiji's competitiveness as an investment destination. Importantly, digital systems also strengthen transparency and accountability where applicants can track the progress of their application and understand the expected timelines, so public trust in Government processes increases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a consistent message throughout His Excellency's Address was the importance of ensuring that development reaches every Province and every island. The Ministry embraces these challenges. Our Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) programmes target rural and maritime communities. Our corporate development initiatives extend across all 14 Provinces. Our Standards and Measurement Officers conduct inspections nationwide, and our digital reforms ensure that the services previously available only in the urban centres can now be accessed remotely.

When a woman in a rural village certifies a product and sells it to the tourism market, that is the development reaching the margins. When a young farmer forms a cooperative to develop their land collectively, that is development reaching the margins. When a business can register online without travelling to town, that too is development reaching the margins.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency reminded us of the wisdom of the three Sieves of Socrates, which are truth, goodness and usefulness. Allow me to apply this principle to the work of the Ministry:

- (1) Is it true that MSMEs are the backbone of our economy? The answer is, yes. Our policies aim to strengthen their contribution to national growth.
- (2) Is it good that Cooperatives are being established across all 14 Provinces? The answer is, yes, because they enable communities to share in economic opportunities.
- (3) Is it useful that we are strengthening standards, improving market access and digitising Government services? The answer is, yes, because these reforms save time, build trust and creates real opportunities for our people.

Our targets are clear -

- increasing MSME contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to 40 percent by 2030;
- strengthening cooperative development nationwide; and
- improving business registration processes through digital platforms.

These are measurable commitments that we can continue to track and record.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, I wish to respond to the call by honourable Ketan Lal, for the Government to revive the failing copra industry. Let me assure this House that over the past three years, the Government has made significant efforts to revive and stabilise the industry. Today, the price of copra is well above \$2,000 a tonne.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, throughout the history of the copra industry in Fiji, this is the first time that farmers have received a price exceeding \$2,000 a tonne. This is a clear demonstration of the Government's commitment to ensuring better returns for our farmers.

In addition, relevant Ministries have been actively supporting large-scale coconut replanting programmes to secure the long-term sustainability of the industry. The coconut mill has also diversified into a range of value-added products to increase revenue streams and, ultimately, improve returns that go back to our copra farmers.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to set the record straight. The honourable Member must remember that the decline of the copra industry did not happen overnight - it was the previous Administration that laid the foundation for the decline.

In 2010, they abolished the Coconut Industry Development Authority (CIDA), a key institution that had been responsible for the development and coordination of the sector. The decision marked the beginning of a steady decline of the copra industry, and it was not only the corporate industry that was neglected.

The Yaqara Pastoral Company, one of our important State-Owned Enterprises, was also allowed to deteriorate due to years of negligible investment and lack of strategic direction. The entity was effectively left to fend for itself. This Government has now stepped in to reverse the situation. Investments are being made. Operations are being strengthened. We are seeing a gradual turnaround. Overgrown areas are being cleared. Fence lines are being repaired. Livestock are being properly accounted for, and a proper management system is being re-established.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me say this clearly to the honourable Member, this Government is working to revive the industry that was neglected and left to decline under the previous Administration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, education plays a vital role in building the nation. Schools are not only places for students to learn academic knowledge, but also environments where they learn values such as respect, tolerance, cooperation and equality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge the State and to state that we need to appreciate the efforts made by our educators. I came across a group of 80 teachers in our cluster, who were meeting last week to discuss pressing issues in six schools in Savusavu, and map a way forward for improving literacy and numeracy. We need to commend their efforts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am amazed by honourable Bala's call for a Government of National Unity. What are you focusing on? When independent Members of Parliament were moving forward to join

the Government and work together, we were called many names, including snake. Yet, today, the same person is calling for everyone to work together.

HON. P.K. BALA.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- A Point of Order.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I never said snake to him. He should get his facts right.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I did not say that honourable Bala said that word.

MR. SPEAKER.- My apologies, I was not listening, to be very frank. Did you use the word 'snake'?

HON. S. NAND.- I did, but I did not say that honourable Bala called the word. I did not state that.

MR. SPEAKER.- It was not directly referred....

HON. S. NAND.- No, absolutely not!

MR. SPEAKER.- You may carry on.

HON. S. NAND.- To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency concluded his Address by calling for unity, service and integrity in public life. I echo that today, the work of this Ministry is not about politics, it is about people - the market vendor is expanding his stall, the farmer is seeking a fair price for his crops, the young entrepreneur is starting a business, and the family simply wants fairness in the marketplace.

His Excellency asked for a simple but powerful question, *e yaga?* Is it useful? The work outlined today is useful. It is useful to the market vendor in Suva. It is useful to the farmer from Vanua Levu. It is useful to the cooperative members in the maritime zone. It is useful to young entrepreneurs starting their first business. It is useful because it translates natural vision into real opportunities for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly support the Address delivered by His Excellency the President, and I encourage all honourable Members to work together to build Fiji, where every citizen, regardless of where they live or the circumstances of their birth, can participate fully in our economy and share its rewards.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians watching locally and abroad; *bula re, bula sia.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the Address delivered by His Excellency at the opening of Parliament on Monday, 16th February. His Excellency's Address was principled, forward-looking and grounded in the realities faced by our people. It sets three clear governing principles:

- (1) unity in diversity;
- (2) sustainability and resilience; and
- (3) integrity in governance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry's response gives practical effect to these principles through our core mandate. His Excellency truly identified that poverty and household hardship are critical national concerns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, reviewing and modernising Fiji's labour standards is the Ministry's most direct response to this reality. Work remains the most sustainable pathway out of poverty. However, work must be accessible, safe, fairly paid, and protected by law. The right to work enshrined in the Constitution is fundamental to dignity and opportunity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this context, wage policy must respond responsibly to cost-of-living pressures. In 2024, the Coalition Government progressively increased the national minimum wage from \$4 to \$5 within a period of seven months. This was a 25 percent increase, and not in drips and drabs, as was done in the past. Similarly, the 10 sectoral wages were also implemented in two tranches.

The Tripartite Wages Council will continue to review and adjust wages periodically, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Tripartism, in its true sense, has been reinstated by the Coalition Government after one and a half decade.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on labour complaints resolution and recovery of wages in the last seven months, my Ministry has settled 484 complaints with a total recovery of more than \$795,000 unpaid wages for affected workers, well over \$100,000 a month.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, labour mobility programmes continue to make a significant contribution to household wellbeing. In 2025 alone, over 2,000 Fijians participated in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme and Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) Scheme. Remittances from these programmes surpassed \$1 billion, directly supporting families through household expenses, education, housing, healthcare, and small business investment. We have strengthened the pre-departure preparation, improved in-country support mechanisms, and enhanced integration and reintegration pathways to ensure that skills gained overseas are productively used by returning workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through cooperation with our partner Governments, four Country Liaison Officers have been appointed in Australia and one in New Zealand, to provide direct assistance to our workers.

An important development was the family accompaniment pilot programme under the PALM Scheme. Since its introduction in 2024, about 90 families have participated in the Programme. This initiative reduces the social strain of long-term separation, supports families' wellbeing, and strengthens the overall benefits for Fijian workers and their families.

The Ministry is finalising the review of the National Employment Policy, which focuses on promoting decent work, strengthening labour market systems, and supporting skills development and entrepreneurship. By expanding employment opportunities, especially for youth, women and vulnerable groups, the Policy aims to reduce poverty and hardship, while improving household income and economic resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency emphasised that every citizen must share in national progress. My Ministry is advancing this commitment through inclusive labour market initiatives. We are expanding employment access across rural and maritime, as well as urban communities, through job fairs, structured work attachments and volunteer programmes.

We continue to enforce anti-discrimination provisions and strengthen maternity protection for women in the workforce, as well as people with disabilities. At the same time, we are supporting youth employment and entrepreneurship, while ensuring that Fijian workers, both at home and abroad, are protected through effective labour standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency made it clear that economic growth must create decent work. The Ministry has reviewed two important legislations, which are currently before the Standing Committee:

- (1) Employment Relations (Amendment) Bill 2025 which modernises employment standards and aligns them with international standards. It strengthens compliance, reinforces equal opportunity and protects key worker rights in relation to minimum terms and conditions of employment.
- (2) Work Care Bill 2025 which modernises workplace accidents, compensation systems, and integrates them with occupational health and safety prevention and oversight. It ensures timely compensation for injured workers while strengthening rehabilitation and return-to-work systems.

Both these Bills are to be tabled in the next sitting of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, improving workplace safety is also a priority. In partnership with the Ministry of Trade and relevant agencies, we have launched an online OHS portal for general workplace inspections and BPAS, to streamline approvals and reduce processing times for businesses. Since 1st January, 2024, my Ministry has been processing employment and school accident cases transferred from the Accident Compensation Commission of Fiji under the existing No-Fault Compensation Scheme. For this financial year, as of February 2026, we have paid out \$6.9 million for 590 pending cases.

In addressing current challenges in our labour market, the Coalition Government has introduced outcome-based initiatives. The Government has incentivised and refreshed the apprenticeship scheme by topping up wages from \$3 to \$5 an hour. In the last two Budgets, 401 awards were provided, and this is expected to increase in the next Budget. Tertiary institutions have been encouraged to increase intakes in TVET with the provision of scholarships.

According to the Graduate Employability Data supplied by the Fiji National University, Fiji recorded a significant number of local graduates between 2023 and 2024 across the various Colleges. In 2023, there were a total of 3,644 graduates, with records indicating that approximately 75 percent were in employment at the time of the data extraction. In 2024, the total number of graduates was 3,211, with around 71 percent recorded as being employed.

Between 2024 to 2026, Pacific Polytech TVET programmes have shown strong growth. The number of graduates has increased from 878 in 2024 to 1,370 in 2026. Training programmes are delivered across 14 locations, including rural areas, with more than 95 percent participation by indigenous communities. In addition, micro-qualification programmes have trained over 2,800 participants, expanding skills and opportunities across urban and rural communities.

From 2023 to 2025, a total of 165 students graduated from Navuso Agricultural School. Similarly, for the same period, in Montfort Boys Town, a total of 147 students graduated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will also review its 2024-2029 Strategic Plan to advance a National Future of Work Strategy. This will assess automation risks, forecast future skills demand and prepare our workforce for emerging sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, productivity remains essential to sustainable wage growth and national competitiveness. The Ministry is progressing the establishment of the Productivity Commission of Fiji as an independent advisory body, focused on evidence-based productivity reform.

Through our partnership with the Asian Productivity Organization (APO), we are embedding productivity-focused strategies into national planning. The Commission will help align wage growth, business sustainability and national competitiveness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, climate change is also an employment challenge. It affects workers directly in sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, tourism and coastal communities. We are developing a Just Transition Framework to support workers affected by climate-related disruptions. This Framework will identify vulnerable sectors, support retraining opportunities and promote green job pathways, while ensuring workers are part of the transition process.

The Ministry is also working in partnership with other Ministries on community based, climate-resilient initiatives, including tree planting programmes that engage communities, while providing allowances for the volunteers for these activities and will be borne by our Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the work of my Ministry is grounded in tripartism — the partnership between Government, employers and workers' representatives. Freedom of association and collective bargaining are essential to maintain stable industrial relations. Through strengthened mediation services and digital case management systems, we continue to resolve disputes efficiently and maintain industrial stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was evident through the settlement of Fiji's longest strike by the Vatukoula Gold mine workers, the recent resolution of the Yaqara Pastoral dispute and Ba Town Council dispute, amongst the numerous others, which demonstrate the importance of good faith dialogue. Stable labour relations support investor confidence and strengthen national unity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, employment is dignity, stability and unity. Through labour law reform, labour mobility, governance, inclusive labour market programmes, productivity initiatives and future of work planning, my Ministry continues to implement the principles articulated by His Excellency - unity in diversity, sustainability, resilience and integrity in governance. We do this with accountability to this Parliament and to the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, I would like to briefly respond to some of the comments or concerns raised by our colleagues in the Opposition. Honourable Joseph Nand raised the issue of challenges faced by foreign workers and the difficulties experienced by some of our employers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the challenges involving migrant workers arise from unscrupulous agents that are based in source countries who mislead workers, creating disputes for employers in Fiji.

Now, these were issues that we have inherited, a spill-over from the previous Administration, because there were no sound policies...

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Government is addressing that by strengthening oversight.

(Hon. R.R. Sharma interjects)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- So what? Pursuing a government-to-government recruitment arrangement with the Government of India, ensuring foreign workers are recruited through recognised and regulated agencies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when you have a 16-year rot, three years is not enough.

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

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must also reiterate that poor planning in the past led to oversupply of workers, graduates in some sectors and a dire shortage in others. We have now got very clearly planned training programmes, and we ensure that we are doing all our educational programmes according to the needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has been a lot of talk about cost of living. Let me repeat that cost of living is mostly out of our hands when it is affected by external factors. If the price of goods goes up in the country of origin, naturally it will go up, because that is where we buy it from.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the best way to address that is to try and put more money in the pockets of people. In that manner, we have increased the minimum wages, the sectoral wages, social welfare and all other benefits.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Hogwash!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- We have also assisted students. A lot of assistance is being provided to the poor and the needy through all the social skills that we have to address the cost-of-living issue. However, they do not acknowledge that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, apart from the minimum wages, salary increase for the civil servants is between 10 percent and 23 percent. That was the highest ever without a job evaluation exercise. I must repeat that without a job evaluation exercise, that was the highest increase ever given.

We also removed the contractual appointments and we gave them tenure. We increase the retirement age to 60 years, so they have another five years of working life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they had a job evaluation exercise in 2017, and all those who got above 15 percent rise, their posts, although confirmed in the past and had been there for several years, were declared vacant, and the posts re-advertised and many of those civil servants were demoted. That was a very stressful period for the entire Civil Service.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they also talked about instilling fear. Instilling fear is the legacy of the previous Government, instilling fear in the Opposition, instilling fear in those who oppose the trade union movement. Anyone who oppose their policies, in some manner or the other were harassed and victimised, whether it was detention, arrest, or taken in for questioning. All these were happening in those days.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also sympathise with my colleagues on the other side. They were also living in fear. They dared never question the decisions made by their bosses. They kept quiet. They were worried about their own jobs. We all know that was happening.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the legacy that was left by their leaders. It is common knowledge that it was my way or the highway. It was very meekly followed by all of them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has brought in true democracy. It reinstated all the rights, whether it is workers, ethnic groups or anyone else, so all the rights are fully restored now. People

have freedom of expression. People have the freedom to express themselves and have the freedom to demonstrate. This is what democracy is. There was no democracy in the past.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also heard a lot about migration - people leaving the country. Let me just quickly repeat in this House what has been stated by honourable Professor Prasad, the former Minister of Finance. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in:

- 2017 - 26,000 people migrated;
- 2018 - 27,000 people migrated;
- 2019 - 28,000 people migrated;
- 2020 - 8,500 people migrated (COVID period);
- 2021 - COVID period;
- 2022 - 28,000 migrated; and
- 2023 - 29,000 migrated.

There is no big difference in the migration during those years, whether it was during their reign or our reign. Because of migration, people's mobility, looking for greener pastures, is nothing new. It has always been there, and it will continue to happen.

From New Zealand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, 122,000 people migrated from New Zealand to Australia and to other countries. That is a 4 percent jump from 24 to 25. If people are saying that people are migrating just because this Government has got bad policies, that is not true. That is a false statement. Very clearly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have given the facts.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians, I rise to respond to His Excellency's Address delivered at the opening of the session of Parliament - an Address that gives us a lot of material to reflect on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just quickly address two things before I forget about it. We have just heard honourable Agni Deo Singh speaking and blaming the political parties of the past. Sir, there is a definition that exists with respect to continuous blaming - it is actually toxic, it is destructive, but it is actually blame-shifting when you have a problem yourself. This idea of raising these issues about the previous political party, a previous government, you are actually defecting from your own problems.

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

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You should just get on with the job. Get on with the job is what I had said when we started this Parliamentary session.

Mr. Speaker, I also wanted to quickly address something that was raised by honourable Nand with respect to CIDA. At that time, he said the Government removed CIDA. It was not a removal of CIDA, it was actually taken into the Ministry of Agriculture. CIDA's responsibilities were merged into the Ministry of Agriculture to simplify administration and reduce costs, so let us not confuse and mislead the House. It was done with respect to better management of that particular part of the industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to take a moment also to ensure that all of us offer our prayers and support with respect to the safety of all our Fijians in the Middle East. It is a region that is absolutely

fought with danger at the moment. There are many Fijians residing in those areas, including my own brother, who happens to be the Ambassador based in Abu Dhabi. I wish him well, I wish him safety, and I wish everyone in the Middle East God's protection.

I want to thank His Excellency for his gracious Address and a very thought-provoking one, which talks of many great ambitions and has some good materials with respect to moving forward, and for us to take an inward look at what kind of nation we are and where we want to be. I commend His Excellency with respect to this.

His Excellency raised issues regarding the sovereignty of our people, the wisdom of our elders, and the sacrifices of those who came before us. He spoke about diversity, strength, unity and purpose. He also asked us to pause and reflect with respect to our national journey since Fiji was ceded 152 odd years ago. These are very important matters, they are not just parts of a speech. He also spoke about our leaders assuming responsibilities of nationhood at independence, and how they did so with humility and a profound sense of duty and optimism, is what he said.

He spoke about service, sacrifice, stewardship. He spoke about equilibrium with respect to maintaining a sense of balance that positions Fiji for challenges that come upon us. He also spoke about our journey with respect to four constitutions, reflecting an ongoing search for fairness, equality and stability. He spoke about sustain, this must be sustained by dialogue, compromise, and most importantly, the respect for rule of law.

He also spoke about the fact that we should now be at a stage of deeper national maturity having gone through each particular chapter. Nation building and how it has progressed was also spoken about and the collective effort must be at the forefront of our journey. Multicultural society issues that he spoke about, and how our unity must be consciously built through a couple of things. He spoke about fair laws, inclusive policies, respectful leadership, and a shared commitment to the common good.

He also asked us, Mr. Speaker, to approach our responsibilities with objectivity, discipline, and with respect. He also quite clearly mentioned how media freedom and parliamentary debate is the lifeblood of democracy, and that is what he quoted. He said, "... but it must be grounded in evidence, with good reason, and practical solutions." I want this to be heard again, this is why I am actually mentioning this.

Again, he also spoke about the wisdom of the outcome of our debates and the sharpness of our debates, and also how we should recommit ourselves to Fijian nationhood, not just on Independence Day. We must look at the enduring obligation to govern wisely, unite our people, and to leave our future generations happier, stronger and more cohesive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in amongst all of that, he mentioned how the philosopher Socrates had devised issues with respect to talking about freedom of expression, and how it remains a cornerstone of our democracy. He said and I quote, "...the three sieves that the Philosopher Socrates devised:

- Is it true?
- Is it kind or good and is it useful?
- Will it just create drama?"

We are all smart people in this room, and I think we need to really take heed of such matters that have been raised by His Excellency the President.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me be quite clear from the outset. The Address reflects the policies of Government and it reflects the promises of Government. Therefore, it must be measured not against aspiration, but against performance. Speeches are easy, but governance is not.

Today, I will speak on matters that sit at the very heart of our nation - our democracy, the strength of our institutions and the future direction of our economy in an increasingly daily uncertain world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is still a young democracy despite our four constitutions, but our democratic journey has not been an easy one. As a nation, as I say, we have lived through four constitutions. Each Constitution has reflected a particular moment in our history - moments of hope, moments of conflict and moments of rebuilding. From the 1970 Constitution, which marked our independence to the 1990 Constitution, which came after political upheaval, then the 1997 Constitution, which attempted to restore unity and inclusivity and finally, the 2013 Constitution, which governs us today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact that we have had four constitutions tells us something very important. It tells that democracy has been tested many times. It reminds us that democratic systems are fragile when institutions are weak, when leaders place politics above principles and when the rule of law is compromised.

A constitution alone does not guarantee democracy; strong and independent institutions do. Institutions such as the Judiciary, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, Fiji Police Force, Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption, Electoral Commission and the Reserve Bank of Fiji must be protected at all times from political interference. These institutions are not meant to serve the governments of the day. They are meant to serve the Constitution and the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we speak about protecting the independence of our public and our constitutional offices, we must also speak about how the people who lead these institutions are appointed. Appointments to those offices must always be based on merit.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- And what do we mean by merit-based appointments? It means appointments are not based on who you know, which town you live in, which district you live in, which village you are from, they are not based on any traditional ties, and they are certainly not and should never be based on the political party you support. Public and constitutional offices do not belong to any Government. They belong to the people of Fiji, and the people of Fiji deserve institutions that are led by individuals chosen for their competence, their integrity and their ability to serve the nation with independence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when institutions become politicised, when appointments are questioned, when processes lack transparency, and when public confidence begins to erode, democracy itself begins to weaken. Democracy is not just about elections every four years. It is about trust; trust that the law will apply equally to everyone, trust that the institutions will act independently, trust that the leaders will be accountable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji today are asking serious questions about that trust. Let me explain the situation using a simple analogy. Think of Fiji as a vehicle filled with passengers, and those passengers are the people of Fiji - our workers, our farmers, our small business owners, our students and our families. In 2022 after the elections, the Coalition Government stood before these passengers and said, "Get into the car with us. We will drive you to a better Fiji, a more prosperous

Fiji, a fairer Fiji and a transparent Fiji.” – that was the promise. People boarded the vehicle, but it is now becoming clear why they did not get an overall majority. Most people knew not to trust these drivers because their records showed exactly what they do.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Three years later, the passengers are looking out the window and asking various questions. Are we even moving? Sir, 36 months later, we are still getting blame game - the blame game that exists every time we start up Parliament. Have we made much progress 36 months later? I do not think so, because what the passengers see is not progress, what they are seeing is a particular vehicle driving around in circles; the same scenery, the same arguments, the same confusion - round and round.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us look at what has actually dominated the life of this particular government for the last three years. Appointments, terminations, investigations, inquiries and maybe some settlements. Who knows? One week someone is appointed, the next week someone is suspended, the following week someone is removed. Then a Commission of Inquiry is established, then the matter disappears and then another appointment is made.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what this reflects is not governance, this reflects chaos and the people of Fiji are asking, who is driving this particular vehicle? The Government promised professionalism, promised competence, promised strong institutions, but the Coalition Government has struggled to maintain stability in its own ranks.

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

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Appointments have been made, appointments have collapsed, controversies have emerged, and I am not saying anything new. Positions have shifted and the nation has been left watching a revolving door. This raises two very serious possibilities, either there is a lack of technical capability or there is distrust amongst the ranks to sustain those appointments. The question that those citizens will ask, is the government cannot even maintain its stability in its office and it raises the profound questions with respect to competence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have had one scandal after another. Scandal arises, questionable decisions emerge whenever a controversy reaches the public domain. Let me say this respectfully but firmly, Sir, we must find out these particular answers. Who is to answer for all of these? Who is the one giving the advice because leadership requires awareness, leadership requires control, leadership requires responsibility. But that leadership needs to get good advice. Where is the advice coming from when it falls astray?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I also wanted to say was that the actual Coalition is cannibalising itself. This has become a feature of the government. There has been internal competition between these Coalition partners and let us be honest about what is happening. They are not all governing together, they are campaigning against each other while still in government. Each partner is positioning itself for the next election. Each partner is protecting its own political territory. Each partner is competing for the headlines, and meanwhile, Sir, what is happening in Fiji has not been thought about.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is what happens when you have a Coalition Government that stops focusing on government and starts focusing on survival. The result is paralysis. Decisions are delayed, policies are diluted, leadership becomes fragmented, and who pays the price? The country does.

On the cost of living and our economic reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we look at the current state of our economy, many families across Fiji are struggling. The cost of living continues to rise, food prices remain high, transportation costs are increasing. Many households are finding it hard each month to make ends meet. Businesses report uncertainty. Skilled workers continue to leave our shores in large numbers, and whilst the Government speaks about economic growth and many ordinary Fijians are asking a simple question - growth for whom? Because economic statistics mean very little when families cannot afford basic necessities and there may be more yet to come with the current state of the world. So, the question that needs to be asked is, what are we going to do about it?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the health of this nation is a reflection of the performance of this Government. Today, we are witnessing the consequences of some poor leadership and weak administration. Our health system is struggling. The state of the infrastructure at CWM continues to deteriorate. This is not progress, this is chaos.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the same time, we are seeing serious failures in basic service delivery. Today, there are thousands of Back-to-School Assistance applications still pending. These are just not administrative files sitting at a desk, they are real families, real parents, real children waiting for support that was promised to them.

His Excellency's Address outlined an ambitious agenda that the Government claims it wants to achieve; very noble, but when the executive itself begins to falter under chaos, confusion and incompetence, that agenda quickly becomes meaningless.

Mr. Speaker, this is a recipe for disaster. A very long word comes to mind, it leads to a state of discombobulation, and the people of Fiji are paying the price. With respect to global uncertainty and national preparedness, we must also look beyond our borders. The world today is facing serious challenges, serious geopolitical tensions on a daily basis. The goalposts are being shifted on a daily basis. Conflicts are unfolding in different regions. Global trade routes are being disrupted and supply chains remain fragile, but we are still the number one destination to come to, Mr. Speaker. We are still said commonly that we are the safest place in the world, but we must be prepared. For a small island nation like Fiji, global developments are not distant issues. They directly affect our economy, our fuel prices, our food security and our tourism industry.

We should be ever so grateful to the tourism industry. It has pulled us out of the fire on many occasions, Mr. Speaker. But where is Fiji's contingency plan? We need to start hearing some things about it. Where is our backup strategy if global tensions escalate further? What is our national plan if tourism declines due to international instability? What is our strategy if fuel prices spike dramatically again? Responsible leadership requires governments to plan not only for good times, but also for bad times. We must invest in renewable energy and local production to reduce vulnerability to all these global shocks.

Mr. Speaker, let us remind ourselves of the contrast, the contrast from 2007 right up to 2022. Between 2007 and 2022, Fiji experienced significant transformation. Infrastructure development accelerated. Education access expanded. Digital government services introduced. Tourism and investment grew. Public services were modernised and direction was clear. Mr. Speaker, the people of Fiji may debate politics, but they cannot ignore progress when they see it.

In conclusion, the analogy of the car remains- the most accurate description of where Fiji stands today. Passengers were promised a journey to prosperity. Instead, they have been taken in these circles and I will say this again. Appointments, terminations, scandals, investigations, internal political battles, round and round. Passengers are no longer amused, Mr. Speaker. They are asking

the driver to either take them somewhere meaningful or step aside.

His Excellency the President's Address outlines a vision of progress, a very commendable one, but the reality of governance is that it must match that particular vision. We must practice what the President has just preached to us in his speech and it is a wonderful speech. It has given us guidance with respect to how we ought to behave and what we need to do. People of Fiji deserve leadership that delivers, leadership that focusses on service delivery, leadership that provides economic certainty, leadership that moves the country forward, not leadership that will drive us in circles. After three years, they are still waiting.

Mr. Speaker, I thank His Excellency the President for his Address, and I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to respond.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that should do us for this morning's proceedings. Before we suspend our proceedings for lunch, I inform the CWP Fiji Group is meeting during the lunch period at the Small Committee Room where lunch will also be served.

Our proceedings is suspended for lunch break, and we will resume at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.19 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.35 p.m.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for giving an early lunch break so that I could prepare further and do some *maro maro* later in my speech. The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition (I thought there were so many Opposition Leaders now), distinguished guests in the gallery and my fellow Fijians from all walks of life. Before I speak proper, sometimes I feel what hypocrisy we have in this Parliament.

First of all, when His Excellency was voted to become the Speaker, we had opposition from that side. When he became His Excellency of this country, we had opposition from that side. Now, their speech says, "Your Excellency and your gracious speech." Do not be hypocritical. If you do not like a person, just move out of this House full stop. I know honourable Koya is waving his head, trying to perhaps disagree with me, but please, this is a new modern of Parliament, where if you do not like a person, just move out and come back in the new term of Parliament.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Point of Order. Standing Order 60 on Relevance.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, can you explain if your observation is relevant or not according to this?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very relevant. If you do not like a person, do not be hypocritical in this Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, are you referring to His Excellency?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- That is right, Sir.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- No, no, you do not have respect.

MR. SPEAKER.- Can I ask the honourable Minister to keep away from that observation? I think they are quite correct in that, they do have respect for His Excellency.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- I wanted to create a bit of a drama before I start my real speech.

Coming back, we have several speakers here who have talked about the cost of living. The country is going out of the roof, 16 years of FijiFirst, you did not talk about it. Do you know or understand how it works in this country, how the prices of goods work in this country?

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Come on, listen!

Sir, what happens in this country is this - we are the receivers end in this country. We only have a small ratio of our own resources. By majority, our imports come are from New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, India and Thailand. Even, whatever we manufacture in this country, our raw products are 75 percent imported. How do we control our goods? We do not have our father's factory sitting there in Thailand? If they give us a price, we have to be dictated by them. And even today, when the Iran-US war started and the Ukraine-Russia war started, we do not have control. We are at the receiver's end.

Do not blame us if the prices of goods have increased here because of honourable Rabuka's Government. Even if the Government changes tomorrow, you will not be able to change the prices. So, do not mislead the consumer in this country, that because of us, the prices went up.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- You want VAT free? Then your salary will not be paid.

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- If you want VAT free, your salary will not be paid.

Now coming back to another issue. Do not mislead the consumers because you no idea how the business of this country is run, in particular, how the supermarkets operate. Do you know what is the GDP of a supermarket?

MR. SPEAKER.- Now, let me just have a general warning to everyone. You do not speak directly to one person, you speak to the Chair.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- To run a supermarket, of course, I come from a supermarket business, I declare my interest. You run a supermarket in this country; you know what is the gross profit of the business? Can anyone in the Opposition give me a number?

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Point of Order – Standing 60, again on Relevance. He is talking about going to the supermarket.

MR. SPEAKER.- It is a similar issue that was raised in respect of, unfortunately, you have to link whatever your you are talking about to the His Excellency the President's Address. If he was talking about cost of living, then the issue on supermarket is relevant. Proceed, please.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Sir.

The honourable Member does not know that they were talking about inflation; I am coming to the point. Honourable Rinesh, a small kid, you be careful.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, running a supermarket ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, Point of Order, honourable Usamate.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Standing Order 62(4)(a). The honourable Member should not be warning Members of this House. He should not be saying, "watch out", he needs to focus. He cannot be offensive, teaching people like small children. These are honourable Members of Parliament who represent the people of this country. He needs to withdraw that kind of statement.

MR. SPEAKER.- I make the ruling, not you.

I do agree with him though. I think you will need to keep away from that kind of language, honourable Minister. If you can withdraw that, we can proceed, please.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, I withdraw, but I think my speech will, perhaps, take another half-an-hour with the interjections coming through, so please bear with me.

Coming back to dishonesty and hypocrisy in this country and in this Chamber. When the Government had submitted the salary increase to Parliament, we had the Opposition opposing. The Opposition Members of G11 were with us and I thank them because they came very honestly to vote for us, but G15 opposed it. What they did, they opposed here, then went to the urban settlements and villages to say, "we opposed this salary." From \$50,000 salary, they got to \$90,000. They opposed, voted against us, yet they collected their salary. I want this whole nation to know dishonesty of the highest order are these people.

HON. R.R SHARMA.- Which people?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Well you, I am talking about them, about you guys.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Sharma, I have warned you, you do not talk directly to the speaker.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- This is not an election campaign stage. I want the whole nation to know what they say in Parliament and what they say outside. If they were honest, they would have told the Ministry, "Look, we do not want \$40,000 more, please divert the money to the destitutes and poor." Now they are collecting it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not want to say National Federation Party, but I am talking about the G15, the dishonest bunch of honourable Members.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now wish to speak on my speech.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- You have not started?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- No, I have 12 minutes left, but you know how the clock works.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address because I love the President. I voted for him; you Members did not.

His Excellency has outlined a clear and principled vision of our nation, one grounded in unity, responsible leadership and inclusive development of the nation's progress. He reminded us that our diversity is our strength. Our unity is our purpose which speaks directly to the mandate of the Ministry which I have the honour of being responsible for.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Honourable Kirpal, do not do all that. I know about you. I am so much better than you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to first express my sincere appreciation to the honourable Prime Minister for the confidence placed in me to serve as Minister of Public Enterprises as well as the Minister responsible for Multi-Ethnic Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts.

Now, some Members are saying that I got demoted. The honourable Leader of the Opposition, you know how demotion and promotion happen in the Civil Service! You were demoted are few

times. Honourable Member, I have been promoted from five sectors to 22 sectors in Public Enterprises. That is a promotion, unless you Members have a miscalculation or have never been to school to understand.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I cannot see the relevance of what the honourable Minister is talking about to His Excellency's Address. His Excellency did not talk about Ministers getting a bigger portfolio or smaller portfolio; nowhere in his speech. This is totally irrelevant, Sir. I am sorry, but I do not see the relevance at all.

MR. SPEAKER.- Can I ask the honourable Minister to keep to his script. The less he talks off the cuff, I think, the better it is.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker. Sir, it is all about good governance. The integration of these portfolios represents a unique opportunity to strengthen both the social and economic pillars of our national development. On one hand, we must nurture unity, cultural identity and social cohesion across our diverse communities. On the other hand, we must ensure that our state-owned enterprises operate efficiently, responsibly and sustainably in support of our national economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts translates a vision of unity into practical action. Social cohesion does not happen by chance, it must be nurtured through inclusive policies, community engagement and respect for Fiji's cultural diversity.

The work of the Ministry is therefore grounded in strengthening the bonds that unite our people, while promoting our culture, heritage and arts and ensuring that every Fijian, regardless of ethnicity, faith or background feels respected, valued and included in the national journey.

One of the key instruments for achieving this objective is Multi-Ethnic Grants Programme. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year the allocation has increased to \$2 million, representing an increase of \$700,000 from the previous financial year. The response from these communities are overwhelming. Last year, the Ministry received 312 applications, of which 202 community-based organisations were supported. This year, the application has increased significantly to 1,074, demonstrating both the growing needs of our communities and the trust they continue to place in the Government's programmes.

Currently, my Ministry is processing 542 approved applications under this programme. Just last week, I was in the Western Division, where I had the privilege of personally distributing grants to 84 recipients in the South-Western region, furthermore, reflecting Government's commitment to ensuring that support reaches communities across the country. Through these grants communities have undertaken projects ranging from water and borehole systems, accessibility improvements, community infrastructure, cultural and educational initiatives, solar installations and facility upgrades.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as His Excellency reminded us, strengthening unity also requires us to honour the historical journeys that shaped our nation. The Ministry, therefore, continues to advance initiatives related to the Giriti legacy. This year, the national commemoration will be held under the theme, "From Roots to Wings - Carrying the Giriti Flame Forward". As my Assistant Minister had given the invitation, I also forward the invitation to your good self and the entire Parliament to please be with us on celebration day. The national event will take place at Ratu Cakobau Park in Nausori on 15th May, 2026, with supporting events planned for Lautoka and Labasa.

In addition, the Ministry has commenced a digitisation over the limit 60,000 Giritiya records, creating a searchable national database that allows descendants to record and reconnect with their

heritage and better understand the history that shaped modern Fiji.

Phase One has been completed and the preparatory work for Phase 2 is now underway. Work has also commenced with the concept design of the state-of-the-art Giriti Museum, with the consultants who are already engaged for the design phase. This important project is generously supported by the Government of India. Once completed, the museum will serve as a national cultural landmark and a centre of education, research and intercultural understanding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also progressing several important community infrastructure projects. This includes the completion of the Tuatua Gas-Fired Crematorium in Labasa, which is expected to be commissioned soon as the final test is done. In addition, the Navua Crematorium project is approximately 60 percent complete while the proposed facility in Varoka, Ba, is presently undergoing an Environmental Impact Assessment process which is in place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department of Culture, Heritage and Arts, which now comes under my Ministry, plays a vital role in safeguarding and promoting the cultural identity of a nation. Culture and heritage connect the wisdom of our ancestors with the aspiration of future generations. The Department is currently finalising the Fiji Culture Sector Development Plan to guide the growth of our cultural and creative industries while preserving our heritage.

This Coalition Government also has endorsed the first-ever Fiji National Cultural Policy after more than two decades of development. The policy will strengthen the cultural rights, support the creative industries, promote cultural tourism, and ensure our heritage continues to shape Fiji's future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to now address the responsibilities of the Ministry of Public Enterprise, which plays a vital role in supporting the national economic development. State-owned enterprises are key drivers of economic activity, employment, and national infrastructure. They provide essential services in sectors such as aviation, communication, agriculture, forestry, and finance, often operating where private investments alone cannot meet the national needs. Currently, 13 entities are classified as public enterprises under the Public Enterprises Act 2019, collectively managing significant national assets and delivering vital services to the people of Fiji.

The Ministry has recently added Assets Fiji Private Limited to the schedule following the recent Cabinet approval. The company manages strategic land assets of public enterprises and other Government-owned entities that have been divested or sold. Under the Act, Assets Fiji Limited will focus on strengthening operations, improving efficiency, and exploring new investment opportunities to enhance the revenue generation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry plays a critical role in providing governance oversight, administration, and monitoring of public enterprises. This includes the appointment of Board of Directors who can govern these entities in accordance with the key principles of the Act – commercial objectives, measurable performance, responsible management, transparency, and effective monitoring.

Strengthening governance therefore remains a key priority. The Ministry will continue implementing the merit-based selections and appointment process for the Board of Directors, ensuring that qualified professionals with appropriate expertise serve on these boards.

To further strengthen accountability, the Ministry is also developing a Director's Evaluation Framework to assess the performance and effectiveness of Board members and identify areas of improvement. In addition, the Ministry will continue reviewing the Business Plans and Statements

of Corporate Intent of Public Enterprises to ensure alignment with the National Development Plan 2025-2029 and Vision 2050. Public enterprises will also be required to submit and table their annual reports in a timely manner, reinforcing transparency and accountability to Cabinet, Parliament, and the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another important focus area is sustainability. The Ministry is encouraging public enterprises to integrate environmentally sustainable, and socially responsible practices into their operations. For example, Fiji Airports is progressing plans for a 3.5 megawatt solar farm at Nadi International Airport, which will reduce reliance on the national grid and support Fiji's renewable energy transition. The company also expanded the use of electric solar farm at the Nadi International Airport, which will reduce reliance on the national grid and support Fiji's renewal energy transition. The company has also expanded the use of electric vehicles within its operations.

Similarly, the Food Processors (Fiji) Limited is exploring the development of a 10-megawatt agrivoltaics solar farm in Batiri, Vanua Levu, combining solar energy production with agricultural activities to enhance both energy sustainability and agricultural resilience.

The Ministry is also undertaking to work to examine potential reforms with agro-based public enterprises. These reforms aim to improve operational efficiency, strengthen financial performance, encourage innovation and reduce long-term reliance on Government support. Option papers are currently being prepared to assess the most appropriate reform pathway for each entity.

In addition, Government is progressing amendments to Schedule 1 of the Higher Salaries Commission Act 2023, following Cabinet approval earlier this year to include eight additional entities within the Commission's oversight. This initiative will promote greater transparency, fairness, consistency in salary determinations for senior executives within Government-controlled entities.

In conclusion, the responsibilities entrusted to these Ministries reflect two essential pillars of national progress – unity among our people and sustainability within our institutions. Through the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts, we will continue to strengthen social cohesion, celebrate our cultural diversity, preserve our heritage, and promote the arts as vital expressions of our national identity.

Through the Ministry of Public Enterprises, we will strengthen governance, improve and ensure that public enterprises contribute meaningfully to economic growth and national prosperity. As His Excellency has reminded us, the true strength of a national lies not only in its institutions, but in the character, unity, and shared values of its people.

Let this Parliament be remembered not for division, but for wisdom. Let us work together as a Government of National Unity, as honourable Bala has said. I do not know under which Party he was proposing that but let us work together to build a Fiji that is fairer, stronger, and more united - where our diversity, culture, and heritage are celebrated, and our public enterprises contribute to a resilient, prosperous economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I sit down, I was trying to see whether honourable Bala had said thank you to honourable Minister for Employment for the \$5 wages increase and to the honourable Minister for Housing for the Local Government Elections.

MR. SPEAKER.- Just before the lunch break, I had looked across to the Minister's desk and he was nodding. I said, "No, you will not deliver your address before lunch, you will wait" because somehow, I sensed that this exchange was going to happen. That is why I thought we will wait until

after lunch to let everyone be content. In any case, it did quite work the way I had wanted it to, but thank you, honourable Minister.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow citizens and online viewers; I rise in support of the motion that is before the House, and that is to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address when he opened this 2026 Session of Parliament. His Excellency reminded us that our diversity is our strength, and our unity must be actively nurtured. It must be built through fair laws, inclusive policies, respectful leadership and disciplined debate.

In his Address, His Excellency reminded us that we govern in an era defined by technological disruption, economic volatility, geopolitical uncertainty and the accelerating impacts of climate change. These forces are shaping our domestic realities, including the movement of people within and beyond Fiji. He observed that global instability is driving migration, creating unprecedented demographic shifts.

For Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this reality carries both, challenges and opportunities. Migration is no longer a peripheral issue - it is central to national resilience, labour market stability and social cohesion.

Technological change and artificial intelligence are reshaping labour markets worldwide. Fiji must, therefore, ensure that its immigration framework supports national development by facilitating the entry of skills that complement and strengthen our domestic workforce, protecting employment opportunities and fair conditions for Fijian workers; maintaining firm, transparent and lawful border management systems; and ensuring that migration processes reflect integrity, efficiency and accountability.

As a Small Island Developing State, we are particularly sensitive to demographic shifts, urbanisation pressures, outward labour mobility, and regional movement of people must be carefully managed to sustain economic growth while preserving social harmony.

Immigration policy must, therefore, be guided by the three core principles reflected in His Excellency the President's Address:

- (1) Unity and Diversity - recognising that Fiji's multicultural fabric is a strength and that lawful and well-managed migration contributes positively to national life.
- (2) Sustainability and Resilience - ensuring that population growth, labour inflows and mobility arrangements align with infrastructure capacity, environmental stewardship and long-term economic plan.
- (3) Integrity and Good Governance - upholding the rule of law in all immigration processes, safeguarding public confidence in our border systems, and ensuring fairness and consistency in decision-making.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, immigration is not merely about the regulation of entry and exit, it is about –

- security;
- shaping the future composition of our workforce;
- strengthening regional partnerships;
- supporting economic competitiveness; and

- safeguarding sovereignty.

His Excellency has set a clear tone, one of stability, reform and service delivery that meets the expectations of our people. Leaders are urged to uphold integrity, responsible debate and national unity, especially as Fiji approaches an election year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Minister for Immigration, I reaffirm our commitment to modernising our systems, strengthening border security and improving immigration services for Fijians at home and abroad.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our passport system is undergoing a major upgrade. This is the first upgrade since acquiring this passport system in 2019. It is a little overdue, but it is being done now. This upgrade, when completed, will significantly improve the quality and efficiency of our passport service delivery to the public.

Individuals will be able to complete their passport enrolment online, wherever they are, even from the comfort of their homes, and only first-time passport applicants will be required to book an appointment date, to visit the nearest Immigration Office for their biometric capture. This will certainly reduce waiting times, improve efficiency and provide greater convenience to our citizens. So, for passport renewals, you will only visit an Immigration Office to collect your new passport. We will make announcements when the upgrade is completed, and our target is by the end of May 2026.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry received a new batch of 45,000 blank passport books just last Friday, 6th March, 2026. This is the balance of the 100,000 books that was budgeted for in the 2024-2025 Budget. In this budget year another batch of 100,000 books is budgeted for, and the contract for production has been signed. I wish to assure Fijians that there is sufficient stock available, therefore, there is no need to an unnecessarily rush through your application.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Immigration is transitioning its border management system from the current system to the MERIT system. This work is supported by Australia, and a team from MERIT will be in Fiji from the 30th of this month, as we commence the implementation process. The modules will be implemented in stages to allow us to plan carefully, allocate resources appropriately, and roll out the system in a practical and effective manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Advanced Passenger Information and Passenger Name Record (API/PNR) project is critical to strengthening our border security framework. This data system is key to the security evaluation of those coming through our borders while at the same time, ensuring faster processing and facilitation of genuine visitors/travellers across our borders.

In line with Government standard procurement procedures, the Expression of Interest was advertised, and it is enclosed, and we are working with ITC on the final stages of the evaluation and selection process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, document fraud remains a serious and growing global threat. Fraudulent passports, visas and identity documents are increasingly becoming sophisticated and often linked to transnational crime, human trafficking, people smuggling and other security risks.

The establishment of a Document Forensic Laboratory in Nadi and Suva is a big development in this very important area of immigration work. We are working closely with the Australian Government as we strengthen Fiji's technical capacity to detect forged and altered travel documents quickly and accurately.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are decentralising our immigration services. A new Immigration Office will open in Nakasi and has been approved by the relevant authorities. It will undergo an office fit-out and we are awaiting new enrolment kits that are being sea freighted with an Expected Time of Arrival (ETA) on 1st April, 2026. This new office will ease congestion in the Suva Office, suddenly reducing travel time for residents in surrounding communities (Suva-Nausori corridor) and bring immigration services closer to the people.

We are also finalising the location of a new Immigration Office in Rakiraki Town. My Permanent Secretary (PS) and the PS Civil Service and staff from the Office Accommodation Unit just returned from Rakiraki today to finalise this process. I am told that they have finalised the location in Rakiraki Town.

This move to Rakiraki will greatly improve access to communities in the Ra Province, Tavua, Wainibuka and nearby rural areas. Presently, these communities would travel all the way to Lautoka or to Suva for immigration services. Like the new Nakasi Office, technical equipment for this new Rakiraki Office is expected to arrive on 1st April, 2026.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are targeting the end of May 2026 to complete all the upgrades to our passport system and open these two new Offices in Nakasi and Rakiraki.

We are also progressing plans to relocate the Savusavu and Lautoka Offices. These relocations aims to improve delivery service and provide a more professional, secure and accommodating workplace for staff and our customers in the North.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Friday last week, International Women's Day was celebrated globally under the theme "Give to Gain". The Ministry also marked this occasion, and I wish to commend the invaluable contributions made by women across all areas of our work.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, within our Ministry, women constitute 70 percent of our staff. Their commitment, expertise and leadership are central to driving the Ministry forward, ensuring that our services are delivered efficiently and effectively. The remarkable contributions of these women strengthen our operations. They uphold the integrity of our work and inspire a culture of professionalism across every area of work within the Ministry of Immigration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my staff at our Lautoka Office are all women. Yes, they do all the immigration work, including boarding all those ships, big and small, that come into Lautoka or Vuda Marina. I know they are happy to hear about the new Rakiraki Office, as it will relieve a lot of pressure from their office in Lautoka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency reminded us in his Address that the review of the 2013 Constitution has commenced. The process commenced in this House when we voted on the Constitution (Amendment) Bill and the consequent proceedings that followed in the Supreme Court.

The National Referendum Bill 2025, which is a prominent part of the constitutional review, is currently going through the consultation process by the Standing Committee on Justice Law and Human Rights. The honourable Minister for Justice and Acting Attorney-General articulated this process very well yesterday.

Some honourable Members of the Opposition have been asking in this House what this Government wants to change in the Constitution, insinuating that there is a list hidden somewhere. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the answer to that ill-founded insinuation is in His Excellency's Address. I will read it to them, and I quote from Page 7 of the Daily Hansard on Monday, 16th February, 2026:

“Central to this review is meaningful public participation, transparency and dialogue. Government is committed to ensuring that the voices of all Fijians - across communities, generations and regions are heard and respected. Through structured consultations and expert engagement, the review will work to build broad-based consensus and reinforce public confidence in the constitutional framework that underpins our democratic institutions.”

His Excellency even went further, and I quote:

“The Constitution (Amendment) Bill, like all other Bills, will be made public and undergo an extensive consultation process with robust public debate and input before it is tabled to Cabinet and even Parliament.”

In other words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the changes to the Constitution will come from the voices of Fijians and the process will follow the process that is laid out in the review of the Constitution.

Let me just add that in our 56 years of independence, constitutional change has been, for the most part, preceded by a military *coup*. However, this time we, the Members of this House in this term, have the opportunity, and Government has the political will to take this Constitution back to the people and at the end of the review process, we will have a Constitution that truly reflects the will of the people as it should and not the will of a few as it is now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his Address, His Excellency paid tribute to our peacekeepers. Fiji has been deployed in peacekeeping missions for 48 years now, and as we know, the missions that they were deployed to and are deployed to now, are mostly around the Middle East. Our troops are currently deployed in the Golan Heights and in Sinai.

As we watch what is happening in the Middle East, we remember our peacekeepers and their families. We pray for their safety and good health. We pray for peace in the Middle East and the world.

To our brave peacekeepers, thank you for your service to your country. Thank you for your service to world peace. To your families, thank you for your support and thank you for your sacrifice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I most sincerely thank His Excellency for his most gracious Address, and I fully support the motion that is before the House.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Members of Parliament, my fellow Fijians; I rise today to support the motion moved by the honourable Prime Minister to thank His Excellency, the President, for his inspiring Address in the House.

First, what a month March has been already, a month of celebrations. A happy Chinese New Year of the Firehorse, Happy *Holi*, *Ramadan Mubarak*, a happy Father's Day to all our fathers and, of course, a happy International Women's Day to all women in Fiji and around the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to especially acknowledge our women who often carry the burden of care in our homes, our families and in our societies - our mothers, our grandmothers, women who look after children, the elderly, people living with disabilities, often not thanked, but yet contributing very much to our fabric of society, and I acknowledge them.

I also acknowledge our women in the informal economy - our housekeepers, our nannies, our caregivers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, who are often unheard. They may not have titles or may not be visible, but yet the same, I acknowledge the very important work that they do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his Address, His Excellency reminded us that Fiji must move forward, guided by three very powerful principles -

- (1) unity and diversity;
- (2) sustainability and resilience; and
- (3) integrity and good governance.

These are simply not principles for speeches, but they are principles for action.

Our people want leadership that improves their lives, speaks the truth and a future that is safer, fairer and more secure for their children. Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to focus on two issues that affect every Fijian family - information, what we believe; and the environment, how we live. Both shape Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are now living in a time where information moves faster than ever before. Rumour can travel across the country in minutes. A fake image can look real. A voice generated by Artificial Intelligence (AI) can sound like a real person. Technology is powerful, but like all power, it can be used for good or for harm.

Around the world, Governments and societies are grappling with a growing challenge of misinformation and disinformation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we saw this clearly during the cyclone in the last couple of weeks. While families were trying to find safety and reliable updates, false announcements began circulating online. One post falsely claimed that Civil Service Offices had been closed because of the cyclone and that civil servants did not have to go to work. It looked official and real, but it was completely false. That is why the Ministry of Information works day and night to verify information and correct false reports.

However, the Government cannot do this alone because today, every person with a smartphone is a publisher, a detective, a coach, a lawyer, a psychologist, and the list goes on. Anyone can post, anyone can share, and anyone can start a story. Sometimes these stories are shared before they are even verified. Sometimes people record videos before helping those in need. Sometimes rumours are shared simply to gain likes, followers, or attention. Sometimes crimes are committed within minutes as private content is shared across Fiji without consent, or *TikTok* videos go viral of personal attacks using vulgar words.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a single post can damage a reputation. It can cause termination of employment. A single rumour can create panic. It can hurt people and break up families. A single share can commit a crime and a single lie can divide a nation. That is why I want to repeat the very pertinent message by His Excellency the President when he referred to the philosopher Socrates: To every Fijian, when you receive information, ask yourself three questions –

- (1) Is it true? (*E dina beka?*) Is there evidence of the truth of the information?
- (2) Is it good? (*E vinaka?*) Will it foster goodwill or cause more harm?
- (3) Is it useful? (*E yaga?*) Will it be of benefit, or will it just create drama?

His Excellency called on leaders, media organisations and citizens to exercise responsibility, discernment and integrity in sharing information so that public discourse strengthens unity. This responsibility becomes even more important as Fiji approaches the Local Government Elections, then

the national elections.

Fiji undertakes constitutional review. Fiji is undergoing the process of truth and reconciliation. Around the world, misinformation increases during election period, but democracy cannot thrive when truth is ignored. It must be built on facts, on respect, and responsible debate.

Later this month, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Information will host Fiji's first-ever Government Communications Conference. The theme is simple but powerful – Coordinate, Collaborate, Elevate. At this Conference, we will launch the Government Communications Guidebook and a new national communications framework called *Sautu*. The word '*Sautu*' in iTaukei represents peace, harmony and well-being, and that is exactly what we want our information environment to promote - not confusion and not division, but truth, unity and responsible dialogue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to acknowledge our partnership with the Government Communications Services of the United Kingdom, who have been working with us for a number of years. We are yet to sign the MOU on the renewal of this relationship, but I acknowledge their support in this conference that we will be hosting, and in the development of this Communications Guidebook called *Sautu*

I acknowledge my colleagues from GCSI who are here today in the Chambers, as well as the Permanent Secretary for Information, Eseta Nadakuitavuki. I thank her and her leadership in assisting me, as we move forward to improve the information environment here in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while information shapes what our people believe, the environment shapes how people live and survive. As we know, climate change is no longer a distant threat. It is here. Our farmers face unpredictable seasons. Our communities face flooding. Our coastlines face erosion, and some villages are now faced with the painful decision of relocation. Despite contributing only a tiny fraction of global emissions, Fiji faces some of the most severe impacts.

We need to be clear, Mr. Speaker, Sir, climate change is not just an environmental issue; it is an economic issue, it is a development issue, and I thank my colleagues who have acknowledged and are working on this issue of climate change and its impacts, even within their own line ministries.

For a small nation like Fiji, it is a survival issue, but Fiji is not standing still. Fiji is leading. I wish to acknowledge the great work that has been shared by my predecessor, honourable Mosese Bulitavu. Thank you for the work in leading the Ministry and the hard work you have put in the last year, and I can only hope to be able to fill the big shoes that he has left behind, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, more than 75 percent of the Climate Change Act 2021 is already in force, ensuring that climate considerations are integrated across all Government policies and planning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am proud to inform this House that our Pacific Leaders have supported Fiji's proposal to host the pre-COP meeting, ahead of Climate COP 31. This is a significant moment in our nation. I thank the honourable Prime Minister for his leadership in securing this auspicious event.

I acknowledge the hard work of our Permanent Secretary and the Ministry team in preparing and submitting the proposal. I also thank our Pacific brothers and sisters for placing their confidence in Fiji to host such an important event. Once approved by Cabinet, this event will bring together not just our Pacific Leaders, but global leaders as well, as we prepare our united voice as Blue Pacific to COP 31 in Turkey.

I acknowledge the support of the Government of Australia, as the Chair leading the negotiations at COP 31, in advancing this initiative. I would also like to acknowledge the leadership of the former prime minister, Frank Bainimarama, who served as President of COP23, laying the foundation for Fiji's continued leadership in global climate action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Ministry has completed the review of Fiji's litter laws, which will soon be brought to Parliament. The proposed amendments will increase penalties for littering, criminalise illegal dumping by corporations and businesses, and strengthen enforcement mechanisms. I seek the support of our colleagues in this House to pass these changes, because a cleaner Fiji benefits everyone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also seeing encouraging progress through initiatives that promote recycling and responsible waste management. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for your immense support for the VAKA Forum, and I thank the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Leader of Opposition and colleagues, who will be attending in great numbers on Monday.

Mr. Speaker, this VAKA Forum, brings together our grassroots waste recyclers. They have come as far as Taveuni, Labasa and other maritime areas to be here for the next few days of the VAKA Forum.

I thank the Pacific Recycling Facility Foundation for hosting, along with our Ministry. I also wish to acknowledge the Return and Earn Initiative, which is in partnership with the Ministry of Local Government, where several Municipal Councils are open to receiving plastic bottles to be recycled at their centres at 5 cents a bottle, where the community can actually earn money while keeping Fiji clean and free of litter.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these initiatives help reduce litter, encourage recycling and create some small income opportunities for families.

I also acknowledge Trashboom Pacific, I know some of you have seen online, where this particular device, which is collecting trash in the Nabukalou Creek, as well as rivers around the country. The Ministry has secured eight more trashbooms that we will be installing in the coming weeks around the country as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Pacific people, the ocean is our identity. It feeds us, connects us, and sustains our economy. That is why Fiji supports the vision of the honourable Prime Minister for the Ocean of Peace. This vision becomes even more important as we prepare for the first-ever Conference of Parties (COP) under the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement, expected in early 2027.

This Agreement represents a historic step forward in protecting biodiversity on the high seas and areas beyond our own national jurisdiction. As custodians of the Blue Pacific, Fiji will continue to advocate for strong ocean protection, sustainable fisheries and responsible stewardship of our marine resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude the message from His Excellency, the President is clear - Fiji's future depends on truth in our information, integrity in our leadership and sustainability in our development. We need to move forward together, united in diversity, guided by integrity and committed to a resilient and sustainable Fiji.

To honourable Bala and his proposal for a Government of national unity, I say to him, we are already doing it. The Coalition Government is a coalition of political parties, as well as the Group of

11(G11), who came over to join the Government. You are most welcome to join us as well!

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, *vinaka vakalevu, dhanyavaad, faiakse'ea*, and God bless Fiji.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests and ladies and gentlemen; *ni sa yadra vinaka* and a good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today with humility and deep gratitude to deliver my response to the Address by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, Ratu Naiqama Tawakecolati Lalabalavu, *Na Gone Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau*, at the opening of this 2026 Session of Parliament.

At the outset, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the *Vanua o Nadonumai, na nodra i tikotiko na Gone Turaga na Tui Suva*, upon whose ancestral land this august House stands.

I also extend my heartfelt appreciation to the *Vanua* and Chiefs of the Province of Ra, *na Vanua Va'uraga o Uluda na nodra i 'iko'iko na Gone 'Uraga na 'Ui Navi'ilevu; Va'uraga 'alega i Burelevu, na nodra i 'iko'iko na 'Uraga na Ra'u ni Na'awiya; valelevu i Nakoro'ubu na nodra i 'iko'iko na Gone 'Uraga na Gonesau; na 'iko'iko va'uraga i Nacobicibici, na nodra i 'iko'iko na Gone 'Uraga na 'Ui Nalawa*; and to the many other communities in Ra from which I draw my strength. Your trust and unwavering support continue to guide me as I serve you and our nation in this august House.

With your permission, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you can allow me to say my appreciation words to the *Vanua o Ra* in our local Ra dialect.

Ena vuku i keirau saka na veikaicini va'a kei Lo Vara na Marama na Minisita ni Qoliqoli, keirau sa cavu'ia na vavinavinaka ena nomuni veivakaba'ui vei keirau me keirau ma'a'akia na Vanua o Ra ena Vale ni Bose Lawa, ka sa voleka ni mai vakacavari na yabaki va ni veiqaravi. Keirau sa cavu'ia na neirau va'havinavinaka e na nomuni vei'okoni ena vuku ni kena ma'a'aki na Vanua o Ra, au sa cavu'ia na va'ha vinavina'ha levu ni veiva'habau'i kei na vanuinui ni Vanua o Ra vei keirau, ni keirau na mai ma'a'aka na Vanua o Ra ena Vale ni Bose Lawa.

Sir, I also wish to express my profound sorrow for the families in Ra and Ba, who were deeply affected over the recent heavy rains and flooding associated with *Tropical Cyclone Urmila*. Our people of Ra are very resilient, as we always incorporate our motto in our hearts, "*Ma'e na Ma'e*" - Fear not or never fear.

I also take this opportunity to thank the Government for the urgent, swift aid, relief supplies and the repaired infrastructure that has begun. Thank you so much, honourable Minister Bulitavu. Allow me to begin with the words of the scripture from the Book of Micah 6:8 and I quote:

"He has shown you, oh man, what is good and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

This verse speaks to the very essence of justice, humility, and service principles that underpin both the President's Address and our collective responsibility as leaders.

His Excellency's Address calls upon us to reflect on our shared national journey. It reminds us that Fiji's strength lies in the sovereignty of its people, the wisdom of our elders and the sacrifices of those who came before us. It recognises that our identity as a nation is shaped by the contribution

of all our communities - the *iTaukei*, Indo-Fijians, Rotumans, Banabans, and all who call Fiji home, including those in our diaspora.

As we reflect on the 152 years since the Deed of Cession and 55 years of independence, we are reminded that nationhood is not defined solely by time, but by a commitment to the values of good governance, education, faith and economic progress.

Independence brought with it both opportunity and responsibility. It entrusted each generation, including ours, with a sacred duty to build a nation that is just, inclusive and resilient.

His Excellency's Address rightly affirms that our progress as a nation has been built through the collective efforts of our people, our workers, our civil servants, our peacekeepers, our community leaders, and our families. It is through their sacrifice, their service and dedication that Fiji continues to grow and prosper.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, central to His Excellency the President's Address is the Government's legislative agenda, which reflects our shared commitment to strengthening the rule of law and ensuring that our legal framework remains modern, relevant and responsive to the needs of our people.

As Assistant Minister for Justice, I am proud to support the Ministry's legislative modernisation programmes, which include the review of laws that shape the criminal justice system and protect the rights and dignity of our citizens. These reforms are not undertaken lightly – they are guided by careful considerations, constitutional principles and the overarching goal of delivering justice that is fair, balanced and accessible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, legislative reform is complemented by the ongoing modernisation of the Ministry's core registries, which provide essential services to our people and businesses. Allow me to highlight a few notable achievements for the Ministry of Justice in 2025.

The Births, Deaths and Marriages (BDM) Registry has strengthened the civil registration and vital statistics system through collaboration with partner agencies, ensuring that every Fijian is recognised and protected from birth. This includes expanding hospital-based registration services, extending outreach to rural and maritime communities, and advancing the review of legislation to support digital record-keeping and certification.

I am also pleased to report that several senior citizens have recently visited the BDM Office to register their births and receive their birth certificates for the first time. One such case is 67-year-old Mr Isiki Temo, who travelled all the way from Lakeba to complete his registration. With his new birth certificate, he is now able to access essential services, including registering for social welfare assistance.

The Registrar of Companies has continued its transformation into a modern, efficient and accessible service. Through digital platforms such as the businessNOW FIJI portal, entrepreneurs are now able to register businesses remotely, significantly reducing processing times and administrative barriers. These reforms have empowered our small and medium enterprises and supported economic participation and growth.

Similarly, the Registrar of Titles has made steady progress in transitioning from manual to semi-digital systems, improving processing efficiency, strengthening record management and enhancing governance practices. These improvements ensure greater reliability, transparency and accessibility of land registration services.

The Official Receivers' Office has also advanced legislative modernisation through the development of new insolvency and financial rehabilitation legislation, while effectively managing insolvency and liquidation matters. The Office has strengthened accountability, safeguarded trust funds and ensured the integrity and accuracy of company records, including the removal of inactive entities from the Register.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the number of active Justices of the Peace (JPs) in Fiji has steadily increased over the past four years, reflecting the Ministry of Justice's continued commitment to ensuring that justice services are more accessible to communities across the country than ever. In 2022, Fiji recorded a total of 515 active JPs. This number rose to 557 in 2023, increased further to 613 in 2024 and reached 673 in 2025. A consistent growth in appointments demonstrates the Ministry's ongoing efforts to strengthen community-based justice services and support the Government's vision of ensuring that no one is left behind in accessing justice.

Through expanding the network of JPs across all Divisions, the Ministry of Justice continues to bring essential legal services closer to the people of Fiji. In this way, the expansion of the JP network forms part of the Ministry's wider efforts to improve service delivery and strengthen public access to justice. These advancements reflect the Ministry's broader commitment to digital transformation, improve accessibility and strengthen institutional performance. They demonstrate that justice is not only delivered in courtrooms, but also through efficient, accessible and trusted public services.

The Ministry of Justice also led and successfully completed a sector-wide functional review and produced the Law and Justice Roadmap 2025-2029. The Roadmap is clear and provides strategic direction of priorities for our law and justice sector.

Legislative reform must always be grounded in public trust. This trust is strengthened through meaningful public participation, transparency and open dialogue. The Government remains committed to ensuring that voices of all Fijians across communities, generations and regions are heard and respected in the law-making process.

I am honoured to serve alongside my colleagues in Parliament, including in my role as a member of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights. Through this Committee, we have travelled to communities around our nation, including most recently in February to the Northern Division, to conduct public consultations on important legislation, including the Education Bill 2025, Criminal Records Bill 2025 and the National Referendum Bill 2025.

These consultations are more than procedural exercises. They are opportunities for our people to participate directly in shaping the laws that govern our nation. They are a demonstration of the Government's commitment to listening, engaging and working in partnership with our citizens.

We have been elected for this very purpose, to represent the voices, aspirations and concerns of the people of Fiji in the most important decision-making forum of our nation. This responsibility cannot be fulfilled without listening, it cannot be fulfilled without dialogue, and it cannot be fulfilled without the active participation of our people.

I, therefore, encourage all Fijians to continue to engage constructively in these consultations. Your presence, your voice and your perspectives are essential. Let us engage not in division, but in dialogue, not in hostility but in respect, and not in silence but in shared purpose.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we heard on Monday from honourable Premila Kumar, including the cheering squad from honourable Usamate, about the Government for failing its legislative agenda in

regards to the Code of Conduct Bill 2025 and Accountability and Transparency Commission Bill 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Member should be the last person to lecture this House about transparency and accountability, given that she served in a regime which, despite the clear constitutional requirement, failed for years to establish the Accountability and Transparency Commission or to adequately resource our anti-corruption framework. What a shame!

The honourable Member should instead thank the Coalition Government for finally bringing these long-overdue accountability measures to Parliament through the Code of Conduct Bill 2025 and the Accountability and Transparency Commission Bill 2025.

His Excellency reminded us, and I quote:

“Our national progress is grounded not only in policy and institution, but in shared values, faith, compassion, respect and service.”

These values define who we are as Fijians. They guide our conduct, strengthen our unity, and they remind us that leadership is, above all, an act of service.

As we move towards the upcoming General Election, we are reminded that elections are a cornerstone of our democracy. They are an opportunity for our people to express their will, to shape the future of our nation and to renew the foundation of our democratic system.

The strength of our democracy depends, not only on the outcome of elections, but on the conduct of all who participate in the democratic process. It requires leaders and citizens alike to act with integrity, restraint and respect. It requires us to uphold the rule of law and to protect the unity that defines us as one nation.

His Excellency's Address presents a vision for a confident, inclusive and resilient Fiji, a nation that honours its past while preparing for the future. This vision can only be realised through a collective effort. Government cannot achieve it alone. It requires the partnership of our communities, civil society, faith-based organisations, the private sector and every citizen.

Before I conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I seek your indulgence if I can speak in *iTaukei*.

Turaga saka na Sipika ni noda Bose Lawa, au gadreva me'u na vosa saka vaka-iTaukei me baleta saka eso na lomatarotaro mai vei ira na noda, se sa vakaevei tiko beka na kena veisautaki se vakavavalagitaki na review-taki ni Yavu ni Vakavulewa ni 2013.

Ni na rogoca saka tiko na lewe ni noda vanua lomani na nodra mala ni vosa na Gone Turaga Bale na Peresitedi, na Turaga na Tui Cakau, ena nodra dolava saka tiko na Bose Lawa ena I ka 16 ni Veverueri, 2026, ni sa na qarava na Matanitu na kena veisautaki na Yavu ni Vakavulewa ni 2013.

Na Yavu ni Vakavulewa vou e gadrevi kina na noda vakasama kece kei na noda nanuma na lewe i Viti raraba - e sega ni yavutaki walega mai na lewe rua. Sa tekivuna rawa na Matanitu na kena vakacurumi mai ena Bose Lawa na lawa vakatutu ka vakatokai saka tiko na National Referendum Bill 2025, ka dua saka tiko na tiki ni lawa bibi ena kena sagai me na rawati, se na katuba ni kena tadolavi yani na kena veisautaki sara na Yavu ni Vakavulewa.

Au taura saka talega na gauna oqo me'u cavuta na vakavinavinaka ena vuku saka ni Komiti ni Palimedi na Justice, Law and Human Rights, ena vuku saka ni neitou veivakararamataki, Turaga

saka na Sipika, tekivu saka yani ena Yasana Vakaturaga o Namosi – na Tako kei na Lavo mai Namosi; Nadroga/Navosa, Serua, me yaco sara yani ki na Yasayasa Vakara, wili sara kina o ratou na noqu tauvu mai Cakaudrove, Bua 'ei Macuata. Au sa cavuta na noqu vakavinavinaka levu ena kena osodrigi saka yani na vale vakarautaki mo ni mai rogoca kina na Komiti ni veivakararamataki mai na Vale ni Bose Lawa.

Au sa taura saka na gauna oqo me'u cavuta na noqu vakavinavinaka vei kemuni na Turaga Bale, Marama Bale ena nomuni tokona saka tu na lawatu qo na National Referendum Bill 2025, na lawatu ni vuli kei na criminal records.

Na yabaki oqo e dua na yabaki bibi ena Matanitu Cokovata ena kena sagai me sa na biu mai ena Vale ni Bose Lawa na lawa vakatutu ni kena review-taki na yavu ni vakavulewa ni 2013. Ena qaravi na referendum mo ni na solia kina na nomuni digidigi na lewenivanua raraba o Viti kei na nomuni vakatulewa me baleta na nomuni nanuma me veisau na Yavu ni Vakavulewa se sega.

Ni dei saka tiko na noda kawa iTaukei. Kakua ni rogoca vakalevu na rorogo. Ia, ni yavutaka na nomuni itukutuku ena dina, ka ni nuidei tu na Matanitu Cokovata, na nodra veiliutaki na Turaga na Paraiminisita ena nodra tutaka saka tiko na veiliutaki e dau vakarorogo. E rogoca na domomuni na lewe ni vanua, ni dei saka tiko na Yavu ni Vakavulewa ni 2013, ena biu tani na veika eso eda sega ni vinakata, ka na biu kina na veika eda nanuma na lewei Viti raraba.

As we enter this important period in our nation's journey, I want to reaffirm my unwavering faith in the people of Fiji and my confidence in the decision of our Government.

We remain committed to serving with integrity, strengthening our institutions and advancing reforms that will benefit both present and future generations. I ask all Fijians to continue to have faith in the democratic process, and in the work being undertaken, to build a stronger, fairer and more united Fiji. Let us move forward together with hope, trust and with a shared commitment to the future of our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I sit, I would invite the honourable Parveen Bala to join G12 and make it G13 so that we can support the honourable Prime Minister. I commend His Excellency the President's Address to this honourable House and reaffirm my commitment to serve the people of Fiji with humility, dedication and respect.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think, honourable Members, this is a convenient time to take our afternoon break but before we do, and given the lateness of the hour, I will, for the purposes of complying with Standing Order 23, invite the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to move his 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, we still

have five speakers contributing to the response to His Excellency the President's speech and also the Bills.

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.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 3.58 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.35 p.m.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of this House, ladies and gentlemen; I rise to support the motion by the honourable Prime Minister to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address to this honourable House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the President's Address provides an opportunity for Parliament to reflect on the direction of our nation and the responsibilities that fall upon our institutions. It sets out the priorities of Government and reminds us of the broader context within which Fiji must operate as a small island state in an increasingly complex international environment.

At the outset, I wish to reflect briefly on an important moment in our recent national history. In 2022, Mr. Speaker, Sir, during a period of political transition and uncertainty following the general elections, the Office of the President carried a significant constitutional responsibility.

At that time, the former President, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, *Na Gone Turaga na Tui Macuata* presided over the constitutional processes that followed the election with confidence, courage and strength. During that period, the nation was closely observing how institutions would respond. The Presidency provided continuity and calm, while constitutional mechanisms for the formation of Government were carried out. For Fiji, which has experienced moments of political disruptions in the past, the conduct of institutions during the transition contributed to strengthening public confidence in democratic governance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the President's Address also provides an opportunity to reflect on the development of our national security institutions and the role they play in maintaining stability and protecting the interests of all the people of our country.

In that regard, I wish to acknowledge the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF). The RFMF is one of the country's central national institutions. For decades, it has represented Fiji in international peacekeeping operations and has contributed to missions across the world under the auspices of the United Nations and other international arrangements. Through those missions, Fiji has earned a reputation as a country that contributes to global peace and stability.

At the same time, Mr. Speaker, it is necessary to recognise our history with honesty. There were periods in Fiji's past when the military institution became involved in political developments in ways that served particular political agendas. Those events shaped public perceptions of the relationship between the military and democratic governance.

Today, the direction of the institution is different. Under the leadership of Major General Ro Jone Kalouniwai, the RFMF continues to emphasise professionalism, discipline and service to the nation as a national institution. The leadership of the Force has focused on strengthening professional standards and ensuring that the institution performs its duties within the framework of the law.

The officers and personnel of the RFMF continue to serve Fiji both domestically and internationally. Their work reflects a commitment to national service and to the responsibilities that come with representing Fiji in international peacekeeping missions.

Mr. Speaker, the policy direction for Fiji's security sector is guided by the National Security Strategy. This Strategy recognises that the nature of security threats facing the country has evolved significantly. Traditional security threats remain important considerations. However, the security challenges confronting Fiji and the wider Pacific region increasingly include non-traditional threats.

These include transnational organised crimes, illicit drug trafficking, cyber security risks, people smuggling and other criminal activities that operate across national borders. These threats have direct consequences for communities across Fiji.

The spread of illicit drugs has become one of the most serious challenges facing many communities. The impact of drug abuse extends beyond criminal activity. It affects families, public health systems and the long-term well-being of young Fijian people. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach. Law enforcement agencies must continue to strengthen their operational capabilities to disrupt criminal networks that facilitates the movement of drugs into the country. At the same time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first line of defense against drug abuse must remain within the family.

Strong families and responsible parenting, families and parents play an essential role in guiding young people and ensuring that they grow up with the values, discipline and support necessary to avoid involvement in drugs and criminal activity. The Fiji Police Force carries the primary responsibility for law enforcement in this area. Continued support for the work of the police remains essential as they strengthen their investigative capacity and operational effectiveness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the evolving nature of security threats also requires a flexible and coordinated national response capability. Consideration is being given to the development of a hybrid framework under which the RFMF can be ready to support national authorities when specialised capabilities are required. Such arrangements should operate within the framework of the law and support the work of civilian institutions, particularly the police.

The objective is to ensure that national institutions are able to respond effectively when complex security challenges arise. Another area of growing importance is cyber security. The digital environment has become an essential component of modern governance, financial systems, communications, infrastructure and national services.

Cyber vulnerabilities, therefore, present potential risks to government institutions, financial systems and critical infrastructure. Strengthening cyber security capabilities form part of the broader national security framework. This includes improving technical expertise, strengthening information security systems, and cooperating with international partners in addressing cyber threats.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's geography also shapes the nature of its security responsibilities. Fiji is an ocean nation with a vast maritime domain. Our Exclusive Economic Zone is extensive and contains resources that contribute significantly to the national economy and to the livelihoods of many communities. Protecting that maritime space remains an important national priority.

Illegal fishing, illicit trafficking and other forms of transnational criminal activity often occur across the maritime routes. Strengthening maritime domain awareness, therefore, remains essential. This includes investment in surveillance systems, maritime patrol capability, which include coordination among the institutions responsible for maritime security.

Work is also underway, Mr. Speaker, through the Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs to advance a number of strategic initiatives that will strengthen the country's security architecture. These include the development of a new Defence Act to modernise the legal framework governing the Republic of Fiji Military Forces. The proposed legislation will update the regulatory environment for the military and ensure that it reflects contemporary security requirements.

In addition, work continues on the development of the maritime security strategy. This strategy will provide a co-ordinated framework for managing the country's maritime security

responsibilities and for strengthening co-operation among relevant agencies.

Mr. Speaker, the development of a national peacekeeping strategy will also guide Fiji's continued participation in international peacekeeping missions and ensure that our contribution remains aligned with national interests and our international obligations under the guidance of the national security strategy.

Fiji's security responsibilities are not carried out in isolation. Our country continues to benefit from strong partnerships with regional and international partners. In particular, I wish to acknowledge the close partnership that Fiji maintains with Australia under the *Vuvale* Partnership and the Defence Co-operation Programme. Australia has provided significant support to Fiji's maritime security capability, including assistance for the establishment and development of the *Vuvale* Maritime Essential Services Centre. This Centre plays an important role in co-ordinating maritime operations and improving Fiji's capacity to monitor and respond to development within our maritime domain.

New Zealand also remains a trusted partner through the *Duavata* Partnership. Co-operation between Fiji and New Zealand continues to support defence training, institutional cooperation, and engagement at the level of community leadership. These initiatives contribute to strengthening both institutional and community resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji has also strengthened engagement with Japan in the area of maritime security. Japan has supported Fiji through maritime capability development and has indicated its intention to provide additional patrol vessels in July this year to Fiji. In fact, Mr. Speaker, that will be three additional patrol boats to Fiji donated by the Government of Japan, in strengthening its maritime surveillance capability. Such support contributes directly to Fiji's ability to monitor and protect its maritime domain. Fiji welcomes the continued development of defence co-operation with Japan and recognises the value of this partnership in supporting maritime security in the Pacific region.

Fiji also maintains constructive relationships with the United States, the European Union and China. We acknowledge especially the creation of the Millennium Challenge Co-operation to replace USA, which has strengthened Fiji's partnership with the USA in a significant way. These partnerships contribute to development, cooperation, economic engagement, and regional stability. Fiji's approach to international engagement remains guided by our national interest and by the objective of maintaining a stable and peaceful Pacific region.

Mr. Speaker, the Address by His Excellency the President outlines the challenges and responsibilities that lie before the nation. It highlights the importance of strong institutions, effective governance and responsible leadership. Honourable Members of this House carry the responsibility of ensuring that legislation, policy, and national debate contribute to the stability, security, and the well-being of the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to make a few short comments before I resume my seat. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the earlier statement by the honourable Parveen Bala. I am glad I had got your attention. I think it is a generous idea. I was going to raise it initially, and I agree with honourable Tabuya, that already the Coalition Government is taking the lead in this regard through the constitute of the Coalition Government itself, also with the presence of the Group of 12 in this Government.

I think Fiji needs to respond to that call – a call for unity and a call to work together – to realise, particularly, interests that we share rather than considering mostly where we differ and providing a toxic environment for our development as a country and as a people. I would suggest

honourable Bala, there is already a model here that is workable. I invite you to come and be part of this national movement of unity that you have very well expressed. And that goes to all of our honourable friends from across the House. Please come along and join us. Obviously, unity is better than disunity, so any concept of uniting people is always welcomed.

I would also like to raise, under the subject of the rule of law, recently I had been receiving queries from the media, both through social media and the traditional media forums, particularly on the role of the RFMF and whether it is going to intervene and people are making appeals from abroad, particularly using social media. I would like to take this opportunity to appeal to our people. I have just noted that the RFMF has looked at its past, has reconciled its past and looking at the future. It has no intention but to follow the law. It is growing and developing into a professional force. I do not encourage people who stir up the RFMF for their own personal interest and benefits.

Many here in Fiji and abroad seem to think that the RFMF is a quick solution for everything. If something does not happen, get the RFMF to do something. That that is never the role. That will never be the role, that should not be the role. In fact, we trust our institutions to be strong, and our institutions must follow the rule of law. That is the short answer to everything. When there is something that affects our nation and our people generally, the first thing to do is to follow the law. The RFMF, as an institution, is going to follow the law. I just want to emphasise that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had alluded to this earlier, the RFMF and the Ministry was very much at the centre of a lot of the political debate. Now, that is no longer the case. I know the Commander asked me once and said, "Oh, we appear to be irrelevant. No one really is asking for our comment." I told him, "Commander, that is exactly the point. The point is that the RFMF must take its place at the back and allow the people to lead. We are here for the people, and we are here for the people through the law which we uphold."

Mr. Speaker, with those additional observations, I thank you for this opportunity to address the House, and I support the motion to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address to the Parliament.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament.

At the outset, I would like to thank His Excellency the President for his visionary Address that aims at building our beloved nation towards peace, progress and unity. The President mentioned Oceans of Peace which quite rightly mentions that the Pacific Ocean remains a region of peace, progress and prosperity. Domestically, our nation cannot enjoy prosperity if our economy is so vulnerable. We must listen to the national pulse, which is agriculture, the heartbeat of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must realise that our sugar industry and our agriculture industry as a whole is the heartbeat of our nation. It is not just a line item in a budget. It is the lifeblood of our rural economy. When the farmer has money in his pocket, the shopkeeper in Ba has customers. When the harvest is strong, the schools are full and the community is vibrant. But when you neglect the heart, the whole body suffers. We are seeing a slow decay in our rural sectors because for many people the government treats agriculture as an afterthought, rather than the primary engine of our survival.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency mentioned about the Household Income and Expenditure Survey. It revealed a truth that should worry everyone in this House. Sir, 50 percent of our people are either below the poverty line or struggling just above. This is not a number in a report, it is a confession of failure. It shows that the fragile stool of this Government has snapped its most

important leg – the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am worried about the economic strangling of our farmers. Let us be honest about the cost of living. In 2023, this Government promised to help the poor, but their first big move was to raise VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent. They did not tax luxury items, they taxed the fertiliser a farmer puts on his field, the diesel tractors and food on the table. This hit the heart of the sugar industry. However, last year the Government reduced the VAT to 12.5 percent coming into the election.

For the cane farmers of this country, the gap between the price of sugar and the cost of staying alive has become a daily challenge. His Excellency in his Address mentioned about a new state-of-the-art sugar mill. While the intention may be noble, but the farmers were promised this prior to the 2022 General Elections. For three years, farmers have watched the changing stories from the former Minister of Sugar.

One day it is a brand-new mill, the next it is a second-hand mill from overseas and the next it is just another study. The former Minister said in Parliament that once he wins the coming election, a new sugar mill will be built. To a seasoned farmer, this would not be making much sense, as the Ministry is unable to fix the existing sugar mill, as we have all witnessed what happened to the Ba and the Lautoka mills.

The darkest chapter of leadership, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the sugar industry, was the leadership that presided over this. The former Minister for Sugar is no longer in that seat and for very good reasons. He presided over what can only be described as the darkest chapter in the history of Fiji's sugar cane industry. He stood in this House and pledged that every stick of cane will be crushed, yet that pledge officially collapsed as the gates were locked. The facts are immovable. Reports have now confirmed that approximately 93,000 tonnes of cane went unharvested across our sugar cane belt areas, and I urge Government to compensate the poor farmers as soon as possible.

Majority of the unharvested cane was in the Western Division, where growers watched their crop dry in the sun. This represents millions of dollars in potential income lost to the nation and farmers. A significant volume of cane was at risk in the Rarawai area as the cyclone approached. The harvesters were stuck, the mills were broken and the leadership was silent. This was not a natural disaster. It was a disaster of planning and systematic incompetence.

You cannot have leadership that mocks veteran farmers while the sector is in crisis. It is on record that the former Minister chose to argue with the farmers, which culminated in farmers having no trust in Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) and the morale of many farmers remained all-time low. The hardworking farmers were not honoured and respected. Instead, the former Minister ridiculed them every time. The removal of the former Minister was an admission of failure by this Coalition Government, and welcome news to the farmers.

To add further, a good amount of harvestable cane on flatland has been damaged in the recent flood. Also, debris and unwanted materials have been dumped in the cane fields, which will definitely pose a threat to mechanical harvesters. As a result, the farmers' co-operatives will be forced to pay for extra costs of repairs should a situation arise.

The recent flood has extensively damaged farm access, roads and crossings. Not only business houses but families in low-lying areas, market vendors and farmers have all suffered losses and so far very little assistance has been given to these families.

I strongly urge the Government to roll out disaster response assistance to all affected families,

farmers and villagers who have lost their livelihood in terms of crops and vegetable damages so that they can breath a sigh of relief.

I also call on the honourable Minister of Local Government to waive the market stall fees and also for the carrier and taxi drivers for some time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must look at the infrastructure rot: tramlines and access roads. What about the basic infrastructure? The Government promised to fix our tramlines. They told the farmers in Tavua, Yaladro and Tagitagi that the rail system would be their lifeline. The most cost effective way to get their cane to the Mill but look at the reality. The rail system in Tavua was ordered to be re-activated back in July, yet farmers are still waiting for a service that actually works.

Discussions do not move cane, working locomotives and solid tracks do. While the leadership sits in Suva assessing viability, the farmers are forced to operate expensive lorries, chewing away what little profit they are left with. We need a serious commitment to equipment development, team training and testing everything - every signal, every crossing, every boiler before the next season begins.

According to the Acting CEO of National Fire Authority (NFA), there was no attempt to attend to the fire at Rarawai Mill by the workers before NFA arrived - whether safety measures were not in place or adequate training was not given to the workers.

The same story applies to our cane farm access roads, the vital arteries of our industry. We were told 3,000 kilometres of road would be upgraded. The budget allocation was increased to \$4 million yet it was admitted that \$500 per kilometre was insufficient for proper maintenance. When an access road is washed away, a farmer's entire year of work is washed away with it. This is not development, it is pure neglect.

Let us not forget the injustice of mill failures and penalties. When the mills fail, who pays? It is not the Minister who sits in the comfort of his office in Suva. It is the farmer. When the cane sits in the sun, because a boiler is broken, the weight drops and the quality goes down then the farmer is hit with burnt cane penalties for delays that was not his fault.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have consistently called for the waiver and refund of these penalties, especially when the Rarawai Mill was not functional, damaged by fire till it became functional. Thousands of dollars deducted must be returned. It is a grave injustice to punish a grower for the failure of FSC's machinery. Where is the compassion? The broken financial model and structural decay is a growing issue our cane farmers face.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sugar industry cannot survive on a broken financial model. We see a total mismatch between the harvest season and the FDB loan cycles. Farmers are being strangled by debt because the interest does not wait for the mill to open. But let us be very clear about what this actually means on the ground. The \$12 per tonne was the repayment for co-operatives to FDB to pay for the loans used to purchase their harvesters. By hiking this to \$14 without consulting these groups, the Government has left them with almost nothing for fuel, servicing, parts and transport. This is not just a deduction, it is a mechanical heart attack for our rural co-operatives. Why are we increasing the burden on the farmers?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am also the President of Riverside Farmers' Co-operative in Ba and I would say one of the biggest sugarcane cooperatives serving 80 sugarcane farmers as of last season. We will be extending our services to more than 70 farmers in the Moto and Naloto Sectors from this

harvesting season, making the total number of farmers more than 150. We will try and assist other farmers also.

Our co-operative is also getting another new harvester to be able to serve all farmers. The challenges are huge running such groups, while the cost of parts, servicing, fuel remains high. I have also discussed with the honourable Minister for Agriculture how co-operatives can work together in regard to food security, such as rice, vegetables and crops. I also have assurance from the honourable Minister in regard to the approval and the issue of a tractor in future for the co-operative. Thank you, honourable Minister, for that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how can the Ministry with stakeholders expect the cane to reach the mill when they have effectively stripped the harvesters of their maintenance budget? I urge the Ministry of Sugar and other stakeholders, including FDB to hear and address the challenges so that farmers are not burdened with heavy payments. Also, due to rising cost of maintaining the harvesters, the Government should step in and give grants to co-operatives to meet the additional cost of operation. We must also look at the structural foundation of this industry.

Our land and our leases, for too long, outdated lease structures have undermined both the landowners and the farmer. When land leases are not renewed for sentimental value, the land stays idle and the owner stays in poverty. This is a colonial hangover that still haunts some sections of our society. We need commercialisation through partnership, where landowning units are the engine of growth, not spectators. There are more than a thousand sugar cane leases that are expected to expire by 2030. It is vital and in our nation's interest that these leases be renewed, so there is stability in the cane production. It is vital and in our nations interest that these leases be renewed so that there is stability in cane production.

The Socrates Test, Mr. Speaker, His Excellency the President spoke about three tests from the Philosopher Socrates:

- (1) Is it true? Is it true that the sugar industry is growing? No. Production has continued to decline over recent seasons, and the 93,000 tonnes left unharvested proves the system is failing.
- (2) Is it good? Is it good that while our farmers struggle, the Government's priority has been its own comfort? It is not good that the people at the top are taken care of, while the farmers are left to carry the weight of a failing industry, example the burnt cane penalty.
- (3) Is it useful? I certainly do not think so, as the cost of living, cost of production and the cost of harvesting has burdened the farmer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, nothing changes unless the leadership changes. The Special Parliamentary Committee on Sugar so far has failed to meet, and as a result, the industry challenges that are complex and some which demand urgent attention are unheard. I do hope that the honourable Prime Minister, who is the Chairman of this Committee will give an update to this Parliament as to why not a single consultation has been done by the Committee, as farmers and stakeholders were eagerly waiting for the Committee to express their views on the way forward for the industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand here for the thousands of farmers whose hard work builds this country. Their message is simple. We are tired of the talk. We are tired of the empty promises. We want a Fiji where hard work actually pays and where the fragile decision making is replaced by permanent solutions.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and fellow Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of

Parliament, ladies and gentlemen - *ni sa bula maleka*. I extend warm greetings to honourable Members of this august House, and I also acknowledge our fellow citizens at home and abroad who are following these proceedings through the Parliament channel and other electronic platforms. I thank you for your continued interest and engagement in the democratic life of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the motion of thanks to His Excellency the President for his Address delivered at the opening of this 2026 Session of Parliament. His Excellency has outlined a clear and principled direction for Fiji, and it is anchored in unity and democratic integrity, sustainable development, institutional reform and accountable governance. As an Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, I wish to outline how the office will advance these priorities through strengthening and policy coordination, inclusive development frameworks and disciplined national implementation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to reiterate that democracy is not sustained by elections alone. It is sustained by institutions that function effectively, the leadership that listens and policies that include them all. A reminder to all the honourable Members as we approach an election year, we must recommit ourselves to democratic maturity, respectful debate, institutional integrity and service above self.

Public trust depends not only on political outcomes, but on the credibility of the governance systems. Sustainable development, accountability and unity are not parallel objects. They are mutually reinforcing pillars of democratic stability. An essential part of any democracy is governance, particularly at community level.

As much as we want to increase and enhance the development outcomes for our people, this cannot be done if we do not enhance the capacity of our local people. Community-driven planning and development processes are essential to strengthening market linkages of smallholder farmers in remote communities, achieve community empowerment and ownership, and secure sustainability.

The Address by His Excellency the President calls for strengthened partnership between traditional institutions and Government to drive national development. While this is applaudable, there should be a considerable attention provided to strengthening the governance mechanisms at our institutions by the Government, and also the related institutions in our communities.

For example, when the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs was undertaking a few visits in the Northern Division last week, we asked the two rice farmers why they were not accessing the power tiller that allow them to cultivate and more land to increase their rice production? They said that the *Turaga ni Mataqali* has the power tiller and he has not provided that to them. Those are some of the areas that can be improved in terms of governance at community and village level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to refer to His Excellency's Address on where he has outlined one of the most pressing problems that we are facing now, poverty. One of the effective methods by which the Government has addressed this is through the provision of jobs. According to the World Bank, this is the most effective way that we can address poverty.

I would like to share my experiences on two of the projects that I have been involved in since I started at the Office of the Prime Minister. The first one is on coffee. One of the first emails that I received when we started in office in December 2022 was from a private coffee processor, Bula Coffee. He said that he needed some assistance as he is not getting the raw materials from the farmers. There has been quite a lot of talk about trying to replace imports, but there has not been any support from the Government.

The following week, I approached the Indonesian Embassy, and after two months, USD25,000 was provided by the Indonesian Government. As a result of this assistance, this coffee industry is going from strength to strength. Bula Coffee, with the funding support from the Government of Indonesia has established six clusters in Navosa and Vanua Levu. Bula Coffee continues to work very closely with farmers, mentoring and supporting them to wait for the maturity of the crop. For the first time, Bula Coffee has been showcased at the China International Import Expo in Shanghai, and thanks to the support of Investment Fiji and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Fiji has now also established a Speciality Coffee Association and Coffee Growers Association, laying a strong foundation for locally-owned and farmer-driven industry. It remains Fiji's priority to produce high-quality coffee while ensuring the industry stays in local hands.

The next step, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to strengthen the legal framework around the coffee production and export to safeguard the quality standards. As Fiji gains global recognition as a serious player in this speciality coffee market, this message will ensure that the coffee leaving our shores continues to meet highest international standards.

The second project that I had been involved in is the promotion of cowpea in Fiji, particularly in the Ra Province. In January 2025, the Office of the Prime Minister, together with the Indo-Fijian Cooperative and the New Valley Cooperative, had a meeting at Burenitu Village in Nalawa where we met up with 100 farmers to discuss the potential of cultivating this new crop – the cowpea or bora, as commonly known. At this meeting, I informed the farmers that the Government would be introducing this new crop, as a substitute for those who used to plant sugarcane. This approach was consistent with the call by His Excellency, the need for strategic collaboration between landowners and the private sector.

When we initiated this project, the first problem that we faced was the lack of seeds. We then sought assistance from the Government of India, who provided six tonnes of cowpea seeds, and planting started when the seeds arrived in August last year. With very minimal training, the farmers were distributed seeds in August, and they immediately cultivated cowpea in the four *tikinas* of Ra.

When we harvested the cowpea after three months, there was overwhelming joy amongst the initial 100 farmers who were involved in the harvest. For the first time, they were receiving cash on hand, after delivering cowpea to the centrally accredited place, where the cowpea were to be processed. I must admit, there were also problems initially when iTaukei farmers were selling to other buyers. I think, the honourable Leader of Opposition will know that when he was the Minister for Agriculture.

Organising farmers – Farmers will sell to whoever will provide them an extra \$0.50. So, this was one of the problems that we faced. The initial buyer, New Valley Cooperative, was not really happy about this and they came to me. They called me and said, “We don't trust this sort of arrangement, these farmers have let us down.” So, I told them, “Hold on, I have to come, and talk to the farmers.”

The following week, we met at Rakiraki - the farmers, the representatives, and I emphasised to them that the project is not only for one year, we will be here for 20 years, and emphasising the need to have a more sustainable framework to be developed. Most of the time, when Government comes in with a project for three years only, it often faces quite a lot of problems. I told them, this project will be there for the long term. We will be planting cowpea here for the next 20 years.

Those were some of the problems, and also it gives an understanding also from the Indo-Fijian community, to understand how the iTaukei operate. There were some areas there that they need share the ideas and what they need to learn in going forward in this new industry.

At the same time, there was a serious attempt to assist New Valley in establishing a cooling facility because we need to have a cooling facility to process this. So the honourable Prime Minister officiated at the ground-breaking ceremony for the processing and cool chain facility at Sabeto in May last year. We were doing the production and at the same time, we need to do the cool chain on the facility.

In February of this year, we had a soft launch of another cool chain and it is now open. The next day on the flight to Cairns, the first shipment of cowpea and frozen rootcrops were sent. There is an enormous demand there, and what the company told me is that the freight capacity is not sufficient, so they might need to explore the possibility of the consignment going by boat.

As I have said, we had the seeds in August and by February, we are exporting. It took only seven months from the time we had the seeds, planted it and, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a record for this country. I cannot recall any other Fijian agricultural produce to be planted within seven months and exported.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition will know better than me. He was the Minister for Agriculture, it took them about five years to send matured ginger, because there were a lot of protocols that needed to be observed—the phytosanitary requirements, et cetera. I must say this is a record that speaks for itself.

At the same time, during this project, we were trying to work with the iTaukei communities, forging social cohesion between iTaukei and the Indo-Fijian community. Most of our farmers are iTaukei and are of course, the buyer, are mostly Indo-Fijian. The manager of the cooperative is iTaukei and the buyer in Australia is iTaukei also. The different races working together is a result of this Government. I heard from the Honourable Maharaj yesterday, this Government is not doing anything, not producing anything for the people.

When I went there a few weeks ago, I asked an elderly Indian man, just tell me, what can you describe about this Government? He said in Hindi, “*Kaam te bhat karo*” which translates to, “This Government, they do not talk, they just come and do the job! I asked him again, what about the previous government? Just mention in two words what they did for you, and he said, “*Bhat bhat!*” which translates to “too much talk. Nothing happened.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to mention that during the short time that we were here, we developed a whole industry and now the whole of Sabeto knows about this whole industry. Honourable Maharaj will know. So those are some of the real-life experiences.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people know what the Government is doing. We are expanding this project to Ba and other areas. More farmers are interested to come on board and join us in this project.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian governance principles extend beyond our borders to the Ocean of Peace initiative. This vision and initiative reinforces Fiji's commitment to promote a peaceful cooperation, maritime security collaboration, sustainable ocean resource management and climate resilience within the Blue Pacific. The Office of the Prime Minister will support a structured implementation of the Ocean of Peace principles through policy integration, regional engagement and cross-sectional collaboration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude His Excellency's Address calls upon us to build a Fiji that is united in diversity, resilient in development, disciplined in governance, and mature in democracy. Through strengthened policy coordination, inclusive, sustainable development, and the catalytic impact of the Development Grant Programme and provided by the PM's office, will continue to serve as the anchor of this national agenda.

We will promote governance that uplifts our Melanesian heritage connections, strengthens engagement with our Vasu iTaukei, ensures the full inclusion of our Rotuman communities, and recognises the valued place of the Banaban communities of Rabi and Kioa within our democratic framework.

Sustained development, unity and democracy are inseparable. Together they secure Fiji's stability and future prosperity. I thank His Excellency for the Address and reaffirm our commitment to deliver inclusive, accountable and sustainable progress for the people of Fiji.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers, Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion before it is moved by the honourable Prime Minister in response to the most gracious Address delivered by His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Fiji, *Turaga na Tui Cakau*, at the opening of the Session of Parliament on 16th February, 2026.

Mr. Speaker, Sir. His Excellency's Address outlines a clear national vision anchored on unity, accountability, good governance and service to the people of Fiji. It reminds us that the work of this Parliament must never lose sight of its ultimate purpose, that is, to improve the lives and well-being of our people.

As Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services, I wish to focus my contribution today on the health of our nation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, our nation cannot build a strong economy with a weak health system. A nation cannot build strong communities with sick families. A nation cannot build a prosperous future for its people when its people are not well or unhealthy; health is not only a social responsibility. Health is a national security. It is an economic productivity, and health is also a national development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to briefly address concerns raised by Members of the Opposition in this Parliament, specifically honourable Alvick Maharaj, honourable Vijay Nath and others regarding the availability of doctors and nurses in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the workforce challenges exist, our discussions in this House must always be guided by facts. The World Bank Health Sector Review 2024 published a report, namely *Mo Bulabula ka Bula Balavu*, which indicates that Fiji's doctor-to-population ratio remain generally within an acceptable international threshold. However, the number of nurses remains slightly below the benchmark recommended by the WHO.

Recognising these challenges, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health continue to strengthen its recruitment. In-service training and its retention strategies for its human resources. Mr. Speaker, Sir, behind every clinic that opens in the morning, behind every patient that receives treatment in every life that saved, there is a health worker. Our doctors, nurses, pharmacists, technicians, cleaners and support staff continue to serve under demanding conditions. They are the backbone of our health system. Today in this House, we acknowledge them for their dedication, their perseverance and

sacrifices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to make a few remarks in support to the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services statement yesterday on the escalating HIV crisis. One of the most urgent public health challenges confronting our nation today is the rapid increase in HIV infection in Fiji. The latest national data indicate that Fiji is now facing what experts believe and describe as a generalised HIV epidemic. Cumulative HIV diagnosis increased from approximately 3,660 cases in 2024 to about 5,676 cases in 2025. Annual infections rose dramatically from 415 new cases in 2023 to 1,583 in 2024.

Important to note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, these figures only represent those that were captured and tested in our various health settings. There are probably three times more infected individuals who have not been tested yet, and that is a worrying situation that we are in right now. If urgent action is not taken, projections indicate that Fiji could record more than 2,000 new infections this year alone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are not just statistics; these are our sons, our daughters, our grandchildren. These are members of our communities. These are Fijians. When this escalating number becomes clear, the Ministry recognises that stronger national coordination is urgently essential. Let me say this honestly in this Parliament, Government should have acted earlier. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was noted that the Ministry has raised early warnings with the rise of HIV infection in previous years during the previous administration, but those warnings were not given urgency required then. We have let our guard down too soon since 2019. Today, we are dealing with the consequences of those delays.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not a time to blame. This is an hour for bold and decisive leadership. The nation expects action, and the time to act is now. Mr. Speaker, Sir, perhaps the most alarming aspect of this crisis is the growing number of infections among our young people between the ages of 20 and 24. Our youth are at the centre of this HIV epidemic. These are young Fijians who should be building their futures, young people who should be studying, working and starting families, contributing to our national development. Many will now face the reality of living with a lifelong medical condition. Mr. Speaker, Sir, when diseases begin to affect the youth of our nation, it is no longer just a health issue - it becomes a national development crisis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another disturbing factor contributing to the spread of HIV is the increasing presence of illicit drugs entering through our borders and the dangerous sharing of injecting equipment. Reports have emerged of the practice known as bluetoothing, where drugs are transferred between individuals using infected needles and syringes. This behaviour dramatically increases the risk of HIV transmission and other bloodborne infections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me be very clear - drugs destroy lives, drugs destroy families, and drugs can also destroy the future of a nation. This problem cannot be solved by the health sector alone. It requires a coordinated response involving law enforcement, the education system, our Great Council of Chiefs, community leaders, faith-based organisations and families. When drugs enter a community, they destroy our social fabric and destroy generations.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, HIV is a chronic disease that requires lifelong treatment. Individuals diagnosed with HIV will now have to take antiretroviral medication every single day for the rest of their lives to keep the viral load low, whereby individuals will not be in a position to spread or transmit the virus. If current and continued projections indicate Fiji could soon have close to 9,000 people living with HIV. Every one of these individuals will require continuous treatment, monitoring, and clinical support. This will induce further burden to our already stretched public health system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the cost of this treatment will run into millions of dollars over the coming decades, which is why prevention today is not only a health investment, but also a prevention in our financial investment in our nation's future. The honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services has called for multi-sectoral national response because HIV is not a political issue, HIV does not ask which political party you support, HIV does not ask which province you come from, and it does not ask which religion you belong to - it affects everyone. Therefore, the response must come from everyone, the Government, the Opposition, civil society, faith-based organisations, traditional leaders, and communities must stand together. When our nation faces a health crisis, unity is not optional; unity is necessary.

Alongside addressing emerging health threats, the Government continues to strengthen healthcare infrastructure across the country. The Ministry of Health oversees more than 200 health facilities nationwide. The ongoing upgrades are improving services across all divisions. The recent projects include a new clinic at Lodoni Health Centre, Naililili Nursing Station in Rewa and Verata Nursing Station in Tailevu. The upgrading works are about to be completed at Navunikabi Nursing Station in Namosi, and Naiyavu Health Centre in Wainibuka in Tailevu.

The major infrastructure maintenance work has also strengthened services at Vunisea Hospital in Kadavu and Taveuni Hospital. The Government has also commenced construction work at the Tokaimalo Nursing Station in Ra to expand the services of primary healthcare in that area. In the Northern Division, the upgrading work at Dreketi Health Centre is improving services for the communities along the Labasa-Nabouwalu corridor. Further infrastructure works to accommodate new services are in progress at Dreketi Health Centre.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even as we speak, a team of health professionals is travelling to the Southern Lau Group to provide both medical outreach services and facility repair in Matuku and Moala islands. They will be there for a month to conduct medical outreach and perform the much-needed minor repairs at Levuka-i-Daku Nursing Station, Matuku and Cakova Nursing Station and Moala Health Centre.

Once these works are completed, all 18 health facilities in the Lau maritime region will meet the required operational standards. This reflects the Government's commitment to equitable healthcare access for all Fijians. The principle guiding this Government is simple – healthcare must not depend on where you live. Whether a person lives in Suva, in the interior of Viti Levu, or on a remote maritime island, every Fijian deserves access to quality healthcare.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, reliable access to medicine is essential for a functioning health system. The Fiji Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Services (FPBS) continue to strengthen procurement and the national supply chain system. The M-supply digital logistics system now allows real-time monitoring of medicine stocks across the 212 health facilities nationwide. This digital transformation enables better forecasting, reduces shortages, and improves accountability in the management of medical supplies. I am happy to inform the House that the stockout of medicine has drastically improved. I thank the Director of FPBS and his staff for their effort in managing the tender process, procurement, and the local supply chain.

The Government is also investing in modern diagnostic technologies. In January this year, a new digital X-ray unit have been installed at CWM Hospital and Nausori Health Centre. We have further installation planning underway for Sigatoka Hospital, Rakiraki Hospital, Vunidawa Hospital, Taveuni Hospital and Savusavu Hospital. This will ensure that patients in rural and maritime areas can access the same advanced radiological diagnostic services as those in the urban centres.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while new health threats continue to emerge, the greatest long-term health

burden facing Fiji remains the non-communicable diseases. Approximately 84 percent of all deaths in Fiji are linked to NCDs, including heart disease, diabetes, and cancers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, hospitals treat disease, but prevention protects the nation. That is why the Government is strengthening prevention strategies through nutrition policies, wellness programs, and community education. Efforts are underway to improve food labelling on food that is on the supermarket shelves, strengthen regulation around unhealthy foods and promote a healthier lifestyle across our communities. And I urge all Fijians to take control of your own health through healthy lifestyle habits.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the address delivered by His Excellency the President, provides a clear roadmap for our nation. It reminds us that the strength of Fiji lies not only in our institution but in our shared commitment to care for one another. The health of our people must remain at the centre of our nation's development agenda, because when our people are healthy, our economy will grow stronger, our communities become healthier, and our nation becomes prosperous.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I therefore fully support the motion by the honourable Prime Minister in response to the most gracious address delivered by His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Fiji. *Vinaka vakalevu*, thank you and may God bless our beloved Fiji.

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, those watching online, on television and Facebook live, ladies and gentlemen.

First, I want to thank God for his blessings, since I was sworn in as a Member of Parliament on September 11th, 2023. I am grateful to his guidance, strength and grace that have carried me through this journey. I feel truly honoured to serve the people of Fiji and to those who voted for me, and also those who did not vote for me. I carry a deep responsibility to work hard for you. I represent the people of Wainibuka, Tailevu, a place that means - one bus, one people, one river. I hold your hopes and dreams close to my heart.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the wonderful people of Wainibuka, Tailevu, Ra and all Fijians, I want to remind you that there are numerous government grants and programs available to support your efforts and improve your lives. I encourage you to take advantage of these opportunities. I am also here to assist and support you. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you need help. Together, through unity and effort, we can make positive change happen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am truly humbled to have this opportunity to serve our nation. The President's speech reminded us of how far we have come in this journey that still lies ahead. Our greatest strength is our unity, and I honestly believe that if we work together, we have a shared purpose, we can build a brighter future for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since coming into office, our honourable Prime Minister and the Coalition Government have been working hard to rebuild trust in our democracy, strengthen good governance and make sure everyone's voice is heard. We have been focused towards restoring confidence, being transparent and making decisions that include everyone.

We are seeing positive progress in our economy, too. Through responsible financial policies and smart reforms, we are supporting vulnerable communities while trying to grow our economy and attract new investments. Our budgets prioritise essential sectors like Education, Healthcare and Social Support because we know that taking care of our people is the key to progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, economic recovery remains a top priority. We are also working with businesses and partners around the world to create sustainable growth and new industries. Whether it is technology, manufacturing or maritime services, we want to diversify our economy and create more jobs for our young people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, strengthening our public institutions is also important. We are modernising the civil service, making it more efficient and improving how we serve our communities. Programmes to develop leadership and reform institutions are helping ensure our public servants serve with professionalism and integrity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the President also talked about constitutional reform and national dialogue. I believe a good Constitution should reflect what our people want and grow with us. Listening to citizens and involving everyone is shaping our future, strengthening our democracy and making everyone feel included.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another important part of our work is bringing people together and promoting harmony. Programmes that encourage communities to talk and work together are helping us build respect, peace and inclusion. We want every Fijian to feel that they belong and are part of our nation. Yes, we face challenges from economic pressures and climate change to global uncertainties, but I am confident that with strong leadership and the resilience of our people, we will overcome these difficulties together.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our commitment to regional peace and cooperation is also vital. The idea of the Pacific as an Ocean of Peace is more than just words. It is a shared responsibility to maintain stability, respect and friendship with other neighbours.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also want to take a moment to acknowledge our hard-working farmers and everyone in the rural communities. Your dedication feeds our nation and keeps our economy moving. We understand the challenge you face from unpredictable weather to rising costs, and we are committed to supporting you with better resources, training and markets. Your work is vital, and we will continue to invest in Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our progress as a nation must be for everyone - every village, family and community. Wainibuka and all over in Fiji should benefit from these opportunities we create through national programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to share a quote from the late Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, one of our most respected leaders, "The strength of a nation lies in the unity and integrity of its people." This reminds us that our unity, our honesty and our willingness to serve will keep Fiji strong and move forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as leaders, we must remember leadership about our service. It is not about making policies, but about listening to our people, understanding their struggle and doing everything we can to improve their lives.

In closing, I want to say that real progress starts with how we treat each other. We must lead with humility, honesty and kindness. Let us be the kind of leaders to inspire hope, who listen with compassion and who work together for a stronger, more united Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, I thank God once again for his blessings and guidance. As the Bible says in Isaiah 41:10 and I quote:

“Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; I will surely help you; I will uphold you within my righteousness hand”.

With faith, unity, and determination, I believe we can achieve great things for Fiji. Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you very much for the opportunity. I support the motion before this House. May God bless our beautiful nation and may our actions always reflect love, kindness and integrity. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

MR. SPEAKER.- On that delightful intervention from the honourable Rokomatu, we end today's debate. Honourable members, we will continue with our next speaker on the Batting Order tomorrow. We now move on to the next item on our Order Paper.

Just for the information of Members, there are three Bills for consideration today. The first is to be moved, followed by a second on the same Bill, and then the third, all are to be dealt with today.

INCOME TAX (AMENDMENT) BILL 2026

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the –

- (a) Income Tax (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Bill No. 01/2026), 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 today, Wednesday, 11th March 2026, but that one hour will be given to debate the Bill with a 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. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Income Tax (Amendment) Bill 2026, is needed to be considered under Standing Order 51, because the amendment is related to an urgent issue that is causing extensive structural damages to houses and buildings in Fiji, particularly in the Western Division, and I am told it is present in the central as well as in the Northern Division, and that is the termite infestation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has put in place some grant or subsidy allocation to residential level for a number of years, but it is not sufficient to support necessary repairs or reconstructions hence these Amendments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Amendment Bill is needed urgently It carries the majority support of the House, and I am not sure if anyone will comment against the Bill, because it is important.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also, the amendment is without any controversy; it is straightforward and a minor change that is to extend the scope of the natural disaster reserve to include termite infestation that is declared a biosecurity emergency. Standing Order 51 has been consistently used by the previous government. Hence, I commend this Income Tax (Amendment) Bill 2026, pursuant to Standing Order 51.

MR. SPEAKER.- 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.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker. Sir, the use of Standing Order 51 is something that people have commented about a lot in the past, but I think one of the things that helps is that when you are given information beforehand, and we know precisely what it is that we are debating, it is that information that empowers us and helps us to move forward.

I think one of the good developments that we have here that the Bill was shared with us earlier, and I think that would be something that we could consider going forward. Before a Bill is placed, perhaps for the next day or something, can it be shared, we can discuss it, so we can move on.

In this particular case, from our end, even though normally if we do not have that information, we might protest against 51, but I think it is necessary, and this is a good practice that can be followed to share that information, so we can discuss it. So, we have no objections to using Standing Order 51 on this particular Bill.

MR. SPEAKER,- Since we do not have any other interventions, I will now call on the honourable Minister for Finance and Commerce and Business Development to speak in reply.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have any other comments to make.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now proceed to deal with the third reading of the Income Tax (Amendment) Bill 2026. I remind honourable Members that pursuant to the resolution of Parliament recently passed, the debate on the Bill will be limited to one hour.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament today, Wednesday, 11th March, 2026, I move:

That the Income Tax (Amendment) Bill 2026 be debated, voted upon and passed.

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

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give a brief background on the amendment to section 28 of the Income Tax Act 2015. The Cabinet has approved the memorandum on the amendment to section 28 of the Income Tax Act 2025 to expand the scope of the Natural Disaster Reserve.

The amendment aims to include declared biosecurity emergencies, specifically the AST or termite infestation, within the coverage of the reserve. This inclusion is necessary due to the extensive structural damage caused by the AST termite outbreak, particularly in the Western Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, section 28 of the Income Tax Act currently provides a tax deduction for deposits into a reserve fund account with the financial institutions for losses to buildings caused by windstorm, tidal wave, landslide or any like catastrophe. For commercial, industrial or agricultural buildings, the deduction is kept at 1.5 percent of the replacement cost of the building. For residential

buildings, the deduction is limited to the lesser of 1.5 percent of the replacement cost of \$500. Withdrawals from reserves for any other purpose are non-deductible and are treated as part of the company's gross income in the years the funds are withdrawn.

In late 2009 and early 2010, Fiji saw a major outbreak of AST in Lautoka and Labasa. The infestation has continued to cause extensive structural damage to both residential and commercial buildings. Notably, insurance coverage is not available for termite-related damages. The Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF) has classified AST termite as one of the most destructive termite species globally, and it remains a declared biosecurity emergency in Fiji.

However, the current legislative framework does not recognise biosecurity emergencies such as termite infestation as qualifying events under section 28. As a result, the affected property owners cannot access reserve funds in a tax-effective manner to support necessary repairs or reconstruction. This legal gap creates several risks such as delay in restoration, especially critical tourism infrastructures, inducing investor confidence due to uncertainty around post-disaster support, and inequitable treatment of property owners affected by biosecurity threats compared to those impacted by natural disasters such as cyclones.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the extension to section 28 would create a positive economic impact, supporting quicker recovery of hotels, tourism infrastructure, and residential housing in termite-affected areas. Therefore, this would ensure that there is continued revenue generation from the tourism industry. Additionally, promoting economic resilience by ensuring fair and consistent access to reserve funds for forms of declared disasters. This measure reinforces public and investor confidence.

The key changes to section 28 of the Income Tax Act are to expand the definition of qualifying disasters to include declared biosecurity emergencies under the Biosecurity Act 2008 or the National Disaster Risk Management Act of 2021. It will also ensure withdrawals for repairs, restorations due to termite infestations, so that they are treated in the same way as windstorm, tidal wave, landslide, or light catastrophe. The amendment to section 28 of the Income Tax Act 2025 will not be retrospective in effect.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have by agreement, the Whips that one speaker is from each side, and given the one-hour timeframe in which the debate will be pursued, I will allow some flexibility into the two interventions.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, flexibility is not needed; it is very short. I was told by my Whip that I am from the West, so I should speak. This is very timely, and I think right at the outset, we are in agreement with this. As someone who is from the West, I know that this issue with respect to termites has become pretty much an epidemic with respect to a lot of homes in the West. As you would rightfully know, there are a lot of wooden homes that exist in the West and a lot of old families who still live in and around that area. It has caused a lot of mayhem with respect to the rebuilding, et cetera. It is a timely inclusion and a very good one. It is sorely needed.

However, there is something alarming and I think maybe the Government needs to address this with the insurance companies. It is quite a shame, Sir, that they seem to exclude things every time something comes up, for example, this one – according to the honourable Minister, insurance companies are refusing to insure with respect to termite infestation, et cetera. Not sure exactly how it is done, but if that is the case, it is something that really needs a discussion with the insurance company. It is like the floods that occur in Nadi; the insurance companies will not touch it. It is something that really needs addressing, and I am glad the Government is addressing it by including it in the income tax deduction for deposits into a reserve fund with financial institutions.

Termite infestation is now classified as something as bad as tidal waves, landslides, catastrophes, et cetera. However, all in all, Sir, we are totally in agreement and being someone from the West and seeing this firsthand, I understand the North has also been affected in somewhat in the Central Division before it gets even worse, it is important that we do such things to assist all homeowners who are affected.

So, from our side, Sir, we are totally in support of the actual Bill before the House.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, I also stand in support of the Bill, which will expand the scope of natural disaster reserve to include declared biosecurity emergencies, specifically AST, within the coverage of the reserve. I am also from the West, so this is something really personal.

Asian Subterranean Termites (AST) are highly destructive, invasive species that live deep underground, typically 6 to 18 feet below the surface. This depth makes them particularly difficult to eradicate, as they can tunnel extensively to reach food sources like wooden homes and crops. They are known as the silent invaders. Termites often work unseen behind walls and under floors, and by the time they are discovered, they cause significant structural damage, turning a minor issue into a potential nightmare.

The chilling fear homeowners feel upon seeing these mud tubes on their homes or flying termites is a recognised, profound psychological reaction to the threat of losing their largest, hardest earned asset - their home. This anxiety is not just about bugs, it is about fear of losing one's sanctuary, stability and financial security.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the AST were first reported in Fiji in 2009. No significant action was taken, allowing these pests to spread extensively and cause widespread damage to properties in the Western Division, with potential damages estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars. The pest destroyed structural timber in commercial buildings, hotels, educational institutes and agricultural infrastructure, causing damage to properties, with reports of about 5,000 homes and numerous houses infested.

In some cases, businesses needed complete structural repairs or, in extreme scenarios, the demolition of affected buildings. The infestation in hotels and tourism related businesses require continuous, costly maintenance and repairs, impacting revenue and operations. Property owners in affected regions face significant financial difficulties, as rental properties become uninhabitable or required expensive, ongoing maintenance to control infestations. This provision, through the Income Tax (Amendment) Bill 2026 is expected to give relief to the affected home and business owners.

Mr. Speaker, since we came into the Coalition Government, we have listened to the people impacted. We have done our research and have been working on solutions. We looked at countries who have been dealing with AST, and our friends in Queensland educated us quickly on how to manage the problem.

It is a pest, Mr. Speaker, and it needed structured pest management. It was as simple as that. It needed awareness, basic pest management and baits made available. In Australia, you can buy termite baits in hardware stores. Everyone is educated on steps to take. So, if the government at the time had acknowledged the problem, taking steps to learn from countries dealing with the challenge, made baits available on time, our people would not have lost millions.

Our Government launched pilot baiting programme with about 1,000 houses in Lautoka, and we saw positive impact. For those earning below \$30,000, Government has provided relief grants worth \$3.8 million to 807 applicants, while other applications are being verified.

When we started, there was no active database to help plan solutions, and Biosecurity only had records of those who chose to report the infestation. Now, there is database and a map for effective baiting programme in red zone areas. To prevent further spread, strict fines ranging from \$5,000 to \$100,000 are in place for moving host materials such as timber, furniture or soil out of infested zones without the approval of Biosecurity Authority of Fiji. Termite baits are now available widely through pest management companies.

Homeowners and businesses can now protect their homes with these baits. Some companies, like Fiji Chemicals Limited, are giving five year guarantees on their baiting programme. So now we have options available and we have been creating awareness and education, so families impacted know how to manage this pest.

You have heard in this House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Ministry of Housing and Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development are building homes that are termite resistant. Our Government has taken AST into account in all our infrastructure development. This tax amendment is yet another relief being provided by the Coalition Government. The affected property owners will now be able to access reserve funds in a tax effective manner to support necessary repairs or reconstruction. I support the Amendment Bill.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the two contributors to the debate. I have seen and heard the support provided for the amendment. As for insurance, we will take the issue further with the insurance companies, but we are aware that some of the insurance companies are flexible and do limited or structural cover for some other risks like floods and cyclones. With those few words, I commend the Bill to the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote. The question is pursuant to the resolution of Parliament today, Wednesday, 11th March 2026, that the Income Tax Amendment Bill 2026 is debated, voted upon and passed.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[A Bill for an Act to amend the Income Tax Act 2015, enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji (Act No. of 2026)]

HIGHER SALARIES COMMISSION (AMENDMENT) BILL 2026

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the –

- (a) Higher Salaries Commission (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Bill No. 02/2026), be considered by Parliament without delay;
 - (b) Bill must pass through one stage of a single sitting of Parliament;
 - (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committees of Parliament;
- and

- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Friday, 13th March, 2026, but that one hour be given for the debate 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. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, I actually had on my side an honourable Member and he was trying to give me direction. So, let us not confuse ourselves. I have a very good legal advisor.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am deeply honoured and privileged to stand in this august House as I rise to move the Higher Salaries Commission (Amendment) Bill 2026 to be debated, voted upon by Parliament this Friday. The Higher Salaries Commission Act 2023 plays a critical role in ensuring that the remuneration of the Chief Executive Officers and equivalent executive positions within the public sector is determined through a transparent, consistent and accountable framework. Currently, this Act lists 27 government bodies under Schedule One. These include key statutory authorities, government-controlled companies that play a vital role in the delivery of essential services and the management of national assets.

Collectively, these entities contribute significantly to Fiji's economic development through infrastructure management, regulatory oversight, investment promotion, maritime safety, industrial capability and the provision of affordable housing. Through the respective mandates, these organisations are responsible for overseeing strategic sectors of the economy and ensuring that the critical public services are delivered efficiently, transparently and in alignment with the National Development Priorities.

Their work supports the Government's broader objectives and strengthening institutional governance, enhancing delivery services and promoting sustainable economic growth. In addition, these entities play an important role in protecting consumer interests, maintaining fair market practices, safeguarding public infrastructure, and facilitating both domestic and foreign investment by ensuring safe and efficient transport systems, promoting responsible management of public assets and expanding opportunities for economic participation. They contribute meaningfully to the national prosperity and the overall well-being of the communities across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this honourable Member keeps on saying that my time is up.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Higher Salaries Commission (Amendment) Bill 2026 seeks to amend Schedule One of the Higher Salaries Commission Act 2023 as I said it includes eight additional government bodies under the oversight of the Higher Salaries Commission, and these entities are:

- (1) Assets Fiji Pte Limited (AFL);
- (2) Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC);
- (3) Fiji Investment Corporation Limited (FICL);
- (4) Fiji Roads Authority (FRA);
- (5) Investment Fiji;
- (6) Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF);
- (7) Oceania Shipbuilding and Engineering Pte Limited; and
- (8) Public Rental Board (PRB).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is imperative that this Amendment Bill be expedited and enacted this week in Parliament, as these entities are not subjected to a standardised process which has a risk of

enforcing inconsistent regulation practices across Government-controlled entities.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Amendment Bill will ensure a consistent and independent mechanism to determine a fair regulation of these bodies, which in turn will promote transparency and accountability. The Amendment Bill will also administer consequential amendments to the following laws:

- (1) Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission Act 2010;
- (2) Fiji Roads Authority Act 2012;
- (3) Investment Fiji Act 2022; and
- (4) Maritime Safety Authority Act 2009.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I once again impress upon the august House the importance of urgently considering enacting the Higher Salaries Commission (Amendment) Bill 2026. This amendment is necessary to strengthen the integrity, transparency and the consistency of the executive remuneration framework across these eight additional Government entities.

By bringing these bodies under the purview of the Commission, we ensure that the remuneration of the senior executive is determined in a fair, structured, and accountable manner, consistent with the standards applied across the broader public sector. This will promote greater alignment in governance practices, reinforce public confidence in the management of the State-controlled entities, and ensure that remuneration decisions are guided by a clear principle of performance, responsibility and fiscal prudence. Ultimately, this step will support stronger oversight and improve accountability in the administration of public resources.

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. I have a list of one speaker.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, I apologise, like my friend honourable Chand, I was not too sure what was expected of me to comment on today. Standing Order 51, I think there is an immediate urgency to have this resolved on Standing Order 51 basis. That is because we want to make sure that we are able to align all of these public offices to the criteria that has now been set by the Higher Salaries Commission. I am sure that because it is just an amendment to the Schedule – in fact, Mr. Speaker, we could have just simply amended the Schedule and it did not need to come to Parliament. But because it has consequential amendment effect on other legislations, that is the reason why we are introducing it today.

I think my colleagues on the other side will also be able to understand why it is important to have this determined under Standing Order 51. It is a minor consequential, if you like – cosmetic, I think that is the right word to use, but it does have its importance in how the whole scheme of things in public service ought to be organised.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me the floor. I think, listening to what the honourable Minister for Lands was saying, it may appear to be a minor thing, but there is a lot of potential ramifications. The good thing about this particular Bill – I was thinking that maybe we would have preferred more time on it, but the good thing about it coming today, we have one day to work on it, and then comes Friday, because we have to really delve into what are the implications.

At the moment, I understand that there is no structure there and therefore, some of these entities, one of the reasons they might have kept it open to attract the kind of people that they want for that particular job. That is one kind of consideration. The other kind of consideration is that you

want to have the comparisons across the board internally. These are not small things; that is my point. I disagree with what the honourable Minister is saying. However, given that, I think we have to move on and on our side, we will prepare our contributions when the debate comes up on Friday.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think this shows a very good Government of National Unity – we have fought, and whatever you got rid off, we will put it back and correct it. With no further words, I move this motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's sitting. It has been a long day as you see from the last exchange. Parliament will now be adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.32 p.m.