

2018-2019 NATIONAL BUDGET ADDRESS

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INTRODUCTION

1. Madam Speaker, Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Leader of the Opposition, it is with much honour and privilege that I present to Parliament and to all Fijians, everywhere in our country and even overseas the National Budget for the 2018-2019 fiscal year.
2. This evening, we have many who are listening in and who are watching this address live, and they're doing so in many different ways. We have families watching this streamed live on the Fijian Government Facebook Page, and on the Parliament Live website. We have some watching from their home, with their families, on television, many on the new Walesi platform. And we even have some who are streaming the address live on their smart phones, as we've just rolled out the Walesi mobile application this week – putting all of Walesi's channels; FBC, FijiOne, FBC Sports, MaiTV,

Channel 2, FBC Plus, the Parliament Channel, and the Hope Channel at the fingertips of every Fijian.

3. It was standing at this very spot during last year's Budget address where we announced the first budgetary allocation for the nationwide rollout of the Walesi platform. Today – one year on – Walesi is available everywhere in Fiji, and now it's also available on every smart phone, bringing crystal clear picture on free-to-air digital television to every Fijian, everywhere in the country. Another bold step into the future, Madam Speaker, that began right here, last year. Another policy successfully implemented and, Madam Speaker, there are many more to come.
4. Madam Speaker, every one of our budgets has been connected – they are all steps forward in the same journey, to realise the same courageous, steady, and consistent vision set out – from day one – by our Honourable Prime Minister. And tonight, we are taking another bold step into the future. Tonight, we will be building on the opportunities we have already sought for the Fijian people to prosper. And continuing the unprecedented development that has transformed our nation's prospects with another bold and

historic National Budget, one that will touch the lives of every member of every family in Fiji.

5. Because what makes this year's Budget special, Madam Speaker, is that this Budget is built for Fijian families. It is a Budget built for every Fijian family, everywhere in Fiji, because all Fijian families matter.
6. When Fijian families are strong, united, stable and thriving, the nation is strong, the nation is united, the nation is stable and together the nation succeeds. And this is a Budget that is grounded in the same values that build strong and stable Fijian families: responsibility, integrity, accountability, foresight, and a sense of duty and care for our fellow Fijians.
7. This is a Budget that empowers Fijian families, laying out new and better economic opportunities for every member of every family in the country. This is a Budget that gives a leg-up to families who need special care, those in rural and remote parts of Fiji and those low-income families, and this is a Budget that protects families who are facing tragic and unforeseen circumstances. And this, Madam Speaker, is a Budget that will bring every Fijian family more prosperity, not

only, in the here and now, but for the years and decades to come.

8. Our focus on family is important, Madam Speaker, and I know all mums and dads watching tonight agree. Because when we listen to something as important as the National Budget, we're not only listening with our ears bent for how it will benefit us personally. We want to know how it's going to affect our families; our children, our parents and our grandparents, and all of our fellow Fijians. Madam Speaker, we want to know how it's going to affect our nation and our ability to prosper now and into the future.
9. This Government has taken that love and care we share for one another, and for our nation, and we've matched that with a business way of thinking, that's brought visionary, responsible and prudent financial management to our economy.
10. That's our recipe for success. And that is how we've forged Fiji – at long last – into a united nation, ending the heartbreak of Fijian families who once felt they did not belong in their own country. That's how we've empowered

hundreds of thousands of Fijians with new jobs, new access to services and new opportunities. That's how we've unlocked our productive capacity as a nation. That's how we've made our economy inclusive; massively expanding our social safety net, giving a greater level of care towards those on the margins of society, our youth, our women, Fijians with disabilities and senior citizens. That's how we've brought water, electricity, roads, telecommunications, health services and higher quality education to more Fijians in every corner of our country.

11. And that is how, Madam Speaker, we have achieved nine straight years of economic growth – the longest running period of growth in Fijian history.
12. Tonight, we build on that success, in a responsible manner, in a strategic manner, and in a deeply caring manner as well. Tonight, we'll see what nine years of economic growth, nine years of prosperity and nine years of progress have created for Fiji.
13. Madam Speaker, I will only be covering the significant new budgetary funding allocations and spending priorities this evening. You'll all remember the detailed budget kits that

were published last year in the Fiji Sun with the full breakdown of the National Budget – that will be happening again in next week’s paper. The Budget details will also be published on the Ministry of Economy website, at www.economy.gov.fj. If you have questions you can e-mail the Ministry of Economy at budgetconsultation@economy.gov.fj, or submit feedback directly to the Ministry of Economy on the new DigitalFIJI mobile app available on Google Playstore for Android devices and which will be available on Apple devices very soon – another new development we’ll cover shortly.

STRONG FAMILIES, A STRONG FIJI

14. Madam Speaker, in strengthening Fijian families, our effort must begin where all families begin, with the birth of a child. Many of us here are fathers; I serve under our Honourable Prime Minister, who is both a father and a grandfather. We also have many parents and grandparents watching tonight, and we have parents and grandparents, and even great grandparents in this August House – many with more experience than me, and many others on this side of the House. But, regardless, we all know, there are few times that

are more stressful – or more special – for a family than when a new child is born. And we want every Fijian family to have a measure of financial security when they welcome the blessing of a new child.

15. That is why we are proud to announce we've allocated \$5 million towards Parenthood Assistance Payments in Fiji. That means mothers from families with a household income below \$30,000, upon the birth of her child, whether it be her first, second, third child and so on, will be granted \$1,000.

16. The moment the new-born is registered at a BDM office, only upon registration at BDM, and is issued a birth certificate, a new bank account will be opened at any participating bank in the child's name to receive that parenthood assistance payment. The first \$500 will be available immediately to the mother, and those funds can go towards the purchase of whatever is required for the rearing of the child – bringing a measure of security to Fijian families in the midst of what can be a very stressful time. The other \$500 stays in the bank, where it will earn interest, and can be accessed when the child enters Year 1 or class 1 or primary school. So no child in Fiji, Madam Speaker, will be starting life without a financial

foundation. Over the long term, we hope parents will add their own savings to those bank accounts, and that will drive home the importance of savings, and of financial planning, for more Fijian families. And no fees will be charged in maintaining these accounts.

17. Madam Speaker, we know the work doesn't stop with the birth of a child. All mothers and, perhaps to a lesser extent, fathers, know this very well. The lead-up to a birth is also an extremely busy and stressful time. And no new or expecting parent in Fiji should be worried about keeping the jobs they need to keep a roof over their family's head, keep the lights on and keep their family fed. And it's Government's job to grant them flexibility and give them financial stability. That is why we're also increasing paid maternity leave from 84 working days to 98 working days, adding another two weeks for mothers to take off from work in the preparation of the birth and in the care of their child.
18. And for the very first time, we're also introducing a paid five days' paternity leave for fathers, effective from 1 January 2019. That leave can be taken three months before or three months after the birth of the child. Madam Speaker, I know

we have had a lot of fathers who were taking annual leave to spend time with their wives and with their children, some were making a difficult choice between supporting their families, and sustaining their pay check – those days are over. Because we cannot undervalue fatherhood. Fathers cannot leave everything to their wives, they can and must be a big part of rearing their children. Furthermore, Madam Speaker, I think more Fijian fathers ought to be changing diapers. I can tell you it's certainly an experience. And that's another reason among many that Fijian mothers are very keen to get their fathers back in the house, helping at home as well. It is also a very rewarding experience altogether, Madam Speaker.

19. Madam Speaker, we're also introducing fully paid five days' family care leave that all employees can utilise each year. So if you need to take your child to the doctor, if your child gets sick at school, if someone you love, such as a parent, is in need of help, or you have another sort of family emergency, you can use these days to be there for your family. Because we cannot let any working Fijian to be torn between going to work and caring for their loved ones when they need help. We've heard a lot recently about

compassionate days being taken away from civil servants, that's clearly not the case. As of 1 January 2019, every employee in Fiji will have more days to spend caring for their families than they've ever had before.

20. Madam Speaker, in order to make all of this new leave possible, we need also to be mindful of Fijian businesses, we need to be mindful of productivity. So we'll be holding our final Sports and Wellness Public Holiday this Friday, which is tomorrow. It's not that we don't appreciate the spirit of the event, it's an important mission and one that will continue through our massive funding towards the health of our citizens. But it's clear Fijians wanted more flexibility, and we know these five new days of family care leave are more than fair recompense.
21. Madam Speaker, Fijian businesses are going to be better off when their employees are able to manage their work-life balance, their employees will be happier, and happy people get more done, and they are more productive – that's just a fact. But to help offset the wages paid to employees for these days, we're introducing a 150 per cent tax deduction for all businesses for salaries and wages paid to those

employees during those times they take paternity and family care leave.

EDUCATION

22. Madam Speaker, every mother and father in Fiji wants to know that their child will grow up in a better society, with more opportunities than they knew themselves. That starts with education. Before this Government, many families were left heartbroken; some were unable to send their children to school at all. Those days ended the moment this Government introduced free education, free textbooks and subsidised transportation to school. And the education revolution, Madam Speaker, started by this Government, is alive and well, with another historic allocation in this year's Budget.

23. For the first time ever, 2018-2019 is a billion-dollar year in Fijian education, as we've allocated a record-smashing amount of over a billion dollars to the education sector; nearly 22 per cent of Government's total expenditure.

24. Fijian families can send their children to primary and secondary school without worrying about money, because both will remain free for all Fijian students with an allocation of \$66.4 million. But we're making one important change. Families who feel – on a voluntary basis – that they can afford their school fees for their children, can now pay their school fees, or any amount they choose, direct into an account that helps fund the construction of schools in rural and maritime areas of Fiji. And we urge the August members of this House, who do have children in school, to take the lead on this initiative.

25. The Bus Fare Assistance Programme will continue as will our Free Milk programme for Year 1 students.

26. Madam Speaker, Fijian schools must afford students the same level of safety and the same duty of care that they enjoy at home with their families. In far too many cases, that is not happening in our schools. We have students being assaulted by other students, students being beaten, bullied, and harassed – and it's totally unacceptable. Making our schools safer, Madam Speaker, starts with instilling values – family values – like respect, tolerance, discipline, teamwork, nation-building and a sense of civic duty. That's why we're

bringing scouting to the Fijian education system, working with the Fiji Scouts Association, of which His Excellency the President is a patron, to bring scout programmes for girls and boys – for the first time –into secondary schools, and new high schools on a voluntary basis.

27. That's going to bring leadership opportunities to campuses in the development of our young people, that's going to build a spirit of teamwork on campuses and that's going to help build communities among our students; home away from home that brings the same structure, stability and security of a family environment. And schools that already have cadet training can offer both of these programmes to their students. We're working with the Fiji Scouts Association to bring this programme online from Term 1 of 2019 and in the meantime, we will be beginning our training courses for the teachers to rollout this programme in the New Year.
28. We're also going to extend the reach of the Accident Compensation Commission Fiji to cover schoolyard injuries so that the families of students hurt at school can benefit from a no fault payment scheme that can go towards the cost of their recovery. This is going to paint a very clear picture of which schools have serious problems with abuse

on school property and need special attention. And of course Madam Speaker, accidents do happen at schools. We've had children, for example, because children are playing around, a pen poked into somebody's eye and they actually lost their eyesight. This is precisely what this compensation will cover for, Madam Speaker.

29. Madam Speaker, we want teachers in classrooms to be able to afford as much one on one attention as possible to our students. To improve the ratio of teachers to students, we've allocated \$5 million to recruit an additional 200 primary school and 50 secondary school teachers, along with another \$26.9 million as a salary grant for early childhood education teachers.
30. Madam Speaker, Fijians don't become teachers because they think it will be an easy job. They do it because they want to make a difference, they want to change the lives of our young people, guide them, empower them and further their development. Madam Speaker, this Government is now bringing that same level of commitment to develop and empower Fijian teachers. We'll be offering 50 full-time

academic scholarships that are open exclusively to Fijian teachers.

- 30 of those scholarships are available to teachers who already hold a diploma and who want to upgrade to a bachelor's degree in maths, physics, English language and literature, information technology, industrial arts, special education and early childhood education; and
- 20 scholarships will be available to teachers who hold a degree and who want to upgrade to a post graduate degree – including PhD programmes – in maths, physics and English language and literature.

31. Madam Speaker, we're offering these scholarships in those areas because there is a serious lack of specialist teachers in the country. We need teachers with advanced skills in areas that are critical in a modern economy, we want Fijian teachers to receive these qualifications, better themselves, and, ultimately, better the education they provide to our young people.

32. Madam Speaker, we are going to comprehensively review our school curriculum, because our students need the right skills, the right knowledge and the right qualifications to be competitive in a modern economy. That's why we'll be re-designing certain courses to better engage with students, for example, an everyday maths track for students who don't want to study complex maths.
33. Madam Speaker, in a truly knowledge-based society, we all need to actively seek education, strive for good information and keep up with new trends. And all Fijians deserve an education system that keeps up with them as well. That's why we'll be developing adult education to be taught after hours, run by the Fiji National University. We'll be giving adults the chance to take courses on how to start their own business, for example how to manage basic finances, file tax returns, apply for social welfare benefits, and other skills – critical skills – and give more of our people more opportunities to do well for themselves and do well by their families. These courses will be taught after hours by teachers and civil servants starting in Term 1 in 2019.

34. We are also working in partnership with the Indian Government and the Commonwealth Open Learning Centre to review our education curriculum, bringing global expertise to bear in the education of our young people.
35. As always, Madam Speaker, climate change poses a serious threat to the education of our people, and we are raising the standard of resilience across the board in education rebuilding back better from TC Winston, Gita, Keni and Josie, with total allocation of \$90 million. We're also bringing a level of uniformity, aside from meeting high standards in construction, to the design of schools in Fiji, along with interior and exterior furnishings, and that will be funded by a special grant for school renovation of \$6.9 million for Government and non-government schools.
36. The Ministry of Education has also been tasked to work with the Construction Implementation Unit to carry out a comprehensive stock take of school premises around the country, based on school needs and applications made by school management. The new system will weed out inefficiencies and make more effective use of the \$300,000 provided to properly fit out schools throughout the country.

37. Madam Speaker, this Government introduced TELS and the National Toppers Scheme, because when we actually went out and listened to young Fijians, it was clear that too many faced financial difficulty in realising their dreams in education past secondary school.

38. TELS and Toppers have grown, they've expanded – in a sustainable manner – they've improved and they've evolved to meet the needs of our students in Fiji, because we keep our ears to the ground, and we've taken on the concerns, the ideas and the aspirations of young, ambitious Fijians. It is critical these programmes stay relevant as workplace demands change and as new industries come to Fiji, so that our people have the right skills and the right knowledge to maximise their potential. As is the case in any developed nation, we need to encourage students to take up in-demand areas of study that have the greatest impact on their future. The Budget does that, expanding Toppers and TELS to help more of our people and to do better by our students, and to ensure they have the skills that are in demand in our modern economy.

39. This year, we are proud to announce we'll be expanding the National Toppers Scheme for students with another 340 full-time scholarships, bringing the total number of scholarships under the scheme to 970.

40. Of these new scholarships:

- 20 will be awarded for overseas study in specialised courses that we don't offer in Fiji, including architecture, counselling, forensic science, genetic science, molecular biology, speech therapy, clinical psychology, specialised education, biomedical engineering, town planning and climate and actuarial studies;
- 20 will be awarded locally for students in the areas of tourism, agriculture, fisheries, forestry and other coursework that is aligned with our national development agenda;
- 5 will be awarded locally for students entering PhD programmes; and

- the remaining scholarships are spread out among the existing priority areas under the Toppers scheme that have already produced extremely talented and accomplished young Fijians.
41. That full list of scholarship awards can be found in the TELS Flyer on the Ministry of Economy Website, the TLSB Website and in the supplement in the Fiji Sun.
 42. Madam Speaker, looking at what we're doing in Toppers, is looking at Fiji's future. It's an inside look at the new generation of Fijian experts, intellectuals and leaders in Fijian society. These 340 new scholarship opportunities will be available at the start of next year, and we very much look forward to seeing young, talented and ambitious Fijians seize this new opportunity.
 43. Madam Speaker, we're also adding 20 more full-time scholarships under the Scholarship Scheme for Special Needs Students, and all of the recipients under this scheme will now be receiving the same slate of allowances offered to National Toppers Scheme recipients.

44. On the back of the historic allocation last year, we're also allocating \$206 million to fund TELS in the next financial year, expanding reach of the programme to a total of over 25,000 students.

45. Madam Speaker, TELS is an investment in the potential and ability of hard-working Fijian students, and when students go on to a job and pay back that investment, they're really paying it forward by helping fund the dreams and ambitions of the next year of students who aspire to tertiary education. Because we are such a young nation, our young people deserve to realise their own dreams to go on to higher education, we need to make every dollar count towards the education of as many Fijians as possible. That's a sustainable model, Madam Speaker, and that's a model that has already funded the educational aspirations of thousands of our people.

46. This year, we're announcing that those who repay their loans more quickly under TELS are going to enjoy a major discount on their total repayment. Depending on how fast you repay you can have 50 per cent, 25 per cent or 10 per cent of your student debt erased completely. Based on what

you owe, you will have a full set of years to make your repayments to enjoy these incentives.

47. It's a simple deal; the faster you repay your debt, the less you'll pay overall. The full detailed breakdown can be found in the TELS Flyer, on the Ministry of Economy and TLBSB websites and of course in the Fiji Sun. Here's an example: if you have \$39,000 in debt, and repay half your debt in three years, the other half of your debt will be waived, or if you repay 75 per cent of that debt in 6 years, the remaining 25 per cent will no longer be owed.
48. So if you manage your money, if you save and are savvy with your spending, Government is going to help you in a very big and very responsible manner. Because the sooner your debt is repaid, the less you pay overall. That's true because it will accrue less interest, and because of the major discounts offered by this programme, and what we're calling accelerated repayment incentives.
49. We're making another important change to TELS, because our students deserve transparency and regular updates on the repayment of their loans, especially now that we have

such an attractive repayment incentive in place. Students will now receive statements on their debt position during and after their studies, and they'll soon be able to view their statements on their mobile phones through the DigitalFIJI app.

50. Under TELS, the case has been that only students whose parents made under \$25,000 were receiving allowances. We've now increased that threshold to \$50,000. And after taking on more input from students, we've increased the bus fare allowance for all eligible TELS and Toppers recipients from \$15 a week to \$30 a week. This will cover, for example, students who are travelling from Ba to the FNU Campus in Lautoka.
51. Funding of \$18.1 million is allocated to the 15 technical colleges that this Government has opened around the country, allowing these institutions to continue passing on invaluable trade skills to our people that are in high demand in our country. We're carrying out a review – in partnership with the Australian Government – on how to keep our coursework in technical colleges relevant and impactful for our students.

HELPING FIJIANS AFFORD HOMES

52. Madam Speaker, as the economy grows, Fijian families do well, and as Fijian families earn more, more dream of one day owning their own homes. A home isn't only a structure that provides shelter, it's not only a space to share with your families, but it is an asset, and one that can increase in value. And with this Budget, we're doing far more to realise the dreams of those thousands of Fijian families to own their own homes, and accelerate their access to the mainstream financial sector.
53. This year, we are announcing the formulation of a new ministry, the Ministry of Housing and Community Development, bringing all the functions of the Department of Housing and the Rural Housing Unit from Rural and Maritime Development, along with the various housing and community services previously offered by the Ministry of Lands and the Ministry of Local Government, under one roof. The mandate of this new ministry is simple: increase the homeownership rate to meet the growing demand in Fiji for quality and reasonable housing at affordable prices.

54. The landmark policies in housing launched by this Government will continue, and many are becoming more impactful. We're continuing our campaign to regularise Fijians living in informal settlements and we're improving basic infrastructure in informal settlements at the city, town and community level to bring more security of tenure.
55. We've also put \$15 million towards the First Homeowners Grant – formerly the First Home Buyers Grant – and made the programme more generous for Fijian families.
56. Now, first-time home buyers with an annual income of under \$50,000 will receive \$15,000 towards the construction, or \$10,000 towards the purchase, of their first home. Families who make between \$50,000 a year and \$100,000 a year now also qualify for this grant assistance, with \$10,000 provided for constructing a new home or \$5,000 for the purchase of their first home. Under this scheme, grant payments for the purchase of strata titles, developed and approved by entities such as the Housing Authority, will be considered at the same rates as the construction of a home. So they will be eligible, even though they may have bought a

strata title from Housing Authority, they will be able to get \$10,000.

57. We're also introducing a new grant, the First Land Owners Grant to help more Fijian families purchase or lease land. Households who make less than \$50,000 will be granted \$10,000 towards the purchase or lease of land, which eventually can be the site on which that they construct a new home of their own. Many people, for example, have leasing arrangements in place – the landowning units has agreed, TLTB has agreed, but they cannot make the purchase price of the lease. So its \$10,000 of that amount.
58. For both the First Home Owners Grant and First Land Owners Grant, the home or the land must be owned by the household for five years, or else the grant must be repaid.
59. Madam Speaker, last year we opened up a new mechanism that allowed commercial banks to take out concessional finance from the Reserve Bank of Fiji at a rate of one per cent, and then lend that money to first home buyers at a maximum of five per cent interest. This year, we're going even further, by subsidising an additional one per cent on the interest rates from commercial banks to first time home

buyers and for first time land buyers. So, if you have a 4.2 per cent interest loan, Government will step in to lower your interest rate to 3.2 per cent, and we'll continue making those payments for a period of 3 years.

60. Madam Speaker, there are a number of financial hurdles in realising land and home ownership that we are helping Fijian families overcome. We have some Fijians who are currently living on iTaukei land – for example – who don't have the funds to conduct the surveys necessary to transition their lease agreement into fully fledged, registered lease on iTaukei land. We'll be covering the cost of those surveys with a new allocation of \$750,000, speeding up the process towards regularisation, and helping give more Fijians the security, financial empowerment and peace of mind for long-term land ownership. It also means Madam Speaker that the landowners will be able to demand the right market price for the land that will be leased to them. There are many areas, for example, in Nausori, that are in this situation.

61. We've moved forward the feasibility studies – in partnership with the International Finance Corporation – on the mixed housing developments announced in last year's Budget. We're looking at land availability, and we've held a number

of discussions with potential investors on the most appropriate scale of the developments and on how we can engage with large private sector partners to move this development forward, and bring major mixed housing developments to Fiji.

62. Soon, Government will be signing off on a new agreement with FNPF that will pave the way for the Fund to develop multifamily housing units in Fiji. These housing complexes will require no capital outlay from Government; instead, the developments will be made possible through a Government commitment to directly subsidise rent for low-income tenants.
63. This partnership will not only further diversify FNPF's investment portfolio – upon completion, the multifamily complexes will immediately open a large inventory of affordable accommodation options, both for rental and sale, in a high-demand market. This effectively kills two birds with one stone by providing Government-assisted housing to Fijian families, while further bolstering the FNPF's diversification to the benefit of its members.

64. And with the announcement of the First Home Buyers expansion in this year's Budget, market-driven demand will make mixed housing projects like this become more economically feasible for developers, opening the possibility for the private sector to follow in FNPF's footsteps.
65. We are working with the Singaporean Government to maximise the value of Government housing assets in the West, particularly in Lautoka, to redesign accommodations in prime locations to take better advantage of space and provide more creative and affordable housing options for civil servants. And we know in that area, Singapore has a wealth of knowledge and experience that we are keen to harness for the benefit of our own development.
66. Madam Speaker, we've continued with the Government's Grant Assistance for iTaukei Land Development; giving Fiji's landowning communities the opportunity to better tap into the nation's prosperity by developing their land and reaping the financial benefits that come as a result. Specifically, these grants are designed to meet the cost of connecting and constructing utilities such as electricity, water, roads and

other critical infrastructure on iTaukei land that would otherwise be inaccessible to the public.

67. To date, 11 development plans in Fiji have received the green-light from Government to embark on that transformative journey: two in Tailevu (one is already completed in Tailevu out of the two), two in Nadroga, one in Tavua, and six more in the province of Ba, with one development having been completed and another three nearing completion. We hope the success of these first 11 developments will inspire many more landowning units to follow in their footsteps, empowering many more iTaukei along the way to become both asset-rich and cash-rich.
68. Of course, as introduced this year, 80 per cent of any of the royalties for any mineral resources mined on any land or seabed in Fiji go straight back to the resource owners.

HELPING FIJIANS ON THE JOB

69. Madam Speaker, anywhere in the world, as an economy grows, more prosperity comes to the country, and citizens earn more money, they want better, and they want more

opportunities. As economies grow, driven by demand, the quality of goods increase and prices go up. That's basic economics.

70. As a Government, we can address that in one of two ways. Option 1: we can be irresponsible. We can act without any care or consideration for the welfare of our citizens, business and the economy. We can increase the minimum wages to 5, 10, or 20 dollars, if we wanted, and then we would have to watch thousands of Fijians lose their jobs, and over one hundred thousand Fijians in the informal sector be crushed by higher prices on goods and services, and far higher costs of doing business.
71. Or, Madam Speaker, we can be thoughtful, we can be strategic, and consider how to ease the cost burdens on Fijian families. We can carefully consider the costs that impact Fijian families and reduce those costs – that is a government's role.
72. It was the Bainimarama Government that actually instituted the minimum wage in 2014 for unskilled workers, and we have increased the minimum wage twice since then to \$2.68

an hour as it stands. We also have the 10 sectoral wages which have higher wages than the national minimum wage.

73. We've carried out a comprehensive review of that wage this year in consultation with an international expert, Professor Partha Gangopadhyay. We've gone to great lengths to make sure that review has been thorough and that it's been participatory, transparent and inclusive. And it's a process that has considered wages and social wages given by Government, the ways we've addressed the major considerations in any family's budget by helping families with education, water, electricity, the purchase of basic goods, and the affordability of housing. That's our record. It's a record of empowerment, and it's a record of compassionate responsibility.

74. We will continue to take this sophisticated approach and carry out regular reviews of the minimum wage, without compromising the rights of workers, without undermining the confidence of businesses, and without costing hard-working Fijians their jobs. We certainly won't let politics drive us into irresponsible actions. That's not how this Government leads. Every step we take forward is carefully considered, every

action is guided by facts and rational decision-making, not by politics and not by when elections may be, but by what will create the most good for Fiji, for our economy and for our people.

75. Madam Speaker, our work is two-fold, cutting down the major costs facing Fijian families, and ensuring fair prices of goods in the marketplace. Thanks to the work of the Economic Intelligence Unit within the Ministry of Economy, Fiji Revenue and Customs Service and Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission, many large wholesale importers are no longer dictating market prices, because by fostering competition, we're seeing a reduction in the prices of goods like diapers, hygiene products, energy bars, baked beans, chicken wings, cheese and washing powder, etc., and we expect other importers to follow suit – and indeed soon.

76. From today, duties will be reduced from five per cent to zero per cent on imported fruits and vegetables, such as apples, grapes, oranges, pears, kiwi fruits, strawberries, apricots, peaches, plums, grapefruit, raspberries, cranberries, pomegranates, carrots, mixed vegetables, broccoli,

mushrooms, asparagus, leeks, spinach, etc., Madam Speaker. And, to encourage healthier living, we're increasing the excise tax on imported carbonated and sweetened drinks to 32 per cent or to a specific rate of \$2 a litre, whichever is higher.

INSURING FIJIAN FAMILIES

77. Madam Speaker, any Fijian family can be hit by serious setbacks, whether that be the tragic death of a loved one, the loss of their home or an injury in the workplace, quite abruptly, a family can find themselves in an incredibly difficult situation.
78. That is why we are introducing Family Insurance for all social welfare recipients, bringing a package of protections that includes life, home and injury insurance, and the premiums for this insurance will be covered by Government.
79. The insurance model we're introducing pools resources, with premiums covered entirely by Government. It's a community-based approach that protects families who have fallen on difficult times. So, for example in the event of the death of a

beneficiary – God forbid – the family of the deceased will be paid \$1,000 for funeral expenses and \$3,000 in the form of a relief payment. If a family's home is lost to fire, \$3,000 will be paid out to the family, and for any form of personal injury the insurance scheme will pay up to \$3,000 to help those families cope during that difficult time.

80. If anyone is curious as to how well this model functions, they can go ahead and ask a cane farmer, a rice farmer, a dairy farmer. Indeed, Madam Speaker, this was first introduced by the Sugar Cane Growers Fund, which introduced packages of bundle insurance for cane farmers last year, and over the past year it has paid out insurance payments to 75 families who have lost a loved one and 10 families who have lost their homes to fire – previously, these families would have been on their own, instead their community – through this bundled insurance – has been able to provide them with relief. And the rice, copra and dairy farmers, as highlighted earlier, have also introduced this insurance scheme model for their farmers and their families.

81. As a Government, we are an employer to many tens of thousands of Fijians. Those women and men have families

who count on them, and those families deserve a measure of security and assurance. That's why we're also introducing Family Insurance for all Fijian civil servants, including the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, the Fiji Police Force and the Fiji Corrections Officers. And that won't come at any cost to the beneficiaries.

82. By introducing this historic package of insurance to our civil servants and our social welfare recipients, we're bringing the security of life, home and injury insurance to a total of 100,000 Fijians, at no cost to them. When you consider the security and assurance this programme grants to these families, this policy, through this Budget, is going to impact nearly half of the country.

83. That, Madam Speaker, is how you care for Fijian families by being smart about your initiatives. And we encourage industries and the private sector to look closely at this model being introduced by Government, and follow suit. And indeed, statutory organisations can also follow suit. Because it makes a real difference for those families who have fallen on difficult times.

CIVIL SERVICE REFORMS

84. Madam Speaker, with this announcement, we'll be insuring and protecting every civil servant in Fiji for the first time in Fijian history. That follows the Job Evaluation Exercise last year that has already led to record pay-rises for Fijian civil servants.

85. We're now allocating the full value of the salary increases across Government. Civil servants will continue to receive their higher salaries, the only change being that ministries' budgets will now truly reflect the salaries of their respective staff.

86. Over the past year, we've continued our critical programme of reform in the Fijian civil service, by introducing a performance management system that will reward employees directly based on the impact they've had within their ministries.

87. That process began at the start of this year with criteria established and training sessions for all levels of the civil service on how that process functions, and assessments are

being carried out across every ministry and department to reward high-performing civil servants. This is the first time that such a comprehensive, thorough and uniform system of assessment and remuneration has been introduced – and it's critical that we get this right on the first go. We're being careful, we're being fully transparent and we're being fair, and after we've standardised these assessments through a moderation process and carry out another round of training for managers, we'll be announcing pay rises this year for high-performing civil servants that will be backdated to 1 August of this year.

88. So, more pay is on the way for high-performing Fijian civil servants. This evening, we're announcing another landmark investment in our civil servants, as we're offering 35 scholarship awards for non-teacher civil servants; and of those:

- 20 scholarships will be awarded to civil servants for post graduate study locally in the areas of tourism, agriculture, fisheries and forests and training itself, in particular teacher training;

- 10 scholarships will be awarded to pursue a postgraduate diploma or master's degree overseas, based on strategic areas of study identified by the civil service; and
 - 5 scholarships will be awarded for civil servants to pursue a PhD programme. It's very rare to find a civil servant with a PhD.
89. We're also introducing a scarce skill allowance across the civil service that provides a major cash incentive to attract individuals outside the country who possess skills that are urgently required across Government. The same allowance also provides an avenue for ministries to pay private sector rates for specialised talent in Fiji from Fiji. Of course, civil servants who acquire these skills can also become eligible for this.
90. For the Police, we're restructuring human resources within the Fijian Police Force to regularise over 600 special constables and other Government Wage Earners within the Force. These women and men are working full-time in the vast majority of instances, and deserve to be compensated

correctly. This is the first phase of a five-year restructure, and in this first phase these new regularised positions will see an increase in salaries to bring them in line with what full-time officers are receiving, and \$24.6 million is allocated for that purpose.

91. Madam Speaker, we've increased our grant funding to provincial councils to \$1.9 million to raise salaries in line with the private sector, in accordance with the same methodology used to bring pay rises to civil servants. And we've done the same for the iTaukei Affairs Board, with a total grant of \$5.2 million.

SUGAR

92. Madam Speaker, we've set aside \$62.3 million towards the Ministry of Sugar Industry. We're continuing our efforts to modernise the industry to prepare it to be more competitive in the global market and more capable of supporting the over 200,000 Fijians and their families who rely on the health of the sugar industry.

93. Sugarcane replanting, the fertiliser subsidy, weedicide subsidy, farm mechanisation, the subsidy for cane cartage, the rehabilitation of cane access roads, the incentives we introduced for new farmers to grow cane, cane top-up payments by Government – that is all going to continue. And, as we saw through Sugarcane-CARE, this Government is ready to respond swiftly and effectively when our cane farmers are hit by severe weather.
94. What's new in this Budget, is that we will be setting up a stabilisation price – funded in partnership with the Fiji Sugar Corporation (**'FSC'**) – of \$85 a tonne for all cane payments for the next three years. We've already maintained cane payments at \$82 for the last three years, but now we're going to be able to bring a solid level of stabilisation. That's possible because of the tremendous effort of this Government to reduce the cost base for farmers and mechanise this industry. That agenda has allowed the FSC to sell off underutilised assets; and this stabilised price will be funded from the Sugar Stabilisation Fund within the FSC, bringing cane farmers a level of security, certainty and confidence in the sugar industry over the long-term.

Government will be funding this measure as well with an allocation in the 2019-2020 fiscal year.

95. Madam Speaker, this is similar to the stabilisation programme we already introduced for coconut farmers, and which will, of course, continue.

TRAINING IN THE WORKPLACE

96. Madam Speaker, it's a government's job to give employers every possible reason to train their employees. That's good for business, that's good for Fijians, and that's good for Fiji. But the current incentive for small businesses through the National Training and Productivity Centre Levy ('**NTPC**') was in dire need of revamping in a modern economy.
97. The simple problem is that small businesses face issues of scale, and they need their employees on the job the vast majority of the time. We get that. And the one per cent NTPC levy wasn't working for these businesses, it was too complicated and an unnecessary burden. That's going to change, because this levy is going to dramatically reduce to 0.10 per cent. Those funds will still go towards training for

employees at the NTPC, which is currently developing a new course that is more relevant for trainees in the 21st century economy.

98. We're also introducing a 0.40 per cent levy paid by all employers who used to pay the NTPC Levy, in the form of a workers' compensation levy, which is going to have a far more direct and powerful impact for employees in Fiji. The levy will fund a no fault workplace compensation fund, in the same model of the very successful Accident Compensation Commission Fiji. So when Fijians are injured, or in especially tragic cases, are killed in the workplace, their families can receive compensation quickly to help them during an incredibly difficult time. So no longer will claims languish on the sidelines for years, no longer will companies have to bear the cost of workers compensation insurance – which is costing them around \$8 million a year – and those who don't have insurance at all, will now be protected, and so will their employees.
99. To keep up with workplace training, we're revamping tax incentives, by giving 150 per cent in tax deductions to all businesses to compensate them for training their staff; with on-the-job training now qualifying under this new incentive.

So small business owners now have a real incentive, that is actually designed – very simply – to the realities they face. Their employees can train through an accredited programme in-house, they can train at the NTPC, they can train locally, they can train overseas, regardless, their Government will support them.

EXPANSION OF HEALTHCARE SERVICES

100. Madam Speaker, a healthy Fiji is a strong Fiji. And our work to expand access to care and improve the quality of health services throughout the country is growing bigger and better, and more tailored to meet the most serious health problems affecting our people.

101. In this year's Budget, we've allocated a total of \$382 million to the health of the Fijian people, of which \$335 million is towards the Ministry of Health and Medical Services and \$47.6 million is towards paying doctors' salaries and recruiting new medical personnel.

102. Madam Speaker, it's well known by now that we are massively upgrading the Ba and Lautoka hospitals into

world-class health facilities through a public-private partnership (**‘PPP’**), and we’re nearing completion on our work on the Ba Hospital. Again, we’ll be partnering with FNPF on this project for the benefit of our people, and their future.

103. Under the PPP, we will engage an internationally-certified hospital operator to complete the upgrade of these facilities and bring an unprecedented slate of health services to the Fijian people, including better tertiary care, oncology services to treat cancer, kidney dialysis, better maternity care for more Fijian mothers, procedures for NCDs, and for the first time ever, the 24/7 availability of open-heart surgeries. Not only for the wealthy, not only for those who can travel overseas, but for every Fijian. So, real change is certainly coming, Madam Speaker. Real change, impactful change, change that will save Fijian lives.

104. The project will also provide a wide offering of new training opportunities for Fijian medical staff and put new, cutting edge medical technologies in the hands of Fijian healthcare professionals. And I’d like to be clear again, this is not a privatisation. All of our staff will always have the option of continuing to work in the public sector.

105. We're currently in the process of carefully selecting the right partner for Fiji on this project, and have just issued the request for tender. We expect to identify that partner this year and get this important project underway. Under the PPP, the annual cost to the Government is expected to remain similar to the current costs of running both hospitals, but those hospitals will be delivering more and better services to our people, in new and more sophisticated healthcare facilities environment.

106. Madam Speaker, the health needs of our people are growing, our population is increasing and Fijians are becoming more conscious of their health and keener to access medical services – and that's a very good thing. In rural areas especially, we still have some Fijians making long journeys to public health facilities, so we need to make a special effort to cater for those communities.

107. That is why we're introducing a new programme to incentivise General Practitioners to set up shop directly in Fijian communities, that includes peri-urban areas, towns and local communities, and rural and remote parts of the country. We want to give our people the ability to easily and

conveniently see a General Practitioner to be consulted on their health and to access basic medical services. If it's a more complex matter, or serious health emergency, then Fijians should rely on the public health facilities, but they shouldn't have to make that journey and wait in line for simple health check-ups and treatments. And that's why we're announcing this programme. We're seeking to create a new sector, a strong private GP sector in Fiji, by offering a comprehensive package of incentives. That will include guaranteed income based on the number of patients they are assigned to serve, with additional financial assistance provided to GPs who set-up in deep rural and maritime areas that are a distance away from our public health network, whether that be in Nabouwalu, Natorowaqa or Korovou, just to name a few examples. We'll fully rollout the first trial launch on 1 January 2019. Madam Speaker, essentially what this means is that if for example a person lives in Samabula, there would be GPs practising in that area. The first point of call will be going to the GP there. The cost of the consultations will be borne by Government. They don't have to travel all the way to CWM or to their nearest health centre. In this way we've been incentivising – GPs to set up more practices. For example, there's no GP in

Korovou, there's no GP in Nabouwalu. If they know they have a set clientele base, they will go and set up shop there. This way we'll be able to make available general practitioner consultations 24/7. Madam Speaker, as I've said, we'll rollout the first trial launch on 1 January 2019.

108. I'd like to specifically thank the Asian Development Bank and the Australian Government for their assistance in developing this programme. Just a few weeks ago the Australian Government facilitated a team of officials that went from the Reserve Bank of Fiji and the Ministry of Economy to look at the Medicare system in Australia, and how it works and how indeed we can learn from the facilities that they have there.

109. As we've said, we've dramatically changed the one per cent NTPC Levy on businesses. In its place we're also introducing a half per cent levy to fund this expansion of GPs in Fijian communities. That's going to have a big impact for businesses of all sizes, because health emergencies for employees, and for their families, can be managed much more quickly when there is a GP stationed directly in a community. And healthy employees are productive

employees, and productive employees build strong Fijian businesses.

110. We're changing the model of delivery for Fijians benefitting from the Free Medicine Scheme. Families who earn below \$20,000 a year can access 142 essential medicines for free at pharmacies throughout the country. What's changing is that private pharmacies will now provide medicine to recipients directly, and then bill the Government, as opposed to us giving them the stock. It's going to give these pharmacies a financial incentive to stock these medicines regularly and give recipients more reliable access.
111. Of the \$60.5 million we've allocated to capital development in the health sector, \$11 million is towards the extension of the new Colonial War Memorial Hospital Maternity Ward. Our Honourable Prime Minister broke ground on that facility earlier this year, and once completed it will house 200 new beds in a facility that will deliver a complete package of coordinated care specially designed for women – the first of its kind anywhere in Fiji, and built to the same standards as anything you'll find overseas.

112. \$11.0 million is allocated towards the construction of the Navosa Sub-Divisional Hospital which will serve over 10,000 Fijians in the Nadroga-Navosa Province, and provide maternity services, pharmacy services and lab testing, along with X-rays and ultrasounds. We're providing \$1 million to construct a new health centre in Lodoni, \$500,000 to extend the Korovou Hospital, \$3 million to upgrade the hospital operating theatre and x-ray capabilities of the Lautoka Hospital, \$2.5 million towards the upgrade of the Valelevu Health Centre, and \$9.5 million to purchase new dental and bio-medical equipment, and a new MRI machine, and another \$43.4 million to purchase new drugs, consumables vaccines, and other medical supplies. All of this will dramatically reduce the travel time for Fijians to access these essential services and new treatments. Because every minute we save for patients travelling to receive the specialised care they require, is another minute our doctors and nurses have to save the life of one of our citizens.

113. This Budget also makes a bold recognition of the critical work undertaken by community health workers in rural communities throughout the country. All of these workers will now be brought in under the Ministry of Health, some of

them are, for example, with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. And a new allocation of \$4.6 million will go towards increasing the allowances for the around 1,800 community health workers in Fiji from \$50 a month to \$200 a month.

114. Last year, we announced the launch of the National Kidney Research Treatment Centre and preparatory works are underway to deliver that state-of-art facility for Fiji. When completed, that facility will be led by Dr Amrish Krishnan – the only active nephrologist in the country and many have said the only active nephrologist in the Southern Pacific in the islands.

115. While that important work is underway, this year, we'll be further expanding the number of dialysis treatments available in the country, and making those treatments more affordable. We've allocated \$2.0 million to make four dialysis machines available at a facility in Suva and three more available in Nadi, which will provide dialysis treatment at \$150 per session to the public. That's going to drive down prices generally for treatment, and that's going to save lives. And for Fijians with an annual household incomes below \$30,000, Government will also subsidise half the cost of treatments with an allocation of \$3.5 million at the new

standalone Government kidney centres in Suva and Nadi and the centre run by the Board of Visitors in Labasa.

116. Other facilities can be included in this subsidy scheme if they are approved by the Ministry of Health, as long as the cost of the dialysis treatment is \$150 or below.

117. Madam Speaker, currently the law does not permit deductions of more than 50 per cent from the wages or salaries of an employee. Because of this limitation, Fijians are getting seriously uninsured, as they are unable to authorise deductions from their wages or salaries for the payment of life and medical insurance. Many Fijians have simply decided to cease the payment of their life or medical insurance policies from their wages and salaries, as they may have other deductions, for example for the purchase of their homes.

118. We want our people to be insured, it saves them money over the long-term, it keeps them healthier and it protects them from debilitating financial mishaps. So we are going to amend the law and exclude direct deductions for life and medical insurance and medical schemes from the current 50

per cent restriction. And that's going to enable more Fijians to obtain life and medical insurance policies and maintain these policies through direct deductions from their wages and salaries, encouraging a culture of savings and long-term planning.

PRESERVING OUR ENVIRONMENT, PREPARING FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

119. Madam Speaker, we know that parents across Fiji want more for their children than they had for themselves, more opportunity, more prosperity, and – particularly – they want them to inherit a Fiji that is safer and more secure. Right now, the worsening impacts of climate change are putting all of that at serious risk.

120. Our environment, our economy and our secure future are all under siege from the disastrous climate impacts; the rising seas, the changing weather patterns and the tropical cyclones that are ravaging our country.

121. Madam Speaker, we cannot budget the exact amounts that cyclones will cost us each year, but we are blessed, Madam Speaker, that we have an economy that has been strong

enough to support affected Fijians in the aftermath of these storms. In particular, the immediate aftermath. This year, we were able to immediately activate the CARE for Fiji programme after the back-to-back arrivals of TCs Josie and Keni, a comprehensive relief package aimed at assisting Fijians badly affected by the storms. To-date we've disbursed \$123 million in assisting around 100,000 Fijian families through Homes-CARE, Farms-CARE, eTransport-CARE, Welfare-CARE, Sugarcane-CARE and Leaseholders-CARE.

122. CARE for Fiji, Help for Homes, and the massive rebuild we undertook following Cyclone Winston have all accomplished tremendous good. But we cannot remain stuck in a dangerous cycle of having to put up massive rehabilitation bills year after year. It is not sustainable, and if we don't take action immediately, it is our children and their children who will have to deal with the consequences. Madam Speaker, in total the direct cost to Government and the Fijian people from TC Winston was FJ\$1 billion in damages. That is a huge amount. And that is not a cost Fiji can afford to pay year in and year out.

123. That is why, abroad, as we continue in our Presidency of COP23, our Honourable Prime Minister has remained steadfast in our campaign to rally the world to more ambitious climate action through the Talanoa Dialogue, and seek the full implementation of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Because no matter how much we reduce our own carbon footprint, our secure future depends entirely on the commitment and actions of the rest of the world.
124. So we cannot relent on the global stage, and we thank the Honourable Prime Minister for the tremendous work he's done to unite the world in this important campaign. Our Presidency, and his leadership, are historic achievements so far, and we will continue to demand more action on climate change all the way up to our handover of the COP Presidency to Poland this December, and beyond.
125. Our climate advocacy will continue through our Chairmanship of the Small States Forum, a special grouping of States within the World Bank, which we have been tasked with leading because we have been at the forefront of opening up concessional financing for climate vulnerable countries, and during our hosting of the Asian Development

Bank Annual Meeting next year. Really, Fiji is fast becoming a place where international and regional business gets done. And we'll also be welcoming the World Exchange Congress to Fiji in 2020.

126. Because of our Honourable Prime Minister and his efforts, we're in a strong position to negotiate with the ADB and World Bank to access financing mechanisms that can be activated following serious natural disasters. Not only in the form of concessional loans, but in trigger-based immediate grant assistance, as we are seeking to move away from an income-based financing system towards a system that responds more effectively to those nations most vulnerable to climate change, like Fiji.

127. Madam Speaker, we're working to develop new insurance products to open up immediate flows of grant assistance to Fiji and affected Fijians in the aftermath of severe weather events. These products are enormously complex, and we've already begun working closely with the World Bank, who is currently modelling a parametric insurance programme in Fiji. That programme would mean that in the aftermath of a serious storm, if a home is lost, immediate funds can be paid

out to affected Fijians. And we are also looking to apply the model to crop insurance in Fiji. For both home and crop insurance in Fiji we've allocated \$1.4 million to cover the initial development costs and premiums once this scheme rolls out. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the IFC for helping us move this important programme forward.

128. Here at our home, Government is aggressively investing in our national infrastructure to protect Fijian families from the devastation of a changing climate. Because while Fiji may be extremely vulnerable to rising seas and strengthening storms, the "vulnerable" label doesn't limit our ambition. We still have our eyes firmly set on building Fiji into the nation we all believe we are capable of becoming.

129. This year, Government will spend \$650 million on climate adaptation and mitigation efforts. From stronger schools to seawalls, from sustainable energy to flood-resistant waterways, we're going all-out to ensure that the Fijian economy is engineered to weather any storm.

130. Madam Speaker, we've published the breakdown of how your Environment and Climate Adaptation Levy, or ECAL,

has been working for Fiji, and it's essential reading for every Fijian. It shows we've collected \$110.6 million and \$106 million has already been used to fund new, cyclone-resistant schools, new bridges, solar home systems, cane access roads, and agricultural loans to farmers, among other programmes that are preserving our environment and protecting Fijians from climate impacts.

131. And the ink is barely dry on a freshly-signed MOU between Energy Fiji Limited and Akuo Energy, a leading renewable energy producer from France, which establishes a joint venture aimed at vastly expanding solar power generation in Fiji, bringing electricity to Fijians living in some of our most remote and maritime areas who would otherwise be unreachable to EFL's grid. And that's very good news for the tens of thousands of Fijians who have recently become shareholders in EFL; because when EFL does well, now, so do they.

132. Last year, we introduced a 10 cents levy on plastic bags. Plastic usage has gone down, but we know we can do better, so we've increased the levy to 20 cents this year, and we're working towards a complete ban of single-use plastic

bags in Fiji by 2020. This will give everybody two years to phase out from using plastic. We're going to work to create more awareness in Fijian communities on the dangers of plastic pollution and on the alternatives for the next two years to give every Fijian and every Fijian business enough time to prepare for this transition.

133. Madam Speaker, Fiji will be introducing a new Euro 5 fuel standards in the New Year that will reduce greenhouse emissions in Fiji, make for cleaner driving and fewer maintenance check-ups for vehicles and lower the fuel bill for drivers on the road in Fiji. We've been speaking with fuel companies on this transition during our Honourable Prime Minister's COP23 responsibilities. It's an important step in our campaign to reduce our own emissions, and it shows the rest of the world how a small island nation is fully capable of embracing and adopting greener, more modern and more efficient technologies.

134. It is this Government that brought about Fiji's zero-tolerance policy for any development that damages the overall health of our natural environment. And we're streamlining our unprecedented environmental initiatives this year by

combining the Ministry of Waterways and the Department of Environment to form a new Ministry: the Ministry of Waterways and Environment, which is being funded at \$70 million.

135. We made this move because waterways are part of our natural environment. Projects that manage our network of waterways are – by definition – environmental projects. So taking these functions under the same umbrella will make funding projects easier, and get projects completed more quickly.

136. Anyone who lived through TC Josie and TC Keni, or who has watched their town or their community be submerged due to heavy rains, knows how critical that work is. We've given \$43.6 million to protect Fijian communities – and families – from water inundation, by improving drainage systems within towns and cities, maintaining municipal council drainage systems and constructing seawalls, groyne and wave breakwaters for villages and communities faced with the threat of coastal erosion.

137. We're rolling out new programmes as well, including the construction of drainage on farmland and expanding drainage infrastructure in rural residential communities.
138. On the margins of COP23, we began discussions with the German Government to bring in expertise to take a hard look at the way we're managing watershed infrastructure, and give their recommendations. This year, the German Development Cooperation will send a technical assistance team to Fiji with a mission to identify suitable climate adaptation activities in the water sector that are in line with national climate, watershed and waterways strategies, and those recommendations will also highlight opportunities for the mobilisation of climate finance into Fiji.
139. We will undertake another round of surveys for the Nadi River Project, which is designed to alleviate the worsening flooding in Nadi town, to update the Master Plan for the project's development based on new river patterns, siltation and changing rainfall. We've also brought new partners on board to get this project done, with the European Investment Bank and the Asian Development Bank joining alongside the Japanese Government. Once we complete this latest survey,

the Japanese Government has committed to fund the most immediate and pressing work that can be undertaken to lessen the risk of serious flooding in the Nadi Town area. Then the ADB, EIB and Japanese Government will together fund the completion of the project, in partnership with the Fijian Government.

140. We're also taking major strides to clean-up Fiji, because as a nation and as a society, frankly, we need to do a lot better. We've allocated \$1 million to standardise rubbish bins across the country, first starting in Nasinu. This won't only look better, it will make it crystal clear in every Fijian community exactly where the rubbish ought to be put. Not in the streets, not in our rivers, but in the rubbish bin.

141. Madam Speaker, we've allocated \$1.5 million towards the collection of rubbish by Government. In our major urban centres, rubbish is choking roadways and communities – and it's unacceptable. And we'll now be increasing rubbish pick-ups every day from Monday through Friday, first starting in Nasinu. We'll also be introducing a new pilot programme in Nasinu to distribute compost bins where Fijians can dispose of organic waste, like leaves and kitchen waste. So

we'll actually be creating compost from that waste for a productive use.

142. We've moved the Rural Local Authority from the Ministry of Health to the Ministry of Local Government, because non-health functions ought to be under the ambit of local government. It's the right ministry that makes the most sense for inspecting and approving new developments. This will also bring rubbish clean-up under the Ministry of Local Government, because this again, is a local governance and development issue. Direct health aspects will remain with the Ministry of Health.

143. We're also launching a new national competition, across Fiji, to clean-up Fijian communities through the Clean Community Competition. We're bringing a sense of pride and achievement to Fijian communities who go the extra mile to keep their homes, community areas and streets clean, by judging and rewarding which communities are the tidiest and are kept the cleanest.

144. Madam Speaker, maintaining a clean environment isn't a job that any one of us can go at alone. It will require a societal change in mind-set, from all of us, to think about our actions,

and consider the consequences. And we're going to be working with companies in Fiji to adopt stretches of roads in Fiji to help keep clean them up. It's a great way for companies to give back to the Fijian community who support businesses here in our country, by doing their part in keeping Fiji clean and beautiful, and protecting our natural environment.

CONNECTING FIJI, CONNECTING FIJIANS

145. Madam Speaker, there is a lot of work to be done to secure our future. But we cannot let that hinder our development aspirations. And because we've done well nine years running, we can take a moment, and consider how to lay a foundation of economic growth and development that will benefit Fijians now, in the year ahead, and for years to come.

146. This Government has already brought the digital revolution to Fiji and into the lives of the Fijian people. eTransport has taken our public transportation into the 21st Century – recording 10 million transactions a month around the country. Fijians living with disabilities are currently riding

buses for free, and that's going to continue. In fact, we're now covering pensioners under the same scheme, allowing them to travel on buses in Fiji free of charge, and that cost of travel for both pensioners and Fijians living with disabilities will be paid directly by Government to the bus companies. So bus companies won't actually have to fork out from their own kitty, we will be paying bus companies ourselves, to ensure that persons with disabilities and pensioners will actually be travelling for free.

147. Fijians are growing more comfortable using M-PAiSA cards through our social welfare payment distribution, and we've been able to quickly and effectively coordinate disaster relief responses through the distribution of electronic cards in the aftermath of severe weather events.

148. That innovative development must continue, because the ICT sector is proven to be one of the most powerful engines in driving sustainable development, improving living standards and achieving rapid economic growth.

149. That is why we've massively expanded access to telecommunications, connecting Fijians more closely to one

another, and connecting Fiji to the rest of the world like never before. This year, we've allocated close to \$40 million towards the ICT sector, and that's funding some very exciting new developments.

150. We mentioned Walesi at the start of tonight's address; it is now available everywhere in Fiji through a terrestrial and satellite network, and it's available on smart phones. We don't need to say how much Walesi has revolutionised television in Fiji, because our citizens are already living that experience, many at this very moment. It's been funded at \$19 million to fund the rollout of the recently launched mobile application, fund the company's operating expenses and licensing costs for the different content on the platform. That allocation will also fund, and this is something that we are very proud of, the installation of free high-speed Wi-Fi hotspots for Fiji National University students throughout all the FNU campuses throughout Fiji, and increased speed in public Wi-Fi hotspots throughout Fiji. So Madam Speaker – My Suva Park, Sukuna Park, Sigatoka Bus Stand, Koroivulu Park in Nadi, Shirley Park in Lautoka, Ba Bus Stand area, Korovou Market in Korovou, Syria Park in Nausori, Labasa Civic Centre and Savusavu Market are the first places – to

give all of our young people – and every Fijian – a community space where they can get online, share and create content with their friends and families. At these Wi-Fi hotspots anyone can receive free high-speed Wi-Fi for 60 minutes every day on a daily basis and the rest of the time they'll have access to choose Wi-Fi speeds and indeed content. This of course will be geo-fenced in these listed locations.

151. I also mentioned that we'll be taking questions and feedback on this Budget over the new DigitalFIJI mobile application. That's the result of our partnership with the Singapore Cooperation Enterprise, an agency of the Singapore Government. We launched the DigitalFIJI application this month, which currently makes a full Government directory available on smart devices such as mobile phones and tablets, and allows Fijians to communicate feedback directly to their Government and track the status of their feedback while they await a response. We expect to rollout more features with the DigitalFIJI app down the track, for example, the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service, Fiji National Provident Fund, and the Births, Deaths and Marriages Registry will also offer direct services to our people through

this app in the months ahead. We are also streamlining the processes of a number of agencies, such as the BDM and the Companies Office. This digitisation effort is funded at \$14 million. We'll also be announcing new internship opportunities to work with the Singapore Cooperation Enterprise on the DigitalFIJI programme; giving young Fijians interested in ICT, studying ICT courses at university, direct access to the extremely competitive IT team here from Singapore.

152. And indeed at many of the launches, when the Honourable Prime Minister launched the app and the other launch last week for Walesi, we had students from three universities, and indeed they will all be required to manage these software programs once the Singaporeans leave, so we need to train them now and indeed the Singaporeans have agreed to train them.

153. Telecentres are being funded at \$500,000 to construct six new centres, making for a total of 35 telecentres providing data in remote and rural areas of Fiji. And as those services do expand, we want to make sure mobile phone companies are taking their cues from this Government, and are

delivering for their customers; the Fijian people. So we'll be charging fines, from the New Year, to any mobile phone companies whose downtime falls below acceptable levels. We have a lot of fall outs at the moment Madam Speaker and of course the mobile phone companies will be required to ensure that the downtime are actually reduced. It's a similar system that they have in Singapore.

154. \$300,000 has been allocated to connect more Fijian schools to the internet. Combined with the telecentre programmes, we're giving schools and universities easier access to updated materials, and more Fijian students can take in a nationwide learning experience.

155. This Budget is also making a big push towards financial inclusion, making electronic transactions easier and more affordable for Fijians and their businesses. For starters, through discussions with all the commercial banks, electronic transactions will no longer carry any fees as of 1 January 2019 at a Point of Sale ('POS') machine. Put simply Madam Speaker, if you go now to buy, pay for your groceries at a supermarket, when you swipe your card, they

charge you 50 cents. From 1 January 2019, there won't be any fees for you.

156. Because in a digital era no Fijian should have to think twice about the cost of swiping their credit or debit card. We can now carry less cash, we can make payments more quickly, and we can all benefit from more efficiency and accountability in our shops and businesses.

157. We know a POS machine can be a big cost for a small operator, so we'll also be paying 50 per cent of the cost to purchase POS machines for small businesses. There's no point in reducing transaction cost, we need more shops to have the POS machines, Madam Speaker. We want more Fijian businesses to offer electronic transactions to more Fijians, as that is a foundational part of creating a more financially inclusive society. Of course Madam Speaker, it also means we have a buoyant level of liquidity in the market.

CONTINUATION OF MODERNISATION

158. Madam Speaker, taking Fiji forward and shaping Fiji into the nation we are capable of becoming is a national effort, it

involves all of us, and we need the private sector to be 100 per cent on board in our campaign to modernise the nation and transform our cities, towns and communities into attractive, welcoming and safe spaces.

159. If you look around Suva, or any of our major population centres, there are too many old, unkempt and deteriorating buildings. They are unattractive, they aren't safe, and they really ought to be fixed up properly. So now, buildings that are at least five years old qualify for a new tax incentive package if their owners make the effort to have them redeveloped.

160. If more than \$1 million is spent on refurbishment to the exterior of the building, building owners get a 25 per cent investment allowance. To receive that allowance owners must utilise a green technology, such as solar panelling on the building, they must provide access to buildings for Fijians living with disabilities, such as a wheelchair ramp to the doorway, and they need to install lighting on the exterior of the building that helps light up our streets. That incentive is available for the next three years. Interest rates are low,

liquidity and confidence are high, and now is the time to make this sort of investment.

161. Madam Speaker, we've allocated \$500,000 to make Fijian buildings more inclusive and comfortable for people living with disabilities and their families. This initiative, implemented by Habitat for Humanity, is dedicated to retrofitting Fijian homes and community centres to accommodate Fijians living with disabilities. This funding will cover a variety of structural upgrades, including the construction of ramps, railings, disabled-friendly footpaths around the home, accessible washroom and toilet facilities, and the alteration of community centre entrances to be accessible to those with disabilities – a change that will truly open doors to the entire Fijian community. Applications for this programme can be made through the Department of Social Welfare.

162. The Reserve Bank of Fiji will also be generally relaxing exchange controls; making it much easier for Fijians and Fijian businesses to make overseas payments – and we expect overseas businesses to take notice that doing in business in Fiji is getting easier.

163. Madam Speaker, in Fiji, we are in the business of forging strategic partnerships with the right development partners. And when it comes to preparing our cities and towns for the future, we are rightfully working with the Singaporeans to assist with our urban planning. They'll be undertaking assessments in Fiji, looking at where roads should be built, where bus stands should be placed, how our urban centres can be properly planned and spaced out so that 10, 20 and 30 years from now, Fijians can look back and say, thank God the FijiFirst Government planned so well for our future.

164. Last year, we announced we'd be funding a National Gallery of Contemporary Art in Suva, in partnership with the British Council, to give our artists in Fiji a modern and contemporary creative space where they can show their work, create new pieces and engage among the artistic community. And we've set aside another \$3 million to begin refurbishments on the St Stephen's Building, and we expect the gallery to open its doors in 2020.

165. Given our recent ascension to major positions of leadership within the United Nations, and our longstanding commitment

to UN Peacekeeping Operations, we've also offered to cover the \$1.2 million in rental costs for a UN Common Premises in Fiji to house the 16 UN entities and approximately 400 staff based in our country. It's a sign of our commitment to our partners around the world and to the frameworks that bind us, given the tremendous good Fiji has created by leading the UN on some of the great issues facing the planet, such as oceans preservation and climate change.

MAJOR BUDGETARY ALLOCATIONS

166. Madam Speaker, those are some of the new announcements from the 2018-2019 National Budget. I won't go into detail over all the ministry budgets, but of course at the Committee stage we will be doing that, but that is not a reflection of the importance of those ministries or the hard work their staff put in every day. Those full allocations can be found online, and in the detailed booklets included with copies of the Fiji Sun next week. But here is a snap shot.

167. Under the Fiji Roads Authority, we'll be beginning construction on the four laning project from Nadi to Lautoka

next year, hitting on the ground towards the latter part of next year.

168. We're bringing better governance, through a higher level of accountability and transparency, to independent institutions, in particular the Water Authority of Fiji, the Fiji Roads Authority and the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji. Board Members of these bodies need to run a tight ship, every taxpayer's dollar that is spent needs to be justified and needs to make an impact. And if there is any abuse, those responsible will be taken to task. This Government has shown repeatedly we have zero – I repeat, zero – tolerance for corruption. Unfortunately, we have discovered that a number of local contractors have not been able to get rid of this old culture of abuse and rid themselves of corrupt practices. And we won't work with anyone who has a poor record of integrity, accountability and delivery.

169. We're coming down hard on contractors who don't pay their workers, or the companies they have subcontracted. If it's found out you're not paying your people you've hired to work, if it's found your actions are non-compliant, then you will be blacklisted by Government. Because Fijian taxpayers deserve better. You need to be fully compliant with FNPF

payments and fully compliant with the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service.

170. We'll also be applying a new policy towards Government ministries and departments as well. The Ministry of Economy will be carrying out regular checks on the budget spends of various ministries. And if we catch slow implementation against KPIs we will take funds away from slow-moving projects and allocate those funds to ministries who are making more efficient use of their budgets.

171. That's because we are a Government that is concerned, above all else, with delivering for the Fijian people. Nowhere was that clearer than when we opened the brand new, world-class Nadi International Terminal earlier this month by the Honourable Prime Minister. We are also nearing completion of the upgrade of the Labasa airport to cater for night landings, granting the ability for same-day return flights from Labasa to Suva. And in Rotuma, we are finally realising the 40-year dream to upgrade the airport to cater for the larger ATR 42s and 72s, increasing the number of passengers who can fly to Rotuma tenfold, thereby reducing fares. Opening up another maritime region of our country to massive new flows of economic exchange, tourism and

connecting them – like never before – to the rest of our Fijian family. Both of those projects are scheduled to open at the end of next month.

172. I encourage Fijians to take advantage of the new Friendly Fares on Fiji Airways and Fiji Link, which is making travel throughout the country, and throughout the world, much more affordable. And we should mention, we're also ending our partnership with Fiji Airways' route to Singapore, as that route is now fully commercially viable. This initiative like others demonstrates the wisdom of Government to 'hand hold' projects that in the long term reap enormous financial and commercial benefits for our country and for our fellow Fijians.

173. We've set aside an allocation of \$97 million towards the Ministry of Agriculture, and within that funding is an ambitious new effort to build up a Fijian goat industry. We're going to support the local goat farmers, assist with veterinary services, help prepare land, construct fencing and provide water sources, to step-up, in a very big way, the production of goat farms, to the point that they can provide kids to other farmers. As we saw Madam Speaker we have Crest and

Rooster Poultry. If Crest did not exist, we would not actually be self-reliant on poultry meat. It's very important to target one or two companies that are actually providing the type of leverage and the amount of goats that are into the market.

174. A few good companies can really revolutionise an entire industry, and our goal is to create a self-sustaining goat industry driven by strong local producers. And we're confident we can establish a brand for goat meat in Fiji that will give our customers more choice in the market, lower prices and support the livelihoods of goat farmers throughout the country.

175. We're also destocking dairy farms of cows suffering from tuberculosis and brucellosis, and then we'll pay for the restocking of those dairy farms, with new healthy cows bred from superior stock.

176. Government has allocated \$20.5 million to the Ministry of Fisheries. Within that allocation we'll be developing new local sources of fish in Fiji. It's a move towards strengthening our food security, and building up local livelihoods in the process by assisting commercial aquaculture farms to boost

their production, and move small players up to the commercial level.

177. If you cannot tell from the incredulous statements that we've been hearing from certain political parties, who have already started their campaigning, Madam Speaker, we will be holding elections sometime this year, and \$20 million is allocated to the Fijian Elections Office for the conduct of those elections.

178. And, Madam Speaker, we're very proud to announce that we've set aside a special allocation of \$500,000 for our commemoration next year of the 140-year anniversary of the first ship carrying indentured labourers, or girmitiyas, from British India to Fiji. I know that means a great deal to every Fijian family, especially those who can trace their lineage back to the original girmitiyas, who were brought to Fiji and made to work, under slave like and inhumane conditions. That will include nationwide ceremonies of remembrance, and it will cover the first round of funding of \$300,000 towards the construction of a museum either in Lautoka or Nadi dedicated to the history, legacy and immense contribution that girmitiyas, and their descendants have made to Fiji.

TAXES AND TARIFFS

179. Madam Speaker, as far as taxes and tariffs are concerned, we've already reduced the tax burden on Fijian families to the lowest point in our history. We've already raised the income tax threshold from \$8,840, just a few years ago, to \$30,000, freeing low-income families from paying income tax completely. Corporate taxes have also been cut to only 20 per cent. We've dropped VAT to 9 per cent, one of the few countries in the world to reduce rather than raise such a tax, and we've completely eliminated the dividend tax. Companies listed on the South Pacific Stock Exchange pay only 10 per cent. Regional or global offices pay only 17.5 per cent.

180. That's meant bigger pay checks and more disposable income for Fijian families. Because when it comes to meeting family expenses, we trust families to spend their own money, rather than have their Government spend it for them.

181. We're taxing smarter, not harder. That's how we've lowered the tax burden on Fijian families, while actually tripling our tax revenue since 2005, with revenues expected to exceed \$3 billion this year. We're taking that effort even further in this Budget by giving the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service more teeth to go after anyone seeking to cheat our tax system.
182. This year, we're introducing a few changes to our revenue policy, in line with the same vision to make our taxation system more equitable, and build upon our record in using revenue collection as a tool to guide development, open flows of investment, and support Fijian well-being.
183. We are introducing a \$1.25 million turnover threshold for businesses who are currently paying STT and ECAL. This threshold is aligned to the \$1.25 million for restaurants.
184. The threshold for resident interest withholding tax has risen from \$16,000 to \$30,000 aligned to the unprecedented rise of the income tax threshold last year.

185. Excise tax on alcohol and tobacco has risen by 15 per cent as we agreed with the tobacco industry, and it is the last year of that agreement.

186. We're expanding the 13-year tax holiday for ICT businesses to include customer contact centres, engineering and design, research and development, animation and content creation, distance learning, market research, travel services, finance and accounting services, human resource services, legal procedure, compliance and risk services and other administrative services that are ICT enabled. Just to give an example Madam Speaker, we have a company that set up shop in Lautoka that has Fijian accountants actually filling out tax returns for Australian tax payers and then submitting the tax returns from Fiji. We see enormous growth in this area. We have locally qualified accountants, they have the CPA qualifications and we believe this is the top end of the ICT sector which we can capitalised on.

187. Fiscal duty on used vehicles that are two years and younger has been reduced from 32 per cent to 15 per cent, or half the current specific rate, whichever is greater, to help more Fijian families afford newer, higher quality vehicles. These

rates depend on the size of the vehicle's engine. The concessional duty rates for taxis have also been extended to used vehicles that are younger than two years old. Meaning that fiscal duty is even lower, at 7.5 per cent. Helping get newer cars on our roads, cleaner cars, and safer cars.

188. And we've introduced a 55 per cent capital deduction for any purchase of an electric vehicle for the next five years. The minimum capital investment to qualify for the five per cent subsidy we offer for the set-up of electric vehicle charging station has been reduced from \$500,000 to \$100,000.

189. We're providing a 150 per cent tax deduction for any cash contributions above \$10,000 to any corporate sponsor towards the hosting of the ADB Annual Meeting next year.

190. We've also revised the medical incentive regulations to include hospitals under PPP arrangements to be eligible for medical tax incentives.

ECONOMIC OVERVIEW

191. Madam Speaker, as far as the economic overview is

concerned, this year, Fiji's projected revenue stands at \$4.23 billion, with \$4.65 billion in expenditure. That means we have brought our national deficit down by a full percentage point from last year to 3.5 per cent this year. In other words, last year it was 4.5 per cent, it's now going to be 3.5 per cent, as we had undertaken in last year's Budget announcement.

192. What's really impressive, is that we've accomplished that despite being battered by three successive cyclones and torrential flooding, despite quickly and generously helping Fijians get back on their feet after the storms, and despite pouring resources into adapting our nation to climate impacts. We kept the economy on course, meeting and exceeding our national goals through our prudent stewardship of the Fijian economy.

193. Through our economic growth, and by virtue of our inclusive approach to governance, we've brought together financial institutions, banks, insurance companies, telecommunications companies, we've found common ground and we have been the glue that have bonded these institutions in new partnerships for the betterment of our nation and our citizens' well-being.

194. Madam Speaker, despite the recent rounds of cyclones, as we stand here today, as Fiji sits on the cusp of an unprecedented ninth straight year of economic growth, we've achieved a growth rate of 3.2 per cent this year. Our unemployment stands at a 20-year low, and our foreign reserves, sitting at about \$2.2 billion, are marking all-time highs. Investor confidence is booming. All around the world, investors are looking at Fiji as a stable, business-friendly climate, ripe with opportunity.

195. These are the facts, Madam Speaker. These are the hard numbers, endorsed by international financial institutions, banks and credit agencies who regularly survey and assess our economy. Some may not like those facts – because they don't bode well for their own political future. But when ordinary Fijian families take a good long look at the facts, they'll see that our management of the economy is sound and effective and, again, it's clear that this Budget is a responsible Budget for Fiji.

196. We'll put our financial strength in more relatable terms, for those sitting at home who aren't economists, or maybe even some who are, based on the economic illiteracy that we've

seen from the other side. The truth of the matter is that, again, Fiji is running an operating budget surplus. Let me repeat, the truth of the matter is that Fiji is running an operating budget surplus, we take in more money than we spend on the day-to-day running of the country. The only dollar that our Government borrows is a dollar invested in the Fijian people. In other words, capital expenditure.

197. One of our most telling economic accomplishments is our debt-to-GDP ratio, which, has hit a rate of 45.6 per cent last year, the lowest level in 15 years. It means that Government is able to borrow the funding that it needs to invest into the betterment of our people, because lenders are fully confident of our ability to repay, and they see the strength in our economy.

198. Suggestions that Fiji is experiencing some kind of Chinese or Japanese takeover because of Government's investment in Fijian families only goes to show that the person speaking – or, more commonly these days, anonymously typing behind a keyboard – is either ignorant, a liar, or both. All too often, the answer is both, as we've seen from past governments' gross mishandling of the Fijian economy and

their attempts to manipulate the facts.

199. Back in 1996, the Government of the day took out a huge amount of debt – that debt was not spent on Fiji’s families or infrastructure, but that debt was squandered to bail out deposits from the National Bank of Fiji. And the person who was the Prime Minister then, is also the leader of SODELPA now. Debt that the economic novices at the helm had no plan to repay.

200. Today, when you consider the difference in dollar value, interest, and opportunity cost of that debt, the number balloons to \$500 million. Let that sink in: \$500 million of Fijian progress lost down the drain, at no benefit to the Fijian people. With that money now, anything we currently owe to China could be wiped clean. Just think of what that money could have done for Fiji if it had been managed by someone, say, capable of managing a political party – let alone an entire nation’s economy.

201. Now many of those same voices are trying to tell us lies about our strong economy; an economy they themselves never had the vision, the know-how, the political will or the ambition to deliver for Fiji. And that’s deeply concerning,

because, as His Excellency our President has said, the Fijian economy is something we must all protect. Our economy is the basis for the well-being of Fijian families, and no one should be telling lies about our economy for their own short-term political gain. Because our economy, the future of our nation, the future of our families and the future of our children, is never fair game. We've heard them say it's a fair game but it's not.

202. We must speak the truth – and the truth is the only reason that Fiji has the ability to invest so heavily in the Fijian people, and to invest in building an economy to last, is because the world trusts us to make good on our financial obligations. Governments of the past tanked our economy, they racked up bills they never intended to pay, irresponsibly leaving a tab of inter-generational debt to be settled at the expense of our nation. The very fact that Fiji today has recovered from this, and can invest in our people at all, especially after being burdened by the debts of those before us, speaks to the strength of our economic management. It speaks to the principled nature of our leadership.

203. Madam Speaker, the truth is that we're announcing this Budget from a position of considerable financial strength. It

would have been easy for us to stand here and play Father Christmas, handing out freebies, announcing gimmicks, giving away money without any care or consideration, announcing 5 or 10 dollars an hour because we are in a very strong financial position. We could have done that, Madam Speaker, but we haven't. We've never done that. Because we're not interested in gimmicks. We don't make policy based on what's easy, or on when an election may be. We're interested in the prosperity of the nation, and of Fijian families over the long-term. We're interested in making thoughtful investments in our people and in Fijian society, to bring opportunity to our people, to empower people and give them the confidence to pursue initiative and enterprise. We're interested in building the Fiji of tomorrow – today. Specifically, this evening through this National Budget.

204. Madam Speaker, this Budget that is grounded in reality, defined by its responsibility and, again, this Budget will be remembered for its vision and for the stable foundation it will establish for Fiji's future success, our children's success, and their children's success after them.

205. This is a true family Budget through and through, and just

like with smart and responsible family finances, we've spent money where it matters and we've made investments in areas that will see a positive return; in improving standards of living, expanding infrastructure, driving important societal change, raising the quality of life for Fijians, and ensuring a secure and prosperous future for the next generation.

CONCLUSION

206. Madam Speaker, I'd like to end by thanking all of those Fijians who contributed to the Budget during our consultations. Our efforts to respond to the impacts of TC Josie and TC Keni meant that many of those consultations had to be cancelled, but we still received many submissions over mail and online, and we thank those Fijians as well. We have received a number of requests to hold nationwide Budget roadshows over the next few weeks to break down the Budget and explain its impact on ordinary people and their families, and we hope to see as many people as possible at those sessions, because it's important everyone get the full picture of how this Budget will impact your lives, your families and your communities.

207. Madam Speaker, we've designed this Budget for Fijian families, to support them, protect them, empower them, and give them the stability they deserve. And from our youngest Fijians to those entering school for the first time, to those going on to higher and tertiary education, to their parents and to those in their later stages of their life, this Budget delivers for every member of every family in the country.

208. This is a Budget for breadwinners; for the business women and men who put in the work to keep roofs over their families' heads and put food on the table. This is a Budget for young and ambitious people, putting new technologies at their disposal, along with new educational opportunities and unprecedented new, higher-paying jobs; younger Fijians who want high-paying jobs to – one day – support families of their own. Because this is a Budget that recognises we are a young nation, it recognises the potential of the next generation of Fijians, and it sets them up for incredible success.

209. This is a Budget for parents who want to see their children do well, and realise opportunities they only dreamed for themselves. This is a Budget for those who care for their

own parents, and for their grandparents at home. This is a Budget for those who need assistance, not a hand out, but a hand-up. And most importantly, Madam Speaker, this is a Budget for our children, and for their future. Because this Budget, Madam Speaker, can give us all the certainty that we are building a better Fiji, and a better world, for our children, for our grandchildren, and one day – for their own families many years on from now. Because every Fijian family matters, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, this Budget delivers prosperity for every Fijian family today and for all those families yet to come.

210. And for that reason, Madam Speaker, I recommend this Budget. Thank you, Madam Speaker.