

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Monday, October 09, 2006*

The House met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**PAPERS LAID**

1. Annual audited financial statements of the Vehicle Maintenance Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago Limited (VMCOTT) for the financial year ended September 30, 2005. [*The Minister of Trade and Industry and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Kenneth Valley)*]
To be referred to the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee.
2. Report of the Law Revision Commission in the exercise of its functions and powers for the year 2004. [*Hon. K. Valley*].
3. Report of the Law Revision Commission in the exercise of its functions and powers for the year 2005. [*Hon. K. Valley*].

APPROPRIATION BILL**(BUDGET)**

[Second Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 09, 2006]:

That the Bill be now read a second time.

Question again proposed.

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar (*Siparia*): Mr. Speaker, I join this debate on the 2007 budget statement and, of course, the Appropriation Bill that would follow. This budget, in my view, drives us further down the road of disaster. In the driver's seat is the monarch of the kingdom of the PNM who has made this Government the most authoritarian, callous and inept government of all. [*Desk thumping*] He continues to unleash brutish assault on our institutions; on innocent citizens protesting for their rightful due; on our youth; on our poor, including the working poor; on our dispossessed; on our senior citizens, our women and our children. Now when our population is screaming out in pain over the high levels of crime, poverty, high food prices, crises in the health and education sectors, problems with infrastructure, traffic congestion and the loss of business competitiveness, this budget does nothing to directly ease the pain of the citizens.

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The Government has become numb to the needs of the people; it has become deaf to the cries of citizens; it has become blind to the crises faced in our country; it has become mute to the abuse of the positions it holds in trust for the people. It is clear to us that the Government has now lost its way.

From the outset, the hon. Prime Minister predicated his budget on what I consider to be a false premise. He announced that the budget would build on the foundations laid by previous budgets, but the fact that he repeated so many of the unfulfilled promises he had made in previous budgets, tells us that there is, indeed, no foundation to build upon. May I remind the hon. Prime Minister that a house built on sand will not stand.

The budget speech amounted to nothing more than a waffling attempt at justifying ineptitude, plus warmed over servings on the usual platter of promises, but as a framework for the way forward, it failed miserably to address many of the issues facing the nation. Even when this budget speech pretended to touch on critical issues, the hon. Prime Minister demonstrated a spectacular misunderstanding of the root causes of these matters and consequently proposed a number of thoroughly inappropriate remedies. That he has decided to continue stubbornly along the misguided policy direction based on a clear misunderstanding of micro and macro economic concepts and issues, convinces me that this Government is lost blindly, feeling its way along and really ignoring the nation's problems, but it is determined to do all in its power to convince itself and others that the nation is not in crisis.

The population today in 2006 is wiser than Government thinks. The people have seen the failures of this Government's past budgets. They have suffered impoverishment and trauma at the hands of this Government. They have noted that the critical issues facing them are not the same as the critical issues and areas of concerns for this Government. Before I list some of the critical issues facing us, it is instructive to recall that the Prime Minister and his colleagues have named this budget "Vision 2020, Moving Onward". They have a passion for catchy sounding phrases, which bear no resemblance to the policy's programme. Last year's budget was entitled, "Addressing Basic Needs"; the ones before, "Ensuring Our Future Survival" and "Charting the Course to 2020, Empowering People". To date they have not addressed the basic needs of the citizenry; they have not empowered our people. They have not ensured anybody's survival except their own and it is obvious that we will not be moving onwards after this very vacuous budget.

Having already wasted over \$140 billion over the past five years, failing to accomplish what they have promised, the Prime Minister comes now to this Parliament with another smoke and mirrors trick, attempting to hoodwink the population with an erratic quick fix here, a plaster there and ludicrous prognoses for relatively simple ailments; once again, attending to the symptoms and not to the source of the malady. After receiving more money than any previous government, after having spent substantially more than any other government, this Government has saddled our country with serious problems.

This Government has triggered and fuelled debilitating inflation by reckless spending on monuments construed as indicators of development. Crime has reached unprecedented levels, as has police incapacity for detecting and solving crime. Poverty has increased. Public health care and education is collapsing. Infrastructural development is simply not on the cards, except for this Government that thinks that by piling more and more and more "road on top of road", making it higher instead of stronger, that it has achieved. Flooding worsens with every next raindrop. Agriculture, now contributing half of 1 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP), has been effectively abandoned. Our environment is being seriously threatened. Our justice system is severely overburdened. Our institutions are daily being compromised and violated. There is reduced confidence in government on the part of the business sector, which is also reeling under the crime wave. The quality of life for our citizens has deteriorated.

After five years of this Government in office, our nation is witnessing the following: Heavily skewed economic growth without development; increased government expenditure on social programmes, but the persistent poverty of a large part of our population; massive construction projects, but labour and material shortages; huge expenditure on technical advice and support to fight crime, but more criminal activity; unprecedented government expenditure, but a lower standard of living; unprecedented government revenue, but poor infrastructure; reduced taxation levels with no commensurate real incomes, these too have gone lower. We have seen a net migration of our human capital.

What has been the response by Government to these problems facing our nation? In classic fashion, they have chosen to ignore these crises. They are like ostriches sticking their heads in the sand and thinking that the world cannot see them, because they cannot see the world. The sheer puerility of such an approach manifests as a fundamental weakness within the structural framework of Government policy and more sharply reflects in the economy. Let us take a look at the macroeconomic indicators quoted by Government.

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The Minister of Finance noisily trumpeted the traditional economic indicators which implied that the country was enjoying steady and consistent growth. It is our view that growth without development is not sustainable and there is no evidence of the latter on any front or on any sphere under this Government. It is our view that what is being publicized by the Government as positive economic growth indicators are really not of this Government's doing, but the result of high international energy prices and buoyancy in energy markets. They are being manipulated to give the public a sense that they are a direct consequence of conscientious and carefully contemplated Government policy when, in fact, they are not. It is our view that this administration has made no attempt to ensure that the tangible benefits of mega revenues being enjoyed by this Government, filtered down to the average citizens in the form of enhancement of a better quality of life. *[Desk thumping]*

The economy is not just the energy sector, contrary to the very obvious bias of the Minister of Finance who should also be made aware that growth in one sector does not equate with the agreed definition of economic growth. We believe that this Government's focus is hopelessly misguided. This will continue to lead to a misdiagnosis of the ills of the economy and, consequently, inappropriate policy formulation and implementation to regularize the troughs and potholes we encounter along the road.

Let us look at the gross domestic product. In strict economic terms, GDP measures the value of goods and services produced in a country. Dividing GDP by the population provides us with a reading of GDP per capita, which the Prime Minister advised is now at US \$13,978. It should be noted that if the price of oil goes to \$200 per barrel, automatically the gross domestic product would also increase, as would GDP per capita. This would not mean that there has been any growth of any sort, except that there will be more revenue coming into the country. Moreover, even if there is a 100 per cent increase in GDP, it does not translate into any similar or any improvement in the standard of living of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Imbert: Errant nonsense!

Dr. Rowley: Rubbish!

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Furthermore, GDP per capita does not describe the distribution of GDP. It does not show who benefits and it has nothing to do with sustainability, so it does not reveal that government Ministers earn upwards of \$50,000 per month, whilst more than the 60,000 pensioners are getting \$1,150 and

with the new figure, \$1,250 per month. It does not equate with data provided by the Central Statistical Office (CSO) which indicates that per capita household income is, in fact, as low at \$1,176.02. So that the average household income is nowhere near the GDP per capita figure quoted by the Prime Minister.

10.15 a.m.

Analysis of GDP shows the extremely disturbing trend of a polarization of growth with the petroleum industry accounting for almost half of GDP standing at 42.9 per cent in 2005 as opposed to when the UNC was in office, where it was 20.3 in 2001. As a consequence, the contribution of every other sector to GDP has been simultaneously reduced by this Government. This is extremely dangerous, since it amounts to putting most of our eggs in one basket and, therefore, leaves us most vulnerable to shocks in output as well as in prices. GDP growth then is in itself, in my view, an unreliable indicator in our circumstances and certainly should not be proffered as the evidence of overall development.

The emphasis of the UNC during its time in office continues to be the emphasis in Opposition; the preservation of a stable macroeconomy, low inflation, steady and balanced growth, a diversified economic base, an increase in the skill level of the population, a reduction in the level of poverty and the steady improvement of the well-being and welfare of all our citizens. UNC then is concerned about growth and development because without development, growth is not sustainable and it is the real development indicators that truly determine the sustainability of the economic growth, not statistics purely to bring fleeting comfort to listeners. So we can ask for example, given the GDP about which the Minister boasts: Can our people afford housing? Can they afford to buy food? Do our people have secure jobs? Can they access reliable public health care? Can they trust the justice system? Are they safe? The answer to every one of these questions is no, yet these are some of the things that people care about to reflect development. Growth must sustain development, but under the PNM, that is not the case. Other than direct government policy, there is a less direct result of Government's operations over the last five years which had a serious, deleterious effect on our population.

Let us look now, Mr. Speaker, at the other indicator—the inflation rate. In a strict economic sense, inflation is the measure of the overall increase in prices over a defined period. Good government policy seeks to maintain stable prices, or at worst, contain inflation to low, single-digit rates. Local and international experts have been warning this Government since 2004 about its reckless spending and the deleterious effect it would have had and continues to have on the

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rate of inflation. Government has consistently ignored such advice with Minister Enill going on the defence at every opportunity to throw out a succession of feeble attempts aimed at reassuring the population that Government has a handle on the situation when nothing is further from the truth.

This is what he has been saying as reported in the *Daily Express* of August 04, 2006:

“Govt: Inflation not a problem

‘Basically, what people have said is that we are doing the correct things. Maybe they believe that we should be scaling it differently. However, we are looking at a number of things, one is how to condition the population so that they understand the issue and that is why it is going at the present rate.’”

Mr. Speaker, in my view, this has to be decoded as PNM’s doublespeak and spin. There are several lines we have to look at closely for instance: “...what people have said is that we are doing the correct things.” Outside the PNM General Council meetings, precisely who, amongst the informed are saying that? We also hear: “...we are looking at a number of things, one is how to condition the population...” Elegant language to brainwash people into believing all is good and well and going according to plans.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to compare that outrageous statement at another level. The Central Bank, the country’s top economist, the IMF, the trade unions, every agency that studies such issues has been warning that Government needs to halt its reckless spending because it is the root cause of high inflation, yet the goodly Minister has the temerity to tell the people that the people are saying that he and his cronies are doing the right thing.

Mr. Speaker, it is this kind of approach that irritates people because they are experiencing the difficulties on a daily basis at the point of sale. They actually go to the supermarket in person; they do not send hired help with a credit card to shop for the boss. So they know when prices of items take a sudden leap upwards. Minister Enill, while masked in absolutely pious demeanour in order to make his utterances believable, has perhaps looked in the mirror far too often during the process so he has now begun to believe himself too, even as inflation rates continue to rise under this Government’s mismanagement of the economy.

Clearly, the economics of this budget like the one before, is fundamentally flawed and it gets worse. Government is continuing on expansionary in fiscal policy at a time when this economy is operating at more than full capacity. The extra demand of Government in its \$6 billion plus capital programme is now accompanied by an expansion of the private sector demand as evidenced by the growth of bank credit over the last year. The ensuing inflation has resulted in the build-up of pressure which, like hypertension, is a silent killer, it destroys other critical organs in the body economic. In particular the interest rate has already surrendered, the exchange rate is also under pressure, the competitiveness of the manufacturing sector is threatened and we now face a contraction, a non-oil debt of the non-oil economy as evidenced by the alarming and widening non-oil fiscal deficit. The macroeconomy which took 15 years to stabilize after the chaotic years of PNM's wastage and mismanagement based on initially high oil prices is today threatened after only two years of this Government's wild feteing with the oil and gas revenues.

The Prime Minister boasts of the size of the external account, but I want to remind him that under the UNC, the exchange rate was at the most stable condition than it had ever been. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Manning: "Doh make joke."

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar: Few individuals were concerned about exchange rate stability then, and there was no queuing for foreign exchange as exists at commercial banks today. There was consumer confidence, business confidence in the economic system, the government, and the exchange rate. This certainly is different from what exists under this Government today. Macroeconomic stability is being threatened as excess demand placed on all sectors of the economy will have the predictable breeze of intensifying the inflation rate. The inconsistency of the budget is that the Prime Minister targeted an inflation rate of 7 per cent for fiscal 2007. This is a number that is below what is the current rate of 9 per cent per year.

Mr. Speaker, however, whilst targeting a lower rate, the fiscal programme outlined in this budget does not reflect this outcome and nothing pointing instead towards even higher inflation rates in 2007. This underscores the fundamental lack of understanding of basic economics which permeates this Government. Worse, is that in order to reach and stabilize inflation at 7 per cent, and given the Government's fiscal stance, the Central Bank would be required to battle both the existing inflation of 9 per cent and at the same time, the additional Government-induced rate; that is to say, the 7 per cent it is aiming at.

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The visual effect then is one of a Central Bank that is trying to empty a barrel with a very tiny cup, whilst Government is filling the barrel with a large hose. I want to extend my sympathies to the already overburdened Governor of the Central Bank who will now have to intensify his intervention in the economic system. We can predict a further pressuring of the Central Bank's repo rate which has already been raised a record number of times in the last year as it tries to temper runaway inflation.

A decidedly aggressive monetary policy intervention is now required to counteract the inflationary fiscal programme of Government. This will prompt higher interest rates, an issue the Prime Minister studiously and deliberately ignored in his presentation.

Today, the prime lending rate is already at 12 per cent and I ask the hon. Minister, where will it go now? What figure does this Government expect prime to reach, given the policies outlined in the presentation last Wednesday? Is the Minister concerned about the effect that substantially high interest rates will have on the business community? It is very likely during the course of fiscal 2007 that the prime lending rate can reach as high as 15 per cent if Government is to achieve any success in controlling inflation. However, it should be noted that despite the concerted efforts of the Central Bank in fiscal 2005 and 2006, inflationary expectations have expanded into the wage sector. Unions are going to be looking not for the 7 per cent projected by Government which is absolutely unrealistic, but at double digit inflation upwards of 10 per cent. Simply put, Government's fiscal impetus is greater than the monetary response which is why we have an inflationary spiral.

So there is a firefight between the Central Bank's monetary policy and Government's fiscal policy. I want to warn the national population of this fiscal irresponsibility on the part of the Government. It has created a monster called runaway inflation and every attempt to control it by them from here on will result in the creation of even more monsters. There is only one solution; we must depend on the fiscal. Government needs to utilize wise fiscal policy to manage the inflation rate but there is no consideration for that in this budget.

Government's fiscal stance is also causing a hemorrhaging of the country's foreign reserves. The Central Bank Governor remarked on this in his last public survey. Why this has happened? Due to inflation, people have begun to lose confidence in the Trinidad and Tobago dollar and have started to flee to other currencies. They will use the Trinidad and Tobago dollar to increase purchases of

foreign currency substituting the weaker for the stronger currency. They will invest more in foreign denominated mutual funds, they may increase purchases of foreign exchange sold by Central Bank in their bid to absorb liquidity and then hoard the foreign currency. This demonstrates a fundamental economic flaw where you have a booming economy but at the same time, capital flight. For the first time in 25 years, this Government has brought the inflation rate to where it is now at an all-time high yet this budget proposes no measures to deal with inflation.

Mr. Speaker, the other indicator is inflation. As is true of inflation, the measurement of our unemployment figures is an equally skewed process. According to the Prime Minister, the URP has a base of 50,000 persons whom the Central Statistical Office (CSO) will consider as employed. The same principle holds for another 7,000 involved in CEPEP, 360 in MILAT, 240 in MYPART; 500 in the community service programme with thousands more in HYPE, YTEPP, MuST and a myriad set of other make-work programmes.

Mr. Speaker, when you think of it, perhaps there is another group that is exclusively working coming up with names for all these various programmes they keep inventing from day to day. Central Bank's figures suggest that 11,600 new jobs were created in the construction sector, but this, too, is temporary employment and is not sustainable.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to remind the hon. Minister, who, on becoming Prime Minister seems to have experienced some serious variations of earlier pastures with attendant memory loss and priority modification on a position that the hon. gentleman articulated on this same issue not so long ago and I quote:

“Our businessmen listen to the fairy tales of the Minister, but they know they cannot get foreign exchange at the banks. They have a true picture of how many job positions they have filled. They know the difference between...(URP) and real job creation.”

This came from Mr. Manning's budget response when he sat in this seat in the year 2000. [*Desk thumping*] Incidentally, I want to thank the hon. Prime Minister for publicly admitting and acknowledging that he intends to take back the seat and give us the one on that side when he said: “I was in this seat for the time being.” He was totally correct. In 2000 that is what the hon. Prime Minister was saying, those were his words.

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In this context to try to convince the national population that unemployment has gone down because you have now included URP and similar make-work type programmes, is, in my view, yet another example of PNM doublespeak and is frankly quite dishonest. Employed persons earn wages, those who receive Government transfers are in receipt of welfare payments, these are in the nature of Government's transfers and since welfare payments are not wages, those who receive them cannot be counted as being employed.

10.30 a.m.

So I am saying that is a kind of statistical "conmanship", to include them in your employment numbers to show that your employment level has gone up. It is as simple as that. In this regard, too, it is my view the Government has lost its way. By deliberately confusing the issue, Government is seeking to imply that employment levels are at an all-time high. However, these programmes constitute a substantial drain on the State's coffers and without commensurate effect. Were oil prices to dip, Government would have extreme difficulty in securing funding for the continuity of these projects. This has happened before. I remind them, those who do not pay attention to history are likely to repeat its well-documented mistakes. What we have here is not full employment; it is disguised unemployment; it is statistical "conmanship".

The UNC remains proud of its landmark achievements in the area of employment and labour history. Our approach to the employment and labour challenge is one driven by the value of compassion, social justice and equality. The UNC believes that there can be no justice unless a Government has compassion. In this regard, the oppression meted out to those suffering in our nation is directly connected to an approach by the PNM Government that lacks compassion for the poor; that lacks compassion for the suffering; that lacks compassion for the working people and those in conditions of insecurity. This is the only nation on earth blessed with enormous wealth, yet cursed by immeasurable suffering.

The previous UNC government worked to ensure that the suffering of the people would be addressed. You would recall we introduced for the first time in our history, a minimum wage which this Government refuses to increase in spite of the inflation pressures. [*Desk thumping*] The UNC government introduced path-breaking maternity wage legislation to protect pregnant workers. [*Desk thumping*] In so doing, we conformed to the International Labour Organization's standards. It is instructive to note that this PNM Government, since 2001, has failed to give

effect to any new labour standard geared to protecting the working people of this country. It is not surprising, therefore, that they have spared no effort in violating the principles of collective bargaining in the public sector and undermining the right to freedom of association of workers in the health sector.

The Manning administration has been a regular recipient of sharp condemnation by the ILO because of its failure to implement equal opportunity legislation institutions to protect workers. They believe that they can continue with their brutal oppression of workers, but with the advent of globalization of justice, today the international community keeps a hawk's eye on delinquent governments, such as the PNM.

In 2005, the ILO observed, and I quote:

“Recalling that it had welcomed the adoption of the Equal Opportunity Act 2000—”

which you recall was passed by the UNC in this Parliament—

“...which for the first time provided legislative protection from discrimination in employment and occupation, the committee hopes that Government would make every effort to draw up new anti-discrimination legislation applying the convention. Please indicate any measures taken in this regard.”

To this day the PNM has ignored this recommendation by the international community. The PNM Government has caused this country unending shame and disgrace for its failure to implement equal opportunity legislation as reflected by observations of the ILO in 2005 and again in 2006.

Government has failed to take steps to promote collective bargaining and freedom of association. You may recall that it was the UNC in government and in opposition that had to drag the PNM, kicking and screaming, to pass the Occupational Safety and Health Act. To this day, the key institutions of this fundamental body of protective law has not been established. The deaths of over 25 workers in industrial accidents over the two years have done little to jolt the PNM into action.

The UNC government, from 1995 to 2001, created over 85,000 well-paid permanent jobs. By our policies we inspired job-creation in the private sector. We moved the unemployment figure from almost 19 per cent in 1995 to 10 per cent by 2001. [*Desk thumping*] We did not use URP, CEPEP and MuST to further disempower and humiliate the jobless into a dependency syndrome.

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It is on this matter that the Opposition wishes to express the highest level of condemnation of this administration. The PNM has introduced a backward and archaic labour strategy of shoving the low scale into a dependency syndrome and therefore presiding over the inter-generational transfer of poverty and dependence. They should take a bow. Very few governments have destroyed their own supporters in the way that the PNM has done. While we look on in awe at the PNM's mismanagement and incompetence, we cannot stand by helplessly.

The UNC proposes a wider and more developmental labour strategy to rescue the working people. It is the next UNC government that will have to clean up what this incompetent and corrupt Government is about. The wider national community knows, and even the PNM knows, that when the UNC says we will fully give effect to the entire Occupational Safety and Health legislation, they know we will deliver. [*Desk thumping*] To protect all workers, we propose a basic floor of rights bill that will extend the same fundamental protection to all workers in every workplace and employment site. This is a basic floor of rights for workers, because this country has no respect or regard for the workers of this country.

A reformed labour absorption and training programme will deliver real and marketable skills to the unskilled and low-paid workers. Unlike the PNM that measures success by how many workers are enlisted in the URP and CEPEP, we will measure them by how many graduate to well-paid permanent jobs. It is a scandal that after five years and \$3 billion in expenditure on labour programmes we still have a labour shortage in key industrial sectors. In my view, this is incompetence.

A training initiative will connect work programmes to exposure to the skills in demand. We will develop training in collaboration with the private sector to match the employment needs with the labour supply. We will match surplus labour to the development needs of our country. After a drizzle, we flood, yet hordes of people are holed up with tarpaulin along the highways.

As a party rooted in the values of the trade union movement, the UNC believes that the time has come to replace the archaic Industrial Relations Act of 1972 with a body of modern labour law which would reflect the changing employment relationships in the public and private sector. We also believe that deeper legislative reform is needed to make the Recognition and Certification Board more efficient and responsive to the social partners. As it is at present, the Recognition and Certification Board just does not recognize workers.

A fundamental difference between a UNC and a PNM approach is that the PNM believes in public sector absorption of labour skills akin to the very discredited approaches of totalitarian societies. We, in the UNC, believe in freeing the private sector to create jobs while the State provides the policy environment to protect all workers and ensure decent work. We believe in the liberation of workers. They believe in the dependency syndrome. This is why they have taken even our bright and successful young minds and workers and symbolically encamped them into their make-work and temporary jobs.

In the five years they have failed to develop a single new industrial site. We spoke about a technology park, a motor city, and agri-industrial villages. They are content to wait for oil-and gas-based development which is essentially driven by external investment decisions. Even when the private sector has created jobs for the citizens, the hon. Minister of Finance has deemed that these people should go back to the breadline.

In the same way that they destroyed Caroni (1975) Limited workers and their families without first ensuring that these workers had other options and opportunities to earn a livelihood, they have now committed to the breadline our 20,000 small farmers; they have now committed to the breadline the workers in the casino industry without making sure that these persons had alternative jobs where they could earn a livelihood. They continue to keep CEPEP and URP workers working under terms and conditions that are in breach of their rights as workers, so that they have none of the benefits of ordinary workers in this land.

A UNC employment strategy will create real employers and risk-takers, not CEPEP contractors. These risk-takers will create the jobs of the future and the skills demanded of the new industrial and technological age. The Government has ignored the needs of the people and designed a series of self-generated medicine show remedies, exclusive of input from those whom such policies directly affect. Government has ignored the basic human and social needs of the nation.

In the budget for fiscal 2007 the Minister of Finance and his colleagues all appear to have missed the fact that after five years of government the citizens of this country are still without the very basic needs of humanity. The very basic need of any human being is the need for security of life, limb and property. The paramount concern of the population is not the numbers in the economic system—the performance—it is the very basic concerns of safety of life, limb and

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property. If you are murdered, you cannot enjoy any of the goodies that the Government or anyone has to offer. So the first duty of a government is to ensure the safety of its citizens. Yet this Government has lost its way in this regard as well.

It was Justice Brandeis, way back in 1928 who said words that I believe are painfully true today, and I quote from the case of *Olmstead vs the United States*:

“Our Government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or for ill it teaches the whole people by its example. Crime is contagious. If the government becomes a lawbreaker, it breeds contempt for law; it invites every man to become a law unto himself; it invites anarchy.”

Spoken in 1928, and so true today. There is no need for me to repeat the numerous instances where Government has been found guilty in the courts for breaking the law. They have been well reported in the media and are well known to the national community. May I quote from the hon. Minister in 2000 when he responded again, as Opposition Leader to the then budget in 2000? He said, and I quote:

“The absence of a cohesive long-term plan has resulted in the current runaway crime wave that has remained unchallenged.”

They never had a plan. They have no plan now and will have no plan in the future. He was then in opposition, and you would have thought that when he got into government he would have tackled this most bothersome issue. He did. In the first budget as Prime Minister he proclaimed—and this is his second incarnation; this is in the 2002 budget statement:

“Mr. Speaker, the increase in crime in Trinidad and Tobago, and indeed around the world, is a matter of serious concern, not only for the Government, but for the society at large.”

He went on in that budget speech highlighting the many initiatives that the Government was going to implement to rid the country of crime. I quote again:

“It is for this reason that throughout this budget we have included policy measures and initiatives that seek to deal with those underlying problems and, in that way, tackle crime at its very root.”

All talk and no action. If speeches could stop crime, we would be the safest country in the world. Instead, the number of murders went up from 120 in 2000 under the UNC, and under the PNM in 2002, it went up to 169. One year later in

2003, the Prime Minister was back in this Parliament and, again, he attempted to talk the criminals into submission. I quote from the 2003 budget statement:

“Safe streets, homes, places of recreation, and work places, provide us with the environment to nurture our creative potential.

Mr. Speaker, the level of security enjoyed by citizens is the most critical problem facing Trinidad and Tobago today. The population is being terrorized as the criminals have declared virtual war on the society.

The Government must and shall respond. Accordingly, we now declare war on the criminal elements and shall do whatever is necessary, within the law, to return this nation to that state where our people can conduct their lives in the full safety and security to which they are entitled.”

That was the hon. Prime Minister four years ago. What has happened since? Once more he talked the talk but he just could not walk the walk. [*Desk thumping*] The criminals know that and so the numbers of murders in that year increased by 36 per cent, to 229. The question you need to ask yourself is why. The national population already has its own conclusions as to why, and I am sure you do as well, Mr. Speaker.

In 2005, the Prime Minister, in apparent recognition of his failure to deal with the problem of crime, indicated that the budget for fiscal 2005/2006 was a reaffirmation, amongst other things. His Government’s position was:

“to implement a policy framework that:

- (ii) creates an integrated security infrastructure which ensures that issues of crime, public safety and security are addressed on a substantial basis.

...the escalation of violent crime and anti-social behaviour constitute the most fundamental threat to the economic and social development of our country and the well-being of our people.”

So he stated then in 2005. Once more the same commitments to deal with crime were repeated ad nauseam. The result? The number of murders jumped again, this time by a whopping 49 per cent, to 387, in excess of one a day and way higher than it has ever been before. The situation is also true of other violent crimes. In 2001 there was 499 reported woundings and shootings. By 2005, the figure had skyrocketed by 61 per cent to a massive 801.

Immediate trends indicate that this figure will be maintained in 2006.

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10.45 a.m.

It certainly appears that every time the Prime Minister proposes a new commitment to deal with crime the murder rate goes up. Perhaps, it is for this reason that the budget speech of the Minister of Finance for this year, on last Wednesday, was devoid of any serious policy or programme to realistically address the problem of crime in Trinidad and Tobago.

Last year in this very House the Minister of National Security proclaimed that if he thought that crime would be reduced if he resigned, he would do so. Today, I want to tell him enough is enough. His being Minister has not resulted in any crime reduction. And yes, we say he must resign on the grounds of incompetence. [*Desk thumping*] Is it really incompetence, Mr. Speaker? There are some revelations that have come over the past year that have thrown light on certain things. The old people used to say, what was in the dark comes into the light.

A certain religious leader when pushed in a corner by his former friends, including persons sitting in the highest offices on the Government Benches, spilled the beans about the close working relationship between the hierarchy of the PNM and his organization. You recall the public statement by Mr. Manning that he was going to give land to the Jamaat al Muslimeen, obviously, to fulfil the promise made to the religious leader. We recall the public hue and cry which prevented that concession. Having realized that the controversy was not going to sit idly by whilst he rewarded the coup leaders, the Government then began to look in other directions for other options for new bad boys to do its dirty work. Do you ever wonder why they insist that they will meet with community leaders rather than community elders?

Honest citizens protesting for better roads are greeted with police battalion but known criminals are wined and dined on the same day at the country's finest hotel. This nation deserves to know why. Let me address the Prime Minister's *cri de coeur*. He says, "Who is to blame for the current crime menace?" Simplistically, he concludes that we all must shoulder some of the blame. Indeed, the Minister is the new Rip Van Winkle. He now finds the crime landscape beyond comprehension and control, forgetful of course, that five years ago he gave a bold start to the spiral by recognizing gang personnel as community leaders whose muscle he used sedulously to win the last election. After letting the dogs of war loose on an unsuspecting citizenry, he now enquires most innocently and piously, who is to blame? Who is to blame?

Let me clear it for the hon. Prime Minister. He is to blame. [*Desk thumping*] His Government is to blame. The law-abiding section of this country cannot do

anymore than they are doing as long as his Government remains in the camp of the criminals. There does not appear to be an honest desire on the part of Government to rid the country of the scourge of crime. The result is that this country will continue to pay with its blood for this folly. The blood of our children will continue to stain the earth because of the folly of the PNM. There is no surprise then that crime has reached the epic proportions that it has. This Government is not powerless. It simply lacks the will. Mr. Speaker, I am certain that you will recall a statement in 2002, in this very House when the Minister of National Security said that they know who the criminals are and when the hon. Prime Minister said that he knew who Mr. Big was. They confessed to knowing who the criminals are. They keep the names close to their chests as our country and people remain maimed and traumatized for life.

There was method to this madness. The Government began by blaming the Opposition UNC for the crime wave. You recall the big hullabaloo about the importance of the Police Reform Bills. We supported those Bills and passed them in this House and Senate. But would you believe that up to today, these Bills have not been put into effect by this Government? The question is: Why? It is a matter of priorities. The Government has never been serious about dealing with the issue of crime. For them it has been a political prop; a distraction from its profligate spending on themselves and friends. This year for the umpteenth time, the Prime Minister has come again promising the same promises; venting the same anger in the same tone and in many of the same words. This year, however, the Minister appears to have conceded as there is a literal absence of any attempt to deal with crime in this budget. There is only damage control as he chooses to blame everybody.

He thinks that the nationals of Trinidad and Tobago are fools. One morning he wakes up and he decides. Aha! New idea; million-dollar eye in the sky. That would be the solution to the robberies on the Brian Lara Promenade. Crime continued unabated. Recently, the Chairman of the National Security Council, our very own Minister of Finance decided again. Aha. Let us front the idea of Israeli armed choppers. Of course, that was shot down unceremoniously. Then, he thought about—Aha! Blimp. The next best thing around the same price, but we will only tell the population after we set up the deal. The result is that we were saddled with a multi-million dollar piece of equipment that was neither suited for the purpose for which it was bought nor did it ever work. Having not learnt his lesson, he thought again. Aha! He went and bought another multi-million-dollar blimp.

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Suddenly, he hits on another gem. Aha! Bring in Scotland Yard, world famous crime stoppers. Weeks afterwards we find out that they were not Scotland Yardies at all. An average of \$1 million in salaries and accommodation for each of these messiahs, pay them better than they ever paid local enforcement officers; provide them with all the equipment that should have been given to our police in the first place. What has happened? Nothing! Crime continues unabated.

It may sound funny, but whilst this Government plays with our money, people are losing their lives on a daily basis. One of our policemen was shot and killed in the line of duty. The hon. Prime Minister said collateral damage. Another was shot and killed in Central because the police station had no bullet proof vests for him to wear and no firearm to defend himself and others. Ordinary citizens are being massacred at the rate of more than one a day. Innocent mothers, sisters, brothers and fathers are mercilessly wiped out. What would it take to make this Government sit up and get serious about dealing with crime? I wonder what is required for them to actually do something. It is not because of a shortage of money.

The Minister of National Security has spent over \$10.5 billion in the last five years under this Government to achieve this state of crisis, with respect to crime, but there is nothing to show for that money. Why? Every day a life is snuffed out and they sit by idly. Crime continues to be the number one concern for Trinbagonians. The Government offers nothing in the budget except to blame everyone. Our citizens continue to live in fear. Our private security services are booming. People take extra precaution to protect themselves. Even the Prime Minister has beefed up his security detail. Not everyone can afford this luxury. The murders, rapes and robberies continue unabated.

Whilst this is happening I want to share with you something that I find most disturbing in this time of plenty in this country. British criminologist and Oxford University Professor Roger Hood recently, in the presentation of the crime situation in Trinidad and Tobago, expressed great alarm at the results of his research. He found that the chance of a murderer getting caught is miniscule, about 20 per cent for this year. To catch them in the first place is very hard. The likelihood of them being convicted, that is after you catch them is even smaller, 5 per cent. Of those caught and going through the trials, 90 per cent would be released after appeal. Let us bring this down to numbers rather than percentage. If we take the analysis even further, this means that on an average for every 1,000 murders that take place in this country, only one murder conviction will be upheld; 999 murderers will get away.

This little country has a murder rate of 30 per 100,000, higher than Haiti and Guyana combined with 11.5 per cent and 15.7 per cent per 100,000 respectively. We are 30 per cent more than Haiti and Guyana combined. We are 19 times the rate of England, 1,009 per cent higher. We are 1,600 per cent higher than the murder rate in Canada. To continue that analysis of the more than 1,340 murders committed to date since this PNM came into office, the analysis suggests that only one person will be convicted and made to pay for his crime; 1,339 of these murderers will walk free.

It is axiomatic that the entire system of the administration of justice in Trinidad and Tobago is operated on an unsatisfactory basis. The basic infrastructure, courts, police, stations, jail, personnel and equipment are in desperate need of refurbishment. In a survey conducted by the UWI Ansa McAl Psychological Research Centre last month more than half of the respondents indicated a serious fear of being victimized by a police officer. I am certain that after the events of Barrackpore, Chatham and Fyzabad that that number will increase substantially. Perhaps significantly, about 70 per cent of UNC supporters surveyed felt that they would be victimized as opposed to 49 per cent of those who claimed to be PNM supporters. Significantly too, a massive 84 per cent of persons surveyed believe that not enough is being done to investigate shooting by police officers. In other words, very few people believe that justice was possible in a case where the police were the aggressors. Similarly, 84 per cent of the persons asked responded that they did not support the Government's purchase of the blimp. Needless to say, that sentiment has been carried by many commentators, but typically, the public was ignored and the blimp was bought by the Government.

The prison service is also in crisis. Prison officers have taken legal action alleging that the Commissioner of Prisons is compromising his authority and is in fact supportive of the prisoners. Perhaps, for the first time in this country there are two Ministers of National Security and a separate Minister who is in charge of the national security as well as several national security advisors, including former PNM ministers. This country is paying more today than ever before for the administration of the Ministry of National Security and getting substantially less for it.

The Government has demonstrated that it cannot for whatever reason and will not deal with the issue of crime. The country has been asked to tolerate enough. We have offered on more than one occasion to work with the Government in dealing with the issue. Always they have postured but never conceded. We say

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enough is enough. We are serious. This matter is too crucial an issue for us to allow petty political agendas to get in the way of stopping this brutal wave of violence against our citizens. The Opposition demands that the Government provide a seat on the National Security Council for a person nominated by the Opposition to participate and work with the parties involved, since it is clear that the Government cannot solve crime. An Opposition representative will force the Prime Minister and his council to stop playing games to justify inaction.

I expect them to talk about national secrets, but we are representatives too. Thus far, none of the national strategic secrets has resulted in a reduction in criminal activity. I believe that we can make a difference if Government is serious. After all, the population wants the State to protect them and that is their just due.

I have spoken about the human development; that is to say, firstly, the basic need of any human being is the security of life. You must be alive to enjoy. In the area of poverty, coming to a second basic need of every human being is the need for food. I am alive but I am hungry. We need to eat. It is perhaps the most painful manifestation of this Government's failure to provide the basic human needs of our citizens in its record with regard to social policy implementation and its treatment of the poor in this country, including the working poor. There are many who come in the number of the working poor.

Despite the numerous social problems with the fancy acronyms the social policy framework is characterized by a network of unstructured, uncoordinated and duplicated programmes with associated waste, inefficiency, mismanagement and corruption. Poverty concerns rarely appear in a prominent way or real way in national planning efforts. Instead, anti-poverty programmes are frequently a set of small scale targeted interventions usually involving social services or the provision of credit for poor people despite the fact that macroeconomic policies, if of course handled properly, have just as much or even more impact on poverty reduction, as we target small scale interventions.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there is example where the populations of the Asian "Miracle" economies had experienced a rise in levels not only of income but also education and social welfare. These economies had experienced what Nobel Laureate Sen has called growth mediated security or rising social welfare as a by-product of increasing affluence, rather than supporting that security which is based on wide ranging support in domains like employment provision, income distribution, health care, education and social assistance. It is clear that this

Government is doing the reverse. It has been pursuing support-led security to little avail.

11.00 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, today it appears that despite increased state intervention; increased expenditure certainly, we have deteriorated into a situation whereby the aged and the increasing poor have become more dependent on an ever failing state for their quality of life.

What is the true level of poverty in this country? There are many figures bandied about; most of them depending on the research done since way back in the early 1990s. Mr. Speaker, I have decided to use the Government's figures and was amazed to learn that after five years of this Government, with the highest ever revenues and expenditure in this country, and a host of programmes, the Government confesses that, at least, a quarter of a million of people in this country live in poverty. The arithmetic is theirs, not mine. Let us take it from their numbers. Multiply 60,000 smart cards—yes, the Prime Minister used the words smart card in Budget 2006, which he has now rechristened Debit Card, perhaps to use the name smart card some other time. Let us take the 60,000, these are for the very needy; these are for the destitute on the poverty line and under the poverty line and, therefore, if it is for 60,000 people, four persons per household, we are just shy of 250,000 persons by Government's own admission, living under the poverty line. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, I have not added to that the old age pensioners who depend on NIS pensions, and who—because that system has failed to keep up with the reality of inflation—have been pushed into poverty by Government induced inflation. In last year's budget speech the Prime Minister stated—it is unfortunate that the Chief Whip and Leader of Government Business do not wish to hear the words of his own Prime Minister. I quote:

“The proposed cash transfer through a Smart Card will target about 60,000 families. The Smart Card will allow for the purchase of food on a defined list of items of \$300 for families of three or fewer persons; \$400... of four to five persons; and \$500 for families with six and more persons.”

This is on a monthly basis. This cash transfer was to deal with the most needy of families, people unable to make ends meet and who were essentially borderline or actually destitute.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to elaborate on what the Members on the other side were thumping their desks about. Let us do the math for them. Mr. Speaker, \$300

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per month for a family of three or more. If you were part of a family of three and you are unable to make ends meet, Government's benevolent contribution to ensure your family's survival would be, at most, \$100 per person per month, which comes down to \$3 per day.

Mr. Speaker, do you know what the international benchmark for extreme poverty is? The extreme international benchmark is TT \$6.30; US \$1 per day and this Government is giving to an individual, who they say is destitute, \$3 per day; heartless, heartless, in this time of mega revenues.

Mr. Speaker, in moderate poverty, the international benchmark is TT \$12.60 per day, which is US \$2. The Government is helping the poor—who we would say are those in extreme poverty—even less than the benchmark for extreme poverty.

The Minister of Social Development and Minister in the Ministry of Housing, Anthony Roberts, managed to keep a straight face when he spoke about what he purported as a poverty eradication scheme. He said and I quote:

“The Trinidad and Tobago Card aims to provide food for the needy persons in Trinidad and Tobago and to liberate some members from the jaws of poverty. It promises a healthier and better standard of living for some families as we strive to create a better Trinidad and Tobago for us all.”

The hon. Minister said this at a media launch of the smart card. It is preposterous and also unconscionable that this Government expects to liberate needy persons from the jaws of poverty by giving these persons \$3 per day to live on. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Speaker, \$3 cannot even buy the cheapest roti, which is a potato roti. I believe that roti cost \$6.50.

Smart card recipients are also required to access classes, under one of the Government's programmes, so out of the \$3 per day, they have to eat and they also have to pay transportation to go to the classes so that they could come out of their destitution. I would really like to see, just as an academic exercise, any of those Members on the other side complete those transactions with \$3 per day, or even with US \$3 per day. This is exactly what the poor in this country are expected to make magic with; \$3. The Minister continues:

“The Card is an evolution of how the Government supports the needy citizens of our country.”

I repeat:

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“The Card is an evolution of how the Government supports the needy...”

Mr. Speaker, we have to commend his candour, because that is precisely how the Government supports needy persons in this country; keep them in abject poverty at \$3 per day. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, a great man once said, and he truly understood what suffering was. I quote:

“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

I might add they know not what they are talking about either. I repeat:

“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

Hon. Member: What is his name? Who said that?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: The good Lord Jesus. This has got to be the lowest level of deception, of absurdity or downright foolishness ever, but we must not forget the incompetence as a major element in the various disasters this Government has inflicted upon us. It has become obvious why the social policy of this Government is such a spectacular failure. The Minister has lost his way.

Mr. Speaker, I want to compare this \$3 per day for persons on the smart cards; I want to compare the \$100 increase in pension with the way that the Government has treated itself. Mr. Speaker, \$3 per day is what they expect the poor to live on. Minister Christine Sahadeo tells workers that their demands are too high, when she is earning \$1,335 per day, including perks. [*Desk thumping*] So do every one of those Ministers on those Benches. Of course, the hon. Prime Minister is earning far more than the \$1,335 per day.

Mr. Manning: How much is yours?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Mine? I did not calculate it; you will calculate it and when you are responding you will tell me. Just think of how much tax these same workers have to pay just to keep these Ministers living in the style to which they have, so quickly, become accustomed. It costs the taxpayer of this country \$14 million just to pay Government Ministers salaries, and many more millions are being spent to pay their advisors. What do we have to show for it; according to the Prime Minister, a booming economy? One only has to compare the glowing macroeconomic indicators from the Minister of Finance with the stark reality of contemporary living in Trinidad and Tobago to realize that those economic performance indicators on their own do not transfer into a better quality of life for the majority of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago under this Government.

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Since this Government has been in office the standard of living has fallen for everyone except Ministers of Government, who are supplied with body guards, who drive on the Priority Bus Route, who are given free rides and meals on luxury Bombardier jets. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, let us come now to the aged; the weakest persons in the society. Pensioners have been the hardest hit by the runaway inflation. In simple terms, the rate of growth of Government pensions and savings has not been matched by the growth of inflation. The frightening part of it is that the purchasing power or real value of money placed in savings is being whittled away, so that we may find that pensions may not be enough to sustain life, except only for Ministers of Government. Mr. Speaker, that is exactly where our pensioners are today.

The money they have put aside for retirement would substantially lessen now because of this Government's aggressive inflationary policies. How cruel it is to have effectively raised the pensions of these old persons by \$100 per month. The Government's approach to handling the conspiratorial combination of rising food prices and subsistence for the elderly also sends all the wrong signals.

It is callous treatment; it is utter disdain for patriots who cleared the path for those who today enjoy the fruits of their efforts to raise their old age pensions by \$100. [*Desk thumping*] The hon. Prime Minister wishes to call it a grant and I will come back to that because that, in my view, is a very dangerous thing giving an elderly a grant rather than increasing old age pension. Giving \$100 per month is probably designed to bring a little humour in the winter of their years, because Government simply cannot be serious.

I do not know when last the hon. Prime Minister personally did any food shopping, but surely his dear wife could have enlightened him on the issue of food prices. Since the PNM came into office food prices have increased by 100 per cent. From then to now food prices have reached 100 per cent. It is unconscionable that out of the whopping \$38 billion scheduled for spending over the next fiscal year those who have toiled for this country; those who have helped to create the largesse now being enjoyed by Ministers on the other side are now only worth a pitiful \$136 million, which takes that \$100 per month increase into account.

The budget contains no hint of a plan to stem runaway inflation, so the elderly, armed with this \$100, are definitely going to suffer, increasingly so, with each passing month as food prices continue to increase. Given the inflation and the absurd leaps in the cost of living during the past year, the elderly have gained

exactly nothing from this increase. In real terms they are behind where they stood at the start of fiscal 2006, which was one year ago.

I wish to remind Members on the opposite side that during last year's budget debate the hon. Minister of Consumer and Legal Affairs promised on October 14, 2005 that Government had declared war on rising food prices and promised to lead the change in a new era of consumer awareness and empowerment. The Government announced new measures aimed at reducing at least 35 food items, including, rice, flour, cereal, salted fish, condensed milk and so on. Anybody going to the supermarket now will know that every single one of these items has shown substantial increase in retail prices.

We were told that in other words to ensure prices were reduced the Consumer Affairs Division and I quote:

“...will act as a watchdog over the process of price reduction which ought properly to follow upon introduction of these measures.”

Given our experiences over the past year, why should we believe the promises. Roughly one year earlier on November 10, 2004, the hon. Minister Christine Sahadeo promised that the price of selected building materials will be reduced as Cabinet agreed to remove the CET on those items and predicted reductions of between 2.5 per cent and 20 per cent. Mr. Speaker, it is common knowledge that the prices of these items went up, rather than down, so why should we believe the new promises.

The only real tax breaks announced in this budget accrues to persons with children studying abroad. Does that not tell us something? Does that not speak more to a particular social group? You increase a tax break from \$18,000 to \$60,000 for children who are studying abroad and you do not tell this country how many people are likely to be relieved by this measure, which indicates to me that you probably know the number and that it is exceptionally small and select.

What is in the budget for the little people in this country, except an attempt at verbal gymnastics, intended to con them with a set of very fragile statistics. Numb them with numbers, fool them with lyrics seem to be the concept upon which the 2006/2007 budget is predicated.

The Prime Minister speaks glibly about nurturing a caring society, about healthy lifestyles? Mr. Speaker, that is nonsense. There is no dignity in poverty. Poverty results in the prostitution of our women to feed their children; it results in

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crime; it results in destitution; it results in vagrancy. Poverty results in the destruction of family relations included and the mess of social ills.

It places additional strain on the resources of the nation in health and social development. In the police service there is a high financial cost effect to it. Instead of pumping money in ill-fated programmes, the Prime Minister would be well advised to prevent these problems from occurring in the first place; treat the root rather than the symptom. That is basic common sense.

I note with concern on this issue that the Prime Minister has not increased old age pension per se, what he has done is to give a grant of \$100 per month. I object to that for two reasons: I object to the amount and I object to the process by which this money is to be transferred to our elderly. A grant is given no legislative protection. A grant is given by “vaps” by the Executive and it can be taken away by “vaps” by the Executive. Therefore I call for the Government, firstly, to reconsider the increase of \$100 to the elderly citizens and to bring it up by \$2,000. [*Desk thumping*] Secondly, I call on the Government that whatever is being transferred to the elderly, it is structured into the legislation.

Mr. Speaker, the old age pension is protected by Act of Parliament and if it is to be changed you have to come back to Parliament to do that. If you give a grant—grants can be given; grants can be taken, we are not taking that, Mr. Speaker. We are calling on the Government to give protection to the elderly.

Whilst the Government gives \$100 there, which works out to about \$3-odd per day; \$3 for persons on the smart cards and so on, let us compare the increases that the Government is giving itself in this budget. Every year I have been making notes and compiling what I have called the propaganda vote of this administration. This propaganda vote is comprised of spending by the Government on entertainment, hosting, on overseas travel, promotions and publicity.

11.15 a.m.

Every year, the Government has increased its allocation at every Budget to the huge sums that they have been putting in this propaganda vote. This year, the Government has budgeted \$209,751,350 for entertainment, hosting, overseas travels, promotions and publicity. What is more frightening, is that this new allocation brings the total amount spent by this Government, and to be spent by this Government since they came into office on this propaganda vote, it brings it to just under \$1 billion. This \$1 billion is only for the Ministers and the Ministries. This is not for the 89 state enterprises and statutory authorities, like the Water and Sewerage Authority, National Lotteries Control Board, and so forth. It

is not for the 15 new state companies they have set up. They have their own so, in fact, it is even more than the \$1 billion; almost \$1 billion wasted by this Government to do what? To spree, to fly abroad, to advertise themselves in full-page colour advertisements in the newspapers. Let us see in this year as I did in the past, which gets what out of this propaganda vote.

At the top of the list, once again, comes in the Minister of Tourism. That Ministry has got \$61.3 million with \$60 million to be spent on overseas travel. He is definitely a high flyer. Not even the Minister of Foreign Affairs is getting the overseas travel vote that is being given to the Minister of Tourism. Not so the Housing Minister. Once again, he has been allocated to almost the bottom of the list. In fact, he is second to last on the list getting a measly \$250,000 for his overseas travel.

Tobago House of Assembly and Central Administrative Services, Tobago (CAST), has been allocated a mere \$100,000. The Office of the Prime Minister combined with the Minister of Finance, because they are one and the same person, that Ministry has been allocated over \$21 million in this budget. Entertainment is the largest part even if it is disaggregated into the two Ministries—my colleagues would do it, I have all the numbers. Even if it is disaggregated, it still places the Prime Minister at a very high level on the list.

Next, I am sure you would have guessed very correctly, is the Ministry of Education. That comes in at \$15.9 million and not surprisingly; the largest slice of this goes to hosting—\$8 million and for promotions and publicity, at \$5.1 million. Old age pensioners—\$3.00 a day. People on smart card, the destitute—\$3.00 a day. Tobago is at the bottom of the total propaganda list with a total of only \$325,000. And the Ministry of Housing, as I said before, comes second to last with only \$1 million in his propaganda vote. I do not think they need to advertise housing.

In such a context, we on this side of the House were astonished with the ease at which the hon. Prime Minister trotted out a string of largely useless measures described as bringing relief to the poor and to the low income groupings.

Mr. Speaker, while on the issue of pensions and the pensioners, I want to turn to the area of pension reform. In his very first budget speech four years ago, this Minister of Finance boasted:

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“We are in the process of evaluating recommendations on pension reform with a view to providing the national community with a comprehensive pension reform framework for wide consultation.”

Again, promise not kept. Again, in the 2004/2005 budget, the hon. Minister spoke of pension reform. Again, surprisingly not there. In fiscal 2007, there is no reference to pension reform and the critical need for same. So in two to three budgets before critical, critical, it is not done and you come this year and if that is dumped, you have abandoned the issue of pension reform. There is a desperate need given what is happening in the macroeconomy, for Government to index pension. This becomes even more important in the context of the increasingly aging population of Trinidad and Tobago and the possibility of unsustainable pension funds to sustain that population. Already, we have realized that the income provided for the aged is insufficient to keep them above the poverty line.

I want to offer a suggestion to assist our elderly and to assist the nation's working poor. I propose that Government institute what is known as an earned income tax credit to assist our nation's working poor. We do not need to re-invent the wheel. This was introduced during the Clinton administration in the United States and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) has met with tremendous success in protecting, sheltering and harbouring the working poor and in helping them to become part of the formal economic structure.

The working poor, we must remember includes: maids, cleaners, gardeners, secretaries in offices like in yours, Mr. Speaker, the law clerks, they are the working poor given the rate of inflation in this country today.

How this system works, the earned income tax credit, is that the basic amount is pre-determined and one would say at this amount, this figure, this number, we do not want our citizens to fall below that figure and then one could use the poverty levels, choose a number given what one feels is comfortable for our citizens to live upon. Working persons would then be required to file their tax returns, they would be assessed, if they fall below that pre-determined line they would receive a grant from Government, a transfer of cash to them to bring them up to the level that they should reach. In this way, we are not creating a patron-client relationship with the State. We would be empowering the poor and empowering the working poor to continue to work so that they would come into the formal system and they would benefit from what is within the formal systems in terms of NIS and so forth. Consider this, Mr. Prime Minister, it is better than anything you have in your budget for the working poor.

Mr. Speaker, I turn now to another sector which is also critical to the well-being of the citizenry. We talked about food, clothing and we even talked about shelter. Every human being deserves shelter. It is the one sector which the Government boasts of its greatest success. In his budget speech, this year the hon. Prime Minister promised 8,000 new homes. He chose not to tell us whether he met the promise of housing for the 8,200 for last fiscal, 2006. But we know that accountability is very important to this Government, and I am sure one of them would let us know if they met their target last year. By now everybody knows that this Government's housing programme is not to provide shelters, but it is a house padding exercise in the marginal constituencies. This Government has no concern with operating a comprehensive programme that examines need on a demographic basis and then distributing low income homes on that basis. Their number one criterion is party affiliation.

When we asked them to come clean on what is their allotment policy they avoided the question. They said there is a process.

We find their process nebulous. It is magical because, somehow, it basically selects by some magic, their own party members. Notwithstanding the diversity or configuration of applicants, the process magically selects their own. Mr. Speaker, in last year's budget speech, under the title "affordable housing", these were the hon. Prime Minister's words:

"The inability to access mortgage because of income constraints; the high cost of land combined with the high cost of construction just takes this dream beyond the reach of many, particularly females earning less than \$3,000 per month."

Great! It is wonderful that the Prime Minister wants to help women who are below that level. He went on to say:

"This Government's strategy is to make acceptable housing available through major construction and upgrading programmes while simultaneously addressing the issue of affordability."

Mr. Speaker, it is startling that when you go on the official website of the Ministry of Housing where the lowest priced house is at \$200,000, the mortgage size is \$200,000, that website reveals that the gross monthly income that a prospective homeowner must have is \$3,417.44. How then could the Minister have been saying that these houses—he said those below \$3,000—here it is the official website lists that \$3,417 is the minimum household monthly income in order to access the house. Whether it is one, two or three, the household must have it. Do not try to hoodwink us.

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In fact, if it is two or three, it is better. It is total household income. The lowest is \$3,417. You will not hoodwink this population! This gives a lie to the words from last year's budget speech. That provision was being made for persons earning less than \$3,000 a month, when, in fact all persons below \$3,417 are excluded by their own criteria. The dream was definitely beyond the reach of these women and of these people under \$3,000 and the dream was beyond the reach of 47 per cent of all households in this country.

The statistics from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) when you cross-reference it, the CSO clearly states that 47 per cent of all households in this country earn less than \$3,000 a month. Therefore, the Government's position on housing based on a household monthly income of \$3,417.14 has already rendered ineligible, 47 per cent of all house owners in this land. This year, the hon. Prime Minister quotes a new income eligibility criterion, where households must now have an income of \$4,000 a month in order to be eligible. Now that the Prime Minister has stated this new minimum monthly income of \$4,000, when we cross-reference this with the CSO data, it means that now more than 61 per cent of all households in this country would not be eligible since they earn less than \$4,000 a month. This means that the dream the Minister spoke about has gone far beyond the reach of 61 per cent of households in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, this is a dreaded situation. We warn the Prime Minister to explain the stand of the Housing Development Corporation (HDC) and the Ministry of Housing and mortgage finance group. I have the download of the website if anyone wishes to see it. The Prime Minister talked about this interim bracket. At least I would be grateful if they can clarify another issue with respect to housing.

Mr. Ramnath: Drop it on them. You are doing well. [*Desk thumping*].

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: The Prime Minister talked about an income bracket of \$1,440 to \$8,000 and stated that persons in this bracket would:

“...continue to be eligible for the houses for which they originally qualified without an increase in monthly payments.”

It seems to be saying that if you are earning between \$1,440 and \$8,000 you are eligible. I would like the Prime Minister, please, to tell us whether this is not a case of classic semantic jugglery of the PNM. I would like the Prime Minister to explain to this House exactly when, under what conditions, and through what methodology this Government considered people earning \$1,440 per month as eligible for this housing now, when the Prime Minister clearly stated the minimum

requirement was \$4,000? The two just do not make sense. Please explain. We also want to know what dedicated efforts were made by Government to make people earning \$3,000 eligible for housing; those women that the Prime Minister spoke about.

The programme, therefore, is another of those projects that the Government trumpets as though it is doing something for the small income earner, when, in fact, it is hurting the persons most in need of help, the lower middle income and the lower income groups. Again I say, the Government has lost its way.

The Prime Minister was making his offer last year in a vacuum. He was merely wishing to palliate women by giving the impression he was thinking of them, and that he would be helping them, when the concept is itself unworkable arithmetic. The flippancy in his words is galling. He knows the problem because he acknowledges it. The people who were under \$3,000 were in difficulty [*Inaudible*] The CSO verifies the verbal concerns that 47 per cent of households were earning below \$3,000, and yet they did nothing to deal with those persons below \$3,000 and now \$4,000. They first deprived the needy people, then they have the audacity to say again, the words of the Prime Minister in the last year's budget speech:

“Government is convinced that squatting has gone beyond necessity. This trend has to be stopped.”

What are the rules of necessity here? Where do they want people to go? In order to solve the persistent problem of squatting, you need to have a well-thought-out policy. In this regard too, Government has lost its way. In order to take away the worst aspects of public and subsidized housing, you need to have reforms that acknowledge and facilitate powerful social dynamics that would shape communities.

When the UNC institutionalized the Land Settlement Agency, it wanted to avoid a new generation of previous policy mistakes. We went for property rights which were neither politically divisive nor dependent on government subsidies. The logic was that shelter policy was a local matter. Tighten security increases in investment and in home improvement, then you will not need to give grants. People are able to do the job themselves. This nation has a history of self-help home construction.

11.30 a.m.

Further to this, the value of a house is partly dependent on the condition of the neighbourhood. If you revive the culture of rewarding achievements such as savings and investments among aspiring homeowners, it will keep the neighbourhood safe

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and clean and people will work harder to arrest any hint of decay. This was the logic. This is how you encourage upward mobility; not by building houses you consider cheap, but are still outside the reach of those who need shelter most urgently. When you do the opposite, you get social ramifications and that is what the PNM has been doing for years. Costly subsidies for housing destroy the incentives of the people to save money and to maintain the condition of their environment.

Look at some of the housing schemes they have built, which have turned into ghettos. What do you see? There are internally displaced people—IDP crisis—in the world. Normally, this crisis takes place due to war, strife or dictatorship. We are a small nation. We have never gone to war—and I pray God that we never do. We have relatively few examples of social strife and although I cannot say we have been immune from dictatorship by this PNM—there is a clear promise that they have the propensity—we do not have an IDP crisis in Trinidad and Tobago. If we look at the ominous noises this administration is making, in the context of the East Port of Spain residents, people in the smelter affected areas, poor squatters in general, we would realize that this Government is utterly resolute to cause havoc in the already hard life of thousands of people, to create IDP, when it removes and relocates entire communities.

We know that this Government is not averse to the use of violence against small farmers, hardworking poor people and quiet peaceful communities. This Government has demonstrated its duplicity by its pathetic surrender to the thugs. Yet it is cruel, it is pugnacious, it is impatient in front of the common people and so they send out their troops when the citizens stand up for their rights because the Government has failed to deliver.

This Government will fail individuals. This Government will create a crisis where none intrinsically existed and not even the fact that we are the signatories of the Habitat Agenda—we signed the Habitat Agenda; we said that we would reject, as the Agenda said, forceful evictions as an effective enforcement measure to stop squatters—but we have already seen throughout this land that this Government has begun to evict poor people from their homes in several areas of the country.

Mr. Speaker, unless you perceive people as inanimate objects, you cannot move them around by "vaps". This creates a fresh catalogue of social problems. There is dislocation that brings with it domestic upheaval. When new schools have to be identified and fresh relationships nurtured—indeed, we would see, even with the housing programmes—it would create a great burden on the system. While they are building these matchbox houses all over the place, they are not

putting all the infrastructure that is needed; infrastructure for recreation, schools and police stations. If Government really wants to ensure that people have shelter, I want to make a suggestion, which clearly a UNC government would do when we move them from office. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, I suggest that if Government is committed to assisting the working poor to provide shelter for the people of this nation that they implement a Home Ownership Savings Plan (HOSP). That would not only assist the working poor to build their homes, but could also encourage savings and thereby help to bring down inflation. A UNC HOSP would entail that for every dollar saved by a first-time homeowner—in the below \$4,000 a month household income; the people they have left out—it will match it dollar for dollar.

That dollar for dollar for housing will come at the time of commencement of construction of the home, so that it encourages savings. I propose further that the UNC would implement, if this Government does not do it, a tax credit as an incentive to the prospective first-time homeowner for the money he puts into his savings. While they are putting the money to savings on their new home, if they are given a tax credit, it encourages them to save; it pulls some of the liquidity out of the system; it helps with the inflationary pressures, but at the end of the day, it will help provide a home for them, which government will support. We must partner with individuals. We must not make them dependent on handouts. We must walk with them hand in hand, dollar for dollar in this country.

I have said that basic human needs must be addressed. That is what a budget is about. A budget is not about numbers. It must take the money and the numbers and provide sustainable development. It must create and cater for basic needs and so, whilst you have life and limb and property and shelter, at some time you may become ill. In addition to the basic need for security of life and limb, food and shelter, another basic requirement is the well-being of the body. This requires personal commitment, appropriate lifestyle choices and access to quality health care. Here, too, Government has lost its way in providing reliable public health care in Trinidad and Tobago. It is not the UNC that is saying this only. NATUC general secretary Vincent Cabrera said, and I quote from the *Trinidad Guardian* dated September 15, 2006:

“The health sector is a ticking time bomb waiting to explode.”

We agree, Mr. Speaker. The only positive step that is being taken by this Government in the health sector is the appointment of Madam Justice Gladys Gafoor as chairperson

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of the Commission of Inquiry into that sector. This lady has taken a hands-on approach and is bringing the issues to the fore so that they can no longer be covered up or swept away under the carpet by Government's public relations machinery.

What she has been able to do in a remarkably short time is to unmask the chaos, the mismanagement, the corruption, the understaffing, neglect and downright abuse present in the health sector. Today, I salute Lady Justice Madam Gafoor as an exemplar and suggest that other chairpersons of commissions of enquiries and parliamentary committees use the same format, making proceedings available to the media so that they in turn could let the people know what we are being forced to accept from this uncaring Government.

I return to the words of the hon. Minister, in his budget response, when he was Leader of the Opposition in the year 2000.

“We will sit down immediately with representatives of the health sector personnel. We will negotiate with them in good faith to arrive at a speedy settlement of their many justifiable grievances. At all times we will treat our health workers and their representatives as mutual partners with a shared goal and mission and show them the respect and dignity they deserve.”

That was Mr. Manning when he was Leader of the Opposition in 2000.

It is now well documented history, Mr. Speaker, that the Minister of Health has presided over an exodus of health care workers, largely triggered and sustained by his abrasive attitude. Health sector workers have been held to ransom, threatened and belittled in the media. To date Government has failed to officially recognize the professional body representing doctors. Advertising campaigns have been waged to present doctors in a negative light. The morale of the health sector employee is at an all-time low.

In his 2003 budget speech, the Minister of Finance unveiled his “plan to fast track the implementation of the reform programme by promoting wellness and providing affordable quality health care in an efficient and equitable manner”. This, again, is empty rhetoric. As with every other commitment from this Government, nothing has changed. Amazingly, it continues to get worst. Today, hospitals are overcrowded and understaffed. There are long waiting lines for basic surgery and patients are being asked to wait sometimes for years for serious surgery. Hospitals are without medication. The infrastructure is antiquated and poorly maintained.

In Sangre Grande, surgery had to be cancelled and doctors had to protest in order to get oxygen lines repaired, although since 2002, the Minister of Health promised faithfully, in this House, to refurbish the hospital. The Forensic Science Centre is severely understaffed, unable to cope with the workload. Criminal cases are in limbo as a result. There is a shortage of ambulances although they had committed to buy 50 ambulances over the five-year term. The list of woes goes on. The question is: Where has the money gone? Government listed as one of its priorities for the 2005—2006 budget—I quote from the *Hansard*; from the budget speech of the Minister then:

“Investing in quality health care by expanding the availability and strengthening the delivery of health and wellness services.”

Unfortunately, Government has done little to actually effect this promise. Government is running behind Justice Gafoor trying to put plasters on every sore. What have they been doing over the past five years that the health sector has reached this crisis? People have died. Children have died and continue to die. This country is receiving the highest income of all its Caribbean neighbours and we cannot have a functional basic health system. Vision 2020 is a joke.

Another five or 10 years will only add to the rot. It is a question of priorities. We have a shortage of beds in San Fernando, but the PNM endorses the expenditure of \$50 million to reimburse, to refurbish, to upgrade the facilities at Beach Camp so that he and his cohorts could lime for a weekend while there are no beds in the San Fernando General Hospital and people are dying. What are the priorities? This Government has lost its way.

When we demitted office, we left the health sector on the mend after 30 years of PNM neglect. Unfortunately, as soon as they got back into power, they reverted to their age-old practice. The ambulance service, a UNC initiative, is now in private hands as the PNM could not manage it. I understand that many of the ambulances are now parked up, derelict somewhere in Couva. They act as if ambulances, just like police vehicles, do not run a high risk of getting into accidents, so do not need maintenance, so they have no provision for on-going maintenance. Mr. Speaker, our citizens deserve better.

On the issue of health care, every objective citizen will agree that the UNC government delivered on the substantially less resources at its disposal. It was then and is now a question of priorities. For five years the Prime Minister and his Ministers of Health have twiddled their thumbs and thumbed their collective noses at

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us. The only positive development which took place under this Minister of Health seems to have been in the pharmacy business and we do not need to wonder why. When he gets the opportunity to speak, he regales this House with all his achievements. Here are a few matters I would like him to comment upon.

“This is the worst place I have even seen’, said Justice Gafoor after touring the lab at San Fernando.”

Express, July 2005. After five years of the PNM, this is the worst place I have ever seen.

Doctors were unable to assure the population that tests done at this lab were correct. Can you imagine that in this day and age? You are waiting for test results to determine whether you will have surgery to cut out one of your organs and there is no guarantee that the results would be accurate. So you run the risk of being misdiagnosed and, of course, mistreated.

Hear, the Minister of Health, in 2002:

“The San Fernando Hospital upgrade has gone out to tender. Tenders are in and are being evaluated for a complete revamping of that hospital. We are putting a new burns unit there and a new lab in the San Fernando Hospital.”

Minister Imbert, *Hansard*, House of Representatives, 2002. This lab from 2002 is the same facility; the same lab that Justice Gafoor was talking about a few months ago saying it is the worst place she has ever seen. Like everything else, there was no implementation and a fresh set of promises every chance they get.

11.45 a.m.

The hearings of the commission of enquiry became stalled for several months, until earlier this year, due to the Government's tardiness. There are some who will agree that it was deliberate; the tardiness in appointing lawyers to work with the commission.

Forgive me, of course, like the rest of the nation, for thinking that the Government could not have taken the heat and thus it became negligent and tardy in appointing the lawyers. They attempted to subvert the commission in that way. It is very clear, you cannot keep a good woman down forever. It is now history that Madam Justice Gafoor continued the hearings despite the Government's refusal to provide the requisite lawyers. She went ahead and did her job. Today we salute Madam Justice Gafoor. Particularly, her findings are a serious indictment on the Government and the Ministry of Health. Problems are plenty in the health system. “Medical malpractice and bad management” was the headline of September 08, 2006. I quote:

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“The Commission of Enquiry into the Operation and Delivery of Public Health Care Services has found that poor management, misappropriation of Government property and financial mismanagement, as well as what would appear to be medical malpractice, plagued public health care services.”

This article of the *Newsday* of September 12 states:

“System worse under RHAs, says PSA”

It was particularly enlightening as it contained the testimony of Mr. Stephen Thomas, the First Vice-President of the PSA.

“‘There is the general perception based upon the evidence that comes in the public domain that the quality of health care delivery is highly questionable,’ said Stephen Thomas...”

citing a sorry state of affairs in the health service, including the case of a man who apparently died of nothing more complicated than a broken leg. He also revealed the shocking tale of a child who mysteriously became comatose after being admitted for treatment for non-life-threatening burns.

Mr. Thomas also highlighted the fact that there was no proper accounting to monitor the use, abuse and theft of drugs, pharmaceuticals and medical supplies at Mount Hope, although there were numerous complaints of inadequacy of medical supplies over the years. There seems to have been no desire on the part of management, including the Minister, to address these problems, although they were clearly aware of them.

Other headlines tell a similar story such as: “Tobago health care system, potential disaster.” Ironically the story did not mention the embarrassment that is the Tobago Hospital. It is my fervent hope that Justice Gafoor tackle that issue as the massive cost overrun attempts to remove Government's preferred contractor. The time overruns all point to corruption, mismanagement and wastage of millions of taxpayers' dollars. Somebody is responsible and somebody must be made to pay. Children have died in Tobago because of inadequate access to health care. We cannot and must not allow these deaths to be in vain.

Perhaps the hon. Minister of Health could recognize this one from the *Trinidad Guardian* of September 15, 2006:

“Corruption at hospitals”

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The person highlighting the allegations of corruption and negligence on the part of Government is none other than Dr. Petronella Manning-Alleyne, sister of the hon. Minister of Finance.

“Dr. Manning-Alleyne also spoke of misallocation of funds and equipment for the neonatal unit, while the physical structure continues to erode. ‘For the 20-how-much years I have worked here, we never had a commercial cleaning’ she said.”

Mr. Speaker, the irony here is that since 2002, in his 2003 budget contribution, the Minister of Health promised:

“We will return the Sterilization Unit to the Port of Spain General Hospital which is going out for tender very shortly, if it has not been done already.”

This was also going for tender. Up to today nothing has been done. They forget that every year they repeat the same promises. Every year they fail to deliver. Today, four years later, Dr. Manning-Allenye advises that it is yet to be done but the woes of the sector continue.

I quote:

“Medical supplies company AA Laquis was named by neonatal consultant, Manning-Alleyne in her allegations of tendering corruption and a medical supply monopoly at the Port of Spain General Hospital.

A member of the tenders board, she claimed, indicated that certain medical supplies were ‘preferred’ and were often privy to inside information.”

Her public accusation has not been refuted by the named company. That surely tells you something.

She lists staff shortages and the absence of middle management. The consultant also pointed to a bigger problem when she said:

“The Health Sector Reform Programme is not something that people have been practising as far as I understand. These are just documents...we do not seem to be fulfilling the requirements that are suggested by that.”

What is more, in her revelation to the commission and to the country she said:

“But the archaic system is not the problem...It is the lack of will to do anything different...and every time you try to do something here, somebody, because of some partisan reason, decides to step on you.”

She speaks of it as being negligence. I call it criminal negligence. These revelations put the hon. Minister of Health to shame. He came forward and said: "We have dealt with all her claims. They are all being addressed." What was he doing before?

The *Newsday* editorial of Tuesday, September 26 describes his comments as follows:

"A shamefully inadequate explanation since if this was so, then at the very least, certain procurement procedures would have been changed and there might have even been criminal charges laid against certain individuals...the hardest proof of Dr. Manning-Alleyne's allegations lie in the simple and awful statistics: an infant mortality rate of 17 per 1,000 live births (with other estimates running as high as 24), an under-5 mortality rate of 20 and a maternal mortality rate of 38."

Our people continue to die.

The article also reiterated:

"In a nation as rich as Trinidad and Tobago, the high mortality rate of babies is not the result of lack of resources, it is the result of lack of a professional, ethical and caring attitude."

No number of promises to deal with the problems can erase the fact that after five years of government by the PNM, hundreds of millions of dollars, the health system is in shambles. Mrs. Manning-Alleyne calls it a lack of will. I call it criminal negligence.

We turn now to the issue of our children. This year, surely, has been marked by some of the worst crimes against children in this country, committed by children. It appears that life is as expendable as those of the characters in the violent video games now popular in Trinidad and Tobago.

When I listened to this budget I had expectations of hearing how the Government was going to improve the standard of living of our children, how they were going to be protected, exposed to a better learning environment; how the issue of street children would be addressed; or simply how their access to health care was going to be improved. Alas, whilst I was definitely disappointed, I was not surprised. This is the Government that up to today has refused to implement the package of children's legislation that the UNC passed since 2002. That could have provided protection for children likely Amy Annamanthodo.

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Across a wide range of children's issues from poverty to education, from investment in the future economy to debt, we will hand to our children, this budget fails in every sequence, disregarding the present and offering nothing to our future generations.

I stand here not only for my children, my grandson and their generation, but I stand also for yours and the future generations because our decisions in this House must respect. They are the ones who would spend the most time living with the consequences of our actions today.

It is the children of Trinidad and Tobago who are most vulnerable. It is the children of Trinidad and Tobago who are without a political voice, unless we stand up for them here and now. There is a huge generation gap, but perhaps, more important, we are witnessing today wholesale importation of the worst aspects of American culture. It is in the music, the videos, graffiti, the street language and the clothes they wear. It is, of course, in the new wave of crime as well.

We are witnessing a growing number of youth in jail for increasingly severe crimes. We are witnessing today increasingly young criminals; children killing children. We are witnessing an increase in the use of alcohol, marijuana and other prohibited substances by our nation's children.

As a former Minister of Education and more so as a mother and grandmother, I am extremely distressed with the scant courtesy with which the Minister of Finance has dismissed the children of Trinidad and Tobago. On the face of it, there is obviously a strong correlation between illiteracy and social misconduct. To be certain, there are other factors including poverty, in particular family environment, family life, a broad base of cultural considerations, which are also relevant. The improvement of several factors would undoubtedly impact on the social problems and must hinge on the Government's policy. We understand what is in store for the youth because we have long witnessed the Government's continuing failure to address these.

During our term in office we had ensured that diagnostic and other testing was introduced at the Form One Specials level. This would inform literacy levels and the guide to a provision of educational opportunities and teaching procedures for those most requiring it.

I am heartened to learn that this programme was not stopped by the present Minister. Unfortunately, the Minister does not seem to have moved it forward

either. I urge that the Minister do so because she needs to take the programme forward, by taking it where it really needs to go into the primary schools.

Having recognized the problem of illiteracy, we began by tackling the new Form Ones but there is obviously a need to work backward to get into the primary school system and to deal with the issue earlier, given the elapsed time and lethargy since we demitted office.

The next step, assessing them and identifying them earlier, offers the opportunity to treat the problem before it gets into the secondary school and thereby phase out the need for the Form One Specials as we bring all our children up to speed. That was the UNC agenda for education.

But literacy needs and other approaches also need to deal with elder students still in the system and with adults who would have already left our education system but who are functionally illiterate.

Today I salute the pioneering work done by the Adult Literacy Tutors Association (ALTA); they have adopted the onerous task of tackling the problem of adult literacy, whilst I lament the Government's continuing disregard of this critical programme that is run privately with no funding from the State.

The IDB, the IMF, the World Bank and the international lending agencies all use the Government provided figures on illiteracy and literacy and they suggest that there is a 95 per cent literacy rate in Trinidad and Tobago but the people out in the field, the organization I spoke of, ALTA advised us recently that Trinidad and Tobago's 95 per cent literacy rate is thoroughly misleading. The last surveys done by ALTA and UWI revealed:

“At the time between 22 and 23 per cent of the population could not be considered functionally literate, and an equal but additional number had limited reading skills. From all observances, those statistics have not varied significantly. In sum, approximately 45 per cent of our people cannot be considered literate according to the agreed international standards.”

This means almost half of our citizens cannot be considered literate, according to the experts in the field.

This disclosure was made early in August this year and there was sufficient time for consideration to be given for inclusion in the budget preparation of this Government, but the Government has failed to do so. I urge the Government now,

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there is still time to include in this budget this year, an allocation to assist and partner with the NGO that is known as ALTA, to assist in the literacy problem.

We come to the protection of children. This budget, like those before, speaks volumes of the Government's lack of care and concern for the nation's children. Like in every sector, they know what is required, they just lack the will.

In 1991, Trinidad and Tobago ratified what is known as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This means an acceptance of the responsibility to introduce relevant measures so as to ensure the general welfare and protection of children in the country. The United Nations then requires periodic reporting of the status of implementation of the rights of the children.

In January this year, this country reported to the United Nations, via the former Attorney General, now High Commissioner in London, Mrs. Glenda Morean-Phillip. She spoke of a revised national action plan for children, which was to be considered by the Cabinet during the first half of this year. She boasted in her report:

“Various strides have been made in the introduction and implementation of measures to safeguard and promote the rights of children. My delegation would like to affirm that the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is committed to working for the full realization of the rights of children.”

She went further to state that in 2000, the Government had enacted five critical pieces of legislation for the benefit of children. These were brought to this Parliament by the UNC and passed by this Parliament in 2000. They are the Children’s Authority Act, the Children’s Community Residences Foster Homes and Nurseries Act, the Miscellaneous Provisions (Children) Act, the Adoption of Children Act and the Children (Amdt.) Act, all of which was done, as I said, in 2000, under the UNC.

Having been robbed of the government soon thereafter, it fell into the hands of the PNM Government to implement the legislation and our nation's children who have benefited from this protection.

12.00 noon

Five years of PNM rule have passed and these laws remain on the statute books, but they have not been implemented while our children are raped, murdered, sexually and otherwise abused. This entire Government should hang its head in shame over the callous disregard for our nation’s children. [*Desk thumping*]

The deception of the United Nations by this Government was highlighted in the UN CRC report on Trinidad and Tobago where it listed as positive aspects, the enactment of these laws. I wonder if the UN knew that this Government has steadfastly refused and failed to implement the critical legislation, what the response would have been. So, they told the UN in January of this year that they have these five pieces of legislation, and for five years they did not implement them. As it is, the UN expressed dissatisfaction that the Government has been negligent in following up on its commitment with respect to children.

I quote from their report dated March 2006:

“...particularly those relating to coordination, data collection, resource allocation for children, abuse, ill-treatment and domestic violence, corporal punishment, alternative care, reproductive health, education, street children, child labour and the administration of juvenile justice.”

In almost every sector for women, children and for the people of this nation, they have condemned the Government expressing dissatisfaction that the Government has failed to do what it is supposed to do. The Government has failed on every single major plank of the Conventions of the Rights of the Child. On every single issue relating to the protection of our children this Government has failed to deliver. This year's budget continues this despicable tradition of negligence. None of these issues are addressed! This country is swimming in money and nothing is being provided to safeguard our children! If not now, when?

Last year, when the Prime Minister refused to implement the Children's Authority legislation, 27 children were killed. This year we are aware of some of the horrendous murders which have already taken place in which children have been the victims. The Prime Minister has come back, once again, for the third time, and he has promised to implement the legislation. You would ask, Mr. Speaker, why I find no solace in this? It is because he has made that promise before. In the budget presentation for 2003/ 2004 he said:

“The establishment of a Children's Authority which will champion the rights of children;”

Mr. Speaker, he came back again in the following year and said:

“Establishment of the Children's Authority and the survey of needs of Children's Homes...will be finalized...”

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Year after year and, again, this year, the Prime Minister comes—I find no comfort and I take no comfort upon that. There is not now nor has there been for months now, anything stopping the Prime Minister and his Cabinet from implementing the law to protect the children of this country. There is absolutely no impediment. If there were, it is five years later and they still cannot do it. In my view, that is criminal negligence. I call on the Government to implement the package of legislation for our children now.

This Government keeps shooting itself in the foot and then uses guile, double speak, outrageously engaging in expensive advertising campaigns and blatant deception and where all else fails, aggressive denial—which we saw earlier when he was talking about housing—to convince the population that it is performing well. In every sector relating to children, the Government has lost its way. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Ministry of Education which has not met any of the glorious promises made by the Minister of Finance.

The Minister of Education, when asked about the tardiness of repairs to schools, and the fact that there were still schools under repair at the time of the opening of the new school term, glibly insisted: “We are really happy with what we have done.” This is in the *Express* dated September 09, 2006. Referring to the special purpose Education Facilities Management Company (EFMC) of the ministry, the Minister said:

“I am very happy that we have stretched our team and they are delivering.”

Mr. Speaker, mere days later, the same EFMC was confessing and admitting that it had failed to achieve the promises made in the 2006 budget with regard to school construction.

With respect to early childhood care centres, every budget of this Government has promised to deliver early childhood care centres. I will not quote it, but in every *Hansard* it says—for this year they said that they would be delivering 36 in one year; 43 in another year, and by 2010 we would have universal child care. My colleagues will give you the *Hansard*. I would not take the time to do that. In every single budget a specific number of early childhood care centres were promised.

Mr. Speaker, listen to this now. Talking about universal childhood education by 2010, the Prime Minister, in his budget speech estimated that 600 early childhood care centres would have to be built between 2006 and 2010. Of course, he did not let us off without a firm promise—a specific promise as he has done for

each year. This year, he said 50 of these centres will be completed and established during this fiscal year. He said they would accelerate the construction into 2010. Mr. Speaker, he said that in a tone that suggested that it might actually happen.

The financial year is now over and the Ministry of Education has failed to deliver one single early child care centre for fiscal year 2006. [*Desk thumping*] To make matters infinitely worse, only three centres are expected to be delivered by the end of October, 2006 and we are now in the new financial year. Mr. Speaker, I quote from the *Guardian* dated September 21, 2006.

The response from the Minister of Education for this failure was to deny it. Mrs. Manning insisted that the EFCL, which directly guides the work, hires the contractors and does the quality control was uninformed, and in true fashion, sought to misdirect attention from her failures. Although only 50 centres had been promised, Mrs. Manning would have us believe that 110 sites had been identified. Mr. Speaker, you do the arithmetic. Not one centre was delivered.

Whilst studiously ignoring the fact that none of the promised centres were delivered in 2006, Mrs. Manning offered that: It was possible that the construction of the 50 promised centres would start this year. The fiscal year is finished, and now it is going to start in 2007. So, when the Prime Minister gives us a new number, we know what is going to happen. We are playing games; we are playing games with projects for adults, and that is one thing, because grown-ups are more resilient, but when we are playing with words in respect of projects aimed to assist children, we must be punishable at some higher level. Although stark incompetence may be argued in mitigation as, in this case, there was not even an attempt to mask the incompetence.

Mr. Speaker, what is worse is when the UNC built early childhood centres, we did set a ceiling of \$250,000 for one centre. Our information is that this Government will build one centre at the cost of \$1 million. [*Desk thumping*] It is in the document.

Hon. Member: It is \$2 million.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: It is \$2 million. It is in the document. My colleagues will provide those details when they speak. I recall we delivered over 41 centres, and many other centres have been refurbished. They have not been able to deliver; maybe only three in the past five years and they have said that the price has now gone to \$2 million.

Mr. Ramnath: No earthen drains.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Having not built these centres, I ask: What are you going to do with the 100 teachers you were supposed to have trained for these 50 centres for last year? What about the children who were supposed to have gone to these schools? Where will they go?

Mr. Speaker, do you know why these units were not built? The same company said that they were unable to secure contractors; market pressures. Well, Mr. Speaker, who created the market pressures in the first place? Where are your priorities? You are building a tsunami stadium for \$500 million for a cricket match without the required approval. The Prime Minister had no problem to get a contractor to build that tsunami stadium down on the highway there; without approval on top of that, but they could not get a contractor to build one single early childhood centre. Where are your priorities? It is a question of where; it is an issue of priorities; and we have shown that children are very low on the list of priorities of the Government. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, I come now to primary school construction. Again, hear them in the last budget!

“At the primary level, the Government would rebuild some 150 primary schools to replace schools which are up to 50 years old. In fiscal 2006, 20 of these schools which cater for approximately 10,000 pupils would be reconstructed.”

How many were actually done in 2006? Again, the answer is shameful.

I quote, again, from the article from the *Guardian*:

“The release added that the EFCL has begun construction on only one primary school...”

This is at the end of the fiscal year. [*Desk thumping*] The Minister of Finance and his dear wife, the Minister of Education, said that they were very happy with their individual performances in those portfolios. Again, I say, the Government has lost its way.

Mr. Speaker, I come now to de-shifting. Everyone acknowledges the horror of schools operating on a shift system. Many of our people have gone through the shift system and have come out dysfunctional because of the shift system they have operated on. The UNC commitment was to de-shift those schools, and if the government was not stolen from us we would have de-shifted those schools. We would have done it! [*Desk thumping*] So, what has happened?

Mr. Speaker, in the 2006 budget speech, hear them!

“At the secondary level, the major initiative is the de-shifting and conversion of junior secondary schools to five-and-seven-year schools as well as the conversion of senior secondary comprehensive schools to seven-year schools. In fiscal year 2006, an additional 10 schools, five junior secondary schools and five senior secondary schools would be de-shifted allowing an additional 3,200 students to benefit from full-day schooling during this academic year.”

How many were actually done? Again, this same company that they have set up, the EFCL, had confessed that only three schools have been de-shifted. What was the response of the Minister of Education? Studiously ignoring yet another failure, she noted that no de-shifted school would have more than 875 students.

Mr. Speaker, who has asked for that? We asked how many schools have been de-shifted. If you go back over the last five years, you would see that if they have de-shifted five of those schools, they would have done many. The Minister said, sidestepping the issue, do you know what? We would not put more than 870-odd children in those schools.

Mr. Speaker, what about the staff? If you go through the estimates you are going to see how much money was allocated. What became of that if you did not de-shift? If you are de-shifting, you would have a plan in place. You do not wait until when the school term starts next year, or when you are finished with de-shifting of schools to try to find teachers. You have to plan in advance. What did you do with the moneys that were allocated? De-shifting requires a planned programme approach; ensuring that all the infrastructures are in place; not just physical structure, but staff and equipment and so forth. What has become of that? This is the fifth budget. What has happened in the last four years with the de-shifting programme? Were they in fact ever sourced or even put in place in the first place, or did the Government expect to fail so it did nothing and they put nothing in place? Did they ever have any intention to fulfil these budget promises?

By now, we should have had a surplus of teachers, desks, chairs, computers and other equipment, which would have been assigned to the de-shifted schools, but since you did not de-shift, you could have sent them to other schools. Today, there are so many other schools that are protesting because of staff shortages and equipment shortages. No planning; no thinking.

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Mr. Speaker, the problem does not end here. The Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA) has complained that the maintenance of schools is also a problem. Recently, in one incident, fire officers condemned two blocks of the Point Fortin Secondary School, citing complaints about the quality of work being done. Permell has called, and I support his call, for an engineering audit of all schools.

Mr. Speaker, may I repeat, the Minister of Education is very happy with her performance. When we were in government, for the first time we put in place a system where principals of schools would receive a maintenance grant so that they would not have to go cap in hand to beg the ministry for any light bulb which they would need to change, or any small maintenance issue which may arise which you know, through the bureaucracy, would have to go to Port of Spain and then it would take so long. All the principal would need to do is to fix a broken window or a light bulb. We gave a maintenance grant every month to principals of schools so that they could maintain their schools on a local basis.

I was shocked to learn that schools, especially the primary schools, have to go cap in hand now. They have reverted to the old system, where money is no problem, to beg for funds to fix a chair or a desk.

Mr. Speaker, I call upon the Government to give the schools back the grants in their hands. They are going to manage it. [*Desk thumping*] They would manage it better than you do, because by the time it leaves your ministry, through the various nails of bureaucracy, it may be too late and a child may have fallen and broken a leg on one of those damaged chairs that they were trying to fix.

Mr. Speaker, up to today, the New Grant Primary School is in such a decrepit state, and the Government is talking about de-shifting secondary schools. This primary school had to establish an involuntary shift system. So, while they are talking about de-shifting, which they are not doing, there are schools that are now being forced to go into the shift system because the Government has failed to maintain them.

Elswick Presbyterian School was condemned and no building has been built for them, and students had to be moved to the Poole Presbyterian which means inconvenience and transport cost and so forth. Mr. Speaker, this is really an indictment in the education sector.

The TTUTA President seems to be more aware of what is going on in education. He says:

“One suspects it is because of bureaucracy, but we are convinced that all our complaints are not handled. But trust me, there are a large stock of primary schools and other schools that need help...fast”.

12.15 p.m.

Do we build a tsunami stadium? Do we build a tsunami stadium whilst our children are going to decrepit, shambling, broken down schools; while our hospitals are in the condition that they are? Where are the priorities? The Government has developed the love for the catchy phrase “Vision 2020”. Their priorities are confused. Money to burn, as the saying goes; education is in chaos; schools are being condemned; teachers are not being paid; short staffing; failure to build.

I ask again, where is the money going? Where is all that money going? Not only is the future of education of our children compromised, the very quality of their lives is also in trouble. When we come to the environment we see the same failure on the part of Government. Government has lost its way again.

If this Government is to be remembered in history, it will be for one thing; for the destruction of the environment of Trinidad and Tobago. Its housing policy is dependent on converting arable land into house spots without EMA approval. Today we see hundreds of acres of land which was formerly under sugar cane being used to build houses on. The Government tries to convince people that this was not good arable land. They have to clear organic material several feet deep prior to construction, but they say it is not good arable land.

By far the worst example of wanton destruction of the environment is taking place as we speak in Chatham and La Brea. Hundreds and hundreds of acres of virgin forest are being destroyed; converted into a vast dust bowl. Natural flora and fauna, unknown species and natural habitats for our wildlife—the wildlife has been slaughtered under direct instruction of this Government as they have engaged in their done deal with those smelters. This is happening despite the pleas of the residents who are faced with armed police. The response of the Government; the smelter would go on.

Mr. Speaker, there are so many unanswered questions about this deal, but I just want to quote from two indices because time is against us. I want to refer you to two environmental studies done by the Socioeconomic Data and Applications Centre (SEDAC) called the Environmental Performance Index (EPI) and Environmental Sustainable Index (ESI).

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The EPI records high scores for Trinidad and Tobago on air quality, water resources, productive natural resources. We know that these will change once the smelter plants come into operation. It recorded extremely poor performance when it came to the use of sustainable energy, like oil and gas, and the protection of our biodiversity and natural habitats.

Let me repeat what the environmentalists and the Cedros residents have been saying: This Government has been given failing marks on the use of sustainable energy in the protection of our biodiversity and natural habitats. This is a totally new index; there is nothing available for comparison. The more relevant index is the Environmental Sustainable Index (ESI) which was released at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland in January 2005. In this one, not the performance index as it was, that we have already spoken of; this chastises government on the sustainability of the index. The ESI details 146 countries' ability to manage and sustain the environment over the next few decades.

On this index Trinidad and Tobago has fallen from 121st to the rank of 139th. In this index there has been a slide on every major world index in Trinidad and Tobago over the last five years; this is one of them. From 129th in 2002, we have gone to 139th, but you know how many countries there are? There are 146 countries. You know what that means? We are way down at the bottom of it.

The index goes further, citing a vast potential of rich natural endowment and diversity; biodiversity is under serious threat. [*Interruption*] I will cut some of it. When we come to infrastructure; so we have disrespected the environment; we have lost our way with respect to protection of our environment and I want to make it very clear here today, that a UNC Government will deal with the matter of the done deal on the smelter issue. I will say further that Government has failed to take into account the voices and the pleas of the people and therefore it will take a UNC government to hear the people and revisit any deal done with respect to those smelters. Development must not be at the expense of our citizens.

Mr. Speaker, when we come to infrastructure, we also know that they have failed to deliver in every regard. With respect to the infrastructure, I will leave that for my colleagues to handle later in the debate. There is just one idea I want to mention, a great UNC idea, the water taxi, very good idea; but when you go into the estimates in those books; for a major project like the water taxis, you know it is never going to happen under this Government, because within the estimates of expenditure, not one single cent has been allocated to develop the infrastructure that will be necessary to have a water taxi operating. Because you do not just hire

a water taxi and send it from Port of Spain to San Fernando—up and down; you have to build a berthing port for the thing to come in; you have to do that. In order to do that you have to allocate funding in the budget. This Government is not serious, once again, to deliver things. They mentioned things that sound really grand and outstanding, but they do not do them. “Government by vaps”, we used that last year when we said it.

In the business community, this is the community we say that the energy sector is the backbone of the country. I would like to say that the business community is the ribcage of the country which protects the heart of the country. Because if you have to go, in terms of generating full-time productive employment, this is the community that will provide the fallback in the event that we have shocks in the oil and gas and so on. So our view is that the Government has done very little to help the businessmen in the last five years.

What has happened now is Government is crowing that kidnappings have fallen, but when we read the reports that are coming, kidnappings have not really fallen; they have taken a different form. The business community is now telling us and it is reported in the media, that they have to pay caution money up front to prevent the kidnappings from taking place.

When I used to go to university and you signed up for your degree and so on, the university required you to pay a caution fee; that was in the event you broke anything that they would have it at the end of the education. What we have here now is the business community, in order to protect wife or husband or children, they have to pay caution money in the form of protection money to ensure that they are not kidnapped. The business community has not been treated well, and as I said, when we go to every major index and these are the human development indices, not the growth indices used by the speaker; when we go to them, Trinidad and Tobago has declined in every one of them.

So when we look at the Global Competitiveness Index, we see we have fallen there. When we look at the Arthur Lok Jack institution, they have brought out something called a CCI. This CCI has several indicators; they are dealing with financial performance. Here the financial outlook goes short term and long term. Over the past six months and the last quarter—

Hon. Member: You have 20 more minutes.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Twenty more minutes? I think the Speaker said I could go until 3.00 p.m. The Financial Performance Index gives a generalized overview of the past financial performance of the firm. More executives felt that

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the financial performance had deteriorated over the past six months than in the last quarter. This index decreased by 25 index points.

The financial outlook index measures executives' opinion about expected financial performance of their firms in the short term, six months; the long term, 12 months. Over the last three months executives' short run financial outlook fell by 20 index points and their outlook for the long term fell by 15 months; so we have been falling on all these.

This line continues a downward trend of index since the third quarter of 2005. It is consistent with movements in the Financial Performance Index. These indices, local and global economic outlook explore expectations of level economic activity on a local and global scale. The game is to quantify expectations about the performance of the macroeconomy.

In addition to investment, employment and micro financial health, this index measures consumption, Government's spending, the value of exports and imports. The outlook for the local economy was less optimistic this quarter. Executive expectations for the local economy in the short and long run also fell by 20 and 21 points as well. So expectations for the local economy are consistent with the other indices, which comprise the GCI.

Mr. Speaker, as we move on, with respect to indices, I will take a look now at some of the international indices that we have looked at. The Global Competitiveness Report; the World Economic Forum annually puts out the competitiveness report. Competitiveness is defined as a collection of factors, policies, institutions that determine the level of productivity of the country, and so they determine the level of prosperity that can be attained by an economy.

There is the growth competitiveness index. This is the GCI; it measures the macro indicators in the country. It is comprised of the quality of the macro economic environment; the state of the country's public institutions and the importance of technology and innovation. It comes as no surprise that on the GCI we have rated very poorly. In fact, since this Government came into office, Trinidad and Tobago has continually been experiencing a downward slide from a rank of 38 in 2001 to when we reached 2005. We are now at rank 60; we continue to slide under the PNM.

Under the business competitiveness this measures two ARS. It measures the sophistication of company operations and strategy and the quality of overarching national business environment in which they are operating. What this measures are the micro-economic issues. On the macro we have fallen on these international indices, but also on the micro we have fallen. So we have come from pride of

place on the business competitive index at No. 34 under the UNC in 2001; we have fallen to 65 in 2005 under this PNM.

When we look at the quality of the national business environment, this is a separate index; this now ranks our country at 63. This is the quality of the national business environment; we are at a rank of 63. This is unacceptable given our incomes at this time. The 2006 World Economic Foreign Report was partially released last week, and it shows again that Trinidad and Tobago's Global Competitiveness Index slid further; there has been a further slippage; down from the 66 last year to now 67 in 2006. An even poorer showing is revealed with respect to the micro-indicators, where our institutions, there has been a slippage down to 85; infrastructure down to 70; market efficiency down to 69.

To highlight the fact that economic indicators are poor indicators of a country's state, it is important to list that even our macroeconomic figures with respect to GDP per capita being high, on our macroeconomy this index ranks us at 38.

So while the figures for BCI and GCI are not yet complete, what they have released so far we expect that we will continue to slide further in the report for this year, 2006. Whilst these indicators are telling us directly that they correlate with the corporate confidence index, the local and international levels coincide. So all these indices I am saying that we have had a slide under this Government.

There is another area of massive spending by Government. Government spending has reached unprecedented levels. We cannot continue to sustain that kind of spending and therefore we call on Government to really halt their reckless spending in this regard.

Mr. Speaker, I move towards another area. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Mr. Speaker, with your leave I will table the entire document that I wrote, but I know the time in the House is limited. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Mr. Speaker, I need to speak on energy because it is an important area. I shall speak with respect to energy. There is some basic arithmetic here that seems to be misleading. There is something misleading with respect to the numbers the Minister has given us. On page 51 of the budget statement, the hon. Prime Minister said:

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"Mr. Speaker, the budget for fiscal year 2007 provides for total revenue of the \$35,125.9 million..."

which is lower than the estimated revenue collections for fiscal 2006. The hon. Minister said:

"The main reasons for the shortfall are the lower oil and gas prices used in the revenue calculations for the new fiscal year."

12.30 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, I do not understand this arithmetic and I wish the hon. Prime Minister would help us, because it seems to go against what we traditionally learn at our schools. The Minister said that the reason given for the shortfall—and I want to remind you the words—on revenue collections for last fiscal year was because they were based on lower oil and gas prices. I repeat, "The main reasons for the shortfall are the lower oil and gas prices used in the revenue calculations for the new fiscal year."

Mr. Speaker, we all know that in the last fiscal year, you predicated upon a barrel of \$35; this year you are predicating upon a barrel of \$45. As far as I know—arithmetic, \$45 is more than \$35 and therefore the reason given—*[Interruption]* No, you will stand and explain it when your time comes. The reason the Minister gives, he says, that the shortfall; the reason that you got less revenue than estimated for last year—estimated revenue collections are lower—the reason for the shortfall was lower oil and gas prices used in the revenue calculations for the new fiscal year. But the new fiscal year has a higher—\$45 I know is always more than \$35; and so you have it wrong. You have it wrong! And denial is not going to stop it; \$45 is always more than \$35, so you would need to explain that to us. *[Crosstalk]*

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Mr. Speaker, the petroleum sector accounts for approximately 40 per cent of GDP; almost half of Government revenue, and therefore, we know the economy is predicated on energy and as such, the proper management of this sector is really essential. This year the sector is framed against a back crop of turbulent times for oil and gas on the international markets which are underpinned by geopolitical risk factors.

In recent times—

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the Leader of the Opposition is just about coming to an end of her speech; give her the courtesy of being heard, please.

Mr. K. Persad-Bissessar: Mr. Speaker, the truth offends. [*Interruption*] I am saying we have already seen in recent times how volatile the price of oil and gas can be. From a peak of \$79 per barrel in August, West Texas intermediate crude plunged to \$59 per barrel last week. In the last 10 months natural gas price in the US has fallen by 75 per cent. In light of these falling prices Government continues with its programme of economic inefficiency, waste and squandermania.

Mr. Speaker, there is a possibility in those numbers quoted by the hon. Prime Minister, that the reason I suspect that he did not give us the revenue collections for last year; the reason that the shortfall in last year's estimated numbers is because fiscal 2006—the shortfall in 2006 I suspect is because of output shocks. Let the hon. Prime Minister come and tell us if this is true. Come and tell us if it is true because we saw last year when the then Leader of the Opposition warned Government that the price of oil could fall they laughed at him, Mr. Speaker. This year we have seen that the price has fallen. So there is volatility as we all know.

Mr. Speaker, today I want to add another warning; I want to call on Government to slow down. If we look at the gas reserves and the Deep Ibis failure we are faced with the reality of our proven natural gas reserves running out in less than 14 years. I stress on proven reserves as we are well aware that there are probable and possible reserves, but it is the proven reserves that matter most to the investors and the bankers.

It is well known that Government and its main gas supplier bpTT; they banked quite heavily on the Deep Ibis well delivering a major gas find. Indeed, the hon. Prime Minister and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries went there on that platform with the Deep Ibis well because they really banked and believed that the output would be so tremendous; of course it failed. It failed. Mr. Speaker, regrettably, it is said by some—some say it—that the hon. Prime Minister blighted the Ibis well. [*Desk thumping*] He blighted the well because no output there; this must now alert us to output shocks in the energy sector.

Given our tenuous position with respect to gas reserves the Government must now tell us about the status of the negotiations with Venezuela. Those talks have been shrouded in mystery. Despite the fact that we are running low on gas, Government has signed a plethora of MOUs with foreign and local investors for construction of downstream plants. It seems the Minister of Finance is not only

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misleading the nation, he has taken his trade to foreign investors. Perhaps, that is the reason for clandestine arrangements, to sell out the nation's patrimony.

Proven oil reserves also are estimated to last another 13 years. *[Interruption]* This means that by 2020 Trinidad and Tobago could have no gas at all. That is probably what Vision 2020 is, Mr. Speaker. Given our reserves and the condition, the Opposition is of the view that the time for Government has come to invest in renewable energy projects such as solar energy and wind energy. While this Government has rushed to close down and destroy the sugar industry, in Brazil what they have developed; they have used their sugar industry to produce ethanol and now that fuels over half the vehicles in their country. We must also provide in times of plenty for a rainy day. Brazil is a model of what is possible in the field of alternative fuels.

Mr. Speaker, just a word on the RSF as I close—the issue of saving. This Government has implicitly indicated that it is de-emphasizing savings. Last year it based its expenditure on an oil price of \$35 per barrel. Naturally, any price higher than \$35 would have generated surplus and that could have been placed in the RSF, as in fact happened. What did Government do for the current fiscal year? They have now based expenditure on \$45, so that if the price of oil stays at \$45 or goes under nothing is to go into the fund since revenue will be equal to expenditure. Savings for future generations is not for this Government. Government does not understand the purpose of using a portion of the energy rents to build a stock of assets to ensure improvements in the well being of those future citizens for whom we are trustees. Government has failed to understand the purpose of the RSF established by the UNC.

Mr. Speaker, under the UNC we had indicated that \$22 per barrel—anything above \$22 would have gone into that fund as a savings. You have raised the ante last year to \$35 and you have raised it again now to \$45 when you could have taken the windfall that is coming and placed it in a heritage fund for our children. That, too, would have been able to help to contract in the economy because you would have been saving more and therefore you would have been assisting in dealing with inflation; you would have more savings.

So, Mr. Speaker, I ask Government to consider that they should move towards having \$5 billion put into the heritage fund and they need to understand very clearly that heritage fund should not be touched. It should not be touched until such time that it is truly needed; not for projects; not for monetary support; not to build tsunami stadiums and not to do anything. It must go in there and the legislation be such—I looked at the draft legislation; it will come to the Parliament; I will speak

on it then, let me say that it does not give the protection to the money that it should. Government rushed that in to bring it before the budget, because every single year we have been attacking them for failing to bring RSF legislation to the country.

So, Mr. Speaker, as I close I want to say that the UNC is not about new politics. The UNC is not about new politics; that is for the elitist! [*Laughter*] [*Desk thumping*] The UNC, Mr. Speaker, is not about the old politics.

Mr. Manning: What is your point?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: The old politics is a totalitarian state that the PNM is putting forward. Mr. Speaker, the UNC is about putting people in the centre. [*Desk thumping*] And that is why I say when you look at the governance indicators; [*Interruption*] this Government has failed in the governance indicators put out by World Bank 2006 on every single one of those indicators; voice of the people and accountability to the people under UNC had 63.8 per cent; a slide under the PNM to 59.9 per cent; effectiveness of the national Government in 2000, under the UNC, 71.8 per cent a slide down to 63.6 per cent under the PNM; just application of the rule of law 2000, UNC, 64.9 per cent under the PNM now 52.7 per cent; regulatory quality under the UNC, 78.3 per cent, under the PNM a slide 69.9 per cent; controlling corruption under the UNC, 66.7 per cent, PNM, 56.2 per cent. [*Interruption*].

Mr. Speaker: No, no. Member, take your seat please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Oh, sorry.

Mr. Speaker: The Member is just about winding up and she is reaching a crescendo; [*Laughter*] so allow her.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: I thank you, Mr. Speaker. Speaking in the Parliament must really have—you have to be like an orchestra playing a symphony, so I thank you for acknowledging that I should get to that point. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker, these are governance indicators put out by a World Bank report in 2006, and so on the last indicator has to do with political stability. Under the UNC in 2000 that indicator, we were ranked at 55.7 per cent, after five years of PNM, in 2005 we went down to 43.4 per cent.

I have used this opportunity to review some of the Government's programmes; "Review of Major Sectors"; there are several other major sectors that are to come and my colleagues will deal with them in terms of agriculture which is a major thrust. I have used that time as I say to review, but, Mr. Speaker, I have made some suggestions as well. I have said that for the working poor to assist them to

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build their homes we need to put in place something like an HOSP (Home Ownership Savings Plan). I have said for the very poor we need to put an earned income tax credit; that is a programme that will assist the very poor.

Mr. Speaker, several of the suggestions are contained within them; under labour I have given you some indicators there as well. And so it is time as we look at what has happened in this economy, as we look to where Government is taking us; that we must now really sit up and take notice, because if we fail to do so then we will have to face a disaster road, that I said before; we will have to see that our children have gone.

There is just one more programme that I would like to recommend to Government which is happening with the school plant and the plant every year. In addition to all these books that you put out every year there is one called the PSIP. I want to suggest, Sir, through you, that Government should also have a PSMP and this is a Public Sector Maintenance Programme; [*Desk thumping*] because we see what happens to school plant; we see what is happening to the hospitals. We must not wait for something to be broken before we fix it. A Public Sector Maintenance Programme placed within the budget would allow you to budget for it; plan for it and to take it forward, Mr. Speaker.

With these words, I thank you for your time and I thank my colleagues for giving me this opportunity to lead them off in this debate.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the sitting of the House is suspended for lunch and will be resumed at 2.00 p.m.

12.42 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

2.00 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is customary in the House that when somebody speaks for the first time, we congratulate that speaker. That is normal parliamentary practice. Certainly, I would like to follow that practice; not because the Member for Siparia and current Leader of the Opposition has spoken for the first time, but because the Member has spoken for the first time in the capacity of Leader of the Opposition and I take this opportunity on behalf of those of us on this side to congratulate the Member for speaking in that capacity.

Mr. Speaker, you know sometimes it is a little unfortunate that you have to give a compliment, but because of the reality of the situation, you also have to give a backhanded slap and, unfortunately, as I give the compliment, because we

in the profession that we are in, I also have to give the backhanded slap. The response that we got today, certainly as far as women are concerned, has moved the women's movement or the desire to have women in politics back almost 100 years and I do not think that I am exaggerating—

Mr. Imbert: A thousand.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Some on this side are saying a thousand. Mr. Speaker, it was unfortunate that the Leader of the Opposition spoke for almost three hours but took the opportunity on live television to misinform the public; to use deliberate falsehoods; to use information that was far from the truth; to use information that does not exist; to also use this opportunity to be unbowed, undeterred and disconnected with reality.

Mr. Speaker, fortunately, there are other women in the politics; other women in this House of Representatives and I can assure you that we the women in the politics of Trinidad and Tobago would rescue the women's movement [*Desk thumping*] and we would ensure that the misinformation that was used by the current Leader of the Opposition would be put to rest. We would take this opportunity to show what the facts are. We would also take this opportunity to ensure that any woman who comes into politics would feel proud to be a woman in politics. I could also assure you I am quite convinced that women in politics in the future would all be coming on this side of the House, under the People's National Movement. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, it is, I repeat, unfortunate, because the information used by the Leader of the Opposition, from her very introduction was pathetic; a pathetic mish mash of confused, pseudo economic gobbledegook. She demonstrated a complete ignorance of economics—she declared that although the country's GDP has doubled under the PNM, she is also saying at the same time that there has been absolutely no improvement in the economic conditions of the country or of the people. Absolute nonsense, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Imbert: Rubbish.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: She sat there or stood there talking—sorry; I would not like Tabaquite to use Standing Order 37 on me.

Dr. Nanan: 36(7).

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: 36(7). The Leader of the Opposition completely ignored the fact that our per capita GDP is now almost US \$14,000 which places us, this small country, amongst the highest levels of per capita income in the

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Western Hemisphere. [*Desk thumping*] That is fact and nothing that the Leader of the Opposition, the Member of Siparia, says, can change that fact.

Mr. Speaker, additionally, we have moved this country from a GDP of less than \$8,000 during their time in office to now over \$44,000 and moving steadily to \$66 billion. I repeat, we have reached \$44,000 and they are moving steadily to \$66 billion. That is fact, real constant GDP. Mr. Speaker, that is fact, nothing could be further from the truth from what the Member for Siparia said. As I talk about the GDP and the perseverance of the macroeconomic—and Mr. Speaker, forgive me if I use the words of the Leader of the COP and I know he loves these words, the macroeconomic fundamentals. [*Laughter*] The macroeconomic fundamentals.

Mr. Speaker, you would also recall that in the Leader of the Opposition's contribution, the Member spoke about the Central Bank's view of inflation and that we were not in keeping with what the Governor of the Central Bank had to say about inflation. First of all, the Governor of the Central Bank, I am sure, needs no defending by the Leader of the Opposition. [*Desk thumping*] What I find very strange, but perhaps it is in keeping with the way they turn from one side to the next, a few months ago, it was those on that side who said that the Governor of the Central Bank was a puppet of the PNM administration; that the Governor of the Central Bank has no mind of his own; that he was being used as a political tool by the Government, but now they are defending everything that the Governor of the Central Bank said.

It is even strange that somebody who was in the bowels of the UNC government or the NAR government I should say; somebody who was steeped in the politics, who was the Governor of the Central Bank at a particular time, the Member for St. Augustine, it was strange that they never said that about that Member because he was active in politics at the time that he became the Governor of the Central Bank. But what is happening now, the Governor of the Central Bank as the Central Bank is in charge of monetary policy, they are free to say what they want and to look at the situation as they see it. It is also incumbent on the Government of the day to ensure that we look at the situation, the macroeconomy and we also make pronouncements on how our policy would impact on inflation.

Mr. Speaker, we recognize that there are inflationary pressures being brought to bear on the economy. At the same time, we recognize that as there is inflation, we must ensure that inflation is coupled with policies to ensure that the level of inflation decreases; but without interfering with the need to develop Trinidad and

Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] The issue is—and we recognize it clearly—once you are in a position to develop your country, you have to make every effort to ensure that development takes place. Never again in Trinidad and Tobago must anyone be able to say that we had money and it passed through this country like a dose of salt with nothing to show for it. Even though as a PNM administration, we will be able to show how many things were done even during that time when that was said. Nobody in Trinidad and Tobago could rightly say that they are not looking around this country and seeing development taking place. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, this development is not just buildings. This development is the development of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We have no apologies for the development that we are proceeding with. We would not apologize for the development that is taking place in Trinidad and Tobago because as we move this country forward, three years ago, the Prime Minister said that we would use our energy resources to move this country from one stage to the next. It is through our energy resources that we would make the quantum leap that would take us from developing to developed country and we make no apologies for that. That is why with each budget, we move this country to the next step.

We recognize and we admit that there would be inflation; there would be other situations that develop; but we also recognize that we would put the policies in place to ensure the inflation and the other issues that do develop, do not put a damper on the development nor do they interfere in any significant way with the macroeconomic fundamentals. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, another issue that the Leader of the Opposition mentioned in the attempt to misinform the population, was the assessment of CSO's unemployment figures. Again, I would term it as being unfortunate. It is the same mechanism that the CSO used during their administration to determine the unemployment figures that is being used now to determine the unemployment figures.

We did an assessment of these figures and if the Leader of the Opposition had looked at the *Review of the Economy* at appendix VI, the hon. Member would have seen the assessment. The movement of unemployment from 2004 to 2006; the movement of unemployment figures from the 1990s to the current figures. I would like to take this opportunity to go through what the *Review of the Economy* stated in simple terms. I do not know if the hon. Member attempted to do that and did not understand what was before her, or whether she was just being mischievous, as is her wont, and attempting to mislead the population as usual.

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2.15 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, in 2004, the total number of persons employed was 580,700; in 2006, that figure had moved to 582,400. The 2000 figure, when the UNC administration was in office, was 503,100 persons. We have moved from 503,100 to 582,400; [*Laughter*] [*Crosstalk*] almost 80,000 new jobs. This is since their administration was moved out of office. I am not just going to quote these figures. The *Review of the Economy* also indicated where the jobs came.

You would recall that the Member insisted that it was just make-work programmes and no permanent employment; on the contrary, in the petroleum sector, 2004, 17,100 jobs; in 2006, 19,500; in the construction sector, 91,400 jobs; in 2006, 96,300 jobs; in retail trade, 102,100 jobs in 2004; in 2006, 104,700 jobs. Between 2004 and 2006, unemployment moved from 7.8 per cent to 6.8 per cent. In the year 2000, the unemployment figure was 12.2 per cent. It is now 6.8 per cent under this administration; we have half the unemployment figure, with real jobs for real people. I have stressed real jobs for real people, because as we look at these figures they remind me of the figures we had in the 2000 election, where under the UNC administration the number of persons eligible to vote was over 900,000.

Mr. Imbert: 930,000.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: To be specific, 930,000 under their administration. Today, the number is just over 800,000. [*Laughter*] Mr. Speaker, 100,000 people have disappeared from the voters list. [*Crosstalk*] I just mentioned that to indicate that in a population which has not decreased, suddenly, 100,000 persons are missing from the list. It is just in keeping with the kind of information that those on that side would want us to believe.

Miss Lucky: Do not generalize.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Sorry; Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, I should not call all on that side; I apologize.

Miss Lucky: Thank you just for that. [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: I apologize for including the hon. Member for Pointe-a-Pierre in that group of people, because we know that the Member does not believe that politics has a morality of its own; "Integrity must reign free." I am quoting, Mr. Speaker.

I talked about that to also bring us to another piece of misinformation foisted upon the population about an hour earlier in relation to the issue of housing.

Unfortunately, the Member for Siparia decided to go all over the place in her budget contribution. Sometimes people think that if they use a scatter shot, they must hit something; something must stick somewhere, but unfortunately, housing should not be one of those scatter shots. Housing is certainly one of the areas of which the Prime Minister to any Member of this Government would say has been doing excellently under this administration. [*Desk thumping*]

The PNM, almost from the time of its inception, from the time that we have been in government, one of the things we have said is that housing the people of Trinidad and Tobago is of extreme importance. Anytime we have sat in government, housing has been a major part of our portfolio; a major part of ensuring the development of Trinidad and Tobago and the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I must take this opportunity to congratulate the Member for San Fernando East, our Prime Minister, on his budget presentation, which was in keeping with what this administration has shown. That was one of the best budget statements of this administration. [*Desk thumping*] The Member must be congratulated.

Prime Minister Patrick Manning in his 2006/2007 budget presentation had this to say about the housing situation. He said that a prime function of any responsible government was to ensure that affordable, quality housing units were available to those who otherwise would not be able to acquire that basic necessity. The Prime Minister further stated that the Government fully understood that a proper home meant a more settled family, whereby members could devote themselves to other worthwhile pursuits, including education, the pursuit of suitable careers, the maintenance of a stable and cohesive family unit and the making of a greater contribution to community and national life.

Consistently, those on the other side would have us believe that the housing programme is a voter padding or house padding exercise. We would like to ask the question: If for six years they built no houses for the people of Trinidad and Tobago and the number of persons who need houses continue to increase, what should we do? Should we sit for five years and not build a single house, for fear of them saying that it is a house padding exercise? Absolute nonsense. We would continue, as we have done since the 1960s, to provide housing for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, especially for those persons who are most in need of housing. [*Desk thumping*]

Imagine a Ministry of Housing, as they had under their administration, that built absolutely no house for any citizen. We will not be accused of that. The information provided by the Member for Siparia, again, was grossly inaccurate.

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First of all, her calculations on the eligibility criteria for housing were totally bogus.

Mr. Imbert: Totally!

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Even if the Member said that she got information from the website, in the Prime Minister's budget statement at pages 26 and 27, it was stated that the minimum threshold for qualification for housing was \$1,440 per month.

Mr. Imbert: It is right there in black and white.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Someone earning the minimum wage could qualify for a mortgage. Even if the person could not get a mortgage, we have put other mechanisms and arrangements in place. We have the rent to own programme; the 2 per cent mortgage programme and the hereditary mortgage. It was total nonsense for the Member for Siparia to stand in this House and mislead the population totally. Even minutes after her response was made, people were saying that she was totally incorrect. Unfortunately, it would appear as though she did not read the document; on page 26, it is clear. [*Crosstalk*] Even if the Member did not read the document, it was in the newspapers.

Hon. Member: "She doh read."

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: The hon. Member sat in the House when the Prime Minister reached page 26, which stated quite clearly what the situation would be; but, again, misleading the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Even if I am to be more specific, on a typical house made available to citizens by the Housing Development Corporation (HDC), the subsidy provided by the PNM is as follows: a typical house, \$50,000 on infrastructure; \$25,000 on land; \$50,000 on building construction; \$200,000 on mortgage interest over the life of the mortgage loan; a total subsidy of \$325,000. This is not any dollar-for-dollar nonsense. Dollar-for-dollar what? So if you do not have the dollar, it means you cannot get a house.

Mr. Imbert: Just like tertiary education.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Exactly like the situation with their dollar-for-dollar tertiary education; if you did not have the dollar, you could not participate in tertiary education. Under this administration, whether you have the dollar or you do not have the dollar, you could get the house and you could get the tertiary education.

Mr. Speaker, we are providing for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Not only because we want to provide for the people—[*Interruption*]—

nothing will happen. [*Laughter*] Mr. Speaker, they are telling me to take it easy, but the children moving. [*Laughter*] [*Desk thumping*] In keeping with the budget, they are moving onward. [*Laughter*]

Miss Lucky: They are looking forward to being born.

Dr. Khan: Camille, I am still here, [*Laughter*] so "doh" worry.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: We are providing, not only because the energy dollars are at a particular level, but this is consistent with what we have said over the years. We are providing for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We deliver, because the PNM cares for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] We care whether we sit on that side of the House or we sit on this side of the House.

2.30 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, it is housing for all and it is not the housing for all like how they talked about water for all. It is a reality—housing for all—and we will trumpet that from now until the last person who needs a house in Trinidad and Tobago gets a house.

Mr. Speaker, remember there was also talk about the energy and I really feel that that part of the response was written by the Member for Couva South because we know his personality.

Mr. Imbert: Machiavellian.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: We know that given the opportunity, Couva South would cut the throat of anybody on that side, particularly the Member for Siparia. I really feel that the Member for Couva South wrote this part of the speech because it was almost startling that the Leader of the Opposition told us that there was a shortfall in the budget. Mr. Speaker, if the Leader of the Opposition had taken the time to look at the documents herself, she would have seen that there was no shortfall. Member for Couva South, I am really disappointed in you for doing something like that.

Mr. Imbert: Wicked!

Mr. Valley: It has to be the Member for Couva South.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Speaker, imagine the budgeted amount for tax revenue was \$28.6 billion in the last fiscal year and the actual amount was \$33 billion. Is that a shortfall? Twenty-eight billion dollars was budgeted, \$33 billion was received.

Mr. Imbert: In her mind that is a shortfall.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Speaker, you know I consistently say I am the Minister of Planning and Development but you and I know that I am an attorney-at-law by profession. Even I know that \$28.6 billion is less than \$33 billion; we budgeted that amount but we really got \$33 billion. We got more money; Mr. Speaker, is that a shortfall? Mr. Speaker, you are not answering but I will answer for you, Mr. Speaker. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Speaker, the non-tax revenue we budgeted \$3.9 billion and received \$4.1 billion. Is that a shortfall, Mr. Speaker? Previously I was saying maybe it was a little misrepresentation but I am coming to the conclusion that it was another deliberate misrepresentation to be foisted on the people of Trinidad and Tobago. All that the Leader of the Opposition did was irresponsible in the extreme and you would also recall that we came back to this House for supplementary appropriation.

Mr. Imbert: She was asleep.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: We also came to indicate that we were putting more money into the Revenue Stabilization Fund, more money into the Infrastructure Development Fund all because there was a surplus and not a shortfall.

Mr. Speaker, it is really unfortunate that the Leader of the Opposition had such a golden opportunity to say so much to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, but took the opportunity to mislead them.

Mr. Speaker, I will respond to the issue of the debit card. Again, deliberately misleading the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The Member said that because of the current situation with poverty being so high that over 60,000 persons have qualified or are in receipt of the debit card. As a matter of fact, the Member quoted the Member for San Fernando East as saying it was 60,000 persons who qualified for the debit card.

Mr. Speaker, it is so unfortunate. Those of us who were listening and who wish to report the truth recall that it was said 16,000. Why did the Member for Siparia take this opportunity to say it was 60,000? That was so unnecessary. What was also incorrect—let us say it was 60,000 persons and her figures were correct, then the number being spent on those debit cards would have been approximately \$300 million.

Mr. Imbert: Where is that in the budget?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: In fact, the amount being spent is less than \$100 million, clearly showing that it is approximately 16,000 persons who need the debit card. But as usual, the Leader of the Opposition in keeping with the previous Leader of the Opposition feel they must say anything to score political points, but thankfully, we on this side are here to correct any and all misinformation given by those on the other side.

Mr. Speaker, the Member also went on to talk about persons living on \$3 per day. Not even a primary school child goes to school with \$3 per day. Totally incorrect information! She went on to talk about pensioners just getting \$100 more and I find it really amusing that the Leader of the Opposition would have said that especially when in 1977 first and then in 1999, the then Minister of Finance said—and it was the same thing said in 1998.

Furthermore, I propose to increase old age pension from \$520 to \$620. [*Desk thumping*]

An increase of \$100 per month and in brackets—[*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, who are the desk thumpers? The same ones who complaining about \$100 per month. We have moved old age pension from \$720 when we came into office to \$1,250 as it stands today. [*Desk thumping*] In addition to that, apart from the senior citizen's grant as it is now called, our senior citizens are entitled to free medical attention; free medication, free bus passes, free surgery at any level.

Mr. Speaker, it has been a giving of the petro dollars at all levels of the society. We have not kept the dollars for ourselves, we have ensured that citizens at every level have benefited from the petro dollars that are now in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, I would also take the opportunity to debunk what the Leader of the Opposition said about some aspects of education. [*Crosstalk*] A debate is a response to either sense or nonsense that was said to clear the record and I am responding to the nonsense.

Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition indicated to us that five schools were deshifed, again misleading the population. There were 15 schools deshifed. It was under their administration they started talking about deshifting schools and bringing computers in schools.

I will read for you the 1998 contribution of their Minister of Education. It says:

Hon. Member: Who is that speaking?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: This is Brian Kuei Tung talking:

I have also made the necessary provisions that every school would have the equivalent of one computer for every class. What this means is that every child in every class, in every school would have access to a computer in 1999.

Dr. Rowley: Nonsense!

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Speaker, nothing can be further from the truth. We are now ensuring that that promise is becoming a reality. They on that side have consistently said that we are not fulfilling the promises we have made. In 1998 this promise was made and it was not carried out, in 1998 the promise was also made to start deshifting schools and was not carried out. We are now ensuring that in every school, in every class computers are available to the students. As a matter of fact, in most schools, there are computer labs and computers actually available for the students of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, the Member for Siparia also said that we have done nothing for the children of Trinidad and Tobago; again this is misinformation.

2.45 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, we have ensured that we have purchased over four million seats in buses for the children of our country to get to school. I repeat: We have de-shifted over 15 schools. We give a book grant to \$1,000. In Form 4, as children are preparing for CXC, we give eight of the text books that are necessary for those children. We have the textbook loan programme. We give thousands of breakfasts, thousands of lunches. I could spend almost my entire contribution talking about what this administration is doing in relation to providing for the children of Trinidad and Tobago. We are also ensuring that children at the primary level are getting auditory and vision testing.

Mr. Speaker: The speaking time of the hon. Member has expired.

Motion made, That the hon. Member's speaking time be extended by 30 minutes [*Hon. Dr. K. Rowley*]

Question put and agreed to.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We have not stopped there. At each level of a child's education we have been providing; in terms of which tertiary education is free. We have also ensured that there are more university places because children can enter UWI and we now have the UTT

providing education of a different type than that provided by the University. We have just incorporated ECIAF into UTT. We have moved the tertiary education grant for children studying outside from \$16,000. Yet the Leader of the Opposition would stand in this House and with a straight face say we are not providing for the children of Trinidad and Tobago. Clearly she is not living in Trinidad and Tobago.

We have moved the enrolment of persons in tertiary education from 20,000 in 2002 to 40,000 in 2006. In less than five years we have doubled the number of persons enrolled in tertiary education in Trinidad and Tobago, from 20,000 to 40,000. We have said that we are moving that number consistently. We have doubled it and we will continue to move that number to the maximum level that can be accommodated in tertiary education programmes. I repeat, it is not through dollar for dollar, but free education.

We also have the HELP Programme, the GATE Programme and while they sit on that side and continuously try to mislead the population, the population is well aware because they are feeling the effects of the reality of what this Trinidad and Tobago has been doing for them. We have consistently said that we have put education, social services, health on the front burner of ensuring that people of Trinidad and Tobago benefit.

Really speaking, the Member for Siparia, the Leader of the Opposition, has no moral authority to talk about education and providing education for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Just to refresh your memory, it was under that Minister of Education that the London Street School was refurbished for \$30 million that had no effect on the people of Trinidad and Tobago, because they could not use the building. It was under that same Minister of Education, as she then was, that secondary school places were provided above rum shops, next to a gambling den and anywhere they felt that they could put children. But they are coming to tell us that we are not providing for the children of Trinidad and Tobago. We would never do something like that to the children of this country, and we will, on this side, consistently ensure that the children of Trinidad are provided with the best in terms of their educational possibilities. [*Desk thumping*]

It was also under their administration that all the youth camps were closed down, all the special training, like the CCC and all those programmes were brought to a screeching halt, without any indication that it was coming. They destroyed the John S. Donaldson Technical Institute; they destroyed the San Fernando Technical Institute. If they were in government for even a month longer, they would have destroyed everything that had been built for the education of the

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people of Trinidad and Tobago. We can only thank God that the PNM returned to office at the time that we did. [*Desk thumping*]

The Member even went so far as to talk about salaries for the Members on this side, those of us who are in Government. I want to talk about the salaries; I also want to talk about the so-called entertainment vote and the overseas vote which the Member personalized and I want to debunk everything that the Member said. You know, the Member behaved as though the salary review that was done was only for Government Ministers. We were the only ones who benefited from that salary review. That is something that those on that side do consistently, almost having amnesia, behaving as though they did not also get a salary increase.

Opposition MPs are now receiving a salary of \$14,000 per month—

Mr. Ramnath: Do not bring that into this debate. Those are general remarks. You are being petty.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: I am just responding. Opposition MPs now receive a salary of \$14,000 per month; transportation allowance of \$3,450 per month and a constituency allowance of \$9,500 per month.

Mr. Ramnath: We do not get that. That is paid directly—

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: The Member for Siparia, who moved from the status of just Opposition Member of Parliament, now receives a salary of \$23,000 a month.

Mr. Imbert: For what? For misleading the public?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: For misleading the public. The Leader of the Opposition moved from a salary of \$14,000 to \$23,800. We did not introduce this into the debate.

Mr. Sharma: What nonsense!

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Transportation allowance of \$4,150; a subsistence allowance of \$950—

Mr. Ramnath: That is an abuse of the House.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: We did not introduce this issue.

Dr. Rowley: Ignore him.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: And a housing allowance of \$9,200 per month. So the behaviour of those on the other side, led by the Leader of the Opposition, is that only those of us on this side benefited from a salary increase. Those on the opposite side also had a salary increase and, as a matter of fact, the Leader of the Opposition got more than she even anticipated, moving from \$14,000 to \$23,000 basic salary.

Mr. Ramnath: Read out yours.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: The Members even complained when the review came, they did not get enough money. We sat quietly and we accepted the review. In addition to that, what those on the other side get is in addition to what they can make in their private capacities. Whereas we sit and do the Government's work full-time, they can work in any other profession, as the Member for Couva South does in Petrotrin. He probably gives this to charity, given the kind of salary he gets at Petrotrin. So they can have two jobs and they consistently fail to tell the public that.

It is also very clear that in keeping with wanting to mislead the population, the Leader of the Opposition also talked about crime. The Leader of the Opposition, prior to the contribution of today, said in the *Newsday* report:

“By contrast...Manning had said nothing about how the Government would fight crime. ‘This was just a bland statement with respect to dealing with crime, so the sad saga of a lawless society unchecked by the protective services, is what we continue to face today.’

She slammed Manning's statement that all citizens must share in the blame for crime.”

She continued:

“I want to make it very clear that the Opposition takes no part of that blame’.”

An opposition which, when it was in government, made the first visitor to the Prime Minister, Abu Bakr; an opposition, when it was in government, insisted that its candidates came from the rank and file of the criminal element; an opposition when it was in government consistently said that community leaders—and they coined the phrase—who were criminals, must be brought into the bowels of how the governance of Trinidad and Tobago worked; an opposition who, when they put up a known criminal in Tobago, said that criminals must be given a second chance; an opposition who consistently is saying that a person who has

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been convicted of criminal activity and is supposed to serve a sentence, should be the chairman of their party and if they win again would be the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, or even worse, the President of Trinidad and Tobago.

3.00 p.m.

An Opposition who when they were in government in 1999, said through their Minister of Finance—they consistently say that they have nothing to do with crime. As the Leader of the Opposition said the Opposition takes no part of blame.

“The incidence of serious crime continues to be a threat to the safety of the individual, the business sector, especially the small entrepreneur, and the security of the nation overall.”

This is what they were saying in 1999.

“This remains a priority on our human development agenda. There is a pressing need for innovation to curb the crises in many communities.

Both the level and nature of crime in this country and the changing character of our communities require that the police adopt more effective methods to deal with this situation. We must support our protective services. We will work with them to improve the quality of recruitment and management...

Any solution to the crime problem in Trinidad and Tobago must recognize a number of things. They must recognize that proper parenting and schooling are essential. The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service must play a vital role. The community must become a full partner in achieving public safety and our protective services must be modernized using current technology.”

When they were in government they felt that it was all of us who needed to be a part of the crime solution. Now they divorce themselves after the crime increase started during their administration.

This Government has ensured that it has put a major part of the expenditure into the solution to crime. We have consistently said that not only will we ensure that the police is assured of every opportunity to deal with crime through technology, manpower and whatever is needed to deal with the crime problem is in fact provided to them, but we have also put our money where our mouth is. In fact, over 16 per cent of the budget has been provided for ensuring national

security and public safety agencies. We have said that we are providing the necessary radar which covers the entire country. We have also said that both the offshore patrol vessels that are needed in order to track down drug criminals will be provided and we have lived up to our word.

Just to give an indication of the provisions that have been made in the budget to ensure all areas are dealt with effectively. Over 29 per cent of the budget has been provided for health, housing, poverty reduction and the development of sustainable communities; 28 per cent to develop roads, bridges, other infrastructure and utility services; 16 per cent has been utilized to promote effective government primarily dealing with national security and public safety agencies; 16 per cent on providing education and training and 11 per cent on supporting economic activity and business development in key sectors of the economy.

There has consistently been a statement that the non-oil or non-petroleum sector is not being developed by this Government. Again, I will like to take this opportunity to debunk that statement. We had said from the outset that the oil and gas revenue of Trinidad and Tobago is going to be the main sustenance of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. We make no bones about saying that. What we have said as a corollary to that is that we will use the oil and gas revenue to develop other sectors of the economy. We have done that consistently.

Using the oil and gas revenue we have now developed new industries which are in their infant stages but are on the path of development. Some of these are the film industry; yachting industry and the merchant marine industry. The tourism industry is one of our main additional drivers of the economy. Consequently, we have not moved from the original focus that we had for this economy. We have said that the oil and gas industry is the driver but that industry cannot be used in and off itself alone. It must be the industry that is used to move the other sectors forward. We admit that and we are moving in that direction. Consequently, the oil and gas industry, as we downstream through new processes for ethylene and polypropylene and developing a plastic industry is also being used to propel the agriculture industry.

You would recall that in the budget statement made by the hon. Prime Minister a statement was made that the intelligence that exists in the energy sector which is used not only in Trinidad and Tobago but also in other countries, we have gained a reputation for the development of our oil and gas industry and that is being used in the agriculture sector. The same kind of drive that has been put into the energy sector is now to be used in the development of the agriculture sector. The captains of industry in the energy sector are now being pressed into

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service in the agriculture sector in Trinidad and Tobago and we expect rich returns from that relationship.

Additionally, the tourism sector has shown definite growth not only in domestic tourism but also in tourist arrivals in Trinidad. We have also recognized that there has been a slight decrease in tourist arrivals in Tobago. We are now working on ensuring that that decrease does not continue but new arrangements are put in place for airlifts and we provide the number of rooms necessary for the influx of tourists into Tobago.

We have also indicated that unlike the statement made by the Leader of the Opposition that we have done nothing about the tech park that was touted by them, the Tamana Intech Park has been started and construction is under way. The statement made by the Leader of the Opposition was incorrect. In keeping with what we had said previously, the highway projects have been started and the Highways Division is moving consistently on ensuring that each project that was stated in previous budgets and the current budget statement is under way.

The Member for Siparia failed to talk about the fact that sport once seen as just a recreational activity under this administration is now being seen as a viable industry. We on this side can consistently say that we have worked in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. There is no one who could stand either in this Parliament or outside this Parliament and honestly say that we have not consistently provided for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. With each budget ours is a movement of the people from one stage to another. We who touted our fifth budget of this administration can stand proudly in this House and outside of this House and say without fear or contradiction that this is a Government for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

We know that despite the fact they sat in Government for six years nothing of that nature could ever be said about them. [*Interruption*] Even if the Member for Couva South is saying that we stole the election which we have said consistently is not true, we have not stolen a cent from the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] The Treasury has not been raided by anybody on this side and no one would ever be able to point a finger at us on this side and say that we have stolen from the people of Trinidad and Tobago. You could be assured that not one of them can say that about their previous administration.

In this our fifth budget we are proud to serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The People's National Movement will go on from decade to decade to consistently serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago in Government.

Thank you.

Mr. Gerald Yetming (St. Joseph): Mr. Speaker, the Member for Arouca South started her contribution to the debate by talking about women in politics. It appeared to me from her contribution that this was a competition, so to speak between two women. She also spoke about debate being a contribution and response. You know that for 200 years we never got into any fight with anybody. We are celebrating on Thursday. For 200 years we never got into any fight with anybody in Trinidad and Tobago and I do not intend to start that today. [*Desk thumping*] I will leave that alone and I will deal with—

The country is concerned about the wanton state and gross mismanagement of our prosperity by this Government. The Government's record of poor financial management threatens to undermine all the sacrifices and good work that went before. After five years of this regime we are in grave danger of losing the possibility of real achievable promise of the future that our overall economic potential suggests. It would be a great shame and a devastating blow to the vast majority of our citizens who kept the faith and demonstrated their patience and who are so close, only to see their prospects of a better life snatched away by the uncaring actions of a destructive Government which believes it is accountable to no one.

3.15 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, that statement was, in fact, made in the year 2000 by the then leader of the opposition, hon. Patrick Manning, Member for San Fernando East. I read that statement because to me this statement is just as applicable today and even more so than it was then. If I might be allowed one commercial; if they did not think that the UNC did it right; we, and the people do not think the PNM is doing it right and it is now left to the Congress of the People. [*Desk thumping*]

The leader of the Congress of the People, the Member for St. Augustine, when he speaks in the budget debate will give a broad response, substantially I will cover the area of the budget, which is covered on page 41 of the published budget, which is headed: Institutional Reform. Institutional Reform on page 41 was intended to centre on the:

- “Legislative approval of the Heritage and Stabilization Fund; along with the establishment of a Revenue Authority; and a new procurement regime;
- Capital Market development;
- Upgrading the level of national financial literacy; and

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- Special Purpose State Enterprises.”

Mr. Speaker, my focus will be on this part of budget.

I will start by making the point that this Government has been creating and allowing the conditions for the loss of wealth of the people in this country and of the country. You have been creating and allowing the conditions for people to lose their wealth. I want to touch on three specific areas where they are allowing people's wealth and the country's wealth to be lost.

The first area I want to touch on, Mr. Speaker, is the stock market and the catastrophe in the stock market, which is covered under “Capital Market Development” in the budget statement. That loss is also allowed through major theft and corruption, due to the absence of a proper legislated procurement regime, which is touched on also in this section, in the context of the many special purpose state enterprises that have been established and the billions of dollars that are now channeled and spent through them.

The third area where the Government has been allowing the loss of wealth is through the high and growing rate of inflation—[*Interruption*]—because people by virtue of their spending power being reduced, by virtue of the fact that people who have savings, and, in fact, it is very instructive that in this very section, the Prime Minister spoke about a literacy programme geared at encouraging people to save. It is that saving that is being lost through the high rate of inflation that they are allowing to happen. Those are the three areas I want to cover, Mr. Speaker.

I think that whatever we may say about the state of the economy—we can talk about the per capita GDP doubling from US \$7,000 to \$14,000; the high rate of GDP growth which, I think is projected at 12 per cent this year, and the fact that the average rate of growth from 2001 to now is about 8.5 per cent, thereabouts—in spite of all those things, and let us forget whether there is poverty and growing poverty, because apart from that which others would cover, is the fact that people's wealth is being eroded by the day.

In the budget statement the Prime Minister admitted, he said:

“There is no doubt, Mr. Speaker, that an important contributing factor to the current downturn in the stock market has been a declining demand...”

because of the legislation relative to the holdings of equities by pension funds and institutional investors.

The admission is that the problem of the current stock market has to do with the fact that the pension funds, in particular, had to reduce their equity holdings to 50 per cent of their portfolios.

The Inspector of Financial Institutions, by a single act of calling upon the pension funds to reduce their holdings to the requirement of 50 per cent, that single act, in my view, was an act of gross irresponsibility. Maybe it was done through inexperience, but the act by the Inspector of Financial Institutions of suddenly calling on the pension funds to reduce their holdings is what caused the crash in the market.

In December of 2004, the Inspector of Financial Institutions called on these institutions to reduce their holdings. I want to make the point that the regulator, the Inspector of Financial Institutions, is expected to protect the market; not to damage it. By her suddenly calling on the institutions to reduce their holdings to the 50 per cent, notwithstanding the fact that it was the law, had the effect of damaging the market. Imagine a stock market in Trinidad and Tobago with the same booming economy, with all the tremendous GDP growth and what have you, and a stock market that has gone absolutely mad.

The point is that these pension funds did not exceed the 50 per cent by virtue of over exuberance by pension fund managers and trustees. There was a bull market, the economy is strong and people were investing, as a result of which the price of shares went up. Because the 50 per cent equity position is priced on the basis of market, and because the market prices of shares, substantially, went up, it happened that all of the funds; the 50 per cent holdings, went beyond the 50 per cent.

In this market the institutional investors make up 80 per cent of the market. Mr. Speaker, 80 per cent of the activity on this market is as a result of the institutional investors. What happened by that single act by the Inspector of Financial Institutions was that the pension funds limit had, in fact, crossed the 50 per cent mark by \$2.2 billion, as a result of which these funds had to sell down holdings as fast as they could to the tune of \$2.2 billion in a very small market like ours.

In fact, up to today there is still an outstanding amount of about \$500 million to be sold down. What that means is that the prices of the shares on the market have not as yet bottomed. What that translates to is that the market hit its high in May of 2005 and at the time the market capitalization was \$123 billion. As at September 08, 2006, a month ago, the market capitalization was reduced to \$88 billion, a loss of \$35 billion. What that effectively means is that people in Trinidad and Tobago lost between May 2005 and September 2006, \$35 billion of their wealth. That is, in essence, like \$35 billion disappeared from people's bank accounts overnight.

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In the budget statement it says that this stock market decline is, understandably, cause of serious concerns—the Government said that and they are absolutely correct. I am simply sharing their concern with them—serious concern for our investor community.

The language used would suggest and would give the impression that this investor community is some privileged class, not the man in the street, but that is so wrong. The little man in the street who has units in the Unit Trust Corporation's First Scheme; the man-in-the-street who has investment in mutual funds in the banks and what have you, are the people who have been affected. It is not just the pension funds. In fact, pension funds have lost a substantial amount of that \$35 billion; substantial amounts of its surpluses have been lost as a result of this one single irresponsible action by the regulator. I have not blamed the Government as yet. The small men-in-the-street, who through excellent marketing, who were persuaded to put money in the Unit Trust Corporation and have benefited considerably through the years, are now finding themselves with losses in their holdings. Like I have said, people who have deposits in mutual funds and the pension funds today, apart from the fact that they have lost a substantial amount of their surpluses, have nowhere to put new moneys flowing into the pension funds in any good form of investment for returns, which can have if continued, severe impact upon the funds' abilities to pay pension later on. In fact, I am informed that some people are already cashing in their insurance policies where there is a long-term savings element.

3.30 p.m.

It does not make any sense. One could argue that, if and when the market corrects itself, that the pension funds would recover, and people who have money in the Unit Trust First Scheme and mutual funds, that they would recover.

I want the Government to recognize that for the people who are holding deposits now in Unit Trust and in mutual funds, and who are directly investing on the market, that for those who through need have to cash in, are cashing in at values far lower than the deposits or the units are really worth. If, for example, as a result of the same Housing Development Corporation of the Ministry of Housing that they had to make a deposit on a unit and they had to cash in their units and so forth, they are cashing at far lower values than they really should, and they are losing money.

I want the Government to recognize that it is a far more critical problem than simply saying that the Central Bank is working expeditiously at a resolution. While the Central Bank is working on a resolution, people are losing money. In many cases it might be just money in the form of a number in the sense that they

may have kept their shares or their units and so forth, but for those who are cashing in, and there are hundreds cashing in out of panic, out of not understanding what has caused the problem, and they are losing. And that is why I am saying that you are causing people to lose their wealth.

I want to let the Minister of Finance know that when he believes that the Central Bank is working expeditiously to reform the existing legislation, it is not. I am telling you that as a matter of fact because the committee that has been established to do it, all they have been able to do so far is to agree on their terms of reference. And while that committee is going about its business in a very bureaucratic fashion, there is a market in Trinidad and Tobago that has gone absolutely mad and people are losing money. The Prime Minister in his Budget statement said:

“The reform will reduce dependence on absolute limits on particular asset classes in favour of a more general risk-management approach.”

That is fine. Whether they use a more general risk-management approach; whether they simply up the percentage from 50 per cent to a higher level because of the thinness of this market; whether they use an average price over a period of time rather than market—and one can say when a pension fund buys a share at \$10 today, and five or 10 years from now it is valued at \$100 that, because of the economy it sends the market up. Maybe, an average price between purchase and market could be used. Whatever the formula, I would expect the committee to examine. But clearly, the Government recognizes that something has to be done and the legislation needs to be corrected. My only concern is that this process is not happening as fast as it should, and that they ought to bring legislation.

I urge the Government to bring legislation tomorrow morning to increase the limit from 50 per cent to 60 per cent and we could always put in the sunset clause whatever you call it, to say that that limit would disappear or be replaced by whatever new legislation when it comes, to change whatever the formula might be to arrive at the limit. So, if eventually, the committee and the Government decide that the limit ought to be increased or it should be a more risk-based approach to the investment, or the accepted price rather than tied to market, but tied to some average price, whatever it is, I urge the Government to bring legislation as soon as possible to temporarily increase that limit from 50 to 60, for example, so that people, small people, not the investor class, do not continue losing money as they are right now every day.

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Mr. Speaker, in the *Review of the Economy*, this year's publication on page 28 under a heading called "Credit Unions", the Government said that they are in the process of drafting legislation to deal with credit unions. In part of what they outlined in that *Review of the Economy*, it says that the legislation will include:

"Transitional Provision—this will give non-compliant Credit Unions a grace period to achieve compliance."

So, what I am suggesting with respect to immediate legislation is not uncommon. The Government recognizes that in bringing credit union legislation they know that a number of credit unions would not meet prudential requirements. And they are putting in the legislation, with which I totally agree, transitional arrangements to allow those, call them "delinquent credit unions", a period of time to fall in line. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that. It is something that is required in a market like this. In any market, in any country, confidence in the financial sector is paramount. And we cannot be talking—in the section under same institution reform, the Prime Minister spoke about financial literacy programme and about personal savings, having, in fact, declined and workers are ill-prepared for emergencies and retirement. And he is absolutely correct. But we cannot be talking about personal savings having declined in this country and people being ill-prepared for emergencies or retirement and, in fact, we cannot be talking as he did under capital market development, about the Government is also considering taking more state corporations to the stock exchange. That is absolute madness. For five years we have been talking about what is the Government's policy with respect to further divestment, whether it is National Petroleum (NP), First Citizens Bank (FCB), National Flour Mills whoever, and we were always told the timing has to be right. And we wait until the market is in a state of collapse to talk about bringing state enterprises to the market. What absolute madness!

I notice in the provision under the Ministry of Finance they have budgeted \$8 million for consultancy for bringing corporations on to the market. It would lead one to think for those cynics among us that you would have waited until the market crashed to bring state enterprises on because you would have known exactly who would be buying and who you would encourage to buy, and you would want them to buy when the price is really dead cheap. [*Desk thumping*] That is the only conclusion one can draw. It defies logic. It defies common sense that after five years when there was a buoyant stock market, a vibrant stock market, and prices were way up high that you did not think it was fit, the timing was not right to bring those enterprises onto the stock exchange and now you are

talking in the 2007 budget that the Government is considering taking more state corporations to the stock exchange, and you are budgeting for it in your consultancy when the market is absolutely dead. But further more, he went on to say:

“We are discussing with some of the energy companies the feasibility of repackaging and listing their local operations on the domestic stock market...”

Which energy company would be so stupid to go through the process of repackaging and so forth, to come on the domestic stock market, which is what we want. But they are not going to do it now. Unless they come very quickly with legislation to move that pension fund limit and to put some life back into the market—one could have all the literacy programmes in the world about teaching people to save and invest and so forth, one could preach all one wants to energy companies about doing what they have to do to try to list on the local stock exchange to expand the stock exchange market, but it is not going anywhere. The first pre-requisite to all of that—all of which is laudable, all of which is right—or the first thing you have to do is to bring some sense and life back into the stock market.

I blame, maybe, an inexperienced Inspector of Financial Institutions, but I have to blame the Ministry of Finance because they would have seen the market go haywire, and they would have been aware of the problem. I blame them because they did not see it fit to take decisive, immediate corrective action.

One must understand when one is investing in the stock market, one takes risks and in the case of a mature market, a chief executive officer (CEO) just has to sneeze and it could affect the price. But, you do not allow in a market like Trinidad and Tobago for something like this to happen, and you do not allow the market to decline, not by virtue of some event which makes the decline inevitable. It, in fact, happened as a result of the irresponsible action of a regulator. You imposed it, you made it happen. And I blame the Minister of Finance for not having taken immediate corrective action because many poor people are losing money in this country by the day. [*Desk thumping*]

In 2001, there was an issue with the public servants with respect to arrears of increments, and as Minister of Finance, I put on the table with the Public Services Association the offer of a part of the arrears of increment per individual, in part or in whole being given in National Enterprises Limited (NEL) shares. NEL shares, I believe, were being traded at the time—let us say around four dollars or five dollars. I am guessing.

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I went as far as to offer shares in National Enterprises Limited (NEL) to public servants at a discount because when they originally went on the market to employees of the companies involved in NEL, they got the shares at a discount. I was prepared to give it to all public servants, who wanted to take their arrears of increment in NEL, at the same discount. The President of the Public Services Association wanted to get additional information and meetings were arranged with the Divestment Secretariat so that we could explain.

My interest at the time was not just the fact that we did not have the cash to pay and we could have done it, but that we needed to encourage more people to get into the market. I had one condition and that was that they had to keep the shares for at least three years and not try to dump them by the following day. Of course, those discussions took place near the end of 2001 and we were out of office by the end of 2001.

If I had been able to pursue that avenue for the settlement of arrears of increment, I am certain that I would have been able to persuade Jennifer Baptiste, President of the PSA, to accept that offer and that every public servant who would have accepted it at the time would have been far richer today and with a better understanding of the stock exchange and how it works.

I will tell you that here is a market made to go mad by the injudicious, irresponsible action of one person, not as a result of market forces, which the Government should have stepped in and corrected immediately. How could anybody, with all the education on investing— you think anybody want to buy shares on the stock exchange now, even if you correct it? It will take some education.

I also say all of this in the context of the desire of the Government to make Trinidad and Tobago an international financial centre. You will not become an international financial centre when you have this kind of man-imposed, bureaucratic, if you wish, irresponsible intervention on the market.

Mr. Speaker, I will end on that point by again urging the Government, while the team that has been established to look at the problem come up with an alternative to the straight line 50 per cent at market and all their studies and they review what might be transpiring in that area around the world, that they bring immediate legislation. Let us increase to 60 per cent. Let us put some sense back into the market until the team completes its exercise, which could be two years down the road.

Mr. Speaker, this Government is also allowing the conditions to exist for theft and corruption in this country.

Mr. Speaker: I do not think you would be better off sitting, otherwise I would suggest you sit.

Mr. G. Yetming: I appreciate that.

In that context, I want to deal with two aspects of that institutional reform section of the budget and one dealing with procurement and one dealing with special purpose state enterprises and I will take them together.

When the 2006 budget was presented, the Minister of Finance indicated that the new procurement regime, for which there was a White Paper out then, would have been introduced by the third quarter of 2006. That has not happened. In his current budget statement he says that it will come early in the new year. My information—prove me wrong—is that early in the new year it will not happen, and my information—prove me wrong at the appropriate time; you cannot prove me wrong now—is that when the Bill comes it will be a watered-down version to what we expect and what is covered in the White Paper.

As a matter of fact and by the way—it is not a significant part of my argument—there is nothing in the estimates to suggest that you have provided for the regulator that is called for in the new procurement regime and in the White Paper. That regulator is a critical person in the whole reform of procurement. This regulator has powers of a commission of enquiry, who has tremendous powers if we go on the White Paper. I commend the Government—this has been in the works for a long time—for taking the position as outlined in the White Paper for bringing it at all. However, I have found nothing in the estimates. I know if you decide to proceed you will vire money from here to there and so on, but I only make that observation.

In this part of my contribution relative to procurement, possible corruption, particularly with respect to the special purpose state enterprises, I want to make my position absolutely clear. I cast no aspersion on the character or integrity of any Cabinet Minister. I cast no aspersion on the character or integrity of any chairman of the board of the state enterprises and I cast no aspersion on the character or integrity of any board member. I will simply highlight the fact that there are lots of weaknesses that I am not satisfied that the Government is attending to.

If we use the airport project as a case in point—I know it will come up because when Tarouba, the \$850 million sports facility was announced after a

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presentation to Cabinet, in this article in the *Guardian* of May 2005, it says—this is to quote from the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs, I believe:

“Certainly from the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs we have hired UDeCott and we are keeping a keen eye on the cost. We are definitely, from our perspective, working hand in hand with UDeCott to ensure that we protect the taxpayers’ money as well as UDeCott has had a good history of not having any overruns.”

And he has assured taxpayers that this project will not be a repeat of the Piarco International Airport terminal building project. In fact, Minister Sahadeo went on to say that proper tender procedures were being followed and the terms of reference were clearly and properly outlined and optimistic that the whole process would be transparent with a high level of accountability, and that they have agreed that any variation at all would have to be discussed and brought back to us.

This Government came into office and there was a tremendous pursuit of what they consider to be wrongdoing in the Piarco International Airport project. Matters are before the court and the court will decide that. However, the point I make is that surely they would have examined the operations of these state enterprise companies that would have allowed an airport project to have the overruns; that would have allowed the fraud and the corruption charges they believed happened there and that they would have taken steps to correct whatever loopholes existed in these state enterprises; whatever loopholes existed in law or whatever, they would have corrected in their first year in office. That did not happen.

Now we are exposed to what we are now being told is \$60 billion in projects over the next couple of years. If in the days of the airport project there was say \$2 billion in projects and they believed that there was some corruption, what are we to believe now with \$60 billion in projects, when absolutely nothing has been done by this administration to correct the deficiencies and loopholes and weaknesses there might be?

I repeat: I cast no aspersions on any Minister, on his character or integrity, neither on any state board. I am simply saying to the Government that until and unless they act people will form their own conclusions. In fact, they have already started to do so. They have, in fact, created opportunities. They have, in fact, opened the door. They have, in fact, left the door wide open for corrupt practices to take place.

When I say that people will form their own conclusions—and I do not have to help them because I do not have any information to lay any charge on anybody and I am not going to do so in a frivolous fashion—

Mr. Speaker: You can continue to stand. Hon. Members, the speaking time of the hon. Member for St. Joseph has expired.

Motion made, That the hon. Member's speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. [*Mr. G. Singh*]

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. G. Yetming: Mr. Speaker, thanks to the Members of the House for extending my time.

When I say that the people will form their own conclusions, rightly or wrongly, I just refer to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. We must accept that it is corruption perception and it is not necessarily a reflection of actual corruption.

4.00 p.m.

The fact is that this international body rated Trinidad and Tobago on a 1 to 10 scale five years ago in 2001, when Trinidad and Tobago first went on this index. Trinidad and Tobago's rating was 5.3 on a 1 to 10 scale. That was five years ago. Every year since then, we have dropped in our rating. The last rating was 3.8, from 5.3 to 3.8. The international average of all the countries is 4.1. We are below the international average. The rating of Barbados is 7, on a 1 to 10 scale. Something is wrong somewhere, where business people: foreign business, local business and the international institutions, when they believe that our politicians and our public officers are becoming more corrupt. That is a fact. We are not helping. [*Interruption*] The perception is that we are getting more corrupt.

Mr. Speaker, I again repeat that it could very well be—I know that the Government is bent on getting the multitude of projects done, costing billions of dollars. I simply want to warn them that unless they take very quick corrective action, we are going to find ourselves—This is why I talk about the Government opening the door and creating the opportunity for corruption. Because when you appoint your state boards and they have many contracts to deal with, you cannot, yourselves, monitor their actions and everything they do there and it is your responsibility to do everything possible to prevent them from doing what they might be tempted to do. You cannot tell me that of the thousand board members that you have, 500 or 300, all of them are angels with haloes on their heads. You cannot tell me that.

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Your job is to ensure that you make it difficult for them to do what they may be tempted to do. My concern is that with \$60 billion in projects over the next couple of years, if we lose \$1 billion, it is \$1 billion too much.

Apart from Transparency International, there is a report dated August 2005. In fact, it is really from the International Monetary Fund Article IV Consultation in 2005. I know the Member for Diego Martin West does not like us to quote too much from the IMF. [*Interruption*] Okay, I withdraw that. This report says that the IMF is seriously concerned about the PNM administration's recent revival of a policy to create new state enterprises.

Sources say that these concerns stem mainly from the Government's quiet removal of a major policy restraint aimed at preventing runaway and unauthorized spending by the boards of these newly formed and existing companies. The report says that in July the Minister of Finance removed the requirement that stipulated that all state enterprises contracts over \$5 million must be approved by the Minister of Finance. That requirement was removed. The danger is that their concerns were also expressed about the fact that the removal of this control measure coincided with the creation of these special purposes companies. It may not have been intentional to remove that requirement, which you believe might have been bureaucratic and might have stifled quick progress. But somebody was able to make the connection between the removal of that \$5 million restriction and the creation of these state enterprise companies, which is why I am saying that people will form their own conclusions.

Standard and Poors, in their credit rating report of Trinidad and Tobago in August 2005, spoke of a lack of transparency in government-owned entities. The IMF talked and made all kinds of observations about these special purpose enterprises and the coincidental removal of the \$5 million reporting requirement for contracts. Transparency International formed their own conclusions, based on what studies they looked at to arrive at their rating.

What the Government has done is that they have used the soft face in the Ministry of Finance to try to reassure the public. They have used the soft face of one of the Ministers in the Ministry of Finance and that soft face is not Hon. Conrad Enill's and it is not Hon. Valley's. They have used the soft face because I think that maybe the image of this Minister in the Ministry of Finance, trying to give assurances that everything is all right—you do not have to believe that—all proper controls are being put in place, they believe that will work. I am telling the Government that that soft face is not working. She comes across as uncertain and

hesitating and she is unconvincing. The Member for San Fernando West knows that.

There is a state enterprise performance manual dated January 2004, in which the Ministry sought to outline guidelines for state enterprises to follow. One of the first things it says is that the direct monitoring of state enterprises should be shared between the investment division of the Ministry of Finance and the line ministry. Where you have NIDCO, it will report to the investment division one way and the line ministry another way. There are approximately about eight line ministries: the Ministry of Housing, the Ministry of Works and Transport and the Ministry of Education, et cetera. Mr. Speaker, there is confusion about who is monitoring whom, because when the investment division believes that the line ministry is doing close monitoring, they are not and the line ministry believes that it is the investment division monitoring, they are not and there is confusion.

Furthermore—[*Mr. Yetming shows signs of discomfort*] Could I sit for a minute, Mr. Speaker? Furthermore, the Comptroller of Accounts—You do not like to see me standing up?

Mr. Singh: He does not like you behind him standing up.

Mr. G. Yetming: The Comptroller of Accounts issued a circular to ministries, giving them guidelines with respect to how they should deal with these state enterprises which receive moneys from the Infrastructure Development Fund. The Comptroller of Accounts told Permanent Secretaries that they are to be administering officers for these moneys, outlined guidelines as to how they would call on the Ministry for funds and talked about administering officers, these Permanent Secretaries establishing a management unit within the Ministry to properly manage these activities. Mr. Speaker, that is not happening.

There was a rush to put these state enterprises in place, to get them functioning and a lot of the infrastructure within ministries and otherwise have not been properly put in place. What is happening is that there are state enterprises with their boards running in a direction, anxious to fulfil the mandates given to them by line ministries but without the required controls and monitoring in place.

Further, in the monitoring manual it states that all state agencies should obtain the approval of the Minister of Finance before awarding contracts above \$5 million. This was in January 2004; a measure that was introduced in 2001. We know that requirement has been removed and that state enterprises are now required to publish

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their accounts of the first six months, within three months of the period and the annual accounts within three months.

The Minister in the Ministry of Finance was anxious to broadcast to the nation when that requirement was introduced, that state enterprises should publish their accounts semiannually in the local newspapers. That has hardly ever happened. Since that statement was made by the Minister we have hardly seen any state enterprise publishing their accounts in the newspapers semiannually or annually. I will go further to say that some of the accounts that should have been sent to Parliament have not been sent to Parliament. These things are not happening.

Now, we know that UDeCott is handling \$10 billion worth of projects right now. We are now hearing that there will be \$60 billion in projects over the next couple of years. The light rail is one of them. That light rail, I do not want to get into it, but I would mention it by the way.

4.15 p.m.

I consider that light rail almost madness, and that we would proceed with a light rail without some kind of feasibility study, I hope the Minister, in responding, would stand and say that there was a feasibility study. With respect to the National Transportation Plan Study, that report is not due until next year, and in the absence of this comprehensive transportation study, we are taking decisions which are worth billions of dollars on transportation things; whether it be light rail, highways and otherwise. The reason I come on to the light rail is that I am informed, and I think it was published, that it will cost between \$15 billion to \$20 billion with an annual recurrent cost of \$3 billion.

I do not know whether—people who travel on this light rail across Trinidad—the revenue we expect to be derived from the volume of traffic would bring in anywhere near to \$1 billion. If we were to be generous, and we are going to get revenues of \$1 billion a year, it means that this light rail will cost the Government of Trinidad and Tobago \$2 billion a year to maintain. I really do not know whether the Government has factored that fact into its considerations.

I strayed a bit, but for that \$10 billion in UDeCott and that \$60 billion overall, that \$60 billion will include apart from light rail and WASA whatever might be done in education with the schools and pre-schools and so on.

Mr. Speaker, the Brian Lara Stadium was originally supposed to cost \$275 million. Then we started to hear the figure of \$326 million. I am now reliably

informed that the Brian Lara Stadium is now likely to cost \$550 million; [*Desk thumping*] from \$275 million it went to \$550 million. That is in spite of the assurances given when that Tarouba Stadium was announced after the Cabinet meeting.

The Scarborough Hospital was originally tendered at \$134 million, and the last claim from the contractor was \$380 million, but it is only 40 per cent completed.

Only in yesterday's *Guardian* there was a headline: "Big stink over \$b Beetham dump rehab". So, clearly, they have gone out to tender to rehabilitate the Beetham dump, and we are talking about \$3 billion. The article speaks about the fact that some tenderers are complaining about a gerrymandering of the tendering process, and they have already concluded that a firm has already been selected.

Mr. Ramsaran: Corruption!

Mr. G. Yetming: We heard from the Minister of Finance that the online games will not be expanded and they will be discontinued not too long from now, then the Minister in the Ministry of Finance, Sen. The Hon. Conrad Enill, was reported to have said, I believe, only yesterday, that it does not prevent private enterprise eventually taking control of the business. According to the newspaper report with a quote from Minister Enill, he has signalled that the National Lotteries are likely to be taken control of by the private sector.

In fact, in a letter to the editor in one of the newspapers, somebody has already suggested that he knows, or we should not be surprised about the names of the persons who are likely to acquire that business which generates to the Treasury \$100 million a year.

Mr. Singh: And he is against gambling.

Mr. G. Yetming: Mr. Speaker, in the case of the Brian Lara Stadium and the Scarborough Hospital and so forth, the problem that I have is that there could be legitimate good reason why there are those increases; there could be. But when all of these state enterprises are finding it extremely difficult to get professional staff particularly engineers where in UDeCott alone, up to very recently when they came before the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee PA(E)C, they had a shortage of five engineers, as I could recall, out of 10, and those very engineers and quantity surveyors have to verify and authorize these excesses. So, what confidence could we have when a contract moves from \$275 to \$550 million, and we do not know who are the engineers, however inexperienced or otherwise or

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however they may be planted in the company, are approving hundreds of millions of dollars of excesses for cost overruns, whether it be for variation in the scope of works which I believe is what happened with Tobago, or time overruns?

The audited accounts which the Minister tried to use to comfort us—these companies will publish their accounts every six months and every 12 months, and everything is there for you to see—that is not true. Even if they were to publish their accounts, as you know, Mr. Speaker, even as a lawyer, the accounts would only tell a part of the story.

When these state enterprises are allowed to engage private auditing firms; not the Auditor General, I can tell you that when these auditors go into these companies, they are not going behind these authorizations for these excesses. Do you think that PricewaterhouseCoopers or Ernst & Young is going to go and dig for that? As far as they are concerned, they went to verify the accounts; the numbers. If an inexperienced or corrupt engineer signs off on an excess for \$100 million, \$50 million, \$20 million or whatever it is, he does not check that.

In fact, I would give the example of PLIPDECO. This is a matter that came before the PA(E)C. The auditor, PricewaterhouseCoopers, not in the audited accounts that came before Parliament, in a management letter that they happened to get, talked about the process that they used for acquiring this crane was fraud. Do you know that PricewaterhouseCoopers is no longer the auditor for PLIPDECO? So that if an audit firm steps out of line, they are gone. We can pretend—and it is not whether PNM is in government or the PNM is not in government—but unless we put measures in place to control these things they are going to continue. [*Desk thumping*]

Now, apart from the regulator, in the context of that new procurement regime, even with the Auditor General—Mr. Speaker, you will recall that when we did the Housing Development Corporation Bill, the auditor for the Housing Development Corporation was the Auditor General. It is not that I believe that they are better than the private auditors in these auditing firms, but they have tenure. The law gives them the right, and the shareholders or the directors of these state enterprises cannot change them. The Auditor General would quicker go behind some of these numbers than anybody else.

Mr. Speaker, even with the Auditor General, you and I know, and I can tell you as Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the Auditor General is severely understaffed and severely constrained in their ability to do the work that they are mandated to do right now, far less to get into special investigations. They have approval to take on more people.

I understand that Cabinet recently approved a new manpower structure, but they cannot take on anybody even if they could get the person, because they have no place to put them. There is no place in their office at the financial towers for them. They are still waiting on the Government to find accommodation for them. If the Government wanted to constrain them, the Government could take five years to get the space for them.

So, Mr. Speaker, the Minister in the Ministry of Finance talked about a special audit committee in the Ministry of Finance. In fact, she took credit for it. She said that it was introduced by this Government. I have a Cabinet Minute No. 1266 of September 12, 2001, where Cabinet approved the \$5 million reporting limit for contracts awarded by state enterprises, and approved the establishment of a central audit committee, headed by a director to be established within the Ministry of Finance. Mr. Speaker, I outlined 18 things for that central audit committee to do. This was in September 2001. Of course, by December, I was gone.

Mr. Speaker, my intent here was not to satisfy the public, because once the audit committee is being directed by the Minister, it could be argued that it could be political, and it depends on the nature of the Minister to decide whether he would generally act or not act. My intent here was that the minute that I heard the hint of a suspicion of any corrupt practice, I was going to send this audit team straight inside. I was not going to wait on the Auditor General, because the Auditor General does not have to take directions from me. I wanted my own team to go in.

Mr. Speaker, furthermore, this is dated September 2001 and it says to submit to the Minister of Finance an annual report—this is this central audit committee—outlining the activities of the committee during the financial year the report is to be laid in Parliament. [*Desk thumping*] I did that. I did not want to hide it from the public, but I would tell you that while they boast in their publication that the central audit committee was of their making, after five years, I dare them to come and tell me what that central audit committee has done. Furthermore, assuming that the decision of this Cabinet stood, I have not seen one report tabled in Parliament. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, the third area was the area of inflation, but somebody else is going to deal with inflation. Many persons have spoken about inflation. I simply want to say that once they leave inflation to run rampant, I guarantee that by early next year, inflation in Trinidad and Tobago will be double digits, because they have not addressed the fundamental cause of inflation in Trinidad and Tobago.

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Mr. Speaker, this Government, maybe not wilfully; maybe by omission, has created a situation in Trinidad and Tobago in the three areas on which I have touched, where the considerable wealth of individuals, including the small man in the street, and the wealth of the country is disappearing and can continue to disappear. I urge the Government, in the three areas that I have touched to please take urgent action.

Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the sitting of the House is suspended for tea and we will resume at 5.00 p.m.

4.30 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

5.00 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

[*Pause*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, and in particular the Leader of the House, the Opposition Chief Whip and the Whip for the Members of the Congress of the People, may I urge you on the next occasion, when the House is suspended to a particular time that you have your Members present at the time when the House is suspended to, so that we will not have a repeat of what we have witnessed here this afternoon.

I do not think the debate has concluded, I am not seeing anybody. The hon. Member for St. Ann's East.

The Minister of Social Development and Minister in the Ministry of Housing (Hon. Anthony Roberts): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am always grateful for the opportunity to participate in this national debate on the budget. I listened carefully to the contribution of the hon. Leader of the Opposition, who I thought started very well, but quickly slipped into an abyss.

I came to the conclusion that the hon. Leader of the Opposition thought that she is still living under the era when UNC was in the Government. Her presentation was punctuated with a lot of untruths and deception, and I am prepared to deal with some of those issues that she raised as I go along.

On the other hand, I want to congratulate the hon. Prime Minister and Minister of Finance on the presentation of this year's budget, which to me is a giant step closer to a realization of a goal which spells a better quality of life for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I also want to commend the hon. Prime

Minister on his visionary leadership as he steers Trinidad and Tobago to attain developed nation status.

A budget exercise for us in this Government is indeed a continuation of a journey. You see we have the opportunity to report on our stewardship to the national community as we seek to point them to the next step or the next stage of this journey. If I could take you back to the years preceding this year's budget, you would see the common thread as we proceed step by step on our vision as it unfolds. I wish to emphasize that this Government's approach to social development is one that provides all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago—and I really want to emphasize all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago—irrespective of race, creed, age, religion and gender with an opportunity to attain an improved standard of living.

This Government puts people at the centre of its development. It is an approach which also promotes the principles of human dignity, respect, equity, independence and participation. The initiatives taken by this Government are guided by an overarching philosophy, which also advocates that the State has an important role to play in ensuring the achievement of social development, goals and objectives and that high value must be placed on equity, empowerment and sustainability. So particular attention is being paid to vulnerable and at risk persons in our society.

Mr. Speaker, let me jog your memory and take you back to last year's budget presentation, when the hon. Prime Minister in making his presentation indicated that under the priorities for fiscal 2005 to 2006 that the focus would be on the family. He highlighted that the family is the basic unit in the society; the main building block. He said if you can fix the family, you can fix the society. He went on to detail certain daily challenges that the family had to face. He indicated as well, that this Government was of a strong view that many of our social ills stemmed from the loss of traditional value and widespread breakdown of the traditional family unit.

He went on to point out that there were those in their good conscience who thought that all our resources should be directed to policing, building more jails and increasing punishment. However, it is the belief of this Government that we should also direct resources and attention to the root cause and that is, the breakdown of the family and to what we can do to restore and strengthen the family.

Since the Ministry of Social Development has been identified as the key player in the process of strengthening the family and the institution of the family,

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today I am pleased to report to this honourable House, and by extension the national community, on the initiatives that we have taken to rebuild the family unit in Trinidad and Tobago.

You will recall, Mr. Speaker on a previous occasion that I alerted you on the severe erosion of the institution of marriage in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Singh: Where is that?

Hon. A. Roberts: I can understand. So, Mr. Speaker, you can imagine the negative effects of the situation on the stability of the family. You will also appreciate the damaging impact of this unstable situation; what it can have on the rearing of children, and this takes me to the issue of parenting, as well as, the inability of the family members to cope with stressful situations. As we make the connection and the link between last year's budget and this year's presentation, you will be able to have a better appreciation for some of the measures taken in this year's budget.

I wish to inform this honourable House that the Ministry of Social Development, together with family focus stakeholders have been meeting to formulate a draft national policy on the family, which indeed will be a blueprint for promoting a family friendly society. This draft document will be the subject of the widest possible national conversation through a series of public consultation, and so these consultations will commence early in the new year.

Mr. Speaker, you will recall maybe during your boyhood and mine when it was said that the community would raise a child. Adults or parents at that time accepted the responsibility to correct children within that particular community any time they went off rail. As a matter of fact, when a child was corrected at that time you could not go home to your parents and complain. I am saying that we have reached the time in our development as a country, when it has become necessary for us to start to teach people to be good parents.

As we continue our in-depth study of the many challenges faced by the family, such as insufficient and ineffective communication, poor and at times abusive methods of discipline and poor socialization skills, the Government recognizes that the time is now to put in place a national parenting programme.

5.15 p.m.

This programme, Mr. Speaker, will equip parents with proven parenting skills and knowledge of child development suited to their unique needs and circumstances.

Mr. Speaker, this programme is intended as well, to provide appropriate systems of support to parents from the prenatal stage of the development of the child. Given the whole issue of male marginalization and the critical role that men are expected to play in the development of the child, this programme is also intended to provide men with the knowledge and skills necessary for fulfilling their role as fathers. At this point I would really like to congratulate the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs for a programme entitled: "Defining Masculine Excellence"; [*Desk thumping*] a programme which is assisting males in our society to come to terms with their responsibilities.

Mr. Speaker, we are aware that at present there are several NGOs actively involved in imparting parenting skills to our citizens and so it is our intention; it is the intention of the Government to build on their expertise and to facilitate institutional strengthening of these organizations engaged in providing parenting service to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

This national parenting programme of which I speak will provide parenting education to persons who are not yet parents, to ensure that they are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed and responsible decisions that pertain to becoming parents. This programme is designed to encourage individuals, as well as the community to participate as we strive to promote healthy family functioning and the building of strong communities in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, as we continue to focus on the challenges facing the family we recognize that there exists a high level of intolerance among family members and even within the community. There are disagreements among parents and children; disagreements between husband and wife; disagreements among neighbours and so, Mr. Speaker, we know that there will always be conflict. I do not think that it was the intention of the heavenly Father for all of us to see the same thing the same way all the time. As a matter of fact I believe that a divergence of views, once handled responsibly will make us a stronger people. And so, once we agree that there will always be conflict it is a question of how we manage conflict, so this Government is committed to the process of mediation as we strive to foster a healthy and caring society. The Government has therefore restructured the mediation programme and during the course of the last financial year we launched five of these mediation centres in Port of Spain, Point Fortin, Cunupia, Couva and San Juan. I would tell you that the intention is to launch five more in this financial year.

Mr. Speaker, the objective of the community mediation services programme is to offer a peaceful, inexpensive alternative to resolving conflict among the family members and members of the community with the help of qualified and experienced

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mediators to continue to preserve the existing relationship among parties within the community. And so, Mr. Speaker, you would note that I emphasize “inexpensive”, because the whole process of mediation is done at no cost to the parties. The entire cost of the process is borne by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. It is our desire to create that kind of social harmony through the promotion of peaceful communities.

The other services offered at these mediation centres include training in anger management; building trust and managing conflict in families and communities; leadership skills and dispute resolution. What we are doing, Mr. Speaker, we are encouraging people to learn to talk it out and not fight it out. I want to place on record—and I recognize that my colleague from Chaguanas is not here—my sincere gratitude to the Member for Chaguanas for the interest he has been showing and has been encouraging members of his community to participate in all the programmes at the mediation centre in Cunupia. I urge other Members of Parliament as well, to do the same so that we could encourage that kind of peaceful attitude within the community.

Mr. Speaker, emanating from the report on the status of the family—and you would recall I made reference to that document before—it was noted that while some families demonstrated resilience in their functioning others exhibited weaknesses which resulted in many of the day-to-day challenges that confronted them. The report recommended counselling as one of the major steps towards ameliorating the breakdown in family life and its consequential harmful effects on the healthy functioning of the family.

Mr. Speaker, in Trinidad and Tobago, at this time, there is not a coordinated approach to this service—the service of counselling—and so the Ministry of Social Development was mandated to address this deficiency and has collaborated with the other social partners and stakeholders to develop a proposal for the implementation of expanded and integrated counselling and other intervention programmes. This counselling programme will make available professional guidance support and other intervention programmes and services that would give adults, children, families and the entire community the skills to cope with social and emotional stresses and to develop the ability to engage in effective and positive behaviours. This programme, again, will commence in the New Year.

When the Government stated its desire to rebuild the family there were those in this society who believed that it amounted to mere lines in a budget, but this Government has continued to attack social ills through the measures in its annual budget. We are all aware of the debilitating effects that alcohol and gambling can

have on the family. Some of these effects are abuse and family neglect. We have witnessed time and time again persons who have shunned their family responsibilities to fuel a habit to which they have become addicted. These destructive behaviours contribute to dysfunctional families. It is for this reason that the Government has put in place support mechanisms such as the counselling programme to which I refer; mediation and parenting services.

We believe that the Government therefore has a responsibility to curb any action that will impede the proper functioning of families in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Earlier in my presentation, I emphasized that the Government has a responsibility to provide all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago with the opportunity to attain an improved standard of living, therefore measures had to be put in place to eradicate poverty in Trinidad and Tobago. And we heard much about poverty in the presentation of the hon. Leader of the Opposition. The Government in collaboration with the European Union's sponsored poverty reduction programme has developed a decentralized approach to deal with poverty in the country. We have set up 14 regional social human and development councils in Trinidad and one in Tobago with the objective of working together with civil society organizations to develop programmes in depressed communities, to empower members of those communities through programmes which create self-sufficiencies.

The poverty reduction programme, Mr. Speaker, provides funding through the Regional Micro-project Fund to a maximum of some \$25,000 to community-based organizations desirous of implementing poverty alleviation projects. The poverty reduction programme, we saw it as a forerunner to this Government's initiative to completely decentralize social services to communities in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, this new system of the decentralization of social services to communities that we have embarked on will focus on the diagnosis of the needs of individuals and families in communities throughout Trinidad and Tobago. What you will find is that generic social workers will be assigned to families and will be directly responsible for identifying the needs of those families to enable the appropriate referral to the relevant government departments, NGOs, private agencies or contracted professionals offering the requisite services.

Mr. Speaker, this programme of decentralization is due to commence in 2007, as the Ministry of Social Development at this time is in the process of recruiting personnel to guide and deliver this project. The Government with the resources bestowed on this country is determined to alleviate poverty from amongst us. We have developed over 100 social programmes and we have begun a multi-pronged

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approach to take these programmes to the people within the various communities in Trinidad and Tobago.

We are doing so, Mr. Speaker, through advertisements in the daily newspapers and the television. We know that we are encountering some problems because sometimes Trinidadians and Tobagonians do not read as they ought to, and even on the television, Mr. Speaker, I do not think we look at some of the local stations in the way that we ought to. We prefer sometimes to look at *Lifetime* and *Tempo*.

Dr. Rafeeq: Sometimes 11.

Hon. A. Roberts: And sometimes 11. So, Mr. Speaker, in addition to using the television and the newspapers, we are going through the respective NGOs in the communities and, as well, we are using our new community outreach programme to reach to the people within the communities so that they would be able to participate in Government's programme.

5.30 p.m.

We want to ensure that these programmes are effective and that they reach the persons in the community that we intend to reach. We have embarked on an intense monitoring and evaluation project to ensure that we have the reach we are looking for and the effectiveness of the respective programmes.

Mr. Speaker, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in collaboration with the European Union sponsored poverty programmes recently—when I say recently I refer to 2005—they conducted a survey of living conditions in Trinidad and Tobago. It is always necessary to assess from time to time so that you could know where you are with respect to poverty reduction in Trinidad and Tobago. Today, the Government feels encouraged with the preliminary results that it has received from the consultant.

I wish to let the Parliament know that these results are preliminary. The national poverty line in Trinidad and Tobago now stands at 17.1 per cent; the indigence line is now at 1.22 per cent. If I should disaggregate the figures between Trinidad and Tobago, the poverty line in Trinidad is 16.2 per cent with an indigence line of 1.22 per cent. In Tobago, the poverty line is 19 per cent where the indigence line is at 0.00 per cent. I reiterate that these figures are preliminary and as soon as the report is finalized the information would be made available to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

At this time, I want to highlight some of the initiatives which we have developed to enrich the lives of some of our more vulnerable persons in the

society. I want to proceed immediately to persons or citizens with disabilities. I wish to state that this Government is fully committed to social inclusion. Persons with disabilities are equal citizens of this nation. [*Desk thumping*] They have the same rights and responsibilities and must enjoy equal access to programmes and services available to each and every citizen of this beautiful nation.

This Government approved a national policy on persons with disabilities which articulates a holistic framework for achieving the goal of social inclusion. The approval and implementation of this policy, clearly signals the Government's firm commitment to creating an environment which is barrier free and encourages persons with disabilities to participate fully in our society. In addition to providing subventions and one-off grants to organizations dedicated to working with and for persons with disabilities, the Government through the Public Transport Service Corporation provided 12 buses with wheelchair lifts to enable those persons confined to wheelchair, access to public transportation.

Based on discussions that we have had with persons with disabilities, they indicated that an inaccessible physical environment is the key deterrent to their active participation in the society. So, the Ministry of Social Development immediately conducted sensitization workshops on physical access for government agencies and other stakeholders to ensure that our citizens with disabilities have access to public buildings, public transportation and public spaces, such as parks and recreation areas.

To follow up these workshops, the ministry held meetings and had discussions with the Port of Spain City Corporation and the Ministry of Works and Transport to recommend further improvement to accessibility which would include proper grading of pavements, and installing accessible traffic lights. These traffic lights are fitted with devices to assist persons with disabilities wanting to cross the roads. The ministry will also continue to train personal assistants who offer support services to persons with disabilities, in their home, school and the workplace so that they can enjoy a greater degree of autonomy and independent living.

Mr. Speaker, during the last financial year, we commenced a project to standardize sign language in Trinidad and Tobago. When completed it will create consistency and give creditability to the signs developed by our hearing impaired citizens. It would improve their quality of education and afford them the opportunity to communicate more easily with their peers and the wider community. In this financial year, the ministry will also be pursuing a project that will facilitate the signing of local news and educational programmes on television.

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As I continue my discourse on members of the family unit, I wish to turn my attention to the jewels of the unit. When I say unit, the jewels of the family unit, the future of this beautiful nation and I refer to the children of this nation.

Hon. Member: What about fathers?

Hon. A. Roberts: Fathers have to learn to behave first. [*Laughter*]

Hon. Member: You hear that?

Hon. A. Roberts: Mr. Speaker, childhood is a very special time in each individual's life. It is a time when you should be encouraged to play and learn by your family and extended caring community. Unfortunately, this is not the experience of some children. Even in their own society, some are exposed to abuse and violence which tragically occur right in their homes which is supposed to provide safety and security. This Government is a signatory to several international conventions on the rights of children and join in the attempts to create a world safe for children.

In 2000, a package of children's legislation was passed. We heard from the hon. Leader of the Opposition the list of the package and there is no need for me to repeat them such as the Children's Authority Act and others. In December, 2001, the Family Court Committee was appointed. This comprised key stakeholders from the Judiciary, the Office of the Attorney General, the Ministry of Social Development, the Law Association and the NGOs. This committee was given the mandate to review and comment on the package of children's legislation. As the committee proceeded with its work it expressed serious reservations about the effectiveness of the legislation.

The package was referred to the Judiciary of Trinidad and Tobago for comments and a Caribbean attorney who had practised in Trinidad and who is a senior solicitor and team leader in the Camden Local Children's Authority in London. The committee also considered the operations of children's authorities in various jurisdictions and there was a body of opinion which stated that the pieces of legislation were so flawed, that the entire package of legislation should have been repealed and redesigned. Further, it was also highlighted that the issues of international child abduction, which is a critical emerging issue, was not adequately addressed in the package of legislation.

Some of the shortcomings of the Children's Authority Act—I just want to get in a few of them: the authority was given wide powers without the protection of court orders. It was considered that the authority was likely to frequently find itself before the courts for judicial review. Parental appeals as well were not

provided for adequately in the authority's procedure and the voice of the child was not being heard. In the operation of authorities of this type in various other countries, provision is made for the child to be represented separately by a children's advocate. The legislation of 2000 did not provide for this.

Mr. Speaker, the legislation also put responsibilities on other state functionaries and institutions which could be in conflict with their governing legislation and might not be capable of being performed. For example, the Children's Authority Act put an obligation on the Chief Immigration Officer to prevent persons from leaving the jurisdiction without the benefit of a court order.

These are only a few of the shortcomings, but having considered the challenges faced by this Government to have Bills of this nature requiring a two-thirds majority, passed in this House, a decision was taken to make the relevant amendments to the present Act instead of repealing the legislation. And so, the recommendations of the Family Court Committee have been accepted by the Cabinet. The amendments are being drafted and would be brought to Parliament before the end of this year, 2006.

Mr. Speaker, in the interim, Cabinet has agreed to the appointment of a team of professionals to advise the Minister of Social Development on the roll-out and implementation of the package of children's legislation for which an allocation has been made in this financial year. We must understand that we ought not to be reckless when passing legislation.

5.45 p.m.

We should not just pass legislation for political expediency. [*Crosstalk*] We should understand that when you pass legislation, it affects the lives of people; so we cannot be callous when we are treating with legislation. [*Crosstalk*]

In addition, Mr. Speaker, this country ratified in 1991 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In keeping with that commitment, this Government has approved a revised national plan of action for children. The Ministry of Social Development has been assigned the responsibility to monitor the implementation of this plan across the spectrum of government ministries and agencies.

It is now my pleasure to focus on some of the more special members of the family; I refer to the elders of society.

At present, there is an estimated 130,000 persons over the age of 60, or 10 per cent of the population of Trinidad and Tobago, who are considered, as we refer to

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them, as older persons in the society. It is estimated that by the year 2020 this figure would increase to about 230,000 or about 15 per cent of the population of Trinidad and Tobago. As a responsible government, it is critical and necessary for us to plan and prepare for this category of citizens.

The Government has recently approved a policy on aging. The goal of this policy is to promote the well-being of older persons in a sustainable manner by facilitating the attainment of their basic needs. [*Crosstalk*] The policy advocates that those in need must be assisted and that older persons are treated as an important resource rather than a burden to the society. In keeping with this policy of social inclusion, the policy ensures that older persons are provided with opportunities to be integrated in the mainstream of this society.

This comprehensive policy addresses the question of social security, participation, involvement, social inclusion, dignity and respect for older persons, health care and standards for hospital and care facilities, housing, continued education, retraining, leisure, recreation, legislation, transportation and disaster preparedness. In addressing the question of social assistance for older persons, the approach would be to ensure that their dignity is maintained while accessing the benefits of the social security system.

This would entail the restructuring of the relevant divisions of the Ministry of Social Development and the retraining of staff to satisfy the needs of vulnerable groups, including the elderly. I wish to advise that this process is taking place at this time. We will also continue to strengthen the collaborative efforts among the nongovernmental community and faith-based organizations to facilitate the ongoing exchange of information and services that would serve to promote responsiveness and relevance in social security programmes for the elderly. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the speaking time of the hon. Member for St. Ann's East has expired.

Motion made, That the hon. Member's speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. [*Hon. K. Valley*]

Question put and agreed to.

Hon. A. Roberts: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank Members for extending my time.

In keeping with this Government's vision for social inclusion in this year's budget presentation, the hon. Prime Minister and Minister of Finance announced measures that would result in the inclusion of, approximately, 10,000 additional

persons who were excluded from what was the old age pension net. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Speaker, in responding to the hon. Leader of the Opposition, old age pension was always a grant that persons had to qualify for since 1939. [*Interruption*] Check your documents.

Mr. Hinds: "Teach dem; teach dem."

Hon. A. Roberts: If the hon. Member was so concerned, her government served within that period to date; she spoke about legislation.

Mr. Ramnath: You are missing the point.

Hon. A. Roberts: She had the opportunity to put legislation in place; that is the point I am making.

Mr. Ramnath: She was not even born in 1939. [*Laughter*]

Hon. A. Roberts: She was born before? [*Crosstalk*] It was in place since 1939.

In addition to these 10,000 persons who will now be included, the hon. Prime Minister sought to give some small increases to those who were already in the programme. The programme will now be expanded from a current 65,000 to, approximately, 75,000 persons. [*Desk thumping*] In order to qualify for the grant, the pension as it was referred to, persons always had to satisfy the criteria of age, residency and income. The Government made an adjustment to the income criterion by introducing a prorated or sliding scale mechanism, so that more persons could benefit; that was all we did.

I want to take some time to explain the mechanism. Persons with no income to an income of \$100 per month, would have received what was referred to as an old age pension in the sum of \$1,150. They will now receive an additional \$100, which takes those persons to the sum of \$1,250.

A person receiving an income of more than \$100, it could be one cent more, to \$1,000—and that \$1,000 could be a benefit from National Insurance—under the previous pension arrangement he would have qualified for the sum of \$1,050. This person will now also receive an additional \$100, which will take him to \$1,150.

The National Insurance benefit of \$1,000 plus a senior citizen's grant of \$1,150, affords a person a disposable income of \$2,150. This disposable income of \$2,150 is the maximum ceiling at which the grant is pegged. So a person

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receiving one cent over the income of \$1,000 and who previously would not have qualified for the old age pension, will now receive the difference between what is received as income and the disposable income ceiling of \$2,150. [*Desk thumping*]

I need to give some examples. A person with an income of \$1,050 previously would not have been able to qualify for old age pension. However, under the senior citizens grant mechanism, he will now qualify for a grant of \$1,100. That will now take that person's disposable income to \$2,150. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Speaker, another example: A female senior citizen who may be receiving a national insurance benefit of \$1,000 as well as a survivor's benefit of \$350 as a result of, maybe, the demise of her husband, because of that income of \$1,350, under the old age pension system she would not have been able to qualify for pension; but under this system, she can now qualify for a senior citizen grant in the sum of \$800, which takes her disposable income to \$2,150. [*Desk thumping*]

Similarly, a retired Caroni worker who receives a National Insurance benefit of \$1,000—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Hinds: And a piece of land.

Hon. A. Roberts:—in addition to a pension from Caroni of, approximately, \$650, which is the pension they generally receive, gives that worker an income of \$1,650. This previously disqualified the worker from old age pension. Under this system, that worker could now qualify for a grant of \$500, which again takes his disposable income to \$2,150. [*Desk thumping*]

I listened to the Opposition Leader this morning. I want Madam Opposition Leader and those Members on the other side who are of her view, to tell those persons out there who are now included and are now receiving, in some instances, as much as \$1,000, which they did not have before, that they are receiving \$100 or \$3 a day. [*Crosstalk*] [*Desk thumping*]

6.00 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, I will like the hon. Opposition Leader as well to tell them that when a similar recommendation was made to her when they were in office they turned it down. [*Desk thumping*] So they left 10,000 plus persons in their impoverished state. When they needed their help, they turned their backs on them. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker, it took the PNM to listen to the cries of the people and do something about it, so to make statements to the press and by extension the national community, as far as I am concerned, amounts to political wickedness. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hinds: Mischief!

Hon. A. Roberts: Mr. Speaker, more than that, to say that this Government is unkind to senior citizens is untrue, it is hypocritical, and as I would say it is wicked to the marrow. They can knock the debit card as they want, but this Government is providing food through the debit card system which will include some of our senior citizens who are assessed as needy; I will repeat it again: A family of three and under will get \$300; a family of four and five will get \$400; and a family of five, six and above will get \$500 on their debit card. [*Desk thumping*] So it is a question of providing food to needy persons.

In addition, all senior citizens—and I think my colleague, the hon. Member for Arouca South, made mention of it—who suffer from some chronic disease can receive drugs and medication from the Government's programme, CDAP which caters at this time for 11 diseases and for the record I want to mention them: acid reflux; anti depressants; arthritis; asthma; cardiac diseases; diabetes; epilepsy; glaucoma; hypertension; Parkinson's disease and prostate. The same Government that my colleague referred to as being wicked to the senior citizens of this country, we are providing medication and we do not say free because it is not at all free, it is at the cost of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, more than that, if they require additional assistance for pharmaceuticals they can get that additional help in the form of a grant of \$700 from the Ministry of Social Development. Those senior citizens who require to repair their homes can receive grants from the following institutions: The Ministry of Community Development through the Commission for Self-Help there is a grant of \$10,000.

Mr. Speaker, you will note I said a grant, it is not a loan. A grant of \$10,000 from the Self-Help Commission from the Ministry of Housing and there is another grant of \$15,000. A senior citizen who may wish to change a galvanize, a door frame or some flooring boards can get a grant of \$5,000.

Again this Government has made provision for our senior citizens with grants at the Ministry of Social Development to assist them to purchase things like wheelchairs, spectacles and other assisted devices to the tune of \$5,000. We also assist some of our friends who are diabetics.

You will appreciate that as a diabetic one will require to keep a particular kind of diet which sometimes could be expensive and as a result, the Ministry of Social

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Development also provides you with a grant to get your dietaries. Mr. Prime Minister, you did not know that?

Mr. Manning: No.

Hon. Member: Well avail yourself.

Hon. A. Roberts: We provide bus passes as well to assist with transportation. Mr. Speaker, I will also tell you that our senior citizens can get assistance from the Ministry of Public Utilities in terms of having their house rewired free of charge and pensioners are exempted from paying their water rate bills. Of course one would have to make an application. All these the Government of Trinidad and Tobago are providing for the senior citizens of this country. So when I say to you earlier that it is wicked for you to say we are not doing anything to assist our senior citizens—and this is in addition to the grant they receive from month to month.

Mr. Hinds: You do not have to say it is wicked, just say it is UNC, it is synonymous.

Hon. A. Roberts: Mr. Speaker, I know you can be very busy at times, but when you have the time, I want you to tell Madam Opposition Leader when she returns that she must not try to interfere with the relationship between the PNM and the senior citizens of this country. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Speaker, you would understand why the senior citizens love the PNM, it is because of the caring nature of this Government. Just imagine all that I have told you is not all.

The policy on ageing speaks to recreation for senior citizens and I note my friend, the Member for Couva South, is paying attention. One of the pains of ageing is loneliness and after a senior citizen would have provided accommodation for his family, the children undoubtedly at some time would move on with their life, you cannot get away from that. Some senior citizens over time would lose their life long partner because of death and end up alone. It is therefore a very critical time in their life and the Government feels committed to providing such a person with companionship.

The Government opened two senior activity centres; one is located at St. James and the other at Maloney, two more are expected to be opened, one in Rio Claro and the other in Chaguanas. These centres target healthy, active seniors and are extremely popular among the seniors. The centres provide them with an opportunity to engage in recreational as well as educational activities which facilitate their continued inclusion in the society.

The one at St. James, the senior citizens are now engaging in activities of tai chi.

Mrs. Job-Davis: What is tai chi?

Hon. A. Roberts: Something like karate. We are also encouraging our senior citizens to get involved in swimming; some cannot but we provide them with the gears which provide them with aquatic therapy. The Ministry of Social Development joins with the NGO's and we provide them with assistance to ensure they can make provision for our senior citizens.

The Ministry of Social Development also caters to the needs of those who are not that healthy and active and may be bedridden and require care. In this case, the ministry has submitted a proposal for the introduction of a meals on wheels programme, which will provide warm, nutritious, diet-conscious meals to our senior citizens requiring this special care.

This programme will be executed in collaboration with the Geriatric Adolescent Partnership Programme (GAPP) of the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs to ensure that we not only provide a meal, but at the same time provide the care, attention, and companionship to those senior citizens who require it. [*Desk thumping*]

A significant percentage of our senior citizens reside in senior citizens' homes throughout the country and the Government has a responsibility to ensure that our senior citizens in homes are well cared for and Government has agreed to pursue legislation to regulate the operations and activities of these homes in Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Speaker, this legislation will be brought to this honourable House before the end of this year.

Our senior citizens are considered to be a very important cohort of people in our society. Among this grouping resides a wealth of experience and wisdom and this Government will continue to interact and consult with the citizens of this country.

6.15 p.m.

Only today this consultation and interaction of which I speak took place in Tobago and will continue tomorrow. We have held four such consultations in Trinidad and we will continue to consult with our senior citizens and to keep in touch with them as we proceed to take Trinidad and Tobago to developed nation status. The projects and services that I have highlighted today are but a few towards this Government's ultimate goal to social inclusion and social integration.

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These programmes and initiatives all seek to ensure the participation of vulnerable persons and persons at risk in decisions and activities that affect them. This Government clearly understands that policies and programmes that are geared towards social integration foster stable, safe and just societies and protect the disadvantaged and vulnerable persons with special needs.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Member for Tabaquite has ceded to the hon. Member for Naparima. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Nizam Baksh (*Naparima*): Thank you very much for the opportunity to—

Mr. Ramnath: I am glad you were not here to listen to the diatribe.

Mr. N. Baksh: I should explain that I am fasting so I just went to break the fast. It is no disrespect to the Minister or anybody else.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute on this Bill to provide for the services of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending September 30, 2007. This morning I think we made record in this Parliament when, for the first time, we had a female making a contribution as the Leader of the Opposition and we are proud of that. I want to commend her for her contribution here; the ease and the eloquence with which she did that this morning. With regard to her delivery and content, I would want to give her an A-plus.

I listened with high expectations to the presentation of the budget statement delivered by the hon. Prime Minister and Minister of Finance. At the end of it, two things came to mind: One, that this PNM Government is out of touch with the needs of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago—[*Desk thumping*—]—regardless of whether you are poor or otherwise. The Minister of Finance failed to address the most crucial and critical issues frontally and effectively. Among those is the most vexing, damaging and uncontrollable runaway inflationary trends. You can ask any shopper in the grocery, for example, and you would hear the moan in the response. Inflation, like high blood pressure, is a silent killer. Government seems to be impotent or lacks interest with respect to the spiralling inflation, perhaps because they are the major contributor in this regard. If we behave like the proverbial ostrich and bury our heads in the sand, the debilitating social consequences could become costly, disastrous and irreparable.

Secondly, the Prime Minister has effectively set the next election date for December, 2007 after listening to that budget.

Mr. Manning: When is it?

Mr. N. Baksh: December, 2007.

Mr. Manning: No problem.

Mr. Imbert: “Yuh want an extra year?”

Mr. N. Baksh: Most of his major programmes for winning the next election are yet to materialize and come to fruition.

Mr. Imbert: Where “yuh” tie? “Yuh lost yuh tie?”

Mr. N. Baksh: I am keeping it to auction it later on. It is going to be valuable.

For the man in the street and the country at large, this budget is an utter disappointment. This budget, like the others presented by successive PNM governments, expresses grandiose plans, projections and policies which hardly ever materialize on time. They are plagued with implementation hurdles and they are besieged by capacity constraints and lack managerial will to deliver on their promises. Apart from several pressing problems which our country faces on a routine basis, this budget does not include precise plans to curb rising inflation.

There is a drastic increase in the poverty class and spiralling criminal activities. To date there are 292 murders, and this has probably increased by now—which figure increases daily. At best, this budget can be described as a vacuous charade with no substance and it is replete with a range of deceptive promises. There is hardly anything definite. Within the past four years I have heard this Government tell the national community of dozens of commencement dates of the intersection at the Grand Bazaar, the extension of the Solomon Hochoy at Debe and the commencement of the Princes Town/Rio Claro/Mayaro Highway. I even attended the environmental impact assessment meetings and to date there is no commencement of any work. All that they can boast of is a ramp at an astronomical cost. I bet this honourable House that the current financial year will end in September 2007 and most of the highway projects will not get started.

The hon. Minister of Finance has allocated \$750 million to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources. I would like to tell him that this sum is inadequate to control even the price of vegetables and provisions. We need a similar allocation as the social development allocation to make any impact in agriculture. What he has allocated for agriculture will not make a dent in the cost of living as well.

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In my contribution, I would like to touch on some of the social ills that are contributory to poverty-creation and stagnation of the will of our people, especially the youths of our nation. I would like to enumerate some of the weaknesses of the social programmes which are not addressed by the Government and which, in fact, are leading to the creation of a dependence state.

My analysis of Government's elaborate social programmes reveals the following facts: A total of 136 social programmes are administered by 16 government departments, including the Tobago House of Assembly. These programmes are divided into three categories, namely, developmental, remedial and preventative. The bulk of the programmes covers developmental—a total of 78—which represents 59 per cent of the pie. The remedial is 25, which represents 19 per cent and the preventative is 29, which represents 22 per cent. A modest estimation reveals that approximately \$2 billion was committed towards social programmes during the last financial year with very little effect, if any, on eradication of poverty.

I have, however, seen a diverse range of colourful, graphic designs of expensive advertisements. It would be rather interesting to get a breakdown of these and the grand total spent on advertisements of social programmes and all other programmes. It would also be interesting to name the companies which have been contracted to do these graphic designs. I am certain that the information would lead to some PNM financier. Of course, this is pay-back time.

I want to focus a little on the development programmes which comprise 59 per cent of the programmes and are centered on training for employment and yet we cannot supply enough skilled citizens for our so-called expanding construction industry. Something is radically wrong and we do not need a rocket scientist to tell us what is wrong. The training that 59 per cent of the programmes are imparting is not equipping our citizens with marketable skills. The skill levels being taught are not relevant to the needs of the construction industry. There is a wide gap between the skills training from these programmes and the skills offered by the National Energy Skills Centre, COSTAATT and the UTT. I have been advised that most of the craft training offered previously by the technical institutes have now been upgraded into the degree programmes at UTT. The end of the craft training means that citizens are not being trained to hold their own in the building skills. What I am saying is that all these development programmes are turning out helpers and not full-scale craftsmen. I will say more on this a little later.

I want to state, categorically, that if the country does not have adequate skilled personnel for the current thrust in the construction industry, it is because a very high percentage of our youths and young people are employed in jobs which do not require a skill. I am referring particularly to the URP and CEPEP programmes in which thousands of youths are handed out temporary employment. If these citizens were, in fact, equipped with skills, we would not now experience a shortage of trained workers for the construction industry.

I want to refer now to the Multi-Sector Skills Training Programme (MuST). I have been told that the expensive, fancy and colourful advertisements invite citizens for practical skills training experience, something similar to the OJT programmes, which I would also examine in a few minutes. Hundreds of MuST selectees are assigned to construction projects at sites where the work has never started, or took months before the commencement date. In the interim they collect a stipend for reporting on the site daily and not doing any work. At the end of the six-month period, they are moved from the site with little exposure or training on that particular job site. So this is a case where they come and only benefit from the \$60 stipend and they do not get any skills training. This is one of the problems we have in people not being fully trained in the construction industry.

I want to say, categorically, the Government is wasting millions of dollars on colourful advertisements and the message is not reaching citizens who are in need or who could benefit from the training. Actually, it is high-profile advertising and imaging for those respective ministries. In fact, I have a number of these advertisements; several of these for the various ministries here, and the Minister admitted that the young people do not read these advertisements, so we have to find other ways and means to reach out to the young people in these areas.

The MuSt Programme has stated a number of beneficiaries. The intended target was 4,928 and what they achieved was 2,082, less than 50 per cent. I am aware that the youths, especially those in rural areas, do not read the media advertisements and the Minister admitted that. I remember as a former community development officer we used to go out to the communities and prepare little posters and put into the bars and so on, that people would read, and we used to also contact the community leaders—the genuine ones—and they would send the message. Also, the youths on the block in the liming spots and so, you pass this information to them and they would be able to disseminate it to the wider community, and this had a positive impact. In fact, you would find the Elections and Boundaries Commission as well, using the shops to advertise their list on a

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regular basis. So that this is something the Government must take note of and to understand that the advertisements are not helping at all.

I also note that in the MuST Programme 2,788 benefited but only 1,752 were awarded certification. So I ask the question: What has happened to the 1,036? Maybe we can get some answers later on this.

6.30 p.m.

The labour market survey conducted by the National Training Agency has identified three sectors in which we need to train people. They are the construction, hospitality and tourism industry and agriculture. They are now targeting 5,000 unemployed. I ask the question: If they say that the unemployment rate is 6.9 per cent, where are we getting 5,000 and other large numbers to train in the various programmes that we are spending so much money to train people?

Mr. Imbert: From the 6 per cent.

Mr. N. Baksh: I did not have time to check the number of people you are targeting in all the social programmes, but they run into hundreds of thousands. Where are we going to find those people to train?

I also looked at the On the Job Trainees (OJT). That is a similar programme to the Multi-Sector Skills Training programme (MUST). There is need for the OJT Programme to be subjected to a thorough evaluation and assessment. I am aware that hundreds and thousands of graduates from secondary and tertiary institutions are recruited and placed in a six-month programme, at the end of which a certificate of participation is awarded. As a matter of fact I am not sure about the level of supervision and monitoring of these trainees while they are on this programme. I have never heard of any seminar or workshop being convened for supervisors to ensure that they are equipped with the skills and expertise for common standards of assessment and evaluation.

The facilitators of the OJT must ensure that on-site supervisors are guiding and assisting the trainees so that they can perform at satisfactory levels. In other words, this programme has the responsibility to ensure that graduates are oriented to produce at acceptable levels in the working environment. This programme places a tremendous responsibility on supervisors to ensure that committed workers are produced for practical work environment. I know how easy it will be for the particular ministry to provide on an annual basis, the total number of youths who have benefited from the OJT programme and the total sum expended

for temporary employment. We would see on television and the newspapers very attractive advertisements saying that 20,000 persons have been trained in the OJT programme. I ask the question: If in 2006, which is the peak for this training we were only able to train 3,209—over the three years I expect that it would have been less—how can we say now that we have trained over 20,000 persons on the OJT programme? You can see these figures are misleading.

They must provide the country with a breakdown of the total number according to constituencies, districts or counties. In the government offices the graduates are left on their own with minimal supervision and the establishments treat them as messengers. In most cases they do the work of established clerks who in turn end up doing nothing. Similarly, university students who are assigned to secondary schools are exploited as well. They are required to perform as full-time teachers and receive the salary of a trainee. They are required to perform as relief for absentee teachers and generally, the established teachers take time-off and leave the trainees to take charge of the classrooms. No wonder why there is so much indiscipline in the schools.

The Minister spoke about the disability grant. I want to address this. He spoke about accessibility for the disabled and mentioned in particular pavements. As of now, if you move around the country you will see pavements under construction and you will be amazed at the way they construct them. You will feel that you are on a roller coaster up and down compared to when you travel abroad and look at those pavements. They are even and smooth to walk on. This is a challenge and it will be double jeopardy for those who are physically challenged. That is something we need to address.

Mr. Valley: Carlos John.

Mr. N. Baksh: You are following him as well. We need to correct this if we are talking about 2020 Vision. It is something we need to address very seriously and urgently.

I note in the budget that the grant has been increased from \$800 to \$900 per month. I am concerned about the ceiling for this grant which is still \$300 per month, a maximum of \$3,600 per year. Once someone is earning an income of \$300 per month that person is debarred from gaining this grant. It is more important to address this than the \$100 increase they will receive. There is another part that we need to address; that is the aggregate period of three years spent outside the country. That should be removed completely. I say this in the context

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that these people go away very often to get medical attention and may have to spend some time. Once they exceed this period they are debarred as well.

There is also the age qualification. I know that this has been reduced to 18 years. [*Interruption*] We know that those people have disabled children at home and it is very difficult to maintain them from birth onward. I am suggesting that this grant be lowered from birth as well. It is more tedious to maintain children from zero to 12 years than from 18 to 45 years. We need to bring down that age.

I want to give you an example of a constituent of mine who wrote to me with regard to this disability grant. I want to put this on record.

My name is Zorina Nanan of 242 Iere Village, Princes Town. On 7th August 2005 my right leg was amputated at the San Fernando General Hospital. My contribution was made to National Insurance office. I am now receiving the sum of \$349.27.

Since the month of September 2005, I went to the Social Welfare Division in San Fernando. I was told by the social welfare officer that I was unable to receive my disability grant due to the fact that I am now receiving the sum of \$300 and more which is \$349.27. This \$349.27 is my only income from the national insurance office and is insufficient.

I am humbly asking you to please take same to Parliament and advise or inform the Government Mr. Patrick Manning, in Trinidad and Tobago to change this law of \$300 at the National Insurance Board to a higher humane level amount, so that I can also be the recipient of this grant. This law at the National Insurance Board is there over 20 years so please help us.

From that time to now everything in this country went up double the price.

Thank you,

Yours respectfully,

Zorina Nanan.

This is a plea. I am sure that there are several persons who fall within the same category. For \$49, in excess of that ceiling they are debarred from getting anything else. I ask the Government to give this some consideration to up the ceiling so these people can benefit a little more. I want to look at national insurance benefits as well.

The retirement pension should be at least 50 per cent above what is paid for senior citizens grant. I say this with the understanding that National Insurance is a contributory fund and it should always be higher than what is given as grants. In this regard I am making this request that the retirement pension should be about 50 per cent above the old age pension. For child allowance the current amount is \$320. This is grossly inadequate. It should be increased to around \$500 or more. Spouse allowance should not be less than 50 per cent of the deceased pension. Today, there are widows getting \$200 and \$300 a month and they cannot survive on it. Consideration should be given to make it at least 50 per cent of the deceased pension.

Funeral grant should also be increased from \$4,000 to \$6,000. The current amount places great stress on dependents of deceased persons. Medical expenses should be reimbursed 100 per cent up to \$50,000. At the moment the limit is \$18,000. I am suggesting that this be increased to \$50,000. One may have to spend up to \$100,000 to get back \$18,000 because it is pro rated. Maternity grant should be increased from \$2,000 to \$4,000 to cover hospitalization as well.

For qualifying conditions for sickness at present it is 10 out of 13 contributions. You must have worked for at least 10 weeks during the last 13 weeks prior to illness. Casual workers, URP and CEPEP workers do not qualify. I recommend that this be changed from 10 to 26 weeks.

With the self-employed, Government has been making promises to bring them in the net for years and nothing has been done. They even promised in the last budget as well. There are 125,000 self-employed persons and their families are without protection from NIS. I suggest that we undertake a feasibility study for the implementation of an unemployed insurance with the objective of alleviating poverty through this insurance.

I turn to the Social Help And Rehabilitation Efforts Programme (SHARE). This has been administered by the non-governmental and community based organization since its inception. Apart from a few minor cases of nepotism these agencies have done an excellent job and I commend them today. These agencies work with the parameters stipulated and provide food hampers for citizens in need. In many cases these agencies resisted political interference which sought to operate contrary to policy guidelines. The concept of allowing agencies to administer the distribution of hampers promoted the development of self-reliance.

This approach also sought to keep Government out of matters that could attribute bias and discrimination. In its ill-advised wisdom Government has

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introduced the Conditional Cash Transfer Programme which now facilitates exactly what the agencies sought to avoid. Government has full control of the distribution of the cards. In their usual practice, PNM's favouritism and nepotism will now be the order of the day. It will be interesting to get a breakdown of the distribution of these cards. Apart from the political bias and discrimination the Conditional Cash Transfer Programme system is open for exploitation by both the users and suppliers.

6.45 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, I have been told that this practice has already shown its ugly head. We must always be guided by the established patterns of behaviours for citizens. For example, an addict would choose a bottle of alcohol and a pack of cigarettes instead of a bag of flour. The grocery owner, in turn, is not concerned with what the person takes as long as he makes the sale.

The introduction of the Conditional Cash Transfer Programme certainly demoralizes the NGOs, the religious and community-based organizations, which are performing an excellent role. I have no doubt that the programme is now open to political influence and corruption.

There was an article in bold headline: "Smart Card Racket". It was very colorful: "Smartmen abuse Smart Card".

With respect to the Conditional Cash Transfer Programme, they are saying that it is a temporary measure. I have come across people who live in Barrackpore and were given correspondence to collect their cards in Diego Martin. I came across three instances like that in Barrackpore.

I have also come across five and six persons from one household who are now getting the cards for only two persons. We would like to know what criteria were used in giving these persons the cards and the number of beneficiaries in the households. You have to tell us what criteria you have used in arriving at those numbers.

I understand, too, that the majority of persons who are beneficiaries of these programmes were persons who were benefiting from the existing programmes. Most of them would have benefited for the six-month period, for which the SHARE programme was operating, and they went over into the cash card programme. They are now going to benefit for two years. In actuality, they are going to benefit over a 30-month period. This is unfair to those persons who have been

waiting to benefit from the programme as well. [*Interruption*] They registered in Barrackpore but they got a correspondence to collect their card in Diego Martin.

Mr. Speaker, I have an uncanny feeling that when the Prime Minister visited Israel he got the idea about this smart man card. [*Laughter*] I have an extract from the Internet which gives a lot of detail about the use of this smart card in Israel. It has been used for a number of activities. It is something for which we have to get full information. They must not impose this on the national community. We must know exactly what the intent is in using these smart cards.

Earlier on, when the Leader of the Opposition indicated that there were going to be 60,000 beneficiaries—[*Interruption*] The Leader of the Opposition indicated that there are 60,000 beneficiaries in this programme. The Member for Arouca South, however, denied this and indicated that it was only 16,000. I will quote from the Prime Minister's presentation of last year's budget:

“The proposed cash transfer through a Smart Card will target about 60,000 families. The Smart Card will allow for the purchase of food on a defined list of items of \$300 for families of 3 or fewer persons; \$400 of 4 to 5 persons; and \$500 for families with 6 and more persons.”

This is on a monthly basis. This is also confirmed in the Social Sector Investment Programme on page 97, in the SHARE programme in which the objective of the Conditional Cash Transfer programme was to provide targeted conditional cash transfers to approximately 60,000 eligible recipients by August 01, 2006. Mr. Speaker, I just wanted to dispel the misinformation that came out earlier on.

I will now touch, briefly, on crime. The number one scourge which continues to threaten life and property of our country continues to be crime. Crime continues to flourish because this Government does not possess the managerial capability to address this serious issue.

We have to discourage citizens from committing crimes. We have to investigate and arrest persons for committing crimes. We have to prosecute and penalize those who have committed crimes. We have to establish relationships with the communities that would allow information of criminal activities to be shared.

Mr. Speaker, the idea of meeting the so-called criminal community leaders will not assist in any great way. We need to operate a police service free of corrupt elements and equipped with the knowledge and expertise that would enable them to apprehend criminals.

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The national community has lost confidence in the Government because they have entered into dialogue with leaders of criminal gangs under the guise of community leaders. A government that negotiates and entertains criminal gang leaders in a hotel environment, will never acquire respect and gain the support of citizens. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, I will quote an article by Suzanne Sheppard in the *Newsday* dated Sunday, October 08, 2006, headlined:

“Gang violence calls for preventative action.

This country is paying a very high price, economically and socially, because gang activity has been allowed to spread throughout this country, with little in the way of preventative action.

As a result, we are faced with a major crisis of violence and crime which appears to be beyond the reach of our law enforcement authorities.

Gangs...are operating in increasing numbers throughout this country,...Each gang operates under a common name or symbol. Usually, members can be identified by a certain type or clothing or some other identifying mark.

The important first step, which seems to have eluded the authorities in this country, is to gather data on gang activities. Information is essential if we are to design effective anti-gang programmes. In all of the communities where gangs have their strongholds, we must find out about their methods of recruitment, activities, signs and colours. This information must be shared, not only with the police, but with all stakeholders, including community groups, social workers and schools.

Most gang members exhibit signs of their status, including wearing specific colours, even with a school uniform.

Here are some warning signs of gang involvement that parents and teachers should look out for:

- A decline in academic performance
- Change of friend
- Skipping classes
- Keeping late hours
- Alcohol and other drug use

- Having large sums of money or expensive items which cannot be explained
- Withdrawing from family
- Abrupt changes in music tastes and clothing styles
- The presence of body modifications, including tattoos, scaring, burns and brands.

These changes can occur gradually or suddenly but generally follow a pattern. To be accepted, the new gang member must display a defiant attitude towards authority figures. Thus disruptive or violent behaviour may be displayed at school or at home.

When it comes to gang activity, an ounce of prevention is worth much more than a pound of cure. We are already suffering major losses because of our failure to intervene. The gangs will not voluntarily go away—they have to be eradicated.”

Mr. Speaker, that is a guideline and I am sure that people will get the information now that we are reaching out to the national community. They will look for these signs and would be able to identify and assist those in authority.

Only a few days ago I had an experience in Barrackpore where there was a bomb threat at the Unipet Gas Station.

Hon. Members: Where you blocked the road.

Mr. N. Baksh: That has nothing to do with the blocking of the road. There was a bomb threat and the police came there and they cordoned off the area and waited for the Bomb Squad to arrive. The Bomb Squad came and looked at the bomb that was placed in a toilet there but after they left nobody took any fingerprints as a follow-up to see if they could find the criminal. I thought this was a simple thing to do—poor forensic training. This is the failure we have in identifying and solving the crimes in the country. We need to address this as urgently as possible.

Two days after, there was another crime threat in a hardware in Barrackpore as well and, again, there was nothing done to identify the telephone calls. People are saying that they were able to identify some of these calls that came to those two business places but yet the police are not in a position to identify these. We are saying that there must be some relationship or authority given to the police to go to TSTT.

Hon. Member: They have that.

Mr. N. Baksh: They have that but they are not using it, so this is something we have to look at very seriously. [*Interruption*] I do not own the gas station; do not worry.

The Government has been boasting, and we have heard it very recently that they are in command of kidnapping and this is why it has gone down to eight. Only recently, however, we saw where Riaz Khan was murdered and to date, with all the devices they are boasting that we have, the police cannot yet find the kidnappers.

There is another instance of Rehanna Ramlochan who was kidnapped a few days ago and we have heard not a word from those who are pursuing this activity. Mr. Speaker, very often we hear nice sounding phrases but we are not getting any action.

I want to touch on the rising food prices and poverty. Trinidad and Tobago is now facing a \$2 billion food import bill. Apart from crime, one of the most critical issues facing our country today is the effect of rising food prices on poverty. Within the past two years, citizens have had to buy some basic food stocks at an increase of over 50 per cent with the same income. This means that the low income earners and the poverty class, in particular, have had to sacrifice quality and quantity to live.

These two years have been the worst this country has ever faced in its effort to cope with the sudden and drastic increase in inflationary cost in basic food stock. The increase is astronomical, and is equally spread on imported as well as local products, while at times increases on local supplies edge past the foreign ones.

7.00 p.m.

This Government in general, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources in particular, do not have the managerial and technical capacity to enable some 20,000 farmers of the country to produce vegetables and ground provisions at an affordable price. No more than three years ago, these commodities were sold at less than \$1.00 per pound when supply outstripped demand. Today, our farmers are a demoralized and dejected lot. They operate with no support, very little technical direction and hardly any incentive for a few farmers' workshops.

Agriculture has never been a priority under the PNM regime. I believe this one is bent on absolute demise of agriculture through the following.

1. They have stood by and failed to introduce any measures to prevent the wholesalers and middlemen from digging out the eyes of farmers. They pay next to nothing to the farmers who are supposed to toil and labour to feed the nation.

We must address the critical issue of rising food prices otherwise our poverty class will continue to increase and those on the lower end will experience greater malnutrition. These days the PNM Government is boasting about the lowest unemployment levels. What they are not telling the country is the employment created is not sustained.

Mr. Speaker: The speaking time of the hon. Member has expired.

Motion made, That the hon. Member's speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. [*Dr. H. Rafeeq*]

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. N. Baksh: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and I thank hon. Members for the extension. Mr. Speaker, I have followed Prof. Spence's articles on agriculture for a number of years, even when we were in the Senate together. His ideas and recommendations are always practical and feasible. One of his recent articles stressed a nine-point plan which I would like to scan briefly. Before I do this, there is another article, an editorial in the *Guardian* of September 25 2006. I quote:

“High food prices still on Govt's agenda”

If Agriculture Minister Jarrette Narine thought that rising food prices was an issue he'd managed to get a handle on, the *Sunday Guardian's* Poll by the UWI/Ansa McAl Psychological Research Centre put an end to that delusion.

Asked how they felt about the Government's efforts to deal with rising food prices, a decisive majority of 93 per cent delivered a resounding no, in a vote of dissatisfaction that crossed party lines and ethnicity.”

Mr. Bereaux: What did they say about Dookeran?

Mr. N. Baksh: Very good. I look now at Prof. Spence's recommendation.

“Modernization key for agri-sector

What are some of the major requirements of a modern, technologically driven agricultural sector? I list here under some of these requirements.

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- 1) Land: This must be available in parcels that are of a size that will allow appropriate mechanization.
- 2) Soil: The soil must be amenable to manipulation that will produce economic yields.
- 3) Water: Since we have an excess of rainfall at certain times of the year and a marked dry period, drainage and irrigation are of particular importance.
- 4) Research and Development: A modern, technologically-driven agricultural sector cannot survive for long without the support of high quality research.
- 5) Genetic Resources: It is necessary to continuously supply the agricultural industry with new varieties of crop plants and livestock types and for this a genetic base is required.
- 6) Energy: In a modern agricultural industry, on-farm activities utilise energy in the form of fertilizers, for irrigation and drainage in-farm vehicles, pre-harvest field operations, harvest operations, drying, livestock care and pesticides.
- 7) Labour: Although the labour requirements of a modern agricultural sector have been reduced to a minimum, nevertheless some labour is needed and thus relative wage rates need to be discussed.
- 8) Food Processing: Many products are not marketed in the form in which they appear at the farm gate but are processed in a variety of ways.
- 9) Education: Well educated farmers, research scientists and extension officers are needed.”

Mr. Speaker, while I endorse those recommendations I would like to add my own ideas. We need to look very closely at our marketing initiatives both local and foreign. Because of a lack of marketing control and expertise, we can easily allow supply to outstrip demand causing a slump in prices. We need to construct and establish more markets in small towns and communities so that citizens could offer for sale produce grown in the neighbourhood and eliminate the middlemen. The intention is to reduce the middlemen who exploit the producers.

In Barrackpore there is now a very thriving weekend market when producers from the neighbourhood sell their agricultural products. We must ensure that our agricultural fund is utilized to assist our farmers in times of calamities. Our fund must be used for our country and not to assist neighbouring countries.

If we are to be self-sufficient in agriculture we must have land security. Almost four years have passed and the former workers of Caroni (1975) Limited have not had their titles. People develop a lot more confidence in themselves when they have security of tenure. They do not wish to invest their labour to prepare land not knowing when it will be taken away.

Mr. Speaker, I move to another interesting area that is common in this country now, barrel children, street children, and with it I will link child abuse.

Barrel children are those whose lives are conditioned on conspicuous or brand named items that are shipped to them from time to time in barrels by their parents or guardians who live in foreign countries. Items of clothing and jewellery enable the children to develop an ostentatious attitude among their peers. Moreover, they are conditioned to believe that their stay in their homeland is temporary and in time would eventually join their parents in the foreign countries. They are not conditioned to persevere for a future in Trinidad and Tobago, but a bright future awaits them in a foreign land. There is no need therefore to waste time with studies and book work. The resultant effect is indiscipline and underachievement. Oftentimes they reside with an aged grandparent who can hardly control them.

I have an article with the headline: "Plight of the 'Barrel Children'." *Sunday Guardian* September 10 by Geisha Kowlessar. The American Dream.

"DREAMS of greater wealth and a better standard of living are powerful forces that continue to draw T&T nationals to the developed countries of the north.

But very often, family life becomes a casualty of that pursuit, as children are left behind to be raised by relatives.

Their only contact with their parents is through telephone calls—and the occasional barrel of goodies.

One manager at the Barrel Shed, located at the Port Authority, Port-of-Spain, told the *Sunday Guardian* that, on average, 2,300 barrels are sent to Trinidad from the US per month.

But in some instances, the child has become so affected by the absence of the parent, that not only their school work suffers, but the child also demonstrates aggression towards teachers and their peers, says Kamla Mungal, principal of Mt D'Or Government Primary School.

In the absence of a parent, not only do some children behave aggressively, but soon their 'sense of self' is affected, Mungal noted."

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This is something one needs to address because we are looking at it in a holistic way when we are looking at issues of children and family life that the Government is putting so much emphasis on now.

In recent months, several infants were tortured, beaten, raped buggered and murdered. These followed the murder of a 12-year-old in February 2006. Recently the print media released a story of a horror home where four children were raped, molested, bore physical scars and were removed by police from squalid physical living conditions. On the same day a prominent local psychiatrist released empirical evidence that because of fear of contracting the HIV/AIDS virus adult men were sexually exploiting young girls and children. The adult men were showing a ready preference for innocent young girls, some of whom may have been under their care and protection.

A release following these unfortunate incidents from the emergency department of the San Fernando General Hospital indicated that there was an increase of 100 per cent in the number of children being brought to the hospital suffering from physical abuse, most of which was inflicted by abusive parents. This increasing trend of heinous and sadistic crimes against gullible and defenceless infants cannot be addressed at present by the State social support system, and as a result, it is incumbent upon this Government to treat with the matter as one of profound urgency.

The case of young Marlon Aguilera must be raised under the heading of child abuse. Recently Marlon committed suicide in the holding bay of a courthouse. Marlon's mother, a single parent, preferred that he be sent back to the Youth Training Centre rather than live at her residence somewhere around the Port of Spain district. His mother informed the national community that she wanted him to remain at YTC because she was scared that while on the outside he would be on the streets where he would be exposed to the gang influence. The issues of this sad story must be examined as follows:

- His mother felt that he would be safe at YTC. This is the feeling of a parent not knowing what goes on at the centre.
- He begged the court and his mother not to send him back to the Youth Training Centre. This means that something happened at the centre about which he was rather fearful. He cried and begged not to be sent back to the centre.

I suggest that a commission of enquiry be appointed to investigate the circumstances that led to his hanging at the courthouse. Is it because of some

dreadful experience he had at the YTC? And those of us who had some information would know that a number of irregularities with regard to activities of young offenders take place there.

Mr. Speaker, more recently, babies in the neonatal unit of the Tobago hospital died from a mysterious bacteria. A three-year-old died from a suspected equipment failure at Mount Hope hospital. Only a few days ago a newborn baby died as a result of the failure of a doctor to respond promptly. One needs to conduct some urgent research. The universities in our country, the social agencies and non-governmental organizations must be involved in data collection to determine the extent and severity of problems related to barrel and street children, and child abuse. We may need to incorporate the assistance of regional organizations like Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), OAS and UNICEF to conduct local surveys. The Government must allocate a research fund and request agencies to provide data.

These areas could have critical effects on our Vision 2020 initiatives. These days we are wasting huge sums of money on blimp and colourful commercials, but we do not have data to tell us the extent of child abuse and neglect in Trinidad and Tobago.

7.15 p.m.

I noted in the budget that the hon. Minister of Finance has made mention of the establishment of the Children's Authority. While this provision may be relevant, its implementation may be long in coming and we could discern that this evening from the contribution of the Minister. While they promise to take action, we will wait another financial year and see nothing materializing.

I want to touch on a trend that we see today—obesity. There is a saying that prevention is better than cure. We already have an overburdened health sector and we need to address this with urgency. Our children are our investment for the future of our country. We must ensure that our children are mentally and physically capable of coping with the daily challenges of life. We need to promote the necessary support services for our children to grow and develop in a safe and healthy environment. Very importantly, we need to develop policies and practices to regulate the types of snacks and refreshments which they relish on a routine basis.

Some countries have already introduced legislation to ensure that certain snacks and fast foods are not taken to school by children. The snacks and fast foods trend is increasing our obesity problem. Parents and teachers have a joint

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responsibility to support one another in their efforts to grow healthy and stable children. Teachers in particular and schools in general must organize extra-curricula activities, especially physical exercises and sports, to ensure that children are physically strong and active. That is why we need to develop more recreational facilities throughout the country as well.

I will touch briefly on education, in particular the San Fernando Technical Institute. Young people from Naparima have complained that they are unable to obtain admission to pursue engineering courses at the San Fernando Technical Institute because the entry requirement has been raised to CXC Grade I passes.

In response to numerous complaints, I have made some enquiries and the findings are scandalous and appalling. The management of the San Fernando Technical Institute has upgraded its entry requirement for all engineering classes. Applicants must now have straight CXC Grade I passes. This is a rather imprudent decision because 100 per cent of our youths with CXC Grade I passes will opt for A level classes in Trinidad and Tobago.

What are the fallouts of this decision? There are at present 16 engineering courses at the technical institute and I would like to relate the number of students registered at present for these courses on a full-time and part-time basis.

Programme	No. of Students (Full time)	No. of Students (Part time)
Diploma Petroleum Engineering Technology	21	8
Process and Utilities Engineering Technology		
-Chemical	2	Nil
-Mechanical	22	19
-Electrical and Electronics	16	Nil
-Industrial Instrumentation	2	1

Information and Communications Technology		
-Computer Engineering Technology	3	1
-Communications Engineering	1	2
-Computer and Information Systems Technology	15	10
Manufacturing Engineering Technology	1	Nil
Construction Engineering Technology		
-Civil Engineering	21	18
Pre-Engineering		
Petroleum Engineering Technology	25	Nil

Mr. Speaker, I give this information because this means that at present there are 247 full-time students and 117 part-time students, making a total of 364 students. Previous statistics are as follows:

1999—2000	1,500 students
2000—2001	1,525 students
2001—2002	1,200 students

Mr. Speaker, the current registration is less than 30 per cent of what it used to be a few years ago. There are about 30 lecturers at present at the San Fernando Technical Institute, who are receiving heavy monthly salaries, some of whom do not have classes and some of whom have less than five students to teach. This state of affairs is scandalous and calls for urgent investigation. As a matter of fact, the hon. Minister of Education should respond in this budget debate and tell the nation what is going on at the San Fernando Technical Institute. It could be going on at the John S. Donaldson Technical Institute as well. This is a national scandal. Teachers are receiving regular monthly salaries and do not have classes to teach.

Mr. Speaker, I want to touch briefly on the sugar industry. In the budget debate there was a deafening silence; not a word on the sugar industry. Perhaps when the Minister speaks, he will tell us about it, but there are farmers who are at

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a loss to know the position with the sugar industry at this time. Government has indicated that farmers would be utilized to produce 75,000 to 80,000 tonnes of sugar per year, but nothing was put in place for this measure. We hope to hear from the Minister later on.

With the demise of Caroni (1975) Limited, it created a lot of uncertainty in the cane farming industry. No long-term contracts were given to farmers to supply cane to the Sugar Manufacturing Company Limited. In fact, today, as it stands, not a single cane farmer has a contract to supply cane and we are approaching, in a few months, the harvesting season for the 2007 crop.

Since 2000, cane farmers have not received any increase for their cane except an increase in the cost of their fertilizers from \$30 to \$92 per bag. Chemicals were also increased from \$18 to \$36 per litre. There is also an increase in labour cost, fuel and repairs and maintenance of vehicles and a constant rise in the cost of living and six years after that increase they are still receiving the 2000 price of cane.

All other sectors are receiving increases and today the farmers are saying that if you are not able to tell them anything positive; if you decide to kill the industry, then they should be given VSEP as the sugar workers were given. In fact, the stake with the cane farmers is far greater than the Caroni (1875) Limited workers because they have made investments in land and in machinery and this is something of which we have to take note. It is not that you can write them off easily and say it does not matter. The point is that they were supplying canes to the sugar manufacturer and this is something that is important. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Mr. N. Baksh: You understand the link there was with Government; similarly, the sugar workers who were working there. It means they would have lost their livelihood totally. They are asking that some definite word be given so that they could prepare themselves for the future. It appears that you have a noose around their necks, tightening it gradually, waiting to let the trapdoor go and you hang them for good.

Mr. Speaker, I want to speak a little about culture and one particular area. I have some correspondence from the National Chutney Foundation of Trinidad and Tobago.

“The National Chutney Foundation of Trinidad and Tobago (NFCTT) is kindly requesting you to assist us in your contribution to the 2006/7 response to the National Budget debate in Parliament to raise some pertinent matters as

enclosed in a Very Brief synopsis of a major problem the NCFTT is currently undergoing.”

“The National Chutney Foundation of Trinidad and Tobago ...was incorporated by an Act of Parliament (Act 6 of 2000) as the legal and official body responsible for developing and sustaining this national artform. In other words NCFTT is similar to what TUCO is for Calypso, and PAN TRINBAGO is to the Steelpan and what NCC is for Carnival etc.

On Monday 4th March 2002 the Minister of Finance and Prime Minister met with a delegation from the NCFTT at his Whitehall office and made an unequivocal Commitment to the National Chutney Foundation to receive an annual Subvention as a National Body in similar form as its pier bodies in the cultural development of T&T. This was so pronounced that the PM gave full interviews to all the media as seen in articles published on the Trinidad Guardian—10th March 2002, with Large Headline—Chutney Rising under PNM too.

The Newsday newspaper of Monday 18th March 2002—Headline—NCFTT to receive \$2.5 Million...The Minister also gave Live Television interviews confirming the promises made to the NCFTT.

The Chairman of the NCFTT was given a written assurance even before the Hon. PM and Minister of Finance took office he wrote the Chairman on October 22 2001 as the then Leader of the Opposition saying ‘he is indeed genuine and if given the opportunity to again form the Government, this area would be pursued to the fullest’.”

So I now make this representation to them that this consideration and commitment will be fulfilled as soon as possible.

Mr. Speaker, you know that we are addressing the thousands of people who are in poverty. I want to make a request for squatters because they are by and large the majority of poor people in this country and suffer most for the basic needs and shelter. I suggest that squatters, who form the greater portion of our nation’s poor and who may not qualify to access loans and mortgages because of their low incomes and absence of collateral, be included in the home improvement grant of \$10,000, which would help them in improving their living conditions.

We have seen that the 2007 allocation of \$7.1 billion for the social sector shows an increase of approximately \$5.23 million over the 2006 programme. There are a number of overlapping social programmes and duplications, lack of

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proper management and lack of accountability. Mr. Speaker, in times of plenty, mismanagement and complacency become commonplace. Transparency and accountability is thrown out of the window. We have arrived there. It is happening on a daily basis and we should take note of this and do everything to remove and replace those responsible for it.

I thank you very much.

7.30 p.m.

Mr. Hedwige Bereaux (*La Brea*): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is my privilege to join this debate on an Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2007.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the hon. Prime Minister and Minister of Finance for presenting a budget statement which can truly be described as developing on the initiatives and strategies, which are designed to take Trinidad and Tobago along the road to developed nation status by 2020.

Indeed, the budget is properly entitled “Vision 2020: Moving Onward”. A significant and appropriate addition to the budget documents is that entitled “Government at your service: Highlights of Achievements”, which chronicles in a reader-friendly manner, the achievements of this Government since 2002.

As a Member of this House of some vintage—15 years to be exact—it prompted me to examine critically the condition in which I met the constituency of La Brea, when first I became its Member of Parliament, and its progress to date. Since I am not constrained by a portfolio, to limit my comments to any particular discipline, I seek your indulgence to outline the strides made in respect of the welfare of my constituents in the past and how this budget will impact on the constituency and its inhabitants.

Indeed, Mr. Speaker, I must confess that I embarked as Member of Parliament for La Brea with great trepidation. The scenario was that Brighton Refinery was shut down, Lake Asphalt was stuttering, Van Liere was shut down, PSAEL floundering and Trintopex offering VSEP and lease operatorships. To put it bluntly, the constituency was in a state of great despair and it appeared to me that the only thing that could be done was to have some industrial development within the community of La Brea, in particular, to try to lift the constituency.

I could recall coming to this honourable House and hearing the hon. Member—I could not help but call him honourable—for Princes Town, Mohammed Haniff, casting aspersions on my constituency and telling me bluntly that all they could

do was to sell young mangoes on the side of the road. It is not that I thought that anything was wrong with selling young mangoes. In fact, the selling of fruits is good, regardless of their maturity. In my view, it is a true sense of entrepreneurship.

Today, I heard the Member for Fyzabad using as an excuse for blocking the road, the fact that things are being done in La Brea that were not done in Fyzabad. I understand his concern and I empathize with him. *[Interruption]* You will speak later, Sir. Do not worry, I am in full flight. I am not giving—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Sharma: I took your advice and blocked the road and now you are quarrelling with me.

Mr. H. Bereaux: I did not give you that advice. You know that very well. If you care to blame me for it, I will take it too. I vividly recall that. The Member for Fyzabad paid tribute to what is going on in La Brea. That is just a sign of good PNM representation.

Along came the La Brea Industrial Estate and Labidco. The first specialized platform fabricating company was located in La Brea; Cairi platform 1; EOG platform; Cannonball platform for bpTT; and the Flare Boom for the Angostura Field. All of those were built in the platform yard in Labidco estate.

The same young men, who at one time were selling mangoes and building mango stalls, are now leading the thrust in Trinidad and Tobago in the intervention upstream in the oil industry. This did not happen by chance. The hon. Member for La Brea, my humble self, made representations and encouraged them to get themselves trained. In fact, I make no apologies for it. I threatened most of the companies there that I expected them to take a hand in training my constituents, otherwise I would go to the Parliament and attack them for doing nothing for the area.

I did not have to threaten too much, but I can now proudly say that as a result of their assistance and the young persons' willingness to take training, we have a number of persons who normally might not have been involved in that kind of work performing at the Labidco Industrial Estate. There are a number of companies there: TUFECO and NM Kaizen. The Member for Couva South will know that name very well. They are all there contributing to the development of La Brea.

More importantly—I do not want to forget this at all, history will not forgive me—in the middle of the construction of the estate, when the UNC government came into power, we had Farmlands Braskem about to construct a plant there. We

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had 63 boreholes drilled, and on the 64th borehole, they encouraged them to leave that estate and go to Point Lisas. I recalled when I raised it in this honourable House, Trevor Sudama, former Member of Parliament, whom I hope will never see the corridors of this august assembly again, told me: “We keep our political promises. We said we will close it down and we are doing that.” The people of La Brea are rising and he is where he is supposed to be; outside of here. He is too vindictive. I did not put him there. His own vindictiveness put him out.

The UNC government moved Farmlands Braskem out at a great cost to the country, because they had to give the same gas concessions that Farmlands was receiving for locating in La Brea. They were forced to give it at Point Lisas. Today another industrial estate, the Union Industrial Estate, is being constructed in La Brea and true to the principles that I hold in respect of training, the Union Industrial Estate has not only come and as some people say, bulldozed the forest and ran the howler monkeys. This is not true. They have made arrangements for training in conjunction with NESCC at the former Vessigny High School.

The forms are out for the young persons who so desire to access training. It is a partnership between Alutrint and NESCC. I expect shortly that young persons—I think the first contingent of 56—will be training there. This is the PNM's method. You do not go into an area and ask for skilled craftsmen. You know that they are not there, therefore, you seek to train them before you begin your construction.

I was so pleased to hear the hon. Prime Minister indicate in this House that the aluminium smelters will be a part of our industrial development, once they pass the necessary tests, which would be of the highest quality, to ensure the health and safety of the nation.

As I am on the topic of aluminium smelters, it also shows that there has been an attempt—and I make bold to say that any time we in the PNM try to do something for the areas that we represent, those on the other side and their cohorts, whether in or out of this House; all former Attorneys General and failures who could not save their deposit, run up and down—to prevent the PNM from taking steps for the benefit of the areas that support the PNM. It appears as though—because they want to go around afterwards and tell the population: “Look, you have supported the PNM and they have done nothing for you.” When we are moving in a manner which will confound that, they immediately start dealing and bringing all sorts of red herrings.

Take for instance Members on the other side who came to this honourable House and purported to deal with the question of the environment, but they forgot

or appeared not to remember that the convict—[*Interruption*] He is. I am saying the convict because it is the truth.

Mr. Speaker: I know the Member was convicted. Do not forget he has an appeal.

Mr. H. Bereaux: That does not change it. I am being very polite. I am describing him properly. He, in 1998, permitted the Cabinet of this country and agreed to put a 474,000-tonne aluminium smelter, Norsk Hydro, in Point Lisas and yet that aluminium smelter would have had a 20-year tax holiday.

7.45 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, that aluminium smelter would have had a 20-year tax holiday but, yet, when they were trying to put a small aluminium smelter in Chatham, and an even smaller one in La Brea, they were trying to create total chaos.

Mr. Speaker, there is one gentleman—I know he is maybe not a member of the other side, but he is one of the bleeding hearts who talks about the environment and other things—by the name of Ishmael Samad who wrote in the *Business Guardian*: “Relocate smelter away from aquifer”. I do not know that he knows anything about the aquifer, but this is what he said:

“I here advise the EMA to consign the EIA for the proposed Industrial Estate at Chatham/Cap-de-Ville to the waste paper basket. There is no ‘major source of potable water’ under the Point Lisas Industrial Estate. There exist north of the former Farmland plant well over 5,000 hectares of abandoned Caroni lands, more than enough to accommodate any new industrial projects. Alcoa can relocate its smelter there.”

Mr. Speaker, you see, just as in 1998, we did not have any air pollution rules or any of those rules, but they wanted to put a smelter, and now the true thing has come out. It is not that they are so upset about the smelters, but they do not want the smelters to go in an area where the support for the PNM exists, and that is in Cap-de-Ville and Chatham.

Mr. Speaker, I want to deal to some extent with the smelter that will be in La Brea. What is going to La Brea is not a smelter; it is an aluminium complex. I think the entire output of the smelter is 125,000 tonnes which will be utilized in downstream industries in Trinidad and Tobago. There will be a wire rod factory and another plant. So, there are going to be three plants with a permanent workforce of over 880 persons, and then additional persons will be employed downstream. In my humble view, that will be of great benefit to the people, just as

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the other activities on the Labidco Estate will be of great benefit to the people, and then you are going to feel the way that I feel where a community and a constituency that hitherto appeared to be going down the drain has now turned around.

There is also Trinidad Lake Asphalt which was tottering. We have a new pelletization plant there, which would make the sale of asphalt more convenient, where it could be exported and sold in various small shops, because we are now talking about 50-pound bags as opposed to 200 tonnes or whatever is the large size of the barrels that are being sold.

Mr. Speaker, a few days ago, I was driving through Santa Flora—I went through the Field Road and I was on my way to Erin—and as I looked on the both sides of the road, the grass was properly manicured. As I travelled along and passed through Santa Flora, onto Palo Seco I drove through—[*Interruption*]—I am just telling you that I was driving through on a weekend and it was comfortable. I was driving on a good road; I was driving through the new bridge in Palo Seco, and a very good bridge; through the new bridge in Rancho Quemado, a very good bridge; and through the new bridge in Carapal Junction, a very good bridge.

While I was passing through Palo Seco, I looked to my left and I saw the two buildings of 16 classrooms that were constructed by Palo Seco Agricultural Estate Limited, a name that you are going to hear about again. They built 16 classrooms in two months after the Palo Seco Secondary School was burnt. Mr. Speaker, when you hear about cost overruns and delayed construction, it always makes the newspapers. This is the second time that I am saying this in this House. When the 16 classrooms were opened, the press was present but they did not carry that report because that was good and it showed performance; good labour force performance.

The Parent Teachers Association and the teachers came out and prepared the school in time so that the children could have written their CXC examinations and produced an 87 per cent pass rate. That is a success story, but it is not something that people talk about. As I am on that matter, I heard the hon. Member for Naparima talking about agriculture but, you see, Los Iros is an area of great agricultural production. The hon. Member for Siparia would know that. That is an area for agricultural production.

I was very happy to hear the hon. Prime Minister and Minister of Finance talk about the large agricultural companies that are likely to come forward. I am

satisfied that the PSAEL which is an agricultural company, and which over the years had floundered could now be resuscitated to go back into full-scale agriculture again, seeing the way that it is being led now.

I know that Trinidad and Tobago cocoa is receiving kudos on the world market. So, maybe we can put back—whenever I think about cocoa and agriculture, I think about “Love Field”, which is a well known cocoa plantation in the Carapal area.

Mr. Speaker, when I was on that beach, I saw the new lifeguard station which was erected in Los Iros. There are so many things that are being done. If you go to Vessigny Beach on a Saturday morning, you are going to see young persons from the ages of nine to 15 sailing in the waters of Vessigny Beach. They did not come from anywhere in Port of Spain or any posh place, but came from Vessigny and its environs. Thanks to the Optimists Club and the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs, the hon. Roger Boynes and this Government’s assistance. That is what you have there.

Hon. Member: You are lucky.

Mr. H. Breaux: You see, I have been there before you, and I have laboured long. I was treated badly at times by your government when you all were in power. Take for instance, when I looked around my constituency there were 21 areas that did not have pipe-borne water and these areas are now being served by pipe-borne water through the assistance of the hon. Minister of Public Utilities and the Environment. [*Interruption*] They are reminding me that I had to behave in a most unseemly manner in this honourable House in order to get water for my constituency. I am not saying that we are completely satisfied with the water supply that we are getting but, at least, there is pipe borne water in 21 areas in the La Brea constituency that did not have pipe borne water. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Partap: They are putting all the resources in the PNM areas.

Mr. H. Breaux: The hon. Member for Nariva said that we are putting all the resources in the PNM areas, but that is not true. I want to remind the Member that in 2000 when persons from my constituency were encouraged by the Member for Fyzabad—he went into Retroville and told the people there that all of them who are in PNM groups and so forth should leave, and if they leave he would give them water. Well, they wanted the water and they left the group. Mr. Speaker, do you know what happened? They had to wait for the PNM to come into power for them to get water. Thankfully, they have water now. I would like the hon. Member for Fyzabad to know that. I want him to know that notwithstanding his misbehaviour, they still got the water. That is not the end of it.

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Mr. Speaker, in Lot 10, although we have not gotten the road as yet, we have a new community centre there. In Daly Village, there is a new community centre. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Baksh: I was just indicating that I worked there as a community development officer. What was remarkable is that when you go to meetings there—there was a secretary—when the officer arrived he would ring the bell and everybody would come out to the meeting. I admired that.

Mr. H. Béréaux: That is a beautiful community. In Lot 10, there is a new community centre; in Sobo there is a refurbished community centre; and in La Brea, there is a refurbished community centre. *[Desk thumping]*

8.00 p.m.

Now we have YTEPP there doing training and you know why they are doing training? It is not because it is the PNM; it is because the Member of Parliament said, “You are not coming here for spite to put no business and no industry unless you train my people”. They agreed with me because they were so pleased to hear a Member of Parliament asking for training. He does not want any contribution or anything; all he wants is training for his people.

As I am on the question of training; every time Members opposite speak they complain about the education system. You know what gets me; the education system in Trinidad and Tobago is alleged to be so bad, yet when you check the results of the A levels, a small country like Trinidad and Tobago with only 1.3 million persons, of the top 250 places with A levels, Trinidad and Tobago got 47. I mean, I do not believe that any literacy rate that is under 100 per cent is good. I want to see 100 per cent, but we must be doing something right in education in order to get that kind of recognition.

Dr. Moonilal: The parents are doing something right.

Mr. H. Béréaux: Yes, the parents are doing something right, maybe. I will tell you; I went to school; I did my Cambridge School Certificate in a carat shed; I studied with a kerosene lamp without shade, because I had broken the lamp shade trying to iron a handkerchief, but that did not prevent me from making a Grade One in Cambridge. *[Desk thumping]* You understand. Jack Warner, ask him, he was the same—he was not in my class, I am older than him. *[Interruption]* No, no, no, I just want to send them to ask somebody. Clarry Benn, they all were in the carat shed; you know about the carat shed Mr. Manohar Ramsaran, so I am just—*[Interruption]* No, I do not know he was much younger than me. But the

point I am making, when you say the parents; it is the parents, the child, all of those things. Everything comes together to make a student perform properly, not those who cry all the time. You encourage your students to cry all the time.

Mr. Boynes: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. H. Bereaux: Mr. Boynes, you will make people feel that I am the only Member of Parliament you are doing things for, but that is not true. Again, Bennette Village, Los Bajos, tennis court, netball court and basketball court with electricity. I have been serving a long time and well.

Senior citizens grant: I just want to make one comment about it. I happen to have as senior citizens in my constituency, persons who have worked in the oil industry in the days when the pension plan was new and as a result of that—you know the pension plan started in Trintopec and former Trinidad Tesoro Apex area in 1971. Accordingly, it did not have the longevity of some of the other plans, so they were paid very small pensions. Thanks to the OWTU which is trying and has been trying over the years to have the pensions increased. But a number of those persons when they get their national insurance and their small pension of \$400 and \$500, so too in La Brea, the old Van Liere and the old Asphalt workers always felt cheated. It is good today to see that a number of them will have their \$2,150 as everybody else. So the increase for them is not, in most instances any hundred dollars; it is substantially more than that; \$700, \$800 and whatnot. I am satisfied and I feel pleased that such a thing has happened.

Now if the Members on the other side want to go and tell their constituents who were working in Caroni (1975) Limited, who got the low pension because the leader of their union did not represent them properly, tell them it is only \$100 they got. That is all right. But I am recognizing that those persons in my constituency got substantial payments.

I want to look now at the question of gambling. I do not gamble but that is only because I learnt a little while now that you can make more money if you sit and think and work hard. A little extra two hours in the night you could earn more, so I do not gamble. But I lived in a country where people gambled. This is a gambling country, in the Bahamas; it is a tourist economy and the economy also involves international banking and there was gambling. After the first year when they had introduced—that was before I got there—they had the same problem and now the law in the Bahamas is that nationals cannot gamble.

Mr. Ramsaran: Long time.

Mr. H. Bereaux: Yes, long time; well right, you know; nationals cannot gamble. We have taken certain steps; for better or for worse, the gambling has its problems and take it from me, there are usually a number of disreputable characters who somehow seem to move towards gambling like flies to honey. At that time, money laundering was not—how I could say it?

Dr. Moonilal: I hope you are not pointing fingers.

Mr. H. Bereaux: No, no, I am not pointing fingers. I am saying that at that time money laundering, in most cases—in Trinidad and Tobago and in the Bahamas—was not an offence. So a number of people got away with certain things which were not illegal, but are illegal now, particularly money laundering.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I want to deal with the financial literacy programme. I noted that the hon. Member for St. Joseph started to talk about perception; about—what is it, not amnesty but Transparency International; they deal with Corruption Perception Index. He was saying how Trinidad and Tobago standing in respect of perception of corruption went lower and lower through the years 2000, 2001, downwards, to 2005. He should know, and I am not saying he is involved in it. In most instances, when banks and financial institutions find people or their senior members or big companies find their senior people involved in certain financial improprieties, they call them in quickly—I do not know if it happens now, I have been out of those systems—quietly tell them to retire, and you hear nothing about it; they settle it quickly.

The reason is that they do not want to give the perception to the wider public that the institution has persons who might not be above board or ever had persons who might be a little crooked. He must therefore expect that the perception of corruption in Trinidad and Tobago must heighten because the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has gone ahead and has caused to be arrested a number of senior people for corruption.

Mrs. Job-Davis: I want to whistle, call some names.

Mr. H. Bereaux: What are you saying?

Mrs. Job-Davis: I want to whistle, call some names.

Mr. H. Bereaux: No, no, I am just—

Mr. Partap: Start with your side, first.

Mr. H. Bereaux: No, please, if I am going to call names you know where I will start, so do not stutter. I would start with the convict.

Anyhow, Member for Nariva, as I was saying, there is a perception and that perception will rise because steps have been taken to deal with corruption or persons who are believed to be involved. That is something we as a Government, we as a country, and as a Parliament, have to deal with. But we know that at the end of the day when we have dealt with it; as people would say, "it would bottom out" and we would again rise up. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Mr. H. Bereaux: That is—in my view, once we operate properly—a temporary situation. Not that I know so much about the reasons why the stock market is not performing as it should. I just want to say one thing concerning the hon. Member for St. Joseph and his complaint about the action by the manager or the inspector of financial institutions to make the pensions funds and keep to the law.

I recall when we had the Home Mortgage Bank (Amdt.) Act coming here, the same Member for St. Joseph, he went out of his way to insist that the Home Mortgage Bank be put under the purview of the manager of financial institutions. He said that was one way to make sure things are going properly. Now, when the goodly lady—who I do not know—is doing her job he gets upset. I do not know why. But if they had allowed the false situation to be shown in the market whereby the prices of shares kept going up or investments kept going up, what we would have been heading for—one day the bubble would have burst and it would have been worse.

When I was speaking earlier, I indicated the condition of the verges of the road in respect of Santa Flora and places in that area. I want to make this one point. Those verges were like that because of CEPEP, whether you like it or not, and grass does not just stay like that after it is cut; you pass a wand over it and it stays cut, somebody has to continue to cut it. There was a time when the grass at the side of the road was always about 18 inches tall. Now it is different because somebody is cutting it and therefore when I hear persons who appear to be ostriches or tattoos dressed in human clothes talking about CEPEP being a make-work programme, I ask them this question; who will cut the grass if CEPEP is not doing it?

Hon. Members: Local Government, they are supposed to do that. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. H. Bereaux: Local Government, Sir, is supposed—

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the speaking time of the hon. Member for La Brea has expired.

Motion made, That the hon. Member's speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. [*Hon. K. Rowley*]

Question put and agreed to.

8.15 p.m.

Mr. H. Breaux: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and I thank Members for extending my time. [*Interruption*] But after being addressed as distinguished by your good self, I want to guarantee that I am not going to be talking very much longer; notwithstanding the praise of the hon. Prime Minister. [*Interruption*]

It is true that the local government bodies were supposed to clean at the side of the road, but for whatever reason they had descended; a decadence had stepped in and they were not doing the work and the CEPEP workers are performing.

Hon. Member: Yes, very well too.

Mr. H. Breaux: And therefore, we leave them. [*Desk thumping*] So, Mr. Speaker, I want to say, simply, that this budget is a very important pillar, or should I say, a very important pillar along the road to Trinidad and Tobago reaching developed country status on or before 2020.

Thank you.

[*Pause*]

Mr. Valley: We will wind up the debate if nobody wants to speak.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Hon. Patrick Manning): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank all Members of this honourable House for the contributions that they have made in this debate on the budget for fiscal year 2007.

Mr. Speaker, it was my intention to spend some considerable time in this winding up in dealing with some of the issues that have been raised in the budget. But I have to confess that the end of this debate has come prematurely and in fact all the information that is required to address effectively the issues such as they have arisen in the public domain are not now available to me. [*Interruption*]

So, Mr. Speaker, I want to propose at this stage the adjournment of this House to Friday at 1.30 p.m., at which time we will complete the debate on this budget. [*Crosstalk*] [*Desk thumping*]

Adjournment

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ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Trade and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Kenneth Valley): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move this that House do now adjourn to Friday, October 13, 2006 at 1.30 p.m. [*Desk thumping*] [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I regret to inform you that I was anxiously awaiting the contribution of the hon. Member for Baratania/San Juan, but now I would not hear it anymore.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 8.20 p.m.