

Leave of Absence

Friday, January 16, 2009

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, January 16, 2009

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from the hon. Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj SC, Member of Parliament for Tabaquite, requesting leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the hon. Member seeks is granted.

PAPERS LAID

1. The annual financial statements of Caribbean New Media Group Limited for the year ended December 31, 2007. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Karen Nunez-Tesheira)*]

To be referred to the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee.

2. The audited financial statements of accounts of the Students' Revolving Loan Fund for the years 1993 to 2004. [*The Minister of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education (Hon. Christine Kangaloo)*]

To be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.

FINANCE BILL

Order for second reading read.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Karen Nunez-Tesheira): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move,

That a Bill to provide for the imposition or variation of certain duties and taxes and to introduce provisions of a fiscal nature and for related matters, be now read a second time.

Mr. Speaker, the 2008/2009 budget statement was predicated on the theme "Shaping our Future Together", which was piloted by the State as facilitator and investor. The primary areas identified were greater diversification, infrastructural development and combating inflation.

As we all know, since the budget speech on September 22, 2008, much has changed. The financial crisis, which began in the United States in the first half of

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2008, has deepened into recessionary conditions in the major advanced countries and has negatively impacted growth in the major emerging economies.

The global financial crisis continues to present evolving challenges as new information comes to light on a daily basis. The international financial system, commodity markets, currency markets are all experiencing unprecedented uncertainty in the face of rapidly evaporating global liquidity and falling demand.

The hon. Prime Minister, earlier this week, updated the nation on the impact of these global developments on Trinidad and Tobago and outlined the fiscal policy responses of the Government based on the most current information. Government is adopting a two-pronged policy response approach to declining revenues.

Firstly, the Government moved quickly to revise the assumptions and programmes outlined in the 2008/2009 budget, a fact not unnoticed by Moody's rating agency. The revised 2009 budget is now based on an oil price of US \$45 per barrel and a gas price of US \$3.25 per mmbtu. Secondly, Government is exercising every effort to maintain economic growth and to prevent the economy from slipping into recession.

In the context of a rapidly slowing global economy, we recognize that expenditure adjustment is only part of the response. We have, therefore, taken a conscious decision to maintain economic growth and employment at acceptable levels by utilizing limited deficit financing. By this I mean that Government will issue bonds on the domestic market to finance the difference between Government's projected revenues and projected expenditure.

Mr. Speaker, this Government has built up significant surpluses over the last eight years and it is by making use of these reserves that we propose to pay the bonds issued to finance the budget deficit when the bonds are retired. This favourable economic position has allowed Government to make expenditure adjustments in some areas, ensuring that the engine of economic growth does not come to a halt while maintaining Government's social programmes. As you will note, Mr. Speaker, the measures in the Finance Bill, 2009 relate to the goals of the 2020 vision of developed country status, in particular, the goals of nurturing a caring society, enabling competitive business and developing innovative people.

Government recognizes that in times of economic adjustments people who live on fixed incomes or persons with disabilities are the ones most exposed to economic hardship and, therefore, this Government has decided to amend the Pensions Act that relates to senior citizens and other such groups to bring a greater measure of relief.

Also, in furtherance of nurturing a caring society, Government is focusing on home ownership. In this regard, the amendment to the Stamp Duty Act will reduce significantly the cost associated with the acquisition of homes through direct purchases or through purchases of land.

To enable competitive business, Government has decided to encourage savings. Increased savings will not only assist persons in their retirement years, but also serve as a basis for greater investment. The amendment to the Income Tax Act, Chap. 75:01 will encourage savings by providing greater allowances to persons investing in pension plan annuities. We need to keep our shoulders to the wheel, maintain growth and ensure that the vulnerable groups are protected. It is in that context that the Bill is before this honourable House to give effect to those fiscal measures announced in the 2009 budget presentation and which require legislative action.

The Finance Bill 2009 will now be examined clause by clause. Clause 1 of the Bill, which recites the short title, is self-explanatory. Clauses 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11 and 12 propose an increase in the minimum pension payable in respect of service under the Government or other public service from \$1,650 to \$1,950 with effect from October 01, 2008.

Notwithstanding prudent fiscal and monetary policies, rising inflation levels continue to pose a challenge to the disposable income of many of our citizens, particularly those in receipt of a fixed income. This Government has acknowledged that retirees receiving a fixed income experience difficulties in maintaining an acceptable standard of living, since their purchasing power has been eroded by inflation. In an effort to alleviate the financial difficulties of government pensioners, this Government has recommended that the minimum pension payable in respect of service under the government or other public service will be increased from \$1,650 to \$1,950 per month. This will apply to the following categories of pensioners in the government service:

- Judges, including widows' pension;
- Retiring Allowances (Diplomatic Services);
- Widows' and Orphans' Pensions;
- Teachers, including assisted secondary school teachers;
- Industrial Court;
- Public officers;

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Police service;
Prison service;
Defence force;
Fire service; and
Municipal corporations.

This honourable House will note that every employee who has paid national insurance contributions, among whom are those very public officers, is entitled to a retirement benefit under the National Insurance Act, Chap. 32:01. The benefit may be either a retirement pension payable for life to persons who have made 750 contributions or more, that being the minimum requirement for a basic pension. The minimum requirement pension was increased by this Government in January 2008 from \$1,000 per month to \$2,000 per month. In addition to the increased minimum pension of \$1,950 to be granted to retired public officers, both officers who have made at least 750 NIS contributions, will also receive a minimum National Insurance Scheme retirement pension of \$2,000 per month.

The retirement benefit may also be in the form of a retirement grant, which is a one-off lump sum payment, subject to a minimum sum of \$2,000 paid to persons who have made less than 750 contributions. Assuming the only source of income of a retired officer is \$1,950 as a minimum public service pension, this officer will also be eligible for a monthly Senior Citizens Grant since his total annual income will be less than \$33,600 or \$22,800 per month.

Turning now to the specific clauses, clauses 2—7, 10, 11 and 12 of the Bill will amend the following Acts by increasing the minimum monthly pension payable under these pieces of legislation from \$1,650 to \$1,950 per month:

- the Judges Salaries and Pensions Act, Chap. 6:02 at clause 2 of the Bill;
- the Prison Service Act, Chap. 13:02 at clause 3 of the Bill;
- the Retiring Allowances (Diplomatic Services) Act, Chap. 17:04 at clause 4 of the Bill;
- the Pensions Act, Chap. 23:52 at clause 5 of the Bill;
- the Widows' and Orphans' Pensions Act, Chap. 23:54 at clause 6 of the Bill;
- the Municipal Corporations (Pensions) Act, Chap. 25:05 at clause 7 of the Bill;

- the Fire Service Act, Chap. 35:50 at clause 10 of the Bill;
- the Teachers' Pensions Act, Chap.39:02 at clause 11 of the Bill; and
- the Assisted Secondary Schools Teachers' Pensions Act, Chap. 39:03 at clause 12 of the Bill.

Mr. Speaker, the increase of \$1,950 to members of the defence force, police service and Industrial Court will come into effect by way of an amendment to the Defence (Pensions, Terminal and Other Grants) Regulations, the Police Service Regulations and the Industrial Court (Pensions and Gratuities of Members) Regulations, respectively.

Clause 8 which treats with the Senior Citizens Grant will now be considered. The Senior Citizens Grant, as provided for under the Senior Citizens Grant Act, formerly called Old Age Pensions Act, is a financial support mechanism which targets a specific group, that is senior citizens, who are unable to or not in a position to earn adequate income. Broadly speaking, there are three main areas of financial support for this category of persons. They are pensions, NIS retirement pensions and the Senior Citizens Grant.

Pensions derived from former employment or office when an individual's—that is the first classification—sole source of income is from employment pension not exceeding \$60,000, his pension will not be chargeable to tax because of the basic personal allowance of \$60,000 granted to residents.

1.45 p.m.

The second classification is the retirement pension payable under the National Insurance Act. This pension is designed to supplement income of individuals who qualify for the NIS benefit after retirement and is payable between the ages 60—65 if retired or, at age 65 whether or not retired. Although this source of income is exempt from income tax, it is nevertheless to be taken into consideration when computing total annual income for the purposes of the Senior Citizens Grant. More particularly, the matter which concerns this honourable House today is the Senior Citizens Grant, which is payable under the Senior Citizens Grant Act, Chap. 32:02.

Mr. Speaker, in accordance with clause 8 of the Finance Bill, 2009, where an individual satisfies the age and residency requirements, he will be entitled to a Senior Citizens Grant where his total annual income does not exceed the sum of \$33,600 or an average of \$2,800 per month. This income may be derived from various sources including, as I have indicated previously, employment pension as well as NIS retirement pension.

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Clause 8 of the Bill amends section 3 of the Senior Citizens Grant Act, Chap. 32:02, which Act was so renamed by the Finance Act, No. 17 of 2007. The rationale behind the name change was simple. First, the expression “senior citizen” is far more dignified than the previous use of the words “old age” and is intended to signify continuing relevance of and respect for this group of citizens of senior rank.

Secondly, the use of the word “grant” instead of “pension” recognizes the fact that although the payment is one to which the recipient would have been entitled to as part of the terms and conditions of his employment, it is nonetheless a payment to which he is entitled under the Senior Citizens Grant Act.

Mr. Speaker, the language used in the Senior Citizens Grant Act states that a person who satisfied the statutory conditions specified in section 4 and receives a total annual income not exceeding \$12,000 is entitled to a monthly Senior Citizens Grant. Under section 4 of that Act, the person must have attained the age of 65 years and must have been ordinarily resident in Trinidad and Tobago for a certain period of time.

This grant is an entitlement granted by a written law and cannot be taken away by the Government on a whim. Having met the other statutory conditions of age and residence, the entitlement to the Senior Citizens Grant is based on a needs assessment with an income qualifying ceiling. If any change is to be made to this entitlement, the Senior Citizens Grant Act must be amended accordingly as is being done before this honourable House today.

Before we examine clause 8 in greater detail, this honourable House will recall that a sliding scale was introduced with effect from October 01, 2006, whereby such individual who receives a total annual income exceeding \$12,000 but not exceeding an income qualifying ceiling of \$25,800 annually or equivalent to \$2,150, that person would be entitled to a monthly Senior Citizens Grant equivalent to one-twelfth of the difference between the total annual income and the income qualifying ceiling. Prior to the introduction of the sliding scale in October 2006, where an individual received income in excess of \$12,000 per year or equivalent to \$1,000 per month, he would not qualify for a Senior Citizens Grant. There were only two bands of old age pensions. Firstly, persons whose income was less than \$100 per month, such persons were entitled to what was referred to in law as a monthly pension. Secondly, persons whose annual income exceeded \$100 per month but did not exceed \$1,200 per month would receive what was referred to as a basic pension, which was less than the monthly pension. However, where a person received a total income of \$1,001 per month; anything in excess of that, the senior citizen could claim nothing. This administration has

changed that with effect from October 01, 2006, with the introduction of an income qualifying ceiling and sliding scale of payments.

The provisions of this Bill would now be considered in greater detail. The Senior Citizens Grant Act will be amended with effect from October 01, 2008 to reflect the following:

- (a) The maximum monthly Senior Citizens Grant will be increased from \$1,650 to \$1,950. It should be noted that the maximum monthly Senior Citizens Grant is paid to persons whose total annual income does not exceed \$1,200 or the equivalent of no more than \$100 per month. This increase is to be found in clause 8(a) of the Bill.
- (b) Where a person is in receipt of a total annual income which exceeds \$1,200 but does not exceed \$12,000, the monthly Senior Citizens Grant will be increased from \$1,550 to \$1,850 per month. In other words, persons in receipt of income between \$101 and \$1,000 per month will be entitled to a monthly Senior Citizens Grant of up to \$1,850 per month. This increase is to be found at clause 8(b) of the Bill.

Clause 8(c) of the Bill deals not only with the sliding scale as indicated previously, but also treats with the income qualifying ceiling which will be increased by this Bill from \$30,000 annually to \$33,600 annually; put another way, from \$2,500 per month to \$2,800 per month. This is an increase of \$3,600 annually or \$300 per month.

By way of illustration, where a person who satisfies the age and residency requirements under the Senior Citizens Grant Act and receives a total annual income of \$24,000 or in monthly terms, \$2,000 per month, whether that source of income is from the National Insurance Scheme or otherwise, that person will be entitled to a Senior Citizens Grant equivalent to one-twelfth of the difference between the new income qualifying ceiling of \$33,600 a year, equivalent to \$2,800 and his total annual income of \$24,000 or equivalent to \$2,000 per month. In other words, that senior citizen will now receive a Senior Citizens Grant of \$800 per month.

Clause 8(d) of the Bill speaks of persons in receipt of a total annual income exceeding \$31,800 equivalent to \$2,650 per month but not exceeding the new income qualifying ceiling of \$33,600, equivalent to \$2,800. Persons within that band will receive a flat Senior Citizens Grant of \$150 per month.

Mr. Speaker, clause 8(e) of the Bill is intended to clean up the drafting from a previous year. When instead of including the provision validating the payment of

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the Senior Citizens Grant paid on or after October 01, 2006, as a provision of the Finance Act 2007, the validation provision was included as an amendment to the Senior Citizens Grant Act as a new section, section 3(7). While the validation in 2007 was not rendered ineffective, the drafters have sought to rectify the validation of payments made prior to the coming into operation of this Finance Act.

I will now examine clause 9 of the Bill. In light of the Government's continued support of the differently abled in the society, clause 9 of the Bill amends the Public Assistance Act to increase the disability grant from \$1,100 to \$1,300. This increase is in keeping with the Government's objective of promoting the wellness of all its citizens and in particular the development of an environment where basic and special needs are adequately met.

As earlier noted, clauses 10, 11 and 12 of the Bill deal with the increase in the minimum pension benefits to public officers. These clauses were discussed previously.

I turn now to clause 13. The amendment to the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act is to be found in clause 13 of the Bill. We are all well aware of the global economic crisis, which is being predicted will have a negative impact on our citizenry. In fact, in relation to the sale of motor vehicles, reports are that the industry has begun to see some decline in purchases. Notwithstanding the projections in the industry, the Government is ever mindful of the still large volume of motor vehicles for private use presently on the nation's roads contributing to the traffic congestion and discomfort of all our citizens on a daily basis. Although the Government continues to facilitate the improvement of our public transportation, we believe that for now, the increase in the motor vehicle tax should be retained. In light of this, the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act, Chap. 48:50 will be amended to reflect the increase in the motor vehicle tax on private motor vehicles as follows:

- for engine size 1,599 cc and under, \$5 per cc;
- for engine size 1600 cc to 1799 cc, \$8 per cc;
- for engine size 1800 cc to 1999 cc, \$15 per cc;
- for engine size 2000 cc to 2499 cc, \$25 per cc;
- for engine size 2500 cc to 2999 cc, \$30 per cc;
- for engine size 3,000 cc to 3499 cc, \$35 per cc; and
- for engine size 3500 cc and above, \$50 per cc.

This House would recall that a provisional imposition and increase of the motor vehicle tax was effected by the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2008, which was published in the *Gazette* on September 22, 2008. The imposition and increase in the motor vehicle tax was effected by the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order 2008, which was published on September 22, 2008. In particular, the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order 2008, imposed motor vehicle tax of \$5 per cc on private motor cars, rented cars, station wagons or estate wagons having an engine size not exceeding 1599 cc. Previously no motor vehicle tax was charged on this category of motor vehicle.

In accordance with section 3(2) of the Provisional Collections of Taxes Act, Chap. 74:01, where a tax is imposed for the purpose of raising revenue to meet expenditure in an Appropriation Bill, the Order which brought such imposition into effect shall expire at the end of four months after the commencement of the Order. Further, any provision contained in a Provisional Collection of Taxes Order which imposes a tax shall cease to have effect if an Act comes into operation imposing with or without modifications any such tax. In addition, where the Order expires before the Act comes into operation, any money paid in pursuance of the Order shall be deemed to be an unauthorized payment or deduction.

As noted earlier, the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order 2008, in relation to the motor vehicle tax on private vehicles with engine size not exceeding 1599 cc commenced September 22, 2008 and would therefore expire on January 22, 2009, that date being the end of the four-month period. Since the motor vehicle tax on these vehicles is contained in the Finance Act, this Act must also come into operation by January 22, 2009.

2.00 p.m.

Clause 14 of the Bill will now be considered. This clause amends section 28(15) of the Income Tax Act, Chap. 75:01. This section places a limitation of \$25,000, with respect to deductions made under sections 27, 28 and 31 of that Act. In respect of contributions to pension fund plans, deferred annuities and the national insurance scheme, in order to encourage savings for retirement, it is proposed to increase the deduction that can be claimed by an individual in ascertaining his chargeable income from \$25,000 to \$30,000.

I now turn to clause 15 of the Bill. Clause 15 of the Bill amends the Stamp Duty Act. Government stated policy is to make housing more affordable for homeowners, and consequently the approach would be tri-fold. Under the existing law, property valued at \$450,000 or less is exempt from stamp duty. In addition,

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the applicable stamp duty rate for conveyances of residential properties valued for every dollar of the first \$100,000 in excess of \$450,000 was previously 5 per cent, and for every dollar of the next \$100,000, 7.5 per cent, and for every dollar thereafter 10 per cent.

In keeping with Government's policy, we are of the view that further concessions should be given to homeowners—property that is—or includes a dwelling house to be used for residential purposes valued at \$850,000 or less would now be exempt from stamp duty. Property of that nature valued in excess of \$850,000 but less than \$1,250,000 will attract a stamp duty of 3 per cent; property in excess of \$1,250,000 but less than \$1,750,000 will attract a stamp duty of 5 per cent; property valued in excess of \$1,750,000 will attract a stamp duty of 7.5 per cent.

The Government felt that there is a need to also address the rates of stamp duty applicable to the purchase of land, solely for residential purposes, since currently, the law does not provide for exemptions on the conveyance or transfer on sale of land. In this regard, land purchased for residential purposes valued at \$450,000 or less would be exempt from stamp duty; land valued in excess of \$450,000 but less than \$650,000 will attract stamp duty of 2 per cent; further, land valued at over \$650,000 but less than \$850,000 will attract stamp duty of 5 per cent; finally, land valued in excess of \$850,000 will attract stamp duty of 7 per cent. It should be noted, Mr. Speaker, that existing rates in the Stamp Duty Act will be applicable for land purchase to be used for purposes other than residential.

Mr. Speaker, we propose—and this is where we need to make an amendment to the Finance Bill that was circulated—to withdraw the provision relating to a change of use on the purchase of land for residential purposes. A more comprehensive penalty provision will be introduced at a subsequent date when further amendments to the Stamp Duty Act will be brought to Parliament. In the interim, the general penalty provisions contained in the Stamp Duty Act will govern failure by the individual to comply with the requirements relating to the purchase of land for residential purposes.

Mr. Speaker, in order to bring the full measure of relief to homeowners' mortgage, deeds will be exempt from stamp duty, where the sum secured by the mortgage does not exceed \$850,000, and is in respect of property or includes a dwelling house, and is used for residential purposes. The proposed amendment to clause 15 has not yet been circulated, but in essence, what I read out just now captures it. In other words, when we look at the Bill that was circulated, clause 15 has been deleted and will be replaced with a new clause 15, as I indicated just

now. What has been excised from that clause 15 is the provision that deals with the penalty provisions, which will be introduced.

So, Mr. Speaker, when we look at the Finance Bill that was circulated, the proposed amendment to that is as follows. We are asking that we delete clause 15 and insert the following, it will be circulated to all Members. Clause 15 should now read:

“The Stamp Duty Act is amended –

(b) in the first schedule:

(i) under the heading ‘Conveyance or transfer on sale of any property’ –

(A) in paragraph (1) by deleting the words ‘paragraph 2’ and substituting the words ‘paragraphs (2) and (3)’,

(B) in paragraph (2), by deleting from the words ‘for every dollar of the first one hundred thousand dollars’ to words ‘exceeds one thousand five hundred’ and substituting the following:

‘for every dollar of the first four hundred thousand dollars in excess of eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars, 3% for every dollar of the next five hundred thousand dollars, 5% for every dollar thereafter 7½%’; and

(C) by inserting after paragraph (2), the following paragraph:

‘(3) Where the property does not include a dwelling house and the property is for use wholly for residential purposes, and an application has been made to the Board in the form approved by the Board, and evidence has been provided to the Board sufficient to satisfy it as to those matters, instead of the rates of duty provided for in paragraph (1), the duty is as follows:

for every dollar of the first two hundred thousand dollars in excess of four hundred and fifty thousand dollars, 2% for every dollar of the next two hundred thousand dollars in excess of six hundred and fifty thousand dollars, 5% for every dollar thereafter in excess of eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars, 7%’; and

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- (ii) under the heading 'Mortgage, Bond, Debenture, Covenant, Bill of Sale or Warrant of Attorney to confess and enter a judgement' in relation to the exemption on mortgage deeds, by deleting the words '\$450,000' and substituting the words '\$850,000'.

Mr. Speaker, if I may, in essence, the Finance Bill that was circulated insofar as clause 15 is concerned, it is only really the first 15(a)(1) that was deleted.

Finally, clause 16 provides for the commencement or provisions in the Bill and validates the actions or anything done in relation to the payment of any pension or grant and by the Board of Inland Revenue, in relation to the collection of any stamp duty.

With this, Mr. Speaker, I beg to move.

Question proposed.

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar (*Siparia*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is a new session that we engage in, in this Ninth Parliament, in this new year, so I want to take this opportunity to wish Members on both sides and those who are listening to us in the nation, the best for the year 2009.

Mr. Imbert: You mean that?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: I mean that. Hon. Speaker, this Finance Bill 2009 does not meet us in a very happy state at the start of the year. It represents another instalment with respect to the budget package 2009, and of course, I feel very certain that before fiscal 2009 is complete there will be several other instalments that will be coming to this House.

We have seen it in the last fiscal year where the original budget was at \$42 billion, but by the end of that fiscal year the Government had spent in excess of \$53 billion; so they exceeded the original budget by \$10 billion. I will come back to that in a moment when I attempt to talk a bit more on the comments made by the hon. Minister on the assumptions that were made in presenting Budget 2009.

So, the first thing I am saying is this here represents another instalment; has its genesis in the budget. The amendments to some 14 pieces of legislation the Finance Bill attempts to amend, out of those, 11 Acts have to do with really putting a common floor for pensions, that is to say, increasing the pensions from \$1,650 to \$1,950.

Basically, this debate may focus on the pension industry in this country; the capacity, capability and sustainability of Government to pay those pensions when

they become due and generally the economic framework within which such measures are being put into place. I am very, very seriously concerned, as others in this nation, about the sustainability of Government's expenditure.

In our budget response last year, we had clearly indicated on this side that Government had no notion of the extreme volatility of international markets, and time and time again—not just in that budget response—before that and thereafter, we have talked about price shocks and output shocks, and we are experiencing both when it comes to oil. The price shocks given the volatile nature of the markets and the output shocks, which were shown within the Review of the Economy documents, presented here with the budget documents, which showed that production had substantially fallen when it came to oil. That is the reality of the situation, where as a small nation, I want to dispute—given that we are a small nation—that we are in fact in a rainy today; that the rainy day has come, because indeed, as a small economy we are always under rainy days, because we are so impacted upon by what is happening in the international markets: one, because we are small, and two, because we are a very open economy. Indeed, from the start of our history we were an open economy; we were exporting sugar, and thereafter we have continued to be this export-oriented, satellite kind of economy.

So, to say that now the rainy day has come, tighten your belt and so on, I do not agree that the rainy day has come. As a small economy we are always faced with the threat of a major rain shower. Therefore, the duty of the financial managers of our economy—that is to say the Government—is really to build and to have a very sturdy umbrella that will protect us, and have it readily available, so the moment any drizzle turns into a deluge, we are covered under that umbrella of protection, and we will be able to be protected from adverse weather.

I am saying we are always into rainy days, but those rainy days from drizzles can become a deluge, an onslaught. So, when the Government is talking about we can weather this crisis, they are talking about savings. What savings are they talking about? That savings is and should be the umbrella that will protect us from the onslaught, from the deluge.

2.15 p.m.

But that umbrella is very weak. It is exceedingly weak. It will not be able, in my view, to withstand the onslaught that is coming upon us and so that umbrella will be only temporary. It will be a temporary shelter the savings that we have put. We should have had in our savings over \$20 billion. That is what we should have had given that over the past five to six years this Government spent and

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therefore had revenues to spend in excess of \$200 million, and in this fiscal year would be spending an additional—they budgeted it at \$49 and now cut down by \$5, so \$44 billion—so we are looking at about \$250 million by the end of this fiscal year.

Mr. Ramnath: Billion.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bisessar: Billion, sorry; \$200 billion spent and we cannot even have \$20 billion in savings to shelter us, to protect us from what is coming, what is upon us now. So the Government now is extolling the virtues of savings and saying, “We can weather this, there is nothing to worry about. We can go through this; we just need to borrow a bit of money. We just need to issue some bonds and we will get a bit of money.” A few billions, you know.

To this Government billions is like nothing. It is like nothing! So we just need a bit of money and we will weather the storm. But I do not believe you because you came last November—first of all, your assumptions were wrong and you took very long to admit that those assumptions, the fundamentals were wrong. You took very long! When you did say okay, you are not saying it was wrong, you are saying it has changed; the circumstances have changed. The Minister used that word today, “Changed circumstances”.

Last November you already came and you revised the price you predicated the oil price upon, it was \$70. That was the budget price and you reduced it to what?—fifty five dollars. Then you came thereafter to \$45, so I am saying you will be coming back again to tell us you have to go lower than the \$45. Therefore the shelter that you are talking about, that you are boasting about in savings is, in my view, an exceedingly temporary shelter. That does not mean it is the end of the world, and I will come back to that, because there is much that we can do that we can still do if this Government will only listen.

You will recall in my budget response I talked about a “tatar” Government. I used the word “tatar”. My “aagee” used to use that word. They are stubborn. They just will not listen. [*Interruption*] And who do not listen have to feel and this country is feeling the stubbornness of that Government, the deafness of that Government to the cries that came, not just from this Opposition, all of last year, but came from all the experts—local experts and international experts; they refused to listen and they are still, in my respectful view, not listening, Mr. Speaker. Because you see, the Government does not understand, they understand nothing about cyclical smoothing.

You talk about prudent all the time, prudent management of the economy but there is nothing prudent about what you did. Because here we are after \$200

billion, today you have to go and borrow money to run this country. You have to go and borrow! What is prudent about that? Where was the prudent fiscal management? That prudent management should have been able to see us dealing with cyclical smoothing so that in times of plenty as a responsible enough Government they would have saved, and in times of scarcity the Government could then dip into those savings so that we would be able to consume at a smooth level over time but that is not happening.

When income is high in this country expenditure is high and when income is low we are told that the time to tighten belts has come, we must save. Mr. Speaker, that is O level economics, when we talk some of these things they told us we are talking A level economics, but that is O level economics this Government is practising. You have high income, you just spend it out; \$200 billion down the drain; the proverbial dose of salts. Coming today to borrowing; telling the population to tighten belt and, in my view, it is a total lack of understanding of basic and very simple economic principles. And we have been preaching this very simple lesson on this side time and again as has been the local experts, the international experts.

I am sure Members will recall that just four months ago we on this side warned the nation that Government did not know what it was doing; that the Government was ignorant of basic economic theory. We spent time trying to explain to the Minister of Finance and to show that the budget proposals were misdirected. We spent a lot of time explaining the nature and causes of the volatility in the international economy and how it would affect the domestic economy. I was concerned then as I am concerned now about the promises made in the budget, the ability and sincerity of Government to keep those promises.

This Finance Bill that is before this House speaks to the elderly and to the disabled, the most vulnerable in our society. Mark my words, this time, it is the most vulnerable groups in this country who have borne and will continue to bear the brunt of Government's incompetence. Pensioners and those on fixed incomes, the children and the poor; I talked about the battered middle class and I will come back to that because you are placing the middle class again in further discomfort where they will be pressured, where they will lose what they have. We talked about that in the budget but with the policy that you are now adopting—the deficit financing policy—I want to say that that too is going to put further pressure on the interest rates and I will come back to the interest rates.

Less than four months ago we told the Government, "In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil but a foolish man devours all he has." That is

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what has happened to this Government, \$200 billion gone! When I said that I was pilloried in this very House; I remember the behaviour of the Member for Diego Martin North/East, when he said it was nonsense, it was “dotish” and it was foolish. We had to sit here and be subjected to that because we raised our concerns on behalf of the population. We had to sit here to hear the Prime Minister confess that he had been using State resources to spy on me and I had already spoken, I had no opportunity to get up to defend that. The Prime Minister cast aspersions on my character and on named public servants, but do you know what those were, Mr. Speaker? Red herrings and distractions to take away from what was the reality and the seriousness of what was happening in the economy. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Ramnath: He should apologize now.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: So, that was to distract from the fact that the economy was under attack, not only from international crises but from the Government itself whose reckless expenditure pattern has resulted in this country managing to collapse from a boom into a bust in less than one year. In less than one year! From boom to bust this Government has brought us in less than one year.

When the Minister of Finance, the Prime Minister engineered to distract us from the reality, can we trust this Government? Are these very pensions being raised by the Finance Bill safe? We have already seen the Government clandestinely change the nature of the old age pension, they call it a grant. Act 17 of 2007 came to this Parliament.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: I was not here in the Parliament then—[*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar:—and in that Act 17—[*Interruption*] I am speaking to you, Sir.

You know, you do not want to hear the truth, eh! You start fussing when you do not want to hear the truth.

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Act 17 of 2007 changed the word “pension”; wherever the word “pension” appeared, it had to be changed to the word “grant”.

Dr. Browne: What is the significance of that?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: I will come to that, Sir. As your Prime Minister says, “Hurry dog eat raw meat.” [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker, Act 17 of 2007 changed the word “pension” everywhere it appeared to be substituted with the word “grant”—Senior Citizens Grant. *[Interruption]* The title of the Act was changed as well.

Hon. Member: What was wrong with that?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: No longer Old Age Pensions Act but Senior Citizens Grant, and hidden within it, not even in the explanatory note of the Bill for that Act, it never talked about the fact that you were removing pensions and now giving a grant that would be discretionary. What it said is a grant under this Act is subject to review and may be increased, decreased or discontinued.

They brought that in then, and here we are, we have 11 pieces of legislation all with the word the majority of which have the word “pensions”, we did not move those, you know; we did not change the word “pension” and call it “grant” there, but when it came to the senior citizens, they call it a grant. By calling it a grant they then put in the amendment:

“A grant under this Act is subject to review and may be increased, decreased or discontinued.”

So, when the hon. Minister of Finance stood up today and very vehemently, very forcefully said, “this is an entitlement”, contradicting what the Minister in the Ministry of Finance, hon. Mariano Browne had said. He said this is not an entitlement. *[Interruption]* So whom should we believe in this Government?

Mr. Ramnath: Ask the Prime Minister.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: They contradict themselves every step of the way. They are confused and they do not know where they are going, that is why left hand is saying something different from right hand. *[Interruption]* If two sides of the body, one side going left and one side going right, you will never go forward you will split in two and you will destroy this country *[Interruption]* and that is what is happening.

So, the Minister in the Ministry of Finance, hon. Mariano Browne says this is not an entitlement. Well, I would like to say for once I agree with the Minister of Finance, it is an entitlement in law. It is, because it is here provided in the Act. *[Interruption]* But what that statement tells us is this, that they are planning to come and take it away under this section that is why the Minister in the Ministry of Finance said it is not an entitlement. *[Desk thumping]* It is not an entitlement!

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: “You are not shame?”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Why else would he say that? Why would he say it is not an entitlement and have this senior Minister come to this House to forcefully say—

Dr. Moonilal: And he is the real Minister of Finance.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar:—it is an entitlement. So sometimes you say a slip of the tongue is a slip of the mind. They talk about a Freudian slip and perhaps that is where Sen. The Hon. Mariano Browne was going, signalling that the Government will tamper with the old age pension of people under this Act.

When we look at what is happening, we are saying we cannot trust the Government. We cannot trust their statements to us because they are contradicting each other and their statements on many occasions proved not to be correct statements. We come to the position now where last week the Prime Minister told this House, and the Minister in her opening referred to the statement of the Prime Minister, explaining and telling the nation about the financial crisis and so on, and talking about the two-pronged approach of deficit financing and expenditure adjustments.

The Prime Minister did his utmost to convince the population that this is a temporary phenomenon where he has it fully in control and that he would use deficit financing by raising bonds. He did admit that this is likely to result in up pressures in the interest rates, and the Governor of the Central Bank echoed what he said—well, it is not going to be very much. It will not really affect the interest rates, we are not worried about that—but we do not believe them. Just as you are now saying you are going to issue bonds for only a limited amount; just as you said last November that the oil price would be cut down from the \$70 to \$55, you come back to change it to \$45, you will come again to change it. Today Bloomberg Energy prices reported on Bloomberg that the New York Mercantile Exchange (NYMEX)—crude—is trading at \$35.75; the West Texas International is trading at \$35.73 which is below the \$45 they have already predicated upon which he came to us last week about, so they will come again. When they come again will they continue to deficit finance and will they continue to issue these bonds and to what extent so that you put that pressure on the interest rates? And when you put that pressure on the interest rates you would again be fiddling with the interest rates.

You have passed a budget that is designed to stifle the middle class, batter them into poverty and this further measure—the deficit financing—in this manner is going to put further pressure on them. In principle, economists will tell you there is nothing wrong with deficit financing, the question is the source of the

deficit financing. *[Interruption]* It is the source, so when the Governor of the Central Bank says great things, I read some economists as saying, yes, good, deficit financing, several of them reading in the newspapers saying, good; the question is, what is the source? And in this case the source is borrowing on the domestic market through the issuance of these bonds. Once you do that you are going to push the interest rates up. How are people out there now on their mortgages and on their fixed incomes, going to survive?

Mr. Manning: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. Member for Siparia for giving way. I wonder if the Member for Siparia has considered the question of liquidity, its implications and the requirements of dealing with that? Has she factored that into her thinking?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Mr. Speaker, I find this most amusing but not surprising, because this is exactly what happened last year, you were sopping up the liquidity, issuing those bonds by the billions, but what were you doing with it? Pumping it back into the economy.

Hon. Member: No, it is not true.

2.30 p.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: I talked about the firefight between the Central Bank's monetary policy and the Government squandermania fiscal policy.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: Would the Member give way?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: I will give way when I am done with my point. Government's fiscal policy: squandermania and the Central Bank's tightening with their monetary policy. That was the firefight all the time. You began with a budget—I started with \$42 billion and by the end of fiscal 2008; you had spent \$10 billion more. Fifty-three million dollars. And so I am saying—I said I will give way in due course, Madam. If you would have some patience, I will in due course, certainly. So here we are, you are going to put pressure on that interest rate. You come and I say, I told you so again. In the budget response, I talked about that same sopping up liquidity through the issue of the bonds, putting pressure on the interest rates.

Mr. Speaker, it happened. By December those interest rates had risen. So whether you do it to sop up liquidity, or whether you borrow it—because you are borrowing it for deficit financing.

Mr. B. Panday: To spend it.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: To spend it, so do not talk about liquidity. I cannot imagine that you will say, "I am going to use this money from the bonds that I am borrowing for deficit financial", which means, I am going to spend it and then get up and tell me you are sopping up liquidity. It is totally contradictory. It is nonsense. [*Desk thumping*] It is madness and that is when I say that the Government does not understand the basic O level economics. Just do not understand it.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: Thank you very much, Member for Siparia. I just want to correct a statement that you had made about the—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Ramnath: Corrected?

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: Yes, corrected, because in fact the Member for Siparia was part of the process of the moving in this House, amendment to the Foreign Investment Act, as well as the Introduction of a Liquidity Bond Act. In fact, what we have been doing, Member for Siparia, because of the liquidity overhang, we have been issuing bonds and those bonds have been issued to date and sterilized. Meaning that they are pulled out of the system, put in blocked accounts, sterilized and they do not enter back into the system, and Member, that has been the approach taken.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: You know, you go to some irrelevant other issue and try to join it with this issue. The issue here is deficit financing. [*Desk thumping*] The hon. Prime Minister got up and asked me, did I consider liquidity. He said, "Did you consider, oh, that when I issue these bonds it is to sop up liquidity?" That is what the issue is here now. We are not going back to what you are talking last. The hon. Prime Minister raised this issue when I said that deficit financing is going to put pressure on the interest rates. The hon. Prime Minister went up and said, "Well, do you not consider we are going to be sopping up liquidity and help the inflation issue?" But deficit financing with due respect, is to go back and spend it. Borrow the money to spend. Borrow it to spend, is as simple as that. Why else are you borrowing it—why do you tell us about deficit financing? Borrow it to spend.

Mr. Speaker, I really have to be very careful because they are engineering a collapse of the mortgage companies, the housing markets which could take us to what happened in the US. Because when you put that pressure on the interest rate—and that is where I was, I do not want to get distracted again, is these people who are on fixed income, who have a mortgage to pay for their homes. When those interest rates go up, what is going to be their position? And it is very

interesting, hon. Speaker, what Mr. Young from the Scotiabank is forecasting, "Scotiabank head forecasts challenges for the banking sector", and here is what he is saying in the *Express* dated Wednesday, January 14, 2009, just two days ago:

"Small business clients could become delinquent...we will have to manage that, he told stockbrokers...and that will help us to meet challenges ahead."

He goes on to say:

"The bank has planned to increase staffing in its collections unit as a proactive measure."

Because they are envisaging that people would be delinquent in paying their loans and what about our collections unit of being proactive. You are going and foreclose on people's house because they cannot pay their mortgage. That is what he is saying and Mr. Young is confident that things will get better. But he says that the bank has planned to increase staffing in its collections unit as a proactive measure.

So delinquent loans are going to be called in. Why would people default on paying for their house? Does anybody want to default on paying for your house? Would you want to do that? But you are on fixed income and because of the Government's policies, your money value is of no worth. Your interest rates will go up and you cannot pay for that house. So that unless we are careful, this Government will engineer a collapse such as we are seeing happening in the United States.

You will ask them what we should do. And what the Government needs to do is to reorient its priorities, not borrow money. Do not borrow money, reorient priorities. Do you know what that means, hon. Speaker? Cut out the waste and the corruption and the inefficiency. Cut out the tsunami stadium—where today, I am reading that \$100 million has been spent, Mr. Riley said at the Commission of Enquiry. I can quote from the newspaper report, the *Express*, January 16, 2009, which tells us:

"Joint Consultative Council President, Winston Riley says he has a document that proves that Hafeez Karamath Limited, the main contractor for the Brian Lara Stadium and Cricket Academy...in Tarouba, received \$100 million advanced payments without any securities (or any way of getting it back...)"
[Interruption]

Mr. Manning: True or false?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Well, tell us if it is not true. So, hon. Speaker, when I read this, I became concerned. So I am saying that Tarouba stadium,

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remember it was for the World Cup Cricket. It is still not open and World Cup Cricket come and gone. Not a ball bowled in that oval and the cost overruns on that stadium, tremendous cost overruns, that is the waste, inefficiency and the mismanagement that you cut. You would not have to go and borrow. You can cut as well with your luxury items. A summit for \$500 million at a time when you are telling the country, tighten belts. You then tightened \$500 million and 200 motor cars. The list goes on and my colleagues will deal with some of those squandermania projects. But there is an answer and the answer is to reorient your priorities, not to run out there at the first sign of the rain on you to borrow money. Let us remember that these bonds are not magic, they are putting the country into further debts. You have to repay those, it is a loan and it is a borrowing. You pay it and then you pay it back with interest. You are further indebting this country.

At the end of the last year as disclosed in the documents on the review of the economy, \$17.4 billions in contingent liabilities, which includes borrowing made by the Government and other debt owed by the Government. So when you talk about the savings, I say which savings again. When you have \$17.4 billion in contingent liabilities and then you have a public debt of several other billion dollars. When you put those together, it is a massive amount of billions that this country is owing, and has to pay with interest, and you are going to indebt the country further by borrowing again.

So when we come here now to this Finance Bill—before I do that, I am saying we cut the mega projects the Government loves. We can cut many of those mega projects. Think about this hon. Speaker. Here we have an economy going into slow down, going into recession, but you know we are keeping those mega projects where we are taking Trinidad and Tobago money to pay foreigners. I read that we are cutting the housing programme in Trinidad and Tobago. Now the housing projects, the building is being done by whom? Mainly the local contractors, but you are cutting that and instead you are keeping the big foreign mega projects with the Chinese and so on. So that the money when paid to them is to be taken out of Trinidad and Tobago, it does not go back to pump into our economy to keep our economy afloat. Is there any logic in that? My respectful view is, there is no logic in that whatsoever. And so, there is another big major expenditure I will tell the Government they can cut, \$303 million budgeted in fiscal 2009 for what I will call the "propaganda vote". Three hundred and three million dollars to spend on the propaganda vote; overseas flying up and down; hosting conferences; and newspaper advertisements. Three hundred and three millions dollars on that propaganda vote in budget 2009. Cut it out. Take that money instead. Do not go and borrow, you have that money instead there.

Whilst I am at that, you know we came here on the eve of the last budget for a supplementary appropriation, which included a sum of \$2.4 billion and we were told in this Chamber that that \$2.4 billion was not to be spent in fiscal 2008, but it was to be part into fiscal 2009, in the Infrastructure Development Fund. What has become of that \$2.4 billion? Is it part of your deficit financing? Is it part of your savings? I did not hear a word about that, when we were being told we have to cut back and how we are going to finance the continuation of the service and supply of Trinidad and Tobago. What has become of the \$2.4 billion infrastructure fund? Is it part of your expenditure for 2009 now that you are encountering these cuts, tell us about that.

So there are many ways. You have \$2.4 billion sitting in the infrastructure fund that you parked, and in my view I repeat again, illegally parked in the Infrastructure Development Fund. Then you had additional moneys in that same fund as remaining for expenditure. You have that. You have the \$3.3 million in the propaganda vote, the \$500 million in the conferences, the \$100 million in the tsunami stadium in Tarouba and Mr. Speaker, if you cut the mega projects—the summit, the conferences, the \$500 million and the luxury cars and so on, you cut that. All the nations are experiencing this slow down in their economy.

They are all very serious about trying to get out of it. Would it not be appropriate for this Government, instead of wanting to have a "pappy show" and a show-off here in April and in November in these International Summits, that you talk to these nations who are experiencing similar meltdown in their economies and say, "Listen, this is very difficult for Trinidad and Tobago at the time. Let us reconsider the hosting of this thing in this grand scale." Now is the time—or cancel. Talk with them, they have problems too. They will know that your \$500 million you are spending—they are not spending it, they are coming here and you are putting them up in rooms and giving them cars to drive up and down—they will understand, because they too—[*Interruption*]

Mr. B. Panday: You might get an offer.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Ha, the hon. Leader of the Opposition has made a very brilliant point. You can maybe get offers of nations who have more than we have, who may be willing to assist in sponsoring the conferences. So do not sit down there and play, look, "I am big bad wolf; I am so great; I have all this money, Trinidad and Tobago do not have to worry. We do not have to worry about nothing, we weather the storm. We could spend \$500 million; we could spend \$1 billion." Let us talk, I made two suggestions. One is, that you talk with the other Heads of Government because they too are experiencing difficulties in

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their economies and meltdown; and two things: you ask them whether they will be willing to assist in the sponsoring of this conference—they may have more than we have which came from the Leader of the Opposition's suggestion—and secondly, that you scale down this grand, brilliant thing that you are having. [*Desk thumping*] Scale it down, they will agree. And you would know some of them—but what would they get from coming here anyhow? What would they get here? They might get murdered on the street. A bandit might hold them up somewhere. What are they going to get here? What will they get?

Mr. Manning: That is not the question I asked. The hon. Member has suggested that what Trinidad and Tobago might do, is to suggest to other countries that they assist us in defraying the cost of hosting the Summit of the Americas Conference, and the question I am asking is what will they get for that? So, what will they get for doing that?

Mr. B. Panday: Same thing you would get from hosting it.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: If they cannot see what they will get from that, if it is no benefit, what is the point? Why are we holding it? Even those—one moment, please, Sir—other nations may cut back on their people coming here because every country is a world crisis. "Fellas", wake up and smell the coffee, it is a world crisis. Let us scale it down. Let us talk to them; let us see if we can get them to assist in hosting this.

Mr. Ramnath: I know you want to shake the Queen's hand.

Mr. Manning: I thank the hon. Member for Siparia for giving way, again. Mr. Speaker, the suggestion is that we try to get them to defray the cost of hosting the conference in Port of Spain. It is in that context I am asking, what do they get for it and I have not had an answer to that question.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: What they will get is that they will be able to come to a conference. If you do not have it at all, there is no conference. And if they feel the conference is so beneficial, well listen, help us please. You want it, we want it, okay, let us join together and do it. That is what they will get. Alternatively, cancel.

Mr. Ramnath: What is the benefit of [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: That is another point. Postpone, perhaps that might be the third alternative. A postponement. So the question then also comes round to this, what is the benefit to Trinidad and Tobago of hosting this billion dollar summit at a time like this. What it is? The Minister of Tourism I am

reading is already telling hoteliers, cut your hotel rates because you are getting less visitors coming to the country and so on. So that what benefit to Trinidad and Tobago are we going to get from these?

2.45 p.m.

We are buying these cars or leasing them—up to now I am not sure—because the statements have been so contradictory. We could take that money and get police cars for the police to deal with the crime in the country. [*Desk thumping*] We could certainly do that.

In all of this, Mr. Speaker, we are seeing, therefore, that the 2009 budget assumptions are totally wrong. The facts are there; I have given you the oil prices for NYMEX and West Texas Intermediate (WTI), all are at \$35.73, \$35.75, and so on. The prices have been falling.

The entire budget, based on these assumptions, has been wrong; the Minister of Finance has belatedly confessed to that. Now Government is talking about expenditure adjustments. It is a nice word, like when you are firing persons and you say that you are downsizing. So you are cutting expenditure; you are saying, "Expenditure adjustments", but nobody in this country really knows which expenditures are to be cut. That is why we talk about reorienting your priorities in terms of projects you carry forward or not.

We were in Parliament last Wednesday and the hon. Leader of the Opposition asked about certain projects that they intended to continue, these mega projects; we do not know which projects are to be adjusted, which ones are to go forward; we do not know. Given that these fundamental assumptions are so essentially wrong, it is incumbent on Government, in good democratic practice and governance, to come back to the Parliament with a revised budget and let us debate the policies and programmes to be done. [*Desk thumping*]

You cannot sit in a secret back room in the Cabinet and decide, "You know what, you see that Mendes Road, where dem people down in the Siparia constituency are protesting, I am not going to give it to dem; and you see in Seebalack Trace, and you see dat school, we not giving it." You cannot sit quietly in your room; this is not secret governance. This is governance that should be for the people, of the people and by the people; but the PNM has never practised that. This is government against people.

Again, I make that plea which we made last year, that it is incumbent on Government to come back to this Parliament; not to make a ministerial statement where nobody has a right of reply; nobody could say anything. You stand here

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and it is like, "Nobody must bark; nobody else must say anything." You stand and make a ministerial statement and feel that is sufficient; it is not sufficient. Your budget needs to come back here for full debate with the representatives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, because it is going to impact on the quality of life of every single citizen; from the most vulnerable, to the middle class, to the upper middle class, and the businessmen. Businessmen are screaming.

A businessman called me this morning and said, "Talk about those interests rates, because right now I am having serious difficulties." Mr. Speaker, you would have read in the newspaper how many businesses have closed down right here in Port of Spain. I read that the Admiral has closed down, Bat and Ball, Hooters, Trotters, and several others; businesses are closing. When the businesses close, what happens to the employees? One of them was 40 years, one of them was 50.

We see too that the AcelorMittal plant has laid off so many workers. In the light of that, they are cutting back and laying off workers, and the hon. Prime Minister tells this country, "We are going ahead with the Essar steel plant." One is here, and one is cutting back. Will the Essar steel plant really come to fruition, if you cannot sell the steel and the prices are dropping so much, downturn throughout? When asked if they would continue with the island off Oropouche by the Creek, the island in the sea, the Prime Minister refused to answer. *[Interruption]* Which projects are we cutting?

Mr. Manning: You want me to answer it?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: The island in the sea off Oropouche, are we proceeding with that project? *[Crosstalk]*

Mr. Manning: Just for the benefit of the Member for Siparia, what the Government has done is look forward, planned forward for the development of industrial estate sites for industrialization purposes. The project in Otaheite, the offshore island in Otaheite, is one that we have identified as a part of the Gulf that is naturally shallow, for the development of an industrial estate. As our industrialization continues and we are out of space, we will bring new industrial sites progressively on site, including that one. *[Crosstalk]*

Mr. B. Panday: As we industrialize we will continue building more islands; we will reach Venezuela one day. *[Laughter]* *[Crosstalk]*

Hon. Member: You could become President of the island. *[Laughter]*

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Mr. Speaker, I repeat: "This Government is "tatar"; it will not listen."

You are calling on the citizens to tighten their belts; “the AcelorMittal plant cyar afford their steel, dey close down, dey laying off, but you going ahead with Essar; yuh going ahead with Essar; yuh going ahead with Alutek or whatever.” Where is it? You have already answered; you said, “Yes, I am doing it; come hell or high water, we are going full speed ahead.” That is where we come back to prioritizing and reorienting priorities. We should instead be taking those moneys from those mega projects and spending them for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We should be going into areas that would assist the poor, the underprivileged, the middle class. *[Interruption]*

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: Tell us for example.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: You take \$500 million, you spend it in CEPEP and you produced a report which now says, “Beautiful, wonderful, great.”

Hon. Member: Give an example!

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: I am giving an example. “Hurry, hurry, do not worry.”

Take the CEPEP Programme, we should take that instead and put it in output production. There is no output production coming out of CEPEP; for the environment there is absolutely none. *[Crosstalk]*

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: There is none; there should be output there. *[Crosstalk]* There is need for a new budget that should come to the Parliament. We have all the wrong assumptions, and in the midst of all of this, the Government is saying not to worry. I see that some persons have dubbed the Member for Diego Martin North/East, the “Minister of Nothing Works”. I see him now being dubbed as that by one of the newspapers. *[Crosstalk]* This Member said in October—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: In the *Trinidad Express* of October 17, 2008, the Minister said:

“Too many people prepared to be thinking along the lines of the cartoon character Chicken Licken who walked and cried, ‘The sky is falling’.”

In the *Newsday* at the same press conference it is reported that Imbert later said:

“The current discourse over whether or not enough money was deposited in the HSF was underpinned with irrationality. There are people with loud voices as

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soon as it happens like Chicken Licken, 'The sky is falling in' and I think we need to stop and have rational and informed discussion."

This is a misdirection of the Government; they continue to refuse to accept what is happening. It is only recently that the Minister of Finance has done that.

Tied in with the misdirection, we are getting the contradictory statements from the Ministers, one of which we talked about, the entitlement versus no entitlement.

"While the Minister of Finance was advising us last week that more budget cuts were coming..."—and this was reported in the *Trinidad Express*..."—"In light of the international factors, including the price of energy products, this week the Minister of Energy and former Minister in the Ministry of Finance was reported as advising that it was too early to be reviewing the budget."

That Minister said that, despite the fact the Prime Minister came to this House last Wednesday to say that was exactly what they would be doing: revising the budget. This Minister Enill—they do not speak.

Minister Enill spoke on Wednesday, January 14, and he said, "No budget cuts." Reported in the *Newsday* of January 14:

"Speaking with reporters outside the Ministry's new headquarters, Enill..."—meaning the Minister—"said no further budgetary revisions were necessary at this time, just because oil was trading at US \$37 per barrel on the world markets".
[*Interruption*]

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: I am reading the report from the *Newsday* of January 14, where Minister Enill was saying:

"No further budget revisions necessary at this time..."

That was just a few days ago; that was just a few days ago. Today is Friday, that was Wednesday; just because all oil was trading at US \$37.91. I have told you today, \$37.73 on NYMEX, and on the WTI, \$35.73. Here it is the Government is standing again on a new price; they have changed it from \$55, they are now saying that it is \$45, but already the price has gone below.

The same Minister at the end of December was boasting that the country had not done badly regarding the economic downturn; you have these statements, some admitting something is wrong, some saying it is not wrong. What is the Government about?

The Prime Minister has advised us that he would use the deficit financing; he said that it was temporary. I want to ask, "What is a temporary deficit finance?" [*Crosstalk*] It reminds me of collateral damage. Persons getting shot and killed all over and he says, "Do not worry; collateral damage." The Prime Minister has no idea, knowing whether it is temporary, long-term, short-term, or whatever, because as is shown, and we have seen, the price of oil keeps falling.

So the Government proposes to run a deficit. There is nothing temporary about it. What you are doing is raising bonds. You have the five-year bonds, you have the three-year bonds or the two-year bonds; there is nothing temporary about that, because those bonds would have to be paid with interest thereafter in the future. That is not temporary. That financing that you are filling the deficit with, there is nothing temporary about that.

In effect, you would be borrowing and you would have to pay it back with interest.

We have seen the squandermania of this Government: \$148 million house; \$558 million in the tsunami stadium, cost overruns, down the drain; \$1.67 billion on the Waterfront Project; \$450 million on an uncompleted Carnival Centre; \$161 million on six housing projects, a cost overrun of \$21 million; millions and millions of those mega projects. Now we have to go and borrow money to run the country; borrow money. What has happened?

The Government boasts about prudent management; we do not believe them. What needs to be reinforced now is that one year ago the Government was the beneficiary of the highest oil price ever in the history of the world. This Government was the beneficiary of the highest oil price ever in the history of the world. They were blasted by massive amounts of revenue. It had nothing to do with prudent management. It was the price of oil and gas. So from \$17 billion in 2002, that was the budget; prior to that, under the UNC, a \$14 billion budget. This Government went to \$53 billion in 2008. The UNC ran this country on oil on \$9 a barrel; we built schools; we built a hospital; we paved roads; we built an airport, and we can do it again; and we will. [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: "You not shame?"

Mr. Manning: Mr. Speaker, I thank the Member for Siparia for giving way again.

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She talks about a budget of \$53 billion last year. How much of that was actually saved rather than spent?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Saved? Hon. Speaker, we come back to savings again. I do not think the Prime Minister should ask me that; the Prime Minister should tell me how much was saved. By the end of that fiscal year, we should have had \$20 billion in savings, which we do not have, with that amount of revenue. We should have had. [*Crosstalk*] You spent the money.

You had the rate of expenditure matching the rate of income. I come back again: That should never be. If you take all your income and are spending the majority of it, what will you save? The massive projects continue to eat into Government's income, and the Prime Minister is so bold, in my respectful view, to tell us that he does not say any major increase in unemployment. We do not believe him, because already we have seen the impact in the domestic market, where firms have started to lay off workers in several areas.

I have spoken about the Essar Steel Plant. My colleague from Couva South has spoken to me about what is happening at Petrotrin. The Government budgeted on \$70 a barrel; brought it down to \$55, and now to \$45. Petrotrin has budgeting at \$100 a barrel, and they have not revised that. They have \$3.4 billion in cost overruns on incomplete projects.

So what is happening now? Moody's—the same Moody that they boasted about which upgraded—has downgraded the rating of Petrotrin. What Petrotrin had to do was come cap in hand to borrow. When they go to borrow, the Government will have to guarantee those loans, otherwise they are going to collapse. Petrotrin would collapse. Where you have budgeted \$100 a barrel, we are seeing \$30 and \$35 a barrel, and you have a \$3.4 billion cost overrun on incomplete projects. Petrotrin is going to collapse.

So that will further increase the debt and contingent liabilities of the Government.

3.00 p.m.

And when I talked about \$53 billion spent last year, you will remember when we raised right here that 90 per cent of the projects for 2008 were never completed according to the PriceWaterhouse Manual for that year. So you budget \$40-something, spent \$53 and yet 90 per cent of projects were incomplete. Is that any kind of prudent management of this economy?

What is happening here now is that the downturn has now begun and we are well on our way if we do not halt that slide, this country is already in serious difficulty and it is going to be even worse. So we have seen this Government for

the second time, it is like déjà vu, for the second time it has taken this country from boom to bust. I remember the first boom that we had; it is like déjà vu where every cent is spent, the squandermania. That is the modus operandi of this Government and we end up back into the claws of the International Monetary Fund, and we are going down that road again. This is a country where almost every sector has virtually collapsed.

That is the context within which we are debating a Bill which has to do with pensions. We are debating a Bill which says that we are going to raise your pension by a certain amount. I want to say today when I talk about reorienting priorities, we on this side are still of the view that all those pensions you are increasing should not be \$1,950, it should be \$3,000 a month for the pensioners.

We made that call last year given the inflation and how these prices continue to increase, inflation over the years has eaten up that money and the purchasing power of \$1,950 cannot sustain the pensioners. And you say Kamla, you are saying that the Government is overspending and now you are saying to give them more pension money. I say to reorient your priorities, cut out the frivolity, luxury, mismanagement and the inefficiency and take that money instead and spend it on the poor, old people of this country.

Here we are indeed, in fact, rubber-stamping, but I would like to make an amendment which I would do in the committee stage to amend all these provisions, that instead of reading \$1,950, it should read \$3,000. [*Desk thumping*] I go further on the whole issue of pension reform. Here we are with 11 pieces of legislation and this Government in 2003 set up a task force of 30 really competent persons to prepare a Green Paper and then a White Paper on the Reform of the Financial Sector and talked about modernizing the pension legislation, bringing it together, harmonizing all of it and absolutely nothing has happened.

When we look at the White Paper on the Reform of the Financial System which was laid in this House in June 2004, none of these things dealing with pensions have been addressed. The report talks about portability of pensions so if you go from one job to another you can take your pension with you. It talks about ownership of the surpluses in the pension. These pension plans are being administered by people, some of whom we know and some we do not know. What protection is given to the pensioners? What is the regulatory regime to make sure when a pension plan is held by a company and invested that it will not collapse and pensioners find when they come to retirement there is not a cent in the plan? That is what this was to do; to set up the regulatory regime in 2004, we are in 2009 and none of it has been done.

The Minister in the Ministry of Finance, the senior Minister and the real Minister who is the Member for San Fernando East could tell us what has happened to the pension plans for the daily-rated workers. I believe in June we were in this House debating another Finance Bill and Minister Mariano Browne told this House that they had agreed to a pension plan for the daily-rated workers and one year later nothing has been done.

Ownership of surpluses, if a pension plan now is being administered by a private company or otherwise and it makes a profit, to whom should that profit go? Should it not go to the pensioners? This is what this reform plan also included and none of these things has been done, none of the reform measures has been put into place. It is not just with respect to the pension industry because when you come to this we are saying it is the reform of the financial system as a whole. We are talking about crisis in the financial sector and all of this has been done by 30 persons, distinguished sons and daughters of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Kamal Mankee, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Finance then; Ms. Joye Donaldson, Secretary to the Committee Divestment Secretariat, Ministry of Finance; Dr. Terrence Farrell, Chairman Macro-Economy and Finance Sub-Committee, Vision 2020; Dr. Penelope Forde, Manager, Research Department Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago; Mrs. Catherine Kumar, Inspector of Banks, Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago; Ms. Radica Maharaj, Manager, Legal Department, Central Bank; Dr. Shelton Nicholls, Deputy Governor, Central Bank; Mr. Gerard Pemberton, Group Manager, Development Finance; Mr. Dave Seerattan, Research Fellow Caribbean Centre for Monetary Studies, UWI and a list of persons were co-opted.

So there were nine of those persons including Mr. Selby Wilson, Chairman Financial Services Subcommittee, Vision 2020. Then a further eight persons were co-opted to work on the White Paper from the CLICO Investment Bank: Mr. Michael Craigwell; Mr. Jason Hagley of Tidco; Miss Lavaughn Pritchard from the Project Unit, Ministry of Finance; Mr. Anton Rambarran, Research Department; Prof. Ramesh Ramsaran, Institute of International Relations; Mr. Kelvin Sergeant, Director of Research, Securities and Exchange Commission; Mrs. Sandra Swan-Daniel, Research Department; Mrs. Althea Thompson, Bank Inspection Department, Central Bank. A total of 13 persons worked on the Green Paper, plus 10 persons on the White Paper, and eight co-opted, a total of 31 distinguished sons and daughters of Trinidad and Tobago worked on this White Paper and it still cannot see the light of day.

It was laid in this House in 2004, so the entire Financial Sector Reform has gone off track and Hon. Mariano Browne told this House last year when I asked about it, they have a new set of consultants—I think it was some Canadian firm Mercer—and they will be going over the whole thing again, re-inventing the wheel. Why are we re-inventing the wheel when we need to have a financial and a pension sector that would be sustainable and viable? Again, *modus operandi* of the PNM.

As I close, I just want to make one other point that has to do with the amendment. I have already said that we would seek to amend the Bill to delete the words \$1,950 and insert therefore \$3,000 so all these persons in all these categories should receive \$3,000 and secondly, I want to raise gender considerations.

Mr. Speaker, we on this side have been very clear in upholding equality of opportunity and equality for all. Indeed, it was this government, the brainchild of the Member for Couva North and the Leader of the Opposition who put forward the idea of the Equal Opportunity Commission Act which still has to see the light of day.

In fact, I got a note from someone telling me that Mr. Kevin Pitman, I believe, who was never interviewed—no transparent process—has been hired to work in that commission. So if that is where you are going with an Equal Opportunity Commission, you have already started on discrimination and a basis of favour. It is a frightening situation, and here we have in these provisions—and I am saying we have always stood for equality for all in this country.

In my budget response I talked about the fact that the budget had not dealt adequately with provisions for women in the country and my colleague, the Member for Oropouche West who had made a very spirited plea for the provisions relating to women that was very forceful. The hon. Member for Oropouche West also filed in this House a motion to seek to find out the status of the gender policy of the Government which seems to have been shelved at the say-so of the hon. Prime Minister. It has been shut down, disappeared, and gone to we do not know where and when the Member for Oropouche West filed that motion, it was around International Women's Day last year, the former Minister of Gender Affairs in a public forum said not to worry, we are bringing it. It is almost one year later and many more years later that gender policy has not been brought forward for discussions.

I say all of this because the Government only pays lip service to equality in this country and one example of that is with respect to gender policy. So when we

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look at the provisions that are being amended, we see that the Acts and the provisions in the legislation are discriminatory, and in the same way we stand and say that women must be given an equal chance, men must also be equally treated in our view and the legislation does not do that.

The Government in Act No. 17 of 2007 changed the Retiring Allowances Act to say that wherever there was a reference to “widow” it should be deleted and substituted with the words “surviving spouse”. You see, the surviving spouse could be a widow or a widower, a male or a female but the law is discriminatory and so the Government knew then—*[Interruption]* You say we did not do it, that is okay but you knew in 2007. You changed one of them but not the others and so the Judges Salaries and Pensions Act for example, makes reference to the widow of the Chief Justice.

You know the day would come when there would be a woman Chief Justice of this country and, therefore, the surviving spouse of that woman should not be discriminated against because of how the law is framed. In addition, it made reference to the widow of the Chief Justice, further it makes reference to the widow of a judge and there are many sitting judges right now on the Bench who are female and, therefore, their surviving spouse should not be discriminated against in the event they should predecease that spouse.

It is also in the Teachers Pension Act, the Assisted Secondary Schools Teachers Pension Act which all refer to the pension for the widow. I am asking that we remove it in committee and also amend these Acts that are being amended to ensure that wherever the word “widow” appears it should be replaced with the words “surviving spouse”.

Mr. Speaker, as I close I am reminded now in these times of the text of the book of Genesis which I am sure the hon. Prime Minister is familiar with. In that book you would recall when Pharaoh had a vision and he saw the seven lean cows and seven fat cows and he asked for it to be interpreted, Joseph did so for him. Because of the interpretation he ended up taking within the years of fat when there was plenty and putting it aside to save for the lean years that would come.

Regrettably, that has not happened in our country, for the past six to seven years this Government did not heed the warning nor the vision that was revealed in the Book of Genesis and now that we have entered into these lean years in this country, we are going to be seeing the collapse of most of the support systems that would be there for the poor, the weak and the vulnerable and that will extend to the working middle class who are on fixed incomes.

I ask the Government to reconsider its course and return to this Parliament with its revised budget so that the representative of the people would have a say and “John Public” would have a say because when it comes here we would have consultations with “John Public” and others so that we can steer a course with the reduced revenues that are coming in which would benefit all in this country.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

3.15 p.m.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Patrick Manning): Mr. Speaker, I am not yet fully recovered to participate fully in the cut-and-thrust of the debates in this honourable House and under normal circumstances I would have just held my peace. Recently, you know, in my recent illness, I did experience a lot of pain, but that has paled into insignificance when one compares the pain that I experienced in listening to the hon. Member for Siparia this afternoon. [*Desk thumping*]

I have passed the stage where I advance arguments merely because they sound good when, in fact, they may have absolutely no basis to support them. I have been in this Parliament for too long; I have been in public life for too long to take that approach and I would have thought—and I am not singular in that respect; there are many others in this honourable House who have been here for some considerable time and over time we expect that they will mature and that they will move away from certain approaches and certain attitudes that may have characterized their earlier years as they bring that level of maturity to the conduct of their parliamentary business. Regrettably, whereas I would have expected that approach from the hon. Member for Siparia, that was not the case this afternoon.

Listen to this argument. The Member argues that we are in deficit financing and that we have come to that place because the PNM has mismanaged the economy. That is what the Member for Siparia was saying. The Member went on to say that there were cost overruns in a number of large projects. In other words, we spent more money for the construction of some projects than we should have spent and had that not been the case, then we would not have ended up in a situation of deficit financing today. That is what the Member said.

Mr. Speaker, you talk about a non sequitur? It just does not follow. It is clear that the hon. Member for Siparia does not understand what deficit financing means and whether we have \$1 billion in savings; whether we have \$3 billion in savings; whether we have \$18.2 billion in savings in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund alone, and other savings elsewhere; whether we have \$100 billion in savings, that could not have saved Trinidad and Tobago from the situation of deficit financing in which we find ourselves today.

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Understand this. The deficit financing has come about through one reason and one reason only, that is to say, that there has been a reduction in your major revenue earners. The price of your major revenue earners has led to a significant reduction in your revenues to the point where your projected expenditure exceeds the revenue that you would get and, therefore, the shortfall has to be made up. If you go to take it from savings, it is deficit financing. If you borrow it, it is deficit financing. Once you have to put into the system moneys that were not earned in the particular year in which the expenditure is being incurred, that is deficit financing. It is clear that the Member for Siparia does not understand that. It has absolutely nothing to do with efficiency.

In fact, it has nothing to do with whether you pay more money for a project or less money. It has nothing to do with that! In fact, what that has done is determined the level of savings that we have today. And contrary to what the Member for Siparia would have us believe, we have well in excess of \$80 billion in savings. We have \$18 billion in savings in the Revenue and Stabilisation Fund alone. There are other funds. The Member for Siparia is getting on as though she does not know. She knows all of that, you know. She has been here long enough. This is not the first debate in which she has participated. She has been involved in budget debates for a very long time; in fact, not just in the UNC; she has been involved in some debates in the NAR, because some of those arguments are coming forward again today.

So that, really, let me make it clear, that the deficit financing has nothing to do with expenditure of the past or lack of it; it has nothing to do with cost overruns in the past or lack of it, all it has to do with is the fact that your major revenue earners have been the subject of a significant reduction and, therefore, a reduction in your revenues in the particular year under consideration. The shortfall therefore, has to be made up in one way or the next. The Government had an option. The Government could have said: "We are going to cut back on our expenditure to close the gap", and that is what we started off saying.

In fact, I came to the national community and I said that the shortfall was \$5.3 billion; that we have been able to trim our expenditure to the level of \$4.7 billion and therefore there is a gap of \$700 million and we would see how we would finance that over the year, trying to avoid deficit financing. But subsequent to that, the price of oil has fallen again and the price of gas. What we said to this honourable House two days ago was that the deficit is now \$7.2 billion instead of \$5.3 billion; that the gap, therefore, is \$1.9 billion instead of \$700 million and, therefore, we have to go into deficit financing.

The alternative would have been to cut the expenditure further and if we did that, the extent of social dislocation in the country would have been so great that it was the judgment of the Government that that was not the way to go. I have no doubt that in different circumstances other people in government would have taken a different decision. If it were the hon. Member for Couva North leading the government, I have no doubt they would have taken a different decision; if it were the Member for Siparia or even “Dhanraj” from Caroni East—sorry, the hon. Member for Caroni East—I have no doubt they would have taken a different decision. That is the difference between them and us, that when we look at it, we decide that the option that we would choose is to go to deficit financing.

We have a portfolio and we have options now. This becomes monetary policy. How do you finance it? You say you are going deficit financing. Are you going to take it out of the Revenue and Stabilisation Fund? Are you going to take it out of the Infrastructure Development Fund? Are you going to take it out of the Green Fund? Where are you going to take it? How are you going to take it on? In the circumstances in which Trinidad and Tobago finds itself today, would it not be better not to take it out of any fund at all, but rather to go and take it out of the domestic market? That is to say, float bonds and in so doing, you sap up some of the liquidity and you begin to control the inflation. So what the Government has decided to do is to kill two birds with one stone; [*Desk thumping*] that you raise the money on the one hand—

Dr. Gopeesingh: You cannot go to Antigua and say that, you know. [*Laughter*]

Hon. P. Manning: And especially at this time.

You see, what we are saying, therefore, is instead of going into our savings, which we could easily do; we saved money for that purpose. It is wiser and more prudent to float bonds on the domestic market where at the same time you would be sapping up liquidity and you would be taking money out of the system without putting any undue pressure on the debt, because Trinidad and Tobago has the lowest debt profile in the Caribbean at this time. That is the reality of it. [*Desk thumping*] We can easily borrow without raising concerns in the international agencies or the banking system because we have savings that far exceed the amount of money that we are contemplating borrowing.

Dr. Rafeeq: I thank the hon. Prime Minister for giving way. But when you borrow the money on the local market; you float your bonds and you borrow the money, what are you going to do with the money? Are you not going to spend it? Is the liquidity not coming back into the system?

Hon. P. Manning: What therefore do you do? What, therefore, does that mean? The fact of the matter is that you had projected an expenditure of so much at the beginning of the year. That is the reality of it. In other words, you were going to spend that money anyway. The question is, how are you going to source it to spend it? In case they did not know it, at the same time Trinidad and Tobago has emerged as the financial centre of the Caribbean. What we have not said to them is that other countries in the region, in the context of the money shortage—the Minister of Finance describes it as the credit crunch; the shortage of credit available for borrowing. Because of that and because of the difficulty now in getting money from the international banking system where so many banks have collapsed and where bankers are very careful now how they lend money because of the difficulties ensuring the payment, a lot of countries in the region are now coming to Trinidad and Tobago’s market to float bonds so that they can have revenues to continue their rate of development, and as they do that, they also sap up more liquidity.

So there you have it. It is not part of the story; it is a total story. Barbados is a country that is contemplating that right now, and there are others. So that the hon. Member for Tabaquite—

Dr. Rafeeq: Caroni Central.

Hon. P. Manning: Caroni Central—do not come to conclusions on the basis of a part of the story; look at the entire story.

The Member for Siparia is saying to us that we are at this stage because the Government has mismanaged the economy. The Member for Siparia would have this honourable House and the national community believe that we have mismanaged the economy. I was Prime Minister in 1993.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: And you mismanaged it.

Hon. P. Manning: Of course not. You could say whatever you wish. In Easter of that year we found ourselves in a situation that the net foreign exchange reserves of the country stood at minus US \$10 million and we floated the currency at that time. All of them felt we should not have done that. It was not just hon. Members opposite, in whatever incarnation it was for them; it was not some sections of the business community; not just them; it was popular in this country to criticize anything that the Government did. What many were saying was, “you had no right to float no currency”, and that it would not work. We argued that the economy was going to turn around in very short order, and not only that, but that as you float the currency you set the stage for the economic growth and development for many years to come.

The reality is that the economy began a turnaround in 1994 and from then until now, we have seen 15 years of economic growth. That is the reality! [*Desk thumping*] We did it in a time when the Government in which she was a part, which preceded us in 1991, could not do it; the NAR. They did not do it!

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Who is “she”?

Hon. P. Manning: Sorry, I apologize: the hon. Member for Siparia. Were you or were you not a part of that government?

You understand, Mr. Speaker? They believe that we forget. We do not forget some of those things.

Dr. Moonilal: That was because your government before bust the country.

Hon. P. Manning: They could say what they want. It was my government before. It was not a collapse in oil prices. You see, there they go. They use arguments that they feel sound good which have absolutely no basis in fact! That is what they are doing! It sounds good! No basis whatsoever!

Fifteen years of economic growth, the Member for Siparia is describing that as mismanagement of the economy. In 1993 I went to a function at the Trinidad and Tobago embassy in Washington and I met the Ambassador for Mauritius, who said to me that the unemployment in Mauritius was 33 per cent and that they had been able to bring it to 3 per cent and I was very much taken aback when I heard that and I asked him: “How did you all do that?” He said: “But you all could do it too in Trinidad and Tobago.”

He triggered something and I began to look at that. When I first became a Member of this Parliament, we never used to check unemployment figures. It was in excess of 25 per cent. When I became Prime Minister of this country for the first time in 1991, unemployment was 20.3 per cent in the quarter in which I assumed that office. The second quarter of last year, the unemployment in this country was 4.5 per cent. [*Desk thumping*]

The Member for Siparia calls that mismanagement of the economy. Foreign exchange reserves today stand at US \$9.2 billion. That is what the Member for Siparia describes as mismanagement of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago and, therefore, it is an argument that sounds good, as far as she is concerned.

3.30 p.m.

When the Member for Siparia talks in that way, it discredits her entire contribution. Whatever else she says that is what it does. It discredits your entire contribution, for heaven’s sake. If that argument came from the Member for

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Oropouche West, I would understand it. I would pull her aside and tell her quietly, “well, is not so; is so.” She is new; she does not know; she is learning. I accept that. For the Member for Siparia? They do not forget. The Member got up today and said that the Government must abandon the mega projects. She came back with that argument again. She was talking about the energy sector. It is industrialization that they are against.

Mr. Ramnath: She did not say that.

Hon. P. Manning: She did not say that? Get the *Hansard* and check it. I am telling you that she said that. Some people just do not understand. That was an NAR position. That was a position that was embraced by the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR).

I will tell you why I take issue with it. I have good reason for taking issue with it. I am prepared to justify whatever I say. I do not have to depend on nice sounding arguments that have no basis. I will justify what I say. They get up; they wrote in the manifesto; they publish a manifesto. The NAR had the view before that the PNM was getting involved in mega projects in the energy sector. They were describing ammonia and methanol as sunset industries and they were on the way out. One of them read a book. Let me tell you what caused them to say that. One of them read a book, not a book, a pamphlet [*Laughter*] that was talking about nitrogen fixation in the soil and came to the conclusion that that would make ammonia obsolete. That was the basis for the argument. It is a straight case of a little learning being a dangerous thing. Ask her who said it.

This is what they put in the manifesto on the basis of that argument. They condemned mega projects which is exactly what the Member for Siparia is saying again this afternoon.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: I did not say that.

Hon. P. Manning: You said that.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Mr. Speaker, the Standing Order which deals with when you are misquoting, misleading and being allowed to speak. The hon. Prime Minister is misleading the House. The *Hansard* record will reflect that those were not the words of the Member for Siparia.

Mr. Speaker: I have to rule.

Hon. P. Manning: On what Standing Order, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Speaker: She still raised a Standing Order. No. It is out of order.

Hon. P. Manning: If that had come from the Member for Oropouche West, I would understand it; not from the Member for Siparia. Sometimes you wonder what the intent is.

Hear the argument. They condemn the PNM's approach on mega projects, essentially ammonia and methanol, arguing that those were sunset industries. They said in the manifesto that the NAR government would develop new subsectors in the energy sector. *[Interruption]* You do not have to listen if you do not want to. They would develop new subsectors in the energy sector, the viability of which would be guaranteed on the basis of the domestic market. Do you understand that? That is what they said.

Mr. S. Panday: They could not say that.

Hon. P. Manning: You were not NAR. You could take that.

Mr. Ramnath: That is not the reason we left.

Hon. P. Manning: That is not the reason some of us left. *[Laughter]* When he was contemplating leaving he was also talking about joining the PNM. I understand what he is trying to say. *[Laughter]*

Mr. Ramnath: Not because I refused your invitation.

Hon. P. Manning: The viability of that argument would be guaranteed on the basis of the domestic market. *[Interruption]* Precisely! 1.3 million people in the domestic market. All those plants are world scale plants. There are seven world scale methanol plants and 10 world scale ammonia plants. They are saying get away from that and develop new subsectors in the energy sector. The viability of those subsectors would be guaranteed not on the basis of the world market of so many billion people but on the domestic market of 1.3 million. A total misunderstanding of the energy sector. On that basis they should not have been elected to office.

Do you know what was the NAR's prescription for dealing with the recession? They used to get on platforms night after night—because the Member for Siparia came from that mould—and say, “You see the recession, you know how we would deal with it? We would roll back the recession.” That is what they used to say. The crowd used to go, “Ray!” It was as though the recession was a carpet. Correct or not correct? That was their prescription for dealing with the recession. You must understand that some of us were around and we understood that. Do not feel you could say those things and get away with them. It is the same argument the Member for Siparia is coming with this afternoon. If we did not spend money in the past we would not have to do deficit financing.

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They stopped the ammonia and methanol. Let me tell you what they did. It took them three years to realize the size of the mistake that they were making, but by then it was too late and they did not know how to reverse it. When they got out of government and we got in, it took us a whole year to bring back Trinidad and Tobago on the radar screens of some of the boardrooms around the world that deal with these commodities. It took us a long time. That thinking caused the PNM to say that the energy policy is too important for the people of Trinidad and Tobago to be caught up in the cut and thrust of politics. Therefore, we want dialogue with the Opposition's energy policy. If the government should change in the future, we do not want that kind of ignorance to be the basis of what the government's policy is predicated.

Talking about mismanagement of the economy, 4.5 is the unemployment rate. The foreign exchange reserve is \$9.2 billion. What other statistics are there? Name it.

When we came in, the sum of \$1.015 billion was in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. It is now US \$18 billion. *[Interruption]* That is not the point. The point is we mismanaged the economy. That is what the Member for Siparia said. How does the Member describe \$1.015 billion in 2001, when we came in and \$18.2 billion in 2008? That is the way the Member describes mismanagement of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. Every indicator that you identify, every one shows you the extent to which the PNM Government of Trinidad and Tobago has been prudent, not only in the adumbration of our policies, but also in the execution of our policies and public pattern of expenditure. *[Desk thumping]* Every one! On what basis is all this mismanagement?

What they are against is industrialization. We have seen this before. The people of Trinidad and Tobago would be well advised to understand very carefully that the day honourable Members opposite should form the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, you would get a fundamental reversal in industrialization policy. From now we are asking them. You condemn the PNM's pattern of expenditure and the PNM's approach to industrialization. What is yours? We will like to know.

Mr. Ramnath: We will think about it in a while.

Hon. P. Manning: In what while? What is yours? Tell us! You condemn ammonia; you condemn methanol; you condemn LNG and you condemn iron and steel. The Member for Siparia. This is what the Member for Siparia has asked. The price of iron and steel has fallen; Arcelor Mittal is laying off people in Point Lisas and while that is happening we are talking about building the Essar steel

plant. In other words, we are wrong. If that had come from the Member for Oropouche West, I would have accepted it. I am not going to accept that from the Member for Siparia who is in this House long enough to know otherwise. These markets are cyclical. All of us should know it. When that happens and you have a crash in the price, what happens? The most inefficient plants go out of production. The newer and more efficient plants stay in production.

The manufacturers use the opportunity because they know that it is cyclical and coming out of that in two or three years, they use the opportunity to build new plants using newer technology that are more efficient. In the next cycle when the downturn takes place again, the new plants that they built would not be the first to go. That is the market. In other words, do not believe for one minute that the fact that the market has fallen is any big surprise to any industrialist. It happens all the time. The markets are cyclical and if they are that is what happens.

It is far from the argument of the Member for Siparia who is now trying to cancel plants; far from the approach because the market has collapsed. Now is the time to build. The market will come back up at some time.

On Monday the Standing Committee on Energy met. In the face of much rumour that was being talked about polypropylene and the companies that were involved in it, a letter came from the principal company making it clear that they are not going out of business and they are as committed to the construction of the polypropylene plant in Trinidad and Tobago today, as they were before this crisis arose.

We have a vision of industrialization. The vision of the modern industrial estate requires ammonia which is petrochemicals, ammonia and methanol. It requires iron and steel, flats and rounds; aluminium flats and rounds and plastics, polyethylene and polypropylene. That is our vision. Whether or not the market is up or down the vision stands. That is the difference between us and the Members opposite. They have no vision. They sway with every wind that blows. That is what they do. Whatever sounds nice is what forms their policy at any point in time.

Our policy is consistent. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago is as committed to the construction of the Essar steel plant as we were before because that plant will bring a new product on the market, the product being iron and steel in flats, as opposed to iron and steel in rounds which is what the Arcelor Mittal plant is producing.

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We now have rounds on the one hand and we will get flats. In the aluminium smelter to come, because we understood that, we were able to ensure that the smelter would produce both rounds and flats. Sound policy!

Mr. Ramnath: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. P. Manning: Sheets. We call them flats. Sheets, flats—What is in a name?

Mr. Ramnath: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. P. Manning: Okay sheets. I bow to the superior knowledge of the Member for Couva South.

Mr. Ramnath: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. P. Manning: You have been reading too. Is it that the Member for Siparia has been trying to work you out of a job? One understands. At least there is some ray of hope on that side.

The point is that the Government is committed to its industrialization policy as it ever was. The modern industrial state of Trinidad and Tobago will be built and nothing has happened to suggest that we should do otherwise. Our savings continue to mount and the option we have chosen, as we go the route of deficit financing, that is to say using money in a particular year that is below your revenues, is to borrow on the domestic market backed by all the savings that you have had.

We are satisfied that our approach is sound and that we will see the benefit of all that in due course for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Thank you very much.

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The mere fact that the hon. Member for Siparia could have gotten the Prime Minister to rise at least six or seven times during her contribution when he did not intend to speak means that she was making a meaningful and piercing contribution, which he could not have resisted.

The fact that the Prime Minister had to get up to debunk what the Member was saying is an indication that there was a lot of truth and merit in what she was saying. For a moment I thought that the distinguished Prime Minister would have been going through a state of personal attacks, but I believe that he moved away

from it. I would have been disappointed. Do not kill the messenger. The hon. Member was bringing information. When she spoke about deficit financing, she was not questioning the issue of deficit financing, but the source of deficit financing; in other words, your borrowing to improve the situation.

Mr. Manning: What was her suggestion?

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: The solution was a more prudent approach to your fiscal policies. The Central Bank was telling you over a period of time that they were out of sync with your monetary policies.

Mr. Manning: I thank the Member for Caroni East for giving way. So you are arguing that you have no problem with deficit financing? You do not agree with borrowing to finance it? What is your prescription?

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: We are not saying that we agree with deficit financing. There would have been no need for deficit financing if you had managed the economy prudently.

During the PNM's administration they spent over \$210 billion and in the last year they spent \$53 billion. During the entire six years the UNC regime was in government—this is the difference between us—we spent only \$55 billion and the price of oil varied between US \$9 and US \$18. When you say that in 2001 we had only \$1 billion in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, it is because we only had a limited supply of funding—\$55 billion in six years—and it was based on a formula we were using. Remember, it was not an HSF Fund. It was what we tried to save even though the price of oil was US \$9 per barrel.

When the hon. Prime Minister seeks to debunk deficit financing, Trinidad and Tobago should never have reached that situation having had \$210 billion over a period of time.

Let us take an analysis of the projects this Government undertook. First were the social projects. We have no difficulty in giving people jobs in the Community-based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP) and Unemployment Relief Programme (URP), but the difference between us and you is that we had unemployment training programmes and were training our people while they were receiving funding. At this moment those social programmes are merely handouts so that is money going down the drain when the human resource element is not there.

If you look at infrastructural development projects, the hon. Minister of Works and Transport cannot tell this country which project they have undertaken

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during the last six years that has had meaningful impact on the nation. The only one, after six years, that is coming on is the interchange at the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway. You have not done anything as far as any development project is concerned to ease the difficulties in terms of traffic and all of that.

Besides not being able to do any infrastructural development projects, you have embarked on a number of projects which have had massive cost overruns. In our Finance Committee meeting recently, it showed that UDeCott had a subsidiary company which was being paid \$99 million every six months, therefore \$198 million over a 17-year period, that is \$3.4 billion for that waterfront project alone and that is rent. We will discuss that later.

Look at the Brian Lara Stadium which was supposed to be constructed before the World Cup to cost around \$400 million, as Minister Boynes indicated. It now costs about \$700 million, with a \$300 million overrun and we do not know where it has reached.

The Scarborough Hospital was supposed to cost \$120 million. The sum of \$200 million was spent and it is expected that it will cost approximately \$300 million. It has taken seven years.

The National Oncology Centre was started. The sum of \$100 million has been spent and only the foundation has been constructed.

Then there are projects where there was waste, mismanagement and nepotism. The National Infrastructure Development Company (NIDCO) has spent over \$500 million that has not been accounted for. WASA has lost almost \$200 billion over a period of time. The work force was about 3,500 and now it is about 5,500 and it is only PNM party hacks and party groups. This is why you have lost almost \$2 billion and WASA cannot give more than 20 per cent of the population water.

You have raised electricity rates for the poor people of Trinidad and Tobago and they have to pay more for electricity despite the fact that we have gas to generate electricity. When you talk about waste and mismanagement, the PNM administration epitomizes that situation—total waste, mismanagement and corruption.

When the Prime Minister said that it was painful listening to the Member for Siparia on the whole question of the PNM spending more money on construction projects, he also said that it was non sequitur. But an analysis of what has gone on in terms of construction projects clearly demonstrates that the PNM has overspent more than \$10 billion in cost overruns in all the infrastructural projects that they have undertaken over time.

The hon. Prime Minister spoke about savings. He said whether it is \$1 billion, \$3 billion or \$18 billion, we could not have saved anything. Mr. Speaker, do you know what the country owes at the moment? It owes \$22 billion locally and foreign: \$12 billion in foreign loans and \$10 billion in local loans. Your administration tends to defend that by saying that the debt-to-GDP ratio has become smaller. If the GDP has increased, the debt-to-equity ratio will obviously become smaller. The total amount that you owe is \$22 billion. The Government has stood guarantee to a number of state and statutory enterprises to the tune of nearly \$13 billion according to the Auditor General's report of 2006. The sum of \$22 billion plus \$13 billion is \$35 billion. There are contingent liabilities of another \$5 billion as stated in the Auditor General's report of 2006, making a total of \$40 billion that this country owes at the moment.

When the Prime Minister speaks about reserves of \$96 billion, they owe \$40 billion. The UNC government never owed anything close to that, so your state enterprises are running very badly. You have to back them up by taking loans for them and you have done that to the tune of \$13 billion and the country owes in total nearly \$40 billion. When the Prime Minister speaks about saving, he has to take into consideration what the country owes at the moment.

The Prime Minister spoke about Trinidad and Tobago having one of the lowest debt profiles in the Caribbean. I want him to understand that the \$40 billion is obviously not one of the lowest debt profiles in the Caribbean. He went on to discuss the question of whether we wanted this Government to cut back expenditure. When the Prime Minister and his Government decided to peg the price of oil at \$70 per barrel this year under the assumption that the International Monetary Fund and all the international financial institutions were saying that the price of oil was \$124, they knew that the situation was going to crumble; it could not hold. The Prime Minister went on to indicate that the experts told them it was \$124 so they have made an assessment. By doing that, they allowed themselves more money for expenditure because they pegged the price of oil at US \$70 whereas in previous years it was \$50. Why could you not peg the price of oil at a lower value so that you would not have to consider a big expenditure of \$53 billion and a shortfall in deficit of \$700 million now, and you would not have had to cut expenditure by \$5.3 billion?

4.00 p.m.

The cutting is going to increase. Even now, the Government has had to revise the pegging of the price of oil and they brought it down from US \$55 per barrel to US \$45 per barrel when the price of oil today is US \$37 per barrel. You keep

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making mistakes upon mistakes time and again. You are repeating your mistakes, when all the economists and financial experts are telling you that you are pegging the price of oil and gas at too high a value. This is why you have to come down and move it from US \$70 to US \$55 and US \$45, when the price of oil is now US \$37. You moved the price of gas from \$5.5 per mmbtu to \$4.5 per mmbtu. Now you have to bring it down to \$3.25 per mmbtu. If you had followed carefully the economic situation, you would have had to reach a situation—you have a fiscal deficit of \$5.3 billion which is now moving to \$7.2 billion having to make that adjustment and now having to go to secure bonds for the value of \$1.9 million. The whole analysis of what the Prime Minister was speaking about, as to whether we want to take it out of the Infrastructure Development Fund or whether we want to take it from somewhere else, is wrong. It does not follow. If he had done the prudent thing about pegging the price of oil and gas properly at the beginning, he would not have reached this particular situation.

Then he spoke about soaking up the liquidity. Who created the increased liquidity and inflation problem?

[MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

It was the PNM Government, Mr. Manning's government, who created the increased liquidity and inflation in Trinidad and Tobago by their excessive and exorbitant spending. They pegged the price of oil high. They had more money for spending and, therefore, they spent and spent. Therefore, there was more liquidity in the market and they had to do things to soak up the liquidity by issuing bonds. That was not necessary because if you had heeded the Governor of the Central Bank directions and kept your fiscal policies in sync with the monetary policies, then this country would not have reached the situation that it is in today.

The Prime Minister also spoke about 1991, when he met the economy in a particular situation. He said when he told the country that he had to devalue, everybody was quarreling about it. The Prime Minister devalued the currency at least three times between 1991—1995. If he said it was not a devaluation and that it was a managed float, it was equivalent to a devaluation. The price for US \$1 was TT \$2.42 at that time. After 1995, the price had clearly risen to TT \$4 for US \$1. This is why he was able to bring the foreign exchange reserve of minus US \$1 billion to a positive. It was because of the simple fact that he devalued the dollar and had more money available to improve the foreign reserves.

The Prime Minister also spoke about when he went to a particular country and met the foreign ambassador. I think it was Washington where he met the ambassador from Mauritius where the ambassador indicated that she brought the

unemployment rate down to 3 per cent and that we had a 20 per cent unemployment rate and it he brought it down to 4 per cent. What is going to happen to the unemployment rate as of now and within the next year or two? We see people being laid off everywhere. People are being laid off in the energy sector. The energy companies are bringing down their staff to a minimum level. Banks are beginning to lay off people. Digicel laid off people. TSTT is looking at voluntary separation. We understand that the regional corporations are going to lay off those persons who have been there for less than two years. Throughout the country, you are going to see massive laying off of people and the unemployment rate is going to climb significantly. The Prime Minister speaks about being able to bring down the unemployment rate to 4 per cent, it is going to climb and he must realize and understand that, because of his mismanagement of the economy, he has created a situation where there will be massive laying off and people will be on the breadline.

The Prime Minister seems adamant about continuing with his mega projects. He is speaking about the ESSAR Steel Company and the manufacture of polypropylene and polyethylene. Where is he going to get the money to participate in those projects and make those projects viable?

Recently, we saw in the Finance Committee again that 40 per cent of the equity of Alutrint and Alutek were costing Trinidad and Tobago almost \$400 million in each one. With respect to the 40 per cent we have in Alutrint, one of the payments was equivalent to \$400 million in 2006 and we are being asked this year again to make another payment of another \$400 million to another company, Alutek. We have Alutrint, Alutek and another company, whose name I cannot remember. Almost \$1.2 billion would be ploughed in those three projects. One of the aluminium companies will make downstream products for the aluminum industry to manufacture motor vehicles. The rest of the world—the Ford Company has had to lay off thousands of people because the demands for motor vehicles have become less. Thousands of persons have been laid off by Ford and other companies manufacturing motor vehicles, but here in Trinidad we are going ahead to make aluminium products for the manufacture of motor vehicles. How ironic! In the developed part of the world, they are closing down these aluminum industries because they cannot sell enough vehicles, but here in Trinidad we want to construct aluminium plants to manufacture downstream industries for the manufacture of motor vehicles. *[Interruption]* I am being told by my colleague for Couva South that it is a joint venture with Venezuela.

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We have given away so much money to Caricom. We have given a grant under technical cooperation to Caricom countries. That is giving away money. We have given away \$400 million to \$500 million under that. We have given away money under the Caricom Petroleum Fund. That money was given to the Caricom countries under the condition that Trinidad and Tobago will be supplying petroleum and petroleum products to the Caricom countries. In one fell swoop, Hugo Chavez from Venezuela went under the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and decided to supply all the Caricom countries with petroleum products at a lesser price and better arrangements for paying. He said: "Pay for only 25 per cent of the petroleum products that you are using and the rest you would pay at 2 per cent for a 20-year period." While Trinidad and Tobago Government was giving away almost half of a billion dollars in the Caricom Petroleum Fund to see whether we could have sold our products to Caricom countries, Venezuela came in one fell swoop and took all of that away. We lost another \$500 billion in the Caricom Petroleum Fund and we are giving away another \$500 million in grants to the Caricom governments. Nothing is wrong with giving to Caricom countries, but you must take care of your own people first. Your people must not suffer as a result of what the Government is doing. Look after your own first before looking after your neighbours.

The hon. Prime Minister spoke about the cyclical pricing on commodities and the cyclical issues that occur, as far as the commodities of methanol, ammonia and steel are concerned. Trinidad and Tobago's financial cycle takes nine to 10 years and the rest of the world takes two to three years. We always lag behind. Our cycle is very slow and prolonged and, therefore, we suffer longer than the developed countries. If the Prime Minister knew that there is a cyclical relationship between pricing and the commodities, did he not know that the prices of ammonia and methanol will fall one day and the money that we received from the surplus during that time should have gone into an increased degree of savings? He did not take that into consideration, but the people would have to suffer now, as a result of that.

I now want to come a little to the Bill before us. [*Interruption*] I had to respond to the hon. Prime Minister. The hon. Member of Parliament for Siparia indicated that this Bill is a fragmented piece of legislation that is coming before Parliament. I would explain that a little further.

It was in 2003 that the Government brought a White Paper on the reform of the financial system and reform of the pension system. That White Paper indicated that they must ensure that fund managers are capable of implementing

the required prudential criteria, but most of all accelerate the harmonization and administrative integration of and the Old Age Pension and National Insurance Scheme. That was in 2003, when that White Paper was proffered by this Government. Today, 2009, six years later, we are still trying to pass fragmented pieces of legislation, when it was promised that there will be one pension-type of reform Act that would incorporate all these different pensions.

Do you know what we have existing in Trinidad and Tobago, as far as pensions are concerned? The pension system is governed by the old age pension and the widows and orphans pension system. We have the Old Age Pensions Act; the Widows' and Orphans' Pensions Act and the National Insurance Act. The civil service is governed by the Pensions Act. We have the Pensions Extension Act for employees or statutory authorities; Assisted Secondary School Teachers' Pensions Act; the Municipal Corporations (Pensions) Act; pensions schemes that are separate for the protected services; the Defence Force Act; Police Service Pension Act; Prison Service Pension Act; Fire Service Pension Act—so many disparate types of pension schemes for so many of these public services throughout Trinidad and Tobago. It was the government in 2003, which said that they were going to bring one piece of legislation for the reform of the pension system. Now six years later, we have to debate so many different types of pension systems and pension schemes, when we could have one pension system covering all these different areas.

4.15 p.m.

Today, we are looking at pensions increase from \$1,350 to \$1,950 for a number of these people who have reached 65 years. The first point is, it is an increase of \$600, but it is bringing it equivalent to the old age pension citizen's grant. You have not gone beyond that. The old age Senior Citizens Grant is now about how much, \$1,950 or \$1,850? And you have carried these people's salaries to \$1,950 now.

So, you have brought them equivalent to the Senior Citizens Grant. You have not done, in fact, anything for them. Let me just give a little rough calculation. We have about 77,000 people who would be benefiting in Trinidad and Tobago from the Senior Citizens Grant; we have about 95,000 who are above age 65. In this Bill that is before us we are increasing salaries of \$600 per person, per month, which is \$7,200 per year. If we have 50,000 people who have to have their pensions increased by \$600 a month, it means then that we are increasing their pensions by \$350 million for 50,000 people. I believe that we do not have more than about 20,000 people under this system. Therefore, we are really fighting to

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spend \$140 million in this pension scheme that we are discussing at the moment. When we have \$52 billion that we had spent last year and you are discussing raising pensions by \$600, in effect you are talking about increasing pensions by \$140 million. A miniscule amount. Why could that not have been raised to almost \$3,000 rather than \$1,950?

Here it is you are coming and saying that you are trying to do something for the people who have reached the age of 65 years, but in fact, you are carrying them to the senior citizens grant level. When you are making the country feel that you are putting so much money into increasing their pension, you are really only spending about \$140 million more out of a budget of \$52 billion. What is the big thing?

So, a person who was receiving an NIB contribution of \$2,000; who gave 15 years service and contributed to the NIB, would now get \$2,000 at NIB and \$1,950 from this, so that is \$3,950, but they will not be receiving any senior citizens grant. On one hand you are taking away the senior citizens grant of \$1,850 and you are saying that you are giving them an increase of \$1,350 to \$1,950. You are really not doing anything for them. You have not improved their situation whatsoever.

Madam Deputy Speaker, if we are to look at the whole issue of pensions, National Insurance Board in their annual report of 2007, the assets are \$14,755,000,000. That alone should be taking care of the senior citizens in Trinidad and Tobago if there were proper investment portfolios done by the National Insurance Board. Here it is you have the chairman of the National Insurance Board, Mr. Calder Hart, in charge of that; in charge of Nipdec; in charge of Home Mortgage Bank and in charge of Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Company. How can he develop? There is interlocking directorate and interlocking nepotism existing. [*Desk thumping*] Therefore, you do not have the type of investment opportunities from National Insurance Board. You have nearly \$15 billion to be invested in the National Insurance Board. An investment of 6 per cent return on \$15 billion should bring you \$900 million a year, and with \$900 million a year, the Government will only have to put a little more to take care of the citizens.

You know where the investments are going; where Mr. Calder Hart is putting his overseas investments? Real estate. Where is he investing the National Insurance Board money? In UDeCott; real estate. Seven per cent of national insurance money is invested—I am quoting from the 2007 Annual Report of the National Insurance Board. This is where our problems lie as far as pensions is

concerned. [*Desk thumping*] Fifteen billion dollars that one man is holding under his hand, and this is why he could lend so much money to UDeCott, and he could allow so many problems to occur in Home Mortgage Bank.

So, the investment portfolio, mortgages, real estate, overseas investments, form almost 30 per cent of the investment for NIB. Mr. Prime Minister, I believe this is something you have got to look at. Your finance committee and the hon. Minister of Finance have to take an active role in the management of the national insurance budget—\$15 billion in assets. [*Interruption*] No, but you are appointing the wrong people, you have your friend now as the chairman of the board. You have your friend as chairman of so many of the other boards. Interlocking—we speak about that all the time. We are speaking about pensions and this Government promised to have one pension reform and a pension Act.

I want to draw this country's attention on another point, the Central Bank Report on Insurance and Pensions, for the year ended December 31, 2006. We have a list of self-administered pension fund plans registered at December 31, 2006. There are 46 self-administered pension fund plans: BWIA, Agostini Insurance, Ansa McAl, Associated Brands, Atlantic LNG, Courts, Cuna, EOG, Ferreira Optical, and the list goes on.

Has the Government or the Central Bank made detailed investigations about these self-administered pension plans, where people have contributed to these pension plans and are suffering at the end of it, because they have not received what they are supposed to receive when they retire? Out of these 46 self-administered pension plans, the hon. Member for Siparia spoke about when there is deficit in these pension plans, the workers have to pay the deficit; they suffer. But when there are surpluses, the workers do not benefit from them.

I want to ask the hon. Minister of Finance, with the supervisor of insurance companies, banks and so on, to investigate all these pension plans that are in Trinidad and Tobago. The 46 self-administered pension plans, and on the next page there is another 45. So, there are 91 self-administered pension plans in Trinidad and Tobago. They make the worst investments. Guardian Holdings is one of the companies that went almost bust and the people have to suffer. BWIA workers are still fighting for their pensions. You have carried that over to Caribbean Airlines, and hundreds of people are not receiving the pensions that they were supposed to be receiving, and you have 91 pension funds like this. You could imagine how many thousands of people are suffering as a result of this?

You have insured pension fund plans, this is group pension plans. These group people take the workers' money; put it in a pension plan; they put a certain

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amount from the company, but the workers never see the light of day as far as these pension plans are concerned. They do not have an idea of what has been contributed. They do not have an idea of what the funds stand at; how much are they going to benefit; and when the company goes bust, the people lose all their money and they end up without any pension whatsoever.

I am sure all the Members opposite will be quite aware that this is a real situation in Trinidad and Tobago. There are 97 insured pension fund plans, all of this could be found in the Central Bank Report on Insurance and Pensions for the year ended December 31, 2006. Central Bank has not done any significant investigations into them. They have named about 30 or 40 companies here, which they have investigated, but not the hundreds of companies.

Annuities, Madam Deputy Speaker. There are six companies that are registered with the Central Bank looking at annuities. Annuities are fraught with complications. People put their money and every year you hear government upon government changing the amount that they are allowed for annuities, and people really do not get the full benefit of what they have contributed under annuities. It is noteworthy to know the situation.

Winding up of pension fund plans. You know how many companies have wound up their pension fund plans? Fifty-five, and four have gone to judicial management. What has happened to the contributions of the employees that have gone to these pension plans which have wound up? Thousands of citizens in Trinidad and Tobago are suffering as a result of not receiving their pensions.

Madam Deputy Speaker—coming close to the tea break—there are a few issues that one must look at in terms of the pensions for citizens. This \$1,950 senior citizens grant cannot do anything for the senior citizens [*Desk thumping*] numbering over 92,000 above age 65. The inflation has gone up by 200 per cent on food over the last few years. The core inflation hovered between 12 per cent and 15 per cent at one time. The food prices have increased; people have not been able to feed themselves; building materials have gone up; interest rates have gone up; electricity rates have climbed, and people are unable to get the type of health care that they need to have in their 60s.

Most people become ill in their 60s, and the poor pensioners who need the health care at that time cannot receive the adequate health care because it is not giving adequate health care. They do not have the money to go to private nursing homes because they get a meagre pension and they end up dying in the hospitals. It is a sad, sad situation where this Government has been unable to take care and deal with the senior citizens in the way that they should be taking care of them.

There is a group of people who stop work at age 55, like the defence force and the police officers, and they cannot receive any pension between 55 years and 65 years. What has happened to those groups of people? Instead of the hon. Minister of Finance coming today and trying to tell the country that they are doing something good for the people by increasing their pensions, there are thousands and thousands of citizens who are not benefiting anything whatsoever.

The question of unemployment which my colleague from Oropouche East will speak about; that is another situation that people will not be able to even have a job to reach the age of pension. So they would not be able to contribute the national insurance; they will not be able to get any money from national insurance; and therefore they will only be able to receive the \$1,950 from the senior citizens grant.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the attitude of this Government in terms of providing for the senior citizens leaves plenty to be desired. They have overspent money in so many areas; they have engaged in construction projects with massive cost overruns; they have mismanaged the economy and therefore they cannot provide the type of care for the senior citizens, which they richly deserve.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, the sitting of this House is now suspended for the tea break, and we shall resume promptly at 5.00 p.m.

4.30 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

5.00 p.m. *Sitting resumed.*

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will continue from where we left off before the break and to indicate that everyone in Trinidad and Tobago realizes that we the Members of the Opposition and indeed, the numerous economists and business organizations and social commentators were over and over again telling this Government and saying the same things to the Government with regard to their overspending and their increased expenditure and fiscal mismanagement over the last seven years.

But what choice do we have, when the Government simply refuses to listen and it was quite evident recently within the last four months that the Government failed to listen to the cries of the population when they were telling them that they needed to make some adjustments very quickly. It was only after repeated statements by so many people and such a public outcry that the Prime Minister decided that he would address the nation on more than one occasion and recently in Parliament for a third time on the fiscal situation.

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They seem to have refused to listen to anything that the people were telling them in the past seven years, but you know history has a tendency to repeat itself. It repeats itself because nobody ever listens. So with a record-high expenditure in this country's history, we have at the end of seven years nothing to show for it, and now the elderly have to pay the brunt of the burden and they continue to suffer as a result of this Government's profligacy.

They have not been able to come up with an answer or perhaps I am wrong, but what we have to show for it today are allegations or indeed evidence of corruption, a commission of enquiry prompted by allegations of billion dollar corruption by the Government state-owned enterprise. We have a health sector that has drastically failed the people and is failing the senior citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Crime that is out of control and senior citizens and the elderly are being murdered as well. High food prices that the elderly cannot cope with; bad roads, in fact it seems that we have been thrown back to 20 years ago when the first economic depression hit after the oil boom and because of wanton mismanagement of the PNM Government.

Imagine the Prime Minister is trying to take us back to the 1980s when he knew that it was a PNM government that threw this country after a boom into a bust and it was the subsequent government from '86 to '91 which had to rescue this country. What is worse and frightening is that we have nothing to show for the biggest set of expenditure in the country's history at a time when the world and countries are going into an economic crisis that will severely affect the standard of living of all citizens.

The Prime Minister adamantly continues to say that he will continue with his projects. He will continue with the massive spending on these projects which are not going to bring any benefit to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. He says the best time to invest is now. How foolhardy that can be and my colleagues say it is like Don Quixote. There are a number of projects that the PriceWaterhouseCoopers indicated that should be looked at and reviewed.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, please. I have been listening to you so intently in the tea room that I forgot that your 45 minutes has been up.

Hon. Members, the speaking time of the hon. Member has expired.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Bear in mind that you did get some extra time which I am sure you will take into account in your extended time.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Mr. Speaker, you know Dhanraj from 1968 and I will not go beyond your request. *[Interruption]* We have been friends for 14 years.

I just want to refer this House to an article I got from the *Washington Post* published on Tuesday, January 13, titled: “As China's Jobless Numbers Mount Protests Grow Bolder”. And the subarticle said, “Economic Woes Shining In Light Of Social Issues”.

So, in other words there is massive social impact as a result of the economic crisis. This is China and the article said:

“And as part of its massive \$586 billion stimulus plan—roughly 15 per cent of its GDP...”

It means their GDP is about \$2 trillion—the Chinese Government has had to bring on this stimulus plan because there is massive unease in the Chinese population at the moment. What is happening, the economy is slowing in China, there are growing legions of unemployed workers who are becoming extremely bold and restless and expressing their unhappiness.

“The ripple effects of the sharp economic downturn (in China) are growing.”— This is a country with 1.2 billion people—“Crime is rising as are labour strikes by taxi drivers, teachers, factory workers and even investors unhappy that their stock market holdings are now 70 per cent off their peak.”

Recently, we saw that Agostini Company issued for a bond on the market and it was not fully taken up because investors have lost their confidence in the stock market in Trinidad and Tobago. If that is happening with the great economic power—that is China—can you imagine what is going to happen here in small Trinidad and Tobago? They have a GDP of \$3 trillion; we have a GDP of about \$136 million.

We know that crime will continue to worsen. The unemployment is going to become terrible and the poverty is going to worsen, there will be erosion of the middle class and there will be a significant increase in the working poor in Trinidad and Tobago. I shudder to think what will happen to this country if the Prime Minister and his Government does not listen.

The Prime Minister told this country last year in two Prime Minister's statements over the media and recently in Parliament here, he told the citizens it is time to tighten their belts but he has not told the population how to do this; he has

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not tried to educate the population nor this Government has tried to educate the population of what it means by belt tightening, because they themselves do not know. As a result of this, I want to propose here today that this Government should try to arrange an urgent meeting with the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Basdeo Panday and the Opposition to formulate an emergency stimulus plan. They must come together, Government and Opposition.

I am sure Mr. Panday and the Opposition will work with the Government to put together an economic stimulus plan for this country that will encompass all details of the economic crisis and seek to ensure that the fallout for the economy and all citizens in Trinidad and Tobago is minimal and one which we will be able to recover from. Such a plan is crucial to ensure our country's survival. An economic stimulus plan brought together between the Government and the Opposition that will be to the benefit of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Opposition is fully certain that the Government alone cannot come up with this on its own. It will need a lot of brain power and it will also need parliamentary approval. So, we in the Opposition are willing to meet to formulate such a plan as soon as possible for the sake of the country's future and this plan should be implemented as early as possible.

Mr. Speaker, as I close I want to say it is never too late to get it right, but we are warning this Government that it got it wrong 30 years ago and we nearly did not recover from that 30 years ago, as a country, after that boom and bust. Lightning does not strike twice. We were lucky once and we will not be lucky again unless we prepare and plan for this upcoming depression. It is going to be a depression and I am appealing to this Government, as I close, to please put the people first and protect our country's future and heed the call from the Opposition.

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

The Minister of Social Development (Hon. Dr. Amery Browne): Mr. Speaker, I thank you for this opportunity and it really is a distinct honour to be able to participate in this debate on the Finance Bill, 2009. And history clearly shows us that none of us should ever underestimate the importance of effective social policy in cushioning the impact of any adverse economic circumstances on our population. But it is with pride that I can say that this Government has demonstrated the necessary vision and did not wait on unfavourable conditions to occur but has been investing in the welfare of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago for many, many years.

It is a fact that since the year 2001 this Government has invested more than one-fifth of the annual budgets into the social sector. Social assistance grants have

been increased consistently and continuously and the Government has improved policies and programming that target the most vulnerable in our society including senior citizens, the disabled, our children and the socially displaced and other vulnerable groups.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I tend to listen very carefully when any Member in this House would speak, including Members opposite and I have been listening carefully for over a year now since entering the political arena and entering membership in this honourable House. I also listen to my constituents and very often they give feedback on contributions that they have listened to, sometimes they may approve greatly contributions on this side or the other side and at times they vary very strongly with what they have heard.

Today, I have heard the contribution from the hon. Member for Siparia and it seems she was trying to drive a bit of a wedge and to somehow demonstrate a theme of inconsistency, and I heard an attempt to drive a wedge even into the Ministry of Finance and I would want to remind the Member for Siparia—wherever she is right now—that there has never been a more unified administration than the current PNM administration [*Desk thumping*] and there has never, in my humble opinion, been a more disunified party than the party sitting opposite us in Parliament. [*Desk thumping*] So please do not try to drive any wedges within this current Government and this current administration.

On the theme of inconsistency, Mr. Speaker, it gave me great pause to hear that coming from the Member for Siparia because if it is one thing that the Opposition has been in this term so far, it is inconsistent. And there are so many examples of that even in the contribution. On one hand there was an attempt to decry a Member who had indicated previously that the sky was not falling and she juxtaposed that attempt to decry that statement with also her statement that it is not a rainy day, so I was not sure exactly what was her assessment of the current economic climate.

5.15 p.m.

On one hand she is saying, "Well, he was wrong to say that the sky is not falling", when we all agree the sky is not falling, but on the other hand she criticizes the Prime Minister when he gave his diagnosis or prognosis that it is a rainy day. So, it is really inconsistent and lacking in logic on that side. There were attempts to decry the advice to the population of tightening our belts and I wonder what really is the advice coming from Members opposite, such as the Member for Siparia. She attempted to decry the Prime Minister's very timely and important

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advice to the population, that at all levels, Government and elsewhere, the process of belt tightening is important. It is critical, so again, there was that element of inconsistency.

Mr. Speaker, I think the issue of inconsistency came to its peak when once again there was another attempt to confuse the population of Trinidad and Tobago—and when I say “confuse”, my eyes land on the Member for Couva South for some reason—on this issue of grants, pension, entitlement, et cetera. Again, I think the Opposition has become notorious for its efforts to exploit the understanding or lack thereof, of some members of the population on this particular issue.

I want to tell you, Mr. Speaker, today in this and other contributions, the Opposition will be exposed for their inconsistency in this regard and we will further clarify the exact intent, issue and background of the pension, the grant and all the other issues that they have been tossing around with some frequency in the last few weeks. And certainly in the contributions of today, whether it is a pension or a grant, a grant or a pension, some of the confusion will be dispelled today in this House.

The theme of its inconsistency, once again there is this fine balance being demonstrated, on one hand trying to attack CEPEP and URP programmes, calling for changes in policy in that regard. My memory might be failing me, but I recall not too long ago during the election season—and I can predict that next election, the same philosophy will roll right back around, when these same Members opposite were courting and seducing workers in these same social programmes, the CEPEP and the URP telling them that they would increase their benefits, will make them permanent, will increase their salary and all sorts of other benefits, and now it seems that they want to wipe the same individuals off the face of the earth. Again, that is another example of inconsistency on the part of the Opposition.

There is one message during the election period when you want their votes or you wanted their votes. You did not get it—but you wanted it Member for Oropouche West and you did not get it—and then there is another message between election period, and then you want to accuse the Government of inconsistency. You have no right to speak on that particular issue.

Mr. Speaker, again, if it is one thing that the Opposition has been doing over the last years, certainly to attack the housing programme of this PNM administration. We have heard it time and time again, all sorts of accusations. It came up in question time, so many allegations against the housing programme.

You deny that? Then we have the Member for Siparia standing up today and attempting to—somehow I do not know how that about face occurred, but it is now somehow putting in a plea and a defence for the housing programme of the PNM administration. As my colleague is saying, maybe it is a case of yesterday was yesterday, and today was today. Again, the one thing that is consistent coming from this side—[*Interruption*]

Mr. S. Panday: Do not attack anybody on this side.

Hon. Dr. A. Browne: I am not attacking you, Member for Princes Town. There are no personal attacks coming here, but I am just referring to your principles, policies and inconsistencies. That is all I am referring to at this time and you cannot escape it.

Mr. Speaker, it is all around us. If the theme about that presentation is about inconsistency, then they have opened themselves up to accusations of inconsistency. There is another glaring example at this time, where we are approaching election in Tobago. Again, in the Tobago season, you really wonder where UNC stands on these matters.

I remember an election not too long ago when there were pledges of the undying support to the people of Tobago and continued commitment, et cetera. When they lost, it seems that the position has changed. I am really wondering if the same approach will be taken to the next election in Trinidad if they are defeated the same way they were defeated in Tobago, if they will decide to no longer compete in the election in Trinidad. That will be a case of consistency on the part of the Opposition, if they are met with the same resounding defeat at the polls.

Another piece of inconsistency by the Opposition—and there were references in almost every single presentation that they make in this House—is referrals to this Government as a minority Government. Again, that really flies in the face of the truth, and if the Opposition were to become consistent, what they would have to recognize, Mr. Speaker, is that this present Government, this present PNM administration, has the largest parliamentary majority in the last 25 years in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] So again, there is just a lack of logic and a degree of inconsistency coming from the Opposition.

Sometimes it is really attempts to fool the population. Another good example—I do not want to have to go to the Member for Couva South, but I saw him becoming a little more prominent in the news media recently and he may have his reasons to do so. I would not go there because there were some very curious statements made about remuneration in Petrotrin, et cetera, and it caused

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quite a few citizens to stroke their chins and make comments. But I would not bring those comments to this honourable House because I have great respect for the Member for Couva South and his many achievements past.

Mr. Speaker, we are talking about the issue of inconsistency and what in my opinion has been some attempts to fool the population on the other side. One of those attempts is this effort to create an image that somehow all of our citizen seniors are bedridden or bereft of any income or savings or deprived or completely invalid. That is the type of image when they speak on the issue, that is conjured in the minds of our citizenry and that really is not the case. They create the image of an entire sub-population with no savings, no investments, no family, and who are completely dependent on the State for their very survival. That is absolutely not the case in Trinidad and Tobago, and in fact, many countries in the Caribbean and the wider world.

If they were to interact with their senior constituents on a more frequent basis, they would recognize that it is really a mixed sub-population, and there are seniors at many different levels in this country. Some of them are very proud of their contributions and their ongoing achievements in Trinidad and Tobago. They will recognize that some seniors continue to earn income well into their older years, and have other sources of income besides, let us say a particular grant or support programme. They would recognize that many seniors also receive support from their families, both locally and from abroad. They would recognize that many seniors continue to be active and vibrant members of our society. Many seniors are healthy and taking care of themselves. I heard the Member for Caroni East, a distinguished lecturer at the University of the West Indies and senior lecturer—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Abdul-Hamid: Senior citizen.

Hon. Dr. A. Browne: No, I will not—he looks quite young to my eye, but I heard reference to when they reach 60, they become ill or more ill and so on, but that is not the case for them and you would acknowledge that. You are dealing with a mixed population. Some of our senior citizens are very healthy and are taking excellent care of themselves. Some of our senior citizens remain engaged in productive *[Interruption]*—I am not going to touch that one—activity, economic endeavour, stimulating endeavours, including formal employment well into their senior decades. So you are dealing with a mixed population. Some senior citizens have been taking advantage of the free—*[Interruption]* I have referred to him as a young person already and I remain consistent in that particular regard.

Hon. Member: Do not try to bribe the Speaker.

Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Mr. Speaker, I know you can relate to a variety of topics—training, capacity building and study opportunities that have been provided by this administration to wonderful effect and these opportunities are provided by both the State and civil society agencies.

I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, a couple months ago we were preparing for the International Day of Older Persons and the suggestion came from our Communication Division that, “Well maybe there should be a picture with the Minister or senior staff alongside a senior citizen in the same frame.” So the suggestion came—no, we would not go to the Member for Couva South. He is a noble senior, highly accomplished and highly respected—that maybe we should get someone from outside. Just pull someone off the street, an older person, preferably an older female to do this particular photo shoot. And preferably at random, a lady who seems to be in her senior year was selected and brought into the Communication Division.

Mr. Speaker, I was quite shocked in engaging in conversation on this random citizen from the street of Trinidad and Tobago to learn how accomplished she was, and how much she had taken advantage of the opportunities for education and engagement in this blessed land of ours.

She had recently achieved her PhD degree at an age 64 years. She not only agreed to do the photo shoot free of charge, but she has been serving as an inspiration to other senior citizens across Trinidad and Tobago, that they can rise above the gloomy image that is sometimes propelled of someone who is helpless or somehow bedridden, or an invalid geriatric dependent on others, and to recognize that many of our senior citizens have been improving themselves and really continuing to contribute to the welfare of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, when you look around Trinidad and Tobago today, it is not just senior citizens who are striving in this regard, but many other citizens are taking advantage of what in my opinion continues to be the land of opportunities. Whereas before, people used to go abroad for employment and other opportunities, the reality now is that they are coming home and even some of our senior citizens are coming home because conditions have changed abroad in a much worse fashion than they have changed here in Trinidad and Tobago. Our senior citizens have not been deprived in any way of these opportunities, and these opportunities continue to grow despite what might be regarded as a worsening global economic climate.

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Mr. Speaker, if we look at some of the non-cash benefits that some of our senior citizens have been taking advantage of, it is really quite an astounding list. It is a list that compares very well with any other developing countries, and certainly any country in the English speaking Caribbean. Some of these opportunities include—and they are well known to Members opposite because they interact with the senior citizens in their constituency, and they know some of the things that the citizens have been benefitting from. Of course, the well known issue of the free bus passes, the Government has added to that free ferry passes. There are five senior activity centres which are very well utilized by senior citizens at this time and which are carded for expansion.

There is the Geriatric Adolescent Partnership Programme, again, which is very well utilized by many senior citizens and really offers a very unique partnership between the younger generation and the older generation. That is something very important for the furtherance of our country. If we could marry the passion and the energy of youth with the experience and the wisdom of the older generation, we might usher in a much brighter day for our country.

Mr. Speaker, I am not using these words in an empty fashion because we have an example right here on this side of the House, a very young and vibrant team married with a very wise and experienced team that has resulted in a very strong PNM government. [*Desk thumping*] So there are some opportunities out there for those types of collaborations even among or between the older generation and the younger generation through programmes such as the Geriatric Adolescent Partnership Programme.

Mr. Speaker, we also have a number of subsidized surgeries for which many of our senior citizens benefit. Health centres across the country which are well accessed by senior citizens in receiving free health care—and sometimes we take these things for granted, but there are many countries in which these opportunities simply do not exist.

5.30 p.m.

The Chronic Disease Assistance Programme has been lauded by senior citizens across Trinidad and Tobago, providing these citizens with free prescription drugs, and now other pharmaceutical items, to combat some of the chronic conditions that confront them. These conditions are well known, certainly to the Member for Caroni East and other Members of this House: diabetes, asthma, cardiac disease, arthritis, glaucoma, mental depression, high blood pressure, prostatic hyperplasia, epilepsy, Parkinson's disease, thyroid diseases. There are over 250 pharmacies

that provide these medications free of charge to our senior citizens through the C-DAP. So, again, the attempt to create a very gloomy outlook or gloomy reality for senior citizens is very, very, very inaccurate.

Mr. Speaker, just taking a page from the note of optimism that was struck so well by the Prime Minister in his statement on return to the Parliament, I would want to invite Members of the Opposition to take another look at Trinidad and Tobago, and to recognize that the gloomy year predicted by their leader, some months ago, really has not come to pass. We are still the land of opportunity and we still continue to strive in Trinidad and Tobago, junior as well as senior citizens.

There are other opportunities and assistance for our senior citizens and other citizens who are in vulnerable situations. We are so blessed in this country, that vulnerable citizens are able to access assistance with regard to acquiring a bed, appliances, even kitchen utensils, mattresses, wheelchairs, eyeglasses, hearing aids, prosthesis, colostomy bags, and so many other forms of support. I would want Members opposite to indicate what other developing countries offer this broad range of social support to so many senior citizens, so many citizens in vulnerable circumstances.

I want to make a statement, that despite the gloomy cloud that the Opposition attempted to cast, the social safety net in Trinidad and Tobago is much stronger than that in our neighbours and similar countries across the region and across the world.

Just on Wednesday, January 14, there was a very interesting article in the *Guardian* newspaper. The title was:

"China plans aid for the needy"

I know China was referred to, to some extent, by the Member for Caroni East. The content of the article indicates that the Chinese plans to hand out \$1.3 billion in aid to its poorest citizens, two weeks ahead of their most important holiday, the Chinese New Year. It was said that the poor in China would receive a one-off payment of 100 Yuan; US \$14.60 if they live in the countryside, and US \$21.90 if they live in the city. This article is indicating an aid plan for the needy in China. I would really want to offer a comparison with what is being offered in Trinidad and Tobago to our vulnerable and needy, our senior citizens. This aid plan, with all due respect to what is being done in China, really pales in comparison.

It is very easy to criticize and talk about pittance and so on, but you have to look at the regional and global reality. In this country, under this administration,

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we take excellent care of our senior citizens and the needy in our population; there is no doubt about that. Mr. Speaker, our senior citizens have so, so, many benefits ahead of us. I would just want to reiterate the point that they are diverse to a population and should not be cast in the light that somehow they are all completely dependent, bedridden or invalid, because that is absolutely not the case.

All modern societies recognize that notwithstanding the development that might be taking place or notwithstanding the economic growth and the fact that many citizens are striving and moving ahead, there will always be a fraction of society that are not able to take best care of themselves. There is a requirement for a social safety net, a cushion of safety and a resting place for the vulnerable populations.

Let me, at this point, make a statement of fact to this honourable House. I have listened to the Member for Siparia, to some extent. [*Interruption*] Yes, yet another statement of fact.

Mr. Ramnath: What were you doing before?

Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Yet another statement of fact. Thank you for pointing that out.

I have listened to the Member for Caroni East very intently as well, and I would make the following statement. [*Interruption*]

Hon. Members: Of fact!

Hon. Dr. A. Browne: The UNC and its representatives are by no stretch of the imagination are in no way, shape or form even remotely qualified to speak to anyone on the issue of poverty or support for the disadvantaged in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] They are completely unqualified and disqualified from such pronouncements. [*Crosstalk*] I know that the truth hurts, but their actions speak louder than words. [*Crosstalk*]

A Member was proud of his ministerial association in another administration, which is now legendary in this country for the impact they had with their policies on the middle class in Trinidad and Tobago. I think the Member for Siparia was actually lauding her contribution in the crosstalk to that particular administration—I thought that very, very interesting—when at the same time the Member for Caroni East was accusing the Government somehow of attacking the middle class.

When the UNC was last in power, did they use their years in government to support the poor and vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago?

Hon. Members: Yes!

Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Did they give meaningful support to older persons? [*Crosstalk*] I have the facts in front of me, so be very, very careful Couva North. Did they spend their time doing that?

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Yes!

Hon. Dr. A. Browne: We are hearing all sorts of bleating on the other side, but the facts state a different reality. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Hon. Dr. A. Browne: There are many in whose opinion the UNC dedicated themselves to other pursuits while they were in power.

How much did you do to deliver new programmes or to strengthen existing programmes targeting poor persons or senior citizens? I want you to name a single programme which you are proud of in your administration in targeting senior citizens or these individuals. That cannot be done, but they would stand here and throw paper airplanes at the Government, and somehow try to attack what in reality is a very proud and continuing record of support for vulnerable and senior citizens. [*Crosstalk*]

Let us get down to some of the facts, because I see some degree of excitement on the other side.

Mr. Speaker, do you know what the senior citizen grant was at the time they demitted office? I am using a very politically correct term. Not \$1,000; you would have liked to say that; it was \$720. [*Crosstalk*] Already you are talking about chalk and cheese, and you know where the chalk is sitting and you know where the cheese is sitting and standing. There is no comparison. That was why I said that they were unqualified to speak and pronounce on these issues. We will go a little further and see the glaring difference. They could talk a good talk now, but when they had the opportunity to act, it was very, very revealing how they approached these vulnerable groups. [*Crosstalk*]

Do you know who qualified for that grant at the end of their term, when they demitted office? The only persons who qualified for that grant were persons earning less than \$8,640; not per month, per year. When the UNC demitted office, to access the senior citizen grant, you had to be earning less than \$8,640 per year or \$720 per month. [*Crosstalk*] That was it; not all those who qualified got the full \$720.

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Hon. Dr. A. Browne: Not all those who qualified got the full \$720, only the lowest income earners, or those who earned zero dollars, got the full \$720. They had created a tier system, whereby those who earned a bit more were getting less than \$720. That was the system the PNM inherited after their term in office. Then they would want to give us a lecture in terms of how to provide grant assistance to senior citizens.

Mr. Ramnath: What did they do before that?

Hon. Dr. A. Browne: I am going to give you the full history; I know you are a historian of some note, but maybe it is time to move out of history and into the present time.

They had introduced a two-tier system in which those who had little earnings or income got less than those who had zero earnings; that was the UNC policy at the time. To clinch what I feel is some degree of hypocrisy in their pronouncements on this issue of the grant and support to the vulnerable, to prove how false their sense of indignation is on this particular issue, to prove how unqualified they are to speak on this particular topic, under the UNC, did you know what was one of the major factors in calculating the income of a senior citizen to determine who did and did not qualify?

One of the major factors was the national insurance (NIS) benefits. For some reason, they have woken up in the last several weeks and including in their contributions today, and are, somehow, trying to confuse senior citizens, that the NIS should not be used in calculating the income with regard to their senior citizens grant. It was exactly the same during your administration. That was why I talked about inconsistency and attempts to deceive and confuse the population. Those are the facts and they are incontrovertible. *[Interruption]* Stroke hypocrisy? No, I cannot use that kind of language; I do not think the Speaker would smile. *[Laughter]* I withdraw that, Mr. Speaker. Absolutely duplicitous! I saw some of the press releases put out by the UNC, and I really have to say that some of them were disappointing, because there really has to be a decision to confuse seniors on this issue.

There is another theme that has arisen in this issue of grants and pension. The Member for Siparia, in her very skilful and delicate way, tried to introduce it into the debate sort of offhand, but, again, I really want to say—*[Interruption]*

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: The Minister of Finance raised it!

Hon. Dr. A. Browne: I dealt with that issue of trying to drive a wedge already; you were not here at the time.

Really, it is a very poor example or a poor effort to try to confuse our senior citizens to feel that something has been taken away from them in terms of the name change. I will deal it with it in a bit more detail, but the fact of the matter is that the senior citizens grant has always been a grant. When it was entitled old age pension, do you know what it was, Mr. Speaker, and the Member for Siparia knows it perfectly well? It was a grant. It has always been a grant since its inception in the year 1939, after the Moynes West Indian Commission. It has always been that way; PNM, NAR, UNC, PNM, PNM, PNM, ad nauseam PNM. [*Crosstalk*] They know that, but they put out these press releases and then make contributions to try—The Member for Naparima knows this all too well, because he has been within the system; not as a recipient, but maybe on the other side. He knows that the system has not changed fundamentally.

What has changed is the level of support that has been provided to our senior citizens to a much more meaningful level. That is why the stakes have been raised a bit, because whereas before you had seniors who may or may not have qualified, and the amounts may have been so small, there really was not as such at stake. Now that the sums being transferred are so significant that many of our senior citizens are sitting up and are really trying to ensure that they qualify for this grant, because it can make a difference. It is not expected to be a full living wage or salary, or anything along those lines, but it is an assistance programme; it is a grant to help citizens to supplement whatever other forms of support they may have in their lives.

Honestly, some of those emissions were, I feel, designed more to confuse or to get a little political mileage out of some confusion that may have arisen, as opposed to a more responsible approach which would be to clarify exactly where things stand and what their position was when they had the reins of power at the time.

It is very unfortunate when you hear citizens talking about, "Well they have taken away our pension and inserted this grant." I can go to the 1939 Act to demonstrate, in effect, that what we are dealing with was always a grant. It was always a grant.

The name change that occurred in 2007 which was referred to by the Member for Siparia was really when the Act was amended to be more accurate. It is as simple as that, so there was no change and nothing was taken away from any senior citizen.

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Mr. Speaker, just to drive home the point a little further, when they demitted office, the total expenditure per annum on the Senior Citizens Grant was just over \$400 million. Do you know how much today this administration expends of the Senior Citizens Grant per annum? Well over TT \$1 billion. In fact, for the last fiscal year the amount was about \$1.3 billion. That is a very significant investment in our senior citizens, and today well over 70,000 senior citizens benefit from this grant, and it is a grant and no one should shy away from the fact just as no one should shy away from the fact that it was always a grant since 1939.

If there is any journalist out there who is interested in doing a proper report on the issue he/she would do that as opposed to parroting misinformed comments, some of which originate from Members on the other side.

Mr. Speaker, I do not propose to spend very long on this issue but I really wanted to drive home that point because there have been clear efforts to confuse the population in this regard. It is a fact that with regard to the Disability Assistance Grant, the Public Assistance Grant, School Feeding Programme and every other grant or support programme that is offered by the State, every single one has been increased under the PNM Government. And our increasing commitment is not dependent on the price of oil—they on the other side always refer to oil prices—it is independent, not dependent on the price of oil and there has been living proof of that consistently over the last few months.

The Minister of Finance has been speaking directly to the national population telling them that these programmes will not be cut, in fact, some were recently increased. So that is the kind of commitment that we have on this side with regard to support and grant programmes for the elderly, the disabled and other vulnerable members of the society. Again, I just want to tell you there is a vast difference on the other side.

Mr. Speaker, I really would like to share so much information that I have on the Senior Citizens Grant but I would like to reemphasize the point that this is a programme that the Government is very much committed to. I know there has been some debate around the issue of an entitlement or not. The fact of the matter is that the criteria for this grant are three in number: age, residency and income.

In the year 2000, the criteria were age, residency and income; in the year 1980, the criteria were age, residency and income; in the year 1950 the criteria were age, residency and income; in the year 1939 the criteria were age, residency and income. I cannot say it any more clearly and I hope it dispels some of the

clouds that have been billowing from the other side and somehow leading a few citizens to feel that they have been disadvantaged by a change of name when in fact, the Act was made much more accurate in its intent by changing the name to a grant as opposed to a pension which it is not and never was.

So, Mr. Speaker, I hope I have added to the particular debate. There were several references on the other side to this issue of the Senior Citizens Grant and I thought it important to join in to offer some clarity on that issue.

In closing, I just want to offer a brief quotation and it is from someone who might be well known to Members of this House, his name is Vaclaf Havel, he referred to the issue of politics and said:

“Genuine politics—politics worthy of the name, are the only politics I am willing to devote myself to—is simply a matter of serving those around us: serving the community and serving those who will come after us. Its deepest roots are moral because it is a responsibility expressed through action, to and for the whole.”

Mr. Speaker, I believe Mr. Havel was a visionary of his time in difficult days in Poland and I equally believe that this PNM Government is visionary in its approach to support the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I believe we should all be visionary in this honourable House, and there have been attempts to decry and denigrate Vision 2020 by several Members opposite in their contributions, but my question to them today would be: What is their vision? What have they offered to the people of Trinidad and Tobago? Was there an alternative? I know during the elections there was an attempt to embrace Vision 2020, and attempts to even claim the process, but that was transient in nature.

Mr. Speaker, the actions in increasing support in every single grant programme by this administration have been clear and consistent. They are not just limited to the Senior Citizens Grant, Disability Assistance Grant and the Public Assistance Grant but they extend even further and deeper than that, much further and deeper than that. Right across the board our vulnerable citizens including seniors are able to benefit and I will give you a quick reiteration of some of those increases.

The Housing Assistance Grant in 2002 was \$5,000 in 2008, in the middle of all the economic changes around the world it went to \$10,000; Household Items Grant was increased from \$3,500 to \$4,500; Medical Equipment Grant increased from \$5,000 to \$6,000; Domestic Help Grant increased from \$350 to \$1,600 per month for a minimum of three months or longer; Dietary Assistance Grant was increased from \$115 to \$600 per month for persons on special diets. And there are

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so many other grant programmes, as I said categorically, all of which have been increased by the current administration, so really it is a very strong record being ruled out.

The Special Child Grant; Pharmaceutical Grant; House Rent Grant; School Supplies Grant; Urgent Temporary Assistance Grant and the open reality is that members from all walks of life once they are vulnerable are able to benefit from these grant programmes irrespective of geography, political affiliation, race and even in many cases irrespective of age.

Mr. Speaker, the record is strong, it speaks for itself and it speaks about an administration that cares about the vulnerable and the elderly in our society, many of whom received increases in the last month and are very happy about those increases.

With those few words I want to commend to you the Finance Bill of 2009 and to Members of this honourable House. It is yet another consistent step in the right direction for an administration whose heart is in the right place.

Thank you.

Mr. Chandresh Sharma (*Fyzabad*): Mr. Speaker, in this Ninth Parliament I would have expected the newness from Members opposite to wear off and we should have gotten from my friend, the Member for Diego Martin Central a much more intelligent contribution. He said absolutely nothing of value.

Some people think he is young and he is a young and handsome Member of Parliament who should have some ideas and be able to communicate to the national community and offer some kind of hope but he parroted a set of nonsense that meant absolutely nothing and he is attacking the senior citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Why is he attacking them? When he said the Panday administration offered \$720, he went to Queen's Royal College, does he know that the \$720 represented a 100 per cent increase?

Dr. Browne: Over what?

Mr. C. Sharma: Do you not know what 100 per cent increase is? I am shocked! Citizens of Trinidad and Tobago watching television, the Minister is asking what is 100 per cent; 100 per cent is 100 per cent over any number. During the Manning administration the only increase in pension over four years was \$41. [*Desk thumping*] My good friend, do you know what the cost of food items was?

In 1996, butter was \$12.63—and this document is in the Parliament Library of Trinidad and Tobago which offered thousands of Trinidad and Tobago citizens

hope. Butter was \$12.63, under the Panday administration, \$10.50 under the Manning administration today it is \$19.36, that is why you could not get cake for Christmas.

Peanut butter, 1996, \$15.08; Panday administration, \$12.99; Manning administration, current \$18.48. One pound cheese in 1996, \$10.35; Panday administration, \$9.27; Manning administration, \$16.76. What a shame! You cannot even offer the pensioners bread and cheese.

Curry, “all ah we love curry.” In 1996 it was \$16.08; Panday administration, \$11.50; Manning administration, \$21.00. I do not know what you all have against curry. Smoked herring in 1996 was \$5.96; Panday administration, \$5.20; Manning administration, \$7.80.

Macaroni, poor man’s food, in 1996 it was \$3.81; Panday administration, \$2.31; Manning administration, \$4.74. Baking powder in 1996 was \$6.24; under Panday administration, \$5.50; Manning administration, \$8.12.

In 1996 corned beef was \$8.03; Panday administration, \$6.90; Manning administration, \$8.10. What a shame! Toilet paper in 1996 was \$1.58; in 2000, \$1.20; current, \$1.34. Yeast in 1996 was \$1.43; Panday administration, \$1.22; Manning administration, \$1.84.

You just told the House absolutely nothing of value. When we come here to debate it is to add value. You represent the Government, you must give policy. You must say how you are adding value to the country, you did absolutely nothing and embarrassed yourself. You do not know when the CDAP started: It was under the Panday administration. The very medication you boast of, today, in every health institution 38 per cent of the drugs are not available. It was under the Panday administration that we installed a pharmacy in every health centre in this country and made a doctor available every day of the week. That started under the Panday administration and today under the Manning administration the doctors are not available. You chased them out of the country and you bring Cuban pharmacists and Philipino who cannot speak the language.

You talk about personal allowance. What do you know my friend? Citizens over the age of 60 we increased to \$30,000 from the current \$20,000 an increase of how much—100 per cent. Seventy thousand citizens we treated with under the Hardship Relief Programme; thousands of senior citizens’ water rates were reduced by 25 per cent, something you have never done.

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You are increasing it and you are making it less available because WASA has become PNM party group number five: friend, sister, brother, husband of Ministers, big “wok”; motor car, travelling. That is how you run this country. Fifteen thousand public servants received improved pension benefits under the Panday administration. You cannot fool the national community. Today they are on television. They know where you are. You have a hate relationship with the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. You do nothing with love! [*Desk thumping*] There is no care; there is no concern.

You saw during the pension fiasco a few days ago when you were on television begging the pensioners, they were saying: “We have no money. We do not have money to buy our medication.” So this foolishness you are saying that they are getting help all over the place is not true. They were saying it on the national television. They went to Mr. Jack Warner’s office in Chaguanas and he had to take his personal money and assist them. Are you not ashamed?

In 1999, basic pension benefits were increased by \$75 per month at the higher income level and by \$250 for the lower income. Why are you lying—sorry, “lying” is a wrong word. Why are you not speaking the truth? From October 01, 2,000 pensioners receiving less than \$2,500 per month will have their pensions increased by \$150 per month. You are in the ministry; you have these figures. You know one of the things you run the risk of, hoping that public servants will bow to your political pressure and give you wrong information favourable to your argument.

You must not do that. Under the Freedom of Information Act that was passed by the UNC administration, all this information is available. I am so ashamed of you, my good friend, seriously, because you and I have a future. If you want to stay in the politics and serve the country, you have to be honest; you have to demonstrate love and care. You cannot come and fool the people here. This is not a party group meeting; this is the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago! [*Desk thumping*] As we speak, we have people looking at us in Canada, in the United States and elsewhere.

Customs duty and VAT were removed from a number of items, including health care equipment needed by person with disabilities; a Panday administration. [*Desk thumping*] In 1997 the UNC government introduced a Disability Assistance Grant. Do you know about that? This provides much needed financial assistance to about 2,000 persons over the age of 40 with permanent physical disabilities.

From the year 2001, the personal allowance for citizens over 60 will be increased to \$30,000. I told you that just now. I cannot understand how a Minister could come in this Parliament and speak so many untruths. In another place I will say you are totally shameless.

Mr. Ramnath: You are being exposed today.

Mr. C. Sharma: Pre-schools: South Africa, among other countries, looked at our model of pre-schools. We were building a pre-school for \$250,000 to treat with 30/40 students. Today you are building that same thing for between \$6 million and \$8 million. The hon. Minister gave us a report recently. We were building a community centre for \$300,000 to \$400,000; today you are building the same community centre for \$11 million. The country's problem is that you mismanage the money. There is too much corruption; too much theft and that is why you have to come with this today.

We have enough money. You do not have the ability to manage! You have to look at your history. The PNM has been known for corruption; theft all over the country! "Thiefing" left, right and centre and that culture has stayed with you. Today you cannot deliver anything.

Recently my good friend, the Member for Barataria/San Juan produced two cucumbers here. Do you know the cost of producing those cucumbers, per pound? It is \$184, because that is what it is costing us for these farms. Come to this Parliament and tell us the amount of moneys you have spent on those farms and per item and tell us what it is producing. You cannot fool the national community. The day you came you should have said, "look, this cost us X amount", but you could not have done that.

Who introduced the Trinidad and Tobago Institute of Technology? It was the UNC Panday administration. Today, the workers that we are producing and training came out of that institution. We started the NEC.

Dr. Browne: Who shut down John Donaldson?

Mr. C. Sharma: This argument about John D, we made sure that the children of Trinidad and Tobago could have accessed education at all levels—the Panday administration. Today, what you have done, look at the quantum of money you have spent on UTT, hundreds of millions of dollars and we are not seeing value for money.

We made the Student Revolving Loan available to all the students. Today, you give \$46 million to your friends and family and you cannot report to this

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Parliament. What a shame! Only friends of the PNM! Today we do not know who is studying where and what it is costing the State.

You told us to take a look at Trinidad and Tobago currently. Well, let us look at Trinidad and Tobago through your eyes and through the simple-minded citizens. Murders, across the board; kidnapping; rape; high food prices; no medication available; dengue fever—you cannot conduct a simple blood test; you can deliver absolutely nothing; hospitals overcrowded.

You talk about the grants. What you did not tell this House, Minister, which I find totally disgusting is that people waiting for eye glasses have to wait more than one year. So when they do the eye test, six months later the eye glasses are no longer the strength recommended. You did not tell this House the people are waiting for house repair grants for two, three and four years. You did not tell this House that a PNM member writes a letter and those grants are treated differently.

So you want us to look at Trinidad and Tobago. What are we seeing? The high cost of living; kidnapping across the board. You made this foolish comparison about China. You know nothing about China. China has 1.3 billion people, so when they get 100 yens, you do not know the buying power of that. Do you know what they could buy with 100 yens in China?

Do not come and call figures that you do not know. What can you buy for \$100 in Trinidad and Tobago? You can buy absolutely nothing in this country. Under the Panday administration, a chicken roti was \$8; under the Manning administration, it is \$18.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: What were people's salaries then?

Mr. C. Sharma: You talked about facilities available to citizens through the social welfare programme. Persons cannot get assistance for hearing loss today. You spoke about the URP. You know, I want to tell you personally, when you speak about the URP and CEPEP, you have racial overtones, because what do you mean by that? We have demonstrated—the facts are there; the figures are there—that the URP and the CEPEP do not cover Trinidad and Tobago's plural society. So when you raised this thing about URP and CEPEP, which has become a PNM war gang; in many instances you have employed them so to do, but the jobs that are given; the work sites that are given, if you go to any PNM member's office—and Members could deny this—every two weeks, as the case might be, the PNM members are able to produce a list of persons who will be working on a project, because that is PNM culture; that is for the PNM boys and girls.

That does not obtain for the UNC. The PNM Member of Parliament, including my good friends from Barataria/San Juan and Pointe-a-Pierre and others, can determine who is going to work on a URP gang and where the job will be, because this is PNM country. I am sure the Minister of Finance is able to do the same thing.

So to sit here and pretend, “we do not know what you are talking about”, you cannot fool the national community. They are sick of that! They are fed up of that and they will take to the streets one day, and rightfully so, because you cannot continue that kind of culture. Why must a sister in any part of this country or a brother, with three or four kids, have to go to a PNM member and beg for work? Why can they not do like they did under the UNC? They registered under the UNC in the exchange programmes and they got employment. No member of Parliament on this side could have determined a work list, as you do in the PNM. There were recruiting officers and they were trained. Under the Panday administration it became URPT, for training. Today those persons who are working in all these construction jobs were trained under that programme.

So you are delivering absolutely nothing. Do you know what you hold? You hold power. You have no levels of intelligence to manage this country; absolutely none. That is what it is boiling down to. I cannot believe a Minister would come and say this foolishness in this House.

Let me go back to this document. I cannot wait, like the rest of Trinidad and Tobago, for a UNC government to return. It is not about power, you know; it is not about jacket and tie; it is about service; it is about adding value, to lower that murder rate, when people were happy; when they could have gone to the homes; when our kids could have gone to school; where they could have gone to any part of this country. For those of us who have young children, we are unable to send them to a little disco today under this PNM; we cannot send them to the malls under this PNM.

Look at what you have reduced this country to. What do you hold? Power? For what? For yourselves? Have you really touched the life of someone somewhere? Can somebody say the Member for Barataria/San Juan did something that really benefits me? Everything is a “gimme, gimme”. Every Minister that controls a purse, controls that money. Look at the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs, they only give to their friends and family.

In the Opposition MP constituencies, we also hosted programmes; we also had youth development. Those moneys did not come to us. Under the UNDP Development Programme, you used all that money to cultivate PNM party groups.

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It is always a programme in steel pan. I have looked around this country under the PNM and you would be very shocked and—I almost said—and disturbed—we see pan theatres all over. We love that, because pan is part of our culture. But not a single tassa theatre under this PNM. What do you have against tassa? All the state organizations sponsor steelbands and we are happy for that and we encourage it too, but you do not sponsor Indian orchestras. Why? You do not sponsor the Chinese dance art forms. *[Interruption]* T&TEC Gayatones? You know that one.

Water: Today, half the citizens are unable to receive water but they have to pay the rates and you are threatening to disconnect. When the Panday administration was out of office—and you know how we went out of office; you made a deal with a former President—can I say that, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Speaker: No.

Mr. C. Sharma: Okay. I would not say you made a deal. The former President seemed to have made a deal with the PNM for benefits of some kind and we were removed from office, because we got more votes than you. Remember that. This is the only country in the world where a party gets more votes and is not installed in office. What a shame!

Three hundred and forty-six thousand persons were receiving a 24-hour water supply. Under the previous administration, 8 per cent or 85,000 were receiving the same. More than 80 per cent under the Panday administration was receiving water, not all of them 24/7. We were working towards the entire citizenry receiving water. In that short period we did 700 community projects; made sure communities got water.

At the dollar value, less than 25 per cent of what you are delivering under the PNM administration and that record is in this Parliament because it was a question answered. In Mayaro, \$10 million was spent when Mr. Franklin Khan was the Member of Parliament to give water for 100 families. So it is an abuse of process. The PNM believes it can throw money at anything. The more you spend, you will look better. No levels of intelligence! You do not see any kind of management; you do not see any kind of creativity. When you look around in this country, for the last six or seven years, \$250 billion, we see absolutely nothing for it.

Postal services: Under the Panday administration, almost every home was receiving postal services. Their pension cheques were delivered on time. Infrastructure: You know, history will record us in whichever way, but the Member for Diego Martin North/East, the records will show has turned out to be the worst Minister of Works and Transport this country has ever seen. *[Desk thumping]* This is one

ministry that delivers absolutely nothing. The UDeCott enquiry is going on in Port of Spain. He comes and he makes his statement here to mislead the national community, but he does not stop there. He goes and pays for a four-page ad in all the newspapers—four pages. If you had saved this money you could increase the pensions, at least the pensioner would have been able to buy a roll of toilet paper instead of this nonsense.

6.15 p.m.

What does he say? We expect the commissioners to deal with what? This PNM administration has not delivered a single project within budget and time. There have been cost overruns on every project. Under the Panday administration you could not do that. You could not go to prime minister Panday and say, “Boss we need \$20 million or \$30 million on this.” We would be in trouble. Under the PNM it looks like you have to tell them, “Boss, ah need ah hundred million dollars and I eh starting de wuk till God knows when.”

The PNM’s culture is totally different. The country cannot continue this way. This is the difference between the PNM and the UNC. The PNM’s members say that is why we are here and you are there. What is the point? You are there doing a disservice to the country. How does the country see you? How do citizens see you? Forget whether you are PNM, UNC, URP or COP. Do they see you as people who could add value to their lives? The answer is no. Do they see you working in their interest? The answer is no. Do they see you as messengers of love and hope? The answer is no. There is absolutely no delivery in terms of adding value.

Look at what you did with Caroni (1975) Limited. One of the regrets that I have being a Member of Parliament is that it pains me to see what the PNM did to the Caroni workers. It was a political decision. Largely, the Caroni works were of East Indian origin. Of course, they were mixed people too. That group of people are supporters of the Panday administration and they cut their throats. They said that in their private moments. Today the country is suffering from it with dengue, cholera and yellow fever.

When you look at the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs or the Ministry of Local Government you would see that the recreation grounds that they maintain are only in PNM areas. Look at the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs, when he takes our citizens’ money and buys equipment, it is always for the PNM’s party groups or connected with. No cricket or football club in Fyzabad, Oropouche or Princes Town got anything from the ministry. Why is that so? Do they think that these citizens would sit there and continue to take that? The role of a Member of

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Parliament is to act and do his duty without fear or favour. My duty would be to tell the citizens the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The worst thing in this country in this part of the world is the PNM. Oh, what a shame!

For infrastructure, we built bridges and fixed the roads across the country. Remember friends, oil was \$9 a barrel. Whether it was for one year or five years, we were delivering at \$9 a barrel and people were seeing things across the country. We added a lane on the Churchill Roosevelt Highway; link roads to Macoya on the Southern Main Road at a minimal cost. We went to Debe and all the link roads or tasker roads in south were done under the UNC administration and we were able to reduce the traffic. We were able to ensure that every citizen in this country could have purchased a motor car. It came from the UNC. Mr. Panday's philosophy was to touch the lives of people. When you come from poverty and you have walked bare feet it is a different lesson.

At \$9 a barrel we purchased more than 100 buses. As soon as the PNM came into office, do you know what they did? They interfered with the buses so that they could have made deals to buy new buses. They sabotaged the buses as they claimed that somebody recently sabotaged the water taxis. The Minister of Works and Transport could go on national television and say that somebody sabotaged the water taxis and we must believe it. We purchased 100 buses to ensure that citizens could obtain transport. Throughout the entire country we improved the road system. Under the UNC administration, there was less flooding for less money spent. We improved drainage across the country.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: What are you talking about?

Mr. C. Sharma: Do you have a question? You are asking what I am talking about. Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!

Sea ports, we did it. The pensioners were benefiting under the UNC administration. We were ensuring that they lived healthy lifestyles; every health centre had a functional pharmacy with a pharmacist and a doctor. You have not done that. You have removed it. We ensured that medication came too.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: What about the OJTs?

Mr. C. Sharma: I am glad that you asked that. We started the OJT programmes. Reality sets in at some point. The OJTs started with us.

Let me tell you what you started. You started corruption.

Mr. Speaker: The Member has made an elaborate foundation to come on to stamp duty. I know that is a favourite subject of his. Lend him an ear, please.

Mr. C. Sharma: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am glad you drew that to their attention.

In response to the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, the PNM started corruption in Trinidad and Tobago and exported it to some of the other Caribbean islands. You started the highest levels of discrimination and introduced geopolitical discrimination, racism. When you look at the projects you are doing, you are choosing PNM areas even in UNC controlled constituencies. That obtains today and is recorded. Look at where your projects are going; where you are renovating community centres. Look at pan theatres and where funding is going. Look at the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs. With the recent appointment of a new minister we have seen a slight change. Look under the previous ministry and see where the funding of \$46 million went. That is where I talk about geopolitical racism and discrimination.

We introduced for the pensioners and all the citizens, the certificate of environmental clearance. We introduced the water pollution rules; the noise pollution rules; the solid waste and hazardous management waste came under the UNC.

Mr. Speaker, you were a Member here and you would remember that in 1997, the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic (Amdt.) Bill came under us. To this day all the citizens benefitted. This was to ensure that the vehicles were roadworthy. I will expand on that. The Minister spoke about the motor vehicle tax, Chap. 48:50. One would expect that in the current scenario the Government would report to the national community that it would lower the taxes in areas. They are talking about increasing the taxes.

Today taxi fares have gone up. When they said it in the budget we warned that taxi fares would go up. They said not at all. What are the car owners in this country getting in return for paying these high taxes? Absolutely nothing! When you look at the traffic congestion under this Minister of Works and Transport there is no improvement in our roadways. It is now taking 2½ hours from Fyzabad to Port of Spain for the worker who has to get to Port of Spain for 8 o'clock.

The Commissioner of Transport, Mr. Reuben Cato indicated that one of the reasons there are so many accidents is because of the quality of the roadways. This has been drawn to the Minister's attention but he has done nothing. They are in a worse condition. There is no improvement in the roads. A number of accidents are resulting in death because of that. Today we see massive corruption as it relates to motor vehicles. I have been told that Ministers are beneficiaries of

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this which I do not want to believe. The Japanese Government sent people here because vehicles stolen in Japan were finding their way here.

The question was asked: How are they getting through with this? I made the point earlier that the PNM has mastered the art of corruption at all levels. Imagine you can steal a vehicle in Japan and obtain taxes on it at the same time. Recently, when they had to clamp down on the office one car that was registered twice was owned by a friend of some high-ranking official who protested. They found the vehicle. I think that it was a CRV. When they checked it had a second number plate.

Mr. Imbert: X Trail.

Mr. C. Sharma: X Trail. Thank you very much. They know about what I am speaking.

Mr. Imbert: It was in the newspaper.

Mr. C. Sharma: The Minister knows it was in the papers but before it went in the newspaper he also knew. He condones it. He did not know this was an accident.

Who talked about public transport? Public transport in this country is lacking. We take taxpayers' money and buy buses. How are they distributed throughout Trinidad and Tobago? Do you have any idea, Mr. Speaker? Do you have any idea Member for Caroni Central? PNM party groups make the recommendations. Fyzabad is UNC, one bus for the record. Couva South, you do not exist in this Parliament, no bus in Couva South. Check the buses in all the PNM areas, three, four, five, six and seven that work almost 24 hours a day. When there was the Motion of no confidence against the Prime Minister, all the public transport buses were made available within short notice.

More than that, what we do not know and I want the Minister of Education to tell this House, a number of maxi taxis are hired by the Ministry of Education to transport school children. They engaged all those buses to bring people into Port of Spain because it was important to have a crowd in Port of Spain. The children were affected because it was important to have a crowd in Port of Spain.

We talk about the motor vehicle tax. People are going to the banks; their families are saving money and purchasing cars. Trinidad and Tobago under the PNM's watch has become the car theft capital of the Caribbean. In excess of 2,000 cars have been stolen to the value of \$180 million. The recovery rate is less than 30 per cent. What is very sad is that all the persons who lose their cars, if a part is

not found—I am referring to the Minister's submission when she spoke about Chap. 48:50—they do not get a single cent. I want the Minister to act on behalf of the persons whose cars are stolen and speak to the Supervisor of Insurance to ensure that insurance companies treat with claims of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Persons driving PH cars for hire are paying taxes. The Government knows that, but there is absolutely no record. Everyday you hear about a PH driver interfering with somebody or somebody disappeared with a PH driver. I recommend that it is time that this Government take notice of what is happening and all PH drivers be registered in this country in the areas in which they operate.

6.30 p.m.

There is a foolish response from the Minister: What do you want? HP? The fact is that citizens are saying that there are PH drivers because there is no public transport. In today's newspaper, there is an article where a PH driver, having dropped off his sister at her workplace, has disappeared.

The Minister spoke about wages and it is high time that the minimum wage be revisited because persons are unable to live with the minimum wage. They cannot pay taxi fares to go to work. We need to look at that. Carjacking has come to Trinidad and if citizens are purchasing cars and paying taxes and causing tremendous income indirectly and directly through the garages, it is time that citizens obtain that level of protection from the State.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister spoke about income savings and part of the encouragement from what the Minister presented was to encourage savings. How do they intend to do this when the same pensioners they want to encourage and the children have to put out additional money for protection? Today, everyone has to burglarproof his or her house. That money could have gone into the savings the Minister wants to encourage under Chap. 75:01.

Today, more and more people have to buy water tanks. Under the Panday administration, the hardware dealers were coming to us asking what we were doing to them. They could not sell their tanks and pumps because 75 per cent of the country was receiving water. Today, under the PNM, there is a water tank sale everywhere. Parlours are selling water tanks. Up and down the highway trucks are carrying water. The PNM has delivered absolutely nothing.

The Member for Diego Martin Central, I do not know why he tries to impress talking about pensions and grants being the same. Pensions are different. That is why they came to Parliament to get it changed. The Minister and the Government

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make it look like when we give a grant or pension, we are doing the citizen a favour. They have paid for this. We all, hopefully, will get a pension one day. We have earned that. It is no big favour. It must be tied in to the cost of living. We cannot pretend. The buying power of a pension today of \$1,300 or \$1,500 is a lot less than when it was \$720 and I just demonstrated that with the cost of food items and any other cost you go to.

Medication today is much higher. Diamicon for a diabetic is \$1.30. CDAP does not give it. Presattum for high blood pressure is \$2. CDAP does not provide that. When you say things on television, they will hear, but they can also check the information. We have Monday night meetings at which we report to the people; every Monday night all over the country. We go to the country with the truth and invite them to raise questions through email. [*Interruption*] Minister, you went to QRC. Last night was Thursday. Monday. Monday night.

I made reference to the Transport Commissioner—a document was just sent to me—road accidents have increased by 60 per cent. Now, Mr. Speaker, I have always made this observation. The Member for Diego Martin Central made reference to the PNM, NAR, UNC and the PNM. I want you to record—and in your private moments you can do this—under the PNM, in any period in which they were in office, something happens in this country. There are more murders, more road accidents and more fires. To use the local term, they are “blight”. There is something about them that evil follows them.

Look at the number of road accidents. This nice young lady from the constituency of Fyzabad, Jizelle Salandy, her first fight was co-sponsored by the office of the Member for Fyzabad. [*Desk thumping*] The PNM wanted to lock us up. The Member for Siparia raised matters in this Parliament. She fought at 14 and won a world title that would never be matched. Upon her death—someone sent me a text—people said they were like corbeaux trying to control the funeral. How foolish! We do not need to do that. In her times of need, you were not there. Her promoter said that the worst Minister in this country is the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs—Mr. Buxo Potts.

The PNM feels that taking the pensioners' and other people's money and giving it, will win them support. We cannot operate that way. Go back and see, under the UNC administration, that there was no \$46 million going in secret for scholarships for friends and families. You will see no \$10 million being spent to run water lines for 100 families. If it was \$10 million, it was 1,000 families.

You have installed streetlights and the story is that some high ranking official is involved, but the cost of installing these lights is the highest in the world. You

are installing them at \$2,600. Nowhere in the world are streetlights installed at this price. You deliver nothing within budget. You must tell the country what you are paying for everything.

I made the point that the most expensive building in this part of the world is the residence of the Prime Minister. Hyatt Regency Hotel is \$250,000 per hotel room from foundation to finish. The Prime Minister's residence cost more than that.

I was making a point that the Transport Commissioner noted that research data shows that road traffic accidents are caused by three major factors: the human factor, vehicle defect and road defect. Under the UNC, we caused to be established in Trinidad and Tobago inspection stations so that all vehicles would be required to go there. Under the PNM, that was changed. Under the UNC administration, the very engineers we had at the Ministry were required to check the roads and bridges so that you would not see a road being washed away or a bridge being washed away. Where is taxpayers' money going? You are wasting the money. We renew the call for pensioners to be provided with not less than \$3,000 per month and to be further tied into the cost of living.

Mr. Speaker, I do not need to speak longer. I have made my point. Thank you very much.

The Minister of Tourism (Hon. Joseph Ross): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to make a brief contribution on this very important Bill this evening.

I have listened attentively to all the Members on the other side who spoke thus far. I was amused by the Member for Fyzabad. I hardly think that he believed most of what he said, so I would not spend time looking at his comments.

I want briefly to comment on a few of the statements made by the Member for Siparia and the Member for Caroni East before I make a few other points. First, the Member for Siparia indicated that the Government has had to come three times with changes to the oil prices on which the budget was based. That may be so, but I would like to ask the Member what is wrong with coming back and saying that our basis has changed. The entire world as you yourself indicated was in shock to see that oil prices had dropped so dramatically in such a short space of time.

I know you are a lawyer by profession and that you have done your MBA, but any reasonable management accountant will tell you that when your bases have changed there is always the need to revise and that is exactly what the hon.

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Minister of Finance has been indicating. I also remind you that when the Minister of Finance predicated the 2009 budget on an oil price of \$70, you had suggested that it be based on \$68. What is the big difference between \$68 and \$70? This goes to show that even the Member for Siparia was very optimistic.

I also want to add that, in the contribution, mention was made that we should have used some sort of cyclical smoothing method of determining the price of oil. What was it? Go ahead!

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: It was with respect to managing the expenses in such a way to allow for cyclical smoothing.

Hon. J. Ross: In this case, it would boil down to the same thing. In managing the economy to take into account cycle changes, you would have to look also at the base on which you have set your price, and that is exactly what the hon. Minister of Finance had done. If you recall, in the debate, the Minister of Finance had examined the price of oil over a period of time—I think it was 10 years or so—and made an attempt to come with what should have been a smooth figure.

The other point I want to touch on is when you criticized the Government for hosting the Summit of the Americas and the Commonwealth Heads of Government conferences this year. What is more important? Hosting the Summit of the Americas or hosting the Miss Universe Pageant that was hosted by your government many years ago. The record will show that hosting that pageant was fraught with fraud and corruption and the information came to this House on many occasions so I would not go into it. Do you know the kind of benefits that would accrue to this country by hosting two such major conferences?

I advise this honourable House that last year the Minister of Tourism hosted two conferences: the Florida Cruise Ship Conference and the Investment Conference, where most of the key stakeholders in the tourism sector attended. On the first occasion we had roughly 1,000 participants and on the Florida Cruise Ship Conference, we had 785 persons attending. The benefits that came out of those two conferences are still emerging. We have seen a tremendous amount of interest shown in this country as a result. We have seen where some of the major stakeholders are quite willing to invest in the tourism sector in Trinidad and Tobago and within the next few years, I am sure, we will see some of the tangible benefits.

6.45 p.m.

I want to simply indicate that the two conferences that would be coming shortly in Trinidad and Tobago would, more than anything else, put Trinidad and

Tobago really and truly very, very prominent on the world stage and we can be assured that there would be tremendous benefits coming to this country.

Last but not least, the Member indicated that 90 per cent of the projects were not completed last year, according to the PricewaterhouseCoopers report. I honestly thought that this matter would have been laid to rest quite a while ago because during the budget debate it was made abundantly clear. We went through the whole process of what is a project cycle and showed that projects started at one particular time may not necessarily be completed within the year, but it goes over a period of time. What PricewaterhouseCoopers showed was what percentage of the projects was completed in each year. I think it is unfortunate that the Member is still coming to this House to misinform the population that 90 per cent of the projects were not completed last year.

Mr. Speaker, the Member for Caroni East expressed concern about the level of assistance that we give to our Caribbean neighbours. He stated that we must look after our own first. That sounds nice, but the Member should realize that when we assist the Caribbean—I think the hon. Prime Minister made the point several times and the Minister of Finance also made the point—we are in fact assisting ourselves. When we look at the level of the favorable balance of trade that exists between Trinidad and Tobago and the other islands of the Caribbean, when we help them we are also helping ourselves. If we allow the other islands to sink, we are sinking ourselves. I trust that the hon. Member would change his thinking on that.

There are a few other things, but I would not bother myself with some of these comments. I would like to emphasize some of the good that is coming out of the Bill that is presented here this evening. The physical measures outlined in the Bill by the Minister of Finance clearly demonstrate this Government's commitment to, among other things, bring relief to the senior citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, to bring relief to our public officers when they retire, to bring relief to the disabled and some of the less fortunate in Trinidad and Tobago, to create a healthy and more sustainable environment and to make housing more affordable to the lower and middle-income groups in this country.

I want to look briefly at the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act, Chap. 48:50. The proposed amendment that is being made to the Bill will definitely address some of the burning issues that we face in Trinidad and Tobago. It will touch, of course, on environmental sustainability, income distribution, the reduction in the demand for foreign exchange and the astronomical growth in the inventory of private vehicles in Trinidad and Tobago, which tend to create traffic congestion on the road on a daily basis.

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Mr. Speaker, information coming from the Transport Division of the Ministry of Works and Transport revealed that as at January 2009, there were approximately 299,478 privately-owned cars. These, cars—if I were to place them in the various categories: under 1599 cc, consist of Corolla, Almera, B15, B14, approximately 129,105 or 43 per cent of the entire private vehicle population; between 1599 cc and 1799 cc, 132,402 or 44 per cent, again Corolla, Almera, B15, B14, Toyota wagons and so on; between 1799 cc and 1999 cc, which would be Primera, Cefiro, Laurel and Vitara, approximately 28,339. Together, in the class between 1599 cc and 1999 cc, they made up 97 per cent of the private car population. From 2000 cc to 3499 cc and above, they made up approximately 3 per cent of the private car population. What this information reveals is that the increase in the motor vehicle taxes is a very progressive one, in the sense that it targets the larger vehicles. In so doing, I am assuming that the people who tend to have the larger vehicles are the people who tend to be able who earn a lot more in this country, so the tax targets this group. Those with smaller vehicles or the low and middle income who fall within that category, largely, are not affected in any real significant way, as has been said on the other side.

Mr. Speaker, by increasing these taxes and in the manner in which they are increased, it may serve to deter the importation of larger vehicles and by extension result in the reduction in the emission of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and the creation of a healthy environment for all of us. Governments all over the world, at this point in time, are concerned with the environment, the legacy and what we are leaving for future generations to come. It is my view that in so doing we are creating a healthy environment in the long run. By increasing this tax we would have additional revenue of anything in the vicinity of \$480,000 as is estimated.

With respect to the stamp duty I want to quote the Minister in the Ministry of Finance, based on the *Hansard* of Friday, October 27, 2000.

“In order to maintain affordable housing and facilitate the acquisition of housing by first-time homeowners, it is proposed by clause 7, to increase the existing exemption from stamp duty on residential properties from its present level of \$300,000 to \$350,000, thereby reducing the incidental cost that attend acquiring one’s home.”

That was the hon. Dr. Morgan Job when he was Minister in the Ministry of Finance under the UNC administration at the time.

When we look at the contribution that they had made to housing, that may probably be the only thing that they had done. I ask Members on the other side:

how many houses did you really build in your term? How much assistance did you provide to the lower and middle income group to acquire and own their own homes? You gave them land, but look at the quality of the homes they have built on those lands. It is not a question of just distributing land willy-nilly. What they have done is created a lot of squatting and squalor. People built homes where the infrastructure was poor. Some of the problems we are experiencing today are as a result of the policy of that government at the time. Were it not for the PNM government over the years, God alone knows what would have happened to the lower and middle income groups, as far as housing was concerned. This Government met a huge backlog and we have continued on a housing programme second to none. We have embarked and continued upon providing assistance to the lower and middle-income groups to ensure that they can acquire and own their own homes, to quote my honourable friend, second to none.

Between 2002 and now, the Government introduced a subsidized interest rate of 2 per cent for beneficiaries with income less than \$8,000 per month for houses costing up to \$450,000. We reduced the down payment on mortgages from 10 per cent to 5 per cent and it was eventually eliminated altogether. People acquiring homes under the Government programme today do not have to make any down payment whatsoever. We increased the ceiling for exemption from stamp duty for residential properties from \$350,000 to \$450,000 and in this Bill today, it is going to be increased to \$850,000.

Mr. Speaker, prior to this amendment, a person wishing to have a property transferred with a value of \$850,000 had to pay stamp duty of, I worked it out, \$32,500. This is the kind of savings that the people in Trinidad and Tobago, the poor ones who want to own their home, would realize—\$32,500 in terms of savings based on this amendment.

If the property is worth \$1.2 million, under the previous arrangements they would have had to pay stamp duty \$72,500. Under the amendment, they would only have to pay, I worked it out, \$12,000, a difference of \$60,000.

[MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Over the last fiscal year, the Government increased the allowance for contributions to annuity from \$12,000 to \$25,000. I had some discussion with some of the banks today and the information that came out was that, as a result of the increase in the contribution to annuity from \$12,000 to \$25,000, there was a huge increase in the number of people investing in annuities to make their lives easier when they retire.

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Madam Deputy Speaker, this amendment today increases the contribution to annuity from \$25,000 to \$30,000, and as a result we expect even a greater number of people to invest in their future. What this Government is doing and what this Government should be highly commended for, is the effort that it is making to ensure that people are able to enjoy a relatively good quality of life when they retire.

Some of the benefits that would emerge from the amendment: there would be a greater amount of money being saved in the economy; it will help buffer inflation during the retired years of these people who put aside money in annuity; by using the annuity the taxpayer does not feel the investment since the deduction is not from his real income, but from the taxes that he would have been paying anyhow you take it. So, we are saying that we are making it easier and easier for people in this country to save for those years when they are no longer employed.

This Government should be commended for its contribution to making the lives of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago much better; for increasing the quality of health care; for ensuring that the young ones are taken care of; for improving the education system, despite the fact that the Member for Caroni East indicated that Government had done nothing, the Member for Fyzabad indicated the same thing. There are so many things that this country can look to and can thank the People's National Movement for putting in place. We can thank the People's National Movement Government for the housing programme; [*Desk thumping*] we can thank them for the education system, for making education free from early childhood care right through to tertiary level; for all the efforts in health, CDAP and so on.

Madam Deputy Speaker, time would not permit me to go on, but what I want to say in closing is that one must put all these measures in this particular Bill in context. We spent plenty time this evening talking about many other things, but not looking at what the Bill is all about. The other side spent plenty of time playing to the camera and not touching on what the Bill is all about. [*Crosstalk*]

The amendment to this Bill is about providing relief to the poor; is about providing relief to our pensioners and those who are going to retire; is about making houses more affordable to the poor and the lower income groups in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

This Government has been consistent in ensuring that we achieve developed country status on or before 2020. All these amendments are pointing towards that,

and it is not only in this Bill, it was in the Bill last year and the year before. Development must take place and will take place under a PNM Government.

I thank you.

Mr. Subhas Panday (*Princes Town*): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. After the debacle that occurred in this House when that Member for Barataria/San Juan came in with a \$184 per pound cucumber and made a complete comic of himself, and was so berated in the press and by members of the public, one would have thought he would have learnt something, but today he has continued with this comedy. [*Desk thumping*]

He spoke about Members deviating from the Bill and speaking about matters not in the Bill. You know what he has done, Madam Deputy Speaker? He quoted from the Bill and he did not understand a single thing he quoted. Totally ignorant! No analysis whatsoever. For example, when he quoted from clause 13 of the Bill, he spoke about the taxation on motor vehicles per cc. He said that the taxation was so designed so that the small man bore the lighter burden and the wealthy bore the burden. I wonder if he does not read! I wonder if he has no institutional memory.

One would have thought that he would have given you the differential. For example, in an engine 2499 to 2999, it was \$25 per cc, it has gone to \$30; for an engine 2229 to 3499 cc, \$35, a difference of \$5 per cc, and he said we are giving them blows. Where he was? Is he from another planet? Before this legislation came into being, vehicles—

Ms. Kangaloo: Who is he?

Mr. S. Panday: It. [*Laughter*] That Member does not know prior to the implementation of this legislation, a vehicle up to 2000 cc paid no duty. So, therefore those people were paying \$15 per cc between 1700 and 1999, because they never paid taxes before. What happened? You do not read? You allow people to write speeches for you and you do not understand it? [*Interruption*] Well, I am sorry for him. From 1599 to 1799, \$8 per cc.

So, how could you try to fool this nation and tell this nation you all are soft on the poor and working class? That is indeed contrary to the legislation, but you, who brought a \$184 pound cucumber to this House, I expect worse than that from you. I will not waste much time on that.

I want to deal with the contribution of the hon. Member for San Fernando East. Every time that Member stands in this House is the same “ol’ time” speech

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he makes, nothing new, and today, one wonders if he should not go back to Cuba to have his head checked, because [*Laughter*] [*Crosstalk*] he is lacking something there. He put forward some arguments today that did not hold any water whatsoever.

In his vitriolic attack against the Member for Siparia, he spoke about recession is ongoing in cycles and this cyclical problem we are having now with recession. Although there is recession now, we are still spending money. One would have thought as the Prime Minister and a former Minister of Finance, he would have told the people, look, we are going to encourage investment at this time because we believe we will come out of the cycle quickly. We asked him, did he do any research as to when this cycle would come to an end? You have decided to create investment into a sector when there is recession, and you do not know the outcome. How long will you leave that investment there? How long will you leave that new plant in mothball? All this investment, how will that help take you out of recession?

These are questions that the Prime Minister should have answered this nation, but not merely to come and say that the Member for Siparia does not know what she is saying and everybody knows that the recession is cyclical, and therefore we will come out; although we are facing a recession, we are encouraging investment. One would have expected the Prime Minister to be much more responsible than he was.

Another question we will ask him: Before you encourage such heavy investment in these mega projects, what is the amplitude of the recession? How deep is the recession? These are questions you must answer. Having regard to the amplitude or the depth of the recession, you could work that now to determine how long it would take to come out.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: And the magnitude.

Mr. S. Panday: And the magnitude. What he should have done was analyze the recession. What has been the cause of the recession? He should have done that. He should have told us, look, there has been recession at certain times; it took three years in the first instance, five years in the other instance, eight years in the other instance, and therefore, having regard to all the modalities in the situation, we expect the recession to be at an end say in three or four years. He has not done that.

He should have told us, look, let us analyze how the recession came; is this recession similar to other recessions? Many people are saying that this is the

worst recession the world has seen since the 1930s—the great depression. How long did they take to come out of that? They are saying that even in that recession, it was not as dangerous as this one, because the banks did not collapse, financial institutions did not collapse. In this recession the financial institutions have collapsed. It is a new road we are travelling, so he should have been much more precise, but he has decided to invest *vaille que vaille* and does not care what the consequences are.

When the United National Congress, Member for Siparia, made submissions, he tried to attack her, tried to knock it out completely, only to say building an argument based on false premises. We are saying that the Government must be much more prudent; they must have a policy as to how to get out of the recession, and do not talk for the sake of talking. I humbly ask this honourable House to take note of the contribution of the Member for Siparia in this debate. [*Desk thumping*]

As to the Prime Minister's attempt to attack the Member for Siparia by saying, oh, when the NAR came into office in 1986 they condemned the mega projects; called them sunset projects and talk about sectoral activities which would have been substantiated or fuelled by the local economy. You know why he went to the NAR? Because the Prime Minister cannot attack the government policy of the UNC—a government which was led by the hon. Basdeo Panday—so they attack the NAR.

Under this United National Congress government, they were able to attract over US \$4 billion in foreign direct investment. Under the United National Congress the Train 1 was started. So, they cannot attack the United National Congress on its good strategic and financial planning, so they are trying to attack persons on this side of the House, indicating that they were members of the NAR and they tried to destroy the mega industries.

7.15 p.m.

We have no objection with mega industries. All we are saying is to ensure that the economy gets off the ground and the economy moves forward. Apart from his vitriolic attack on the Member for Siparia, the hon. Prime Minister really made no serious contribution to this debate. As to the Member for Diego Martin Central, he tried to create some dissension and tried to put the UNC in a bad light, [*Interruption*] yes, in the light of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. He says that we condemn the CEPEP. We have never condemned the CEPEP. [*Interruption*] Shame on me! What we are saying, we condemn the PNM in how they appointed the CEPEP contractors. While the CEPEP workers are being brutalized and

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exploited in the hot sun and making \$70 or \$80 a day, the contractors are making over \$50,000 a month. [*Desk thumping*]

That is the objection we had and we want to tell the country, we have nothing against CEPEP workers. As a matter of fact we are sorry for the CEPEP workers, the way the PNM is allowing their hacks to exploit them that is our objection. Hon. Member for Diego Martin Central, that is our objection, so do not try to go and tell the people in this country we are against CEPEP workers. The workers themselves, we congratulate them for how hard they work. What we are hurt about, is how you, the PNM and your lackeys, how you exploit them; you underpay them and you take all the money and pocket it! [*Desk thumping*]

There are many people who were nobody before. All down in Point Fortin, La Brea and now they are driving SUVs; they are going on the site and giving orders to people. They do not go on the site, you know, they only going for the cheque because in the CEPEP thing they have four men; they have technical men, they have labourers, so they do not go on the scene, they are just riding and taking money—these PNM friends—and what we want to say is that we want to give you the history of CEPEP. When CEPEP was formed it was not to help people, it was to use the Government funds—Member for Diego Martin Central—for election purposes. After the 18/18 the PNM Government made a concerted effort to go in polling divisions which they thought were marginal and they asked the CEPEP contractors that they must get at least 30 votes there or 30 employees and by so doing the philosophy in the CEPEP was really for election rigging.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Gang.

Mr. S. Panday: To make gangs. That is what we are annoyed about! Having won the election you continue to intensify the exploitation of poor people. Do you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, there are people who are in CEPEP who have O levels, three GCE and you have them cutting grass by the road? That is what we are annoyed about!

The Prime Minister said that they will create a training component in CEPEP, we ask you today, Member for Diego Martin Central, has the PNM up to today introduced a training component in CEPEP? If so, how many persons have qualified? How many persons have gone on to obtain substantial employment? Tell us! [*Interruption*] You have them working there, no toilet facilities, no water, no maternity facilities, no sick leave and then you will force them to come into Port of Spain, humiliate them to come into Port of Spain when the no confidence motion against Government was filed. [*Interruption*]

These are the things that we object about CEPEP. Was there a training programme in CEPEP? We would have liked to see young bright people come out of CEPEP as labourers and move up. That is why we were telling you, you can use persons from CEPEP to deal with crime, you could take them out from CEPEP and deal with the road traffic problem, you could take the people from CEPEP who have two and three O levels and train them to be traffic wardens so that they will be on the streets assisting the police; they probably could help with littering, with vehicles that pass and litter the road; they could help people with the police with speed traps, instead you all have them on the streets in the sun and the rain cutting grass when this PNM Government has a golden opportunity to uplift the people and instead of doing that they are keeping them down in the gutter. [*Desk thumping*]

Why are you so wicked, PNM? [*Desk thumping*] Why are you so wicked? Why are you so wicked to the people of Trinidad and Tobago? These are the questions that we are asking. So when you come here today and say we “bad talk” CEPEP we want the nation to know what we are “bad talking” about CEPEP [*Interruption*] and that we are really interested in the poor people in CEPEP—

Miss Panday: And their well-being.

Mr. S. Panday:—and their well-being. He speaks about corruption and he speaks about housing, second to none in corruption—

Mr. Ross: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. S. Panday: Okay, the Member for San Juan/Barataria, the housing is second to none. Corruption!

Hon. Member: Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. S. Panday: Okay, the cucumber gentleman, Barataria/San Juan.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: What do you have with that cucumber? [*Laughter*]

Dr. Gopeesingh: It is too expensive.

Mr. S. Panday: One hundred and eighty four dollars a pound, he came here with it in Parliament. [*Interruption*] Wasting money! Instead of helping the poor farmers to produce agriculture, they put the megafarms and producing cucumbers at \$184 per pound. This is what we are laughing at.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Two hundred million dollars in the megafarms.

Mr. S. Panday: Two hundred million dollars in the megafarms.

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Madam Deputy Speaker, the Member for Barataria/San Juan spoke about housing, what we object about is the corruption in housing, the corruption in the allocation of housing, the nepotism. There are persons in four persons in one family who get four houses and do you know what they are doing with them? They are living in one and they are renting them out. Pleasantville, Embacadere, Tarodale Heights—and do you remember the women who used to take money to give out housing, the one who died in the hospital. *[Interruption]* Corruption! You are telling people *[Interruption]* “All yuh trying to heckle me” the shamelessness in “all yuh”. *[Crosstalk]* *[Laughter]*

“All yuh” corrupted and “all yuh” trying to heckle “meh” when I am trying to expose the corruption. *[Desk thumping]* You say you have a lottery system but you only put PNM people names in lottery so therefore at the end of the day—

Hon. Member: Say Tarodale.

Mr. S. Panday: Okay, Current Hills. *[Laughter]* I will tell you about Current Hills in a minute. You are only putting PNM people’s name in the lottery so when the results come out only PNM and their friends getting the houses. This is what we object about.

In the Current Hills, no toilet facilities, no roads and they give out houses to their friends. Did the lottery produce that? This is the kind of shameless corruption that we are objecting to by the PNM. So when you talk about the housing second to none, even genuine people—once they suspect that you are not a PNM—who voted for the PNM cannot get houses. I know people who voted for the PNM are crying for houses and they cannot get. What you have to be is a PNM hack or you have to know somebody in the top of the PNM to deal with it.

There was a former Mayor of San Fernando who was selling houses, taking money, that is why they had to take the Minister from Pleasantville to put her there to try to clear it. There is a lady—Miss Cox or somebody like that—selling houses, coming from the Prime Minister’s office, this is what we are quarrelling about. This is what we are saying that there must be equity in the distribution of the resources of Trinidad and Tobago and the biggest corruption they have is in the housing programme. *[Desk thumping]*

Imagine Sen. The Hon. Hazel Manning, came to Princes Town and say they want to put 4,000 houses in Princes Town. Do you know why? Not to help people you know, not to help PNM people you know, because they want to win Princes Town North.

Dr. Gopeesingh: That is right.

Mr. S. Panday: Imagine this PNM is so shameless, they will go in the public and say we are going to put housing, not for people, but we are going to put housing to win a seat.

Miss Panday: To voter pad.

Mr. S. Panday: To voter pad. How could you use State resources for political purposes so shameless like that? These are the questions we are asking. These are the questions the PNM must answer. Are you using housing for political purposes? Madam Deputy Speaker, do you know what that means?

I told the people of Princes Town North, you voted for PNM and PNM say nobody, including PNM people from Princes Town North and Princes Town South could get a house. Do you know why? They would not add to the vote stock. They will not add to the voting stock so therefore the people who will be getting those houses in Princes Town North and Princes Town South are PNM people. Persons who they sure are PNM persons, they will bring them there to voter pad.

This is what the PNM is about. This is development, this is 2020 development. Member for Barataria/San Juan, this is 2020 development. This is the housing programme which is second to none, where Sen. The Hon. Hazel Manning went in public and said that we are going to put houses in Princes Town in order to win the seat. Deny that! I come up with it, deny it.

Hon. Member: I never hear that.

Mr. S. Panday: You never hear that? Stick break in your ears then.

As he comes back, that Member for Barataria/San Juan spoke about reducing the taxes under clause 13, will reduce the number of vehicles on the road. We ask them, has that happened? They said also, we shall reduce the vehicles on the road by introducing a water taxi from San Fernando to Port of Spain, that is a Minister of nothing that works. [*Laughter*] He is a Minister of nothing that works!

Hon. Member: They find two rags.

Mr. S. Panday: Imagine they find—he says somebody sabotaging the water taxis, they throw rag in the fuel tank. I went to the wharf the other day and we cannot see the tank, the tank is hidden, and do you know this PNM Government is so comical, they have no sense. Imagine that Member of nothing that works, that Member for Diego Martin North/East, he wants this population to believe that they sabotaged these water taxis because of his incompetence. Who will believe him? That is the biggest joke we ever heard.

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So, there are the four water taxis, one would have expected you would have put everything in place before you inaugurate the service, but he has been accused so often of being so incompetent and he could do nothing, he decided water taxis coming and down the road they are going, only to find out there is no boarding place in Port of Spain which has been designated for the water taxis to come. You have these water taxis, you have persons employed on these taxis every day and when a cruise ship comes in there is no place for berthing for the water taxis so they cannot run the water taxis. What incompetence on that Member for Diego Martin North/East. What incompetence! And this is the kind of scam that he epitomizes of this PNM that they inflict upon the people. [*Desk thumping*] That Member for Diego Martin North/East. [*Interruption*]

Madam Deputy Speaker, that water taxi has been a disgrace. They started up and had a big ad in the newspaper, "Smooth sailing", sailing to nowhere [*Interruption*] typical of that Member for Diego Martin North/East, going nowhere, busy going nowhere. I want to ask that Member for Diego Martin North/East, why you did not make arrangements for docking of the water taxis from San Fernando before the service was instituted? Why you did not make arrangements? Why did you make a fool of yourself like that? Why did you embarrass your colleagues like that? I expect you to have some shame. Why did you make them so ashamed? Set the water taxis when a cruise ship comes it cannot work so persons now who buy tickets and hope to travel find themselves having a ticket and nowhere to go.

Hon. Member: Walk through the cruise shed.

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. S. Panday: All they could do is walk through the cruise shed. Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, what do you have to say about that? You are the Minister of Finance, you passed moneys for that, what do you say about that type of incompetence?

7.30 p.m.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: I say it has nothing to do with finance.

Mr. S. Panday: But, Madam, it seems as though you do not understand what you did. I am relating it to the taxation on the ccs, because he said those water taxis will reduce the number of vehicles on the road and the water taxis will take that passenger lift. So you see, it seems to me that you yourself do not understand what you are saying, so therefore, answer it now. Answer, how do you feel? How do you feel Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara about the incompetence of that

Member for Diego Martin North/East? Tell me. No answer. I myself—and big ad in the papers.

One of those Members here today, spoke about how they so care about people, that they give free passes for the ferry. Who said that there, you?

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: Member for Diego Martin.

Mr. S. Panday: Member for Diego Martin Central, we ask, you have poor people who have to come from San Fernando to Port of Spain, why did you not extend the free passes on the water taxis from San Fernando? [*Desk thumping*] Why not? Why? You hate the people of Trinidad or you feel that the people of Trinidad are so stupid, that regardless to what you do them, they will still vote PNM? Well, I want to tell the people of Trinidad, all of you who vote PNM, look how they are treating you. Bus free and from here to Tobago, they gave them free ferry pass. So you are telling the poor pensioners to whom you are addressing this Bill, you cannot use the sophisticated service of the water taxi to come to Port of Spain—[*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Mr. S. Panday:—or if you want to say, pseudosophisticated. So when they come here before the Parliament and they pretend that they care, vote for them, you are stepping up with them. Now the people are saying that you are stepping on them. The people in this country are saying PNM is stepping on them. So I will not waste much time with them.

I really want to thank you, Mr. Speaker, that on the Second Session of the Ninth Parliament, your patience— I am somebody who is always tied down with relevance and to see how patient you were with everybody today, and I hope that this is a good omen for the future. The Member for San Fernando East was so irrelevant, that I had to prepare an irrelevant speech to reply to him. [*Laughter*] So irrelevant, that now I am going on to my relevant part of my speech which I prepared because I know about relevance.

I am now going to start on the relevant part of the speech. I thought that Members on the other side, who have ministries, would have stuck to the Bill and talked about it. But the Member for Diego Martin Central spoke about everything except the Bill. I will now move on to clause 2 on the Judges Salaries and Pensions Act. The Judges and Salaries Pensions Act is amended in section 12, subsections (1) and (2), by deleting the words, "one thousand six hundred and fifty dollars" wherever they occur, and substituting the words, "one thousand nine hundred dollars".

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I wonder if the hon. Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara really understood or if she read this before she came. Were you speaking about judges? You do not want to answer? No, no, I wanted to know if you know what you did. Were you speaking about judges? In clause 12, do you know who they spoke about? You piloted the Bill. Did you read it? Do you know who it spoke about? Well if you did not, let me help you.

Section 12(1) states:

"When a person dies while he is entitled to receive pension in respect of his service as Chief Justice and he leaves a widow, the widow shall be paid a pension at a annual rate equivalent to two-thirds the pension payable to him at the date of his death."

So this is really a pension for the widow of the judge.

What we are concerned with, Mr. Speaker, is really pension for judges while they are alive. The point that I want to raise today, is that, I wonder also if the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara had read the Finance Act of 2007. It seems to me that this Finance Bill of 2009 is different from the Finance Act of 2007, because the 2007 Act says, in that the same section 12:

"(i) ...by inserting after the words 'date of his death'"—that is the last word in section 12—"the words 'or monthly pension in the sum of one thousand, one hundred and fifty dollars, whichever is the greater';"

So what the Finance Act of 2007 was speaking about, was you are getting this pension in this Act, but if according to the Judges Pensions Act, that pension was higher than this pension, you could choose. But do you know what they have done now, Mr. Speaker? What they have done in this Bill, they are saying whether that pension is higher than now, you have to take this lower pension, because in the former Act it says, X dollars whichever is higher, and that higher was the pension which is spoken about in section 12.

Hon. Member: No.

Mr. S. Panday: Yes, read it. You all came here unprepared. That is what happened. So you are putting the pensioner in a worse position under this Act than the former Act. Read Finance Act, No. 17 of 2007. You did not read? You did not know what you were doing?

When you come here and you talk about helping people, what are you really doing? We are concerned and this country should really be concerned, not only

for the pension for judge's wife after the judge has died, but we want to concentrate on pension for judges. Judges need better pension. [*Desk thumping*]

There are many judges today who are alive and have served their lives on the bench and their families have to help support them. There are many judges today who have demitted the Bench and have to go—I would not say where they have to go because I have such great respect for the Judiciary—to scope out a living in Marabella. Do you know why? You have to go there and sit and be humiliated by people. We should not do our judges that.

Mr. Speaker, a judge is in a peculiar position and this country must make sure we take care of our judges, because if we do not take care of our judges, we will not be able to attract the best persons to the Bench. When a person accepts a judgeship, do you know what that means? You cannot expect or hope for promotion. You cannot advance in your profession because there is no meritocracy in the promotion of judges, from a puisne judge to an Appeal Court judge.

Mr. Speaker, as you know, there are many puisne judges who are very good, but yet you find that when it is time to be elevated to the Court of Appeal, persons from the outside come and take the jobs and they are bypassed. Judges are in a position where they cannot say, "Look, if I become a judge today, I want to be the Chief Justice. I want to make advances to become the Chief Justice." We had a brilliant young judge from the South who was appointed at the age of 38, went to the Court of Appeal within four years; everybody thought that he would have been the Chief Justice. Lo and behold, they took a junior judge, put him in the Court of Appeal and made him the Chief Justice. So when you become a judge, you give up all the power to fight for your own working conditions, to fight for your benefits.

There is no guarantee that you will ever be promoted, therefore, in those circumstances, we need to motivate judges and we need to motivate judges to work. How do you motivate judges to work? It is to make sure that their salaries are commensurate with that position which they hold and also, that their pensions are increased to such an extent that they could live a comfortable life after they demit the bench.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Same thing as old age pension.

Mr. S. Panday: Mr. Speaker, do you know what they are doing here? They are giving the judges and their relatives the same increase as an old age pensioner or old age citizen's grant.

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This amendment here is very important. We should not take it very lightly by saying, "Oh, across the board we are giving an increase from \$1,600 to \$1,900." No, judges must be treated in a particular way because they perform a very important function. The Judiciary is one of the most important arms of the Government. The Judiciary is the bastion that protects our democracy, therefore the persons we put as judges, we must compensate them for the kind of work they do.

In the circumstances, I am humbly asking the Government to review the pension paid to judges. Mr. Speaker, do you know what happens to a judge? Once you accept judicial appointment, ten years after you cannot work. So all this knowledge—you might be appointed like my brother from San Fernando at 38, going home at 65, almost 20 something years service. All that knowledge which was gathered and acquired during that 28 years, when you demit the bench you cannot use the knowledge. Judges are the only persons in Trinidad and Tobago who, because they are bright, have knowledge and character, persons of high caliber and dignity, they accept this job and at the end of the day when they demit the bench, nothing for them. They cannot even appear before a court.

Mr. Speaker, we must feel for judges. Imagine, the Legal Profession Act says that when you demit the bench, for ten years you cannot work. So if you demit the bench, Mr. Speaker, at 65, from 65—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: [*Inaudible*] conflict.

Mr. S. Panday: I agree with you. That is why it say we should review the pension for judges in a special way. So if you agree with me, I will stop. If you tell me today, Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, that we will review the pension for judges, I will stop now.

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. S. Panday: No, that is not good enough. I cannot trust you. You are the Minister of nothing that works. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Speaker, I challenge the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, if she gives this House the undertaking that the pension of judges will be reviewed in a timely manner, I will stop speaking immediately. [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: I wish I can do that. I feel for the judges.

Mr. S. Panday: I am happy to hear the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara saying in her personal capacity, she feels for the judges.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: I did?

Mr. S. Panday: That is what I gathered from what you have said. So you do not care about the judges? So you do not care about the pension for judges? Tell me. Stand up and say if you do not care about judges getting a good pension.

Mr. Speaker—no, I just wanted to find out from her—at 65 you are going home. As a judge at 65 you are demitting the bench, so up to the age of 75, you cannot practise, you cannot appear in the courts.

7.45 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, at 75 do you expect a judge to be able to compete with young, robust persons in the courts? I humbly submit—

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: Look at your leader, he is robust.

Mr. S. Panday: The Member for Couva North is a special case to demolish and deal with the PNM. [*Desk thumping*] I am speaking about judges; do not try to distract me.

As you are aware, the laws are changing so fast. If for 10 years you tell a judge that he cannot practise in the court, by the time he is ready to come out, he will be obsolete. The point I am making is: Why should we take care of our judges? Why should we ensure that the Judges Salaries and Pension Act should be amended? It is because we expect a lot from judges. I want to put my neck on a block today to say that I have the greatest confidence in our Judiciary; I have the greatest confidence that our judges' hands are clean. We must assist them to be the way they are. Long ago you hear about magistrates taking bribes; do you know that when you check the salary they used to get it was TT \$300 a month?

Today I went to the library and I found a little document. Mr. Speaker, hear the complaints:

"The average age at appointment of the present judges of the court of appeal, the judges of the high court and masters is forty. In fact, at present these judicial officers are expected to serve for an average of twenty-one years. This tenure must be understood in the context of a limited opportunity for movement..."

Those are the people who are preserving our democracy; hear the problems they have:

"...limited opportunity for movement out of the judiciary..."—so they cannot come out—"seriously curtailed by the mandatory ten year ban on practice in the courts as an attorney from the date that a judge demits office."

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The judges are complaining, but they have nobody to complain to. What the Government tried to do was to increase allowances, but they were non-pensionable allowances; that is a serious thing. So while a judge is there, you are probably giving him little perks, but when he comes out, you throw him on the streets. We must not do our judges that.

For example, this document says:

"The first...introduction of a range of allowances payable to judges starting in 1981 has effectively reduced the salary component of a Judge's compensation package from approximately 98% prior to 1981 to 37% in 2002. The present proportion is approximately 56%."

So you give them a little allowance, like the persons in the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) department, professional allowances are gotten, but when they leave office, their allowance is not tagged unto their salaries; when they go out there, they are being shocked.

The document continues:

"Ironically perhaps, those allowances were introduced, at least initially, to do away with the 'relativities' in the total compensation payable, while preserving— unjustifiably..."—in the judges' view—"the relativities of salary." [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the speaking time of the hon. Member for Princes Town North 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. S. Panday: I thank you very much, Mr. Speaker and all Members of the Government side and Members on this side.

I want to tell the hon. Minister of Finance today to hear the cries of the judges. They should not be crying, because they protect our democracy. They should not be crying out for help, but they are crying. They say:

"What must also considered is that pension levels must be such that they remove from public perception a need for a Judge, or the possibility of a Judge, being offered an inducement or reward to be met post-retirement in relation to a matter tried before him or her while in office." [*Interruption*]

Procedural Motion

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PROCEDURAL MOTION

The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert): Mr. Speaker, I wish to move a Procedural Motion in accordance with Standing Order 10, that the House continue to sit until the completion of the Finance Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

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Mr. S. Panday: Mr. Speaker, I want the Minister of Finance, the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara to hear this:

"What must also be considered is that pension levels must be such that they remove from public perception a need for a Judge, or the possibility of a Judge, being offered an inducement or reward to be met post-retirement in relation to a matter tried before him or her while in office. It is absolutely vital that the hallmarks of independence and impartiality be pellucid at all times and not merely while a Judge is in office."

They are saying do not treat the judge in such a way that the public may feel that his pension will be so low that if a matter comes before him while he is sitting, he might be forced to move in a certain direction to preserve his life post-retirement.

The judges are asking:

"Given all this, as regards sitting Judges, we repeat our previous proposals that all or some of the allowances be included within the definition of pensionable emoluments;..."

So they are saying to include the allowances which are given to them into the pensionable emoluments, or certain specific allowances be merged with the salary with regard to both sitting and retired judges.

They also humbly ask that since after they demit the bench a judge cannot work anywhere to make a living for 10 years, that whenever judges get an increase that amount is transferred to them. They also ask that:

"...retired Judges increases in pensions payable be linked to one of several other increases as they occur from time to time, for example increase in salaries as paid to Judges and/or the cost of living."

When we come today and bloat and gloat that we care about people and that is why we are raising the pension from \$1,600 to \$1,900, you are including judges in that type of increase in pension; you are including judges in a scenario where

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other persons receiving pensions could do something on the side, when you tie this officer's hands behind his back while he is on the Bench. That is too important an issue to be left in a Bill like this one before this honourable House.

So, Mr. Speaker, I put this case, and we hope also that the Government is such a caring Government they would ensure that democracy is preserved.

As I make this argument, there are some persons who are saying, "Why do you give them and not other persons?" I want to indicate to the public at large that if a judge is satisfied, the independence of the Judiciary is protected, and democracy is preserved, every single person from the cradle to the grave will be protected. [*Desk thumping*] This is the pitch that we must look at to ensure judges' pension.

Somebody spoke recently about a judge who was about to retire. They said that he was ill, had serious heart problems and that he did not know what would happen to him. It seemed to me that his family would have to take care of him. Imagine that he is passing judgment on million dollar cases, he is passing judgment which affects the lives of persons, and he has to beg for a lodging after he retires; no, that must not be. All of us in this House and every single citizen of Trinidad and Tobago must stand up for this injustice, I humbly submit, which is being meted out to the judges.

Mr. Speaker, I move on in my spirit of relevance. [*Laughter*] I move on now to the fire service. The Fire Service Act is amended—this speaks about the fire service; Chap. 35:50. [*Interruption*] I wonder if this Government has done any homework, because the impression one gets here is that persons who have retired from the prison service and things like that, are going to be given this pension. In any event, in the case of clause 10 with regard to the Fire Service Act:

"The Fire Service Act is amended in the Fifth Schedule in paragraphs 3(1), (3), (4), (8) and (9) by deleting the words 'one thousand, six hundred and fifty dollars'..."

One would expect that this is probably speaking about a fireman who has reached the age of 60 or 65, is retired and probably getting that money together with NIS. But what paragraph (3) in the Fifth Schedule speaks about is really about a fireman who has 10 years service and who was injured or medically boarded; that is the person it is referring to. This section speaks about a fireman who has 10 years service and who has been injured. Mr. Speaker, you could imagine a fireman who has been injured, and this is the money you would give him?

Like the judges, persons in the fire service provide yeoman service to our people. Mr. Speaker, when a fireman goes out to attend to a fire, nine out of 10 times he is not sure he is coming back safe; he is not sure if he will be burned or killed; he is not sure if something would fall and damage him. But when you watch our firemen, you see them at every fire, sirens blaring coming through the road; the moment the fire engine stops, they jump off the truck and start running with the hoses to out the fire, to save people's lives. In that process, a fire officer might be hurt or damaged. A fireman who is hurt, a fireman who has to obtain medical services, a fireman who has to buy medicine, a fireman who has to attend a doctor; do you think this is a conscionable increase in pension for a person like that? I say no, no, no.

8.00 p.m.

I humbly ask the Government to review the legislation, review what we are doing, look at the law we are amending and make sure we do not come to the Parliament—What makes me suspicious about this whole Bill; it seems to me that there is no thought process in it. If you look at the Bill, everyone is from \$1,650 to \$1,950. clause 2(a) the same thing, 2(c) the same thing. They cannot be serious to take a whole Bill and cut and paste.

I want to find out why are they not using any discretion? Have they not looked at the Acts so they could vary the pension for certain people? That is why I ask if you all did any research. Did you think it over? So in the case of the fireman who had been injured you will give him that pension. That fireman must have worked for 10 years and he would have had to be of pensionable age otherwise he gets nothing. Do you see the complexity in the matter? So for the fire officers, enough thought has not gone into this legislation.

When we look at the Widows' and Orphans' Pension Act, you heard the Member for Caroni East speak about Widows' and Orphans' Pension and you heard the Member for Siparia speak about the citizens' grant, but I want to ask you what is the purpose of clause 7 which says "The Municipal Corporations (Pensions) Act is amended—" and the Municipal Corporations (Amdt.) Act, Chap. 25:05 speaks about officers of the corporation and it says that it has been amended by section 10 of the Act and section 10 speaks about provisions for every officer holding a pensionable office.

Having read the Municipal Corporations (Pensions) Act, clause 10 which says that the Finance Act, 2009 is really amending the Finance Act of 2007 by deleting

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the words \$1,650 and substituting the words \$1,950 and it speaks about officers of the corporation holding a pensionable office in the service of the corporation who have obtained 10 years.

Mr. Speaker, but if you read that alone you go nowhere, so you go back to the parent Act and try to find out who are the officers of the corporation and little or no research would guide you, but section 36 says that the chief officers of the corporation shall be the Chief Executive Officer, the Corporation Secretary, the treasurer, the engineer, the medical officer.

What is the definition of an officer? In the definition section of the Act it says: “officer” among other things is someone who has been appointed by the council.

Mr. Speaker, what a joke! You are saying that the Municipal Corporations Act speaks about officers of the corporation, but when one goes into the Interpretation section of the Act, the officer is defined as somebody who has been appointed by the corporation. When one looks at the reality, one sees the Chief Executive Officer, we do not have any Corporation Secretary, no treasurer, the engineer is not appointed by the corporation, medical officer of health, not appointed by the corporation. So you have a situation where we have to come to the Parliament passing legislation to deal with pensions and there is nobody to give the pension to. This is the comedy of the PNM.

Mr. Speaker, I have been mandated by the caucus of my party to speak on clauses 2 to 7 and I think I have touched almost all those clauses, but before I go, it would be remiss of me if I do not deal with that Member for Diego Martin Central when he speaks about the best health care system in Trinidad.

Mr. Speaker: I would prefer if you use the parliamentary language, the hon. Member for Diego Martin Central, not that Member.

Mr. S. Panday: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, but I will inflict what I have to inflict upon him. He compared the health system of Trinidad and Tobago with other systems in the Caribbean and other parts of the world.

Dr. Browne: I never did that.

Mr. S. Panday: You did that. I want to tell him, if you want to “dead” go in the hospital. Today, somebody from the Mount Hope Hospital called the hon. Member for Caroni Central and begged him: “Take me out of here before dey kill meh.” And she is a doctor, a doctor begging to be taken out from the Mount Hope Hospital before she dies. Is this the health system you all are speaking about?

When you talk about health system, there are people who are sleeping on the floor in the hospital.

In December, none of the pharmacies in Trinidad had the CDAP drugs because there were only three persons in that area distributing CDAP drugs and two had retired and pharmacies were out of CDAP drugs for November/December. Do you know that?

You talked about CDAP and the great strides. What incompetence on the part of this PNM Government. Today you were talking about CDAP drugs; do you know that there is no flavix in the hospital? There are no vital drugs in the hospital. Do you know the condition of the hospital?

Last week there was a dengue problem in Trinidad and Tobago and last week, persons who went to the San Fernando General Hospital could not have their blood tested because the machine was not working and it had no reagents. Shame on this Government! Do you know the doctors had to send the blood to private nursing homes to have it analyzed? This is the caring PNM Government, the Government that speaks about 2020 vision. This a Government that is totally incompetent, corrupt and one that does not care about the people.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I promise I would not be very long.

Mr. Speaker, it is necessary to clarify some issues in the context of the amendments that have been circulated to remove any ambiguity if that is possible. What the amendment seeks to do is amend clause 15 of the Finance Act and put into perspective what the amendment is seeking to do, that is, to remove references to penalties that appear in the Bill before the House. We thought at this time, that was a bit complex and needed additional study and, therefore, we are taking it out so that the amendment before you will deal simply with adjustments to stamp duty with respect to house and land and land.

Let me summarize it very carefully. The amendments will result in a regime where for house and land up to \$850,000, there will be no stamp duty; between \$850,000 and \$1,250,000, the rate of stamp duty will be 3 per cent; between \$1,250,000 and \$1,750,000, it will be 5 per cent; and between \$1,750,000 and above, it will be 7½ per cent.

With respect to land, up to \$450,000, no tax, no duty; between \$450,000 and \$650,000, 2 per cent; between \$650,000 and \$850,000, 5 per cent; and above

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\$850,000, 7 per cent. So what we are seeking to do with the amendment is to delete clause 15 and substitute it with this amendment that will result in that new regime.

The other point that needs to be made, Mr. Speaker, the Member for Princes Town North made heavy weather of clauses 2 to 7 in the Bill and gave the impression that what we are about today is an attempt at comprehensive pension reform. That is not so. The Member for Princes Town North spoke about requirements for adjustments for pensions for judges, firemen, et cetera, he spoke about the application of the various pension laws and the persons who will be in receipt of pensions, but that is not what we are about today, and I think that needs to be made absolutely clear.

The vast majority of the provisions in this Bill are substitution provisions. At the present time the pension regime is such that the old age pension now called the Senior Citizens' Grant is harmonized with the minimum pension that any person would get within the public service, so a judge, prison officer, a diplomatic officer, et cetera, at the present time, the minimum pension such person can get is the same as the old age pension or Senior Citizens' Grant, and having increased the senior citizens' grant from \$1,650 to \$1,950, a number of consequential amendments are required in all these pieces of legislation to harmonize the minimum pension so that no one, whether public servant or senior citizen would get a pension of less than \$1,950. It has absolutely nothing to do with who qualifies for a pension and what kind of pension one would get and so forth, all we are doing is substituting \$1,950 for \$1,650 and thus making the minimum pension throughout the public service \$1,950, that is all. So there is no attempt of any comprehensive pension reform that the Member for Princes Town referred to.

Mr. Speaker, I thought it necessary to speak for a particular reason, the Member for Caroni East in a not unusual attempt on his part to demonize Mr. Calder Hart—because this is not uncommon—made statements with respect to the National Insurance Board (NIB) and indicated that in his opinion Mr. Hart should not be in charge of the NIB and he was not investing NIB funds properly, was not getting proper returns on the fund and so forth. He spoke about investments in real estate and other high risk instruments. I listened to the Member and I thought I could not allow that inaccuracy to remain on the record, so between the time the Member for Caroni East spoke and now, I have been able to get the relevant information which I wish to put on the record because I do not think it is

appropriate for Members opposite to come to this Parliament and make wild, unsubstantiated statements. It is obvious that the Member for Caroni East made his statements in the absence of facts, so I would now put the facts in the record.

I am advised that Mr. Hart was appointed Chairman of the National Insurance Board in January 2005; I am advised that just before he took over chairmanship of the NIB he was a member of the Board before, but was appointed Chairman in 2005.

8.15 p.m.

The total assets of the NIB were of the order of \$11.8 billion. In December 2004, just a couple days before Mr. Hart took over as chairman of the National Insurance Board, the total assets under the control of the NIB were \$11.8 billion. I am advised that in December 2008, exactly four years later—so this would have been four years after Mr. Hart was appointed chairman of NIB and four years of his stewardship as chairman of NIB—the total assets of the NIB grew to \$17.1 billion. So in December 2004—[*Interruption*] I am just simply giving you facts. In December 2004, the total assets of the NIB were \$11.8 billion; in December 2008, total assets of the NIB were \$17.1 billion.

In terms of the long-term benefits fund, which is perhaps the most relevant fund within the NIB system, I am advised that in December 2004 the value of the long-term benefits fund was \$6.7 billion and in December 2008, the value of the long-term benefits fund in the NIB was \$13.7 billion, which is an increase of over 100 per cent in the long-term benefits fund in a four-year period.

I am also advised that the number of persons participating in the national insurance system increased from 400,000 in December 2004 to in excess of 500,000 in 2008. So you had more persons because of the increase in the benefits; because the pension itself went from \$1,000 to \$2,000 in that period; the pension doubled in that four-year period that Mr. Hart has been chairman. Because of the increase in the benefits, more people are interested in being involved in the national insurance system and, in fact, over 100,000 additional persons got involved in the NIS.

Dr. Gopeesingh: That is a legal requirement.

Hon. C. Imbert: Self-employed persons, and so on.

Investment income: Now this is the most important thing, which would deal directly with the allegation made by the Member for Caroni East. In 2004, the investment income of the NIB, its return on its assets: \$751 million; in 2008, after

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four years of stewardship of Mr. Hart, it went to \$2.050 billion. So it went from \$751 million in 2004 to \$2.050 billion in 2008. It tripled. So that the return on investment of the National Insurance Board tripled in the four-year period from December 2004 to December 2008, from \$751 million in 2004 to \$2.050 billion in 2008. It tripled.

Therefore, on the face of the information available to me, if someone has taken over as chairman of a state enterprise which is given the responsibility to manage pension funds and has tripled the return on investment in four years; has more than doubled the long-term benefits fund and has increased the total assets from \$11 billion to \$17 billion, then by no stretch of the imagination could any rational or reasonable person make a statement that that particular individual is mismanaging the funds under investment.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Would you not think that the increase in the assets of the NIB from \$11 billion to \$17 billion is as a result of the increased contributions, secondary to the increased amount of people paying the legal issue of making sure that they must be registered with NIB? If it moved from 400,000 to 500,000, you have 100,000 more people. Therefore the increase in assets will obviously increase by a significant amount of billions of dollars.

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, those points are not germane to the matter under discussion. The matter under discussion is the allegation that Mr. Calder Hart should not be in charge of NIB because he has allegedly not managed the funds properly and I have demonstrated to this Parliament that under Mr. Calder Hart's chairmanship—and I want to repeat—the total assets grew by \$6 billion or \$5.3 billion; the long-term benefits fund doubled, from \$6.7 billion to \$13.7 billion and the income grew from \$751 million to \$2 billion. Those are facts, and if you actually go into the numbers, Member for Caroni East, and you look at the actual percentage return on investment, you will also find that the internal rate of return—the percentage return—has increased significantly. [*Interruption*] Well, you could do it yourself.

Let me assist you with some simple arithmetic. If the return on investment in 2008 was \$2 billion and if the total assets stood at \$17 billion in 2008, then it grew from \$15 billion to \$17 billion in 2008. Work it backwards now. If the return on investment was \$2 billion in 2008 and the fund was \$15 billion at the end of 2007, then what you are looking at is a rate of return in excess of 10 per cent, and I am aware it is in excess of 10 per cent. When you go into the records you will see that the rate of return on investment in 2008 exceeded 10 per cent. There is no bank in Trinidad and Tobago; there is no mutual fund; there is no

investment instrument in Trinidad and Tobago that is achieving those kinds of returns. Therefore, by any yardstick, the Government, through its appointees in the National Insurance Board, has been managing the people's pension funds—

Dr. Gopeesingh: Would the Member give way?

Hon. C. Imbert: Again? I am trying to wind up.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Just give me half-a-minute. Thank you. You are quoting figures as at December 2008. You said your information tells you up to December 2008. Was that audited information that you are quoting to the Parliament here? Because if it is ending at December 2008, obviously, it is not audited.

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, I do not want to get into any “cankatang” with the Member for Caroni East. I do not want to get into any argument, because I gave an undertaking that I would not speak for very long. The Member for Caroni East, however, could jump high or jump low; these are facts! These are facts that I have put into the record! These are facts and figures and they will be borne out when the audited accounts of the NIB are laid in this Parliament. [*Interruption*]

However, I can assure you that the information put into this Parliament by the hon. Member for Caroni East, had no basis; had no substance; he provided no evidence; he provided no information; he just made a statement—

Dr. Gopeesingh: I stand on a point of order—correction. The information I quoted came from the NIB report of 2007 and I gave it to the *Hansard* reporters just a while ago.

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, I seriously doubt that contained within the NIB report of 2007 is a statement that Mr. Hart should not be in charge of NIB because he is mismanaging the funds. I mean, what is the point? It is getting late. You have uttered inaccuracies in this House, Member for Caroni East, not for the first time. You are totally wrong—

Dr. Gopeesingh: I stand on a point of order—

Hon. C. Imbert: What “happen” now?

Dr. Gopeesingh: He is saying that I quoted inaccuracies. I have just told him that I quoted from the NIB report. He cannot make the statement that I quoted inaccuracies.

Mr. Speaker: If the hon. Member has quoted from a report, then you cannot accuse him of inaccuracies. But I do not know if he has quoted. I am taking his word that he has quoted from a report. In those circumstances, you cannot accuse him of that.

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, I intend to wind up now, but it is impossible—and I repeat—it is impossible for the 2007 report to indicate that Mr. Hart should not be in charge of NIB. It cannot be quoting that, and that Mr. Hart is not investing NIB funds properly. That is a ludicrous proposition. It is ludicrous for the hon. Member for Caroni East to come here and try and pretend that that is in the report. Come on!

So, Mr. Speaker, I thought it was necessary to put into the record that under Mr. Hart's stewardship, the NIB has grown from strength to strength; the long-term fund has doubled; the investment income has gone from \$700 million to \$2 billion and it is therefore testimony to this Government's prudent management of the people's pension fund.

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

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Karen Nunez-Tesheira): Mr. Speaker, when one listens to the other side in their respective contributions to this debate on the Finance Bill, 2009, one would be led to believe that Trinidad and Tobago is responsible for this economic downturn in our fortunes. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am hearing the Member, sitting in Chaguanas West's seat—I do not know if that is any indication of the future, but I am hearing the Member for Couva South agreeing with me.

That is, in fact, so, because Trinidad and Tobago is experiencing the effects of a global financial crisis not of its making. Trinidad and Tobago's economy is in a very strong position, entering into a global recession not of its making. In fact, I would not go back over the facts that led to the circumstance which confronts us today. It started in the United States and certainly we have seen the fallout continue and grow deeper and deeper, not only in the so-called advanced economies, but as well as in emerging and developing economies. So I want to put that to rest once and for all.

What is the responsibility of this Government if we accept—as we must—that we have not created this crisis? This crisis is something with which we are confronted and that Trinidad and Tobago has entered this period of global recession in a very strong position, a statement that is backed up by many other respected agencies, whether it is the International Monetary Fund, Standard and Poor's or Moody's. What is our responsibility, therefore? Our responsibility is to act with nimbleness, alacrity and to respond with policy prescriptions. Because one of the things we are sure of as we move forward is the volatility and uncertainty of this global recession.

Before I go to the prescriptions which this Government and which the hon. Prime Minister has indicated, I just want to mention a few remarks that were made by Members on the other side. The Member for Siparia, perhaps, is suffering from a bout of amnesia, because for the Member for Siparia to attack this Government for using a budget price of \$70, the Member clearly cannot recall that in her contribution to the budget debate, on behalf—giving the official response; she did not only contribute in the debate, but giving the official response on behalf of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia concluded that the Government should go with a price of \$68 a barrel. I do not know there is much difference between the two. In fact, I would only assume that the same information that informed our decision, informed the decision of the Member for Siparia.

I do not have the actual figures with me but we do know that we looked at the planning price for many of the other oil producing economies, and whilst I do not have the information before me I can assure the House, whether it was Mexico, whether it was Alaska, those economies had a budget price higher than Trinidad and Tobago.

8.30 p.m.

Before I look at the policy prescriptions that this Government has carved out, I want to make a point that the Member for Siparia has made on several other occasions. That is the comment that the Government should come back to Parliament, address it and get the blessings of the Parliament as we move forward in managing the people's business and the public account. I remind the Member for Siparia who is trained as an attorney and refer her to section 113 of the Constitution which we know is the highest law of this land. Section 113(1) says:

“The Minister responsible for finance shall cause to be prepared and laid before the House of Representatives before or not later than thirty days after the commencement of each financial year estimates of the revenues and expenditure of Trinidad and Tobago...”

The section goes on to talk about the requirement for appropriation. This is the point at subsection (3). It states:

“If in respect of any financial year it is found—

- (a) that the amount appropriated by the Appropriation Act for any purpose is insufficient or that a need has arisen for expenditure for a purpose for which no amount has been appropriated by the Act; or...”

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It says that you have to come back to this honourable House.

The point I am making is that the circumstances for returning to this honourable House after a budget has been passed are circumstances where the Government and the Minister responsible wish to appropriate more than was appropriated under the budget. If you want to appropriate more from the Consolidated Fund or allocate funds from a different head of expenditure, you need to come back to Parliament to remove any doubt as to not only the authority but also the intent of the legislature in terms of the authority of the Minister of Finance. Once the budget is passed and the amount intended to be expended does not exceed the amount appropriated by the Consolidated Fund by the budget, section 3 of the Exchequer and Audit Act provides:

“The Minister shall, subject to the Constitution and this Act, have the management of the Consolidated Fund and the supervision, control and direction of all matters relating to the financial affairs of the State which are not by law assigned to any other Minister.”

In addition, in Part II under the heading “Control And Management of Public Finances”, subsection 5(2) says:

“Notwithstanding any general or specific authority which may have been given by him, it shall be within the discretion of the Minister to limit or suspend any expenditure charged under any Appropriation Act or by virtue of section 18 and so authorised if in his opinion the exigencies of the financial situation render such limitation or suspension necessary.”

I will not go on to belabour the point. The law is very clear as to the authority of not only the Minister of Finance to manage the affairs once the budget has been passed but also to make the appropriate judgment if the exigencies of the circumstances so require.

I move on to the budgetary policy prescriptions that were adopted. The Prime Minister spoke at length about them and deficit financing. On that point I refer to the newspapers because the headlines are very instructive. They give an idea as to how the media persons—the headline “Central Bank Governor says Government on right track” is in the *Express*, I believe. “Prime Minister plans to use Central Bank Governor; Prime Minister’s plan to use deficit financing a good move”. What is this deficit financing? The Prime Minister addressed it. I want to make a point in terms of deficit financing. The impression one gets when one listens to the other side is that if the Government goes into deficit financing, somehow it is a reflection of the parlour state of our finances. Nothing could be further from the

truth. Deficit financing merely, is to finance the difference between your projected revenues and expenditure for a particular fiscal year.

We know that in public accounts you do not roll over surpluses from a previous year. As part of its Vision 2020 policy, this Government has stuck to that commitment and ended always with a surplus. I do not think that the other side can say that when they were in office. Over the last seven years we have always ended the fiscal year in a surplus, but that surplus does not roll over. It goes in and is retired into the Central Bank's reserves. When the other side asks: Where will we get the money to support the bond issuance? When we float and raise those bonds on the domestic market and the money is raised, when the retirement or maturity date for that bond arises, the Central Bank's reserves are more than capable of meeting that debt, because over the years we have built substantial savings in our Central Bank's reserves.

When the Prime Minister spoke of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund of \$18.2 billion and the Infrastructural Development Fund (IDF) and the Treasury account, he was merely indicating to the national community the level of savings that this government has amassed over its tenure of office. This speaks to the way in which it has managed the people's business which is well.

I will now speak on how we intend to manage the economy in going forward. It is a combination of further budgetary adjustment as well as the deficit financing. To do what? The infrastructural development programmes. We know that infrastructural development is the engine of growth. We continue our commitment to education. By the way, the Member for Fyzabad could not recall, but the On The Job Training (OJT) was started by this Government. I remember because during the election they closed the On-The-Job Training Programme and the Civilian Conservation Corps Programme. Not only do we spend the people's money on infrastructure, education, housing and social programmes—that is how this Government has shown its commitment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Before I turn specifically to the Bill before us, I want to make one last point about the recommendation of the Member for Caroni East about the stimulus plan. You need to speak with the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Couva North and come together to devise a stimulus plan. That shows that the Member for Caroni East—I hope that is not a reflection on the Member for Couva North—believes that the answer is a stimulus plan. It is not a stimulus plan. Let us make a distinction. In the United States, Europe and most of those economies, they are dealing with a credit crunch, a drying up of liquidity. Because the

liquidity has dried up and credit is not available, it has eroded consumer confidence. Banks are not lending and consumers are not borrowing. All the measures that they have taken in those countries are to stimulate or jump start the economy to get people to spend. It is not only the fiscal measures. It is reflected in a monetary measure because they have dropped the borrowing rate to 0 per cent. It is an intention to get people to spend.

Let us look at the situation of Trinidad and Tobago. Trinidad and Tobago continues to have a liquidity overhang. We are flush with liquidity. When this whole financial crisis started, not only did the Governor of the Central Bank come out, but also all the bankers came out and said that the banks are well liquidated and flush with cash. Today, the Prime Minister said that one of the Caricom countries came here for the private placement of a bond because Trinidad and Tobago still has substantial liquidity, a lot of money in the system. To talk about stimulating, the Governor of the Central Bank has been doing and it is reflected in the monetary policy is this. We do not drop the repo rate. The repo rate is 8.75 per cent.

Yesterday, in his speech the Governor said that he would not drop until he sees the inflation rate come down more because we are still dealing with a liquidity overhang in our economy. The monetary policies in Trinidad and Tobago are consistent with a liquidity issue, whether the reserve requirement or the repo rate is raised to 17 per cent. It is different from the United States and other countries that are dealing with a credit crunch. I hope that we got that clear. *[Interruption]* Thank you very much, Member for Couva North. You need to tell the Member for Caroni East because he is still talking about stimulus package. He has it all wrong.

Our response and the Governor of the Central Bank said it in his speech is that we anticipate that the economy would grow by 1 to 2 per cent. The commitment of the Government is to ensure that our country does not go into a recession. We are not in a recession. The Governor said that. *[Interruption]* You know that, Member for Couva South. This is the problem, the mischief. We are not in a recession. There is the commitment to continue the growth.

When you see the developed economies are dealing with negative growth to have 2 per cent growth in this global environment is something for which we can be justifiably proud. That is why the Government has to play a critical role in ensuring that the economy continues to grow, whether it is the infrastructural programmes to ensure that we maintain employment. This too shall pass! You know that every economy goes through a peak and a trough. *[Interruption]* You

have the crystal ball to see that. This is the point about coming back to change the price. You are making the point. That is the difficulty every country deals with. It is volatility and uncertainty. The Government's responsibility is the way in which we respond to that. The way that we have responded to that has been greeted with the greatest amount of commendation by those who matter.

I now turn to the Bill. Those matters were raised in the debate. One matter is that of the pension. I want to remind the other side that if they go back to the budget speech under Institutional Reform, they would note that under the pension system, a tremendous amount of progress has been made. The consultant, Mercer that we have retained has completed Phase I of the consultation and made significant recommendations in terms of the framework for the public pension. I will not go into it now. It is there in the budget for all to read. The consultants are about to begin Phase II which is the actual drafting of one piece of legislation to encompass all the public servants legislation that is contained as we see in this Bill.

Another point I will make and it was made by my colleague is about the way in which the National Insurance Board (NIB) has performed. It performed very well but I would not go over that point. I support what has been said in terms of the NIS benefit with persons over the age of 60—65 years if they are still working, it has gone from \$1,000 to \$2,000. That is not the only increase. From January 2008, we increased the retirement grant from \$200 to \$2,000. We implemented a monthly widow and widowers pension of \$400. We also increased the maternity grant from \$2,000 to \$2,500.

8.45 p.m.

In addition, when you compare the contributions to the value of the pension, we in Trinidad and Tobago can justifiably be proud. For example, our own current rate of contribution is 10.5 per cent, yet we are in receipt of a minimum monthly pension of US \$317. By way of example, Mr. Speaker, if you look at Venezuela, their contribution may be only 6.75 per cent but their monthly pension is US \$138; Mexico, 8.65 per cent is the contribution, but the pension is \$150; in Saudi Arabia, it is 18 per cent and they get a monthly pension of US \$461.

Administrative expenses—and this really speaks to what the Member for Diego Martin North/East spoke to—when we compare the administrative expenses of the NIS as a percentage of its total insurable wages for Trinidad and Tobago in 2003—I got this from the Caricom Secretariat—it was 0.6 per cent, which was the lowest in the region and compares to the Bahamas of 1.7 per cent, Dominica, 1.7 per cent, Belize, 2.2 per cent, St. Lucia, 1.3 per cent and Barbados 0.9 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, I turn now to the provisions in the Act—clause 2—about which my friend, the Member for Princes Town, made a lot of heavy weather. I want to clarify something for him on the provision which deals with judges' salaries and pensions. When we were preparing this Bill to present to the Parliament, there were several other pieces of public office legislation which were not included. The reason for that was that they were no longer relevant because there was no one receiving a minimum of \$1,950 except—and that is why we left this one in—two persons who, in 2007, were in their late 90s and were receiving a pension less than the minimum. In order to protect them, we introduced a minimum pension of \$1,950. It was because at that time they were receiving less than that. To make the statement as if there are judges going into retirement now and receiving a pension of this amount is absolutely wrong and misleading.

In reading it, you excluded the words “and whichever is the greater”. Those words are still there. We have not taken them out of the legislation. I have it right here. You look at the Judges' Salaries and Pensions Act as amended and it leaves in the words. We did not change it in the Bill.

Mr. Speaker, the other point that the hon. Member for Princes Town North made with regard to the Act itself is that he referred to the Fire Service Act, clause 13 of the Bill. That is in relation to specific classifications of fire officers who have had to retire on medical grounds. It does not apply to other classifications of firemen. In other words, these provisions setting out a minimum monthly pension only refers to a specific classification of fire officer.

In any event, those persons who would receive this pension would also receive, in most instances, the NIS benefit of \$2,000 and, for the older persons who are not in receipt of the NIS benefit, they will also receive the Senior Citizens Grant up to the maximum of \$2,800. That deals with provisions for pensions.

The Senior Citizens Grant I would not speak too much on because my colleagues spoke with erudition on that point. We all know—and the Member for Siparia knows—that the Senior Citizens Grant is an entitlement from the point of view that it is covered by legislation.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: What did Minister Browne mean when he said that it is not an entitlement?

Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira: One of the things I have learnt in my one year as a Member of Parliament is never to believe a headline, because newspapers are in the business of selling newspapers and, from my experience, you have to be careful about looking at headlines.

Secondly, I would not have been present when the Minister spoke to the journalist. I have also had the experience of having what you have said taken out of context or qualified. In that context, I am confident that the Minister was speaking to what we all understand, that when we talk about it in the context of an entitlement as a part of your employment, there is a distinction between that and what the Minister would have been referring to.

If it is part of your contract employment, it becomes an entitlement in that sense. When you talk about the Senior Citizens Grant, it is for those persons who are the most vulnerable and has little or nothing to do with whether or not you worked. It has to do with your need and the fact that you are now at a more vulnerable age, 65 years and over, and in need of assistance. It is an entitlement because the law gives you that cover.

That deals with the Senior Citizens Grant. That grant provision, the pension provision, the disability provision all speak to that pillar of nurturing of a caring society. The provision dealing with annuity and savings also is in keeping with the Government's commitment to prudent and sound management of public funds.

Finally, stamp duty: The duty really speaks of the Government's understanding that it is the aspiration of every citizen to home ownership. This Government is committed to ensure that each citizen, whether through its own housing programme, of which we are justifiably proud, or giving support through stamp duty exemption, we are doing our part to ensure that each and every citizen gets an opportunity to own his or her home.

That wraps up the Finance Bill. [*Interruption*] Mr. Speaker, a matter raised by the Member for Siparia, with which we have no difficulty, is the issue of the words in the legislation dealing with judges where the word "widow" appears and the implication there which was consistent with the reality at that time. Persons who held those positions were usually male and the beneficiary female. We recognize that is no longer the case and the legislation should be consistent with that.

We have given the undertaking that we would amend that. The recommendation is that instead of going through each piece of legislation, we could go to the Interpretation Act, section 16, and provide that the male includes female and vice versa.

With these words, I beg to move.

Question put and agreed to.

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Bill accordingly read a second time.

Bill committed to a committee of the whole House.

House in committee.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 12.

Question proposed, That clauses 2 to 12 stand part of the Bill.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Mr. Chairman, I beg to move that clauses 2 to 12 be amended as follows:

That the words “one thousand, nine hundred and fifty dollars” be substituted with the words “three thousand dollars”.

Mr. Imbert: As much as we would like to, we cannot. Revenues do not permit.

9.00 p.m.

Question put.

The Committee divided: Ayes 11 Noes 21

AYES

Rafeeq, Dr. H.

Panday, B.

Persad-Bissessar, Mrs. K.

Ramnath, K.

Moonilal, Dr. R.

Gopeesingh, Dr. T.

Panday, S.

Panday, Miss M.

Peters, W.

Partap, H.

Baksh, N.

NOES

Imbert, C.

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Nunez-Tesheira, Mrs. K.

Gopee-Scoon, Mrs. P.

Kangaloo, Ms. C.

Abdul-Hamid, M.

Ross, J.

Taylor, P.

Swaratsingh, K.

Parsanlal, N.

Beckles, Miss P.

Mc Donald, Miss M.

Hunt, G.

Le Gendre, Miss E.

Browne, Dr. A.

Cox, Miss D.

Jeffrey, F.

Hospedales, Miss A.

Joseph, R.

Hypolite, N.

Regrello, J.

Sinanan Ojah-Maharaj, Mrs. I.

Amendment negatived.

Question put and agreed to.

Clauses 2 to 12 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 13 and 14 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 15.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: Mr. Chairman, I propose a new clause 15 which reads as follows:

Delete this clause and insert the following:

“15. The Stamp Duty Act is amended in the First Schedule—

- (a) under the heading ‘Conveyance or transfer on sale of any property’—
 - (i) in paragraph (1), by deleting the words ‘paragraph 2’ and substituting the words ‘paragraphs (2) and (3)’, and inserting after the words ‘7%’ the words ‘Provided that only half the above rates of duty shall be payable where the amount or value of the consideration for the sale does not exceed one thousand five hundred dollars and the instrument contains a statement to be made by the conveyancer certifying that the transaction thereby effected does not form part of a larger transaction or of a series of transactions in respect of which the amount or value, or the aggregate amount or value of the consideration exceeds one thousand five hundred dollars.’;
 - (ii) in paragraph (2), by deleting from the words ‘for every dollar of the first one hundred thousand dollars’ to the words ‘exceeds one thousand five hundred dollars.’ and substituting the following:

‘for every dollar of the first hundred	3%
thousand dollars in excess of eight hundred	
and fifty thousand dollars...	
for every dollar of the next five hundred	5%
thousand dollars...	
for every dollar thereafter...and	7½%
 - (iii) by inserting after paragraph (2), the following paragraph:

‘(3) Where the property does not include a

dwelling-house and the property is for use wholly for residential purposes, and an application has been made to the Board in the form approved by the Board and evidence has been provided to the Board sufficient to satisfy it as to those matters, instead of the rates of duty provided for in paragraph (1), the duty is as follows:

for every dollar of the first two hundred thousand dollars in excess of four hundred and fifty thousand dollars... 2%

for every dollar of the next two hundred thousand dollars in excess of six hundred and fifty thousand dollars... 5%

for every dollar thereafter in excess of eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars... and 7%;

- (b) under the heading ‘Mortgage, Bond, Debenture, Covenant, Bill of Sale or Warrant of Attorney to confess and enter up judgement’ in relation to the exemption on mortgage deeds, by deleting the words ‘\$450,000’ and substituting the words ‘\$850,000’.”

New clause 15 read the first time.

Question proposed, That the new clause be read a second time.

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed, That the new clause be added to the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 15 added to the Bill.

Clause 16 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Before we finish the Bill I would like us to—
[*Interruption*]

Mr. Chairman: My recollection in terms of what you are substituting is that there was in the Eighth Parliament some amendment dealing with penalties when you change use of property for stamp duty purposes. Perhaps, you may want to look at that. There was in fact legislation dealing with the change of use of property for stamp duty purposes.

Mr. B. Panday: There is also the question of the widow thing. What shall we do with that?

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: What we had proposed is that we would deal with it by an amendment to the Interpretation Act, so that the male shall include female and vice versa. I believe that is what we are going to do.

Question put and agreed to, That the Bill, as amended, be reported to the House.

House resumed.

Bill reported, with amendment, read the third time and passed.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday, January 23, 2008, which would normally be Private Members' Day, but by the benevolence of the Members opposite they have agreed—*[Interruption]* benevolent or benevolence, whatever you want to call it, but with the agreement of the Members opposite—that on that day we would do the Finance (Supplementation and Variation of Appropriation) Bill and we have agreed to return the Private Members' Day for January 30, 2008, to the Opposition. January 30, 2008, the fifth Friday in the month, will now become Private Members' Day.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, before I put the question on the adjournment, there is—*[Interruption]* The Leader of the Opposition wants to say something?

Mr. B. Panday: No, Mr. Speaker, I will raise it at another time. I just wanted to indicate that we propose that on Private Members' Day that the Government gives us an undertaking that they would not shortcut our day by moving the adjournment of the House at 4.30 p.m.

Mr. Imbert: I prefer not to make any firm commitment at this time, but I think it is something we can discuss.

Mr. Speaker: That is quite in order. Before I put the question on the adjournment, there is a matter to be discussed. You have two or one? Summit of the Americas, is it?

Summit of the Americas (Government's Lack of Information)

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (Caroni East): Mr. Speaker and Members of the House, the Motion before this House this evening is the failure of the Government to

provide citizens with sufficient information in respect of the meetings of the Summit of the Americas and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference in April and November 2009.

Mr. Speaker, I thought it was extremely important that as a matter of priority this honourable House discuss the impending Summit of the Americas, since it is an issue that is likely to cause Trinidad and Tobago profound international embarrassment, due to what is widely reported as our state of super “unreadiness”. With less than two months to go, my information is that the lack of preparation in every aspect is apparent and appalling.

I wish to point out that when I raised these issues last year, the Members on that side moved to shut me up because they have something to hide. Further, we have not had any public information disseminated about the actual preparations and the state of readiness for this important national event. The Government is acting as if it is the biggest secret of the century, not realizing that by proposing to expend over \$500 million for both the Summit of the Americas and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference, they owe the taxpayers not only explanations but updates in the preparations and the state of readiness. The Government has failed to be accountable and transparent as is their normal *modus operandi*, but this time it is even more unacceptable.

With respect to the Summit of the Americas, it is my information that very little is ready. These are the issues and we need information and accountability on accommodation and transportation. There are reports that boats, cruise ships and all the hotels will be used and to date we have not heard any clear, accountable and unambiguous plan for the acquisition of the 200 luxury vehicles that the Government claims it needs. We want to know details of these two areas. What hotels, cruise ships, guest houses and cars will be used to house not only the delegates but all events connected with their visit? We need details of these luxury vehicles and the leasing of the cruise ships because, so far it is meshed in confusion and questionable financial transaction. More than that, we need details as to how much this will cost taxpayers.

The issue of the horrible traffic and poor infrastructure in and out the capital city comes into play. My information is that on a pre-Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting Planning Visit for one day, September 29, last year, senior members of the Commonwealth Secretariat were staying at the Hyatt and had to do a site run to the Hilton Hotel, but because that was the day of heavy rains the traffic was so horrible that they had to turn back after spending four hours on Wrightson Road. That is what we are faced with.

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This Summit is happening in April and April showers are common. The Government, therefore, needs to tell us what their plans for such eventualities are. You cannot fix the traffic and infrastructure problems. You cannot prevent the rain. The hapless Minister of Works and Transport, the hon. Member of Parliament for Diego Martin North/East, is on record as saying the rains are God's job. Well then, what contingency plans do you have in place if God decides to demonstrate that he is not a true "Trini" because he rightly wants to punish this incompetent PNM for its sins of corruption and mismanagement? Most importantly, how much will it cost?

The second issue is advertising and media offices. My information is that the state of advertising, accommodation and facilities for the international media centre and general publicity issues are again not prepared. Tenders only went out last November and, of course, the cost remains an issue. We want clarification on this matter.

A public holiday—I want the Government to come clean tonight and tell us if it really plans to have a national holiday on the day of the Summit's opening to offset the traffic and congestion woes. Those are the reports and it seems to be Government's quick fix for the numerous problems that I want to warn will not work.

Security—my information is that the Government is completely unprepared to meet the demands for security that are required for the conference. With crime out of control, international governments have advertised on their embassy websites, advisories against visitors coming to this country due to crime. We all know that. We are told that the country has not met the requirements for the United States, as per their security needs, especially in light of the heightened security that would be required for the new President Barack Obama, if he is coming. We want details as to what the United States Government was asking for, with clarification as to whether this includes the ability to accommodate security fighter jets and we want details as to how much all the security arrangements, including patrols on mobile and foot, will cost.

The Secretariat—a major bone of contention has been the competence and inefficiency of the Secretariat appointed by the Prime Minister to run these international Summits. The Prime Minister handpicked Carlos Louis Alberto Rodriguez as head of the Secretariat and we are told that international agencies are not satisfied that he has been competent so far. We are told he is working for a salary of \$161,000 a month, but none of the NGOs supposed to work in collusion with him or regional bodies have been satisfied that he has disseminated the moneys appropriately.

9.15 p.m.

It is our information that regional governments have been constantly complaining about the secretariat's lack of cooperation and keeping them in the loop, as it was and it is supposed to do.

Mr. Abdul-Hamid: You are sick.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: When the truth comes out, it offends; he is saying I am a sick man. This is the truth, Mr. Speaker. When the truth comes out it offends to the heart, so they make all sorts of statements.

My information is that by last September, the state of unreadiness for the Summit was so clear that the Prime Minister was forced to transfer its then head of the PNM spy agency, the top security office of strategic services, headed by Mrs. Joan Massiah, to the secretariat. We were told that Mrs. Massiah's experience as a former ambassador and chief of protocol meant that she was extremely competent in knowing what was needed for these types of summits, and she was transferred as a last ditch attempt to save the Summit and be ready on time. My information is that Mrs. Massiah was so frustrated by inaction and inefficiency that she has resigned from the post this week. Mr. Speaker, I call on this Government to answer all of these issues here tonight.

In conclusion, we on this side have consistently asked the Government about these summits, because our country cannot afford them, nor are we ready to host them. As a consequence, I have in my possession a letter dated January 14, 2009, signed by the Chief Executive Officer of the Port of Port of Spain, Wieger Koornstra. It reads as follows:

“Bulletin 53 - Summit of the Americas - Implications for Port and Port Users

Trinidad and Tobago is the host country for the Summit of the Americas, which is carded for April 17-19, 2009. This has certain implications for the Port and port users by extension.

From April 9-22, 2009, the Port will have limited use of its quay since this space will be used to accommodate additional conference and hotel requirements via the berthing of two cruise ships.

It is important that Port users note, that we will be unable to handle any General Cargo, Paper or Car Vessels for the period April 9-22, 2009.”

The port will be closed for 14 days between April 09—22, 2009.

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“We do apologize for this unavoidable restriction in the Port's operations and trust that this early notification will enable you to amend your schedules without too much disruption and inconvenience to your clients.

If further clarification or information is required, please do not hesitate to contact Mr. Graham Evison 623-2901/4 Ext 276 or E-mail: grahame@patnt.com.”
[*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Mr. Speaker, do you understand how the entire business community will suffer as a result of these two weeks of closure of the Port? I read this into Parliament.

So, we are now faced with the prospect of being so embarrassed on the international stage, because of our state of unreadiness. It is so pathetic for these summits that our country will suffer a tremendous fallout in forging relations and the tourism and investment that go with that.

Of all times we cannot afford that, not in a time when we are facing such a horrible financial crisis. Further, because of the questions that surround the head of the secretariat, we are also faced with a situation where massive corruption may have taken place in the secretariat.

For these reasons, it is incumbent that the Government answers all these questions asked this evening relating to these issues. Although I must warn that false transparency now will in no way save us from the severe embarrassment, financial and other fallouts that we will face, because our country is just unprepared to fulfil its commitment of hosting these major international events.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Minister of Information (Hon. Neil Parsanlal): Mr. Speaker, let me thank you for the opportunity and thank the Member for Caroni East, for providing yet another opportunity for the Government to inform and further educate this honourable House, and by extension, the national community, on the matters surrounding this country's hosting of the Fifth Summit of the Americas and the Commonwealth Heads of Government.

I find it scandalous in the least, that the Member for Caroni East can stand here this evening—perhaps it is the cold, perhaps it has been a long evening, perhaps it is an attempt to impress someone, I do not know—and suggest to the national community that there has been no information about the summit, is scandalous in the least. What makes it even worse is that the Member for Caroni

East stands here and says to this House, and to the national community, that nothing has been said about the 200 luxury vehicles, and attempts to portray to the national community that this Government has not been providing information, when a Minister in the Ministry of Finance came to this very House, of which the Member was here, and made a comprehensive statement to the House and the national community. It is clear that this is yet another attempt at mischief; it is another attempt to mislead the national community and we will have none of it.

I want to thank the Member for the interest that he has demonstrated this evening, and the public at large, since we believe that these conferences will make and leave an indelible impression of the imagination of our country. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, what we have seen this evening is certainly not surprising to me, because it speaks of an attitude; it speaks of a perspective of smallness, where we cannot even believe in our own strengths, our own goodness, that we can in fact accomplish what we set out to do, and Members on that side will have us continue to believe, like others who have gone before them, that we will achieve nothing in this country. Nothing can be further from the truth, as I will demonstrate this evening. [*Desk thumping*]

These two meetings will position Trinidad and Tobago, not as just one of the leading democracies in the Americas, but certainly as an emerging financial economic and diplomatic force in the region. [*Desk thumping*] We want to make the point very clear. In 2009, the world will come to our shores, and we are more than ready. [*Desk thumping*] The Summit of the Americas, by means of information will be held in Port of Spain, from April 17—19, 2009. The theme chosen for this Summit—for his benefit, because clearly he has not been reading—is “Securing Our Citizens Future by Promoting Human Prosperity, Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability.” [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Hon. N. Parsanlal: Mr. Speaker, you see such is the hypocrisy, and my colleague, the Member for Diego Martin Central used a word earlier, he said it was “duplicitous”. This is the *Mirror* newspaper of today, and it runs two articles about information that has been provided by the secretariat on the Summit on page 8 and further on, on page 17. This is the *Mirror*, it is not the *Newsday*. You understand? Pages 8 and 17 of today's *Mirror*, all the information you want. Perhaps you should change your reading habits, and that way you would get the information you seek.

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The Government believes that the theme of this is timely as we approach First World status, and the issues that we will address at this Summit will redound, we believe, to the benefit of all citizens, as we build stronger democratic institutions, as we promote good governance and social inclusion, as we uphold the rule of law.

With respect to the other meeting, the Commonwealth Heads of Government. The Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) is convened every two years to review global, political and economic developments. This conference will bring to Trinidad and Tobago 54 Commonwealth Member states, and the theme for CHOGM 2009 is partnering for a more equitable and sustainable future. In 2009, the world will come to our shores and we are ready. [*Desk thumping*]

Both of these conferences will leave, I suspect, a much more indelible impression on the world than the Miss Universe competition, which was hosted by the administration, in which the Member for Caroni East played some minor role, no doubt. This time we are sure, we know that thousands and thousands of persons will be coming to Trinidad and Tobago, and that the positive financial impact, directly and indirectly, of close to 4,000 visitors to our shores with an ensuing demand for accommodation, meals, entertainment, rivals even the expectations of Carnival. They are coming to our shores and we are ready.

The Government has always insisted that the success of these summits is, to a large extent, dependent on the cooperation of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. For this reason, the Government, through the national secretariat, has been keeping the public abreast of every development. You do not take one letter and make that the basis of your argument. We believe that significant sums are being expended and the public and interest groups have a right to know; we have been telling them, and I will tell you how.

It is precisely for this reason that the Minister in the Ministry of Finance, the hon. Mariano Browne, appeared at a post-Cabinet press conference just two weeks ago, and announced that Cabinet has decided to use the old southern terminal of the Piarco International Airport to accommodate arriving dignitaries for the two summits.

You are talking about transparency. As soon as the Cabinet took the decision, it was communicated immediately to the public, and this has been the case from the beginning. From the time we announced that we were hosting the Summit, the Government has been providing the country with the information. No one had to guess—not even you, hon. Member—the amount of moneys that were allocated

to host the Fifth Summit of the Americas, because the figures were widely circulated in the budget that was read in September. You did not have to guess that, we told you that.

The bogus issues that arose over the so-called luxury cars, which were never on the cards, only arose when this Government insisted that there be a public tender for those vehicles. That is when it arose, you know; when our desire to be as transparent as possible there was a public tender for those vehicles.

9.30 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, we have said and even yesterday at our post-Cabinet press conference, the Minister of Tourism spoke again about the two cruise ships that are coming, so we are not worried about the Member for Caroni East. [*Interruption*]

I think it is important that we understand how Members opposite treat with some people. The minute anybody is successful in this country, the minute anyone is successful in delivering in this country you will attempt to pull them down and it is simply the case again with the Ambassador. But this Ambassador—and he is getting the job done. He is getting the job done. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Hon. N. Parsanlal: It was this Ambassador who has met and addressed quite receptive audiences; the South Chamber for instance, the local chapter of Transparency Institute, the NGOs for women, all of whom have endorsed the country's hosting of the Summit of the Americas and CHOGM.

Mr. Speaker, the Member for Caroni East would have noted that the network—and I am sure you would be very interested—of women NGOs coming out publicly in support of the summits. [*Desk thumping*] Again, this is another example of the public being kept informed. We had a youth forum here last year—[*Interruption*] I am telling you we all are ready for it. We are all ready for it.

On November 18, the Secretariat facilitated the Caribbean Subregional Private Sector Consultation on the Draft Declaration of Commitment, and all those things are available on the summit's website. [*Interruption*] These were all public events to which people and organizations across Trinidad and Tobago, as well as. all media were invited. There is even now—and this is one of the things that the *TnT Mirror* article pointed out—an essay competition organized by the Secretariat for the Summit of the Americas.

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The Motion on the adjournment speaks to the Government not providing information, and we are saying that there is sufficient information; we have produced information and we will continue to provide the information. Mr. Speaker, it is clear that with everything going on around him, perhaps in his party too, the Member for Caroni East has missed the messages. [*Interruption*] He has missed the messages aimed at the wider public but fortunately, my brother, in this information age you can still get the information, and so, let me direct you—“doh aye me”—[*Laughter*] The official website—“doh aye me”—www.fifthsummitoftheamericas.org. You could log on, you would get all the information there, where he would be informed of all that we have said and for information on CHOGM2009, www.chogm2009.org.

Only last week, on January 07, the national secretariat held another media conference to update the national community on the progress being made in arrangements to host the Commonwealth heads meeting in November. [*Interruption*] It was reported in all the media. The national coordinator along with officials of the Commonwealth Secretariat entertained questions and even suggestions from the media.

As the summit approaches, we will escalate the intensity of our communications even further and extend the range of media we will be using. One suspects that in his excitement the Member for Caroni East has become impatient. We understand but we want to give him the assurance that he will be hearing even more about the summits in the next few days and he will understand the legacy that we will speak of. The legacy of considerably reduced expenditure on public service vehicles over the next few years; the legacy of improved and wider access to broadband services because of what we will be doing; the legacy of an additional operational terminal at Piarco; the legacy of a beautifully landscaped country; the legacy of the world coming to our shores led by the newly elected President of the United States, Barack Obama.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you and I thank the Member for Caroni East for his interest in the summit. [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 9.34 p.m.