The House met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS

[Madam Speaker in the Chair]

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2019) BILL, 2018

[Second Day]

Question proposed.

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (Siparia): [Desk thumping] Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and allow me also to thank hon. Members of this Chamber for allowing me the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the fourth budget presentation of this Government. I wish to first place on the Hansard my very deepest gratitude to my staff at the Office of the Leader of the Opposition, my staff at the Siparia constituency office, all Opposition MPs and their staff, Opposition Senators, UNC councillors, aldermen, members of the national executive, constituency executives, and activists throughout the length and breadth of our country.

I also want to thank the numerous stakeholders and the multitude of citizens in their personal capacities or through various business organizations, NGOs, CBOs, FBOs, as well as trade unionists who have kindly assisted in the preparation of my response here today, via giving much needed feedback during many meetings and pre-budget consultations over the past several weeks. Their reflections and realities, their suggestions and wishes, their recommendations and pleas, their demands and concerns have all been taken into active consideration by myself and my tremendous Opposition team, and it is with the people's blessings and direct input that I reply on their behalf today. [Desk thumping] I want to give
them the assurance that I will continue to be their voice, that I will continue to stand with them, and I will continue to stand for them, and stand side by side with them.

Madam Speaker, from the widespread consultations that we had, and also from the various media commentaries, we were able to identify several common crucial concerns, including runaway crime, jobs and the economy, health care, education, infrastructure, governance, quality of life and, of course, Petrotrin. In my contribution today, I shall address among these areas. In the course of the debate, our MPs on this side will also delve into these and other sectors in detail as per their shadow portfolios.

Further, Madam Speaker, today I want to use this opportunity to share with you and the national community some of our comprehensive plans for the advancement, progression and transformation of our nation. We have a vision for our country, in which each and every citizen can enjoy a better quality of life, more prosperity, safety, access to quality health care, and improved equal opportunities for all. In these plans, we have designed them in such a way that we will be able to re-engineer our society from one that has to protest for roads, to protest for drains, to protest for water, and we would transform that in an aspirational society. We will recalibrate the chaos that has been created by the mismanagement and incompetence of those on the other side. [Desk thumping]

Our plan will help to return Trinidad and Tobago to a nation of prosperity, rather than the failed state that they have reduced us to. We will get to work immediately. We will ensure that the persons they have left unemployed and impoverished will get back to work soon. [Desk thumping] And we will do this by rebalancing our finances, reforming our institutions with particular attention to the state enterprise sector, and most important, we would do all of this with the people
at the centre as the single most important priority. [Desk thumping] With diligence, with resolve and a shared vision we can transform our nation and ensure a brighter future for every citizen of our country.

But, Madam, before I share our plans, we need to first identify the problems which confront us so we can talk about how we go about dealing with these problems. And from the consultations that we held, several questions were raised and several answers given, and amongst these are the following: When in those consultations people were asked, “Do you feel safer today than three years ago?”

Hon. Members: No.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The answer was no. “Do you feel secure in your job?” The answer was no.

Hon. Members: No.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Has the economy improved?

Hon. Members: No.

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Are you confident?

Madam Speaker: Please Members, the Leader of the Opposition has the floor and I am not going to allow this shouting of “No”. Please continue.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Madam. I understand one of my colleagues is complaining that they are reading from a script, and he is not admitting that they were also doing the same thing on Monday. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia. [Continuous desk thumping] Member for Siparia, I would ask you to rise above those complaints, there has been no objection raised here, and therefore you just focus and do what you have to do. Continue, please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Certainly, Madam, I am guided. “Are you

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confident enough to open a business?” The answer is no. “Has your purchasing power increased?” No. “After four years—three years, are you getting better health care?” “Are your children getting a better education?” No. “Have they fixed or maintained your roads or improved your drainage?” No. “Are you satisfied with the behaviour of the Government?” No. “Has your quality of life improved?” The answer is no, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

Let the Hansard record of this country show that after three years of the PNM Government they have created by 2018 a return to the politics of the past, which changed the majority of the working class of this country, to life of the working poor with hardly any prospect of social mobility. In fact, in the consultations which I have referenced, a common theme was how people feel totally and completely betrayed by the Prime Minister and his Government, who, like the Saviour Jesus, was sold out by Judas for 30 pieces of silver. [Desk thumping]

They feel abandoned and oppressed by the policies of alienation and pauperization being implemented, and they have lost their sense of trust in the Government to seek their best interests. With the impending shutdown of the Petrotrin Refinery, our nation’s greatest modern-day patrimony, we are now on the cusp of perhaps the greatest crossroads in our nation’s history. People have expressed the view that they are now unwilling, vulnerable and helpless pawns, victims of this Government’s incompetence, as the Government is plunging our nation into one of the worst social and economic crises in its history. They feel treachery, they feel there has been betrayal and ingratitude for those who have voted and went out to put this Government into place. That would be, in my respectful view, the legacy of this Government.

As I would demonstrate through economic references, comparisons and
contrasts, the pattern of broken promises and outright falsehoods by this Government, I dare say that they have breached their social contract with the people who elected them to represent their democratic rights and interests in the best possible way. Instead, they feel this Government has returned that sacred trust with policies of destruction and tyranny. In that context, Madam Speaker, I have named the theme here for my response to this budget, “At the crossroads of our nation’s history, a nation in crisis, a Government in collapse, a people betrayed.”

[Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I indicated that we would first try to identify the problems we are facing before we go on to share our plans as to how we can bring economic recovery and a better quality of life. In that regard, I would now examine the vital signs of the economy, people call them the macro-economic fundamentals. But they are indeed the vital signs of the body politic of the economic body, in the same way as a human we have vital signs that we check the blood pressure, and the heart rate, and so on, and we can determine whether the body is healthy or whether the body is sick.

So, let us look at those indicators. One of the most important ones, the most critical and the most common measure of the health of an economy is called the gross domestic product, also the GDP, and I would use the word “GDP” from henceforth. That is the heartbeat of the economy. The GDP is the total value of every product, good or service produced in the country. Past Monday, with puffed-up chest and smirking at the population, the Minister of Finance when talking about the GDP boasted, in his normal manner, that the Trinidad and Tobago economy is projected to grow in real terms by 1.9 per cent in 2019. On the basis of this, the Minister crowed that the economy is experiencing a genuine economic turnaround, thanks to his sound fiscal and financial management.
Indeed, that was after a repeat of the mid-year review commentary when he first announced this turnaround.

I want to make it very clear, no one would be happier than I if there were indeed an economic turnaround, and the quality of life of all our citizens improve. But we know that we cannot believe anything this Government says.  

And so, when we look at the Minister’s and Government’s own statistics, their own books presented to us here on Monday, we discovered evidence of the usual statistical gymnastics of this Government and this Minister. Far from expansion, in the last three years the economy of Trinidad and Tobago has shrunk, has contracted in real terms, thanks to their policies. By 2015, when we were in office the real GDP was $170.4 billion.  

In 2018, after three years of the PNM Government, under Minister Imbert, real GDP fell to $159.2 billion. A reduction of $11.2 billion in the last three years. Any Standard 1 child could tell you that 159 billion is less than 170 billion. But the Minister of Finance boasts of recovery. We have the figures now, and the figures are available on the Minister’s own website, the Ministry of Finance website, and we can see clearly now that there is no recovery.  

What this means is that under this Government’s management, the economy actually contracted by 6.5 per cent over the past few years; 6.5 per cent. In fact, according to their own numbers, their own figures, the GDP at current prices now is lower than when it was in 2012, than it was in 2013, than it was in 2014, and than it was in 2015 when we were in office in all those years. Under his stewardship, the size of the economy today is 10 per cent smaller than it was in 2014, which was our last full year in office. Our economy has not grown. Our economy has shrunk under their watch. So I ask, where is the turnaround? The Minister does not want you to look at his tenure. He wants us to just take ’18 and
compare it to ’17, but you cannot do that. We have to see what has happened under this Government. Minister Imbert wants us to forget, and the Government wants us to forget that they are in charge since 2015. It is this Government who has crashed the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping]

But the deception is even more pronounced when you look at the difference between last year and this year. Do you know what accounts for the GDP figures between last year and this year? And this is the first time I have seen it. It is that they have included an item, a component called “Taxes less subsidies” in computing the GDP. So this Minister has claimed to grow the economy in the last year by doing what?—increasing taxation. Nothing to do with generating revenue, generating jobs. And for the first time I am seeing this in GDP numbers where you are putting taxes less subsidies. And so, 30.7 per cent increase accounted for by taxes less subsidies.

The growth in the economy the Minister is boasting about is because what?—the increased tax burden. How many times raised the price of gas?—three, four, five times. Increase on Green Fund, business levy, corporation tax, elimination of fuel subsidies, tyre duties, online purchase tax, alcohol tax, tobacco tax, inspection fee, environmental tax, gaming taxes—all of this. All these taxes in three short years, by this measure. And the Minister has not been able to balance the budget yet with all these taxes. [Desk thumping] The Minister promised in his first statement—or the second one—that the Government would balance their budget by 2018. Has not happened. And so, by this measure the more they tax you, they think the better the economy grows, and now you are depending on the property tax for 2019, and then you would come and say, growth again.

Not surprisingly, Madam Speaker, you know in an interview recently the Minister promised no new taxes until after 2020. He is right, you know, because
we will be in office in 2020.  [Desk thumping] And again, says there would be no new taxes, when in fact, the Minister proposes and the Government proposes to tax your property, to tax your fowl coop, to tax your dog kennel, to tax your puja room, and all of that which must adversely impact the pockets and disposable income of every citizen.  [Desk thumping] So, it is hypocrisy to say that no new tax for 2020 when you told us, they told us, in 2019 you are going to impose property tax.

The Minister has repeatedly spoken about the improved performance of the non-energy sector. Well, let us look the figures: Between 2015 and 2017, mining and quarrying fell by $5 billion. Not million, you know, $5 billion. Construction contracted by $1 billion, trade and repairs by $6 billion, transport and storage contracted by almost a billion dollars, Madam Speaker. These are the things that go to make up the GDP statistics. All these sectors have suffered deep contractions under this Government. The Government has touted the success in the manufacturing centre in his budget statement. But he did not want to tell us, or has not told us, that he has now taken the petroleum chemicals—petroleum and chemicals—and put it where?—into manufacturing, because in 2017 they rebased the way that they were assessing the GDP, and so they took up all these things that were in the petroleum sector and drop it in manufacturing, and then come here to tell this House, “Look, great growth in the manufacturing sector.” Totally not true, Madam Speaker. Not true.

Even by that additional $1.5 billion that he took now from petroleum products and so on, to expand the manufacturing sector, there is negligible change in that sector. Interestingly too, the manufacture of petrochemicals, refining, including LPG, petroleum support services have increased the contribution. But you know what? You have taken it out of the energy sector, and you have placed it
where?— into the manufacturing sector. And now it is certain that the closure of Petrotrin will further lower the recent gains in output from these sectors come 2019, should they proceed with their dastardly plan. Where is the economic recovery in all of this? I have no confidence whatsoever in the Minister's untruthful claims. [Desk thumping]

There is one sector the Government with their policies could have had some influence on over the past three years in office, and that was the manufacturing sector, traditional manufacturing sector. And yes, the Government has influenced that sector, but they have done so negatively. [Desk thumping] So, where is the economic recovery? The fact is, Madam Speaker, that thanks to policies put in place by my Government when we were in office, and now inherited by this Government, the country is now experiencing an uptick in natural gas production, which has improved the fortunes of the energy sector. [Desk thumping] Ask former Minister Mariano Browne, he was open in his comments that all that uptick in the energy sector has come from the work that we did previously. Madam, I am being disturbed.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, please observe Standing Order 53. I would like to hear the contribution of the hon. Member for Siparia. Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much. So I said, Mariano Browne has—former Minister—[Laughter]

Madam Speaker: Members! Members!

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: They do not like Mariano.

Madam Speaker: Members, the outbursts—whether they be jeering, laughing—, are not going to be tolerated. Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you. Well, if you do not like Mr. Mariano
Browne because of your own politics, the head of bp in an interview with, I believe, Anthony Wilson, made it very clear that all these incentives that were aggressively pursued under our watch are what led to the projects and to the Juniper project, and many others.  

[Desk thumping] So, the energy sector has grown in spite of the incompetence of this Government of this country.  

[Desk thumping]. Strange enough, they would not blame us for that. They would blame us for everything else, but they would not blame us for the good fortune that they are now experiencing.

Madam Speaker, I would speak a little more on Petrotrin, the energy sector, later, with reference to Petrotrin. But, as I said, this time we are looking at vital signs to see, has there been recovery? Are things improving? Or is it that it is stagnant or is it getting worse?  

So, as a result of this Government’s policies, what we are witnessing in Trinidad and Tobago is a crisis of confidence in the non-energy sector, which I shared with you previously. This crisis of confidence has resulted in there being no new investment in the non-energy sector. Not one. In the three years they have been in office there has not been a single project. Not just—when I say investment, not just FDI, there is not a single new project. And do not tell me you did Unicomer, because that was done under my watch.  

[Desk thumping] Not a single project. No new investment since they came into office. Between the very distortionary taxation policies, including the property tax threats, runaway crime, unavailability of foreign exchange, absence of a trade and foreign policy, the traditional manufacturing sector is reeling, especially the small and medium-size enterprises; and those are really, really the veritable engine growth in an economy such as ours.

Government incompetence has resulted in the precipitous fall in our rank in the ease of doing business in 2018. We were at a modest rank of 79 in 2015.
Where are we today?—102, Madam. Ease of doing business. This is also hindering development in the business sector. Last year the Minister came to the Parliament, got approval to establish a system of allowances for exports by manufacturers. That would be great because they will earn foreign exchange, shortage in foreign exchange. You know what happened? They never introduced it. And they are like a Government of announcements. They make announcements, but they never follow through and never implement. After three years the Government has shown that it does not have a clue about what to do to grow the economy. Indeed, when we look at their book on the 2030 Vision—Vision 2030, do you have a copy please? If you could get me one?—which is really not the vision, but a reporting on achievements of their Government from 2015 to 2018. The first time this Government has put out a book of achievements. I would say almost every single year that we were able to put out a book of achievement. [Desk thumping]

But it is amazing, Madam Speaker, when you open this book the baseline for the targeted areas—take an example, baseline, the target, the actual measure and indicator performance, you know what it is saying?—To be determined. So this is not Vision 2030 reporting on progress. This is TBD vision, “To be determined”. [Desk thumping] And that is the same vision of that Government on the other side, to be determined. Have no plan, still to be determined. So, we are reaping the whirlwind of their incompetence today. And the only plan they seem to have is what? Blame Kamla, pray for incentives that she put in place—central government put in place for the energy sector and wait for those to bear fruit. [Laughter]

Earlier this year, you know, Madam, non-energy manufacturers reminded the Minister of Finance of the problem of long-outstanding VAT refunds. This follows complaints made late last year that billions in VAT refund were
outstanding to businesses. Now, VAT refunds belong to the business community. They do not belong to the Government. It is their money. It is their money that allows them to stay alive, to survive, to continue in their business. Do you know, for almost three hours the Minister of Finance spoke here, and not one word, not a single word about how, or when, or why that you would have addressed the issue of the VAT refunds.  

[Desk thumping] Not one word. And that attitude by this Government to genuine business concerns is another reason that businesses are facing this, in a bad way, and they are facing declines, declines.

You know in our pre-budget meetings with people, they told us of numerous cases of small businesses closing down, forced to send home employees as a result of the promises of the Government. For small business, that VAT refund is very, very important. For a big business it is very, very important too. For any business, VAT refund—and you know what, it is also grossly unfair, because you have to pay a penalty if you file your VAT return late. But you know what, when the Government holds your VAT payment they could take how long they want, they do not have to pay any penalty whatsoever. It is grossly unfair. So you are being penalized. Businesses are being penalized for—[Interruption]—you know, Madam, please, I do not want to have to ask my friend, always whispering in the ear. I do not know what he is whispering about.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, again, for those who are not speaking, I kindly ask you to observe Standing Order 53. If I have to remind specific Members about that then I will have to invoke the powers of the Chair. Member for Siparia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you again, Madam. I am saying, “not one word about VAT refunds”, a matter that is so crucial, and it is so unfair. You must pay a penalty, you know what for? You are being penalized, a business person. For what? The incompetence of the Government to complete the VAT refund
restitution. [Desk thumping]

And do not tell me I had it so, because we did not have this problem that you are having, that you are holding on to the VAT refunds. You know why? Your Minister told us why, you know. Minister West somewhere recently, probably expecting that the VAT issue would come up in the budget, said in an interview, and a very, very long-winded—

“In addressing the issue of VAT refunds cognizance is taken of the country’s prevailing economic climate and its impact on Government’s fiscal accounts and its cash management capability. Accordingly, the level of refunds falls among one of several economic variables which are constantly monitored to ensure”—what?—“Government’s overall macro-fiscal objectives are maintained in a scenario of other competing demands for financial resources.”

All that means, you are saying, no pay. Not getting it. So, do not come and talk to me, do not accuse me here of, “UNC did not do nothing about it”. It is your fault that you have not been able to pay [Desk thumping] and to take into account the hardships that businesses experience, and that is why you are not growing the economy. That is why businesses are forced to let go people, more jobs being lost because of the incompetence, and you know it is not just incompetence, it is they just do not care, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

10.30 a.m.

Our consultations also revealed the fears of the large class of businessmen with respect to the impending closure of Petrotrin and other companies. The effect of this failure to develop and implement any policy to stimulate the manufacturing sector is already being felt by a significant fall, Madam Speaker, in the traditional manufacturing sector’s contribution by about $600million. So where is this
turnaround? Where is this economic recovery? They took a sector with tremendous potential and they turned around and destroyed that sector.

Ironically, while they dismantle the manufacturing sector, the country’s need for the survival of that sector grows. I have said before and I say it again, that this Government is a “big people” Government. For the small businessmen and businesswomen they appear to be enemies, they appear to be their enemies. It is not just our domestic business sector that lacks confidence in the Government and the economy as a result, the World Bank has reported that after receiving FDI, Foreign Direct Investment, inflows of over $855 million in 2014 and 2015, this country suffered a significant net outflow of US $398 million in 2016 and 2017.

You know what that means, Madam? A net outflow, that where we were getting this in ’16 and ’17, we were getting the US $855 million in Foreign Direct Investment, is the opposite. The money is leaving. That is what a net outflow means. So, more money going out and none coming in, US $398 million. What this means as a country is not receiving FDI during those years and the absence of confidence in the management of the country resulted in the US dollar equivalent, this is almost TT $3 billion we are talking about, you know. Leaving the country is a result of lack of confidence in the environment under this Government. [Desk thumping] Business community is simply not investing, not interested in investing their profits and they prefer to repatriate those profits, some people are saying capital flight.

I do not see the potential for growth of the non-energy sector under the current conditions and most definitely not under this Government. [Desk thumping] And therefore, I do not see the ambitious projection by the Minister, of a 2 per cent growth in 2021. I have taken note of the multiple projections of the Government based on the latest IMF report and I find it extremely disingenuous, to
say the least, for the Minister to throw up IMF projections for growth of the T&T economy and the associated indicators, when the Minister knows fully well or he ought to know that those figures did not factor in the contractionary effect on revenues, foreign exchange generation, productive capacity, labour, government tax and expenditure, consequent to the dismantling of Petrotrin.

In other words, when the IMF wrote that report, they had no knowledge and they were never advised that the Government was planning to shut down Petrotrin. 

[Desk thumping] None. And therefore, that surprise decision to shut down the refinery without advising the advisors, the IMF, means that the projections in that report are wrong. And therefore the Minister’s use of those projections, in my respectful view, is a deliberate attempt to hoodwink the population into believing a projection which the Minister knows or ought to know is not true.  

[Desk thumping]

I turn now to the energy sector, Madam. I was looking at the non-energy sector. The Minister of Finance has boasted that there was a return to growth in the economy. The Minister said he projected growth of 1.9 per cent—

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, 53(f), please.

Madam Speaker: Members, I would ask every Member to practise self-regulation. We are all very familiar with Standing Order 53 and what is required.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you again, Madam. Energy sector: projected growth by the Minister, 1.9 per cent for fiscal 2018, which is now complete, fiscal 2018. And I want to talk about the turnaround in gas production for a short while. The growth in the energy sector, as I mentioned earlier, is due to an increase in natural gas production from the bp Juniper project which as I pointed out, started under our watch. That project brought 590 million cubic feet of natural gas per day into production, thanks to the administration I led.  

[Desk
thumping] What the Minister will not tell us, is that bp’s decision to invest over US $2.1 billion in this project happened during our time. You know why? Because of the very aggressive strategies we engaged in and due to the fiscal incentives we offered. Construction began almost immediately and today Trinidad and Tobago is reaping those benefits. [Desk thumping]

Further investment projects came, again, from work done under our watch, including Angelin, TROC and BHP Greater Angostura which came into fruition under our watch. When these additional projects come fully online, at least an additional 900 million cubic feet of natural gas will be produced per day, helping to reach a target of four billion cubic feet of natural gas, thanks to the Partnership Government. [Desk thumping] Had those investments not been made, we would have been in really dire state right now. We are not seeing that same level of FDI that we saw in our times now. That is the consequence of the lack of plan and vision of those on the other side.

I turn to look at gas supply contracts and the business environment in the energy sector. Whilst the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries was busy praising the best friend of the hon. Prime Minister, A&V Drilling, there was an unprecedented level of hostility between the Ministry, NGC and companies at Point Lisas. This became evident when NGC and Caribbean Nitrogen Company publicly went to war over gas supply contract. Tact and diplomacy are not part of their remit on the other side, Madam Speaker. CNC actually shut down temporarily, they threatened to leave the country because of the difficulty in negotiating with the Government. It is no secret that plants at Point Lisas are facing significant increases in the price of the natural gas that they purchased. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries confirmed this in a press release dated July 26, 2018, at the time when he was accusing CNC of being petulant.
Well, Madam Speaker, the main reason for the increase in the price of natural gas for companies on the Point Lisas Estate appears to be the new contract between the NGC and EOG resources. That was a contract price which the Prime Minister admitted that he negotiated in a hotel room in Houston in March 2017, right here in this Parliament.

Stagnation in energy: During our time we made 14 amendments to the fiscal regime in the energy sector aimed at creating a business-friendly environment to facilitate investment that led to the upsurge in natural gas production. After three years of this PNM Government, we can see no investment in our future. There is only incompetence in HD, high definition. [Desk thumping] You know, someone reminded me this morning, first there was Machel, MMHD, not my colleague the hon. Marlene Mc Donald. [Laughter] Now it is “PNM HD”, because you know why, Madam? We see that there has not been a single new bid round since they came into office.

We are seeing a steady decline in drilling which can be measured in rig days. Drilling rig days in 2015, our last day in office, 2,765.

Hon. Member: What! Whoa!

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Drilling rig days now under this Government, down to 1,831 in 2017, and we will see a further decline next year because they have put nothing in place. We are seeing a marked decrease in exploration and production, both on land and offshore. We are seeing an unregulated, ageing infrastructure which is not being properly maintained. Not a single new licence or a new production sharing contract has been awarded since September 2015, not one. So how are you going to increase your production? No bids mean no further exploration, no further exploration, no further or increased supplies. All this means we are headed for a period of stagnation in the energy
sector because this Government is not invested in our future and the future of our children.  *[Desk thumping]*

I turn now to public debt. The level of indebtedness of a nation is another indicator of the health of the economy. This PNM administration has embarked on a dangerous borrowing pathway which will take this country, if they remain in power and they continue those policies, will take this country straight into the hands of the IMF and their structural adjustment policies. As of June 2018, Madam Speaker, the country’s gross public debt stood at $122.1 billion. It is the highest it has ever been in our country’s recorded history.

**Mrs. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh:** Madam Speaker, I would like to draw your attention to 53, please, Standing Order 53.

**Madam Speaker:** Please continue, Leader of the Opposition.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you. It is the highest it has ever been, our public debt. It is the highest it has ever been in our recorded history. Our children and grandchildren will have to try to clean up the mess that this administration is making. This is a debt-funded disaster. This is a balance sheet meltdown. This mortgages the future generations away. Instead of transferring savings for future generations, this Government is bent on transferring debt to the future generations.  *[Desk thumping]*

And I want to begin, you know, at the start. I have absolutely no problem with a government borrowing per se, governments do borrow. What I have a problem with is why the Minister continues to borrow so much and more than that, what is being done with this borrowed money, Madam Speaker?  *[Desk thumping]*

Because you go through the country, that money is not reaching down to the ordinary man and woman in the country. Where is this money being spent? I have not seen a single project that this Government has started, implemented and

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completed; not a single one. Instead, they stand here boldfaced, taking credit for the Arima Hospital being built, the Point Fortin Hospital and my God, last Monday, “state of the art” Couva Children’s Hospital. Taking credit for the projects that we initiated and then we want to know “where the money gone”? “Where the money gone?” Over 100—and what is it? Sixty billion spent in three years. Where has that money gone—155 in three years? Over $155 billion spent in the three years. Where is the money going? “Where the money gone?”

I remember my colleague who used to sit in that chair for Diego Martin West, the hon. late Prime Minister Patrick Manning, standing right there and asking, “Where de money gone”? “Where de money gone?” [Desk thumping] So we are saying yes, people borrow, but debt must be tied to the country’s capacity to repay the debt in the medium to long term, especially if the debt implicates future generations to repay. And this is the very fundamental principle which I disagree with, this Government’s rapid borrowing profile.

In just three years the Government has already borrowed over $20 billion, three years. Today the country’s net public sector debt outstanding stands at $96.6 billion, the highest in our nation’s history. And this does not include the 4.2 billion taken out of the HSF, another 4 billion lifted from the public via the National Investment Fund, bond issue. And I could not believe my ears when the hon. Minister told this House that that 4 billion from the NIF, was what? State enterprise profit. Profit. You have to pay it back, that money. The future generations have to pay back that money and you are calling that profit? I never knew that when you have to pay back money, that that is a profit. [Laughter] I cannot understand in whose wild imagination can a debt that has to be repaid be called state enterprise profit, Madam Speaker.

This Government has spent a total of 150 billion, 155 billion since 2015.
This has pushed up public sector debt by over 13 per cent. The Government—I am sorry, Madam, what the numbers are showing is an even more frightening reflection of the Government’s fiscal incompetence, and that is a trend of increasing borrowing.

The country is being run on borrowed money with no end in sight. This is not a mark of a competent fiscal management. To make matters worse, when the Minister ran out of headroom, meaning he could not borrow any more, you know what he did? He came to the Parliament and used the PNM’s parliamentary majority to do what?—to raise the borrowing limits so he could borrow more money. Borrow more money. [Crosstalk]

I will tell you about the max out just now. I will deal with “max”, not the late Max Richards. The problem is this Government has used every possible opportunity to borrow, in addition to taxing citizens into poverty. As a Soca artiste once said, “If you cannot bring joy, you kill joy”. The problem is that no one can see, as I said, where this money is going. They are not doing anything for generating revenue, productive capacity. It is going into recurrent expenditure. They say it is going for debt refinancing. No projects that have come to create capacity to generate consistent revenue. Every project they mentioned as a revenue generator has been coming soon, coming soon to a cinema near you. [Laughter] Coming soon, from the scandalous Sandals scheme, and now I will share with you in a short while, this dry dock La Brea which is like the latest new sliced bread being mentioned to bring revenue, create jobs. That is not going to happen any time before they are kicked out of office. [Desk thumping] Any time.

So we can look at debt to GDP ratio. Here we see again, this Government has come into office, debt to GDP has grown from 47.8 per cent in fiscal 2015—do you know what it is now? 61 per cent in 2018.
Hon. Members: “Oooh.”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: When we look at Central Government debt to revenue ratio, that was 1.5, in 2015 the ratio was 1.5. What that meant is you could pay off the debt. If you used all your money you could wipe out the debt in one and a half years. Today that has gone up from, the ratio of 1.5, Madam Speaker, to where it would take two and a half years using every cent collected by the Government. So that, if we took every cent collected, revenue, from now until 2020, the money still would not be enough, Madam Speaker, to pay off the debt. Even as Government robs people of their jobs, the debt load carried by every single working person is $155,000. You owe that, you owe that. [Desk thumping]

There is yet more reason to be concerned. Under this Government foreign debt has jumped, 26.6 per cent of total debt, June 2018. When we were there it was 16.3 per cent of total debt, 2015, September. What this means is that the increasing demands are being put on doing little foreign exchange reserves. So, we now have a situation where the Government actually is competing with the private sector for foreign exchange, because they have to get that foreign exchange to pay foreign debt.

Today, half the country’s foreign reserves are mortgaged to repay external debt. All these factors point to an inherent danger of our country being unable to meet runaway debt, particularly foreign debt. And you know what this does? It puts us at the mercy of countries engaged in what has been described as debt diplomacy. And what is this debt diplomacy? What is it? [Desk thumping] When a country, a particular country build the port in Sri Lanka, when they could not pay for it, what did they do? They took the port. In several countries—

Mr. Charles: In Zambia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—in Zambia. Debt diplomacy if you cannot pay
your debt and at the rate we are racking up this foreign debt, we are heading in that direction.

There is no policy statement, you know, which tells us that attention is being paid to this critical factor of how we are going to pay this massive growing debt. How they propose—and I demand the Government to tell us, what are you going to do to repay this debt? But you see, they do not really care. It is borrow now, spend now, because they know that they are not going to be there for much longer. Borrow now and spend it and leave it for others “to ketch” as they say in Trinidad. You borrow, you fund, what did you do with the money? I said “Where de money gone”? You know what?—to fund the addiction to vanity projects, to commit the expenditure of foreign exchange, to repay foreign debt, continue to deny access to foreign exchange to citizens and small businesses for the benefit of friends, family and financiers, the “triple-F club”, Madam Speaker.

This Minister is drowning us in a sea of red, a red sea of debt, and says it is because they have no money. Now, if we believe that, how did they get the money to spend on these vanity projects? How and where? You know, the Minister of Finance told us, October 05, 2015:

“...and rather than wasting money on expensive white elephants and vanity projects, we will expend substantial resources on training opportunities in all areas…”

It is clearly evident that the Minister has a short memory, because none of these promises have been kept.

While the Minister and the Government ran up and down this country, misleading the population that the Treasury was empty, country was running on fumes, they found money to spend, on what? What are their priorities, what are their priorities, these vanity projects? Different kinds of priorities, and so
punishing the population for three years. They took bread and butter out of the mouth of ordinary people, babies went hungry, children cannot get medical attention, because their priorities were on the following: paintings, 3 million; Soca on the Seas, 0.5 million; new Benz for the Prime Minister, 2 million; CL Financial, sexual harassment settlement, 3.5; a hello and goodbye telephone call to the US President, 16 million; Tarouba Stadium that has no accreditation still, none, 130 million; a Red House that they promised to deliver in May 2018—where are we now?—September/October, 2018, 440 million; Buccoo Estate 174 million. Hear this one, Madam Speaker, a loan to a toilet paper factory, 30 million, up to today we cannot find out who are the owners of that toilet paper factory, because they are registered in St. Lucia. Trade Unions; Massy Communications, 225 million and I see we are getting a new brand now, we are not going to have Bmobile anymore. I think it is called AMPLIA. So when you see AMPLIA you know where it is coming from. It is nothing from Mars or space, Massy Communications; that is where it is coming from. Ernst & Young audits, 20 million. [Crosstalk] You know which one, you know them very well. Jazz Festival, 20 million; house in Tobago, 15 million; Diego Martin Stadium without any tendering process, 200 million—tendering process, sole select; Cabo Star mobilization fee, 13 million; Ocean Flower mobilization fee, 20 million. So did we pay that 20 million? And where is this Ocean Flower II now? I know they came and they parked up somewhere, I do not know if they have gone again. Hilton swimming pool, 7 million; wet lease plane from LIAT, 4 million; fete match to open the Brian Lara Stadium, roaming bills, 59,000; romping bills, 95,000; settlement of inappropriate behaviour in the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs, 150,000, and we are still waiting for the report, Madam Speaker. Four boats without any proper procurement, 1.4 billion; a dog pound, 3 million. You know, Madam Speaker, old people have a saying,
“when dog living better than man, you know you are really gone through, you are in a bad place”.

The Auditor General has also reported—now, this overdraft, Madam, across the floor, the Minister has in budget one, budget two, budget three, budget four, and I think going down to his grave he will still be saying this, that this Government, the Government that we had, ran the country on—maxed out the overdraft, running on fumes and so on, making a lot of noise. Whilst we made use of the permissible overdraft limit, I want to remind the Minister of Finance that in fiscal year ’16/17, and I can only speak for this, because we have the numbers printed in black and white, we will have to wait to see what happened in ’17/18. For fiscal 2016/2017, the Minister actually crossed the limit of the overdraft by over $3 billion—

**Hon. Members:** What!

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—$3 billion. This is found in the Auditor General’s Report, 2017. I got the page because they will say we are lying. Auditor General’s Report 2017, page 97.

**Mr. Charles:** Tell him that.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The Auditor General also reported that this Exchequer Account—that is the one where this overdraft issue comes from—has been in overdraft since 2003. Let me also remind this Minister of Finance that the latest IMF report recently out, has scolded the Government for persistently maxing out the overdraft at the Central Bank. In fact the IMF recommends in this report that this Government settle the outstanding overdraft balance at the Central Bank and rely on market based finances for its fiscal operations. And may I remind this honourable House that in December 2017—please, Madam.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Siparia, please continue.
Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Ma’am. [ Interruption ] Yeah, stop muttering. Please, Madam, through you. If you do not like what I am saying, leave.

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia—

Hon. Member: You do not like to hear the truth.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: You do not like to hear the truth.

Madam Speaker: And Member for Princes Town, I am on my legs. Hon. Members there is a—and it is coming from both sides, a consistent buzz and there is also what could be a sort of echo in respect to when the Leader of Opposition is speaking. Again, I urge Members to self-regulate. For Members who cannot self-regulate, they are always invited to take a walk and return. We understand what is the decorum that is required of us. Member for Siparia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much. The truth offends, Madam Speaker. [ Desk thumping ] I remind this honourable House that in December 2017, the same hon. Minister came running to the Parliament to do what? To increase the overdraft ceiling from 15 per cent of revenue to 20 per cent. So the Minister came not just for this overdraft, but he also came to increase the borrowing limits for other matters. So twice he came, the hon. Minister came to increase these limits. The same Minister who repeatedly chastises the Government I led for using the overdraft facility, chastises us, has done the same. I will call a spade a spade and a hypocrite a hypocrite. [ Desk thumping ] And the difference is, we can show you the schools, over 100 schools, the hospitals, the police stations, [ Desk thumping ] the roadways, the highways and byways, the bridges—called us “box drain Government”. That is why—you have stopped taking care of those things and the flooding in Port of Spain, the flooding throughout the country, [ Desk thumping ] everywhere—
Ms. Ramdial: Everywhere.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: That is why we were able to build the Aquatic Centre, we were able to build the Velodrome, the Tennis Centre, the hospital in Couva, all these projects, that is where it came from. So we have projects that you can touch, projects that you could see, this Government has nothing to show for their spending. That is the level of hypocrisy. [Desk thumping]

I turn to another indicator, Madam, vital sign, foreign reserves and this is grave cause for concern. In this climate where the forex issue is such a controversial one. In a country driven as our country is, import driven, our ability to buy goods and services, from food to medical supplies, hinges on our ability to generate and manage foreign exchange and this then is a very important indicator for the health of the economy. In the Minister’s very first budget delivered October 20, 2015, the Minister declared and I quote:

“…rebuilding confidence in the management of the foreign exchange market represents a central thrust as we revitalize our national economy. The current situation is untenable”—and such—“contributed to great uncertainty and capital flight.”

11.00 a.m.

You see how you could talk when you are in Opposition, Madam Speaker? And when you come in to govern, the hon. Minister changed his tune completely. What the Minister was saying then was that the situation was unacceptable. And yet, at that point in time, Madam Speaker, under our watch—because we had just come out of September 2015—October 20, 2015, this Minister was saying that the situation was unacceptable. And this was a time when our country was holding a foreign reserve of US $10.6 billion. [Desk thumping] And on top of that, what does that do? US $10.6 billion is almost one year of import cover.
Today, after three years of this PNM Government, the level of net foreign exchange holdings has collapsed by 27 per cent, and from US $10.6 billion, has fallen to US $7.6 billion. And that is just about eight months import cover, the lowest our reserves have been for over a decade. And you want to talk about growth and recovery? Last month, Republic Bank, RBC—Royal—and Scotia all confirmed that the demand for foreign exchange far outstrips the supply; that the banks were unable to satisfy customers’ needs. And do you know why people are seeking this foreign exchange, Madam Speaker? RBC reported they wanted it for their businesses—the forex—to settle outstanding bills. They wanted it to pay foreign suppliers. They wanted it for capital investments. They wanted it for regular travel. They wanted it for education and they wanted it for medical needs.

The TTMA President noted that while things have improved a little it is still not at the level required for easy access for the manufacturers. The Chamber—Gabriel Faria reported that a June 2018 survey of their members revealed that many of them continue to have challenges and so on. And they are not alone. You remember the very embarrassing situation with St. Vincent and the Grenadines, when they were forced to ask their Prime Minister to intervene in order to access foreign exchange in spite of having the TT currency accounts. They are not alone. In the past three years, several companies have closed down, again because of this difficulty with the forex. Persons who need forex for medical purposes. Citizens sacrificing to send their children abroad for an education cannot get this foreign exchange. Businesses. Average nationals. You know, you go to the banks and you go to beg for $100 a day, and you have to make several trips.

This problem will worsen, Madam Speaker. The agreement to purchase gas from Venezuela will need more forex. The purchase of these vessels—and we know no proper procurement—that is more forex. The shutdown of Petrotrin and
where we will have to buy all the refined products, the lubricants, the LPG and all those other products; bitumen, all the things they make; all fuels; all refined petroleum products, what do you have to use? Foreign exchange. Because we will not be making these things again. Import it.

The signing of multiple agreements with international companies on the basis of concessional loans, again, we have to pay it back. And so that is what we are seeing in the future, that it would only get worse. In the last three years, not a single project, not one that you could point to, to say, look, this will generate foreign exchange. And do not come and tell me of some bubblegum or Miss Tootsie factory, or something—[Laughter]—to generate foreign exchange to create jobs. All these people are going to be losing their jobs. All the persons who have lost their jobs, you know, under this Government—no project. The projects, like the Sandals, Tobago, La Brea Dry Dock, are shrouded in secrecy. You do not even know what it is the country will get. The only plan this Government seems to have is to continue to raid the HSF and to borrow, borrow, borrow. [Desk thumping] That is all the plan they have.

When we look at inflation as well, the Minister came patting himself on the back, boasting they have lowered inflation rate to 1 per cent in August. That is deceptive, to say the least, to be boasting about this rate as though that is such a great thing. Because, one, they have re-based the consumer price index recently, and again you have changed the methodology, so the inflation rate could be deceptive as they would have altered the weights of the items in the basket of goods. Just like what I talked about, the GDP, where they re-based the components in the GDP.

Secondly, the economy is characterized by a low business confidence with a stagnant non-energy sector and inflation approaching near zero. These are signs of
a deflationary economy. And thirdly, rising unemployment levels. What happens? They do not have money. So what happens? The demand falls. So what happens? Low inflation rates. And please remember that prices are still rising, you know. It is not that prices are not rising, you know. The prices are rising and a low inflation rate means it is rising at a lower level, but they are still higher, and that will be borne out, Madam Speaker, from data we found from the Ministry of Trade where food prices on a basket of goods—and this is the Ministry of Trade’s data—between 2015 and today—using data from the Ministry of Trade and Industry—a basket of goods has increased by over 21 per cent.

The Ministry of Trade lists 117 items that could be found on their website with the prices, and so it tells us what has increased or decreased. You would be surprised to hear—or maybe not surprised—that out of the 117 items on that list, 101, the prices have gone up under this Government compared to the prices that we left the country with. This then tells you purchasing power has decreased, and so on. While economists have disputed the inflation rate given by the Minister, any student studying Principles of Business in Form 3 and up, could tell you that when demand is low, inflation is also low. Somalia is a prime example of that. They have a very low inflation rate, yet there is tremendous economic strife. And if one were to check, Madam Speaker, the global index, we do not rank as the lowest. We rank as 88 on that global index of inflation rates.

So these are the economic indicators, or vital signs, as they were. And as I close off this section on the health of the economy, there is another major factor which affects the health of the economy, and that is fiscal policy of the Government. That is clearly in the hands of the Government—fiscal policy. In some of the problems I had raised earlier, the Government’s hand—their fiscal policies there—I referred in particular to the current taxation and expenditure
policy undertaken by the Government which has resulted in an investment climate unfavourable to fostering business confidence and engagement. The Government has adopted a fiscal policy of increased tax, of sale of assets and of borrowing to generate funds, but they are not using these funds to build productive capacity. Instead, they are using the funds, as I say, for vanity projects and recurrent expenditure. The result is predictable, the continued contraction of the economy, which in turn has caused a sharp reduction in the tax base, so that in 2018, the revenue from taxation was almost $11billion lower than what it was in 2015. More tax, less revenue. That has been the hallmark of this Government.

The last three years we have seen a virtual collapse in expenditure—and this is a serious matter—under what is known as a Capital Development Programme, the PSIP. In 2015, expenditure was $8.16billion. This is to build roads; this is to build houses; this is to build schools, the police stations, infrastructure development throughout the country; capital, something that you could feel, you could touch, you could taste—you cannot taste it, feel it. You will see it in front of you. When you drive on the highway you will see the hospital. When you go down to Diego Martin you will see the high-rise health facility there. When you go to Point Cumana, you will see the school we built there. When you go to Paramin, you will see the school we built there. [Desk thumping] Health centres throughout.

And you see this thing about they are going to open some health centre, or something for 24 hours? You know, some people may call that playing smart with foolishness. You are going to open a centre? Wow, great. Why do you close something down and then come to say you are going to open it back? [Desk thumping] Why? Why? Again, hoodwinking people for three years, man. So more tax, less revenue. Three years, as I am saying, just collapsed in a PSIP
programme—$8.16 billion to 3.53, and then comes here in the most demoralizing manner, or a most derogatory manner to talk about the most profligate spending, the worst spending. “Oh, they spent, they spent, they spent.”

First of all, what you scream across here that we spent, we did not spend that. We spent less than that, but we were able to do so many projects—[Desk thumping]—so many projects across the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago. And then some Members accuse us that we did no work in their constituencies. Well, my Members here will tell you, you know. In this budget debate we will remind you. Work was done in every constituency in Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping]—everyone. Even in Tobago we built the—we set up the integrated campus. In Tobago we set up these MIC centres. I am going off-track. My Members will develop and go into the details of the achievements to see where that money went. We can account for where the money went. [Desk thumping]

So, no fiscal stimulus to support a recessionary. No fiscal support to grow the economy. Even more alarming is that the Government lacks the capability to implement much needed capital projects, and even with their own vanity projects. The Minister, in the Review of the Economy—the Government confesses there, expenditure on the Government’s PSIP in 2018 was lower than budgeted. Hear why, eh. This was due to delays in the implementation of projects, variations in the scope of work for several projects, non-submission of claims by contractors and administrative delays in processing claims for payment.

So first, lower budget. Why? Delays. Incompetence again. Why? Variation in the scope of projects. So you come and tell us here now, you are giving—one of your projects is about Maracas Beach, and say that we abandoned the project. Nothing is further from the truth. The contractor was in place. And
by the way, same contractor you want to sue in court you give him back the contract.  \[Desk thumping\] Calling people cartel and all kinds of things and spoiling people’s names, and you go and give back that same contractor the contract. Anyway—so the contractor there. When you came into office, you fired the contractor.  \[Desk thumping\]

**Hon. Member:** Then they re-hired.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Yes. Look the Minister of Port of Spain is now admitting “we fired the contractor”. They fired the contractor. To do what? To delay the project. Fired to re-hire. And therefore delays, variations, and they vary the project. You know, if you had done something—and you talk about government in continuity. If you had taken up those projects that were in train, today you would have had so many projects to deliver to the country.  \[Desk thumping\] But “bad mind” and spite and malice, you would not do it. What you would do is stop it and then come and change the name. Change the name! The Couva Children Hospital is not the children’s hospital. What is it? Couva Training, what and what and what. Change name. A rose by any other name is still a rose.  \[Desk thumping\]—still a rose. So you could run but you cannot hide the fact that those were projects under the government I led.  \[Desk thumping\] The Government has run very large budget deficits over the years and I will predict—I am not a seer woman but I will predict that there will be five years of budget deficits under this Government should they stay that long in government.

The other area is with respect to labour. This is unemployment and labour. I think this is one area—it is like a great betrayal—great betrayal—the worst examples of hypocrisy and betrayal, and there have been many, but this one, with deliberate brutalization and terrorizing of the nation’s labour force. When the then Opposition Leader asked the country to vote for his party in 2015, the Member met
with members of unions, signed agreements, promised all manner of interaction, acts and support; appointed a former PSA President as the Minister of Labour to represent labour issues. By the way, is the Minister of Labour still the PSA President? I cannot say, because we have not seen any work being done in the Ministry of Labour in favour of workers. [Desk thumping]

And so, we will recall workers were told the PNM will establish an appropriate set of minimum wage rates. Three years, nothing. In office, we raised the minimum wage not once; twice. [Desk thumping] They promised, “We will ensure through employment exchanges managed by the regional corporations that workers can transition with job-specific training to self-employment and better paying jobs.” It never happened. What has happened instead? On their own data—their data—and that data is not the amount. On their own data—and again, Madam, you know what is happening? Why can we not get data for fiscal 2018? The only data on unemployment and persons without a job is from the third quarter of 2017—fiscal ’17, you know. A whole budget year and we cannot get any numbers. And those numbers, based on their own books, over 30,000 persons are without jobs who had jobs in 2015.

Now, that is only what is registered. There are so many out there in the informal sector where their numbers will not get into the books. But in their own numbers, 30,000 persons who had jobs in 2015, do not have. So they have not kept a simple promise. And what happened to this trucking something in—[Crosstalk]—the whole of ArcelorMittal. What happened to the 10-point plan or the 20-point plan to help those workers? So that, you see, I do not believe a word, and no one should believe this Government [Desk thumping] when they want to come and say they would take care of frontline communities when they shut down Petrotrin; they will take care of Petrotrin workers. Because when Caroni was shut
down, all those promises were made. Up to today, those farmers are still waiting on some of the fruits of what was promised to them.

So, instead of getting employment opportunities, the Government is scrapping entire industries. The closure of Petrotrin means nearly 5,000, 6,000. The hon. Prime Minister said the numbers really do not matter, but I totally disagree. These are human beings with families. [Desk thumping] The numbers matter. Are you saying that the numbers do not matter? So you took a decision to shut down this refinery and you do not know how many workers are there? What kind of reckless behaviour is that? You do not know 1,700, 2,000, 5,000? Do you not know? But yet, you took a decision to close it down not knowing how many families? These are people who have to pay mortgage. And these are people who have to send their children to school, man. So they are not concerned about creating jobs, just about taking away jobs.

The Minister said the number of persons has increased marginally. Over 50,000 people have lost their jobs since they came into office, 30,000 on their own admission, and from anecdotal evidence in the reports, it is about 50,000, man. And then the Minister comes here to boast growth, recovery, turnaround. Well, the only turnaround you are getting here is run around from this Government. [Desk thumping] So it is not true, “marginal”. And you see, again, when you do not see these numbers—numbers do not matter. But they are not numbers, they are people. They are human beings with hopes and fears, with tears of joy and with cries of pain, with love in their hearts, with families. That is how we have to see them. And that is when we see them as humans and not numbers, we will take care of them. We will provide for them.

So in 2018, the Minister says the unemployment rate is 5 per cent. He says that it was not substantially different to rates in 2011 to 2015. Well, let me educate
him. And go back and check your own books in the Ministry of Finance—your own books in the Ministry of Finance. In 2011, under my watch, unemployment was 5 per cent. In 2012 it was 4.9 per cent; in 2013, 3.7 per cent; in 2014, it was a historic 3.3 per cent—[Desk thumping]—in 2015 when we left, 3.4. That is what they met when they came in. Earlier this year the Minister attacked several economists because their views were not aligned to these views. He said,

“There are people in the country who just talk out of a hat. They know nothing and they just talk. They say things and they have no facts. They have no information. They have no data. They do not have a clue what they are talking about, but they just say things.”

Madam Speaker, he was speaking about himself. [Desk thumping]

So there has been a failure by the Government to engage with an enabling environment to create jobs. This is unacceptable, Madam Speaker. It is a critical factor impacting on productive capacity, on our revenue base, on our tax base. The Minister of Finance is making prescriptive billion-dollar decisions, promoting projects of all kinds in various locales without the benefit of information, when you can come here—and you know, I really do not think the hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East would lie in the Parliament. I do not believe that. So therefore, it means he just does not know that his statement is incorrect. I would advise the hon. Members to read all those books you have in the Ministry of Finance. As a matter of fact, they are online so anyone can read them.

Now, from this check on the vital signs that I have gone through, Madam Speaker, it is clear that our economy is in bad shape. The economy is sick, sick; sick economy. [Desk thumping] We are facing a crisis of confidence. We have heard of no comprehensive, concrete, viable plans from the Government, and therefore, let us now examine an economy that is recessionary, coming out of a
recession, whether coming, or coming out, I do not think so from the vital signs—what prescriptions. If you are sick, you will get your prescription. What prescriptions have they got to fix our sick economy? They have come with repeated promises. Yes? Year after year, repeated promises. They have come with typical PNM promises; never materialize. And then they come with pie-in-the-sky projects to deal with fixing the sick economy. There is a history of repeat, repeat, no performance, no delivery. They said, you know, in 2015, “Let us do this”. They said that they had a doctor to fix the economy, but based on these economic vitals, I am saying that this doctor is guilty of malpractice [Desk thumping] and should be fired.

So, repeat promises never materializing. Budget one, budget two, budget three, budget four. We heard the repeated promise of the establishment of a TTRA, the Revenue Authority. Budget one, budget two, budget three, budget four. Repeated promise of property tax and efficiency for tax collection. Budget one, budget two, three, four. They came, promised to complete Point Fortin Highway. No progress since we left office. Budget one, budget two, budget three, budget four—[Crosstalk] Madam, they are complaining they opened a section. But that work was done by us, eh. That was done by us. So be careful. Be careful what you take credit for.

Budget one, two, three, four. We have heard about the Toco Highway. Up to this time, no construction has begun. In some of our rural areas fishing is the lifeblood. Once again, the Moruga fishing port—new port for Moruga—is in its design stage three years later. Three years later you are now designing? You will never finish before the election—never finish. [Desk thumping] Budget one, two, three, four. Promised again the San Fernando Waterfront Project. So far, the land has not even been acquired, far less there will be any construction. Again, in
budget two, three and four now, the Minister pronounced the Curepe Interchange. Up to this time the acquisition of the land has not been completed. Budget two, three and four promised the delivery of Point Fortin, Arima. Again, waiting, waiting, waiting.

In the last budget, the Minister assured us they are going to open the children’s hospital; they will find a way forward. One year later they are still looking for an operator—still waiting for an operator. Budget one, two and three and four, the Minister promised the Sandals project. Up to this day we are nowhere closer to laying one brick, turning one shovel of gravel, or cement being put down at the side.

Madam Speaker, that is the performance. Promise Government by announcement; never follow through, never implement. And come back in this budget, when times are so crucial, to repeat these projects; almost all of them. Even the ANR Robinson Airport, you come and tell us about that already.

**Hon. Member:** We named the airport.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Well, yes, we named the airport—that is true—after the late ANR Robinson. And as we are speaking about the former Prime Minister, former President, Mr. Robinson, I think I would talk a little bit at this juncture about the sea bridge. It really hurts my heart as it probably hurts the heart of everybody in Trinidad and Tobago. So let us talk a little about that sea bridge. The country continues to suffer under this Government, having endured the utter incompetence of not just one, but two Ministers of Works and Transport, which led to a total collapse of the sea bridge between Tobago and Trinidad. [Desk thumping] That has been more destructive to the economy of Tobago than any Category 5 hurricane has been. It is a total collapse of businesses in Tobago. Tobago business has been flattened by the incompetence and negligence of those
on that side. [Desk thumping]

The most troubling part of it all is that the nation has received no assurance that this Government will ever change its process and methods for procuring capital assets. Until such time, we are doomed to suffer the consequences, such as we endured with the saga. The *Galleons Passage* has been purchased some—how long ago is that, 10 months? Some 10 months ago this *Galleons Passage*—and it is yet to make a commercial sailing. And I am looking forward to the day when it actually limps across to see Watson Duke in his pirogue. He has promised to race the *Galleons Passage*. So we look forward to that—the great race.

This can only be described as a monumental waste, burning a hole in taxpayers’ money to the tune of over $120 million. One hundred and twenty million for a boat that you bought 10 months ago, “cyar” move; “cyar” work. You should be so ashamed. It reminds us of the *MV Su*, bought when Diego Martin North/East was a Minister at that time too, which never sailed. I think it never sailed—never sailed.

**Hon. Member:** Sold as scrap iron.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And just imagine, after it has been serviced a mere couple days ago, the deck of the *Cabo Star* was reportedly flooded out on its voyage yesterday. They just seem to have a thing with boats, a very blight with boats, yes. From the evidence presented, Madam, we can see a clear strategy for going down the cliff. We are going to fall off the cliff. That is where we are heading. Having presented my case, Madam, I will leave it for the population to judge.

The other game changer—and again, why would you talk about game changers? Running a country is not a game. It is serious business. [Desk thumping] Serious, serious business. And so, that La Brea Dry Dock, well, oh
gosh, every praise is on this Dry Dock now, the Minister of Finance; Prime Minister. Based on a recent story in the *Trinidad Guardian*, the Prime Minister—This single La Brea Dry Dock Project is his Government’s solution to our foreign exchange crisis and our need to grow the GDP. The deception is not just that they are asking residents of La Brea to vote for them in 2020, you know, in the hope of getting jobs in 2023—because that is when the project will start operations. So what will you do now? We are in 2018. 2019, 2020, ’21—look. You might as well “dead” now before that thing will happen; that project will come on stream.

11.30 a.m.

The project will bring no foreign exchange for years. You cannot put all your eggs in that basket to say “bring me foreign exchange”. You are not going to get it, and in the meantime the country will continue to decelerate, continue to go deeper and deeper into the abyss. Deception is not the untruth that a large number of thousands of people that are being fired from Petrotrin will bring jobs, would go down there and get a job. I mean, the skills you need to work in a refinery, and exploration, and drilling, those are not the same skills to work on a dry dock. So do not give people false hope because this is like—I do not like to use the word Ponzi scheme, but it will collapse. This is going to collapse. The economy is going to collapse. We are falling over the cliff. So it is not just that there are no local content agreement signed. What is most frightening, and why I say this is not going to happen soon, is the admission that they have not done a market analysis yet. [*Desk thumping*] They have not done a market analysis. So on what basis all these promises are being made? How do they know that this project is even viable? How do they know that 5,000 jobs are being created? You are making it up as you go along. [*Desk thumping*]

A promise that the Chinese have agreed to arrange for their ships to use the
La Brea facility; that is no guarantee of a market you know. How many Chinese or other vessels have expressed interest in coming to Trinidad to be dry docked? Is the plan to build the facility at some unknown cost and hope that it is used? That is why you have to do the market analysis. What happens if you cannot attract sufficient enough clientele? Will the dry dock then have to go to a foreign state? Is this like another WGTL waiting to happen leaving us in billions of dollars of debt on junk? Even worse, the report states that China will control 30 per cent of the equity, Government 70. What is the source of these funds? Is the Government going to be taking another loan? If this is so, then there is another significant demand for foreign exchange. The Government has already wasted three years hopelessly trying to stabilize the economy, and given their very poor track record of economic management, they will waste another two years if they are allowed to remain there, if they can keep themselves there into 2020. Their policy making is characterized by incompetence, illiteracy and insensitivity. 

Madam Speaker, having examined the vital signs, having shown how the Government’s prescriptions to heal the sick economy are not working, that they already have no plan to fix the economy, I want to share, with your leave, a UNC national economic recovery and diversification plan because you see all is not lost. There is hope. Our economy can be fixed. Our country needs the implementation of a strategic and systematic treatment protocol—because the economy is sick—to pull us out of this illness they have inflicted on us. The first critical step is to state the obvious. You must have a plan. In keeping with this forward-thinking approach towards building independent, self-reliant, resilient and confident society of the future, the UNC has been working on a credible economic plan to regain fiscal balance, stabilize public debt, stop the bleeding of official reserves and to bring our economy back on a growth trajectory.
And the party that I lead, the UNC, has the plan that can move us forward.

Let us share it with you, Madam. We shall engage and implement the following—I have spoken of it many times.

- The digital economy in the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution;
- The innovation culture;
- The entrepreneurship impact;
- The diversification strategy;
- Good governance;
- Corporation tax issues;
- Specific job creation; and
- State enterprises reform.

The global digital economy: I have articulated the need to adapt, as I say, to the Fourth Industrial Revolution as a means of achieving sustainability for future generations. And I have been advocating this as far back as 2010. That is when we began the laptop programmes. Then we started to roll out broadband and so on. We had begun that step. The technological phenomenon of the digital age offers fantastic opportunities for growth and development. In addition to the digital economy, I have articulated blue, green, silver economies as models for achieving these outcomes.

Last year, Madam Speaker, it was estimated that the spending in products and services in what is known as the internet of things alone would have been around the two trillion mark globally. The development of the technology sector to train our people to take advantage of these opportunities presenting themselves in this moment in time, but this Government has no interest or knows nothing about creating. They only know about shutting down and destroying. These strategies will all be integrated to what is known as the circular economy, and the
circular economy is a model to augment the other mechanisms I mentioned for achieving growth. The circular economy, as the name suggests, is a model that is industrially regenerative system by design. It replaces what is known as the end of the life concept with restoration, shifts towards the use of renewable energy, eliminates the use of toxic chemicals which impair reuse and a return to the biosphere and aims for the elimination of waste through superior design of materials, products, systems and business models.

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, 53(f) please.

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia, please continue.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I was talking about the circular economy. At its very core this circular economy, as I said, limits waste, recycles materials in addition to reducing the carbon footprint. I know all of this is in relation to now when we talk about climate change and all the ills of climate change. So, global digital economy, the other areas that I mentioned and working all through the circular economy.

Secondly, Madam, prosperity through innovation. Our future, the future of this country, under a UNC government, will be built on a platform of sustainability inclusive of values and will propagate a culture of tolerance, peacefulness, happiness where this would be our hallmark. We will create the environment required for innovation and creativity to celebrate our people’s own innate talents and abilities, and emerge the best in us in a worthwhile way.

Technological innovation is disrupting, Madam Speaker, as we speak, every sphere of human existence. Manufacturing is being disruptive with 3D printing, which is also creating new opportunities for the health sector. And so the work is on the way across major labs in tissue printing for kidneys, Madam Speaker. It is amazing. Transport delivery systems are being disrupted as drone technology is
being perfected. Amazon’s drone technology, Prime Air, is presently being tested. Programming, reprogramming, testing, piloting, repairs and maintenance, and innovation to create unique brands are all real new opportunities rapidly developing. These are just the few areas in the vast unchartered galaxy of the digital age. In the internet of things, other driverless vehicles, street clothes, manufacturing and so on.

Madam Speaker, I can go all day through the vast array of opportunities in the digital age. Augmented reality will help surgeons see inside the human body, protect workers in operating in dangerous situations. Robotics, a combination of machine learning algorithms, automation and coding, all present opportunities in this vast galaxy of the digital age. Quantum commuting will give the processing power real time online information. Plasmonic materials are light controlled nanomaterials which can be used to fight diseases like cancer. Electroceuticals to fight disease, personalized medicine are just some of the innovations happening already. So where do we fit into this? Are we grasping these opportunities? And how do we grasp them to create these jobs for today, but just for the future? I have said it before that many of the jobs that we know now as they are, will no longer exist. Already many of those jobs have been wiped out in the more developed world because the machines are doing it, the robotics, the artificial intelligence and so on.

Another area I think we can grow is through entrepreneurship. This empowers people and enhances and develops economic growth. Madam Speaker, under a UNC government entrepreneurship in the digital age and global economy will be encouraged, fostered, nurtured, and empowered by specific initiatives, probes and programmes and projects to accomplish outcomes for economic empowerment and economic development. We will establish the policy
framework for prosperity of entrepreneurs in technology, manufacturing, and other inbound and outbound logistics to ensure their development. We would have spoken before about the blue economy as a way of diversification that will encompass the utilization of our marine economy, the marine industries and so on. The green economy we have spoken before as an instrument of diversification, utmost importance to the environment especially land-based assets and resources. Agriculture is a very critical component to the national security.

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, I think we have reached a little beyond the halfway mark. I am having a little difficulty in hearing the Member for Siparia. I will ask you, again, for the final time, to please measure your volumes in accordance with Standing Order 53.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you very much. I am reminded by my colleagues that the Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Mottley, has in fact set up a Ministry of the Blue Economy in Barbados. [Desk thumping] So I have spoken on the blue economy, green economy. The green energy economy, which deals with alternative renewables—renewable energy—that is a huge source of savings and wealth creation today.

We have already seen how India, and Denmark, and Norway, they are engaged this as a productive section. Please, Madam—

**Madam Speaker:** Members for San Fernando West, Diego Martin West, Arouca/Maloney, I am hearing you. Okay. I am hearing you. Member for Siparia.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you, Madam. I am talking about the green energy economy with the renewables as an instrument of diversification, but I do believe that agriculture could become a very important driver of diversification in the land. [Desk thumping] I think it is reported that the hon. Prime Minister said
that we do not have land and I think that is a very sad thing because we have such rich resources in the land, [Desk thumping] and so I want to say that the UNC government would make agriculture a driver of economic diversification. [Desk thumping] We will give agriculture the budget it requires to help in our country’s economic transformation. We have singled out agriculture because of its potential contribution to our food and security needs; foreign exchange generation; deepening our sectorial linkages; management of the environment and the fight against climate change. So this is not just about land. This is about food security and it is about earning the much needed foreign exchange. [Desk thumping]

For agriculture to thrive and develop in Trinidad and Tobago, it must become globally competitive, shifting away from primary agriculture commodities to higher value added products. By focusing on agriculture commodities in which we have a distinct comparative advantage—and that is what we have when we say we have the resources. We have a comparative advantage. It is quite possible for Trinidad and Tobago to capture a larger share of the global agricultural trade market and boast agriculture’s contribution to GDP and export earnings. Whilst I agree tourism could be a diversification strategy, Madam Speaker, do we have a comparative advantage in that? No! All the islands in the Caribbean what do we have? Sun, sea and sand. Sun, sea and sand, and some of those islands have better sun, sea and sand—beaches, and so on—than we have. What we have to look for is something in which we have comparative advantage. For over 100 years we had a comparative advantage in guess what? Oil.

**Dr. Rambachan:** Cocoa.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Cocoa. Yes, for the chocolate. So we must look for something that would give us that comparative advantage and we can then get a larger market share, trade market, to boast the contribution of agriculture to GDP.
We have several commodities where there is significant market opportunity and good growth potential. People are moving away from mega farms because they want to know where the food is coming from—this is one aspect of it—and how it is grown. So do you know what they are demanding now? Organic super foods, turmeric, moringa. I think we have a different name for moringa.

**Hon. Members:** “Saigan”.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** “Saigan”. I grow up eating “saigan”. It is a long stem. You could break it up and cook it. They are now eating the leaves, making tablets with it. I see moringa trees grow—“saigan” trees—they grow so easily. They grow very easily. That is now like a super food. Cocoa which you mentioned before, avocado—is avocado, whatever you call it—gluten-free flours like cassava floor and green banana flour. I read where the Prime Minister once saying you must learn to peel cassava, but the gluten-free flour from cassava and green banana flour, these are super foods in great demand. We could grow these things. We have the climate. We have the knowledge, we have energy. We could do it. They are also demanding coconut water, other high value—cocoa; products such as coconut milk, coconut butter, coconut sugar. You are willing to pay premium prices for these, Madam Speaker.

When we had our coconut industry—I remember growing up and my grandmother used to make oil from the coconut, and then the colonizers come tell us, you know what, coconut oil bad for you. You remember? Bad for you. But what? Import their soya oil and all the other kinds, corn oil. Use their oil and kill our oil industry. They are now saying this is good for you—coconut oil. We would also revitalize traditional agriculture industries such as sugar cane, cocoa, coffee and rice, but you are saying an agricultural cooperative model in which both state and farmers—[**Interruption**]
Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 53(e). Oropouche East and Caroni Central are disturbing me. I cannot hear Siparia.

Madam Speaker: Member. Again, I remind you all, we have about an hour to go and I wish we would all support the Member for Siparia by being silent and listening to the balance of her contribution.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you so much again. I am talking about agriculture. So I said the model we can use is that of a cooperative in which both the state and farmers are owners of agribusinesses. And so, I beg to differ. Unlike the Prime Minister who has been quoted as saying, “Agriculture will never be commercially viable as oil”, I totally disagree. And therefore—I mean, things like peppers, Madam. Every pepper you grow will be bought for export. I have a councillor who lives in the Barrackpore end; pineapples. You have a niche market in pineapple. He has a large piece of land on pineapples, very, very profitable business. Pineapples, peppers. There are a lot of products—pawpaw. There are products that we—and pineapple is a very good one. There is what is call a niche market. There is a great demand for it, and with that it is hard. It will not mash up and blah, blah, blah. So we have a great—there is much more, but my MP with responsibility for agriculture will talk a little more on the details.

The other one is renewable energy. Countries are turning more and more to renewable energy; this is a growth area. This is a growth area we need to develop for capability and capacity. Innovations provide scope for generating wealth, for sustainable jobs for the future. It is important now since according to world indices, we consume about 9.6 gigawatts of energy. Renewable energy generation will mean more oil and gas would be available for export instead of consumed domestically, adding to the value chain of energy sector and becoming a huge source of savings and wealth. Okay? Of course, providing jobs which we need,
foreign exchange which we need. Therefore, as part of our plan we want to protect this land and ensure that proper steps are taken to minimize the risks of climate change. So several benefits from renewable energy which we can create, which we can sell, earn foreign exchange, we can use our domestic market and, of course, save foreign exchange from having to import all these products now that the Government is shutting down.

E-waste recycling, disassembly of computers, printers, et cetera, to cover reusables. Countries would actually pay you to do this. You then resell the materials. You know, I am sure in Trinidad and Tobago the amount of old computers we have sitting down everywhere, do you know that we can create an industry out of that to disassemble them and then you can sell each part, the pieces of copper, whatever kinds of metals? These are things in renewables. These are things—the circular economy that I spoke about. Look at how much we waste and cause the flooding with these plastic bottles. Why do we not use recycling for those as well and gain moneys from it?

The fifth I talked about—strategy—the return of good governance. Madam Speaker, all these innovations will require complete overall in the governance of this country. But I would like to concentrate on the state enterprise sector for a minute that we will need to do some reform in that sector. State enterprise sector—the reform in the sector. The main challenge to take command of our fortunes lies with reforming the sector. We recognize that many committed employees who work in companies owned by taxpayers, and a plan that ensures the long-term viability of these entities to benefit stakeholders. So what we can do initially, Madam Speaker, the model, which has been tried prior in our market and in other markets like in Singapore, we start by creating a new entity. So you take a state enterprise—by the way, I have seen in the budget documents, in revenue, that
the revenue from state enterprises, from having been in billions, in the next fiscal year, these books here, for 2019, the status has gone down to 500 million. I will ask the hon. Minister of Finance if he would be kind enough to tell us why has the dividends coming in from the state enterprises dropped to such a small amount. I suspect part of it is because of the NIF, but that will be a very important point.

So here we are, you take the state enterprises; we have many of them. The majority is not profitable; you create a new entity. Of course, we could decide if we need to change the name. Then the reformation begins to vest the assets of the old enterprise in this new entity giving them a clean slate. You take the debts of the old company, if any, and that would be maintained in the old company. A debt strategy would be followed. A debt strategy workout can include renegotiations of the terms and conditions of the debt. At times it can result in settlement of the debt for less than the face value. And then you capitalize a new company upon consultation with best in class plant property and equipment guided by leading industry, engage private sector investors and these can be from any part of the country or out with the state in a Government structure. This approach would result in the state remaining as a player in all enterprises but ensuring benefits are obtained from goal oriented professionalism that will emerge from synergizing with the private sector and the state will thereby retain ownership. You then mandate the private sector investors and management to return a profit and deliver dividends.

Madam Speaker, Singapore Airlines is one of the most profitable airlines in the world. And what Lee Kuan had done is exactly what I am describing here. He said, listen, run the company, but you must make a dividend, and that—I heard him in an interview—in fact, I have seen a TV interview where he spoke about it, that they had to make the dividend. If not go. They did make dividends and the
company remains one of the most profitable in the world. So people can benefit from improved efficiency, business models and so on, quality service and delivery, dividends to the coffers of the state. Productivity pay is another area that can be looked at, and that approach— What I am describing here is not the approach contemplated for Petrotrin, eh, as revealed thus far to us as opposed to the outright sell out of our patrimony at Petrotrin. That is not the model that I am advocating.

Such an approach, however, we will not take with essential services, those stated crises in essential services, such as those that have to do with national security and key utilities. There are scores of state enterprises and many of them may be amenable to such a plan. From the State Enterprise Performance Monitoring Manual there are 80 state enterprises, 44 wholly-owned, seven majority owned, three less than 50 per cent owned, 26 indirectly owned as subsides of the State. So this is a major area. The State should not be involved in—what is it? Seafood? They have a company known as the seafood board. So you have—how many they say?—80 boards up-running companies. You are paying salaries. You are paying for the board. You are paying for salaries, and so on. No profit. And really what are you doing with a seafood board? Maybe at one time it was a viable something whenever it was created. I just used that as one example, but many of them really do very little, and it is not because the workers do not want to work, but really that is not the way to be caught up in business for the Government.

One other matter here, job creation. I have spoken about this before to designate the East-West Corridor as a special growth pole. We have a highly educated and skilled workforce along the corridor. They need jobs. Because the target industry is food processing, and packaging, manufacture of basic medical supplies, needles, bandages, gloves and so on, why can we not create jobs for our own citizens? We can manufacture medical furniture, beds, trolleys, chairs, office
and school furniture, home furniture, specialist chemicals for the oil and gas industry, garment manufacturing, foundry for precision casting, glass-work for manufacture of panes, household glassware, optical lens. These are things that we can do. These are industries that we can create to provide jobs along the corridor when we designate it as a growth pole, special growth pole. Manufacture simple household equipment, simple electronic assembly, and you start simple but as the workforce builds then we will get more sophisticated.

The other area I see that we can use for growth has to do with corporation tax. I have seen in the United States—I have read. I have not seen, I have read. Under the Trump administration, what they have done is to reduce taxes and what that does is it attracts investment because you leave a country—in fact, our tax rate is now higher than they have, eh—corporation tax. Apple, for example, one of the largest companies in the world, Apple started to repatriate back into the US when they decreased the tax rates because Apple says, “Well now look we could go in, we can make money”—bear it home. So we will implement a phased reduction in corporation tax over a five-year period. [Desk thumping] Because you see that corporation tax, you know when the Minister—I think when the Minister came he was saying “Oh this for the small man. He had to tax the big man because you blah, blah, blah. Big man had to pay for small man.” All of that is airy fairy, airy fairy.

In order to grow the economy we have to grow the manufacturing sector. We have to have small businesses. We have to have big businesses. You cannot have productivity. You cannot earn foreign exchange. You cannot create the kinds of jobs that we need if you do not stimulate the manufacturing sector. And so, a UNC government on a phased basis will reduce the corporation tax over a five-year period. This will attract foreign investors—and they are three years in
office. I have said it before, not one single foreign direct investment, and on top of that not getting any. No FDI. No, FDI. You are borrowing money from China. The Mitsubishi plant happened under my watch. [Desk thumping] When you came you stalled it because you wanted to negotiate for whatever reason. Yes. And so, we reduced that tax.

I mentioned earlier about you have net outflow of foreign direct investment. It is of inflows. So here we are. This will attract foreign investors. It will give a boast to small and medium manufacturers and so, they will increase investment in plant equipment, efficient technology and research and development. That is what we need to grow the economy. That is what we need to grow revenue. That is what we need to grow forex. It makes no sense to overtax our local businesses, taking money out of their pockets only to inefficiently try to return it in directed subsidies. So you are taking it away here and then you say I am giving you 50 cents a day. That is the joke of the centenarian. You know, all of them banging their desk. This Minister says he is giving this grant and when you work out the grant it is 50 cents a day, 55 cents. Great deal, great deal.

12.00 noon

You know, if you go to the supermarket—I wonder if they go to the supermarket. If you go to the supermarket, you cannot even buy the bag to put the groceries. “You cyah even buy the bag with that 50 cents a day. So do not come here and thump yuh chest and bang yuh desk and yuh helping the poor man, when yuh coming to property tax him, when yuh sending up the fuel price”, and when the hon. Minister could tell this country—what he said about the fuel tax? It would not hurt anybody or it is a good thing for people? [Interruption] It will help poor people. Where is he living? Already, the prices have gone up. Taxi fares, look I have the route—it is okay—well, I have the route thing that they have given out.
Taxi fares have already gone up, already gone up. That is why I said they are living in a fantasy island. So corporation tax on banks, in our plan, will remain. Businesses know best and where how to allocate their money, Less Government interference is better for improvement.

Over the five-year period due to the phase basis, the impact on Government revenue will be offset by increased jobs because you see they will have more money, they will invest and there will be more jobs. When they have less money, they are firing workers, less productivity. Increased jobs will lead to a reduction of persons who are dependent on the social safety net where you have to give these subsidies. “Pretend yuh helping them and give them 50 cents ah day.” In essence, taxing at a lower rate of a much larger economic pie, as compared to taxing a higher rate of a smaller and declining economic pie, that will grow the economy, enable businesses to expand. Local businesses are at a great disadvantage at current taxation rates. Export capacity will only increase as some of the large export markets we are targeting have lower tax rates. I mentioned it earlier. And so we become uncompetitive. SMEs will grow faster at these new lower rates and new businesses owned by young entrepreneurs will be better able to get off the ground. So these are some of the parts of the plan with respect to the economy and growing the economy. But we also have plans with respect to national security, with respect to health care, with respect to agriculture and many of the other sectors in our economy.

But I really want to spend a little time on Petrotrin because that is the elephant in the room. For three hours, the hon. Minister spoke but did not engage on anything new about Petrotrin, about the workers, about where they were going or not going. I have just been handed a letter dated October 05, 2018, today, now:

Distribution of Letters of Termination
Based on overwhelming feedback received during this week’s employee communication sessions, the Interim Executive Transition Team has decided to accelerate the distribution of termination letters.

The distribution of these letters will commence this morning.

October 05, 2018.

Given the sensitive nature of this exercise, we kindly ask that everyone be at the ballroom point of the Staff Club at the time specified for them to collect their letters.

How contemptuous! [Desk thumping] How contemptuous! You want them to come to the ballroom to collect what? “Yuh pink slip, the termination letter man.”

We want to remind all employees of the need to continue to observe the policies of the company and in particular, those policies that seek to protect the company’s assets, its employees from misuse and abuse. Article F, Appropriate Workplace Behaviour, states: Dishonest or illegal activities on company premises or while on company business will not be condoned and can result in disciplinary action, including dismissal and criminal prosecution.

Can you believe? Could result in what? Dismissal. “Buh yuh tell them come and collect yuh firing letter”, you have already dismissed them. Firing in HDS.

The non-observance of policies could jeopardize health and safety— and so on.

Reynold Ajodhasingh,

Executive Director

Dated today. You know, Madam, people are in a courthouse. There is a matter pending before the courts and it will not breach a sub judice rule, but therefore, this, in my respectful view, is a contempt of court. [Desk thumping]
You know, Petrotrin has been the exclusive supplier of the energy fuel in our lives—from the LPG we cook with, the gasoline we need for our cars, a wide range of lubricants, fuels, feedstock and so on, downstream, medication, fertilizers, plastics and so much more. When I was researching for this debate, I came across something that speaks to the legacy of Pointe-à-Pierre refinery and indeed it is very relevant to our future. What is not widely known is that the Pointe-à-Pierre refinery helped win a world war. On December 07, 1941, the Japanese bombed the US base at Pearl Harbour. George Beeby-Thompson was appointed officer in charge of Trinidad’s operations and the Department of Mines was mandated to organize the production of fuel for World War II. The refinery at Pointe-à-Pierre was then placed under military surveillance by both local and foreign security officials. Wartime demands for refined products had to be increased and a new refinery at Pointe-à-Pierre was built in 1940. For security reasons, the project was named 1234 and was started and completed in 14 months. That is the legacy of that Petrotrin refinery, helped to win a world war, Second World War, Madam Speaker.

And given in our very volatile world, this is a very important thing. Energy security is exceedingly important. [Desk thumping] This is how Pointe-à-Pierre refinery and Trinidad and Tobago was so important in terms of getting products to fight that war—I mean, the story goes on. The historical record goes on as to how much we actually produced and so on. So Petrotrin history makes it all the more difficult to accept the Government’s mismanagement of Petrotrin. We have seen mismanagement of similar proportions with the Tobago seabridge. We are seeing it again with Petrotrin and in the end, guess what? It is sufferation. People are suffering. We are worried that the situation being created will allow the Government to sell Petrotrin refinery at bargain basement prices to a preferred
financier. [Desk thumping] The Public Procurement and Disposal of Property Act, 2015, has not been fully proclaimed by the Government. And I mean no disrespect to the Office of the President and so on since the Procurement Regulator falls under that office but I intend to write Her Excellency regarding this matter requesting her to exercise her power as Head of State to advise the Government to hold their hands on the sale of any Petrotrin assets until that Act is fully proclaimed. [Desk thumping]

Over the past five weeks, tens of thousands of people who rely on Petrotrin for their livelihoods have woken up every day uncertain as to when the Government could change the course of their lives with a fateful announcement on that day and it happened today, Madam Speaker. It happened today. Tens of thousands of people now, those directly at the refinery and others. Many contradictory statements have been made. Even the number affected, is very day to day—one day, 1,700; one day, 5,000. It is outrageous, however, to suggest that only 5,000 jobs will be affected by this closure. You see no refinery would mean no transit through the neighbourhood, through the towns and villages, no transport. Taxis supplying these businesses migrate. In other areas, businesses that are highly dependent on sales may also slow down. So when all the Prime Minister’s handpicked Chairman of Petrotrin can say, when he could say all, all, all, all, all, all, when asked about how many, each and every one of those, I say, represents more than one person because their families.

Between August 30th and September 4th, the Energy Chamber conducted a survey of 400 Chamber companies and they said one-third indicated they expected to retrench workers due to closing of the refinery. I have demanded from the EMA to disclose whether or not a certificate of environmental clearance has been granted for the decommissioning and the closure of Petrotrin’s refinery as is required by
law. The closure of the refinery without satisfying legal requirements of the EMA Act will have catastrophic and cataclysmic effects on the environment. This is a matter of great public importance. It will affect every single one. So how did we get here?

Part one, 05 to 10: Problems at Petrotrin are the result of corruption and management of the PNM over the years. [Desk thumping] The Government crying all over the place that they have to take US $850 million bullet payment to be paid, another 250 and so on to be made. Well documented. These debts are debts incurred and borrowings made during the last PNM Government. [Desk thumping] They pursued a strategy of pumping large sums of borrowed money into the refinery while allowing the exploration and production part of the company to decline. This is why my administration, when we got into office, focused on E&P, went through the very aggressive incentive strategies to grow the economy. This is why we focused on E&P to bring back the [Inaudible] to country.

The records will show between ’05 and ’10 the ill-fated ’and scandal World GTL project ended with Petrotrin spending $3.15 billion. And when the case was brought, and the case was before the court, this Government withdrew it from the court, withdrew it. [Desk thumping] Withdrew the case to save one of their own, withdrew the case. So now the workers and their families have to suffer for what happened under that Petrotrin board under Malcolm Jones. The GOP increased, the gas optimization, $2.4 billion in ’05 to $12.6 billion when it was completed. The ultra-lower sulphur diesel project rose $7.91 million to guess what? $2.89 billion. What was going on there? How could any Government have sat down and allowed these astronomical increases in cost overruns? And some of those sitting here were Members of the Cabinet. [Desk thumping] If I am not mistaken, the hon. Member for Diego Martin West, Diego Martin North/East, Arouca/Maloney.
The Members of the Cabinet who were the ones to oversee the cost overruns which have now saddled and strapped Petrotrin into the position it is in here today.

We saw a sharp decline in Trinmar’s production to 33.5 thousand barrels per day in ’05 went down to 22.3 barrels per day in 2010. The two international bonds I mentioned for a collective US $1.6 billion. Upon assuming office, you said “What did I do?” When we got into office, we sued Malcolm Jones to try to recover the moneys lost. When we got there, I mandated that the strategic plan be implemented at Petrotrin to ensure that accountability and transparency were the foundation of decisions. I have already spoken about focus on exploration and the production and the returns which are benefiting us up to today and will benefit us tomorrow. How did we get here?

Part two, 15 to 18. Petrotrin, under this Government, has had three management teams in the last three years. Just like the Port Authority, Petrotrin went through three chairmen in three years. With so many changes, it is not surprising they have no consistent plan. They could not develop it or execute even if they had one. It is noteworthy under my watch that before the 2015 election, Petrotrin was able to source an unsecured loan for US $500 million [Desk thumping] from eight international banks. The loan required no Government guarantee. This loan could have provided capital to help maintain stability at Petrotrin. You know what happened? Once they came into office, they rejected this measure, rejected the unsecured loan, putting Petrotrin into further problems.

I want to tell you something that—some of the falsehoods they have been perpetrating. Deceptions and falsehoods. One, Petrotrin has paid no taxes and is a burden on the State, false. The EITI made clear that between 2010 and 2016, Petrotrin made payments in the sum of TT $20 billion; 2011, it was $3.6 million under my watch; 2012, $1.5 billion under my watch; 2013, $4.2 billion under my
watch; 2014, $6.7 billion; 2015, $4.1 billion. TTEITI has reported that the $4.1 billion can be used to pay every public servant’s salary, pay for the GATE and meet the budget in the Ministry of Agriculture.

I call on the Minister of Finance to clearly state the amount of any payments made by Petrotrin to the Government for fiscal 2016 and 2017. I have documents which show that payments were made and I call upon the Minister to confirm or tell this country \[Desk thumping\] whether payments were made in fiscal ’16 and ’17. The EITI data is in public knowledge up to 2015.

Further too, the refinery has not made a profit. False. False. At a Joint Select Committee in February here in this Parliament, the board told the country that Petrotrin had generated a free cash flow of TT $1.8 billion between the years 2013 to ’17. Was the board lying? Do you think the board came here and lied to this Parliament, Madam, or spoke untruths? I know but I would not expect their board to come here to tell untruths to the Parliament. And further, the unaudited financial statements showed a gross of $1.1 billion, 2017, gross. Further false statement: The company is close to insolvency. They have announced that. The audited financial statements for 2017 show this is not true. How many are going home? Again, the discrepancy with the numbers and so on which I have already said is so disgraceful and disrespectful to watch them. The numbers do not matter.

What do the reports say? Not one single report, Lashley, Solomon and whoever else, we do not even know who they are. Not one report that we know of recommended the closure of the refinery. \[Desk thumping\] All the reports that we know of, the reports commissioned, they spoke to refining various processes to improve Petrotrin. They did not recommend closing down. I call upon the Government to tell this country who advised them to shut down the refinery? \[Desk thumping\] Who advised them to shut down the refinery? Not one of the
reports. And by the way, for these reports, they paid—these reports and some other consulting—$63 million, you know. Twenty something for one of them but they had some other consultants eh. There were some other consultants, but a lot of money paid for these reports and you did not even follow any of them. What you paid that money for? Why waste that money? Because they were telling you, do not shut down, we are giving you a plan to move forward.

And when the people came here before the Joint Select Committee, they said that, when the board from Petrotrin. They would have to close Petrotrin to ensure that no records will be found and so on, you know. Petrotrin would have to be closed. Why would they try so hard to mislead the public? What about the matter of the fake oil and the Prime Minister’s best friend? Who is the Prime Minister’s best friend? What implications are there in this matter? Are there any PNM operatives who are allegedly implicated in massive corruption of millions of dollars from Petrotrin? They would have to close Petrotrin to ensure those records—not Petrotrin, the refinery—that you do not find them. So where do we go from here? Where do we go?

I spoke about the history of Petrotrin under the last Government to highlight the differences of their Government and ours. We took a failing Petrotrin and we turned it around to a success. I told you we showed how much we paid in taxes and royalties. I have showed you how we turned around for the gas and oil sector. PNM took a profitable Petrotrin which was making tax payments and they ran it to the ground. [Desk thumping] In less than one month, the tens of thousands whose livelihood depends on Petrotrin—well, I thought was less than one month but look, it is here already, today. The effects of the closure of that refinery will have a contagion effect on south and central communities and in fact, on the entire financial system. Where will families turn? To whom will they turn when they
have their mortgages to pay? How will parents tell their children we cannot send them to school, cannot send them to university anymore? What explanation will businesses give to their creditors when they cannot pay, when their debts become due? This Government has proven that it is not prepared to listen to the people, did not listen to the people, it is not prepared to listen to the union, is not prepared to listen to the experts because all the reports, not one said close down. They are intent in selling out the assets of our country to the chosen few. This will be the greatest loss to our future generation and as a people, we ought not to allow this to happen. [Desk thumping]

Countless times, the PNM has been voted out of Government you know. For what? For greed, corruption, bonding and “debting” us back into slavery to colonial entities and each time, we, on this side, we step. We have to pick up the pieces, mending the economy, creating opportunities. It is now instructed that the PNM will never occupy that PNM Government again. [Desk thumping] The polls are coming in. Their own political pundits and advisors are telling them the same. The people want you out of Government. [Desk thumping] So what do they decide to do? Mash up, destroy everything good in Trinidad and Tobago. What they think is that we will not be able to fix it and as they laugh down on us more, they can run off to enjoy the spoils of this perverse feast.

I want to assure you firstly, we will not stand back and allow you to destroy our country. [Desk thumping] When I speak, I speak with the authority of not just hundreds of thousands who voted against you in 2015 but the thousands more who have come on our side. [Desk thumping] And even with the worst of the damages that you can do, let me assure you that I will once, again, lead the Government with the experience, the innovation, the intelligence and the heart for the people to work with them to overcome this period that they have gone through. [Desk
And believe me, neither history nor the citizens will vindicate you. The country will never forgive you. [Desk thumping]

With all the voices on the Opposition Bench, with the trade unions, the workers, the men and women on the street, the children in schools, on their behalf, I call upon this Government, you must not close the refinery. [Desk thumping] You must look to other solutions. You must keep our energy sector and preserve our energy security. You must preserve jobs and retain our lands. You will not sell our assets. You will not be allowed to destroy our legacy in the petroleum sector over 100 years old. You will not be allowed to sell out our patrimony. You will no longer be allowed to abuse the citizens each day. We will fight you in here, we will oppose you in public and we will take you to the courts and we will win. [Desk thumping]

And that is not the only reason that they will never forgive you. Again, you have put out a document, the Vision 2030, this document. Very first time, after more than three years in office, faced by an anxious population demanding to hear what you have achieved in your three years and so, so we come up with the report in progress. I prayed to God that no one was paid to write up this report “yuh know”. I hope it was free from PNM activists. To begin with, the document is produced at September 2018 and purports to give comparative data for 2018. How in the world can you assess achievements even before the year fiscal is complete? How? How? When one examines the data, it is very unhelpful to draw conclusions.

I noticed in the previous incarnation, they had Vision 2020. Government now has laid Vision 2030. I am told that when someone has perfect vision, it is 2020. But when you have 2030 vision, [Laughter] “yuh going blind”. It seems that the Government is visionless. They have underperformed in every Ministry,
every sector by their own admission when we look at the book. They have judged themselves and after three years, when you go through this, you will be amazed. They have on their own admission, exposed their own failures and non-performance.

Let us take housing for example. When I opened this document, I thought it was a joke. Every single indicator in the housing sector is guess what? To be determined. Every single one, to be determined. TBD, yeah, it is a TBD document. Three years, five housing Ministers, including the Prime Minister, Member for Diego Martin West. If you cannot account for how many houses you inherited, how many houses you have distributed, then something is terribly wrong. I do not want to be discourteous to the Minister of Housing but we do know that he knows a lot about housing and apartments. [Laughter] This Government is unable to say how many units completed, how many distributed, how many loans granted to purchase or how many grants were disbursed in their own document. All that is to be determined. All of it. They are unable to account for any of these things because guess why? They have done nothing. [Desk thumping] Not a single new home was constructed under this Government. Finance told us that there are over 176,000 applicants who have to get basic housing and so on. After three years based on their own document, the data suggest that they have not started and completed a single house on a new housing site, not designed or developed by either my administration or that of the former late Patrick Manning.

Education, the Vision 2030 document told us Trinidad and Tobago ranked 48 out of 137 under Pillar 4, Health and Primary Education on the Global Competitive Index 2017/18. Well that sounds really great; 48 out of 137, very good. You know what happened? How shocked I was because I wanted to go
back and check this. When I went and looked at the GCI myself, 2017/18, to check it, you know where Trinidad was ranked? 60. “Is 6—[Interruption] they fudge the number. Fudge the number or put out a blatant untruth. I hope it is a typo eh because I really would not like to believe that a Government will mislead by fabricating statistics in this manner. That would be tantamount to conmanship if that were the case. It shows that anything they tell us, we just cannot believe them. Madam, I am only hearing she, she, she, she, I hope it is not me and it is another she perhaps. [Madam Speaker raises hand] Thank you.

Mr. Imbert: “Woman, just read yuh thing.” [Crosstalk]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: “Woman, read yuh thing.”

Madam Speaker: Member. Member for Diego Martin North/East, I heard that and I know you know better. So if you will just stand up, withdraw it and let us continue.

Mr. Imbert: Certainly, Madam Speaker, I apologize profusely.

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you. This woman will read her thing and will continue to speak the truth. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Speak the truth. [Desk thumping] The truth hurts, you know, Madam.

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia, we have passed that. The Member has got up, he has apologized and I really do not think it is proper for you to repeat it. Let us go on, please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Madam. I will continue to speak for the people. [Desk thumping] I continue to stand for the people. [Desk thumping] I will continue to raise my voice here in this Parliament in their defence [Desk
thumping] and no amount of heckling is going to stop me from doing that. So education, back to this document, the TBD document. I said this GCI, typo or deliberate, to fool people, I cannot say. We cannot believe them. They have done nothing for the primary education sector, nothing for secondary and nothing for tertiary. My colleagues will go into more detail on this thing. Through their incompetence, schools remained closed since the school term reopened. Children have to flush toilets. You know, they are taking buckets of water in the school. To do what? Flush toilets. The same day when we were reading big billion-dollar budget here, many of our schools were in disrepair and then, of course, the high level of violence.

When you look at this very document, their TBD document, the number of students who benefited from GATE in 2017 was 29,492. Do you know how many now? Do you know how many now? I remember election night 2010, a nice beautiful child stand up crying saying “Kamla will”—in Balisier House, “Kamla will take away GATE, Kamla will shut down CEPEP” and so on. Who is taking away the GATE? Who is shutting down the CEPEP? Look in the books and you will see the allocation for CEPEP, whether your MPs know it or not. They are going to get fired in your constituencies too yuh know, do not think it is not just mine “cuz they fired mine long time”. In your constituencies, the allocation for the CEPEP has gone right down. In the other programmes where people could have “ah lil job”, yes, it is not the best job but you could make a “lil” money to feed your family.

12.30p.m.

GATE, 29,492, under my watch. Now it is 17,924. When you put all of this together, property tax, fuel prices, not getting help “fuh de GATE, fuh ya chirren tuh go tuh school, uh, taxes and so on”. What is going to happen? “De sufferation,
sufferation under dis Government.” And then you want to say—

You know, I thought the *Newsday* was very unkind to the hon. Minister you know, “when dey say it was ah small man budget”. [Laughter] No, it said “small man budget”. I always thought he was a big man. I mean, I was really—I think it was disrespectful to the hon. Minister. [Laughter]

**Madam Speaker:** Order.

**Mr. Imbert:** “Read yuh ting nah.”

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I will. I will. I will continue to read. So, here we are, GATE and education. And those numbers I am getting from their book, eh Madam. These are not anywhere. It is in the TBD book. What this means is, it is as if Government shut down the GATE. They have displaced 11,568 students from attaining a tertiary level education.

You know, this is not one, two, or three or four, or five. Because I heard them when they said they took away the food cards from how many people?

**Hon. Members:** Eighteen thousand.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Eighteen thousand. “And then dey coming tuh give 50 cents ah day or something.” You know, and then they are saying “cheaters”. You mean 18,000 people were cheaters? Eighteen thousand you are saying in this country? If you got 100, 200, 300—18,000 people? “Man, not serious.” You cannot be serious. Hon. Prime Minister, they are not telling you the truth, 18,000. And here we are now, these children with the GATE, 11,568 taken off. They were cheaters too? All these people? No man, I cannot believe that. Their achievement in tertiary is to disqualify, disenfranchise 11,568 students. So you are not even training people for the jobs. You are heading, we are heading, over the cliff.

Every year in health care, the Minister tells us how many hospitals he is
going to build, throwback to each budget, hear about the Arima Hospital, Point Fortin, and so on. There is a need for more beds. We hear cries about it. In this document, the TBD document, do you know what happened? Nothing has been done to deal with the problem of the provision of hospital beds. Their own document. Look, open the Couva Hospital. [Desk thumping] Open it. You can get 230 beds immediately.

We look at public safety and security. On the homicide detection rate, they do not have a target rate. So you do not know what is your target. Because that is how this document is made up, the baseline, the target and then what the achievement is. So you have none. They do not have a target rate on what they want. But it shows that they have no plan, no target. So you are operating in a vacuum, in a “vaps”. And then to make themselves look good, you know what they did? They placed their target of the crime rate detection for serious recorded crimes as 32 per cent. Do you know where it was before? Thirty-one per cent. “Dis 1 per cent thing, ah doh know what dis—people get upset ’bout dis 1 per cent thing, yuh know?” So they are being deceptive with the stats. The 1 per cent increase in the detection rate for murder is negligible by itself, and let us not fool ourselves, you know.

Today, thus far, as from, before I came in here, the murder rate is what? Four hundred and seven.

Hon. Members: Eight.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Four hundred and eight now. You know, since the “Minister of Everything”, Minister Young, sorry, has become the Minister of National Security, he has become the “Minister of Nothing”. We do not hear anything from him again. Murder rate at 407/8 now. Not a word.

I do have in my brief, which I will pass to my colleagues to share with you.
our tremendous concern with respect to what has happened in the arena of crime. Because that is one with the most important priorities, and we do have plans for dealing with the situation. [Desk thumping]

Listen, he comes to this Parliament and tells us about a uniform change. Well, change—we do not need a uniform change, we need a Government change to stem the crime. [Desk thumping] He comes to tell us here that one way to deal with crime is—what? Install GPS. Do you all have short memories? Are you living here? We did that since 2014. [Desk thumping] Since 2014. So I was going through some of the TBDs, but I will leave the rest for my colleagues because it is a lot.

One of them that is the most ironic is this one, in foreign relations. Somebody has to be delusional here, delusional. Do you know what they said? One of their achievements is improving foreign relations. And do you know, ironically, how are they doing that, is by reducing the number of overseas missions. I mean, delusional. Achievement: improving foreign relations. And how do you do it? By reducing overseas missions. Please explain that, please?

Transport system: Again, falsehoods, eh. They said the baseline for transport/road, in 2015 was—guess what? Two point seven kilometres. Madness. The whole country knows that we built this highway here, the Valencia Highway, Diego Martin, all, Caroni. I mean, 2.7 kilometres, only to make yourself look good, because you really did not build any highways. No roads. In one year alone we built—1,100 roads, we paved in one year.

Public utilities: “Well, we taking dat. We taking dat one.” Public utilities in this book. In 2015, 93.6 per cent of the population had water. Water to the homes. [Desk thumping] Yes, we were very ambitious and talked about water for all. But we were, in their document, I am taking that blame, but we had 93.6 water
going to homes. We take that one. “We taking dat one.” They have admitted no progress. When they are giving their thing, they have made no progress for 2015. [Crosstalk] Okay my dear.

Fiscal balance: Well, let me go again. Fiscal balance, the year 2018 has come and gone. The Minister promised balanced budget, gone and gone. When you look at the book, this same one, I am sorry to lift it up, this Vision 2030 report. Do you know what it says about fiscal balance in this book? The Government—you will see there is no target. Nothing was done. There is no plan to balance the budget. There was no target. “So how you balancing budget?” In a “vaps”, in a vacuum. Because you cannot do it. [Interruption] And so, a “palancing”. You are right. It is “palancing” left, right, “palancing”. Then we look at the marginal job loss. The promises and falsehoods. Marginal job loss, full employment, I spoke about that already.

We have the best health care here, the best health care, Madam. But every chance they get they are flying off to the United States. We have the best health care in the Commonwealth. I wonder if they even understand, what comprises the Commonwealth? Fifty-two nations. I was Chair of the Commonwealth, so I very well know it, 52 nations—Chair in office. [Interruption] Chair in office, I was. Chair in office of the Commonwealth. [Desk thumping]

**Madam Speaker:** For all Members who do not recognize, I am on my legs. Member for Siparia, continue.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you, Madam. I repeat, I had the honour and privilege to represent Trinidad and Tobago as the Chair of the Commonwealth [Desk thumping] as the first woman, and I do thank the late hon. Patrick Manning for calling that election early, which allowed that to happen. I would not hide that, unlike you would hide how you became the FATF-whatever. You would not tell
us how you became but we know, we knew. It was when then Attorney General—that is what happened. It is Government in continuity as we say, in some places. So here we go. I am not going to get distracted. I have a lot of things to say. We have the best health care here. Fly off. I think in the Commonwealth—I think they distracted us, you know—52 nations. Do you know what some of those nations are? Canada—

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 53(f), please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Gosh, come on, I just have 20 minutes.

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia, I guess you could rise above that, please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I will shout above it, Ma’am, thank you. We have Canada. Best health care in Trinidad? We have Australia. We have the United Kingdom, New Zealand, India, South Africa. And we have the best health care here? Nothing is further from the truth, Madam Speaker. Fantasy, Fantasy Island. [Desk thumping] What is so hypocritical, is you leave everybody else here “to catch”. Have to wait so long to get appointments. “Cannot get bed in hospital”, and so on, and you fly off to California. Another one went to wherever it was, the USA. I mean no disrespect to you, but that is reality. So if we have the best health care here, stay home, why are you going abroad? Why are you going abroad? I do not understand it.

Why did you send one of your PNM people from the THA to India, with THA funds, when there is no provision in law? There is no Head, no line Item for that to happen. Sent off to India. Why? And then you want to—who are you fooling? Who are you fooling? Best health care here, and you cannot give our children the surgery that they need, the life-saving surgery. To me, that is the most callous.

And when asked if you would amend the law—when we did the law, that
was historic law by the way. When we did the Children’s Life Fund, it was historic, the first of its kind in our country to help our children. Every law, you come here every day with amendments to law, all the laws you come with amendments. Now, having seen the large number of children who are being left out, because of the definition, when asked if you would consider amending it, the Prime Minister gave no undertaking. I give the undertaking. I will amend that law. [Desk thumping] I will amend it. [Desk thumping]

Gas price increase will benefit the poor. Taxi fares have increased. Somebody sent me something about the number of vehicles. The Minister had originally said that—someone had sent me—it is not true to say that the majority of vehicles do not use super. That is not true to say. I have the numbers somewhere. It is not true to say that. Because the amount of litres—on the price increase to the super fuel, the Minister stated the cost of public will not be unduly affected. Prices are already increasing. And the numbers here, gone up on the eighth, the super produced by NP far exceeds, it think it is by almost a million liters, the fuel from diesel.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: You want ours to use?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: No, no, no. You do not have that data. This is from NP. But thank you. You are the TBD, but thank you for offering us your help. So, we have all of these here. We have all of these things that are promises and falsehoods, and so on.

I will move on, Madam Speaker, before I close, on the price increase with this $1. I am saying it is not true from information I have that the majority do not use super. From the information I have, the majority does use super. Okay? And, therefore, it is going to be widespread. Already you are seeing it going off into price increases. This means that March 2017, March 2018, I am told the volume of
super sold was 516 million litres. The volume of premium sold was 23 million litres. So it means that drivers of super, versus premium, exceeds by 23 million. Let me go over that, Madam. Super drivers, they are selling diesel 516 million litres; yes? Sorry. Super, 516 litres; 23 million litres—

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Pass it for me. I will read it for you.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Oh please! I can read for myself.

**Hon. Members:** Ooohhh.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** No, but you keep—they keep heckling and harassing, heckling and harassing, because the truth hurts. The truth hurts.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Siparia.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** No man, you all shouting at me and I must stay here and listen. I am very tired of you.

**Madam Speaker:** Members, Members, order. We understand this arena is one where there is banter and I am sure all Members have a certain tolerance for that. We have a few minutes left. I will ask Members to conduct themselves in a parliamentary way and give this Chamber the decorum it requires. Member for Siparia.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I thank you again, Madam Speaker. 516 million litres, super; 23 million litres, premium. Okay? So, 96 per cent of drivers use super versus premium, and super exceeds diesel by 100 million liters. So from this data from NP, NP data, the majority use super. [*Desk thumping*] And I would like to know why the hon. Minister has changed his mind. Because on 08 October, 2012, debating the Appropriation Bill, the Member for Diego Martin North/East told this House:

> “The petroleum subsidy was put for a reason.”

The Minister remembers it. He is smiling. So maybe he will explain why he
changed his mind.

“It was put in to protect people, to help them to deal with the high cost of petroleum products…few countries in the world…have a Petroleum Levy Act…They do comparisons to other countries…but…do not tell you that none of those countries has a Petroleum Production Levy and Subsidy…where the oil companies are taxed on behalf of the people…to reduce the cost of petroleum products.”

These are not my words. This is not fake news or alternative facts. This is the Member for Diego Martin North/East who has turned around, about turn, full circle. Life is a turnaround, full circle, to put on this levy.

The social sector grants, I have spoken about already. The fiscal measures, the fuel subsidy will definitely impact on everyone. The social sector grants, I have talked about it. Whilst I am sure that these persons who will receive it will be happy for the 50 cents, it is really a slap in the face when you are dropping all these other taxes and hardships on people.

Okay, Madam Speaker, as I come down to the end of my contribution, I just wanted to share with you a few of the proposals we had for crime, because it is so important. Clearly, we will have to go beyond police stations and smart phones and uniforms, into deeper, social and psychological issues in the fight against crime. Our philosophy is that we will invest in people, community, and by community, we will build the nation.

We propose the introduction of community and village co-ordination officers programme where officers will walk into the communities. This will be integrated with a technology backbone to ensure two-way flow of communication. We believe a fundamental principle of modern policing is that policing is a two-way street, citizens are more likely to listen. A common thread you will find
running through all our plans is about education and training, investing in people. And so, one of our proposals will be to allocate part of the campus at UWI, Debe, for training of protective services, doubling as a faculty for both the public and training of protective services, [Desk thumping] certificates, diplomas, degrees, degrees in policing, postgraduate degrees. This will allow our servicemen and women to build sustainable and fulfilling careers to perform their duty to the nation.

In addition, we propose that we accommodate, at the UWI Campus, Debe, part of it, that we use part of it for a forensic science centre and to create programmes for forensic science as well, degree programmes, diploma programmes. We are in dire need of persons with training in forensics and we are in dire need of a properly-functioning forensic science centre.

Witness Protection Programme: I am told that one of the murders recently was because—and this is down in my area, in my constituency—I think it is Dr. Moonilal’s—one of it had to do with the fact the guy was a witness and he had given the police evidence. And they came—that video was circulated—they just came straight so and shot the guy. It was clear that they came directly for this guy. That was in Mahase Road, I believe. The Witness Protection Programme must be dealt with, properly resourced.

The Justice Protection Act: We will repeal it and replace it to bring law into provisions, laws to operationalize the relationship between our country and the Caricom and others and provide proper protection. We will bring legislation to wipe out corruption in the protective services and a special court to deal with corruption in the public service, the protective services and the public service.

We will bring—[Crosstalk]

Hon. Member: I hope you make it retroactive.
Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes, I will make it retroactive and come for you [Desk thumping] and your Prime Minister’s best friend, A&V Drilling.

Protection for victims of domestic violence: We will need to, again revamp that entire Domestic Violence Act. We will take a community-based approach. We did it before and we can do it again, to bring down crime in Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker. So these are some of the—my colleague here on my left will share some more with you.

So, in conclusion, anyone who looked or listened to the Minister’s speech on Monday, knows that the turnaround he speaks about is not real. It cannot be felt, it cannot be seen, it cannot be touched, it cannot be smelled, it cannot be tasted. So it is not real, because we see and we know things through our five senses. That is how any human being knows the world; through your five senses. There has been no turnaround of empty pockets, no turnaround of empty kitchen cupboards, no turnaround of empty wallets, no turnaround of job losses, no turnaround of lackluster incompetent performance of the Government.

Last three years, four budgets, they are already campaigning for the next election. The Prime Minister tells us he is not afraid to lose the next election. But you know, in the same breath, you know what the Prime Minister tells us? Balisier House is run better than the Government. I think everyone will agree with me that anything and everything is better run than the Government. [Desk thumping]

No amount of bravado, no amount of strong-arm politics and so on, can change the reality that citizens cannot afford to buy school books. They cannot afford to put bread, or Johnny bake, or roti on the table, many of our citizens. Citizens are fed up of the blame, of the excuses. They are completely fed up of the PNM. Their strategy is not to fix the economy, not to help the small man, not to create jobs, not to uplift the country. Their strategy is to stay in power and to keep
enjoying luxury yachts, golf trips and Mustangs. They do not know or care about your pain, the hardships you face.

I have always told you, no one will control me. I am not for sale. [Desk thumping] I am here for all of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And everywhere I hear the same. Everywhere we go there has been no turnaround. Instead—as I said before—of a turnaround, all we get from this Government is a runaround. [Desk thumping] It is not a turnaround Government at all but a runaround Government. Dey run you in circles. They blame Kamla, blame de police, blame de public servants, blame de police, blame de teachers, blame de unions, blame de economists, and Lord knows who dey will blame next.

This is tragic and frightening crossroads we find ourselves; a Government which appears to be destabilizing every sector, destroying peace of mind, livelihood, taking away democratic rights and protections. The Government has breached its social contract, I said that already, by those who elected them in good faith. My fellow citizens have been repaid with betrayal and treachery, brutality, ingratitude and inhumanity.

When the hon. Member for Diego Martin Central, ended with a song from a foreign, not local performer—

**Hon. Members:** Central?

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Diego Martin North/East, my apologies, Member for Arouca and to Diego Martin North/East. The hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East ended with his song, not a local performer, it was not exactly reflective of the reality of the citizens in our country. I want to offer him a song that he could have really ended with, and this is one by a former Soca Monarch. This is Voice.

“Tell them I don’t need no strap

**UNREVISED**
To defend no people
From the wicked and evil, wo
So, sit down
Rrrock back
Big man look for ah wuk
Yuh too damn evil
If they distress my people den”.

Madam Speaker: Member, Member.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Sorry.

Madam Speaker: I know you are quoting.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Sure, I will withdraw.

Madam Speaker: When you quote it becomes your words in here. And I think some of the words just mentioned are un—so if you can withdraw them, please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I withdraw it.

“If they distress”—
I withdraw that particular word without repeating it.

“If they distress my people den
Fire go bun dem…
Fire go bun dem…”

Madam, can I kindly, through you, tell the Member for Diego Martin North/East: Why did you choose that song? When we look at the lyrics of the song he chose, Madam, that is a farewell song:

“...the end is near and so I face my final curtain.”

[Desk thumping] May I say that the hon. Minister is facing his final curtain with the delivery of that budget speech.

And so, if we are to come out, my fellow countrymen and women, I speak directly to you. If you are really looking for a turnaround in this country, I say to
you turn your face to the rising sun. [Desk thumping] Let the shadows fall behind you. It is time to step out of the shadows. Original quote:

If you want to turn things around, turn your face to the sun and let the shadows fall behind you.

And I will close with a placard I saw when I came to Parliament one day. You know the hon. Prime Minister always tells us: “Meet meh on de pavement. Meet meh on de pavement.” The placard said: “Look, I will riot with my fingers.” I call upon the hon. Prime Minister today, “stop threatening people to come on pavement”. Come out. Go meet us on the campaign trail. Meet us on the hustings and let us get the people, come into the voting booth and vote you out. Call the election now. I thank you, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I think it is agreed now is a convenient time to take the suspension. [Crosstalk] Hon. Members, I think it is agreed it is a convenient time to take the suspension. So we will take the suspension for lunch now. This House now stands suspended till two o’clock.

12.59 p.m.: Sitting suspended.

2.00 p.m.: Sitting resumed.

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan): [Desk thumping] Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I am honoured to make my budget contribution here in the Lower House and I have an advantage that I have two bites of the cherry because I will also be in the Upper House. [Desk thumping] And I am also very privileged to open the batting as it were. This is supposed to be a five-day debate, so I will call it a Test match, so I was expecting pace like fire from the opening bowler. Somehow they felt it was a One-Day or a T-20 and they opened with spin. [Desk thumping] But I will still have to.

Before I begin, Madam Speaker, let me congratulate the Prime Minister, the
Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning and Development for what was an excellent budget. In my recollection, not for many years, has a budget been so well received by a wide cross-section of the population and in my opinion, the vast majority of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, in September 2015, we met the economy in a state of free fall, and listening to the Opposition Leader it is obvious that the Opposition Leader is in denial and is now peddling a new narrative that has no basis in fact. [Desk thumping] We inherited an economy in Trinidad and Tobago in 2015 that was in virtual collapse. And it was basically on the brink of bankruptcy. It has been well articulated, but I will just repeat as the hon. Minister of Finance had said, classically, we were running on fumes. There was three days’ supply of money to run the country. We maxed out the Central Bank overdraft. They do not like to hear it. The Green Fund was mortgaged.

There was no fiscal consolidation and that is an important point because they were experiencing extremely high oil prices. So what they did is that they increased the expenditure, a maximum of $63billion, when oil prices were high, okay? And then what they did, because they budgeted oil price at $65, it went to $100, you have to split half of the additional revenue with the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, that is the law. So, they still spent all the revenue and went to borrow money to put in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. You are borrowing at a higher interest to save at a lower interest—

**Hon. Member:** That is UNC math.

**Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:** If that is not economics “alawho”, I do not know what is. We inherited a bill of virtually $6 billion worth to contractors. Some questionable bills, but we still inherited a bill. There was $5billion in back pay which was liquidated by the Minister of Finance within two years. [Desk
So, there is no issue that we were on the verge of bankruptcy and the
economy was in virtual collapse. Hence the reason, 2016 budget was titled
Restoring Confidence and Rebuilding Trust; obviously, that is the first thing we
had to do. Then we moved ahead in 2017, A Blueprint for Transformation and
Growth; 2018, Changing the Paradigm: Putting the Economy on a Sustainable
Path; and now finally we have reached the Turnaround, as was articulated by the
hon. Minister of Finance. [Desk thumping]

Let me start my discourse with some facts, because we tend to forget the
facts, you know; we tend to forget Hosein from whence we came and from where
we came. Today I go on the record in this Parliament and saying it was the PNM
that has written the economic history of Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping] It
is the PNM that has built the energy sector over the decades, that has been
instrumental in giving Trinidad and Tobago the standard of living that it has now
grown accustomed to. It is the energy sector policy that has been the driver of this
economy for decades.

But, let me highlight three areas, starting in 1973. There was something
called the Arab oil embargo. Everybody of this age group knows about it. Oil
price increased six-fold within a couple months. From $6 to $30-something. We
were lucky at the same time that production off the east coast commenced in Poui,
Teak and Samaan. What we did, Dr. Eric Williams introduced something called the
Petroleum Profits Tax Act in 1974. That is what brought the windfall to the
country, you know, not the oil and not the price, you know, it is the Petroleum
Profits Tax Act. Because, prior to that oil companies were taxed at normal
corporation tax. The petroleum profit tax is a 55 per cent tax on profits. That is
PNM policy. [Desk thumping]
The next oil shock came in 1980 with the Iraq-Iran War when oil prices for the first time in history crossed $100 per barrel—1980 dollars, you know, that is 38 years ago. In today’s equivalent it is probably over $200 per barrel. What did a PNM administration do? We implemented the supplemental petroleum tax, SPT. Today everybody talks about PPT and SPT, PPT and SPT. That is how it originated. PNM policy, again, is a windfall profit tax where government takes part of the windfall that the oil companies had no say in getting that windfall.

We went ahead. And coming out of that oil era, we started to find more gas off the east coast. At that point in time, gas was considered nuisance value to oil production. The royalty rate on gas then in those old E&P licences were TT 1.5ȼ per Mcf. What did a PNM government do? We formed the NGC. The NGC’s first project was to take low pressure gas off the east coast, compress it and pipe it to shore for power generation.

Trinidad and Tobago, because of that, became one of the first countries in the world to generate 100 per cent of its power from gas turbines and natural gas which is the cleanest fuel outside of renewable energy.

Then we developed what is called the Trinidad and Tobago gas model for development. We conceptualized Point Lisas, the NAR had said that is a twilight industry, you know, okay? Well, thank God, it is not twilight because it is what sustains the country today.

And then more importantly, we took the decision under the ’91—’95 Manning administration to get into LNG. The highest revenue this country has ever earned was in 2008 because of Trinidad and Tobago going into the LNG business.

And finally to finish with the fiscal matters here is this administration’s imposition of a 12.5 royalty on natural gas; that is estimated to bring in
appropriately $2.5 billion to $3 billion in fiscal 2019.

What was the state of play when we assumed office? Gas production peaked at 4.3 Bcf in 2010; the hon. Leader of the Opposition likes to compartmentalize this country into who was in power and who was not in power. 2010 was the last year of the Manning administration, it peaked at 4.3 billion cubic feet per day. In 2011, it fell 3.8 and by 2016 it was a mere 3.3 Bcf per day. The NGC was not able to meet demand and was facing claims in excess of 4 billion. Downstream contracts were not renewed, upstream supply contracts were not negotiated; because of the above, there was limited investment in upstream, and finally we had to deal with the state of Petrotrin.

But, before I say what we have done, let me just respond to some of the claims made by the Leader of the Opposition. The UNC likes to speak about this Juniper Project, this Juniper Project and fiscal incentives—I see the Member for Caroni Central “shaking yuh head”—

Dr. Tewarie: No, I “just watching”.

Sen. The Hon. F. Khan: All right. Yes, the UNC provided fiscal incentives that led to the investment decision for Juniper. But through you, Madam Speaker, they threw the baby out with the bathwater. The candle cost more than the funeral. Because by the act what you gave to the oil companies were as follows: 100 per cent write-off on exploration expenditure in the year in which it was expended. You know what is that? You know how much to draw an exploration well?—US$100 million. A company could write off that in the very year without no amortization spread. Capital expenditure in the oil companies is divided into two areas—tangible and intangible. They gave accelerated capital write-off; before that, it was 30-20-10 for tangibles and 20-20-10 continuing for intangibles. Under the UNC the new incentive was 50 per cent in the first year, 30 per cent in the
second year and 20 per cent in the third year; you are allowed to write off all your capital in a mere three years.

What resulted there was a significant drop in tax revenue to the country. So it is all well and good a company drilling and producing gas, you know, but if the State does not extract economic rent from it, especially from a depleting asset it makes no sense. So, you cannot look at one side of the equation. Because at the end of the day, especially with oil and gas management, the State who is the owner of the resource—because it is not renewable, so “when it done it done”—has to extract fair economic rent and when you throw the baby out with the bathwater that is why we are in such a stringent fiscal position today. [Desk thumping]

And let me just debunk one final matter before I get into my core contribution. “Ah fed up” come to this House and hearing about A&V, A&V, A&V. Let me put the facts on the table for the records. An internal audit report into volume discrepancies in the amount of oil supplied from exploration and production to the refinery, which is called overage or shortage, dated August 17th, was prepared by the internal audit department. The report suggested that the discrepancies were attributable to A&V Drilling. Kroll and Gaffney Cline, the two international firms, were recruited to further investigate. They submitted their reports to Petrotrin board.

Petrotrin board decided to terminate the IPSC contract with A&V—IPSC meaning Incremental Production Service Contract. That is the facts. The Petrotrin board, through its lawyers, forwarded the files to the Office of the DPP. Government has nothing to do with that, you know. The Petrotrin board, through its lawyers, forwarded the files to the DPP. Under the terms of the IPSC, this matter is now before arbitration.

That is the story, Madam Speaker, no more, no less. So all this conspiracy
theory about we shutting down Petrotrin to protect A&V—

**Hon. Member:** Nonsense.

**Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:**—I mean, you will shut down a multibillion-dollar operation that is haemorrhaging money for this? That is the long and short of the story. [*Desk thumping*] Those are the facts, the matter is before arbitration and a file has been submitted to the Office of the DPP. We have absolutely no say as to where this leads. So let me just put that to rest once and for all.

So, we met the energy sector in a very bad state, and when the energy sector is in a bad state, Madam Speaker, the national economy is in a bad state. What did we do? What did the Prime Minister do? This matter was so serious and had such far-reaching effect and impact on the national economy, it called for prime-ministerial intervention, and I will give you some strategic intervention that was made by the Prime Minister.

First and foremost, he reconstituted the Standing Committee on Energy. Madam Speaker, energy policy is so significant to this country that the Manning administration at the time felt we should have another layer of oversight between the Minister and the Cabinet, hence the reason for the Standing Committee on Energy. It has been always chaired by the Prime Minister, it includes the Minister of Energy and several other key Ministers in the Government.

I am just reading a Cabinet Minute here:

Cabinet agreed to the reconstitution of the Membership of the Standing Committee on Energy has indicated hereunder…

November 11, 2010. The members are as follows: the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Chairman, the hon. Anand Ramlogan, Attorney General, Kevin Ramnarine, Delmon Baker, Winston Dookeran, Errol Mc Leod, Vasant Bharath, Larry Howai, Ganga Singh, Dr.Bhoendradatt Tewarie—for five years under UNC,
Madam Speaker.

**Hon. Member:** What year is this?

**Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:** This is the reconstitution, that is in 2012, but it was already there from 2010. Madam Speaker, the Standing Committee on Energy, probably the most important committee chaired by the Prime Minister, outside of the National Security Council. We have had 20 Standing Committee meetings in our term of office up to now, every single one was chaired by the hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Rowley. This committee under the UNC—listen to me carefully—held 17 meetings in the five years and the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Chairman of the committee and then Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, did not attend a single one.

**Hon. Members:** Ooh!

**Madam Speaker:** Order, order!

**Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:** And comes here today under her stewardship the whole situation collapsed; it was the one eye leading the blind, you know. [Desk thumping] If that is not a dereliction of duty, I do not know what is. That is the single most important standing committee of the Cabinet, as I said, save and except the National Energy Council, that is how they govern. [Crosstalk]

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members. One, Members are sucking their teeth, that is unparliamentary, and I also remind Members that there is a particular way in which you make an interruption in accordance with the Standing Orders. Okay, so let us remember where we are and try to abide by the Standing Orders. Minister.

**Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:** [Desk thumping] Yes Madam Speaker, I always knew that she hardly attended, but when I actually checked the records yesterday, not a single meeting. [Crosstalk]

**Madam Speaker:** Minister, one minute. Member for Princes Town, it is very
early in the day, all right? And therefore, let us try to control some of our
dispositions to shout across the floor. I also want to thank all hon. Members who
would like to suggest to me what should be done and also ask them to be temperate
in their expressions. Continue.

Sen. The Hon. F. Khan: The energy sector was in crisis, first intervention by the
hon. Prime Minister, Standing Committee. Second key intervention, Madam
Speaker, we had no gas supply contract from the up-streamers, they were supposed
to expire in 2018 and 2019. You do not go in 2018 January to renew a gas supply
contract for 20 years in January for the gas supply contract to get effective in
March; these things are negotiated years in advance. The Prime Minister had to
step in personally; that is the famous Houston meeting where he went to Houston
and discussed with the energy companies, in particular bp and EOG, and brokered
a new gas supply agreement. That came with a commitment of the upstream
companies to invest US $10 billion in Trinidad and Tobago over the next five
years. [Desk thumping] So gas supply, upstream investment secured, Standing
Committee operational.

Then we go to the Dragon deal. “Everybody have ting to say about Dragon,
you know.” But, let me just for the records say something here today in this House.
Madam Speaker, Venezuela our next-door neighbour, seven miles away,
swimming distance from Cedros, Point Fortin—you swim the distance already?
Okay.

Seven miles away from Cedros, has the world’s largest oil resources, more
than Saudi Arabia and Russia, put together. Venezuela also has the fifth largest
gas reserves in the world. And hear the advantage we have being close to them. A
significant part of those reserves, gas, occurs in eastern Venezuela, which is the
underdeveloped part of Venezuela, not western Venezuela, Caracas, Lake
Maracaibo and that other area. Gas, unlike oil, you cannot store it. So you need infrastructure to monetize the gas. Western Trinidad has one of the world’s most advanced gas infrastructure, we have pipelines, we have petrochemical plants, we have LNG plants. So there was a symbiotic relationship with Venezuela monetizing their gas through the Trinidad infrastructure and both parties could live happily ever after.

The breaking point in this deal was agreeing to a pricing structure that both countries could live with. That was finally done and the agreement was signed. Everybody saying some secret deal between Dr. Rowley and Maduro. There is no secret deal. When we went to sign the Heads of Agreement, it is an international border transaction. You must have a Heads of Agreement before the operating companies sign. We took a planeload of people, you know, we chartered an ATR on the Tobago run; half of the plane were press people, reporters and cameramen and what have you. What secrecy is that? We have disclosed every aspect of that deal. The quantum of gas, where the measuring point will be, where the fiscalization point will be, who will operate it, where the pipelines will run, what Hibiscus will accept the gas from Trinidad side, ship it down to Point Lisas and to Point Fortin. The only aspect of the deal that has not been disclosed and cannot be disclosed is the commercial terms vis-à-vis the gas price.

So, I do not know where this conspiracy theory coming about that it is some secret deal between President Maduro and Prime Minister Rowley. So I put that to bed.

And finally, the revenue shortfall which I spoke about based on the generous concessions the UNC gave. The Prime Minister, myself and Minister Young in particular went up to London and held discussions, outlining to them the issues we faced and there was some agreement and as we speak we are in very sensitive
negotiations to correct some of these matters.

So let me just move to the gas outlook now. Minister Imbert gave quite a comprehensive discourse in his presentation: 2018 we expect average gas production to be 3.8 Bcf; 2019, 3.94; 2020, 4.05; 2021, 4.14; and 2022, 4.09.

I now come to gas reserves. Madam Speaker, this is the best news I am going to announce to the country today that I have had since I became Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. Trinidad and Tobago produces approximately 1.3 trillion cubic feet of gas per year. What it means is that if you do not find in new reserves 1.3 trillion cubic feet every year, you are going down a slide; it is called in the industry “walking up a down escalator”. Since 2004, Trinidad and Tobago has never replaced 100 per cent of the reserves that it has produced, so every year we have had a decline in our reserve base; 2017 was the first year, year on year, that we have replaced 154 per cent of the gas that we—[Desk thumping]—2004, you know, and all that was driven by the gas sales agreement with the up-streamers that was brokered in Houston. [Desk thumping] Do not take this lightly. And it will continue to climb because there is deep-water exploration going on now as we speak.

Some of the information is still confidential, but all I would say is that there are three deep-water wells that have been drilled by BHP. Two have made gas discoveries, one more significant than the other. They are on a fourth well now that is called Concepción; after BHP finishes drilling that well, probably in about four months’ time, the rig will be going to the Gulf of Mexico to drill three wells there. BHP is so enthused that they plan to return immediately after that, to come back to do follow-up drilling in the deep waters of Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping]

And that is the upside we have, because if you do not keep finding new
reserves, you are fast getting out of the business and the challenge in the exploration production side is to complete to come to terms and continuously replenish the reserves in which you have produced. And we have been successful as a country. We are in the oil business 100 years now; we are in the gas business 30-something years now; and we have, by and large, been successful in replacing reserves. And that is a credit to every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago in that regard. [Desk thumping]

So I have dealt with deep water. I have dealt with revenue collection. But, Madam Speaker, I have about 25 more minutes and, really and truly, I will abort my further discourse on gas and deal with one of the more topical issues in the country today: the state of Petrotrin, and what are the plans for Petrotrin.

Madam Speaker, as a Government, when we came into office we realized that we had a serious systemic problem coming out of Petrotrin, operationally, financially and debt-wise. One of the major challenges facing the Government on assumption of office in 2015 was Petrotrin. The company which possesses the majority of the country’s known oil reserves had continued to encounter serious operational and financial issues. Given the situation, one of the earliest decisions we took was to appoint a new board of directors immediately after forming the Government.

2.30 p.m.

That board of directors made a presentation to the Cabinet. They outlined the difficulties the company face—cash flow challenges, deficient asset integrity, declining land and marine production, manpower surpluses. The financial forecast was not good, and no matter what business plan we were able to put in place, we were not seeing light at the end of the tunnel and everything continued to pile up—the debt, the losses, the asset integrity continued to deteriorate, and all these things
came down on this administration as a perfect storm. We had to act. It would have been irresponsible of this administration not to act, and not to act decisively to save the economy of Trinidad and Tobago [Desk thumping] and we used due process.

We did not get up a morning and the Prime Minister call me and say: “Frankie, we are going and close down Petrotrin.” We did not do that. We went through a process. Coming out of the first presentation from the board of Petrotrin, we realized it was water more than flour, you know, very early in the game. We appointed the Lashley Committee to look at Petrotrin and come up with some restructuring plans, et cetera, et cetera. The Lashley Committee had two members of the Oilfields Workers’ Trade Union. Okay?

These are some of the assessment and recommendations: that Petrotrin was overburdened with debt. The net debt at financial year end 2015 amounted to $11.4 billion. It is now as high at $13 billion. Government provided guarantees for short-term loans of $230 million to support its operation and to meet financial obligation. Taxes and royalty owed to Government amounted to $3.2 billion at that time. It is now $3.5 billion.

**Mr. Imbert:** $3.6 billion.

**Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:** Well, $3.6 billion. The Ministry of Finance is more online than I am, and let me debunk something the Member for Siparia said, that Petrotrin pay royalties and they pay tax. You know, it comes like when you owe Chin shop $200 [Laughter] and say Chin: “Hold a $5 this week and just forget the rest of the debt.” [Laughter] That is what happened. I think they made a small payment in 2016. Good. The debt is so big, it is like you are telling Chin hold a $5 this fortnight and I will come back.

**Mr. Hinds:** And Chin chased Kamla.

**Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:** The company was unprofitable and their outlook was for
a worsening of operation unless there is major capital injection and restructuring. The Lashley Committee submitted its reports and we realized at that point in time, step two was completed. Step three, we realized also that we had to reconstitute a board, because we needed a board with specific high-skill people who were willing to serve the country. The new board was mandated to implement the restructuring and to make the company a profitable entity.

That board has been working nonstop and continuously for the last almost two years, and I want to go on record as the line Minister of Petrotrin, to personally congratulate the members of the Board of Petrotrin for their very hard work [*Desk thumping*] which is not finished, but I think they are doing an excellent job. They are balanced and they know what they are doing. The board engaged industry experts in the determination of the way forward for Petrotrin. There was consensus that the business model was obsolete, uncompetitive and its operations inefficient. The company required capital injection of $25 billion just to survive and would continue to incur losses of $2 billion per year. It had a negative refinery margin. I fed up say this. You are importing 100,000 barrels of crude to lose $3 on every barrel you refined. What maths—the hon. Member for Siparia talk about a Form 3 child could read that. Well, a Form 3 child could more than read this too.

**Mr. Imbert:** US.

**Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:** US. Good. Refinery utilization averaged a mere 60 per cent. Fuel oil yield is still above 30 per cent and, most importantly—the Member for Siparia mentioned about foreign exchange to buy fuel—it is the net user of foreign exchange. So the board distilled all the reports—the Lashley Report, Solomon Report, McKinsey Report, their own internal work, other reports the company had generated over the years. They have consulted far and wide. They
made several presentations along the way, both to Standing Committee of Energy and to the full Cabinet and, finally, the decision was taken to go the way we have to gone.

And let me just debunk another rumour and fake news that is spreading through Trinidad and Tobago by certain people that Petrotrin crude has no value, that it is heavy crude, it is sour crude. Madam Speaker, Petrotrin’s crude—let me just back up here. Every crude in the world is traded to a benchmark price of a reference crude. It is not no loose marketing arrangement. Every crude is traded against a reference crude. Petrotrin crude is traded against a crude called Vasconia crude out of Ecopetrol in Colombia. Madam Speaker, Vasconia crude recently has been traded as high as WTI less $3. On the average over the year, they forecast it will trade WTI minus $5 to $7. WTI is $75 today. So this thing about you cannot sell the crude and the crude has sulphur, there is market for crude based on a configuration of a refinery. So this thing about you cannot sell the crude, the sale of 40,000 barrels of Vasconia-based crude will more than generate enough foreign exchange to import all the refined products and still have US $200 million or more.

[Desk thumping]

So, we have remodelled Petrotrin. Okay? And after the decision was taken, the Cabinet approved the way forward for Petrotrin through the presentation of the board. The board was asked to go back and communicate to the union that this is the decision, and begin discussion as to how the logistics of the transition period would be worked out. The Prime Minister called a meeting with the Oilfield Workers’ Trade Union on August 21, 2018. I was in the meeting, the Minister of Finance and a couple other Ministers, and I am reading from the Minutes of that meeting.

Minute 2.6.3: The Prime Minister informed the Union that based on a
decision, Petrotrin will be exiting the refining business and the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery will cease to operate. It could not be clearer than this. This was in the meeting with Comrade Roget and his executive.

So, what I want to do now is give some more details on how the transition will work because, again, there is a tendency here in Trinidad—and people have their rights—that you know, again, let me use a cricket analogy, they want ball-by-ball commentary, but there is also something called a summary of the day’s play. So sometimes a summary of the day’s play might be more appropriation than ball-by-ball commentary. [Crosstalk]

So, Madam Speaker, the company will be restructured along the following lines: Corporation Sole is the owner of the company. We will be forming a holding company with four subsidiaries. We have already found a name for the holding company, Trinidad Petroleum Holding Limited, which will be the holding company. The four subsidiaries will be as follows: subsidiary one will be Petrotrin, which is the old Petrotrin that will just be there to deal with legacy items. They will have no operation under Petrotrin. Subsidiary company No. 2, is what we call Newco One, new company one. That will be the exploration and production company that will operationalized and the assets of Petrotrin that are now the exploration and production assets will be transferred to this company.

Subsidiary three, which we called Newco Two, will be the terminalling and marketing company. The terminalling facilities at Pointe-a-Pierre and the whole marketing operation will fall under that company. That company will be responsible for importing refined products, selling them to the local market and further on selling it to the smaller markets of Caricom. It is a viable business. [Desk thumping] What you have to understand now is that in this value chain,
traders make more money than refiners. In fact, sometimes especially in gas, I can
tell you that. The traders are the people who make the money and you have to
make all this investment—upstream, midstream and downstream—and then the
traders come. It comes like the market vendors. The farmers are not making as
much money as the vendors, you know, and all he does is buy and sell. So that is
how business is unfolding. So trading and marketing do not turn a blind eye on it.
It is profitable business, and the fourth subsidiary will be what we call Newco
Three, will be the company that the refinery assets would be placed in—and to use
the Prime Minister’s phrase—for opportunity attention.

We are not going to—and let me refer to the Member for Siparia, again. There is a difference between shutting down and decommissioning. There is no
need for any CEC. We are just closing down the operation. We are de-
 inventorizing the asset, which is taking out all the sealable products, saving the
plant, largely with liquid nitrogen, so that it could be mothballed for possibly a
short while, and when a new business model emerges, based on conversations we
will have with the market, then the refinery could be re-operationalized. It is as
simple as that. [Crosstalk]

And then, the cash flow, the cash flow that will be now generated, hopefully
by the E&P arm of the company and marketing, should be sufficient, based on the
models we have on, to service the debts of Petrotrin, because it will not be held
with this albatross around its neck called a refinery, and that is the business plan.

I have some dates here, but I probably would not have enough time to share
all. The refinery wind down will be from the 15\textsuperscript{th} to the 31\textsuperscript{st} of October. The first
import shipment of products will be on 17\textsuperscript{th} of October, 2018. The first crude
export—and take this one—will be on the 27\textsuperscript{th} of October, because we have to ship
500,000 barrels. So it takes about 10 to 12 days to accumulate that volume and

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then there are other areas of the vesting and what have you.

Throughout this transition, Madam Speaker, it is one area that is of serious concern, and we are paying particular attention to it and that is health, safety and the environment, because there is nothing more dangerous to derail this process than an HS&E disaster. We are very conscious of that. We have security on the plant and equipment but, more importantly, we are monitoring any issues of tampering or any operational shortcoming that could lead to a major environmental disaster or anything there, therefore. So, this is an area that we are very, very focused on. We will spare nothing, including major expenditure, to make sure that asset integrity, health, safety and the environment is very well protected.

And finally, Madam Speaker, is reliability of supply. We have a very robust plan in place that will take care of that. Reliability of supply, we are working on four—

Madam Speaker: Minister?

Sen. The Hon. F. Khan: Yes.

Madam Speaker: Your original 45 minutes are now spent, you are entitled to 10 more minutes, if you wish to continue.

Sen. The Hon. F. Khan: Yes.

Madam Speaker: You may. [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. F. Khan: There are four major areas of concern to the population which I will address now in the next 10 minutes. It is the reliability, seamless continuation of supply of fuels to the local market, starting with the petroleum products. And I indicated when the refinery operation has been terminated, there will be a 20-day supply of fuels for the local market.

Our first shipment of imported products will be coming in on the 17th of October. That will supplement, and then as we phase out the local supply, there
will be a continuous flow of imported products. So, hopefully, and I feel quite confidently in saying this, that there will be a seamless transition from refinery-based products to imported products, because at the stage of the pump, nobody knows whether the gas you are putting in your car comes from the Petrotrin refinery or from a refinery somewhere in the Gulf Coast of the United States, you know.

**Hon. Member:** Diesel.

**Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:** The diesel will be even better. [Crosstalk] Okay? So that is it. LPG, again, is a concern. Few people—let me just put the facts clear. The local market for LPG requires 2,500 barrels per day. With the closure of Petrotrin, local supplies will come from Phoenix Park Gas Processors Limited and Atlantic LNG. There will be no importation of LPG. The Member for Siparia said that today we have to import CNG, and where we getting the foreign exchange from. [Crosstalk]

At present, local production of LPG, our local demand, is 2,500 barrels. Local production is 14,700 barrels; 8,100 barrels from PPGPL and 6,600 barrels from Atlantic. All systems are in place for Petrotrin to hand over that responsibility to PPGPL. I spoke to Mr. Chan Tack up to this morning and everything looks as if it would be a smooth transition [Desk thumping] and there will be no gaps in the LPG market. And let me go on record to repeat what the Minister of Finance said, the price of LPG will remain the same, heavily subsidized by this Government. [Desk thumping]

**Dr. Tewarie:** The subsidy will remain.

**Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:** Yes, the subsidy will remain. [Crosstalk]

And, finally, bitumen. Bitumen is a product that is used in road construction and paving and what have you. As we speak, bitumen is produced as a product from the low-end part of the barrel at Petrotrin refinery. It is marketed by Lake
Asphalt. Lake Asphalt does not have the facility. They just do the invoice, give it to contractor and he goes and he fills up his bitumen at Pointe-a-Pierre. With the succession of the refining operations at Pointe-a-Pierre, the country will have to import bitumen. We are putting things in place so that that importation will be done in the first instance, largely by Lake Asphalt Trinidad and Tobago Limited. However, consideration will also be given to opening up the markets so that contractors can import their bitumen at their own risk and at their own cost if they so desire. So, it would be a fairly liberalized market for bitumen. There is some small use for sulphuric acid, because WASA uses sulphuric acid to make alum, which is aluminate sulphate and YARA will be the importers of the sulphuric acid. They always supplement the sulphuric acid supply now, as we speak. So, again, we see no major hitches in that area.

So, Madam Speaker, I have attempted here today—I was expecting some pace bowling, but I had to bat spin—[Crosstalk]

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Slow spin.

**Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:** But bat, I did bat. [Desk thumping] Okay? I have outlined, very clearly, where the energy sector was when we came into office. We have outlined, largely by indicative driven by the Prime Minister, how we have balanced this gas supply situation. [Desk thumping] That was no easy task. [Desk thumping] That called for high-level, complex negotiations. When you are in London meeting the President of bp and Shell, those guys know what they are about, you know. They have an infrastructure that supports them.

As a matter of fact, I should say so to the Parliament, today we have a negotiating team that is currently speaking with them, and it is the best prepared negotiating team ever in the history of Trinidad and Tobago [Desk thumping] because we have brought on board expert advice, Poten & Partners, the same
people who prepared the Gas Master Plan are now our consultants in these negotiations. [Desk thumping] White & Case, one of the top energy lawyers coming out of New York are also our advisors. So when we sit around the table, for the first time we sit as equals, you know. [Crosstalk] And I am very optimistic that some of these negotiations will be concluded in an amicable way where both sides will feel happy, both the oil companies and the Government and the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

So in closing, Madam Speaker, I think I have outlined the issues in the gas sector. I have outlined the issues that face Petrotrin. There are other issues with oil that we will be dealing with later on, and episode No. 2 of this discourse, if you want to hear it, you could come up to the Senate in two weeks’ time. Okay? [Desk thumping] And, finally, let me just go on record as saying, I want to personally thank and congratulate the Prime Minister for his leadership role in this. [Desk thumping]

**Mr. David Lee (Pointe-a-Pierre):** [Desk thumping] Thank you. Thank you, Madam Speaker, for allowing me to join this debate on this Budget Statement of 2019 presented on October the 1st by the Minister of Finance, the Member for Diego Martin North/East. Let me first start off by saying that I now understand why the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries was never returned as the Chairman of the People’s National Movement. [Desk thumping] No substance. He came here this afternoon, and we expected him first to tell us about Petrotrin and the employees that are being laid off today [Desk thumping] and give them some sort of comfort that they will be taken care of by this—I would not use the word, unparliamentary word—Government.

He talked about opening the batting, but the amount of bouncers he got today from the Leader of the Opposition [Desk thumping] he could not even
understand [*Desk thumping*] and he talked about two bites of the cherry. Well, I really hope they do not put him back in the Senate to talk the next time around, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, first, let me start off by congratulating the Member of Parliament for Siparia, the Opposition Leader, my leader [*Desk thumping*] for a visionary contribution today. She showed true leadership. She took apart the Budget Statement by the Member for Diego Martin North/East in a clinical way, and they opened the batting, as the Minister of Energy and Affairs said with himself. But when I used to go to school we used to have fellas like the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries that always had the equipment, the bat and the ball, but we always allowed him to bat last because he could never bat and always bowl last. [*Desk thumping*] So, really and truly, I do not understand what this Minister was saying throughout his contribution. It was very lacklustre.

He talked about 154 per cent reserve replacement in 2017. Madam Speaker, I want to let this population know that they did not do that. It is the Savannah and Macadamia that we, under the PP Government, that we had put in place that saw the fruition in 2016. [*Desk thumping*] He talked about they brought back reserves. It is a total untruth, and let us be real.

Madam Speaker, this Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, when you listen to him—and I listened to him over the last few weeks, especially, when the whole issue of Petrotrin started up about closure—and he gives the impression to the population that he has all this wealth of information and knowledge of energy—he worked in Petrotrin—and he feels for the employees. But you would have thought that given his knowledge and experience in the energy sector, he would have asked the Prime Minister to allow him to run Petrotrin to save the jobs and lives and the crown jewel of this country and put his knowledge—you know
what he is doing? He is destroying Petrotrin. He is using his knowledge to destroy Petrotrin.

So, really and truly, I do not understand when he gives this to the population, Madam Speaker, that he cares about Petrotrin, he cares about the employees, that he would not have used his—the Minister sorry—the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries would have used his experience to try and save our crown jewel. It is like Caroni, Caroni that they shutdown, Madam Speaker—this wicked PNM Government *[Desk thumping]*—and Petrotrin is another one like that. *[Crosstalk]*

Madam Speaker, they love to open companies, you know. This Government love to open companies. They opened a company called Upstream Downstream Liability or Limited to put the assets of NGC in it, and to hive off certain assets from the energy sector and put it inside it. Up to today, in this Budget Statement, we heard nothing about that company and, yet, again today, he is coming to talk about this Petrotrin Holding Company of having four subsidiaries, and it is just to fool the population. It is to fool the population. And he talked about this new company will be selling Caricom fuel, but just last week, Madam Speaker, the Caricom countries are already looking outside internationally for their supply of gas that they used to get from Petrotrin. So I do not know who he is going to sell this fuel to.

Madam Speaker, this Minister of Energy and Energy and Industries, is delusional, really, really delusional. And, you know, I used to admire him. He used to smile a lot, but I know of lately he does not smile anymore. I do not know why. I think he is really—I genuinely feel he is not in agreement in shutting down Petrotrin, Madam Speaker, but he is going with the status quo, because I sat on the energy committee with the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, along with the Ministry of Finance for the last three years and nowhere in that committee did
they give the committee any inclination about shutting down Petrotrin.

So, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, I would have thought he would have come and give us something of substance even in his energy Ministry, he would have talked about even in the extractive industry he would have been doing something for it, trying to at least beef up the employees in his Ministry, so that the Government and the country could really get the kind of benefits that are due to them.

3.00p.m.

Madam Speaker, I want to turn a bit to about Petrotrin, because Petrotrin is really what we are here about today, in my view. I am the Member of Parliament for Pointe-a-Pierre. The Petrotrin refinery and the head office resides in Pointe-a-Pierre. There are—a lot of my constituency members work at the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery within the compounds of Petrotrin. There are a lot of fence-line communities that are impacted by the closure, or, as they would say, the restructuring of Petrotrin, and the impact, it is really going to be felt through the length and breadth of Pointe-a-Pierre. You have the Member for Tabaquite, also another fence-line community of Gasparillo. You have even my colleague on the other side, the Member for San Fernando West. His constituency will be affected. The Member for San Fernando East, his constituency would be affected. And, you know, I would not call any names, but today I was at lunch and a colleague said, “You know, you all might be very happy that we shut down Petrotrin.” And I said, “You know, why, why would you want to—how could I be happy about that?” Because my constituents are crying every day. They come into my office and they are hopeless. And I would have thought that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries would have come here to talk about some relief for these people or even the fence-line communities.
So let me get into my contribution about Petrotrin as part of my debate. You see, Madam Speaker, for the past three years since taking office, we have seen Members of this Government, led by the hon. Prime Minister, the Member for Diego Martin West, seek to belittle and make the most damning statements about the performance of Petrotrin. In the past three years, not only has this Government turned its back on the crown jewel that I call Petrotrin, which is a part of Pointe-a-Pierre that has led significant development within our own country over a number of years, Madam Speaker. Our country must never forget that when the Opposition Leader, who is now the Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, needed support to come into high office, you know what he did? He promised the best to the workers of Petrotrin. As a matter of fact, he signed an MOU with the OWTU on August 28, 2015, which was supposed to ensure, you know what, Madam Speaker? Mutual respect, genuine consultation, political will and collaboration to ensure a better tomorrow for all of us. Did that happen, Madam Speaker? I would say, no, because the proof in the pudding is here today where we have seen the Opposition Leader read out a termination letter sent out by an Executive Director, Reynold Ajodhasingh, Distribution of Letters of Termination.

So, Madam Speaker, this Government is very disingenuous about how they treat with the whole issue of Petrotrin. I want to go to the Minister of Finance’s presentation, page 4, second paragraph, and I quote:

“When this PNM administration, under the leadership of our Prime Minister, Dr. the Honourable Keith Rowley, assumed Office in September 2015—just three (3) years ago—we promised the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago a transparent, honest and accountable Government.”

We are not getting that. The people are suffering. I want to ask them about Petrotrin, are they transparent, honest and accountable about Petrotrin? And the
answer is no.  *[Desk thumping]* I want to ask them about just even the sea bridge and the vessels that they procured. Are they honest, transparent and accountable to the people of this country? And the answer is, no. I want to ask them about WGTL and the sale to NiQuan just recently, are they being transparent? The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries talked about the Dragon gas. He talked about in his contribution they took a plane load full of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, half full with media, but the reports came back that the media was never even allowed to witness certain things in that. So it was just a PR stunt by this Government.

So where is the transparent, honest and accountable Government that the Minister of Finance, in his second paragraph, talked about? *[Desk thumping]* None. And I would have thought that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries would have come today to at least clarify some transparency, some honesty and accountability to the people, the citizenry who are looking on about Petrotrin and the whole issue of energy. He has done nothing. Far from that, Madam Speaker.

I want to go through a little bit that has been said before about Petrotrin’s history of debt, and you see this Government does not like to take responsibility. They seem to feel that, as a colleague of mine says, that the PNM only came into power on September 2015. They only existed since September 2015. They like to tell the population that, that before September2015, it was either old PNM, PP Government, but not this PNM. So they move, they are like a moving target, Madam Speaker. But this country must never forget about the same issue that they are using to shut down Petrotrin about this $13billion debt, because it moves every day; one was 11, 12, 13.

So let us put it this way, it is over $10 billion debt and they are not telling
this country how this debt came about. This debt came about because of them, Madam Speaker, [*Desk thumping*] one, Malcolm Jones, and the decisions taken by the PNM Government during that tenure. And they had senior members who sit right there opposite who were part of that Cabinet at that time. [*Desk thumping*] You had Diego Martin West. You had Diego Martin North/East. Well, I would not call the Member for Arouca/Maloney because I could not verify that. I heard a Member call her today. I would not call her name. She was there—the Member, sorry, Madam Speaker. I am sure the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries would have been somewhere there, somewhere around, based on his experience in energy.

**Hon. Member:** Who?

**Mr. D. Lee:** The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. The present Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. So you would have thought that even at that point in time the OWTU—and the records are there—was against some of those projects that Malcolm Jones was doing at Petrotrin because they felt it would burden the country; and they were correct today. But the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries comes here and he, you know, they like to say, well, yesterday was yesterday and today is today. Madam Speaker, this citizenry will not allow them to get away with that. [*Desk thumping*]

The numbers are there of the waste, mismanagement and corruption under the Malcolm Jones-led era of management. And you know what is ironic? When the present Prime Minister, the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin West, came into power in September 2015, the first person he appointed on an energy committee was Malcolm Jones. The same Malcolm Jones that has caused this country to be in the position that it is today, and our energy security is literally vanishing as we speak. Under the PP Government we had challenged Malcolm
Jones. We had taken him to court, and you know what the first thing that the Prime Minister with the present Attorney General did—you know what they did? They exonerated Malcolm Jones and took the issue out of court, Madam Speaker.

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** Member, would you give way?

**Mr. D. Lee:** No.

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** You would not? You really would not give way?

**Mr. D. Lee:** No. It is too early in the debating to give way, Madam Speaker. It is too early.

**Mr. Al-Rawi:** You are misrepresenting and you know that.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for San Fernando West—[Interrupt] Please, the crosstalk. It is a debate, everybody will have an opportunity to join the debate and make whatever comments they wish. Member for Pointe-a-Pierre. [Desk thumping]

**Mr. D. Lee:** Madam Speaker, if the Attorney General is telling me he is disappointed in me that means I am doing “rell” good here today. [Desk thumping] “I doing rell good.”

Madam Speaker, I want to tell you what the PP Government did while we were in control of Petrotrin. We had a plan; we had a strat plan, 2014 to 2018. We had competent management. We had qualified competent staff. We were really about turning around and saving the jobs of the people of Petrotrin. We had a plan, and you know what? When this Government came into power in September 2015, they had a new board that they installed in Petrotrin’s chairmanship. The chairman at that point in time was Andrew Jupiter—

**Hon. Member:** Professor.

**Mr. D. Lee:** Sorry, Prof. Andrew Jupiter. He resigned for whatever reasons, and I got the impression that he—being on a board was too onerous for him. But you
know what the irony of Prof. Andrew Jupiter was? He still remained on the board of NGC. So he resigned from Petrotrin as chairman but he still kept his directorship in NGC. Something is not right there, Madam Speaker. So, when—

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East and Member for Couva South. I have, you know, been exercising a lot of leniency, but you all are engaging in excessive crosstalk and almost running commentaries. I will assure you, both of you all would have your 55 minutes if you wish.

Mr. D. Lee: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I want to get back to Prof. Andrew Jupiter, who was chairman of the first board under this present Government in September, or thereabouts of 2015. Andrew Jupiter, and I have always felt, Madam Speaker, where I sat, and I still sit, on the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, I always felt that this Government was painting a narrative since back then in September 2015 to shut down Petrotrin. And it has come to past that—I am not a “seer-man” or any prophetess or prophet, but it has come to pass that I am not too far of the mark, because when you look at Andrew Jupiter’s history while he was at Petrotrin, he created and he crafted the narrative and put things in place for the entire shutdown of Petrotrin. You know, the first thing he did, they got rid of all the competent staff that came in underneath us, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping] These were international people that had no affiliation with the PP Government. They were hired based on competency, they were hired based on whatever international experience they had and they brought it to the table for the good of the country. The first thing Andrew Jupiter did was to get rid of them.

The other thing that Andrew Jupiter did was start to drop the production in the same E&P area that this Government is banking on. He started to curtail the production in Trinmar and other aspects of Petrotrin. They were painting a
narrative all along, because one of the individuals that was hired under the PP Government—I cannot remember his name—he was the—for lack of a better—finance director. When we were in Government the PP was in control of Petrotrin. That individual, based on his international reputation, Madam Speaker, was able to secure a loan of, I think, over US $500million. Based on the reputation at that point in time that the lending agency had, based on the management that they had in place, and what was trying to be achieved, they were going to lend them that money based on that reputation and criteria without any Government guarantee. You know what Andrew Jupiter did? They declined the loan, and that loan at that point in time could have gone to even assist and help with the development of Petrotrin and turning it around. So, Madam Speaker, you really have to look at the narrative that this Government was painting with Petrotrin back then.

Madam Speaker, there was another area under the PP Government. They talked about trying to increase the production locally of oil for the Petrotrin refinery, and there were several things that the PP Government had in place with the board of Petrotrin at that point in time and the management of Petrotrin. And if Andrew Jupiter and his team had followed through, Petrotrin would not be in the position that it is today, because those same strategies, Madam Speaker, that the PP Government was going to do and had in place before they demitted office, what this Government did, and the board of Petrotrin did, was they temporarily shut down those strategies for the last three years, and some of those same strategies are what they were coming here to do in the E&P. [Desk thumping] It is just like the Couva hospital. They changed the name of the children’s hospital and they are waiting for a while and then they will open it for the betterment of the citizens. Open the Couva hospital now. [Desk thumping] So, Madam Speaker, it is clear to me that there was a narrative being painted about Petrotrin, and I do not know if it
was to break the OWTU. I ask.

Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago, we need Petrotrin. We need Petrotrin. Petrotrin has been good to us, and I would have hoped and thought that this Government would have put aside and really do what is necessary to try and save a corporation that has been good for the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago, every one of us in this country. And, you know, the Minister talked about Chin—well, I am a Chin because I am an Asian—and he talked about some sort of thing about when you go in a Chin shop, you give them a little thing and, you know—because my grandpa had a grocery, Madam Speaker, and they used to come and trust. And they used to write it on a brown piece of paper. Every Friday they come and they pay off their bill and they take more. But the evidence is there that under the PP Government, if you read the Extractive Industries report, it was there that under the PP Government Petrotrin contributed millions of dollars. [Desk thumping]

Hon. Member: Billions.

Mr. D. Lee: Billions. But the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and his Government is trying to paint a narrative again that Petrotrin is just a bad corporate citizen.

So, Madam Speaker, what happened? Andrew Jupiter, he did his narrative, and then they said to Andrew Jupiter, well, take a side, relax, resign because we have a new chairman to bring in, because if Andrew Jupiter was fed up with sitting on boards under this Government he would have resigned from all boards. So he resigned from Petrotrin and what happened? They brought in a new chairman, one Wilfred Espinet. Now, from the time I saw Mr. Espinet coning in as chairman of Petrotrin, I said this is the final nail in the coffin for Petrotrin [Desk thumping] because of his track record as a businessman in another company that at one point
in time used to be a state company called Trinidad Cement Limited, and his track record there.

So, Madam Speaker, it was clear to me, sitting on the energy committee, that this is what they were going to do, because when we—it was frightening, because when you listen to Mr. Espinet now and when he first started the narrative about Petrotrin and his 1,700 workers, and then it jumped to 3,500, and then the Prime Minister in his speech said something like 4,000, then it jumped to 5,200, and then at one press conference Mr. Espinet said, all, all, all, all, all going home, all going home, “doh ask meh” again, all going home. So clearly, Madam Speaker, they keep changing the narrative about Petrotrin because they had no plan about Petrotrin. [Desk thumping] They were just about shutting it down and getting rid of the union, because when Mr. Espinet first started to talk about the closure of Petrotrin, he said the refinery is closing down. “Closure” means close for me. But when you listened as the time went on, Madam Speaker, you see another change in the narrative.

Today, you hear the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries saying that they are not decommissioning the refinery. Am I correct that you said so? They are not decommissioning the refinery. They are mothballing the refinery. Now, what is the meaning of—I am not an energy expert. So you are not decommissioning the refinery now, you are mothballing the refinery. There are issues between when the moth starts to come off of the refinery. During that period of time there are environmental issues, because, one, the narrative that they have also painted about the refinery and Petrotrin is asset integrity. I have a document, Madam Speaker, that the biggest set of funding and capital expenditure that is required in the asset integrity for Petrotrin is in the E&P area. The same area that they are banking to be profitable for this country. The same E&P area,
you know. The asset integrity, there are issues within the refinery, I grant you that, Madam Speaker. But the bulk of the funding that is required to correct asset integrity is in the E&P area. [Desk thumping] The same area that they are talking about that they are giving. The same area.

So, as I said, their narrative keeps changing, Madam Speaker, because Espinet said shutting down, closure. We asked him when I had done a release, he said—the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, when I had done a release before when I understood they were closing down and sending home people, they said the MP for Pointe-a-Pierre does not know what he is talking about, and five days later they shut down the whole thing. They talked about it. So the MP for Pointe-a-Pierre does not get any information from people inside of Petrotrin. I want to tell him I have so much information about Petrotrin, right; [Desk thumping] so much information.

Madam Speaker, I am glad that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries has stayed back to listen to my contribution. I really want to ask the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, who recommended the closure of Petrotrin? Who really recommended the closure of Petrotrin?—because we had asked—I think I had asked the Prime Minister a couple of weeks ago, or two weeks ago before the end of the last sitting in question time, Prime Minister’s time, show us or tell this country what report that the Cabinet, his Cabinet, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, Wilfred Espinet did, saw, read, that talked about the shutdown and the closure of Petrotrin for the good of this country; and I will tell you there is none, Madam Speaker, none. [Desk thumping] The Lashley Report that they banked on when they came in prior to Wilfred Espinet coming in as chairman in September, the Lashley committee was formed in, I think it was in January 2017, if my memory serves me correct. And based on that report, which
was a life and the importance of Petrotrin, it did not discuss the closure of Petrotrin. It discussed hiving off Petrotrin into three units: Trinmar, refinery and marketing and E&P. E&P was considered land, Trinmar was considered maritime. And when they met with the union, Madam Speaker, the union added, which they agreed to look at, a fourth unit which was their hospital area for the benefit of the workers.

So, Madam Speaker, in the Lashley Report which was being debated in front of the energy committee, and we never completed it, because we never met after that, since February 2018, it clearly showed nothing there about the Lashley Report of closing down Petrotrin. As a matter of fact, in one of those committees one of the directors who is the finance man—

Madam Speaker: Has that committee reported?

Mr. D. Lee: I am not talking about the report, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: No, the committee, you are talking about the committee, because I heard you say the committee never finished its investigation, all right. So that I am not going to allow you to give any information about that. Okay?

Mr. D. Lee: Madam Speaker, one of those meetings was out in the public and it is there for the public to view, so I am assuming that it was not done in camera. So whatever came out in that meeting, because I saw it on YouTube, I viewed it on YouTube, and I am just reporting what I saw on YouTube, Madam Speaker, [Desk thumping] but I take your point.

Madam Speaker, there is something called the Solomon report, the Solomon report which they have been doing work for Petrotrin, not only under this Government, under previous regimes, Madam Speaker; the McKinsey report also, they never talked about shutting down Petrotrin. They talked about restructuring Petrotrin. They never talked about shutting down the refinery and sending home
all the workers. They might have talked about restructuring and maybe there might have been some severance or—well, maybe a restructuring of the employees, and I am assuming, based on the MOU that they would have signed back in September or August 2015, when they came into power with OWTU, that they would have sat down with the recognized union and try and work out issues for the betterment of Petrotrin that they are trying to do now, that the OWTU says, “Well let us sit and discuss.” Madam Speaker, since this refinery and this talk about the closure of Petrotrin has come into the domain we have so many different individuals that have come out there and talked about whether for and against.

I used to work with a gentleman, Dr. Terrence Farrell. I respect him, I think he is a fine economist, a fine mind. I worked with him in Central Bank, Madam Speaker, and Dr. Terrence Farrell, when this Government first came into power, he was the chair of the Economic Development Advisory Board. And you would have thought that when he sat as the chair of that committee, and the mandate of that committee was that, if my memory serves me right, was to go into state companies, state companies that this Government said they did not know much about, that they were scared about the situation, because I heard the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries say that the country was running on fumes when they came into power. And Dr. Terrence Farrell’s mandate was to go into companies like Petrotrin who would have had great issues and tell the Prime Minister, or report to the Cabinet, report to the Prime Minister of Petrotrin. I am sure about that. But you know what Dr. Terrence Farrell said recently when they talked about closing Petrotrin? And I want to quote him. He referred the closure of Petrotrin as a tragedy. A tragedy, Madam Speaker.

I have utmost respect for Dr. Terrence Farrell, and I am sure Dr. Terrence Farrell and his team would have gone into Petrotrin in September and would have
spent time in Petrotrin to get an understanding of the issues of Petrotrin. So today he is saying it is a tragedy. It is a tragedy. So what does Dr. Terrence Farrell know about Petrotrin that this Government does not know? And I respect Dr. Farrell. So maybe that is why Dr. Farrell no longer sits at the chair of the Economic Development Advisory Board. Madam Speaker, one Sunity Maharaj—Sunity Maharaj is not a PP favourite person. She is, I think, an independent writer, and she is asking in one of her articles in the Express on Thursday the 13th, 2018, the closure of Petrotrin should not be a Cabinet decision or a board decision, it should be consulted—the people and the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago should have a say. [Desk thumping] And she is also recommending that that should have been brought to Parliament to really debate and flesh it out.

3.30p.m.

Now, Madam Speaker, if Petrotrin is so onerous on the country, why this Government did not come to Parliament before the last session ended and be honest—based on the Minister of Finance’s second paragraph—and be honest and transparent and accountable to the citizenry, and come here in Parliament and tell us what is the true picture about Petrotrin? They cannot do that. And the citizenry are asking for it; everyone is asking for it. If you read every article about the closure of Petrotrin, there is an unknown, a question mark, and they are asking why this Government cannot do the right thing and come to this Parliament and really let us debate Petrotrin.

Dr. Francis: So, we are not doing that now?

Mr. D. Lee: Madam Speaker, I want to go to energy security. Our energy security is now threatened. You know, I listened to the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries last week and I asked him a question—if fuel prices will increase? “He say, ‘Well, I cyar say, yuh have to ask de Minister of Finance’.”

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And in the budget, the fuel price went up. And, in his statement to one of the questions that I asked him, he says “trust” him. I remember the Member for Oropouche East said, “trust him?”

Now, let me go to energy security, Madam Speaker. We are citizens of this country. We have always had that luxury, that comfort of knowing that we can go to our gas stations and fill up on gas, we can have LPG. We had that comfort—we had that comfort. We had that for years—years. This Government has destroyed that overnight. [Desk thumping] They have destroyed our energy security overnight, and that is something that we must not take lightly of, because we are no better off based on what they are doing with Petrotrin. We are no better off than any other island in our neighbouring Caricom countries.

We used to be a supplier. We used to give them that comfort that they can get their energy security from us, Trinidad and Tobago. That is no longer so, because we cannot trust them—we cannot trust them—when they say that we would have a 20-day supply of fuel. Madam Speaker, I mean, for two years we cannot get the sea bridge correct, how we could get the supply of fuel for our vehicles, our airplanes, even the Galleons Passage? How can we get that right if they could not get the sea bridge right in two years, and they still have not sailed the Galleons Passage? So if they cannot get something as simple as the Galleons Passage and the sea bridge correct, how they could get the energy security of this country correct? It is impossible by them being in charge.

Madam Speaker, even purchasing the fuels from international, that is an entire business by itself. It requires certain competencies as employees, because we did not used to do it at Petrotrin. I heard the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries talk about our crude, the type of crude, and he is saying, well, you know, people are saying that the crude is of a high sulphur content, and they really do not
attract any good prices out there, and he quoted something, $3 less WTI. Right?

Madam Speaker, I would have thought that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries would have come here today and tell this country, based on accountability, transparency and honesty where “we selling our fuel, where we buying our fuel, what price we paying out there”. [Desk thumping] Give this country some comfort.

Madam Speaker: Your original 45 minutes are now spent. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to complete.

Mr. D. Lee: So I would have thought the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries in—I do not know if he was batting or running up. I think he might have been trying to bowl here today, because he was bowling underhand whole evening. I would have thought that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries would have come and talk and give some comfort to our fence-line business people, our fence-line business community.

Madam Speaker, Marabella, certain parts of San Fernando, Gasparillo, there are business that have employees that are in jeopardy of closure based on this decision by this Government. I would have thought that he would have come and give some sort of comfort. They talk about the La Brea dry dock, but that is “pie in the sky” according to my leader. It is not going to happen now. They talk about that the San Fernando waterfront would absorb some of those—I mean, you are taking a technician from Petrotrin and sending him down on the San Fernando waterfront and say go and—do what?—I do not know—[ Interruption ]—dig some sand. I mean, that is an insult to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. That is why their parents would have sent their children to school to educate them, to be able to work in a refinery, to be engineers, to be technicians, and that is what you want to tell them?—“Go down to the San Fernando waterfront and go and dig some sand,
go and lay some decking or something.” That is an insult and arrogance.

Madam Speaker, there is much more I could talk about Petrotrin. I thought I needed three hours like my leader, but given I only have a few more minutes, I want to talk about some failed energy promises by this PNM Government—failed energy promises.

When you look at the FDIs within the energy sector, it literally is zero under their tenureship. They did nothing for the last three years and counting. Today, as it stands, not a single deep-water bid round has been held under their administration, and they promised that. They promised that to the people—they promised that to the people. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries talked about our fiscal incentives that we gave, and he talked like we “give it away”. But there are 20 pages in this budget manifesto that refer to energy—that refers to energy—and the same fiscal incentives that the PP Government put in place, that this country is enjoying and they are enjoying and trying to take credit for is under the PP Government, and it is there in their budget statement—it is there in their budget statement.

I want to just read it, page 76: “Juniper, now fully operationalized”—PP Government incentive; Angelin, PP Government; TROC, PP Government. [Desk thumping] Even Starfish is PP Government. [Desk thumping] So everything—and they talk about their uptick in gas production. The uptick in gas production is because of the incentives and what the PP Government put in place. It is not them—it is not them.

Madam Speaker, there are 20 pages inside of here that relate to energy, and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries referred to none—none, none. He talked about fake oil and AV Drilling, but this is the same Minister of Energy and Energy Industries that was in another place boasting about the production level by
that same company—by that same company.

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** He said 4,000 barrels per day.

**Mr. D. Lee:** Madam Speaker, I know I only have a few more moments and my other colleagues would “ting”, but I want to talk about some issues in my constituency, because I want to give thanks to my constituents who have been supporting me over the last few years, and I thank them for supporting me, but there are some issues within my constituency. An early childhood care centre that is close to completion, like 5 per cent outstanding, and the Minister of Education would not open that early childhood care centre in Marabella. It is for the people and the citizenry of the country. [Crosstalk] They talk—the Harmony Hall Presbyterian School has been abandoned.

**Madam Speaker:** Order!

**Mr. D. Lee:** Mount Pleasant Government Primary School that could not open in September because of a sewer system issue that this sameMinister of Energy and Energy Industries said that he would rectify. The Claxton Bay Junior Anglican School; the Macaulay Government Primary School; health care centres that they talked about opening 24/7, let me enjoy some of that in Pointe-a-Pierre. Roads and infrastructure. Crime. Crime has been rampant since this Government took over, especially in the Claxton Bay area, and now the closure of Petrotrin will hit Pointe-a-Pierre hard.

I want to tell them, if they are trying to suffer me, David Lee, they are really suffering the people of Pointe-a-Pierre, [Desk thumping] and I will not allow them to do that. Just as how I walked with OWTU on their first day of marching from Pointe-a-Pierre to Couva South with MP Indarsingh, we will support and continue to support the workers of Petrotrin, and we would not allow this Government to shut down Petrotrin like that. So, Madam Speaker, with those few words, I thank
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you.

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Cherrie-Ann Crichlow-Cockburn): Madam Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this budget debate, and I seek your leave under Standing Order 44(10), please.

There are three well-established criteria by which the record of performance of organizations and institutions, including governments worldwide, is scrupulously and objectively valuated. I refer to the heights achieved in discharging, one, their legal responsibilities; two, their financial responsibilities; and, three, and by no means least, their social responsibilities.

Madam Speaker, as I rise to make my contribution to the national budget for 2018/2019, I do so with a great deal of satisfaction and deep conviction that, given the disastrous financial state of affairs which the PNM Government inherited following our success at the polls in 2015, the record of performance of this administration can only be described as phenomenal. [Desk thumping] If our citizens genuinely reflect upon the three evaluation criteria to which I have alluded, this is what they will find. In the discharge of our legal responsibilities, no one can truthfully deny the enviable track record achieved in working towards the completion of the more than 100 items on our legislative agenda projected for the period 2016 to 2020. But I leave that record of achievement to be dealt with by my colleague, the hon. Attorney General.

Madam Speaker, insofar as this Government’s discharge of its financial responsibilities to the people of Trinidad and Tobago is concerned, there is absolutely no doubt in respect of the clinically structured and intellectually charted road map along which our Minister of Finance has led us, caringly and confidently over the past three years, designed as it was to extricate the nation as painlessly as
possible from the calamitous state of affairs which confronted this administration in September 2015, and now having guided us along a path to recovery, a stabilized economy and achievement of positive growth. [Desk thumping]

And now, Madam Speaker, what a budget presentation on Monday; what thoughtfulness, what immeasurable wisdom, what a demonstration of caring and putting people first. A “Turnaround” budget so patriotically, patently and professionally crafted in PNM tradition, in PNM style and, above all, in PNM’s unrelenting quest for a much improved quality of life for all. [Desk thumping] And so Minister of Finance I congratulate you on your presentation of such an amazingly appropriate budget, filled as it is with the wide range of cogent, comforting and caring measures all aimed at the good and welfare of all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping and crosstalk]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, while I understand everybody being eager to support their respective side, even support in terms of clapping, jeering and any such behaviour could be considered disorderly. Please continue, Member.

Hon. C. Crichlow-Cockburn: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The ability to look after the needs of the vulnerable members of our society is a blessing, an indispensable component of the social transformation landscape. From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs, according each and every citizen opportunities to aspire to self-sufficiency through the ability to acquire skills and qualifications, eventually leading to improvement in standards of living for themselves and their families.

Social transformation programmes have been at the heart of everything that PNM Governments create and develop for the benefit of all, and are exemplified in affordable housing, free health care, free universal primary and secondary education, reflected in exceptionally low cost of water and electricity, the support
for sport and the creative arts, maintenance of a safety net for the poor and vulnerable, and I can go on and on, Madam Speaker.

Today, however, my focus is on the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and its role in the discharge of the Government’s social responsibilities. But before I do that, I want to make reference to the Leader of the Opposition’s contribution this morning. I can only, summing up that contribution, as being reminiscent of smoke and mirrors. All the Leader of the Opposition sought to do this morning was to try and obscure the truth of this situation—and that is the fact that we have an excellent budget. [Desk thumping] We have been presented with a budget that seeks to enhance the quality of life of most of our citizens, especially the vulnerable. So what did we get this morning? An attempt to distort the facts and to distort truth.

Our economy is in recovery, but that was denied. Our economy is experiencing growth and is expected to continue to experience growth into the medium term—that was also denied. It is interesting though that the pundits have not denied this, but the Leader of the Opposition sought to do that this morning—smoke and mirrors.

The Leader of the Opposition also lost me, and the integrity of her whole contribution diminished when she used the analogy of doctors and patients and hospitals, because all that came to mind was the fact that her Government would have opened the Couva Children’s Hospital when they knew it was not operational, and it could not have functioned, so it was a farce, and that summarized her contribution this morning—a farce. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I also want to mention the contribution of the hon. Member for Pointe-a-Pierre. Now, I recognize and understand that he is passionate about Petrotrin because that is in his constituency. But where was that passion, where
was that interest over the last eight years, during their period of their administration when Petrotrin had already been in trouble? He stood up here today and said he had a plan. Why was that plan not implemented so that Petrotrin could have started to recover? \[Desk thumping\]

He also mentioned that this Government has not been sharing information, and they were not aware and the public was not aware of what was to happen with Petrotrin. But Madam Speaker, the hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley, almost a year ago, spoke to this nation and would have indicated what the situation was with Petrotrin, and except for those who may have buried their heads in the sand it was very, very, very clear that action had to be taken with Petrotrin to preserve the patrimony of Trinidad and Tobago.

And so, I go now to my area of core responsibility, and that is the delivery of social services, including income support through the provision of three major grants: the senior citizens’ pension, the Disability Assistance Grant and the Public Assistance Grant.

Now, it was very interesting today, normally those on the other side label this Government as uncaring, but having heard this budget and having read their budget contributions, they know that they could not have come here today and say this Government is not caring. \[Desk thumping\] So they have gone with a new word, “incompetent”. I sat there and then I got tired of listening to it. The Leader of the Opposition used the word “incompetent” at least eight times, but Ladies and Gentlemen by the time I am finished and after all of our colleagues are finished, this nation will be left as to no uncertainty that this is a very competent, if not one of the most competent governments, to lead this country.

And so, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services continues to maintain the safety net, and to provide income support so that we can ensure the
protection of the vulnerable in our society, and try to cushion the impact of poverty. This is all in keeping with the PNM’s philosophy of caring and putting people first, the UN’s 2030 agenda for sustainable development, which seeks to end poverty in all forms, and Trinidad and Tobago’s National Development Strategy, Vision 2030, Putting People First and Improving Service Delivery. Over the last three years this Government’s commitment to care for and protect our poor and vulnerable citizens was very evident in the fact that despite our straitened economic circumstances, we maintained all grants, all benefits, all services at existing levels, with no reduction in quantum or frequency of payments.

In 2018, we spent $4.4 billion or 93 per cent of our recurrent expenditure on these three major grants. This year in 2019, we will be again spending approximately 93 per cent of our budget, but this time it has been increased to $4.6 billion. [Desk thumping] But even though Government has now reversed the decline and stabilized our economy, we have to be still prudent. So although the turnaround has begun, this Government will continue to exercise prudence for we are not yet out of the woods.

And so, the proposed increase in the cap of combined monthly incomes to $6,000 will result in increases for 27,263 existing pensioners. The minimum senior citizens’ pension of $3,500 per month will be maintained, for although the turnaround has begun, this Government has to be cognizant of the fact that pensions in state enterprises, for which the Government has a say, could be similarly affected, and this Government at this time cannot afford to increase pensions in state enterprises. And so what we have done, the seven current bands will be consolidated into three and we will introduce a new band of more than $4,500 to $5,500. So the maximum income to qualify for senior citizens’ pension will increase from $4,500 to $5,500. This increase in the maximum income to
appropriation enables an estimated 2,500 persons, who are already 65 years of age, to access and qualify for a senior citizens’ pension.

Madam Speaker, and I say here now to Mrs. Ward in Diego Martin and a constituent, Mr. Harding in Arouca, they will now qualify for this senior citizens’ pension. [Desk thumping] Persons receiving the maximum pension of $3,500 will increase by 1,817 persons to 69,208. Madam Speaker, 24,636 persons will receive an increase of $500, and 2,627 persons will receive an increase of $1,000. [Desk thumping] This measure is expected to cost an additional $194 million, but it will be money well spent. [Desk thumping]

I just want to inform this august House and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago that Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana are the only countries that provide a senior citizens’ pension that is non-contributory, and while ours stands at $3,500, Guyana pays the equivalent of $612. So we are indeed taking care of our elderly in Trinidad and Tobago.

The budget also proposes an increase in the Public Assistance Grant. This grant is normally paid to children with a disability, adults who are unable to work because they have a disability, children whose parents may be deceased or incarcerated or may have abandoned the families, the spouses of imprisoned persons who are unable to work because they have to care for their children. So these are people in our society who are very vulnerable. There are 23,885 such persons, and we also have 1,024 children with special needs. So while the increase is $150, this is very important and will be very, very well received by these persons because of the impact it will have on their ability to take care of themselves.

The Special Child Grant currently is paid via cheque, and these cheques are printed at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. So there are times based on administrative reasons where these cheques may be late. This has
not been a good thing because it has produced undue hardship on families, and so a number of them have been accessing the Public Assistance Grant. But what happens in situations like that, if a family has two children who may have a special need, the sum that they are paid is less than if they were receiving two Special Child Grants, because in that case instead of receiving $1,600, they would receive $1,400. So what we have proposed is to have children paid under the Disability Assistance Grant. In that instance they will not be subjected to a means test and they will also receive $1,500. This would represent an increase of $750 for some persons, and an increase of between $350 to $700 per child or $1,400 to $1,600 for two children.

Now Madam Speaker, I heard the Leader of the Opposition speak very disparagingly about an increase of $100, but for those whose pockets are well lined and their savings may be in the six and seven figures, $100 may not mean a lot, but for our poor and vulnerable citizens an increase of $150 means a lot. [Desk thumping] I want to give this House—relay a situation that occurred at my constituency office, so that they would understand how important $100 can be.

A young lady with two children, a single parent, came to my office, and her situation was such that she needed assistance. It would have taken some time for her to access the food card or the Public Assistance Grant, so the staff at my office gave her $100 and took her to the grocery. Madam Speaker, that young lady was able to shop for groceries for the week for herself and two children on that $100. Has anybody in this House ever been to the grocery and the Bill came exactly rounded to $100? I think not, but you see God takes care of the poor and the needy, and that was done on that day. [Desk thumping] This Government, by providing this increase, continues to take care of such people, and I just wish to inform this House that the lady did in fact get a food card and her Public Assistance Grant.
And so, Madam Speaker, the Disability Assistance Grant, in addition to removing the eligibility age for children—sorry, the measure to remove the age eligibility and allow children under 18 to access this grant is nothing short of a stroke of genius by the Ministry of Finance because it now enables middle- and lower-income families to access this grant because it is not means-tested.

And, Ladies and Gentlemen, our experience has been for a number of middle-income and lower-income families, it has been very onerous taking care of children with special needs on $800 or $1,150 a month. So, now because of this increase to $1,500 and the fact that they cannot be means-tested and told that they do not qualify, this is of very, very significant importance, Madam Speaker, to those 23,245 persons.

And, of course, the Ministry continues with its General Assistance Grants, all of these grants continue at the same quantum, there will be no reduction. So, for example, victims of natural disaster can still access grants to the value of $10,000 to replace household appliances; for house repairs, they can access grants of $15,000; for the rewiring, up to $25,000; and for sanitation $15,000.

Madam Speaker, we will still be providing assistance in terms of the Funeral Grant of $7,000, Rental Assistance Grants of $2,500 for up to six months and, of course, one that has grown in great importance, the provision of a grant to purchase prosthetics up to $40,000, but in exceptional circumstances that grant can be provided up to $75,000. And in 2018, we would have spent $1.7 million to provide prosthetics to 49 persons.

Madam Speaker, I now come to an area that seems to be of great
importance and a thorn in the side of the Members on the other side and that is food support. Madam Speaker, the fact that this Government, this administration, has been able to save $150 million by taking action that resulted in 18,000 persons who knew that they were not eligible for the food card, come out of the system, seems to be a problem for the Members on the other side, but, Madam Speaker, neither myself nor this Government will take that to heart. I personally prefer to be disparaged for doing right than to be lauded or recognized for doing what is wrong. [Desk thumping] And so, Madam Speaker, this Government will continue to provide food support to families that are in need and unable to provide a nutritional meal for themselves every day.

Those on the other side like to talk about this Government is incompetent but, Madam Speaker, they would have spent $97 million and an additional $20 million in settling a court matter on the biometric system, and this system was only used to support 3,158 persons or 2 per cent of the recipients. And it was a system that was fraught with corruption and wastage, and no database was maintained so it was almost impossible to determine what were the numbers and how many persons were being, in fact, serviced. But that was not by accident, Madam Speaker, that was by choice.

But having taken all the action that we have taken, we are now assured that the 24,300 persons who have been paid the food support are, in fact, persons that are eligible for such support. And so, Madam Speaker, this budget provides for an increase of $100 per month in food support.

Now the Member, the Leader of the Opposition, would have indicated that 18,000 persons could not have been cheaters, and she looked across at our side and looked at us as if to say, you all cannot be right, you have to be crazy,
there could not have been 18,000 persons in the system who were not eligible.

But, Madam Speaker, when we looked at the fact that during their tenure, every month, each MP was given 50 food cards to give to constituents; when you total that for five years it comes up to 87,000 food cards. Now, if they would have given out 87,000 temporary food cards, it is very believable that 18,000 food cards were, in fact, given out to persons who were not eligible. But we—this Government—have taken action to ensure that only persons who need that support are getting it and will continue to get it. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, this Government is very concerned with moving our clients from a state of dependency to one of self-sufficiency, and what we have been doing is taking action to ensure that. This is a totally different approach from the one that was taken by those on the other side when they were in Government. They seem to be content to keep our citizens, keep the clients of the Ministry in a state of being dependent. And we can all understand that when people rely on you for their income, for their very livelihood, it is a means of control, and I believe that is something in which those on the opposite side engaged. But we, Madam Speaker, our intention is not just to reduce poverty, but to bring our clients to a state of independence, and to this end we seek to educate them, and so we have our adult education programmes. Currently, there are 4,000 persons enrolled in 26 courses at 26 centres.

We also seek to ensure their entrepreneurial development, and to this end a seed grant valued at $15,000 is provided. And this grant is primarily for the benefit of the Ministry’s clients. This grant, Madam Speaker, is now conditional on the completion of training because it is not our intention to just give a grant, but to ensure that when the grant is given, the person can manage a
small business and manage it successfully.

So, we are currently working in collaboration with the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago. And before a grant is approved, those applicants must engage in training that entails marketing, customer service, record keeping, financial management and the mind-set and practice for the entrepreneur. And this year, a couple months ago, we had 67 persons graduating from the training and receiving their seed grant.

Madam Speaker, those on the other side during their tenure were supposed to have had a developmental component to the food support programme, it was called “Rise Up”. But it would seem, I do not know if it is that they did not have any ease, but that fell flat because it never got off the ground.

This Government is in the process of introducing what we call our Social Transformation and Empowerment Programme Uplifting People -Step Up. And this is essentially a programme of psychosocial support designed to facilitate families through a social-protection framework from programme entry to exit. We will work with economically challenged and other vulnerable families experiencing psychosocial barriers which prevent such families from achieving their fullest potential.

Madam Speaker, this process involves a process where short-term assistance in the form of a grant, exposure to developmental programmes, life-skills training, and skill-enhancing tools are combined over a period of up to two years. And a key feature of this component is that a family caseworker is assigned to provide continuous support to the family. The Ministry is currently in the process of recruiting social workers to facilitate the full implementation of
Caring for and protecting our vulnerable: Madam Speaker, this Government recognizes that the civil society engagement is a key success factor in sustainable development. And we also recognize that we need to partner with these organizations to assist us with the socially displaced, with the elderly and with persons with disability. And to this end, we continue to pay subvention to 24 NGOs, and three statutory boards including the Trinidad and Tobago Association for Retarded Children, the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing Impaired, and the Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association. Madam Speaker, last year we budgeted $43.7 million to provide subventions to these organizations, and this year we are projecting to increase it by $13,207,000.

In caring for our elderly, we continue to provide free transportation on our public transport service and the ferry service. We also provide free transportation to our elderly and persons with disabilities on our ELDAMO services. And Madam Speaker, over the last period we would have made 10,200 trips transporting such persons.

I am very happy to inform this House, once again, that Cabinet has approved the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities, and in September the Ministry was finally able to lay the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities before this Parliament. That document, that policy, Madam Speaker, will help us in addressing the demands and rights of persons with disabilities in advancing legislation and increasing the role of assistance services to support full inclusion of these persons.

Madam Speaker, the National Enrichment Centre: After three years we
have finally been able to take all of the corrective actions that needed to be taken after those on the other side would have opened that centre while it was still a construction site, while there was still remedial work to be done and while none of the statutory approvals have been obtained. We are awaiting the certificate of completion and that is supposed to be provided, it should have been provided today, and we now have an opening date for the operationalization of that centre at the end of October.

Initially, the centre, we will operate it as a resource centre where persons with disabilities and their respective organization can have access to the centre for data information, as a meeting space, as a space for recreational activities, for use of the pool for therapy, and we expect to transition to full operationalization by the end of fiscal 2019.

Madam Speaker, our community care programme which provides accommodation for persons, elderly persons who may have been abandoned at hospital or who may have been in a home for the elderly but were subject to elder abuse, we currently have 86 such persons in 22 homes. And there has been an increase of 31 over the last period, and this is linked to the removal of persons who were subject to elder abuse to a safe environment. In 2018, we would have addressed 69 reports of elder abuse, and would have resolved 79 per cent of such cases.

Under the Geriatric Adolescent Partnership Programme, Madam Speaker, we continue to provide caregivers to assist elderly persons and persons with disabilities who are unable to care for themselves. Currently, we have 600 caregivers within the system, and they have provided assistance for 1,719 persons over the last period. But, Madam Speaker, we are recognizing that
there is an increased demand for this service, and so the Ministry is working towards gathering all of the data to support a recommendation for an increase in the number of caregivers so that we can ensure that we can take care of our elderly and persons with disabilities.

Subventions are also paid currently to four senior activity centres and this is to ensure that there are opportunities for our elderly for active lifestyle. Madam Speaker, over 2018 we would have spent $3.2 million on these senior activity centres.

Our socially displaced: Madam Speaker, the last head count that was done last year would have indicated that there are 414 persons who live on the streets, 392 males and 22 females. Court Shamrock in San Fernando and St. Vincent de Paul, which is responsible for the centre for socially displaced persons in Port of Spain, currently provide services to 160 socially displaced persons. And what they provide is shelter, a place to sleep, a place to bathe and a meal.

At our New Horizons facility where we have socially displaced persons with mental health issues, we had 46 new residents enrolling, six graduated from the programme, and five of them would have been able to seek employment during the period of their stay with us.

The Piparo centre, which deals with persons with substance abuse, continues to be a success story. We would have had 40 persons going into the system during this period. It has not finished yet so have not had any graduates but they continue to engage in agriculture and have been able to provide all of their vegetables, all of their seasonings and 133 pounds of tilapia from their tilapia production system.
Madam Speaker, the Street Dwellers Working Committee, the committee that was established to oversee the implementation of the Street Dwellers Working Committee report, has been established. Thus far, we have selected two locations for the establishment of assessment centres and transitional housing, one in Port of Spain and one in Cocorite. And I am very happy to report that the centre in Cocorite will cater for children and women [Desk thumping] because currently there is no place for women and children. We have also finalized the design brief for the centre that will be established in Port of Spain.

Madam Speaker, a few weeks ago, I delivered a statement in this august House on our Social Mitigation Plan, and at that time Parliament and the nation were updated on the Ministry’s ongoing work in this area. Thus far, we have implemented the standard means test. We have developed a framework for the “Step Up” model, our public education campaign on financial security is in place and ongoing in collaboration with the Central Bank. We have established the two committees to guide the operations of the one-stop-shop model, the social support and empowerment unit and to oversee implementation of the Social Mitigation Plan. So, Madam Speaker, we are well on our way with the full implementation of the Social Mitigation Plan.

The family plays a critical role in the nurturing and socialization of individuals, and it is also very important to the socio-economic prosperity of our country. And within recent times there has been great concerns with respect to the declining stability of families, and the resultant negative impact on communities and country. The social ills of domestic violence, child and elder abuse, indiscipline and violence are also of great concern.

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And to this end, Madam Speaker, the Ministry pursued two major policy initiatives aimed at safeguarding the family. One was the implementation of the National Parenting Policy for Trinidad and Tobago, and it was laid in this honourable House as a green paper to facilitate wider public consultations. We are also working on the developing the national family policy for Trinidad and Tobago because the intention to provide a nurturing and secure environment for the family.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services collaborated with the Gender and Child Affairs Division of the Office of the Prime Minister and hosted our inaugural national symposium on the family. The response was overwhelming, and the feedback from that symposium is being incorporated into the draft national family policy.

We also launched our national campaign on values, attitudes and behaviours because we recognize that we need to go back to a state of civic-mindedness and a return to values and morals and such basic things as “good morning” and “thank you”. And, Madam Speaker, that campaign has been launched and it has been rolled out.

We also hosted seven community parenting workshops, and we have established a number of community-based support groups. The National Family Services outreach programmes “Let’s talk” and our radio programme “Let’s Talk” have been very successful. As a result we have experienced an increase in our client base, and we have responded to 8,041 requests for counselling, referral services, information and co-parent counselling.

Madam Speaker, I want deal now with the steps that we have taken to improve the operations of the Ministry. We are currently in the process of
transitioning the recipients of the senior citizens pension, the Public Assistance Grant and the Disability Assistance Grant to a direct method of payment. Thus far, we have transitioned 80,668 persons and this represents 56 per cent of that population.

What this means, Madam Speaker, is that these clients no longer have to worry about cheques being lost, cheques being stolen or cheques being late. The money is deposited directly into their bank account, and they can access it on the same day.

And we have introduced our standard means test, and that has improved assessment greatly because it is now standardized across the board. A read of the Auditor General reports for last year would have revealed that there was one local board where four different forms were being used for means testing. What this meant, Madam Speaker, is that one person may have come in and would have been assessed as being qualifying for the grant, and another person may not have been, but with the standard means test now, across the board, all persons will be assessed in the same manner.

Madam Speaker, we sought to have an integrated IT system purchased on behalf of the Ministry. This was being done through iGovTT. They went out to tender and the tender was not successful. The Ministry decided to use our in-house capabilities to develop an integrated system that may not provide all of the things that we require, but one that can facilitate and improve and enhance our effectiveness and efficiency.

And, Madam Speaker, I am very pleased to announce that we do, in fact, now have such a system, and this system allows for simplified data sharing and collaboration across all local boards; this will eliminate double-dipping and
duplication. It also will result in a reduction in processing time for applications, there will be more complete information on the database, and because of online registration we will not have the problem of lost files.

Madam Speaker, one of the key features of this that the public of Trinidad and Tobago, I believe, will be very much interested in, is that the public will be able to go online and self-assess. They can access the means-test form and do their own self-assessment, and that will remove a situation where persons complain about “they qualify”, but they were told that “they do not qualify”. They can do their own self-assessment, print that form and come into the Ministry with it.

Madam Speaker, we continue to train the staff in the Ministry, particularly our front-line staff because we recognize that we can have the best grants, the best programmes, but unless we have accompanying excellent customer service, this can detract from what we are providing. And so, we continue to provide customer service where we seek to improve the knowledge, the behaviours and the attitudes of our staff. And we have seen improvement in that there has been a reduction in the number of complaints, and a reduction in the number of persons complaining that they have been taking too long to receive their grants.

We continue to educate the population of Trinidad and Tobago about what the Ministry offers, and thus for this period we would have had 40 sessions, education awareness sessions, and based on those sessions, Madam Speaker, we have been receiving very good reviews, and we have more persons who are really in need from depressed areas coming into the Ministry to access the grants that are being offered.
Madam Speaker, I would now take some time to speak to my constituents of Lopinot/Bon Air West. [Desk thumping] I wish to thank all of the constituents of Lopinot/Bon Air West for the support they have provided over the last three years. I wish to thank all of them for coming out whenever there are meetings, whenever we have our caravans and providing information on what is happening in their area and how they feel about different things in the Government and in the community.

And, Madam Speaker, I just want to remind and say to the constituents of Lopinot/ Bon Air West, during the campaign I made two promises; one was to get water into Windy Hill. And, Madam Speaker, I am very pleased to inform this august House that water was in the pipes of the residents of Windy Hill [Desk thumping] but I also want to exhort my constituents, the Government is working on your behalf. We have worked very hard to bring water into Windy Hill and there are over 400 households, but only 40 of you have registered so far to be connected. So, I am exhorting you, work together with us, go to WASA, pay for your reconnections so that you can have a water supply to your home.

We were also very successful in having an intake put in place at Mc Davis Trace. So the persons who live in lower Surrey Village and at Soap Hill have had no problems with water this year. [Desk thumping]

My second promise was to get electricity to the persons at upper Bertie Road in Five Rivers. They have not had a supply of electricity ever. And, Madam Speaker, working together with T&TEC and with their electrification project, we were able to bring electricity to upper Bertie Road in Five Rivers, and for that I am very grateful and take the opportunity to thank T&TEC. [Desk thumping]
For some reason, Madam Speaker, the residences of Ulex Drive, Fern Drive, and Poinsettia in La Florissante have not had their streets paved in the last 25 years, and this was a burning issue for them. I wish to report that working together with the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, those three streets were paved, and we got a lagniappe in that we got Elm and Holly paved also, and I know the residents of La Florissante are very happy for that. We also had a problem with flooding in Phase I and we have since had a drain—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, your original speaking time is now spent, you are entitled to 10 more minutes to complete your contribution.

Hon. C. Crichlow-Cockburn: Thank you, Madam Speaker, [Desk thumping] We had a drain constructed and the road paved and that problem with flooding has been alleviated in phase 1 in La Florissante.

Madam Speaker, one of the greatest needs of the constituents of Lopinot/Bon Air West, based on constituents who visit the constituency office, and those who come out when we have the caravan in the respective areas, is the issue of housing. And, Madam Speaker, I am very pleased to report that within the constituency we have had the Bon Air north and the Trestrail housing developments phase 1 completed and houses distributed. [Desk thumping]

In our neighbouring areas of Malabar, Bon Air south and River Run Through, we have also had phases completed and houses distributed. And I am very happy, based on feedback from some of my constituents, some of them have benefited and are very thankful, Madam Speaker.

In terms of plans for 2019, the HDC has indicated that they would be installing play parks in Pine Ridge development, Cleaver Heights and Guanapo
in Five Rivers.

The community centres in Surrey, those are going to be renovated and upgraded, and Tacarigua is finally going to get a new community centre; great news for the people of Bon Air West. [Desk thumping]

Based on the budget, we can also expect to have landslips, flooding, our drainage and roads addressed. And this, Madam Speaker, will benefit residents of Lopinot, Martinez in Arima, Cumberbatch in Arima, Five Rivers, Paradise and Tacarigua. Madam Speaker, I am saying to my constituents, we are in this together, and thus far, it has worked very well.

Madam Speaker, as I close I wish to thank the staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. All the achievements that we have made would not have been possible without their dedication and their hard work. [Desk thumping] I also wish to thank the staff of the constituency office in Lopinot/Bon Air West, and again, I thank my constituents. Of course, I thank the Minister of Finance and his hard-working staff in the Ministry of Finance because without them and the Prime Minister leading, we would not have had this exceptional budget. [Desk thumping]

And, Madam Speaker, as I close I thank you for the opportunity to support this exceptional “Turnaround” budget, and as I close, I close with a quote from political analyst Mr. Winford James in the Express of October 04, 2018, when he would have stated and I quote:

“The Rowley administration has managed to compose one of the more positive budget that I have seen in some time, and this has left me with a good taste in the mouth...the 2018/19 budget is one of mostly good vibes.”
Madam Speaker, I thank you. [Desk thumping]

4.30 p.m.

Mrs. Christine Newallo-Hosein (Cumuto/Manzanilla): Thank you. Thank you, Madam Speaker. I thank you very much for this opportunity, and as I rise to contribute to this budget debate, I would like to congratulate—[Crosstalk]

Madam Speaker: Members, the crosstalk is getting a lil too loud. I would like to hear the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla. Please proceed.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would like to congratulate our Opposition Leader who made an outstanding contribution, [Desk thumping] comprehensive contribution. It demonstrated her visionary ability to lead this country back to prosperity. [Desk thumping] And, of course, I would like to congratulate the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre for his sterling contribution as well. You know, Madam Speaker, I cannot help but feel that this budget is really a run around. [Crosstalk]

Madam Speaker: Okay, Members. Members, the excessive talk and the loud talk, I would ask you all again to check it. It is now 4.31, I understand in a normal sitting now would be teatime, but please compose yourself. Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, I just want to go back a little bit to a budget presentation in 2015. It starts off like this, the Minister of Finance:

“In addition, consistent with our 2015 election manifesto promise, I propose to increase the cap on joint incomes received by retirees in respect of National Insurance and Old Age Pensions…The new cap will now be $5,000 or an additional $500 per month which will cost $160 million and will put
more money in the pockets of 88,000 senior citizens.”

Mr. Indarsingh: “Who say dat”? 

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: “This measure will take effect on December 1, 2015.”

Then today I am hearing the Minister, and, of course, the Minister said the same thing, and I am going to repeat:

“Madam Speaker, we are continuing to improve the wellbeing of our elderly by increasing the cap on joint incomes received by retirees in respect of national insurance and old-age pensions. The new cap will now be $6,000… that is allowing a person…”—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, will the Member—is she going to give us the quotation? [Crosstalk]

Madam Speaker: So, one minute. One minute please. Member for Arouca/Maloney, if it is that you are making an interruption—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Yes, I am.

Madam Speaker:—I expect you to make it in a particular way. And secondly, all Members are either referred to by their constituency or by their portfolio. Okay, so I do not know that you are really asking to make an interruption in the proper way.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Thank you, Madam.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

“…in receipt of both an NIS pension and a senior citizen’s pension, to receive $3,000 a month from the NIS and up to a further $3,000 a month in the senior citizen’s pension.

Madam Speaker, this measure will not only benefit 27,263 elderly individuals from the existing senior citizens grant base of 95,300 individuals, but will add over 2,000 persons to the senior citizens’ net bringing it to over 97,000 elderly individuals…in receipt of a pension…10,000 more than when
we came in.”—to office—“The cost of this adjustment is $194 million...and the measure will take effect on the 1st of January, 2019.”

Madam Speaker, first in 2015, the increase in a cap was supposed to benefit 88,000 senior citizens, according to what I am reading here which is verbatim notes. So, I am not making up the figures. And here today, in 2018, the figures are now 27,263.

Madam Speaker: Let me ask you something. In terms of the 2015 quotation, is that the Hansard?

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: Yes.

Madam Speaker: And therefore, you would have to give us the reference if it is the Hansard.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: It is taken from the Hansard—2015, October.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members. [Interruption] Member for St. Joseph, if you would just give the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla an opportunity to respond to the question that I have just asked. If it is Hansard, you would have to give us the proper citation? Please continue.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: October 2015, Madam Speaker. It would have been on a Monday, I believe it was. And the Minister of Finance, hon. Colm Imbert was the Minister of Finance who gave the statement. And the same thing, the second statement, it is the current budget debate that we are debating. This budget of which the hon. Minister Colm Imbert had given this statement, and of course this figure of 27,263 it has just been confirmed by the hon. Minister of Social Development. So, I am going based on the figures that had been put to this honourable House.

It means, therefore, that if it is 97,000 persons according to the statement of
the budget of elderly senior citizens and only 27,263 are going to be able to benefit from this cap, it means that 69,737 senior citizens will not benefit. And therefore, if they will not benefit, it means therefore, it is incorrect to tell the population that they will benefit in no uncertain way, and therefore I am concurring with my political leader that this budget is a runaround. [*Desk thumping*]

We have the Public Assistance Grant. Madam Speaker, the increase is as follows: First of all the Government is proposing to allow for the public grant assistance to be increased. What is not being told is that, one, it is increased by $150. So one person would move from $1,150 to $1,300; and two persons from $1,400 to $1,550 and onwards. But, it is not per person, you know, and I think the population needs to understand this. When you say two persons, and three persons, and four persons getting $150, it is for the household. So, it is not one person getting—if you have four persons in the household that each person would be getting $1,550. It would only be $1,550 per household; and therefore it must be said and clarified because I think that this Government is causing this turnaround to really be a run around for this country. [*Desk thumping*] And then, at the end of the day I am hearing about the parenting symposium. Madam Speaker, do you know, under the baby grant, when political leader and Prime Minister—[*Crosstalk*]

**Dr. Moonilal:** Madam Speaker, speak to the children, please.

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Member for Oropouche, nobody in here I expect is a child, and therefore if you want to raise a particular Standing Order, which you are entitled to do, I think you are seasoned enough to know to do it in the proper way. And I therefore ask all Members to be respectful of the other. I again want to caution Members, particularly all Members to my right, there is a running commentary and there is excessive crosstalk, and again in the spirit of respect, the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla has my ear, and I wish that all Members will
afford me the opportunity to listen. Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla.

**Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. So they changed the name, the Government changes the name from the baby grant, because in the baby grant you had a parenting aspect which was very important.

So they removed the baby grant, removed the funding and just had a parenting symposium, and that is supposed to be successful. How many persons attended? How many persons have changed lives? Nothing here. But you know with the baby grant when we launched it we had all those figures in place as to how many persons attended, how many persons benefited, how many persons realized that there was something in their lives that needed to be changed, and that would come through education. And I just want to touch on these things that the Minister has spoken about before I get into my substantive debate.

The Minister spoke about operations and a direct method being utilized to deposit the grants into various bank accounts, and I am asking the question: How do we monitor and evaluate whether the moneys that are being—the grants that are being given to, whether it is senior citizens, or for public assistance, or whatever it is—how do we measure whether or not the persons who are receiving these grants are actually using the grants for the purpose that they are intended to? And usually when you have the card, because the card when you go to a grocery or the various outlets that we had mandated under the PP, you would have been able to see and you would have been able to enforce that persons could not buy anything other than foodstuff or pharmaceutical items. This cannot be done when you have a direct method system in place. There is no monitoring and evaluation, and therefore how can you really assess someone at the end of the day?

And it comes back to the point of the biometric card, and I must speak about the biometric card, especially when we are being told that this has been full of
corruption and so forth. It is nothing further from the truth. Under the People’s Partnership of our esteem leader Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the biometric card was put in place for a number of reasons. One, it was a case management system. Currently there are no case management systems in place to monitor and to evaluate the clients who come in. You are looked upon, you say okay, you are on this grant for six months, let us take you off and see if it is that you have been getting any better. And that is not how you monitor someone. That is not how you evaluate someone. And I can say that with all certainty, because even in my constituency I have had a number of persons who have been on grants and they have been removed, and they have been told they have to reapply in six months. They have been taken off several grants, because it is several different persons I am dealing with. Over a year ago, they have been going to reapply, they are either—no, at one time there were no staff in place, because all the staff were sent on leave because they were doing a transition, so they only had their OJTs and they could not take the information. They could not even assess anyone. And so you had a number of persons going in and could not be assessed and so they were told that they had to come back.

So, you have persons who have been taken off the system and are still awaiting to be assessed, and this is unfair, because, you know, at the end of the day the hon. Minister is questioning, “Oh, we had 50 food cards going out to the MP’s office”. And do you know what used to happen, Madam Speaker? Sometimes a person came in need, and while the Ministry would have been doing their own assessment—because the office staff were in fact trained to assess persons—and while the person was awaiting the full assessment from the Ministry, the MP’s office would facilitate by helping the person for a minimum of 3 months, because within three months you would have been assured you would have been
assessed—either you were qualified to receive a grant or you did not, and at that point a decision would be made to have the person transition into another area. And so, there was a reason for it: The reason is that no one left at all hungry.

And so, it is commendable that the staff would have put $100, but how many persons can do that? So therefore, we are not dealing with one person coming into an office. You have hundreds of persons coming into an office, and further to that you have persons who would require help especially when you have so many persons losing their jobs within the last couple of years, which is no fault of theirs. And therefore, the Government must be cognizant of the fact that there are persons who require the assistance almost immediately, and cannot wait to be assessed in a couple months or a couple weeks. [Desk thumping] It is unfair.

And so I just wanted to address those few things, and just say that, you know, I think we have had enough of the running around, and let us get to the fact that this Government really is incapable of doing the necessary checks and balances to bring about good governance in this country. After four years and we cannot have good governance, I do not think it would happen again.

We have the issue of flood grants. We are an island that is in the tropics and therefore we would always have the issue of hurricane, rainy season, and flooding as a result of it. Probably if we had the drains cleaned and we had proper infrastructure, after four years we probably would not have had flooding. But, we do not have it. PP Government is not in place so we do not have it. After four budgets we still have to have flood grants. After the last flooding in 2017 we still have outstanding flood grants, persons waiting to receive their flood grants. [Desk thumping] And it begs the question. I mean, maybe we should ask some Ministers to come into our constituency and, you know, maybe—

Hon. Member: Get a bath.
Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein:—get a bath, and we would have compensation. [Laughter] Because, within two weeks of a wetting there was compensation. And therefore, it really begs the question, what really would get the attention of the Ministry to facilitate across the board all the constituencies where there are incidents of flood and so forth.

And you know, coming back to the issue of the biometric card. The biometric card allows that if anybody—because oftentimes you find someone might get ill and because they are living in a particular area they have to be cared for in another constituency because of a family member taking care of them. You know, if that person moves, Madam Speaker, their grant is cut. And because it is cut, because they now have to go through the whole process of being assessed, they have to be able to go to the necessary agency within that constituency that they are in and identify themselves. Until a field officer goes to ensure that the persons in fact are at the place that they in fact are still in the condition that they are in for the purpose of receiving the grant and all of that, they will not get their grant reinstated.

Now, mind you, although it may be backdated, you may get a full refund for the couple of months that you may have been cut for, it is still an inconvenience. Because at the end of the day, people still have their lives to continue with, whether it is to pay rent, eat food, or whatever it is. And therefore, I am saying that with the biometric card what it is allowed to do is—not only dealt with files being lost, it also dealt with that anywhere that person went; if they lived in Tobago and they came to Trinidad as a result of their illness, even in Trinidad they did not have to have a file being taken too, because the biometric card would have allowed for the system—because it is a case management system—would have allowed for that person to not lose any income as a result of their transition. [Desk
And so I think it is very important for the Government to understand that it is not just a waste of time, and how many persons were enrolled. Madam Speaker, that actual biometric card system was activated in August of 2015, and then we had elections in September. Good grief, how many persons you expect to have enrolled at the same time? A million people? It was a work in progress. They did not give anything a chance to do it. They just saw it, it was PP, they do not like it—cut, cut, cut. [Desk thumping]

Now, Madam Speaker, critically what happens at the end of a budget is determined largely by what was done and what was not done within that specific period of time. And clearly, this budget is yet another one of many errors that have been made by this Government. A budget with no sense of direction. One that lacks formal preparation before, during and after. Its intended preparation and implementation, and therefore this is budget that is designed to fail the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago for yet another year. There seems to be very little hope in this budget. A budget that is focused only on dollars but no sense. A budget that lacks a clear and concise sense of direction. One that is short on details in moving this economy forward. And you know, I just want to take something from the PNM’s manifesto. I am not going to display it, Madam Speaker. But, it is the 2015, page 58, “Let’s do this together”. And so it says from the Social Sector Programmes, and I quote:

“The PNM believes that the main aim of Social Sector Policy is reduce poverty and improve social justice with the objective of ensuring a more stable society.”

Madam Speaker, we cannot be further from the truth. This country is far from stable. [Desk thumping] And therefore I ask the question, really and truly, what is
happening in this budget? We have witnessed mismanagement at the highest level, and taxpayers are now called upon to shoulder the financial burden. How is this budget, Mr. Finance Minister, expected to remedy this injustice to the most vulnerable? The poor? The differently abled? [Desk thumping] Families living below the poverty line, and pensioners?

I tell you, Madam Speaker, this administration will pay a political price with this. [Desk thumping] And it is coming sooner than later. We have witnessed over the last three years a dismantling of some critical social assistance provided to the most vulnerable. A drastic reduction in the distribution of food cards. [Interruption] And “they boasting”, we removed 18,000 as though 18,000 cards is just 18,000 cards. Eighteen thousand cards multiplied by four persons equals to 72,000 persons! [Desk thumping] Seventy two thousand persons who would have had their food just like that snatched away. You know how many persons went with their card, swiping, swiping, swiping, and cannot get through. Why? Because it was stopped. No one called them to tell them. No one! Seventy two thousand persons have been affected. A complete stop of the baby assistance grant. Stopping the stipend to mothers of children affected by cerebral palsy.

Oh my goodness, I have a constituent, her son has cerebral palsy, and her grant was stopped while they were doing investigations, provided the information. This is five months now and the grant has not been reinstated. If you know what it means to take care of a child who has cerebral palsy, it is not the easiest thing. I, as a Minister visited homes, and visited to see what the conditions were at the home, only to find out with shock and dismay, sometimes parents cannot even leave. They do not have a life. They do not have a life because they have to take care of a child who is in this manner, and therefore you take away the only thing, because they cannot go out and work. If you cannot go out and work, what you
want them to do? And so, we gave support through the programmes that our political leader had the vision to come about and say [Desk thumping] this is what we had to do for our most vulnerable in our society.

**Hon. Member:** Empathy.

**Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein:** She empathizes. She cares. When you talk about care, that is care. You talk about love, that is love. And so you had the shutting-down of the Street Dweller Removal Programme, the Couva Children’s Hospital remains closed, shutting down the People’s Issues Resolution Coordinating Unit. Government’s refusal to open the National Empowerment and Enrichment Centre in Carlsen Field.

Madam Speaker, you would not believe, that centre would be able to help a lot of parents who can least afford it to begin with the therapy of the children. It is so important, because it was going to be done at no cost. They want to open the hospital in Couva finally, and what do they say?—at a cost. Why it is that the most vulnerable in our society must suffer, and they only suffer at the hands of the People’s National Movement. [Desk thumping]

This new cap for the pensioners, Madam Speaker—you know, you ask the question, you hear the Minister speak, and he says, “Oh, I am going to increase fuel prices.” And only, only, and super. Only super. Am I getting the fingering? Only super.

**Dr. Moonilal:** That is how he behaves.

**Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein:** And so you ask yourself, let us look at it: A hundred dollars, and—not a hundred dollars, sorry. It moved to $3.97, and so you have $3.97 on super gas, and you ask yourself, who is affected?

**Hon. Member:** One dollar.

**Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein:** One dollar, who is affected by that? And I would tell
you who is affected. Public servants are affected. You know why? Because the only car they could afford to buy at most times would be a foreign used. And the foreign used is what uses super gas. Who does it affect? It affects every agricultural farmer. You know why? Because they use mistblowers which use super gas; they use the wackers which use—

**Mr. Imbert:** Wacker uses kerosene.

**Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein:** No, no, no, they use super gas. Do not even try that. Madam Speaker, they use super gas. So therefore it means that you are going to have an increase—[Crosstalk]

**Madam Speaker:** Order!

**Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein:**—in foodstuff. You know, also, the water pump that they use, that is their personal water pump, uses super gasoline. So you find that a lot of the agricultural products utilize super, which, I guess the Minister of Finance did not realize that. You also have the senior citizens, for those who may have mobility problems they may not have a car. I do not know about you, Madam Speaker, but just the other day I was about to take a taxi and I have no qualms with taking a taxi. But you know, guess what? Guess what? I would have taken a maxi coming down either the bus route or the main road. But guess what? After I come out of that maxi, “the maxi doh make no drop inside”, you know. Maxi “doh go inside”. So when you come out, you have to take a PH.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** A PH.

**Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein:** And the PH uses super. [*Desk thumping*] So you ask yourself, really—

**Dr. Moonilal:** No Mustang for you.

**Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein:** No, I do not drive a Mustang. So you ask yourself, who is affected? You know, the most vulnerable, because sometimes if you have a
child that has a disability or who is differently abled and you do not have a vehicle, the maxi you take one way and you have to go inside, you have to take a car. Whether it is a PH or a taxi you still have to take a car, and those vehicles use super. So it impacts upon them.

This Government is boasting, we gave you a $150 increase when it is going right back into transportation. “And the hon. Minister himself say, it have transport, they doh need that, that does use diesel”. So, I am trying to bring really to the point to the Minister, that really and truly it is a runaround. All right? And it cannot be. This country does not have an efficient transit system and as such persons who can, opt to purchase a foreign-used vehicle.

And so, over the past couple of years you would have had increase in travel expenses because how much times fuel has been—subsidies have been removed. So you have expenses to visit the doctor, the clinics, the social welfare office, the bank, the post office, the grocery, everywhere. And, of course, all these things will require shoudering—and you are asking the same vulnerable persons to shoulder the increase, and there is no—and it is like, “hee, hee, hee”. That could not be so. That could not be so.

5.00 p.m.

So when you hear certain questions, you know, oh, we are going to have persons being looked at for election next year. Ask yourself, is this an election gimmick? Is it an election gimmick? Is this what the increases are all about? And let us not shy away from this reality. That is how this administration view its ageing population and the most vulnerable in our society, as an afterthought. So three years came and went, they did not receive anything except the high cost of living. So this year and maybe next year you will give them a little something to stay quiet when in fact you have given them nothing. [Desk thumping]
Our most vulnerable are placed in the very same position, but they are smarter than you think, they are not so easily fooled. They will see right through this and are just waiting on that day to be called when they would return the favour. So you have ignored their cries. They too felt the impact of high food prices, especially when you remove VAT—when VAT, sorry, was reintroduced by this administration on all of the basic food items which form part of their special diet and nutrition. And I want to say something, eh, our senior citizens and the differently abled and the young do not consume the same food as we do because of their age and ailments. They are restricted to special diets and of course the cost could be quite exorbitant in some cases.

So therefore, this $100 increase on the food card really cannot even purchase one item of food listed on this special diet. And you have to consider that there is no medicine in the pharmacy. And so in the pharmacy when you do not have any medication in the hospital pharmacies, you have to go out into the public pharmacies to purchase and it is very costly. There is specific medication that is required. You are talking about persons who have diabetes or heart disease or mobility issues or cancer. These basic drugs are unavailable in the hospital. And so, many of our citizens in receipt of social grants, are responsible for paying their utility bills, some rent, some assist their grandchildren, which is no fault of theirs, and particularly now with, how many persons having lost their job, they may have to go back home even by this same mother or parents to help take care of them because of these extenuating circumstances.

So it is very important to understand that this $100 increase to the food card really is negated by this removal of the fuel subsidy. And it brings me to the point eh, why would we have a direct deposit system when you would not even be able to know whether the persons are getting the nutritional needs that are required.
How can you report to the UN that these are the things that you have put in place, this is how you deal with it, this is what is being bought? Because with the biometric system you were able to identify, you could clearly see because it came up, it tagged you, because you would have been able to see, wait a minute, this person is not using their grant wisely. So you have to bring them in and ask them, why it is you are doing that? So when you want to remove anyone off a grant you have in place a track record to see what is happening, but no.

Instead, we should really seek to improve on the delivery of these services which are utilized and consumed by the elderly and the most vulnerable. We should have opened the Couva hospital. We should have ensured that critical machines are always working, whether it is the x-ray, radiology, the echocardiogram, because we are dealing with the elderly and they have all these issues, and particularly with the differently abled, so that the vulnerable would not have to pay for these services privately. It is very costly. I have persons come to my office asking for assistance because sometimes they have to wait a year or two in the hospital and they cannot because the doctor is saying, you need to get this done immediately because we need to be able to assess what is really wrong with you, but they cannot get the X-ray in the hospital. Either the X-ray machine is down or they do not have any of the actual X-rays. So it is important for us to understand that.

We had enabled the elderly, the society, the environment, especially the differently abled by providing an efficient and hassle-free method of transportation system so they can do their everyday chores. And this was the ELDAMO bus service. What is happening with that? We are not hearing anything about it. Implement the system making food and other specific cooking ingredients readily available and affordable for those with special diets. So, you know, I do not know,
I know that the hon. Minister indicated early o’clock that the, I do not know if it is the acting AG or the AG will be speaking about the achievements. I do not know why the Minister could not have spoken of the achievements for herself. I do not understand that. I would have been excited if it were me, my Ministry had achieved so much, I would have been excited to speak about all the achievements in my Ministry. [Desk thumping]

**Hon. Member:** It is just a runaround.

**Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein:** So I think it might be a runaround, it might be a runaround. So, you know, I am asking, with these 18,000 food cards, did officers visit to clinically verify that these were people who were not in need of a food card? As you boast about removing them from the system. No doubt you would have created a level of poverty in the population and, again, for which I believe that the Government will pay a political price. You know, I just want to go back again to the manifesto, the PNM manifesto and it speaks about, one of:

“The PNM Government will thus ensure:

- Independent and scientific monitoring and evaluation procedures;”

How this would happen through a direct deposit system? How will you be able to have an independent and scientific monitoring and evaluation procedure with a direct deposit system? It just does not make sense. It is a runaround, really and truly. And therefore this budget has created a false sense of well-being and security for the most vulnerable in our society.

Clients have been applying for pension months before they turn 65. The Government would cut their disability, public assistance grant, providing that they were getting that, as soon as they apply for their pension, Madam Speaker. So I am going to be 65—not me—I am pretending to be an elderly person, so I am
going to be 65 in December. So right now I am getting disability and I am getting a food card. So from the time I apply, “bam”, it gets cut until I turn 65. And my pension now—it does not happen automatically because they do all their checks and balances and check to see that I was not living away, and if I was living away I would have to get a letter to write from the country I was living in to say that I am not earning a pension. It is a whole long procedure.

So here it is, I have done all of this and I still have to wait some months, eh, because they have to do their—no mind that, you know, I would get a retroactive cheque, but I would have lost my grant, my public assistance grant, while waiting and it puts me now, an elderly person whose only dependency, financial dependency is on this public assistance grant or disability and I cannot do anything because it has been stopped while they are waiting for that. And I am saying, if it is that the Government is very much interested in really seeking the interest of the most vulnerable, let the grant continue until the actual, [Desk thumping] you know, approval, so you move on. So we have to stop, the PNM has to stop blaming the previous administration, all right. I think they should run out of excuses for Kamla, because right now she is the best thing since slice bread. [Desk thumping]

You know we come now to, how will this budget address the irreparable damage done to Tobago resulting from the ferry fiasco? They promised to fix the ferry service between Trinidad and Tobago, but they have not been able to. Every time they speak about a sailing, it keeps shifting. Well, it is 1.30 today, no, it is 2.30 tomorrow, no, we “aint go do it again”. And there is this continued promise to fix the problem and they cannot fix the problem. So I am asking, will this budget remedy this situation? Because this budget cannot be just about dollars and cents but ameliorating the lives of the people, the tax paying citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And the reason why I am raising this fiasco is to highlight from your
own manifesto. Again, I am going back to the PNM manifesto, eh, page 58, Madam Speaker, it says here:

“Focus on prevention and early recovery in social programmes, rather than the current focus on maintenance which offers no assistance in lifting persons out of poverty;”

They said:

“Emphasis on social impact studies and feedback to help formulate government policy;”

You know, that is fluff. What feedback? The feedback we are getting on the ground is resign. [Desk thumping] That is the feedback we are getting. It continues and it says:

“While we recognize”—hear the fluff—“that the state has an important role to play in this effort, we are fully conscious that governments are not always most efficient or effective in implementing social programmes.”

They should talk for themselves. PP was effective [Desk thumping] and efficient too. [Desk thumping] Speak for yourself. [Clapping hands] And we were creative.

So therefore, Madam Speaker, we have to ask the question, when we on this side said that the Government was inefficient and ineffective and they say, no, but they say so in their own manifesto. They said that, they say, we are fully conscious, they are not always the most efficient and effective. And that speaks to them.

Dr. Gopeesingh: It is admission of their failing grade.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: Admission of guilt.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Failure.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: So therefore I think they should stop from now on, the

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Government should stop from now on, blaming Kamla for their problems. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, in any sphere of life, business, home, government, there is always a need for transparency and accountability, and a budget must create trust between a government and its citizens. Can we say that this is taking place? And the answer is, no. I mean, the hon. political speaker had asked questions and the answer was no. The Member of Parliament for Pointe-à-Pierre asked the same question, the answer is no. And I am asking the same questions, and if it is a different question the answer is still no. [Desk thumping] So how would this budget ensure that another Tarouba stadium will not sink taxpayers into a black hole?

Speaking about Tarouba stadium which recently hosted the finals in the CPL, and again congrats to the Trinbago Knight Riders. But what has been the cost of this facility to taxpayers, moving from 300 million to just over a billion dollars? And would this administration seek to recover some of this money or even attempt to sell the facility as an attractive sporting destination so that we can earn some foreign exchange? But I guess they cannot do that right? Because they do not have the proper approvals and accreditation. So, what is happening at this facility throughout the year that would be beneficial, financially and otherwise, to the country’s development? Can the Minister of Finance tell us that in this budget? What are their plans for the viability of the National Aquatic Centre for sporting tourism as a whole?

And therefore, you know, I heard the Minister of Finance gave his assurance that all sports will be funded. And I wish to highlight the plight of a young constituent of mine, who struggles, she is highly talented in the area of karate. And she struggles, her parents struggle, to raise funding for her to attend

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international competitions. And I might add eh, Madam Speaker, she has won several gold medals, and this is year after year after year. And while she continues to put us on the map, she has not received any assistance from this government, even though I have written on several occasions on her behalf. The truth be told, eh, I do not think that the Government has an idea of how to take this country forward whether it is through sports or otherwise. And I would also like the Minister of Tourism to really share with the citizens the tourism master plan.

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Member, your original speaking time is now spent. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to complete. But before you do, I have recognized a certain trend with respect to your references to Members. You would be well advised to re-familiarize yourself with Standing Order 48(5).

**Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would like the Member for San Fernando East to give us a tourism master plan. And the reason why I am saying this, especially my constituency of Cumuto/Manzanilla, you know, I have—National Geographic comes to my constituency, Madam Speaker, because they filmed the white bats. Yes, I would say it every year, because if nothing has been done then I have to speak about it.

**Hon. Member:** Correct.

**Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein:** Right. [Desk thumping] And so they filmed the white bats in the Tamana caves and you know what, you do not have to give them anything, you know, you just have to invite them, on an official—with an official mandate because they come unofficially and they do all their filming and they have literally put us on the map. But we cannot put ourselves on the map, which is so sad. We have North Oropouche which has an excellent turtle site which would cost very little to develop. But it takes an administration with vision and political will to get tourism off of its feet.

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And so, Madam Speaker, you know, we ask the question, what—why has this Government taken food out of the mouths of babies and children and deprived the citizens, in particularly, you know, the elderly and all of us. Why have they deprived us? You know, you have a brand new Mercedes Benz, is that needed? You have paintings, was that needed? And, you know, to say that you know when the Government came into power their mantra was that, fumes, fumes in the Treasury. How come fumes buy “so much ah painting boy”? [Desk thumping] How come fumes “could have buy painting and buy car, buy three boats that is not working”, how—[Interruption]

Hon. Member: Fixing house.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: Fix house?

Hon. Member: Fixing house.

Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein: Fixing house you know. How can that be? Again, I think it is a runaround. It was a runaround. In my constituency it is predominantly agriculture. I saw the amount that was budgeted, that only takes care of the current expenditure. Nothing could be done in my constituency for infrastructure. [Desk thumping] We need roads. What about—the moneys are there—you realize they have no intention of dealing with Los Iros’ situation after this earthquake with the farmers. Nothing at all. We have so many bridges that are in need of repair. You know we had a big—the hon. Minister of Works and Transport, said the pothole, we are going to fix pothole. I send him a whole list of potholes, [Laughter] I did not even get one pothole fix, [Crosstalk] not even one. As a matter of fact, I thought it was a Carnival band because it was launched in Carnival, “the same way it come, the same way it gone”. [Laughter and desk thumping]

And so we have our farmers, approximately, three years have been waiting for reimbursement of the equipment they purchased. With this, only $700 million
for recurrent expenditure. Will our farmers get any reimbursement at all for the same incentives? I see the incentives have been decreased by $18,636,000 in this budget and I ask myself is this Government for real? Do they believe that they can do something with putting agriculture up on the list? Agriculture can do something, even if it is you do not want to export, it could feed us. Look at what is happening in the world today. Do you think with what is happening with all sorts of flooding and hurricanes and so forth that nations will look to give us their food? We have to look to feed ourselves, Madam Speaker, and obviously the farmers cannot fix anything with the amount of funding they received. The farmers still have not received any compensation for flood damage. So you have flood damage for the farmers and you have flood damage for citizens who have been affected.

Again, you are looking at the impact on an increase of super. You know the persons, the little workers who have, not CEPEP, but have that same sort of concept and going out and making their little dollar, cutting grass, is super gas it takes. So you are affecting small businesses. It is the middle income persons that are going to be affected and they are going to literally be reduced to a working poor and it does not seem as though that the Minister of Finance, the hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East, is cognizant of that fact. And so we have—even in Plum Mitan we have the super gas pumps and you have diesel and the diesel pumps which the Government has, is not getting diesel in a timely manner and that is happening in the Plum Mitan Lagoon. So people are asking what is happening. The increase in gas price also affects the fishing industry, because the fishing boats use super gasoline. So it is a lot of people that are going to be impacted by this and you say “it is only a dollar, hee, hee, hee”. [Laughter]

You know, I just want to touch quickly on my constituency with the Ministry of Education. I have Sangre Chiquito Presbyterian School. We still
have—they do not have their school. Their class is split. You have the Infants and Standard 5 are based in an activity centre in my constituency and the rest of students—

**Madam Speaker:** Order, order.

**Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein:**—they are based in the Grosvenor Presbyterian Primary School. You know they are not—because each school has a different mantra, they have different watchword, a different way of training their children, no matter that they are all Presbyterian, you have a basic thing but every school has their own way of dealing with things.

**Hon. Member:** Ethos.

**Mrs. C. Newallo-Hosein:** Ethos. We do not have that. Why is that not happening in my constituency? We have the Manzanilla Nariva Government Primary School, three additional teachers they are missing, because they have two infants missing and a Standard 1. They got one Infant—one teacher, and when the teacher does not come they have to send the children home. So we have children who are not getting an education and we could not be happy about this. And we ask the question, why is it that we are not getting our schools in place?

My colleague, Member for Caroni East you know, boasts of building so may schools, why is it we cannot get the schools operational and have the teachers in place? There are so many people who are waiting, who have applied to the teaching service and they can be employed. Teachers also do additional volunteer work with the students on evenings and weekends. And it is the same teachers you are asking to bear the brunt of $1, because they do not drive luxury cars, they drive cars just like, you know, who are using super. Not Mustang, you know. I need my bridge.

The farmers of Genda Road in Fishing Pond, we want our bridge. We ask
the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government for the bridge, I want our bridge. We have in national security, Cumuto Police Station needs a vehicle. The distance from Cumuto to Tamana is so vast that you cannot get there in a timely manner if something happens. We need to have a police post put in Tamana and we need additional police vehicles. And I must commend them, they are hard-working, they are talented, they are dedicated, they are on the job, I really commend them that in the midst of the fact that they have so little resources, I mean the police station in Cumuto is leaking and all sorts of things. I go there and look. They did not come and tell me anything, you know, Madam Speaker, I go and I look. I visit my constituents. I walk around and I do not get wet. [Laughter and desk thumping] And before, in my few minutes, Madam Speaker, I really need to get some roads rehabilitated and I am going to take the time to call out the names until it finish because my constituents are very upset. Bon Air Road, Minister has promised to fix it since April. Madam Speaker, I got a letter, I get letter from businesses, I get letter from ERHA saying:

…reference, in your response you indicated that road rehabilitation works along the Bon Air Road will commence in April 2018.

I gave that date because the Minister gave me that date, Madam Speaker. I “ent” pull it out from a hat. I did not go and give anybody no runaround. And so, and they ask:

…further to this, I am kindly requesting any further updates on same as it continues to be a challenge.

It is a challenge for everybody there. Cars are being destroyed as a result. Flat tyres, people have to be buying tyres all the time because of the fact that there is—Cumuto Main Road.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla, your time is now spent.
Hon. Members, I believe that it is now agreed that we will take the suspension for tea. We shall resume at 6.00 p.m.

5.25 p.m.: Sitting suspended.

6.00 p.m.: Sitting resumed.

Madam Speaker: Member for Port of Spain South. [Desk thumping].

The Minister of Public Administration (Hon. Marlene Mc Donald): Thank you, Madam Speaker. And, Madam Speaker, once again, thank you for this opportunity for contributing in this budget debate, 2019. This is my 12th offering in this Parliament in this budget debate—my 12th time.

Hon. Member: Like the 12 disciples.

Hon. M. Mc Donald: Like the 12 disciples. But before I could present, it would be remiss of me if I did not thank the constituents of Port of Spain South [Desk thumping] for the tremendous support that they have shown me over the past 11 years, and especially in July when I was ill. I thank you, Port of Spain South. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I need to respond to the Member of Parliament for Cumuto/Manzanilla who, indeed, made quite a few errors in her contribution. And I want to look at something she touted—the Member touted, my apologies—where 18,000 food cards were withdrawn. But, obviously, the Member did not quite understand what the Minister of Social Development and Family Services said, and I want to make sure that the records are clear on this. A recertification exercise was done to determine eligibility of all the clients who would have been in receipt of food cards; 18,000 of them did not respond. Despite many attempts to get at them, they did not respond. One could only surmise that they were not eligible and, therefore, they did not come forward. [Desk thumping] But the Minister has
advised me that they can still apply and come in and get the means test done. That is the only way that they would be able to access those cards.

And I will tell the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla something. You know, many of them might have been given those food cards out of trunks of cars—many of them. [Desk thumping] And therefore, a proper means test was not done on some of these individuals, and therefore, they were placed in a very embarrassing situation that they cannot come forward at this point in time because they probably do not qualify to hold a food card. [Desk thumping]

And, Madam Speaker, I will tell you something. I have a personal friend and she is a teacher and her husband is a customs officer, and she has a food card—a $700 food card.

Hon. Member: How she get that?

Hon. M. Mc Donald: She has a food card, a $700 food card. So how did she qualify for that?

Hon. Member: She was not a teacher then.

Hon. M. Mc Donald: Okay? How did she qualify for that? Madam Speaker, there was a trend in this country and that is why the hon. Prime Minister said to us when we got in, in 2015, the day he finds any one of his Ministers distributing food cards, you will be a former Minister. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I want to clear the air on something else that was said by the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla. With respect to the senior citizens’ pension, the Member did not understand what the proposal was all about with respect to that senior citizens’ pension. The Minister said that an additional 27,263 would benefit from the budgetary proposal. But there is already existing in the system, 67,391 members, and that is where that 94,654 has come in. That is the maximum. And they are at the maximum. They would have been at the maximum. So these are
the people now who would now be joining that group, that 27,000.

**Dr. Francis:** That is what “additional” means.

**Hon. M. Mc Donald:** The Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla also said that a parent of a special needs child is not eligible for a grant. This is untrue, Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla.

**Hon. Member:** Educate her.

**Hon. M. Mc Donald:** That is not true. I have been reliably advised that a single parent who is unable to work because they have to care for a child can qualify for a public assistance grant. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Imbert:** “She doh know nutting about nutting.”

**Hon. M. Mc Donald:** Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla, you also said in your offering that nothing has been done in the constituency of Cumuto/Manzanilla.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** In three years.

**Hon. M. Mc Donald:** In three years. But, Member, I sat here for five years, from 2010 to 2015, and your Government spent over $400 billion in five years. You should have put in a plug then for Cumuto/Manzanilla. [*Desk thumping*] That is right. And Port of Spain South, for five years, I got nothing. I got nothing—Port of Spain South. [*Crosstalk*] And I am now being informed again—

**Madam Speaker:** Order! Order!

**Hon. M. Mc Donald:**—that Cumuto/Manzanilla got two community centres.

**Hon. Member:** What? Two?

**Hon. M. Mc Donald:** Two community centres. And just one more, Cumuto/Manzanilla. You know, in this House we have to be careful because at the end of the day when we leave here we all are colleagues and we still have to live in Trinidad and Tobago, and what happened today I found was quite disrespectful. That incident with respect to water—all right?—and the wetting and, you know,
you could go and you could get soaked down and then you could go to court and get compensation, Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla, we are all representatives. [*Desk thumping*] And, you see, “when your neighbour house on fire, wet yours”.

[*Desk thumping*] And we must try our best, Cumuto/Manzanilla, and all Members, to be respectful to each other. We all are striving—all of us here are striving to improve the standard of living of all our constituents. We might take different approaches to achieve that goal, but that is what we are here about. [*Crosstalk*] And when I am speaking, please, I did not disturb you.

**Madam Speaker:** Member, please direct your contribution this way and therefore some of the banter, you would be able to rise above.

**Hon. M. Mc Donald:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] And I want to respond to the Member for Siparia—

**Hon. Member:** In absentia.

**Hon. M. Mc Donald:** In absentia. You know, that was a wandering—I did not quite understand—meandering. I cannot find the adjective to describe what I heard this morning—vacuous. “Ah doh understand it.”

**Hon. Member:** “Yuh doh know the meaning of dah one.”

**Hon. M. Mc Donald:** Exactly. No direction. I really, really, really cannot understand, but I want to explain something to the national community. The Member said that—she complained a lot about the untimely data; that we were not presenting accurate figures and those figures were untimely. I want the Member to recognize that it was her Government that virtually closed down the CSO, the Central Statistical Office. [*Desk thumping*] The staff had to be at home for years. It was only just prior to the 2015 election—March 2015—that the staff was housed.

But I am happy to announce today, via the Minister of Planning and Development, that the completion of the National Statistical Institute of Trinidad
and Tobago Bill, in fact, was laid in this Parliament, had its first reading in June and certainly the second reading will take place very shortly in the House of Representatives. [Desk thumping] And that has come about because we recognize that the former Government paid no attention to the CSO, and so, in our campaign and our manifesto, which is now Government’s policy, one of the institutions that we would establish is this National Statistical Institute. [Desk thumping] And when we were in Opposition, we had to depend on figures from the Central Bank. We could not get figures coming out of the CSO—could not get it, under the former Government.

I also want to talk about what the Member for Siparia also said. She criticized us and said that there would be five years—she could predict that there would be five years of budget deficits from this side. She also said that our plan—what is our plan? She asked the question: What was our plan? Are we going to balance the budget? But I want the Member for Siparia, in her ramblings, to understand, that for five years—five years—we got deficit budgets [Desk thumping]—five years massive budgets from the other side.

Hon. Member: Oil was $120 a barrel.

Hon. M. Mc Donald: Every single year—and I am going to answer and I am going to provide the statistics in my contribution. And the Member must understand, too, that for the five years I was here as the Opposition Chief Whip on the other side, and I remember, it was like almost my mantra on an annual basis, where I kept asking the former Government: “What is your exit strategy?” Deficit financing is something that is used worldwide. However, you cannot remain running heavy deficits every single year. You must be able at some point in time to come out of it gradually, and they did no such thing.

Now, I was appalled today to hear the Member for Siparia so very concerned
Hon. Member: Small-man budget.

Hon. M. Mc Donald:—the small-man budget, yes. Madam Speaker, I will address some of these issues a little later on in my contribution. Madam Speaker, the Government’s theme for 2019 is “Turnaround”. And it is very appropriate, indeed. The theme “Turnaround” has come on the heels of the 2018 theme, which is “Changing the Paradigm: Putting the Economy on a Sustainable Path”. And, Madam Speaker, we have seen the benefits derived from such an objective.

And it was with great pleasure when I read sometime last week where the IMF’s outlook for Trinidad and Tobago is very positive. Madam Speaker, it is a small milestone, but we have achieved a lot over the last three years and this I am thankful for. I am speaking here but I am very heavy, simply because we could have done much better had it not been for those five years where there was spending and spending and I should say the five years and 90 days of the disastrous rule of the former Government. [Desk thumping]

And this Government—the former Government—we must never, ever forget their fiscal irresponsibility. We must never forget their disregard for basic norms. The end result of this fiscal irresponsibility is that they spent over $400billion. On what? [Interruption] You will have your time, Caroni East. Madam Speaker, no new income streams were created to support the unprecedented—[Interruption]—Madam Speaker, please protect me. [Crosstalk]

Mr. Indarsingh: We will protect you.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Couva South, maybe if you are looking this way you would realize I am on my legs. Okay? Please proceed, Member for Port of Spain South.

Hon. M. Mc Donald: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, no attempts
were made at any form of diversification. You know, I heard the Member for Siparia today said that we have not brought in one single cent of foreign direct investment.

**Hon. Member:** That is true.

**Hon. M. McDonald:** But I recall in either 2013 or ’14—because I spoke about it in the budget—that there was a whole crew. They went off to India. They spent over $15 million. It involved about six Ministries paying for the trip. They went—over a whole plane-load went off to India. I remember well—because I was pivotal in that debate—200 meetings they said they attended and not one cent in foreign direct investment came back in this country. *[Desk thumping]* That is your record. That is your—check the *Hansard*. That is your record. And today we are being told and we are being scolded that we have not brought in any foreign direct investment. *[Crosstalk]* Madam Speaker, may I have some silence, please?

**Madam Speaker:** Members, again, please control the level of the banter. Member for Port of Spain South. *[Desk thumping]*

**Hon. M. McDonald:** Madam Speaker, by running these heavy deficits each year, the difference was made up by borrowing. They borrowed as if it was going out of style. And, Madam Speaker, I want to demonstrate something here this evening. It is based on really what the Member for Siparia said this morning about this huge deficit. Let me remind them of their record.

- **2011:** expenditure, $49 billion; revenue, $41.3 billion; deficit, $7.7 billion.
- **2012:** expenditure, $54.6 billion; revenue, $47 billion; deficit, $7.6 billion.
- **2013:** expenditure, $58.4 billion; revenue, $50.7 billion; deficit, $7.7 billion.
- **2014:** expenditure, $61.2 billion; revenue, $55 billion; deficit, $6.4 billion.
- **2015:** expenditure, $63.7 billion; revenue, $60.4 billion; deficit, $3.4 billion.

That was your record. And, Madam Speaker, our record, we came in, in
2015—September 2015. In 2016, our expenditure was $62 billion. Why? It included a $5 billion that they promised the public officers in back pay and we were committed to it. We had to pay it. They committed this country to that. 2017: our expenditure went from $63 billion—that was their last figure in 2015—down to $53 billion. [Desk thumping] 2018: $50.5 billion [Desk thumping] and 2019, our projection is $51.7 billion. [Desk thumping] And let us not forget the $14 billion from National Gas Company. Up to now they cannot tell us what they have done with that $14 billion from National Gas Company.

And further, over their period, $20 billion in revenue we lost as oil prices plunged to below US $50 per barrel—by 2015. But they continued to spend. They took no action to stabilize the public finances—none whatsoever. But I will tell you something. We are a real Government and the situation before us in 2015 was quite clear. We cannot spend what we do not have. It was back to basics. If our revenues have been reduced, then we have to bring it in line with our expenditure. And that was our new reality. If we did not change the paradigm, we would have placed this economy on a dangerous path.

And as the Member for Siparia said that we are the ones mortgaging away this country, but if you had continued in office, and we had continued with your policies, we were the ones who would have been mortgaging away this country and the debt of this country would have been passed on to our children and our children’s children. [Desk thumping] All that was done, Madam Speaker, we know it was difficult over the last three years, but as far as I am concerned, there was minimal discomfort. Things were tight but we were able to retain our workforce. And you would have heard from the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, our social safety net remained intact. [Desk thumping] And further still, we did not have to go to the IMF.
Hon. Member: They already here.

Hon. M. Mc Donald: We—I should not say “we”, but the Minister of Finance made our adjustments for our citizens. He made the adjustments for our citizens and we did not allow the IMF to do it for us. And we could just look next door to our neighbours in Jamaica. And now—[Interuption]—Madam Speaker, you know, Pointe-a-Pierre, when you were speaking, I allowed you.

Madam Speaker: Member, if you have an objection, please address me. Okay? [Crosstalk] Members, one expects that there is going to be a certain amount of banter, and I am sure all experienced Members can rise above that. Please proceed, Port of Spain South. [Desk thumping]

Hon. M. Mc Donald: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, it is about the third time I had to sit for you to discipline. Madam Speaker, would I get back my five minutes, please. [Laughter]

Hon. Members: Proceed.

Hon. M. Mc Donald: Madam Speaker, I recall back in 2015 the then Governor of the Central Bank, Mr. Jwala Rambarran, approached the Minister of Finance and announced that Trinidad and Tobago only had three days of cash left in the Government’s current account at the Central Bank to run this Government. Apparently he was oblivious to this fact prior to the 7th of September, 2015. But through sheer prudence and stringent financial management, this Government was able to re-prioritize its expenditure to reach that projected sum of $50 billion by 2018. [Desk thumping]

So, Madam Speaker, from a cover of only three days to run this country in 2015, to achieving stability and a projected economic growth of 1.9 per cent in 2018 is quite a tremendous task. And that is what this budget is all about, a genuine, real, transparent, economic turnaround for Trinidad and Tobago. This
Government was able to maintain spending on education, maintaining our social safety net. We have made sure that despite what has happened, we were able to maintain all the benefits to our poor and vulnerable citizens. We did not leave them behind. We stimulated private construction in the housing sector. We have tackled the hard issues like Petrotrin. You have heard from my colleagues, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, earlier today. We have started the deregulation of the fuel subsidy, and we are revitalizing the energy sector. [Desk thumping]

As a consequence of the deregulation of the fuel subsidy, we realized a savings of some $700 million, and we have intentions—the Minister of Finance of ploughing this sum back into the economy. And how is he going to do it? Well, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services outlined some of the measures: increase in the food cards. This will cost an additional $29.2 million; increase in disability grants, to cost $78 million; public assistance grant, $41.4 million; cap on senior citizens’ pensions, moving it from $5,000 to $6,000. That would cost an additional $194 million. Tax allowance for tertiary education, moving from $60,000 to $72,000 per year. This will cost an additional $15 million. Stamp duties for first-time home owners, moving from $850,000 to $1.5 million, which would realize a savings to individuals of $37,000, but revenue foregone by the Government in the sum of $12.5 million. Madam Speaker, these are some of the mechanisms that the Government would use to give the citizens back some of that money that they would have gotten from the deregulation of the fuel subsidy.

I want to commend at this point, the Minister of Finance, for delivering a budget that presents hope, that presents stability for a brighter future for our citizens. [Desk thumping] Also, too, how could I forget my colleague and sister,
the Minister of Planning and Development?  

[Desk thumping] Believe me, no project would happen unless it is under the hands of the Minister of Planning and Development who works very closely with the Minister of Finance. Thank you very much.

So, Minister of Finance, I salute you this evening for producing a socially balanced budget.  

[Desk thumping] Our economic indicators are good. And we are moving in the right direction. Inflation is low, and despite the challenges, our debt is still manageable.

Growth has returned, 1.9 per cent, unemployment has risen slightly but again still at historically low levels, our exchange rate remains stable and, finally, there is evidence of even a rebound of some areas in the non-energy sector.  

[Desk thumping] I rest my case, Madam Speaker.

6.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, I turn my attention to the Ministry of Public Administration. That portfolio is concerned with modernizing the public service to enable better service delivery and the ease of doing business. The Ministry is also a leader in information and communications technology—ICT for short—for both the public service as well as for individuals across the country, every citizen. No one would be left behind in our ICT development plan. The Cabinet has just approved the National ICT Plan for 2018—2022 and the plan is aligned, may I say, to our Vision 2030.  

[Desk thumping] This plan takes into consideration empowering citizens, and to this end there are four operational ICT access centres—in Penal, in Cumana, in Marac and down in Guayaguayare—in your constituencies.

These centres allow for persons in these rural communities to access computers which they can use to access information on government services. They
can also access ICT training on how to use the Internet and the email. There are also Wi-Fi pavilions. So if you have a device you can go to one of these access centres and you will be able to access the Internet, et cetera. Since these centres have been opened, over 14,000 persons in these rural communities have accessed these centres.

Madam Speaker, there are two other phases to our ICT plan, competitive businesses and also transformational government. Transformational government is simple. Our e TecK has been a success. We also have TTBizLink and that is an online platform for trade services. We also have gov.pay. We plan to introduce this in 2019, and this is where the Government can receive payments from citizens using either debit card or credit card. Investments will be made in gov.net to realize e-government services in the coming year, and we are already working with banks and three key service providers—Registrar General, IPO Office and the Licensing Division.

Our public service modernization. Madam Speaker, I know that there is a lot of talk about the modernization of the public service and this has been going on for years. I have been there for seven months and I could tell you that this process is a journey, a very long and tedious journey, but in this regard we have continued our training and leadership programmes under the Public Service Academy impacting well over 1,000 public officers.

Madam Speaker, there is the programme there called the e-Based Competency Development Training Programme, and this particular programme is a pilot project. It is an online training programme developed by the Ministry of Public Administration and the University of Trinidad and Tobago, and it is tailored, Madam Speaker, to meet the needs of the public service officers. To date, there are four modules. There is computer training, there is business writing,
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supervisory skills and customer service. Over 500 officers to date have been trained, and I want to bring this to the attention of the public, that this particular programme, this e-Based Competency Development Training Programme, has just won an award, the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation award (CTO) [Desk thumping] for best application, e-learning.

So good things are coming out of Public Administration, and if you notice for the past two or three weeks we have been doing little things to bring to the—and we will do it in a more sustainable manner as we develop the programmes, et cetera, because I think what happens in Public Admin is one of the best-kept secrets. A lot of things, Madam Speaker, would go on there but the public is unaware. Even when I was not Minister I did not realize that it was such a progressive Ministry. So I thank all the officers there. [Desk thumping]

There is a division there, Public Management Consulting Division—and that is the PMCD—and I am rather intrigued with this particular division because it functions as an internal management consulting agency by providing executive advisory services to the Cabinet and Government Ministries. They have been doing this for more than 60 years and it is always a pleasure to read their comments because many Ministries, in terms of their staffing and restructuring, they will then write to PMCD to get their views on whether they are going in the right direction, or whether 10 staff will be needed, whether two staff would be needed. It is always such an edifying exercise to read the comments made by PMCD.

Madam Speaker, this brings me to the PRESD department, which is the Property and Real Estate Services Division, and I am happy to announce that we are in the process of developing an information system called the PMIS. For the first time—[Interruption]
Hon. Members: “Waaay.”

Madam Speaker: Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

Hon. M. McDonald: I would not call that word again—which will provide the Government with a full inventory of all properties under the remit.

Madam Speaker, there was a time when you could not have gotten any information with respect to Government’s properties, be it the privately owned ones or whether those leased rental ones. Now, we have completed the phase one and we are now into phase two, and this is to show you how technology is working in our favour, ICT, and it is being done internally so we do not have to pay. We do not have to pay external consultants to develop the programme. Everything was developed inside and being done internally. So therefore, we have continued apace with our national ICT agenda. Citizens and businesses can expect better telecommunications infrastructure from us, more opportunities to use ICTs and more e-government services, and the ease of doing business. Our public service is continuously modernizing. I said it is going to be a long arduous task, but we will continue working to upgrade the skills of our public officers. We will use our ICTs for improved efficiencies and effectiveness, and we will continue, I will say by doing so, and we will realize value for money.

Madam Speaker, I turn my attention to the constituency of Port of Spain South. I am happy to announce that the long-awaited Piccadilly Government School construction would commence sometime in the fiscal year. I am very heartened as I have seen it in the PSIP. I am also pleased to see the overhead walkover in Sea Lots finally. [Desk thumping] Indeed, this would save a lot of lives of my constituents in Port of Spain South [Desk thumping] and you know I have a special place in my heart for Sea Lots. A planned activity centre in the Woodbrook area geared for use by senior citizens in the Woodbrook area, that is
also in the pipeline for 2019 and, of course, my pet project, the rejuvenation of the East Port of Spain area along Piccadilly Street is in the pipeline for 2019.

Madam Speaker, I want to thank you once again—[Crosstalk]

Madam Speaker: Order! Order!

Hon. M. Mc Donald:—for this opportunity. I have touched on the points that I want to make. I want to thank the hon. Minister of Finance, I want to thank the hon. Minister of Planning and Development because I know these projects would be realized under her hands [Desk thumping] and thank the Prime Minister for providing us with the visionary approach [Desk thumping] and to all my colleagues, thank you for whatever input.

Madam Speaker, I thank you. [Desk thumping]

Dr. Lackram Bodoe (Fyzabad): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this 2019 budget debate on an Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2019. Madam Speaker, first of all let me congratulate the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia [Desk thumping] and former Prime Minister, for her excellent contribution, and I also want to take the opportunity to thank my two other colleagues who have made some very sterling contributions—

Madam Speaker: Member for Diego Martin North/East, are you leaving?

Mr. Imbert: Yes, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Yes, please. Please exit in silence. Thank you. Please proceed, Member for Fyzabad.

Dr. L. Bodeoe: Thank you, Madam Speaker. So I just wanted to congratulate my colleagues, the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre and the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla for their excellent contributions. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I wish to take the opportunity to address a few concerns raised by
the Member for Port of Spain South, Minister of Public Administration. Member, I know that you felt that you had to rebut the contribution of the Leader of the Opposition, so good it was [Desk thumping] and, of course, it is the tradition of the House, but Member I want to assure you that the sterling contribution that we witnessed today in the House would have enlightened the members of the public and especially those stakeholders of Petrotrin and other stakeholders in this country. [Desk thumping]

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER in the Chair]

The Member for Siparia is right to be concerned about budget deficits, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the Member for Siparia was merely looking after the interest and advocating on behalf of the future generations who will have to carry the burden of any budget deficits that this Government incurs and puts on this country. I also want to raise again the issue that the IMF figures and predictions were not informed by the fact that the Petrotrin refinery would be closed and, therefore, one has to be cautious in the interpretation of those recommendations and data.

I also wanted to look at the issue raised in terms of the expenditure of the People’s Partnership Government and this has always been an issue, but I want to say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that that was really money well spent. [Desk thumping] Those are projects, it was seen, they are all over this country and, in fact, many of these projects that were started under the People’s Partnership Government are now being embraced and continued by this present PNM Government. [Desk thumping] In fact, many of these projects that this money was spent on would have been in constituencies outside of the Partnership’s constituencies. A brand-new health centre was provided in the constituency of La Brea—

Hon. Member: Eh?
Dr. L. Bodoe: A completely refurbished—that is the Palo Seco Health Centre, brand new in the constituency of La Brea. [Interrupt] Of course, that was under the Partnership at the time—a completely refurbished health centre was provided in the constituency of Point Fortin—I am sure the Member for Point Fortin is very much aware of that—and of course, in Carenage a brand-new health centre was provided. My colleague, who was the former Minister of Education, also notes and it was mentioned that the Partnership Government built the Rose Hill RC Primary School [Desk thumping] and began an ECCE in the constituency of Port of Spain South.

Hon. Member: “Nah.” Repeat that.

Dr. L. Bodoe: Yes, two schools in the Port of Spain South constituency, as well as the Carenage RC in Point Cumana, and the Paramin RC in the constituency of the Member for Diego Martin North/East. So I just make those points, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to make the point that the money was spent and it was spent equitably and fairly [Desk thumping] across all parts of the country and to benefit all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

There was also the issue raised by the Member for Port of Spain South regarding the level of foreign direct investment, and I wanted to state that the highest amount of foreign direct investment in the history of Trinidad and Tobago was actually in the year 2014 when the Partnership was under Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

I just wanted to correct a few statements that were made as well with regard to the fact that the People’s Partnership Government would have halted the economic decline in 2013 and restored the growth and expansion, and we moved from minus 4.4 per cent decline in 2009 to a recovery and growth by 2011. I also wanted to mention the fact that the GDP per capita moved from $16,000 in 2010 to
$20,900 in 2014. We also created under the leadership of the Member for Siparia, 56,000 new jobs and decreased the unemployment rate to 3.7 per cent. [Desk thumping]

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me move on to a few issues in the budget debate itself, and I must say that this debate does not give me or my constituents in Fyzabad much hope for any sort of recovery or any hope that they are going to enjoy better life or better year coming forward.

The question that ran through my mind as I listened to the Finance Minister’s marathon presentation, on Monday, is what was this Government going to do differently this year; what would they do differently to ease the pain and suffering of so many of our citizens and to improve their quality of life? The fact is that over $150 billion has been spent by this Government in the past three years, but citizens are still living in hopelessness and despair. So it appears that this administration has not got it right after three years in office.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wanted to examine from the budget statement—I refer to page 11 of the budget statement and the Minister mentioned nine areas in which his Government is pursuing policy reforms, and I just want to draw the attention of the House, and the country, to two of those reforms, two of those measures; one of those and I quote is:

“reversing non-progressive values, attitudes and behaviours such as low productivity and poor work ethos;”

And the second would be:

“ensuring effective and efficient public service delivery and implementation of development interventions and measurement of results;”

These are areas of national life that need to be addressed and addressed urgently if we are to develop as a nation and to achieve First World status.

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I know that the Member for Port of Spain South mentioned several initiatives that were currently taking place in the Ministry of Public Administration, but reform of the public sector and getting value for money in the public sector, Mr. Deputy Speaker, remains an elusive dream in this country—over several administrations—and we are yet to have some direct impact in terms of how we improve the public service. And whilst I take note of the initiatives mentioned by the Member for Port of Spain South, I also want to point out that we have a long way to go and there is still a whole lot to be done.

You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the question really is, are we on the track to improving the delivery of goods and services through the public administration, or is it that Trevor Farrell has come to the right conclusion about us as a people as he stated in the title of his book, We Like It So? It is very good reading—Terrence Farrell—but, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do not believe that this is the case. I believe that we, as a people, still have to fulfil our potential and we just need proper leadership, management, and guidance from those who have been given the mandate to take us there.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, whilst there are many factors that impact on values, attitude and behaviour, I believe that the reward and reprimand model has been proven to be effective in bringing about measurable change. We continue to experience very poor service at the majority of Government institutions and really one has to wonder what is the reason for this. Is it because there are no sanctions in place for poor service? Is it there is lack of supervision? These are issues that really need to be addressed. In fact, I hope that I am wrong about this. I recently viewed a video of employees combing each other’s hair during working hours at what appeared to be a government office in full view of the public—certainly behaviour that is not becoming of those who are paid by the State.
So I was happy to hear that the customer service training is taking place, but I want to point out that when I looked at the budget allocation—and the Member for Port of Spain South spoke about the Public Service Academy which is responsible for some of the training—I noted that in 2018 only $736,000 was spent in 2018 compared to $23,640,000 in 2017. Quite a marked difference. So I am very concerned that on one hand that we are speaking about training public servants and yet the budget allocation does not reflect that. So we are quite a long way from improving the public service.

There are some issues that I may have raised in previous contributions with regard to the modernization of the public service and I just want to make note. I note that now the Ministry of Public Administration has created a new division which is a new line Item in the budget. It is call Modernization and the Service Improvement Division. I really was hoping and expecting that the Minister of Public Administration would have shed some more light on this new division and what the role of this new division would be in terms of improving service to the public.

I just want to raise a few more issues again for the consideration of the Minister with regard to how public servants work. I know the issue of flexitime has been mentioned, the issue of working from home, and this is especially important, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in view of the fact that we face a tremendous problem in terms of people getting to work especially when they live in south and central. [Desk thumping] There is quite a bit of decrease in productivity in terms of time spent in traffic, tremendous amount of frustration, and one wonders that when you reach a public office as a consumer, as a member of the public, and you encounter someone who is unfriendly, or is not willing to talk to you, whether in fact they are not suffering from the fact that they have been in traffic for three and
four hours. And, of course, the increase in the price of fuel is going to make that worse.

So flexitime, you know, staggering the times, maybe some decentralization of government offices because there is really no reason why all of the government offices have to be in the capital city. One can look at moving some of these to other areas, areas outside of Port of Spain, Chaguanas of course, and San Fernando of course, and to other parts of the country and, of course, there is always the possibility of working from home now with computers and the Internet and so on. So those are innovations that can be utilized very easily.

In terms of the traffic, I just want to cite an example trying to get here this morning, I would have had to leave San Fernando very early to get here in time this morning anticipating the traffic. You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you reach to Chaguanas there are three lanes. There are three lanes from Chaguanas to take you to Grand Bazaar, but can take you straight to the Priority Bus Route, and really and truly why it is that one of these lanes cannot be modified as an extra lane for the buses and we can call it a high occupancy lane, where if you have a vehicle that has three or four passengers you allow them to use that lane so that will encourage sometimes a bit of carpooling or people cutting back on the traffic.

We have 800,000 vehicles on the roads of Trinidad and Tobago and, of course, what you are doing by implementing that measure is that what you have done there is just extended the Priority Bus Route, but, of course, what that will require, it will require citizens to have the confidence to park their vehicles in Chaguanas—I am talking about those who come from the deep south, they must have a safe place to park their vehicles in Chaguanas, hop on the bus of course, and come straight into Port of Spain, and that is going to ease a lot of the traffic and the frustration in terms of getting to work.
Another issue that troubled me as well when I perused these documents, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is when I looked at the PSIP document in terms of the allocation and the amounts expended and I looked at the years 2016, 2017, 2018, there is a very interesting table in one of these PSIP documents, but the bottom line is that in 2016, $7 billion was allocated but $4.7 billion was expended; in 2017, $5.1 billion was allocated but only $3.5 billion was expended; and in 2018, $5.1 billion, but $3.5 billion expended. So the pattern here is suggesting that only about 65 to 66 per cent of the PSIP allocation has been expended, and when one considers that the purpose of the PSIP is really to further and to enhance the development of the country it is very worrisome, and the question really that comes to mind is what are the reasons for this gap in the implementation between the allocation and the expenditure. Really, the questions that need to be asked and hopefully answers are provided: Is it that the approvals are taking too long either by the Cabinet or the Ministries; is it that the funds are not being released or were not released in a timely manner; is it that there was poor project management; and, of course, the big question is really is there sufficient capacity within the public sector to deal with project implementation and, of course, whether the institutions that currently deal with implementation have the capacity?

So, we know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the importance of the institutions and properly functioning institutions in nation building. I am happy to hear the Member for Port of Spain South promise that the national statistical institute will soon be a reality. Of course, having proper statistics and accurate statistics is very important in terms of decision making, and implementing and planning policies and programmes and so on. So we look forward to the implementation of the national statistical institute where we can get data that will inform our decision making in all aspects of national life.

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So the PSIP, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know is a budgeting and strategic planning tool employed by the Government to translate its priorities and plans into tangible programmes and projects and, therefore, it is really the delivery arm of the State and one of the interventions mentioned in that document is the establishment of a project management information unit and I trust and hope that that will soon be a reality and that we will see an improvement in terms of the delivery of goods and services.

7.00 p.m.

The Ease of Doing Business Index was mentioned by the Member for Port of Spain South, but really and truly, we are worse off in terms of that Index now, than we were a few years ago. We have gone from being number 66—now 102, and therefore we have to analyze and look deeply at why we are falling behind in these indices. So the question really, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that: Is there going to be a turnaround or are we just getting a runaround by this Government? [Desk thumping]

I just want to address one other issue in the budget statement, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and that comes under the heading of “Building Human Capital” and it is on page 103 of the Minister’s budget statement and I quote here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, from the document, and it says that—this is regards to “Health and Healthcare”. I just want to make a few comments on that issue as I move away from public administration and make a few comments on the issue of the health sector and health care. The Minister of Finance in his budget statement has stated and I quote:

“…the quality of our public healthcare…remains high on our policy agenda.”

When I read that statement, I asked myself: Is it really true? Because when I went
to the actual allocation in the budget documents, I have noticed that the recurrent expenditure to the Ministry of Health has been cut by over $300 million.

I was also very concerned that the allocations to the regional health authorities have been reduced by over $400 million under Transfers and Subsidies and perhaps the Minister of Health may have some explanation for this, but it is worrisome. It is worrying in view of the fact that we know that the RHAs are the delivery arm for goods and services on behalf of the Ministry of Health. The other thing of concern to me was the fact that the expenditure on drugs and other related materials in 2018, was $500 million out of an allocation of $630 million, and this is especially worrisome in view of the numerous complaints that patients frequently would make regarding the shortage of drugs and the waiting time for surgeries and so on.

So just a few suggestions, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and this is with regard to the number of unemployed doctors and nurses that are currently in the system, and one of the suggestions, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that serious consideration should be given to matching the output of allied health care, doctors and nurses, to our needs. So we need to have a needs assessment. But I just want to mention the model in Cuba where I would have visited with my colleague, the Member for Barataria/San Juan when he was the Minister of Health, and their model is that they have their faculty, they have their medical schools under the direct control of the Ministry of Health. And what that does, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that it allows the Minister of Health and the Ministry of Health to have a direct idea of how many students are graduating, so there is a direct control by the Ministry of Health over those who are graduating. So this is something that I would want to suggest that the Government and the Minister of Health can look at.

One of the other suggestions I would want to make with regard to the
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Dr. Bodoe (cont’d)

training of doctors, is for the Government and for the Ministry and the Minister to look at the reimplementation of a two-year internship. I am saying that, Minister, because it is—

Mr. Deyalsingh: I said so already.

Dr. L. Bodoe: No, but it is important, Minister, I will tell you why.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, please, please, address the Chair.

Dr. L. Bodoe: Sure, yeah. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am saying that because I myself was a beneficiary when I graduated many, many years ago—in 1983/84 thereabouts—of a two-year internship, and what that did for me is that the normal internship is where you rotate amongst four specialities: medicine, surgery, obstetrics/gynaecology and paediatrics. That is the standard thing. But what the second year does for you, it allows you the opportunity to do what is called elective training as well and it makes you a better—well, from what I have seen, it makes you a more well-rounded, a better doctor, you have the experience and what it does, of course, as well is, you know, it prepares you because many doctors choose the option of going out for private practice. But—[Interruption] Sure.

Mr. Deyalsingh: Thank you for giving way. Both myself and the former Minister of Health have proposed to UWI, a two-year internship. UWI flatly refuses to do it across the Caribbean. They cannot do it for one campus and not do it for Barbados and Jamaica. I have raised this. I have said categorically that a one-year internship is not good, we need to move to two years. It is up to UWI to do it across the Caribbean.

Dr. L. Bode: Thank you, Minister. But you see, and that is where I made the point, Member. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I made the point that this is not going to happen unless the medical school and the faculty of medicines come under the direct control of the Ministry of Health. It has been done in Cuba, it has been done
successfully, and it is something that maybe has to be taken at the Government level, maybe at the Caricom level to deal with, but I think it is something that needs to be dealt with.

But I wanted to go a little bit further with regard to the training of doctors and I want to raise an issue that may be very controversial and I might incur the wrath of my medical colleagues, but I want to suggest, we have a system in Trinidad, currently, where after one year of internship, you are allowed full registration by the Medical Board of Trinidad and Tobago. What that means, Mr. Deputy Speaker—the Minister of Health is aware of this—is that with full registration, you are allowed to go out and open an independent practice where you can treat members of the public. I am very unhappy with that situation. There used to be a tradition, where, even though that happened, there would be an understanding and an undertaking that doctors would remain in the hospital and train themselves further before they go out. Of course, part of the problem now, Minister, is that doctors cannot get the places, the jobs in the hospital. So I am proposing in addition to the two-year internship, that the doctors in training are required to get one more year for full registration. There might be some issues with that, especially with regard to doctors who are going to specialize and so on, but it is just some thoughts and it is something I am sure that can be worked out. But at the end of the day, it is going to benefit the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who have to be treated by medical professionals.

I just want to piggy back on a suggestion which I know has been thrown out by my colleague from Barataria/San Juan and to, again, suggest that specialist training should be available at all hospitals because we do have that issue with regard to specialists and the unavailability of specialists in the public health system. And I just want to make a call to the Member for St. Joseph, the Minister
of Health, to look again, Minister, at the levels in the San Fernando Teaching Hospital that was specifically designed for teaching with anatomy and physiology labs and so on. They were purpose-built, and I know that they have now been occupied by the Human Resource department, and I think that is a situation that needs to be looked at. It is something that, perhaps, you may want to look at, Minister. [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Dr. L. Bodoe: I also think that we need to review the remit of the regional health authorities. I am throwing out these suggestions because I think that is the way we go forward because managing the health sector is not easy, it is difficult, and we have to think outside of the box and we have to look at what we are doing and whether it is giving us the results that we are looking for. And I think there are two issues that can be dealt with almost immediately and that is with regard to the issue of hiring of medical personnel. We have four RHAs; each RHA does its own hiring. Sometimes it is difficult to move one doctor from one RHA to the other. I am suggesting the creation of a central recruitment or hiring agency where the Ministry has the oversight. You hire and then you allocate the doctors according to needs within the RHAs.

The other issue which I know my colleague, when he was Minister, had started is the issue of a central procurement agency for all the RHAs which is going to bring cost benefits and so on. And even the remit of the RHAs in terms of what they perform, really and truly, should RHAs be responsible for building health centres or doing work that can be done better by others? Should they not be more responsible for the operational aspects of providing patient care and delivery of clinical services? So I think the remit of the RHAs, what they do, needs to be reviewed so that the money that is spent is geared to bring greater benefit to
patients.

The Minister of Finance went on to say in the same document, and again I quote him:

“…our goal of achieving universal health coverage is quickly becoming within our reach with every citizen having access to first-class healthcare with specialist…services being provided in an environment of modern, primary and secondary health institutions.”

And again, I am thinking that the Minister is saying something but there is contradiction in terms of what is actually happening. And whilst we take note that the Government has chosen to complete the Arima and Point Fortin Hospitals, which started under the Partnership Government, [Desk thumping] but we are happy that those are being completed and we are happy that the residents in those areas in Arima and Point Fortin are going to enjoy the benefits of modern hospitals. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, how then does this Government explain to the population why a brand new hospital with the capability to offer first-class health care lies abandoned in Couva? That to me, that to me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is a contradiction in terms of what is said [Desk thumping] and what is done.

So, you see the message here that I am reading, and I am sure the population is reading, is that by completing the 150-bed hospital in Arima, the 100-bed hospital in Point Fortin, and it was also announced in the budget that you are going to build a 100-bed facility in Sangre Grande in 2019—I am very happy. I mean, we are all happy as citizens to know that the health infrastructure is being developed but then you are telling us that you need more beds but then really, why do we have 230 beds left empty in the Couva hospital more than two years. [Desk thumping] And I really hope and trust that when the Minister makes his contribution that we will get some real update in terms of what is going to happen
at Couva and how soon patients can expect to be utilizing that facility, because after all, it was built for the benefit of patients.

And again, I am throwing it out that like all the other facilities, I know that there has been some talk about being a paying facility. I think the Government has to consider very carefully how that model is going to work and who is going to access that facility and what system is going to be used to determined which patients pay and which patients actually use the services at that hospital. So, Member for St Joseph, the ball is in your court. The hospital is there. It has withstood the recent earthquake of 6.9, standing strong, ready to go.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance also alluded to the continued improvement in maternal and child health in terms of the Government and the Ministry meeting their SDG goals. We are all very, very happy for that. This is good news for pregnant women and for citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, but I also think it is important that we look at how this happened. And again, I speak of bridges that are built and bridging one Government to the other and I think it would be remiss of me if I did not mention the role of the former Prime Minister and the Member for Siparia who had the very pivotal role in starting a process that now, the Government and the Minister of Health— but not the Minister of Health but the pregnant women, are able to benefit from. And that process started in 2011, following a maternal death in San Fernando when the Prime Minister mandated the formation of a committee to look and to review maternal mortality.

And I think it would be remiss of me, and if you will permit me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because this report has formed the basis and there are many recommendations that have been implemented by the doctors and the nurses and the midwives in hospital over the years, from 2013 and continuing. In fact, the creation of the Director of Women’s Health, which is now playing a pivotal role in
terms of improving maternal care, would have been one of the recommendations from this committee. But Minister of Health, I just wanted to throw out to you that there are two other issues in this report that you may want to give consideration to and one speaks to the audit process for maternal deaths in terms of the creation of an independent national maternal mortality and morbidity review committee. That is something that can gather data that will help us to improve health care.

And the other speaks to a recommendation which may require some sort of legislative change in terms of the recognition that the current law says that if a baby is born under 28 weeks gestation, the baby has to be registered as a miscarriage or an abortion, and in fact and truly now, because of modern technology and improvements—the survival of babies from 24 to 28 weeks. So it really is a disadvantage to these newborn babies because that really is something that needs to be corrected and perhaps, Minister, you may want to look at that in terms of bringing some legislative change to deal with that issue.

So I just wanted to add a few more points on the topic of the SDGs and specifically to address the SDG, Goal 3.4 which is the reduction of premature deaths from the NCDs through prevention and treatment and the promotion of mental health and well-being. With regard to the issue of NCDs—this is the non-communicable diseases, big problem in Trinidad and Tobago—has been estimated by some to cost the country, the social cost and otherwise, close to about $6 billion annually when you look at the impact of the NCDs. The “Fight the Fat” programme and the “No Sugar” campaign started by my colleague, the Member for Baratarya/San Juan and carried on by the Member for St. Joseph, have had—they are good but the impact is still there to be seen. I just wanted to throw out a few suggestions, Minister, for your consideration.

Again, when I looked at the Social Sector Investment Programme on page
52, I saw that last year, the Government would have paid for 554 angiograms, that is the test for blockage of the heart; 125 angioplasties, 180 coronary artery by-pass procedures, grafting procedures and the recurrent expenditure for adult cardiac disease would have been in the region of $20 million, and for kidney disease, for renal dialysis, $24 million with an allocation of $30 million in 2018, which means that the Ministry is recognizing and realizing that there are even more patients that will have to be treated with renal dialysis and kidney failure. The point here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that when we have to expend that kind of money, we are treating end-stage diseases and therefore, we really have to try and catch these diseases before they require that kind of expenditure. And this is only expenditure in the public sector, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This does not take into account what is spent in the private sector by many who, because of waiting times and so on, may choose to go privately because sometimes it can be a life-threatening condition when you get a heart attack. So it really is a big burden on the country and therefore, we have to move with haste and a pace and with speed in terms of how do we do the preventive measures.

Again, I want to throw out a few suggestions which I would have made in the mid-year review budget contribution but again, for consideration—and I think of it in terms of screening as state screening and self-screening. Now, the state screening, the extended hours at the health centres, under the Partnership, there were extended hours in some of the health centres, not all of them. This is something that can be extended. But not only for treatment, Minister, it is something that you may want to use as opportunistic screening. Quite often, people are not going to go to a health centre between 8.00 to 4.00 when they have to earn a living and after 4.00, they may want to go and have their numbers checked. And what can also be of tremendous benefit is to have mobile screening
clinics at places on weekends where you have big crowds. Have them in the malls, have them in the groceries and so on. That is something that can bring benefits. I know sometimes drives are made once in a while but this is something that can be done every week and we can pick up those cases of high blood pressure, diabetes and kidney failure and so on before they become that way.

Again, one of the initiatives that I think could make a big impact would be to find a way for the State to get a scale, a blood pressure machine and a glucometer in every home. I know it sounds like a tremendous amount of expenditure to have it in every household provided by the State, but I can give you the assurance—and I am sure, Minister, this is something that eventually will turn out to be cost effective because you can have patients taking, you could have citizens taking responsibility for their own health. They can do their own numbers, they can do their body mass index, their blood pressure and their sugar and so on. And now with WhatsApp, you can have those numbers sent in to a central centre where they are manned by your doctors and nurses, you know, who could give advice and deal with the issues.

So, you know, I wanted the Government to think about that, to give consideration. The capital cost might be a bit high initially but you have to look at the long-term benefits. Because you know, there is a school of thought which will say some may think, okay, you have to take responsibility for your own health but at the end of the day, when these patients get sick and they come into the public health sector, it is all of us, the taxpayers, who have to foot the bill and take care of them. Look also at the issue of maybe giving some tax incentives on gym fees and for gym owners and for the purchase of personal exercise equipment.

You know very interesting, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I recently saw a video—I am sure it is not fake news because these are things that happen in countries abroad
all the time—where in a bus station, there is a sit-up machine and when I looked at the video, I was wondering, and this guy was holding on to the sit-up machine and doing some sit-ups and I saw a number coming down: 30, 29, 27, 25 and then it came down to zero. So he had done 30 sit-ups and at the end of the 30 sit-ups, the machine gives him a free bus ticket. Could you imagine that? It was very innovative and it is perhaps something that we can look at. You know, it is a good start. Implement it in the bus stations. You give some sort of incentive for exercise.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just wanted to raise a few points with regard to the fiscal measures and this is something that my constituents would have had tremendous concern with in terms of the budgetary measures. There is a general feeling that this will increase the burden on the middle income and lower income groups and that it will negate any increases in the food card and disability grants that were announced in the budget. So really and truly, are the citizens really going to benefit from those additional increases that were given? You know, many citizens believe that private transportation is essential in Trinidad and Tobago. We do not have a proper public transportation system and therefore until such time as we have a proper working public transportation system, citizens are forced to use their private transportation and it is going to impact on them.

Something that was also brought to my attention which I was not aware of, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that you know we have been pushing for the use of hybrid vehicles in the country. But did you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that hybrid vehicles have to run at a certain speed to get the benefit from the arrangement and if they remain in traffic under a certain speed, then the engine converts back to using gas? And therefore, in truth and in fact, in a country where you have tremendous amount of traffic congestion, the hybrid vehicle does not give you the
benefit that it was intended to create. So it means even those who have hybrid vehicles are not going to benefit, they are going to be spending more, they are going to be burning more gas. So this is something that was mentioned to me.

There is also the issue of the CNG stations, the move to convert your vehicle to CNG. But one of the shortcomings there is that there are limited CNG stations in the country. In fact, in the south, there are only three—in Cocoyea, Rushworth Street, in Point Fortin and therefore, even if citizens want to move in that direction, then the options are limited.

The issue of the 24/7 opening hours for remote health centres—and my heart jumped for joy when I heard that measure. I thought it was all health centres, Minister, but I know you probably cannot get there as yet but it is a good idea, of course. It is an initiative, as you would know, that was started in Cedros under my colleague, the Member for Barataria/San Juan, the former Minister of Health. But one of the difficulties that we experienced in Cedros is that whenever you have an emergency come to these remote health centres, the great majority of times, the patient has to have access to a secondary care facility. So in the case of Blanchisseuse and so on, they will have to be taken to Sangre Grande. So it is very important that the consideration is put in place for an ambulance to be on site to transfer those patients.

The penalties under the Litter Act, the councillors of the Siparia Regional Corporation have drawn to my attention that there have been no litter wardens at the Siparia Regional Corporation since June of 2018. So the question is that you are going to impose penalties under the Litter Act but who is going to police this? So again, you have a contradiction here where you are implementing a measure but you do not have what is in place to deal with it. So the Government needs to look at that.
I just want to touch briefly on the issue of Petrotrin. As you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Fyzabad—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member, before you commence, your initial 45 minutes has expired, you have an additional 10.

**Dr. L. Bodoe:** Thank you. I will take 10 more minutes.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Proceed.

**Dr. L. Bodoe:** Thank you very much.  

[Desk thumping]  

So with regard to Fyzabad and Petrotrin, there is going to be a big fallout, historically I mean: the labour movement and oil. Fyzabad has been very, very instrumental and there is a great amount of history and the constituents, those who were employed in the industry have expressed their concerns about the fallout. So I want to join in the call by the Leader of the Opposition and my colleagues who have spoken so far, for the Government to consider very seriously whether they are making the right decision. It is going to have a big impact in Fyzabad and of course, on the country overall.

If you could permit me just to mention a few other issues within the constituency of Fyzabad that require the attention, and there is a couple of schools. The issue of the Forest Reserve Anglican School. Minister of Health, I know, would have answered the question in the Parliament last week but there is still the situation where over 100 primary school students are yet to be housed and I trust that that matter will be resolved very shortly, Minister. There is also the outstanding issue of the completion of the Siparia Union Presbyterian School and the Debe Avenue Early Childhood Care Centre. The issue of the sluice gates at the St Johns Trace remains a burning problem. We had that issue last year when the floods came and the residents in that area, you know, very apprehensive that if the floods come again this year, that the non-function of those gates might be a
problem. So I call upon the Government to look at that and see if that can be fixed in time to avoid any disasters.

In the constituency of Fyzabad, for some reason—but I am sure it is a problem throughout other constituencies—the issue of potholes caused by WASA leaks is a perennial problem. Almost on a daily basis, calls have to be made to WASA to deal with the potholes and again, I would want the Minister of Public Utilities to look at that and see how best that problem can be resolved. In fact, recently, we had a situation where two motorists would have damaged their vehicles, burst their tyres and so on in a pothole and the residents in the area took it upon themselves to repair the pothole. But of course, this is not something that residents can do all the time.

The Otaheite fishing facility, you know, diversification, very important, especially now with the impending closure of the Petrotrin refinery, the Pointe-à-Pierre refinery, and the fishing industry in the constituency is centred around the Otaheite fishing facility. And again, I want to call upon the Government to resolve the issue. There is a structure there that was built for the use of the fishermen and for whatever reason has not been opened. Various reasons have been given both by the Minister and by the residents, you know, but the role of a government, Mr. Deputy Speaker, regardless of the challenges that are faced in a particular community, is to get the job done. It is a facility that was built with taxpayers’ money and I really would like to see on behalf of the residents, that that facility is commissioned and opened for the use of the fishermen.

7.30p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I close, I just wanted to reflect again on a budget that really, I would say, lacks imagination and innovation. It creates no hope for citizens for better health care, for personal security, for economic well-being. I am
afraid that constituents are going to continue to suffer. As some constituents pointed out to me, Fyzabad faces a dark and gloomy future under this Government.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am not sure that this is a turnaround budget. I have to agree with my colleagues that we are getting a run around. And with those few words, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you again for the opportunity. [Desk thumping]

**Mr. Darryl Smith (Diego Martin Central):** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to present here for my fourth budget debate for the fiscal year 2018/2019. I would also like to thank God for bringing us all here together in this august House and that we reach home safely and that he continues to bless our twin-island nation Trinidad and Tobago.

I would like to thank our Prime Minister who has been guiding us through these rough waters. [Desk thumping] I would also like to thank the Minister of Finance and his team who would have worked night and day to have this document laid on Monday, his PS and his other staff that would have worked there with the Ministry of Finance.

A lot of people do not know the work that also goes in from the Ministry and the Minister of Planning and Development. I want to thank the Minister of Planning and Development for her work as well all the Ministers in Cabinet. [Desk thumping] You have already heard from three so far, with regard to what they have done within the last year, what they have planned coming up for 2018/2019. I personally would like to thank all the staff at my Member of Parliament Office, the constituents of Diego Martin Central and, of course, my family. [Desk thumping] Mr. Deputy Speaker, I could speak on my behalf and, of course, to those on this side. The budget was laid on Monday, and between Monday and today, I know a number of my colleagues on this side who are Members of Parliament
were able, of course, as they usually do, to meet with their residents in their constituencies. I for myself could speak for the people of Diego Martin Central, where I was able, thank God, before coming here to represent them, to get some feedback from them on this budget. And you know we have been bombarded since Monday evening with radio, TV, social media, everybody giving their opinion, which everybody has a right to, with regard to how they felt about the budget. And overall, we have seen that it has been a positive feedback that we have been getting. [Desk thumping]

In terms of the feedback I have gotten from Diego Martin Central, there are a number of points that I was able to pull from, a wide cross-section of people: the young, the elderly, different races, different religions, different areas from Diego Martin Central. And it would have been too much for me to bring and discuss. So what I did was just to pick out seven points from the budget that they had feedback on. I have some ideas that we could have tweaked, and so on.

One of the first points that they were very pleased about, and you would have heard my Member and my good colleague, the hard-working Minister from Lopinot/Bon Air West speak about it, was the increase in the various grants that were given. The Disability Grant and the Public Assistance Grant in particular, people—they are actually making the joke saying that Christmas falling on January 1st this year and not the 25th of December next year because most of these things would be kicking in on that date. [Desk thumping]

They were very pleased and happy with the food card, the changes that were made, the increases in the food card, the increase in the cap in pension. A lot of the elderly, a lot of the grandkids and adults who are taking care of their parents, and so on in their 70s were very pleased to hear that increase in the cap. And they were very happy to see, very early in the week, after the budget, that the
agriculture grant—because Diego Martin on the whole, Diego Martin Central, as you know the three Diego Martins are very close to each other, Central, West and North/East. We are literally separated by a line in the road, and it is a very densely populated area—to see that the agricultural grant was kicked in. There were a lot of young people that came to get information as to how to tap into that. So we are very pleased with that.

Mature as they are and patriotic, the people of Diego Martin Central—because I asked them this question just to get some feedback, because those on the other side and overall people are trying to be mischievous with regard to the property tax—and they were so mature and they understood. They were respectful and said: “Listen, you all won the election in 2015, based on the property tax and the changes with local government reform.” They understand that it is something that has to be done and they respect that and they will work very closely with us again when that kicks in. So kudos to the people of Diego Martin Central. [Desk thumping] Yeah, very patriotic.

One of the issues that you would have known six/seven years ago, “if yuh sneeze too hard” in Diego Martin, not just Central, but Diego Martin, used to have floods. All right? Well, that was changed when I became the chairman. But one of the things that happened was we used to have a lot of bush fires in Diego Martin, the entire Diego Martin area. And I used to hear as chairman and as MP, a lot of young people may be messing around up on the hills and causing these fires; people being lackluster when they are burning their rubbish and not being able to control these fires and they would spread. For those who may not know in the public, when you have vegetation on the mountainsides burning, and we used to lose thousands of acres, I remember seeing these helicopters with the buckets, and so on, tirelessly through the night “yuh hearing dem” trying to out these fires.
Thank God we have not had any in a while. But we see that happening in a number of other countries and states, California, and so on, where they lose thousands of acres. Not only do we lose wildlife but it also has a serious effect with regard to flooding and run-off, where the water is not slowed down by trees and the vegetation and so on, so it runs down “too quick” for our rivers to take. So we are very pleased to hear with regard to the bush fire fines being increased.

They went on to give us ideas because the people of Diego Martin also like to give their opinions and ideas, which I take as well. They needed to get more information and they were asking if Crime Stoppers, if they could have called Crime Stoppers, and so on, to give this information, because they know of people who do it all the time but “dey” see it and “dey doh know who tuh call”. So, it is something that I would talk to the Minister of National Security, and so on, to get a campaign out there so that people could really take advantage of stopping these bush fires.

I remember the Diego Martin Regional Corporation actually went out and started doing replanting and actually cutting out fire trails in the steep hills so the firemen could have easy access. That is how serious it is in the Diego Martin area. So I am pleased to hear that.

I am also pleased to see, pinning on to that, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries starting back the replanting/reforestation programme, which would also help with these issues with bush fires. So kudos. That was one of the other points that they brought up with those ideas.

They were also very pleased to see the increase in the Litter Act by 100 per cent. In Diego Martin, just like many other places, there are people who are not patriotic who dump tyres, who put out their garbage on the wrong days, and so on, and it blocks the rivers and stuff. We still see some fridges and vehicles and stuff
in the rivers. Again, they were very pleased to see that and they wanted to get more information on how and who to call. They were even asking if we will follow in the other point, which I am going to talk about with regard to the increase with Crime Stoppers, if they report seeing people like that, if they will also be able to get $100,000 reward for complaining and bringing that information. I told them I doubt that highly likely. That was for a completely different aspect with the people that are wanted. But they were very pleased about the Crime Stoppers reward as well, to try and curb time, not just in Diego Martin but the entire Trinidad and Tobago.

They were very pleased as well with the increase in the cruelty fines to children, not that I have seen much or heard much in my area, but it does occur sometimes very quietly. As you know, the children may not have a voice. So this might be something that will assist the young people of Trinidad and Tobago who are suffering silently.

The young people were very pleased with the increase in the allowance for tertiary education. We have seen a number of young people in our constituency doing quite well in the CAPE exam going to UTT, going to UWI, going aboard to study, and so on. So this will fall in really, really well with those young people who want to further their education and assist their parents with getting the funding to move forward to help better themselves and more so to propel Trinidad and Tobago forward.

So, these are just a few of the points that they brought up that they found were very pleasing and they were very happy. One or two were, you know, there would be those who would have other issues, and stuff, but overall, the feedback that I got from the people of Diego Martin was positive and this is just a handful of some of the things that they brought up.
Some of the things that we have been doing in the Diego Martin constituency, and I want to thank all the Ministers who have been involved in these projects. You would have heard the Member for Port of Spain talk about the walkover in Beetham, which I was very pleased to see. You all remember that horrific accident that they had over there where several people were injured and passed away. That was promised several years ago and it is finally being done. It is almost being completed.

We also see one being done right out here by the Parliament, by the Hyatt, which is going to be done pretty soon as well. But more importantly, what people do not understand with that is it will also ease up with the traffic flow, where it is one less stop at the traffic light. So you know there is a timer of 30 seconds, I think. We would not have to deal with that any more. So it will be a flow of traffic.

The reason why I bring that up [Desk thumping] is we also have an issue. I want to thank the Minister of Works and Transport, because the people of Four Roads, with the new highway that was built—they were promised that under the last regime and it was not done. He said as soon as that is completed, he has been coming down the line—he did Beetham, he is doing here—the people of Four Roads, it is in the budget to be done, and it will be done in the next fiscal year, and we are very pleased with that. We have a number of people who were injured and lost their lives in that walkover as well. The challenge that we have now is to ensure that people are disciplined to use it “because yuh still see people” ironically crossing highways right under these walkovers. So, hopefully they will have the discipline to utilize it.

One of the projects very close to my heart—and I want to thank the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs for continuing that project; as I said before, most of
Diego Martin Central, North/East and West’s boundaries is a pavement or a white line; we are very close to each other and very densely populated—is the Diego Martin Sporting Complex. I remember hearing the same banter from the Member for Siparia last year about how the contract was done, and I answered it last year and I will answer it again. First of all, it is not $200 million. So I do not know where they are getting that figure from. That project was a project that started over 12 years ago. I played football on that field and won the league there. Merry Boys is from that facility as well. It is called Northern, the original field, and there is a debate among the three Diego Martin MPs whose constituencies it lies in. Of course, the Prime Minister won that battle. But my point is, Diego Martin for how big it is, with regard to the population size, does not have any sporting facilities. We do not even have an indoor facility. So this is something that is needed, unlike in Siparia where they built two next to each other, back to back, in Irwin Park, right before the election, and handed it over to local government and up to today they still cannot maintain it; two, back to back. You “coulda just take up” one and put it in Diego Martin.

But the point of the fact is, with regard to the contractor, the contractor started— the same contractor that is there today started 12 years ago. I said this last year in the budget. The same contractor put down a foundation on concrete 12 years ago, and those who know building know once somebody builds a foundation it is very difficult if impossible to have anybody else who would come and give a warranty on somebody else’s foundation.

But more importantly, I remember when I was chairman, I was invited, in 2014, by the then Minister of Sport under the UNC, to do a site visit at that same facility and he invited the same contractor to start the job. So I do not know why we keep bringing this up again. It is something that is needed in Diego Martin. It
Mr. Smith (cont’d)

is above board. It is not $200 million, when you see the facility that would be utilized. It was the home of Merry Boys, the cricket champions and it would be fully utilized. It was coming within the budget that was planned previously and I am letting you all know when it is finished this year, there is a Phase 2 to come because we have no indoor facilities in Diego Martin. There always was a Phase 2 plan to be done. Now, they removed squatters and that was part of the plan. So I hope that puts that to rest with regard to the Diego Martin Sporting Complex.

Hon. Member: What is the cost?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Couva North, please.

Mr. D. Smith: Not $200 million.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: There is a procedure to go about that.

Mr. D. Smith: Not 199, but—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Mr. D. Smith:—the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs will deal with that.

In terms of health in Diego Martin Central, we are building a state-of-the-art, and I want to thank the Minister of Health—I worked very closely—for pushing this. A new health centre will be built this year. He told me the sod turning will happen before Christmas in Diamond Vale on the Wendy Fitzwilliam Boulevard. [Desk thumping] And this is something that is needed in Diamond Vale. For those who know Diego Martin, Diamond Vale is an ageing community. Most of the residents there are 60 and older. Now, they could actually walk to their health centre to get their check-ups and so on. So, the people of Diego Martin are looking to that.

There is a place in Diego Martin called Surprise. It borders—I do not know if you all know that. There is a football field, and so on. Surprise is the name of the area that borders me and Diego Martin North/East. That area has as much as
50 to 60 residents living there and it has been there for over 50 years and it is opposite a secondary school. I do not know if you all know the area called Blue Range, which is one of the more upscale areas in my—[Interruption]

Mr. Mitchell: They know upscale.

Mr. D. Smith: They will know there. They will know Blue Range. “Dey still have” dirt roads, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There are still dirt roads. I am pleased to announce this evening, and I want to thank the Minister of Local Government, that as of Monday they would be coming in to pave Surprise, the ground. They will be doing a parking lot. In fact, in November is Divali. That is the field that Diego Martin Central and Diego Martin uses to light deyas, and so on. So, they are going to be starting on Monday. They light for Divali. They light deyas for Divali and they will be starting that project as of Monday and they already started with the Diego Martin Corporation doing School Street, which is opposite.

Again, those who know, there are main arteries throughout Diego Martin. One of the main ones that a number of you all would know is St. Lucien Road. That road was not paved for over 10 years and it was paved a few months ago. So I want to thank the Ministry of Works and Transport for that, along with St. Lucien Road was paved as well after 12 years.

Last week the Land Settlement Agency worked with us to give out deeds of comfort to a number of squatters in the area and they were very pleased to deal with that. We had a number of people finally getting their deeds of comfort so now they could build, and so on. So, we were pleased with LSA for assisting us in Diego Martin Central.

As I said before, we used to have a lot of flooding in the Diego Martin area, and I want to thank the Diego Martin Regional Corporation and the Ministry of Works and Transport for the work that they have been doing, not just in Diego
Martin, in all of Trinidad and Tobago, with regard to the cleaning of the rivers and the maintenance of the rivers, and so on. That has also helped us with the flooding in the area.

We have a new power grid that was put up. T&TEC put up a new power grid in St. Lucien Road as well for Diamond Vale and for the Blue Range area and that has been helping with the fluctuation of current which was causing a number of residents’ appliances, and so on, to blow out. That was a huge project that was done and I thank T&TEC for that.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries—in Cocorite we used to have a bamboo/wooden pier or dock for years—quietly came and we did a project and he has actually done a full concrete asphalted pitched dock for the boats and he is doing a whole fishing depot in the Cocorite area, and hopefully we could do a sod turning for that as well. But it is pretty much completed. So, I want to thank the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries for that.

There was a project that was carded since 20 years ago, 15 years ago, under Ken Valley, by the West Mall area/Victoria Keyes area, to do a flyover. That is one of the projects that the Ministry of Works and Transport is hoping to start in 2019. And that again will alleviate some of the traffic issues that we have coming in and out of the Diego Martin area to suffice the three Diego Martin constituencies. So we are excited to see that flyover get started as well.

When I was chairman as well, it was something that I pushed in Diego Martin, and the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government is doing a fantastic job. To cut cost, we are looking at cutting on the rental that we do. We are finally, in Diego Martin, going to have its own administrative building starting this fiscal year as well, opposite West Mall; where the office right now that they utilize, they rent. They are going to actually have their own building where they
could have their vehicles and a staff and accounts, and stuff like that; at a central location in Diego Martin where everybody could solicit the services that they offer.

In that same area, work is also carded for 2019 for the first green space in Diego Martin area opposite West Mall. We are partnering with the Port of Spain Regional Corporation to start that project as well and we are excited for that to start. So there are a number of projects that we are looking at for 2019, in the Diego Martin/Diego Martin Central area.

I want to thank as well the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government for finally giving us, and most of the other constituencies, CEPEP teams in the constituency. They have made a big difference, especially in the rainy season where the bush is growing and the rivers have silt, and so on. They are working very closely with the other agencies to ensure that the area is healthy and clean. So I want to thank the new teams that have been installed. So far, so good.

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development, I want to thank you, and the people of Diego Martin would like to thank you, and the former Ministers that were there, for the completion of Vieux Fort which borders me and Port of Spain. Those towers are finally being finished. They sat down there for some time. As MPs, we know that the number one request that we get from residents is housing. So we were pleased that Vieux Fort was able to be completed, the first phase. There are two other towers that are currently being worked on now and the people of—not just Diego Martin, but the entire Trinidad and Tobago—are looking forward for the completion of that. And, of course, earlier in the year and last year Victoria Keyes and Chaconia Crescent were completed in our constituency.

I want to also thank them for the continuous work, for the maintenance of the current Powder Magazine painting, and so on. Kudos to HDC and the Minister of Housing and Urban Development. We are very blessed, again, as I said,
although it is across the road from Diego Martin Central. But it is really in our area.

We have two community centres which are going to be built and are in the process of being built right now in Four Roads, which is in the Member for Diego Martin West’s constituency, but again, it is a stone throw away from my constituency; and I have a big chunk of Four Roads. I have started work. I want to thank the Minister of Community Development, Culture and the Arts for that and also in Bagatelle. So Diego Martin is in good footing with regard to that.

Overall, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Diego Martin Regional Corporation, URP, the police, fire, we all work together in tandem to ensure that the people of Diego Martin Central are safe, that they are secure, that they are healthy. We are doing our best. We are excited about this new fiscal year and we are willing to work with all the Ministers, all the MPs and all the residents to ensure that 2019 is a fruitful year.

I just want to thank the constituents again for the support and I remain on the ground and grounded with them to hear their concerns and their ideas so that I could bring to the Parliament and represent them. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you for your time. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Oropouche West.

Mrs. Vidia Gayadeen-Gopeesingh (Oropouche West): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and thank you for this opportunity to contribute to this Budget Debate 2019. Before I proceed with the substantive issues with this budget, I would like to congratulate and commend the Leader of the Opposition for a sterling contribution. [Desk thumping] I would like to compliment the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla for a very vivacious contribution; [Desk thumping] the Member for Fyzabad, soft but very erudite; and the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, most sterling contribution.

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Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have to respond to the Member for Diego Martin Central, and I will start, perhaps, from his last statement. He said quietly the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries came to his constituency to pave a road for boats and so on. Is that so?

Mr. Smith: A dock.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: Right. I want the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to come quietly too in Oropouche West [Laughter] and let him give all those moneys that are outstanding to the farmers [Desk thumping] who have all their crops that have been flooded out and to this date they are still waiting for compensation. [Desk thumping]

I want the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to come quietly and let us go down to the Oropouche Lagoon and let us make that a tourist site so we can at least stimulate the tourism sector in this country.

Hon. Member: How tourism get in that?

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: Because it is the Oropouche Lagoon. You see, you all do not read. That is what your Minister told you all, your Prime Minister.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Oropouche West, again, address the Chair. And other Members, please, shouting across the Chamber. Proceed.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: I also would like to respond to the Member for Diego Martin Central when he said that people were so pleased with their $100,000 reward. I am wondering why are people pleased with this $100,000 reward, when the Minister of National Security said that blood was in the hands of the UNC? The Attorney General said that we need the Anti-Gang Bill because we know who are the gang members and we know the names of the gang members. So we just needed that Anti-Gang Bill to go and do what we had to do. The police
were begging for it. They said all that. And now you are giving $100,000 to tell people: “Help me”. You want help to find these people, and you said before you know everybody.

The other thing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Diego Martin Central said that students were very happy to go to university when how many students could not get GATE. How many students that this Government, under the Ministry of Education, cut out GATE for a number of students. Who is going to benefit from this? Who?

Dr. Gopeesingh: Twelve thousand.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: Twelve thousand, the former Minister of Education is telling me.

Mr. Garcia: He knows nothing. [Laughter]

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: Then, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member. Members, again Members, I would not tolerate the crosstalk across the floor, and Member for Oropouche West, address the Chair.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: Thank you. The Member for Diego Martin Central also said there was a walkover, a long-awaited walkover, at the Beetham. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that walkover cost $10million. One was built, a similar size, similar dimension, by the Divali Nagar. It cost the former Minister of Works $6million, same thing.

Then, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the CEPEP teams in Diego Martin, they are keeping the area clean. Oropouche West, all the CEPEP teams have been disbanded; nobody working in CEPEP. So these are the things, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we talk about equity under this Government. In fact, the Member for Diego Martin Central thanked the Minister of Housing and Urban Development. And apart from the known Sumintra case, Member for Laventille
West, there are also a number of other requests for updates for homes in Oropouche West for persons.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me tell you how long they have been waiting: Sumintra Sookoo from San Francique, 10 years; Tara Samaroo-Ramcharan from La Romaine, 23 years. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am very concerned about this person named Tara Samaroo-Ramcharan, single parent—same thing Member for Lopinot West spoke about, a single parent, two children, boy and girl. She trying to sell in “ah” little parlour, teenage children and she has to separate her boy, the son, from the daughter because they cannot live in one home because where she is living cannot accommodate three persons. The son and the daughter do not even have what you call growing up with the sibling or rivalry or that love. She had to separate them. [Crosstalk] Yes, 23 years. Devin Seerattan from Toolsie Trace, 19 years; Veronica, 16 years, from La Romaine. “And yuh know what?” Diego Martin Central happy and he is complimenting.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, one sec. Again Members, Standing Order 53 still holds within the Chamber. And again, I am not going to tolerate no more crosstalk, so please. Oropouche West.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: Thank you.

Mr. Hinds: Point of order. The Member is imputing improper motives against the Member for Oropouche East. [Laughter and desk thumping]

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [Laughter and desk thumping] Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, Members.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: Before I proceed, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with, as I said, the substantive issue, I want to recall and reflect on the first budget statement I listened to here in 2015. It was a day to remember, Mr. Deputy
Speaker. I recall the level of passion exhibited by the hon. Minister of Finance.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Passion?

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh:** Passion, coupled with aggression.

**8.00 p.m.**

He flicked the pages of the budget statement in such a disputatious and truculent manner—

**Hon. Members:** “Oooh”

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh:**—as he repeated the words mismanagement, corruption, nepotism and cronyism. I never forgot those words. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is like a karmic cycle that the words used by the Minister of Finance reflect the reality of the governance today. [Desk thumping] And, Mr. Deputy Speaker—[Crosstalk] Member for Laventille West, “Mind water fall on you, eh. Stay quiet.” [Laughter and desk thumping]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Members—[ Interruption]

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh:** Mr. Deputy Speaker—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** One second, one second.

**Hon. Member:** He wants wetting again.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Again, the Member for Oropouche West is the recognized speaker on the floor at this time, and again, Member for Oropouche West, once you address the Chair, once you continue to address the Chair, things will work out fine. Member for Oropouche West, proceed.

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh:** Thank you. [Desk thumping and crosstalk] Mr. Deputy Speaker, and this year, less than a minute into the Minister’s contribution, Mr. Deputy Speaker, he spoke on the mismanagement under the People’s Partnership. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Minister, he had the audacity, he had the gall and the unmitigated temerity to talk about five years of
mismanagement after his Government for three years spent $160 billion and not a biscuit to show.  

[Desk thumping]

Hon. Members: “Aaah.”

Mr. Indarsingh: No sardine and no biscuit.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, in those five years, where he blamed the People’s Partnership for mismanagement, the citizens of this country could have seen over 100 new schools—

Mr. Charles: Yes.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh:—over 95,000 laptops given. Eight new police stations.

Mr. Hinds: Where?

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh: And I am going to call where.

Mr. Hinds: Name them. Name them.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh: Arima, Maloney, Piarco, Cumuto, Brasso, La Brea and Moruga.  

[Desk thumping] There was construction of the Solomon Hochoy Highway Extension from Golconda to Debe. We started the construction of the Arima and Point Fortin Hospitals. We completed the Scarborough Hospital left by a PNM Government.  

[Desk thumping] We built a state-of-the-art health facility in Diego Martin West; world-class aquatic centre in Couva; [Desk thumping] world-class cycling velodrome, Couva. Mr. Deputy Speaker, time would not allow me to list the achievements accomplished under the astute leadership of the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

Mr. Indarsingh: You could talk for the duration of the debate.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that propaganda that this Government has been perpetuating for the last three years, that the UNC did nothing, hoping for it to take traction, must stop and stop now.  

[Desk thumping]
Mr. Deputy Speaker, I ask: Who is the author, the editor and the publisher of the book on mismanagement other than this Government? [Desk thumping] From the procurement of the Cabo Star—[Interuption]

Mr. Indarsingh: “Dey print ah book fuh de San Juan bye-election.”

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh: —The Ocean Flower I, Ocean Flower II— [Interuption]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 53(1)(f). I cannot hear.

Dr. Moonilal: You “doh” have to explain, just call the Standing Order.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: I cannot hear. The Members for Couva South and Naparima are making so much noise, I cannot hear.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, one second. Member for Oropouche West, and again the Member for Naparima it is continuous. It is continuous from since this morning. And Member for Couva South, you were going fine, but I think you are now starting to come to the fore. So please, let us listen in silence. Proceed.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh: Thank you. So I said from the procurement of Cabo Star, Ocean Flower I, Ocean Flower II, where the Prime Minister himself said there was corruption that smelled to the highest heavens, and not to mention the procurement process for the Galleons Passage and not even one passenger on board as yet.

The people of this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they must be reminded of the Prime Minister’s partner, the $100million in fake oil. So what has this Government done in the last three years?

Hon. Member: Nothing.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh: What have they done to bring peace, security and comfort to the people of this country? The people are feeling the change now,
where they have to forcibly live in self-imposed jails.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we look at the Government’s tagline for last year’s financial budget, the last financial year, “Changing the Paradigm: Putting the Economy on a Sustainable Path”. The question must arise: Was this Government able to put the economy on a sustainable path? Every sector in this economy has collapsed. Now they have come with a new mantra in 2019, “Turnaround”. Turn around and go where? To Fantasy Island, as the Opposition had asked? Mr. Deputy Speaker, we usually turn around when we cannot find our way, when we have lost our direction.

But I want to focus now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the incompetence of this Rowley-led Government, and I turn my attention to agriculture. I ask what this Government has done for the last three years to stimulate the agriculture sector. What has this Government done to diversify the economy, since we can no longer depend on oil and gas for revenue? We cannot depend on the manufacturing sector since it has contracted. The construction sector has contracted. The only tourists in Tobago are Trinidadians, and agriculture, after three years under this PNM Government, has totally collapsed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if we were to look at some of the promises versus the reality under this agriculture sector, I will just, with your kind leave, read a few. The promise under the PNM Government; one:

“Establish an appropriate unified structure and governance arrangement for the state agencies responsible for agriculture.”

What is the reality, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Caroni Green Limited was decommissioned mid-2017. NAMDEVCO has become inefficient and ineffective. The packing houses at Brechin Castle and Tabaquite are currently closed. The Central Wholesale Market is 99 per cent complete, however, it has not been
opened. Two:

“Develop a comprehensive agricultural sector plan with the view to significantly increasing the sector’s contribution to GDP and employment.”

What is the reality, Mr. Deputy Speaker? The rice sector contracted 42 per cent. Almost every root crop on average decreased by 20 per cent. Pawpaw production decreased by 6 per cent. Poultry, dairy and small ruminants all decreased by at least 10 per cent. And you can get that from the Review of the Economy 2018. Three:

“Consult with farmers on changes to agriculture policy.”

Reality, no consultation has actually taken place between the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and farmers.

“Introduce a wide-ranging programme of tax and duty concessions, subsidies and waivers for agricultural chemicals, vehicles, fishing vessels, equipment and pest-control.”

The reality, many farmers still waiting for compensation. Mr. Deputy Speaker, those are some of the promises. The reality, the broken promises.

And when we look at page 42 of this year’s Budget Statement, I want to quote at page 42 what was said with respect to agriculture and agro-processing, and I quote:

“I propose to strengthen the framework for boosting non-energy exports and for generating foreign exchange by introducing an incremental foreign exchange earning tax credit for the manufacturing sector, in particular for: agriculture and agro-processing…”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, someone listening to this may try to figure out: What is this? In fact, I had to read it a second time to figure out: What is this? And one would want to know what is this tax credit. This might be an incentive, Mr. [UNREVIEWED]
Deputy Speaker, for a manufacturer and agro-processor, but is the tax credit 1 per cent, 2 per cent? What is it? In fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are talking about incremental foreign exchange earnings. And I would like to know which sensible businessman would export commodities like, take for example, Jamaica or Barbados or the US, receive foreign exchange and want to bring it back to this country? That is a question I am asking. Because, most business persons are relatively smart and I do not think they will want to repatriate their profits and deposit it into an account, a commercial bank account here in Trinidad, because when you request your own US cash they are telling you that you have to give them a month’s notice. So nobody really, Mr. Deputy Speaker, who are business persons accumulating foreign exchange, would want to bring it back to this country and declare how much they make. Because the easiest thing for them to do is to open a US account in the country that is importing their product and leave that US there. [Desk thumping] So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this incentive really is a—I will describe it as a bogus incentive for persons.

And when you look at, Mr. Deputy Speaker, page 21, the Minister went on and said:

“…the diversification of the agricultural sector remains a high priority for this Administration. We are creating and sustaining competitive advantages in areas where our capabilities can be utilized to exploit national and global opportunities.”

What does that mean? Who is really creating and sustaining these competitive advantages in the areas where our capabilities can be utilized? Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government has been saying this for the last three years, and we must remind the public that the hon. Prime Minister said on June 07, 2018, at a public meeting in Barataria that “diversification” is an annoying term. The Prime

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Minister he is annoyed to hear the word “diversification”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker—[ Interruption]

Mr. Indarsingh: He is annoyed to hear the word “agriculture”.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh:—the Minister of Finance in his budget statement wants to diversify and the Prime Minister thinks it is annoying. No wonder the hon. Prime Minister stated, perhaps, last week, that the PNM is more organized than the Cabinet, because neither one knows what is going on. [ Desk thumping and crosstalk]

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the last three years—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh:—about $3 billion was allocated to agriculture. This year there is an allocation of $700 million, a decrease of $2.6 million from the previous year. Mr. Deputy Speaker, by the year 2050 the world population will be 9.7 billion persons, and this is from the United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs, June 2017. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is every nation’s responsibility to provide food security for their citizens.

The food import bill is $5.6 billion and let us look at what we import here in Trinidad and Tobago, and this is the CSO’s Trade Stats, January to November 2017. Mr. Deputy Speaker, from Suriname, fresh bananas, $34 million; from St. Lucia close to $2 million; St. Vincent and the Grenadines—$2.5 million that is fresh bananas.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you look at peppers—sweet pepper. We import close to $2 million from the USA. And when we look at cabbages, $3 million, and the list goes on and on. Mr. Deputy Speaker, and when we look at Jamaica, the Minister of Industry, Commerce, Agriculture & Fisheries—I believe his name is Audley Shaw—said that there was growth in seven sectors in agriculture in 2017.
He said that in the House of Representatives on 5th of May, 2018. He said there has been growth in the production of corn, almost 8 per cent, banana production 10.4 per cent, plantain 6.1 per cent, dasheen 13 per cent and coconut, Mr. Deputy Speaker, 25 per cent; 25 per cent in Jamaica for coconuts. And here we have in Trinidad, we have a company by the Massy Group importing bananas from Jamaica, when, Mr. Deputy Speaker, three containers of bananas per week, which is 2700 crates of bananas, when we have the same typography, the same climatic conditions, the same undulating hills that is required for the planting and the cultivation of bananas. Why is it that we have to be importing things that we can grow? [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I understand we need to strengthen what you call relations and reciprocity with Caricom nations, but why use scarce foreign exchange to import a crop that we can produce? Mr. Deputy Speaker, what the Massy Group could have done is that to make arrangements perhaps with local producers and see how they can save this foreign exchange, unless Massy Stores has no problem in getting US, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Because, we have the potential to cultivate bananas. In fact, only last week I saw in the Jamaica Gleaner, 19th September, where Jamaica has now gotten the greenlight to export mangoes to the US and it just has to undergo a process called irradiation, that is all, and they could export, and we have the potential for all these crops. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let us look at the company called Caroni Green Limited. It was an initiative under the People’s Partnership in the year 2013 where 5800 acres of land under Caroni was brought under cultivation for hot peppers. And in the year 2016, pimento pepper exported from Trinidad to the US rose to TT $7.5 million and there was a solid growth with pepper.
What we had, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there was a readymade market for this pepper. We had a ready-made market in Miami, in New York and London. It employed about 100 persons with a grant from the European Union, so we were not using taxpayers’ money. A grant from the European Union.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Repeat that.

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh:** Twenty-two million euros. Persons who were employed at Caroni Green were many impoverished families, single mothers and so.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Ex-Caroni workers.

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh:** Yes. And what did this Government do? They shut it down. And what was the justification? The cost of production. That was the justification, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It was cost of production.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government, I believe, has imprinted in its DNA that philosophy to shutdown, breakdown, deconstruct, send home. Under this Government, Mr. Deputy Speaker, thousands of persons—poor persons—who are working for minimum wage, living pay cheque to pay cheque to put food on their tables and books in their children’s school bags were sent home.

Two weeks ago in the Senate, I recall the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, contributing to the Payments into Court Bill, said the cost of production of hot peppers at Caroni Green was $87 per pound, highest prices you getting $3—$4. And I really wanted to ask this hon. Minister: Where did you get that formula? How can you calculate something and get this formula to say $87 per pound to cultivate one pound of peppers?

**Hon. Member:** Very easily.

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh:** You see—*[Interruption]*

**Mr. Indarsingh:** He want a pay rise, you know.
Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh:—you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, any PNM Government that want to shut down and get rid of workers—that small man—they justify that callousness by saying, you know what, the company is not profitable. That is what they did with Caroni (1975) Limited and up to now those Caroni workers they are still suffering from that shock.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Caroni Green was making US $1million in 2016. The Auditor’s Report was there, but the Government still shut it down. And one of the markets or the countries that produces hot peppers is Puerto Rico, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Puerto Rico produces hot peppers like habanero and *aji caballero*, these are hot peppers that when Caroni Green was shut down, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Maria and Irma, the two hurricanes that hit Puerto Rico destroyed their whole agriculture sector. What we could have done here was absorb that market share, because there was already a market. [Desk thumping] Because up to today Puerto Rico still has not done anything with its agriculture sector. But you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to do all those things requires the use of your cerebral cortex. [Laughter and desk thumping] And one really cannot fathom—

Mr. Indarsingh: Laventille West, “yuh hear that?”

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh:—how you can have something functioning and then shut it down.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have something called the “Moruga Scorpion” and “Scotch Bonnet” peppers. What happen to Moruga Scorpion? It was once in the *Guinness Book of Records* to be the hottest pepper; 1.2 million scoville units. We did not patent it, so we got it taken over for a hotter pepper using our same genetic material, and get a hotter pepper, the “Carolina Reaper” for 1.7 scoville units.

So you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you have to get into the production of anything, you have to have what is called the intellectual property regulations, and
Mrs. Gayadeeen-Gopeesingh (cont’d)

what we could have done with Moruga Scorpion and Scotch Bonnet pepper, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is potential for pepper production locally, regionally and internationally.  *Desk thumping*  What you find in pepper is an active ingredient called “capsaicin”. Capsaicin can be used to make rheumatoid rubs and so. It can be used in pharmaceuticals and you could use it to make the dry pepper—pepper flakes.

But one of the most important things that you can use capsaicin for, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is to make pepper spray. Pepper spray, Mr. Deputy Speaker, which will turn out to be a multi-million dollar industry in Trinidad and Tobago. *Desk thumping*  And I believe, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that every women, every female in this country should be given a pepper spray to put in her handbag. *Desk thumping*  If you cannot get a gun legally, the second closest thing is pepper spray, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because it is time that women in this country are not slaughtered, they are not raped—  *Crosstalk*

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:**  Silence.

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gooseesingh:**—and not thrown at the side of the river or drain. *Desk thumping*  And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, once a husband knows his wife has a pepper spray in her bag the rate of domestic violence will decrease. In fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, *Crosstalk* in fact, all those matters you are filing in the Magistrates’ Court and talking about restraining orders and talking about domestic violence, in fact we would not clog up the Magistrates’ Court and it will help the hon. Attorney General in getting rid of some of these matters. *Crosstalk*

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:**  Silence. Address the Chair.

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gooseesingh:**  I believe honestly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I feel the Member for San Fernando East, his kundalini needs to be awakened.  *Laughter and desk thumping*

*UNREVISED*
Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Oropouche West, what is the meaning of that? What does that mean? What does that mean?

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh: It is the base of your spine where you need the chakras to open—[Laughter, desk thumping and crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Once you are sure, proceed. Once you are sure, proceed.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—[Crosstalk]

Mr. Indarsingh: Goggle it.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh:—Mr. Deputy Speaker, we also have the potential for the cultivation of pineapples—K-U-N-D-A-L-I-N—I—and you know this morning the hon. Leader of Opposition spoke about pineapples and the potential. Tableland is a country that is known for pineapples. [Crosstalk] It is an area, sorry, known for pineapples. So what we need to do is to quickly patent that sugar loaf pineapple so we do not lose it, just as we had lost the scorpion pepper. [Desk thumping] As I said, you have to secure your intellectual property rights, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because again, all these crops, you have what is called value-added components.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what is the plan for our coconut industry? What is the plan for our coconut industry? Last year’s budget there were four lines—[Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh:—on Coconut Rehabilitation and Replanting Programme. From page 50, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I quote:

“the Coconut Rehabilitation and Re-planting Programme is developing sustainable coconut-based enterprises: coconut growers are being trained in new technologies; appropriate agronomic practices are being implemented, coconut estates are being rehabilitated; and a coconut seedling garden using
Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Mayaro, born in Mayaro, grew up in Mayaro—and this whole nursery development had to be in the east coast of Trinidad which is in Mayaro. I spoke with him, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and we are still looking to see where those nurseries are. We cannot find those nurseries. [Laughter and desk thumping] In fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, at page 174 of the Development Programme Estimates, over the last three years they gave out 2,000 coconut seedlings—the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries—and you know what was the cost, Mr. Deputy Speaker? $134,000 for 2,000 coconut seedlings. If you are driving down Mayaro, you see coconut seedlings that are growing at the side of the road, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You could pick up all that free, but it is $134,000 here.

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** Sixty dollars for one.

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh:** And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you do not know where or who were given those coconut seedlings.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Somebody get a farm, you know.

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopeesingh:** So you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is much potential for our coconut estates because coconut is a super food. You have the oils from it. You have the water which could rehydrate, because you see now many athletes—I believe the hon. Attorney General is very active in exercising and he so he would drink lots of coconut water, I believe. [Crosstalk] So it rehydrates. It is a good—  [Continuous crosstalk] So what you are seeing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that what we had is that if you go to the supermarkets you are seeing imported coconut water from Guyana. We have the potential here to produce coconut water. Member for Laventille West, why are you engaging in catharsis? [Laughter and desk thumping]
Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Oropouche West. [Continuous laughter and crosstalk] Again Member. Member, address the Chair. Address the Chair.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopesingh: Thank you—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I would not be able to protect you. Address the Chair.

[Laughter]

8.30 p.m.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopesingh: The coconut water industry has great potential— [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopesingh:—but we have poor management, poor management, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Goopesingh: When we look at the cocoa industry, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the cocoa industry, at page 51 of the budget statement, there was one line:

“The Cocoa Rehabilitation Programme is focusing on improvement in varieties.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, one line? We cannot be serious about diversification and cocoa production in this country. That was the end of cocoa in this year’s budget statement. And, in fact, Trinidad and Tobago is admired for the country producing one of the best quality cocoa in the world. [Laughter] Trinidad and Tobago, the cocoa should be really—we should be recognized in the world map, but what we are recognized for, Mr. Deputy Speaker? The highest number of ISIS fighters per capita. That is what we are recognized for, because on the 18th of September, we saw that two Trinidadians found to be aiding and financing ISIS fighters, that is what—I believe the hon. Attorney General is moving to impose some Mareva
injunction on their assets, but I will move on, and do not let me digress because we have to talk about the cocoa and how our production has fallen from 500 metric tons now, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In fact, the Tobago House of Assembly, they had some rural programmes for URP workers. They wanted them to rehabilitate some of the cocoa estates in Roxborough. And Mr. Deputy Speaker, 200,000 square metres of land which, if you calculate it—200,000, you multiply that by 10.76 and then you divide it by 43,576—you will get close to 50 acres of land. And you know how much cocoa they get? Mr. Deputy Speaker, 145 pounds, 145 pounds of cocoa from 50 acres of land. We are really serious in this country about rehabilitation of cocoa? And taking the URP workers and taking them down to these estates—145 pounds.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Trinidad produces one of the best quality cocoa in the world. [Desk thumping] It is called Trinitario, and it is a mixed or a genetic combination between forastero and criollo. It is two different types of cocoa. What we have, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is 2,100 genes of cocoa in Trinidad and yet we cannot turn it into chocolate. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we command at a premium price, Trinitario cocoa, of US $5,000 per tonne compared to 2,000 for bulk cocoa, and you are telling me we cannot really rehabilitate these estates? In fact, under the People’s Partnership, there was an incentive bonus, $2 per pound for cocoa beans and if you increased and exceeded your production from the previous year by 25 per cent, there was an incentive to give you $3 and I am not sure what happened to this incentive. I believe the PNM shut it down too.

So that is—I want to remind you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, about this guy named Harriman Chatoorgoon. I think he is from the constituency of Tabaquite. He and his son produced over 25 tonnes of cocoa, bagged and ready for export, and it is still there, because the Cocoa Development Company, they cannot source any
international market for them. It is rotting there, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and we should be known—just like Champagne is known for France and Scotland for Whisky—we should be known for Trinitario brand of cocoa.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if we look at access roads, during the 2018 mid-year review, there was an appropriation of $20 million for access roads in Trinidad, $20 million, and in Tobago, $240 million was spent on roads to build access roads.

**Ms. Ramdial:** How much?

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh:** $240 million. [Crosstalk] Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I calculate this, it means that roads are being built all in the sea in Tobago, because I do not know where you could take $240 million and you have no access road. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I had lectured to many Tobagonians and they live in Tobago, and I ask them—I call them and ask them for access roads for agriculture and they said, not a single access road. So what we need to do, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we need to ask the THA, “Where the $240 million gone”? Just as Mr. Manning would say: “Where the money gone”?

**Dr. Gopeesingh:** Follow the money, follow the money.

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh:** So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you are building things in Tobago, I have absolutely no objections to building roads.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member? Member? Your initial 45 minutes has expired, you have an additional 10. Do you care to avail?

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh:** Yes.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Proceed. [Desk thumping]

**Mr. Indarsingh:** “Laventille West and San Fernando East eh recover yet.” [Crosstalk]

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh:** So, in those 10 minutes, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Their energy has not been awakened.
Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: When we look at the rice farmers in this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is something called Moruga Hill Rice. I saw three Ministers run down to Moruga to give somebody by the name of Mark Forgenie, a cheque for $317,500 to do research on rice. But Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have different Ministries, different sectors or subsectors under the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, that get an allocation for research and development. Take, for example, CARDI, $60 million. What do they do? Research and Development; Chicken Feed Centre, research and development. We have a separate research and development unit under the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, but this person here got this money to do research and development and then, Mr. Deputy Speaker, an additional $50,000 given for this same person to find what is called “geographical indicator”. So, we are trying to figure out, what is that?

Geographical indicator, Mr. Deputy Speaker, just like if you lose your phone in the Beetham, and you have the GPS and you could find it, this is you trying to find rice. **[Laughter]** You pay a man $50,000 to find out the origin of this rice and they know that the Merikins had brought the rice. So, 317 plus 50, to find rice—367 and, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is what we call “slush grant”, just like the scholarship grants. And, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I believe if we had given Scooby Doo that, **[Laughter]** he would have solved that mystery and found that rice. **[Desk thumping and laughter]** And he saved that $50,000. **[Crosstalk]**

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in fact, there is an agro-processing unit set up in Moruga, costing $77 million, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, $77 million. But there was an existing processing plant in SFC and what does this Government do? Shut it down in SFC and you want to go into agro-progressing. What do you process? Agro-
processing means you have excess of what you have consuming. Any time you have excess of a commodity, you do it for agro-processing. Which commodity we have in Trinidad that is in excess supply to do agro-processing? We do not—the Prime Minister himself, two days ago, said that we do not have enough tomatoes to make tomato paste. Well, I am saying, we do not have enough cucumber to do cucumber pickle. We do not have enough corn to make cornmeal. [Crosstalk]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Silence.

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh:** But you set up a company with $77 million to do agro-processing for one of their partners, $77 million. [Desk thumping] What is the procurement process? It was tendered? Who are these people building this thing for $77 million? And your own Prime Minister, our own Prime Minister, is saying we cannot do agro-processing, we do not have excess commodities in this country.

The processing plant at SFC was canning and freezing and doing the same thing that this plant is set up to do. So why are you doing something you know that is not going to take off on the ground and remain as a next white elephant, to give to who? [Crosstalk]

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), imputing improper motives.

**Hon Member:** To who?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Members. Member, you care to clarify?

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh:** No, I just asked a question.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hold on. No. I am asking the Member to clarify.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for OropoucheWest implied that there was something nefarious about the payments that were made.

**Hon Member:** But she did not accuse anybody.
Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member. Member. I recognize—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Yes, the Member did. I am on my legs. You would like to say something?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member. Member, please. [Crosstalk] Listen. One sec. Just one sec, one sec. One second. I have recognized the Leader of the House in order to expound on the Standing Order that she raised, and I am only recognizing her at this time. Proceed.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Thank you very kindly, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Member for Oropouche West indicated that the money that she is referring to, was for a partner of somebody on this side and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as far as I am concerned that is imputing improper motives. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. One second. Member for Oropouche West, unless you are willing to expound on what you said, I would like you to retract that statement please.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I did not implicate anything.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, Member.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: Yeah.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: One second. With regard to the statement of stating that “for their partner on that side”, it is either you expound on it, more information or, if not, you retract it. I want no explanation, either/or.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: I will move on. I will move on.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Statement?

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: It is retracted, yeah. Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, proceed.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker—
Mr. Deputy Speaker: Chief Whip, please. Hold on, one second. Chief Whip, it has been continuous. All right. It has been continuous, please. Oropouche West.

Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: Thank you. Also, I believe two days ago, the hon. Prime Minister said that we do not have enough land to do agriculture. I do not want to quote his whole—perhaps it is a whole paragraph, and my time is running—but you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is something called vertical farming, there is something called innovation [Desk thumping] and there is something called ICTs. That is what our Leader of the Opposition—her thrust was always on the fourth industrial revolution. [Desk thumping] And what that does, is that you do not need land for all the crops that you want to plant.

All green leafy vegetables, Mr. Deputy Speaker, can be grown in what is called vertical farming. [Desk thumping] It is where you have controlled temperatures, controlled environment—from the seeds, right on to the full grown plant—and one has to understand that agriculture is a science. Agriculture, you need to know the physiology of a plant. So in using this method of vertical farming at every stage of the plant, the nutrient is given to the plant according to its needs and also, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you have what is called LED light that imitates and mimics the sunlight, so the photosynthesis goes on.

But, you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister believed since 1956—when you are obsolete and thinking about just going to plant land or doing an aluminium smelter; this is modern technology. [Desk thumping] This is not about backward. You do not take retrogressive steps. You move forward in this 21st Century, and that is what we need to do. We have to get out of this whole obsolete idea about everything is land.

In fact, if you have so much land—in fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we do have land, you know, so some of the crops that do not need the land, like the green leafy
vegetables, like ground provisions and so, and whatever crop other than the green leafy vegetables, you use the land. But they are using the land now to build homes and houses. So if you cut down from the St. Augustine Nursery—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member, you have two more minutes.

**Mrs. V. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh:** So, those are issues, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You have to know how to manage and how to run things efficiently in a country.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition and to go along and support and throw some light into this 2019 budget to say really, it is a budget with no turnaround, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but it is one of running around. That is what it is, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is nothing of substance, this 2019 budget, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and with those few words, I thank you.  

*Desk thumping*

**ADJOURNMENT**

**The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Monday the 8th day of October, at 10.00 a.m. at which time we will continue debate on the Appropriation Bill.

*Some Members stand*

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Members, I have not adjourned the sitting as yet.  

*Laughter*

Hon. Members, the question is that this House do now adjourn to Monday the 8th of October 2018, at 10.00 a.m.—*[Interruption]*

*[Member for Caroni Central stands]*

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Caroni Central.

**Dr. Tewarie:** Sorry, Sir.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Members, no. Listen, on a serious note, let us continue to
ensure that the decorum of the House is maintained at all times. We are all anxious to go home, but please, let us ensure that the procedures are carried out efficiently. Fair enough?

**Hon. Members:** Yes, Sir.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*House adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 8.49 p.m.*