

*Leave of Absence**Friday, December 11, 2015***HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES***Friday, December 11, 2015*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, hon. Terrence Deyalsingh, Member for St. Joseph, is out of the country and has asked to be excused from the sittings of the House during the period December 09 to December 15, 2015. The hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, MP, Member for Siparia, Mr. Prakash Ramadhar, MP, Member for St. Augustine and Dr. Fuad Khan, MP, Member for Barataria/San Juan, have asked to be excused from today's sitting of the House. The hon. Camille Robinson-Regis, MP, Member for Arouca/Maloney, has asked to be excused from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Members seek is granted.

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE
(APPOINTMENT OF)**

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received correspondence from the President of the Senate dated December 09, 2015, on the change of membership in the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee and the Public Accounts Committee, titled "Change of Membership - the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee and the Public Accounts Committee".

"I wish to inform you that at a sitting which commenced on Tuesday 8th December, 2015, the Senate agreed to the following changes in membership:

- on the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee - Mr. Wade Mark in lieu of Mr. Rodger Samuel; and
- on the Public Accounts Committee - Mr. Rodger Samuel in lieu of Mr. Wade Mark.

Accordingly, I respectfully request that you cause these matters to be brought to the attention of the House of Representatives at the earliest convenience.

Yours respectfully,

Christine Kangaloo

President of the Senate"

PAPERS LAID

1. Annual Report of the Industrial Court of Trinidad and Tobago for the period October 2012 to September 2013. [*The Attorney General (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi)*]
2. Annual Report of the Industrial Court of Trinidad and Tobago for the period October 2013 to September 2014. [*Hon. F. Al-Rawi*]
3. The Report of the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago with respect to the progress of the proposals to restructure CLICO, BAT and CIB for the quarter ended September 30, 2015. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]

To be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.

PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTIONS

**Climate Change Conference in Paris
(Representation at)**

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Hon. Prime Minister, given that 150 Heads of State and Government attended the Climate Change Conference which ends today in Paris, what high-level representation did our country have at this conference?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Thank you. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago approved the attendance of His Excellency the President to attend the Heads of State climate conference in Paris. That was on the eve of the attack on the city of Paris and subsequent to those developments, His Excellency cancelled his attendance at the function.

However, at about the same time—in fact, the week before, with one conference flowing into the other, the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting which was scheduled to take place in Malta did take place and Trinidad and Tobago was represented by the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. And that Commonwealth gathering had as one of its major focuses the whole question of climate change and climate change issues. It formed a substantial part of the plenaries and it also formed a substantial part of the retreat of Heads which were both attended by the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago.

During the retreat, all the small island states, among which we count ourselves, and particularly those of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, made sure that the issue of climate change was focused on by the Heads of Government and at the end of it, we as Heads of the Commonwealth agreed to and did, in fact, issue, for the first time, in my knowledge, a communiqué to the conference in Paris and

to the world, where the Heads of Government in the Commonwealth have taken the position with respect to this issue of climate change. So, Trinidad and Tobago has been very well represented on this issue. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Supplementary question. Given that His Excellency the President did not attend the Climate Change Conference, would the Prime Minister tell us who headed our delegation? And it continues: is this level of representation adequate given that on a per capita basis, our country has the second highest carbon footprint globally—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Naparima, I will entertain the first part of your question. Just the first part of your question, please, because it must relate to the answer that was initially given by the Prime Minister. Just the first part of the question. Hon. Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Could the Member clarify?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Question, first part.

Mr. Charles: The question was in the view of the fact that His Excellency the President did not attend, who headed our delegation in Paris?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: If the Member knows of another delegation, please advise.

Mr. Charles: Is the Prime Minister saying that we had no delegation at the Paris Climate Change Conference?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I could repeat the answer to the Member. We would have been represented by the President of Trinidad and Tobago who is the Head of State. At the last moment—I am repeating the answer. Do I? At the last moment, he withdrew as a result of the terrorist activities. So clearly, I have said, that there was no delegation because His Excellency withdrew and it happened on the verge of the conference and so therefore there was no delegation. And I went on to explain to you that the issue was adequately dealt with at a parallel conference also on the eve of the Paris conference. So we were not without representation on the issue at an international level. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Are you going on to your second question or do you still have another supplemental?

Mr. Charles: No, it is a supplemental question based on his response.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Based on what was said.

Mr. Charles: Is the Prime Minister aware that several of his Caricom colleagues, Prime Ministers, left the CHOGM conference to attend the Paris Climate Change Conference?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, the question must relate directly to your initial question and also to the answer that was given. No, I am not giving way, hold on, hold on, I am speaking to the Member. So that question does not pertain to this at this time.

Mr. Charles: Supplemental question. The Prime Minister said that there is no delegation—no Trinidad and Tobago delegation, I accept that. The question I asked: is he satisfied that given the importance of climate change to a country like Trinidad and Tobago that has the highest per capita carbon footprint, that we have no representation?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, the Prime Minister has answered accordingly and we shall proceed, please.

Mr. Singh: Supplemental.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Well, this would be the third one. All right, go ahead.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Hon. Prime Minister, the Head of State was the head of delegation for Trinidad and Tobago, is this going to be a pattern of the Government for the President of the country to represent us at conferences in which the Executive, meaning the Cabinet and Prime Minister, has that responsibility?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I am not sure he knows what he is asking me. The conference entertained Heads of States and Heads of Governments. In our case, we were being represented by virtue of the presence of the Head of State who, in fact, was scheduled to speak at that conference. So I do not know exactly what he is asking me after that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Next question, last one. Four questions are allowed. Question No. 2, Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: What was the important position championed by Trinidad and Tobago in the national interest at the Climate Change Conference?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And you know, and also, outside of Head of State and Head of Government, if what the Member is trying to say is that Trinidad and Tobago was unrepresented, that is not correct. Okay? Ambassador Eden Charles—

Mr. Singh: “Now getting info”.

Mr. Charles: Now we are getting the info.

Mr. Imbert: “You now ask the question”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I am responding to the Member's attempt to indicate that there was no representation but the question was fashioned in the context of Head of State and Head of Government. There was a presence by Trinidad and Tobago at that place and that is why I asked you, if there is another delegation, let me know. Clearly, you are asking questions about something you do not know and I am giving you the answer. You do not want an answer. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: The question has not been answered. [*Interruption*] The question is what important position was championed by Trinidad and Tobago? There was a delegation and they must have a position. [*Continuous interruption*] Eden Charles.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Have we gone on to Question No. 2?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Yes, we are on Question No. 2, hon. Member, which reads—the question that is here, kindly read it, please.

Climate Change Conference in Paris (Trinidad and Tobago's Position)

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): What was the important position championed by Trinidad and Tobago in the national interest at the Climate Change Conference?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Any position championed by any Member of Trinidad and Tobago's delegation, either at Heads of Government, President or Ambassador, any level, Trinidad and Tobago's position is that we acknowledge that there are climate change challenges for the world and we will do our little part to ensure that we do not contribute to gases that can contribute.

However, we do not subscribe to the position being championed by the Member, as he is, that Trinidad and Tobago is the world's leading per capita polluter and so on and so on, because that is the story of those who are, in fact, seeking to circumscribe our industrial development by designating us the second

largest polluter in the world on a per capita basis—a very nonsensical statistic which we do not subscribe to. As a matter of fact, if nationals keep subscribing to that, we could find ourselves eventually, when penalties are applied to world polluters, we could find ourselves, as a small industrialized nation, carrying more than our fair share of such a burden. That conversation is not for us. [*Desk thumping*]

1.45 p.m.

**ArcelorMittal Workers on the Breadline
(Details of)**

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. To the hon. Prime Minister: given that a large number of workers of Point Lisas steel manufacturing company ArcelorMittal will be on the breadline, can the Prime Minister say whether the Government plans to do anything about this situation?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Yes, the Government, by way of the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, is scheduled to meet and talk with the union and the employer. The Government is appealing not just to ArcelorMittal, but to all employers, to not seek to use retrenchment and closure as the first response to any challenge, which may come their way in this period of challenges. [*Desk thumping*].

**Trinidad and Tobago in a Recession
(Details of)**

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, again, to the hon. Prime Minister. Does the Prime Minister agree that Trinidad and Tobago is in a recession?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Agree with whom? [*Laughter and desk thumping*]

Mr. Indarsingh: Given the pronouncements of the Governor of the Central Bank and taking into consideration that Independent Senator Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir, in another place, indicated that Trinidad and Tobago is currently in what we would call stagflation mode?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Are you asking about recession or stagflation mode?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Prime Minister, recession. Let us deal with recession.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Thank you. Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the best of our knowledge, recession is referred to when two consecutive periods of decline have been observed by those who monitor the performance of the economy. To the best of my knowledge and by checking on my calendar, we are still in December of 2015 and, therefore, we are in the last quarter of the year 2015. And, in fact, that quarter cannot form any basis for determining what happens with recession in the country. So, therefore, it must refer to the two previous quarters and earlier.

If, in fact, we were in recession in those two quarters, we would have expected to have heard that from him and his friends. [*Desk thumping*] Thus it would have meant this quarter started October—it goes October, November, December; that is still going on. We also do not know the source of the data to which he is referring, he and those he made reference to. July, August, September, that quarter and the previous quarter, would have had to be the quarters of decline known, from statistical data that is acceptable and believable, to determine whether or not Trinidad and Tobago is in recession.

Insofar as the last Government's spokespersons, who are now on the other side, know so much about recession, I want to remind them, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that they were the ones who failed to tell this country that we had been in recession and decline during their term. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Rambachan: Supplemental. Hon. Prime Minister, in view of what you are saying about the last two quarters. Does your Government or has your Government received any official data, whether it be from CSO or Central Bank, with respect to those figures?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: To the best of my knowledge, we have received no data, which is why I am asking the mover of the question, what is the source of your data and the persons who you quoted as authorities, what is the source of their data? Because I am not aware that the CSO, which is the agency that compiles the performance statistics of the country, has made any documentation available, and that is why this issue is so contentious, because the basis for promoting it is quite questionable. Not that we have any difficulty acknowledging if the data does show that the economy has not grown or has remained stagnant over the last three months or so; we have no difficulty. But what we do have a difficulty with is arbitrary, spurious data being used to determine the performance of the economy

Dr. Gopeesingh: Supplemental. Would the hon. Prime Minister indicate whether he is prepared to accept the information provided by the CSO bearing in

mind certain statements in the past by the current Minister of Finance who was then in Opposition, stating that the CSO's figures are unreliable. Would you be prepared to accept the CSO figures when they are given to you, based on past statements?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I am not in a position to judge what the past statements are. I will tell you what, until the data is in front of me, I would not be able to take any position on it, because if spurious data appears in front of me from the CSO or the OSC, I will have to take a position on that. So as of now, I have no such data to adjudicate upon.

Contract Workers in the Public Service (Termination of)

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*): Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the Prime Minister. Does the Government intend to terminate or continue the contracts of the approximately 6,000 contract workers within the public service? What is the intention of the Government on that matter?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Mr. Deputy Speaker, contract workers are an integral part of the public service, and the Government has no position to systematically terminate and end the use of contract workers in the public service. The Government has no plan or programme to terminate 6,000 workers in the public service. And even if the Government did that, it will be 2,000 less than the last Government did in its first quarter, but this Government has no plan to do that.

Secondly, insofar as any contract workers are being terminated, and by terminate, I mean, if their contract comes to an end and it is not renewed, or if it is terminated for cause, one of the main possibilities of a contract being terminated is a person—or if there are persons who have been improperly hired by improper process, or who are found to be unqualified for the position that they hold, which was something that the previous Government has done across the public service. And if we find people who are in positions for which they are patently unqualified, and if they have been hired by improper processes and we so identify, we will not hesitate to take the appropriate action.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Are you casting aspersions on the Public Service Commission and—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member—*[Interruption]*

Dr. Gopeesingh: These are public service appointments—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No.

Dr. Gopeesingh: He said if they are improperly employed. The hon. Prime Minister indicated that when he spoke about the 6,000, he said it is 2,000—whether it is 6,000, in other words, we—8,000; we sent home 8,000. Would you be kind enough to present or give us the information where that came from?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: By way of referring you to an answer given by the UNC Government in 2010 to a question which I filed, asking how many persons, contract workers that had been terminated and/or being—that is part of the *Hansard* record given. I am advised it was December 2010 that the UNC Government advised the Parliament that 8,000 workers who were contract workers had ceased to continue working in the system. So 8,000, minus 6,000, equals 2,000 less. [*Desk thumping*]

**Governor of the Central Bank
(Termination of)**

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*): Would the hon. Prime Minister indicate whether the Government is considering taking action to terminate the Governor of the Central Bank?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Mr. Deputy Speaker, if there is any person taking action which would result in the termination of the employment of the Governor of the Central Bank, that person is not the Government.

Dr. Rambachan: Is the Prime Minister, in view of what he has said, in support of the position of several speakers on behalf of the Government, who have been saying that the Governor should exit office?

Hon. Member: Who said that?

Hon. Member: What?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I am sorry, I missed the first part of the question, sorry.

Dr. Rambachan: I am saying whether you support the position, hon. Prime Minister, of speakers on behalf of the Government who have been indicating [*Interruption*] that the Governor should exit office.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, you care to identify these speakers in terms of—just for clarification?

Dr. Rambachan: There has been a war between the Minister of Finance [*Interruption*] and the Governor of the Central Bank, in which the Minister has

indicated [*Continuous interruption*]*—*a war of words. There has been an indication from the Minister of Finance with respect to the Governor that the Minister is not satisfied and the Governor should leave office.

Hon. Member: When was that said? Ask him when was that said?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: If there is a question somewhere there, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would be happy to answer it. [*Laughter and desk thumping*]

Heritage and Stabilisation Fund (Utilization of)

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*): Could the Prime Minister state what is the Government's position in relation to the utilization of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, in the short or medium term?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): The Heritage and Stabilisation Fund had been created for a particular purpose, in a particular situation. And if those situations arise, it will be for the Government at that time to take decisions with respect to that fund and its use in cushioning our circumstances. However, at this point in time that is not part of our consideration.

Allowances for Ministers (Reduction of)

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*): Based on your Government's current wage freeze and loss of hundreds of jobs in the public sector, would you be moving to reduce the allowances for your Ministers based on the economic climate?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): The first thing I want to clarify, these questions are directed to the Prime Minister, and when you talk about your Ministers, the Prime Minister does not own Ministers. Ministers are public officials, doing public duty appointed by the Prime Minister. [*Desk thumping*]

Secondly, there is no wage freeze being implemented by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Gopeesingh: Well, we saw evidence of that—[*Interruption*] supplemental. We saw evidence of that in one particular case where there was no increase in wages for a particular enterprise, what is your comment on that, since you made mention of the fact that there is no—the Government is not exercising any wage freeze?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: There are a number of corporate bodies run by boards, and if in managing the affairs of those entities, the persons with responsibility for managing them take decisions with respect to increases or not, that is not the Government directing that, that is the board with responsibility to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Another supplemental, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The corporation sole, who is a member of the Government, is responsible for most of the boards and, therefore, the direction has to come from the corporation sole. Would the corporation sole be—would you be able to indicate whether that directive has been given to the corporation sole, who is the Minister of Finance?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: No directive has been given for that. However, if that is the most appropriate action which the board sees fit to extend to the agency or company, and that is what is in the best interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, then the corporation sole, the Ministry of Finance and the Government will, in fact, support the board's position.

Government Seeking IMF's Support

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*): Could the Prime Minister indicate whether your Government's present discussions with the IMF are leading to the Government seeking support from the IMF in the short or medium term based on what the Minister of Finance has been saying?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Trinidad and Tobago is a member of the structure of the IMF, and we stand throughout whether it is in fair times or in foul times. We stand ready to receive whatever assistance can be provided to us by the IMF or any other agency. However, I am not sure that the Member is talking about IMF's support in the context of what you might be talking about. We continuously talk to the IMF. The IMF comes on a regular basis, carries out Article IV Consultations, not just Trinidad and Tobago, all members of the IMF, all member countries of the IMF, continuously interact with the IMF and we are doing so now as we would have done when we were at the peak of our earnings and when we were in a boom period. It is a continuous process, and during those processes we always would get support of one kind or another from the agency.

2.00 p.m.

**Increased State Borrowings
(Details of top five projects)**

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie (*Caroni Central*): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Having secured parliamentary approval to increase state borrowings by a further \$50 billion, would the hon. Prime Minister state the top five projects, in order of priority, for which these loans are to be applied?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): The top five projects will depend on a number of things at the time when the funds become available, and on other circumstances. So, today, I will not be able to tell you the top five projects but, I can tell you, we do have a number of projects, and depending on the readiness and the suitability we will proceed to use the funds effectively. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Gopeesingh: I want to ask the hon. Prime Minister, noting your Government pegging the budgeted price of US \$275 per MMBtu during the budget debate, would you indicate the average price of natural gas received since your Government has been in office?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, an average price by itself is really meaningless, or could be misleading, because we get our earnings by way of netbacks from specific cargoes, and what I can tell the Member is the range of prices that various cargoes had been sold at, or receipts based on cargo sold in a variety of markets, we do not only sell our cargoes in one market; it could be three or four or five markets. However, the prices that cargoes have been sold for, and resulting in a netback to us, our earnings per MMBtu in October ranged from US \$1.79 to US \$5.30. That is the range of prices. Now, one has to go to the number of cargoes to get any idea of what is the meaning of that. That was in October; in November the range was again \$1.79 to \$4.86, depending on the specific contracts, because, you know, we have different contracts between Train 1, Train 2, Train 3 and Train 4, and also depending on which market those contracts are sold in.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, supplemental, the hon. Prime Minister in Opposition, we had provided answers to 16 areas where natural gas was shipped to—by now I believe you might have an understanding of where we are in terms of all the natural gas that has been sent and shipped—what would have been the total costing and then calculation based on the MMBtu? In other words, you shipped X to Y, another amount to another country, has there been any

calculation by your Government to understand where we are in terms of revenue for the last two, or two and a half months?—so you could know where to carry your economic adjustments, and so on, based on what you have received from natural gas, based on natural gas being the main determinant of your revenue.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Given the complications of the question, you could imagine the complications with the answer. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You only have a couple more seconds on Prime Minister's Questions, so I will let you proceed.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: At the appropriate locations within the system, the answers exist for that question but I am afraid I was not given enough notice to bring that to you, and I would not want to do those calculations in my head.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The time for Prime Minister's Questions has expired, so we will now move on to Urgent Questions.

URGENT QUESTIONS

Mr. Indarsingh: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I do not know, based on what you had indicated, that the substantive Minister of Health is out of the country, who will be answering.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, I understand that the Government will deal with it, proceed.

Emergency Health Services (Failure to Respond)

Mr. R. Indarsingh (Couva South): To the Acting Minister of Health, can the Minister state why on December 07, 2015, an ambulance from the Emergency Health Services failed to respond to the numerous telephone calls of the members of the family of Mrs. Lydia Mohammed-Pinchilla of Post Office Street, Balmain, Couva, to transport her to the Couva District Health Facility for medical treatment?

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Mr. Deputy Speaker, deputing for the acting Minister of Health who is unavoidably absent, the answer to the question is as follows: the Ministry is currently seeking to verify the facts related to this incident from GMRTT and the SWRHA.

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, just on the basis of the response that has been given by the—I do not know if he is dualling in his responsibility as the

Minister of Finance and the Acting Minister of Health, I will want to guide, or just to follow up in indicating that the late Mrs. Lydia Mohammed-Pinchilla is a constituent of Couva South, and the family has advised me that they made numerous calls requesting an ambulance.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, it is a question, a supplemental question at this time.

Hon. C. Imbert: I can answer out that attempt as a supplemental question, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you so desire.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Not at this time, please. Another question, Member for Couva South.

Emergency Transportation (Reduction of Waiting Time)

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (Couva South): Can the Minister state what measures have been put in place to reduce the waiting time for persons in need of emergency transportation by ambulances attached to the Emergency Health Services and the Ministry of Health to our nation's health facilities?

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, deputing again for the Leader of Government Business and the Acting Minister of Health—deputing—the answer to the question is, the Ministry has established an internal team related to the systems for monitoring the provision of the Emergency Ambulance Service. The Ministry is also working with the National Ambulance Authority to enhance the patient handover process, and the times taken at emergency health facilities.

Forestry Division Employees (Reasons for Non-payment)

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (Caroni East): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Can the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries give reasons why employees in the Forestry Division, I have been advised, have not been paid for the last three months and when will they be paid?

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Mr. Deputy Speaker, the way the question is written the short answer is, there have been no employees of the Forestry Division who have not been paid for the last three months. I do not know if the Member wishes to ask a different question.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Supplemental.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, the supplemental must be based on the initial question, as well as the answer that would have been given. Who do I recognize? The Member for Caroni East.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Would you consider the re-afforestation programme not a part of the Ministry, of the Forestry Division?—and, therefore, if they have not been paid is it not incumbent to give an answer to it?

Hon. C. Rambharat: The Reforestation Programme is not part of the Forestry Division.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, am I allowed one more?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: One more.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Well, then if it is, and the members of the Reforestation Programme have not been paid, could you give an indication when they would be paid?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Minister, it is based on your answer of reforestation, and he is just enquiring.

Hon. C. Rambharat: It is not part of the Forestry Division, it is a different question from what was asked, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I would be happy to come and answer that question on another occasion. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay.

Food Card Holders (Inability to Access Funds)

Miss Ramona Ramdial (*Couva North*): Can the Minister explain why food card holders across Trinidad and Tobago cannot access the funds on said card for the month of December?

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Cherry-Ann Crichlow-Cockburn): Mr. Deputy Speaker, food card holders across Trinidad and Tobago have been utilizing their food cards this month. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services conducts periodic reviews to ensure that only those persons who continue to meet the qualifying requirements remain on the system. The persons who would not have been able to utilize their food cards are those who would have been removed from the system because they no longer qualify. All such persons would have been formally notified of their removal from the system.

Miss Ramdial: Is the Minister aware that permanent food card holders have been cut from the system?

Hon. Member: Permanent?

Miss Ramdial: Two-year cardholders. They call them permanent food card holders.

Hon. C. Crichlow-Cockburn: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the persons who would have been removed from the system are those persons who no longer qualify. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Supplemental.

Mr. Indarsingh: Could the Minister state, based on the reviews her Ministry has been conducting, how many persons have been removed from the food card system since? Mr. Deputy Speaker, she has indicated that they have been removed and I would like to know the numbers.

Hon. C. Crichlow-Cockburn: Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I would have indicated, the persons who would have been removed are those who no longer qualify. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Next question. Supplemental questions have been utilized, hon. Member, so we will now proceed to the Minister of National Security, and the question is from the Member for Couva North.

Vessels Used by Coast Guard (Details of)

Miss Ramona Ramdial (*Couva North*): Can the Minister identify what type of vessel was used by the Coast Guard in the \$5 million drug bust on Tuesday and when these vessels were purchased?

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Maj. Gen. Edmund Dillon): Mr. Deputy Speaker, the vessel used by the Coast Guard in the \$5 million drug bust on Tuesday was an interceptor. The vessels were acquired and commissioned into the Coast Guard on August 27. Based on the poor procurement practices of the last government we are still completing the purchase of the Damen vessels, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Next question to the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries from the Member for Chaguanas West.

**National Gas Company Group of Companies
(Cost of Christmas Party)**

Mr. Ganga Singh (*Chaguanas West*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Could the hon. Minister indicate the cost of the Christmas party to be hosted by the National Gas Company Group of Companies, at the Hyatt Hotel on December 12, 2015?

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Hon. Nicole Olivierre): Mr. Deputy Speaker, the cost of that event is \$650,000.

Mr. Singh: Supplemental. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. How does the hon. Minister reconcile this hosting of this party at the Hyatt Hotel when there is a memo given to all state enterprises and the public sector? And if I can refer to it, dated December 08, 2015, in which:

To ensure that the budgets for Christmas events are modest, and that no event should be held at the Hilton, the Hyatt, and the Radisson.

Hon. N. Olivierre: Mr. Deputy Speaker, now this event is catering to 850 employees and their spouses of the NGC Group of Companies. It includes the National Gas Company, National Energy, NGC CNG Limited. Now, NGC would have already made the arrangements in April of this year, and they paid a 50 per cent down payment to the Hyatt. [*Desk thumping*] So a 50 per cent down payment would have been made at the time. Now, prior to that memo going out from the Government, NGC had already paid the remaining amount of the money, so at the time the memo went out it really was too late for them to be able to do anything about it. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Al-Rawi: More baggage we inherited. More baggage.

2.15 p.m.

Mr. Singh: Is the Minister indicating that there was no attempt, having regard to the memo sent out to all state agencies?

Hon. N. Olivierre: Mr. Deputy Speaker, after the memo was sent out, NGC did engage the Hyatt. The original cost of the event would have come up to \$1.2 million. [*Interruption*] So subsequent to the memo going out, NGC did some rearrangements. They were able to reduce the per head cost and that is why it has been brought down to \$650,000. [*Desk thumping and crosstalk*]

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

**International Relations Officer/Foreign Service Officer
(Contract Employment of)**

7. Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs:

With respect to the employment of persons on a contract basis to perform the functions of International Relations Officer/Foreign Service Officer, could the Minister indicate:

- a) whether the Government proposes to cease such contract employment upon the expiration of the current contract periods; and
- b) what policies will be implemented to have a professional, permanently employed cadre of Foreign Service Officers?

The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dennis Moses): Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs does not propose at this time to abolish the position of international relations officer at its headquarters or at the overseas missions, either before or upon the expiration of the current contract period.

Mr. Charles: Part (b) which is to have a “permanently employed cadre”—and by that I mean employed in the public service as opposed to contract.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, Part (b) of the question, could you read it as presented on the Order Paper, please.

Mr. Charles: What policies—is that what you are asking?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Yes.

Mr. Charles: “what policies will be implemented to have a professional, permanently employed cadre of Foreign Service Officers?”

Sen. The Hon. D. Moses: The Ministry will collaborate as appropriate with the Service Commissions Department for more frequent recruitment processes to fill existing vacancies. The Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs intends to develop and implement a robust training plan for new and serving officers in order to build the cadre of professionals required for the Ministry to fulfil its mandate.

**Trinidad and Tobago Police Service
(Details of Current Establishment Strength)**

8. Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Could the Minister indicate:

- a) the total number of police officers on the current establishment of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service;
- b) does the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service intend to increase its establishment strength in the financial year 2016 and if yes, by what number;
- c) what is the basis upon which the establishment strength of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service is determined; and.
- d) what steps the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service intends to employ to attract a cadre of officers who can meet the current challenges?

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Maj. Gen. Edmund Dillon): Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are two categories of police officers in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, namely, the regular police officers and the Special Reserve Police officers.

In the context of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service the term “establishment” refers to the sanctioned or approved number of police officers. At present, the sanctioned strength of police officers in the TTPS is 7,750 regular police officers and 6,707 Special Reserve Police officers.

The TTPS has indicated that at present the actual number of regular police officers in the service is 6,706, and the actual number of Special Reserve Police officers is 3,088.

To answer part (b) of the question, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service has no plans to increase its sanctioned strength in 2016 financial year; however, there are plans to increase the actual number of police officers by approximately 500 persons in this financial year:

Part (c)—the sanctioned strength of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service is determined by the following factors: the national population, the level of crimes in the country and the demand for policing services.

Part (d)—in order to attract the cadre of police officers who can meet the current challenges, the TTPS intends to employ several methods. These include the following:

- Targeting young persons who are customer oriented and possess qualities that are consistent with the core values of the TTPS;
- utilizing more innovative methods such as extensive recruiting endeavours after the release of CXC results in May and August, to reach persons who have met the academic requirements, including seminars at the universities;
- setting up recruiting stations at malls, at public spaces, publishing media advertisement, inclusive of video clips which depict the benefits and opportunities of becoming members of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service;
- headhunting quality personnel based on recommendations from officers who have knowledge of their backgrounds;
- conducting recruitment sensitization sessions with different radio and television media;
- educating students in schools across the country about the need to live crime-free lives with a view towards preparing prospective police candidates for the future;
- partnering with local celebrities such as popular soca and chutney artistes, while using social network to tweet and like the police recruiting drive, as a means of encouraging persons to apply to join the service;
- continuing to facilitate walk-ins at police academy for candidates; recruiting young persons from police youth clubs who have been moulded and guided towards becoming responsible and productive citizens with strong moral values and positive attitudes;
- attaching successful probation and field training officers to the police academy for the field training programme duration of three months which will help to better prepare officers to competently execute their duties and responsibilities; and finally,
- initiating online document screening services in the future.

Mr. Charles: Would the Minister be kind enough to provide information relating to the number of police officers per thousand of population, so that we

could get a context as to how we compare vis-a-vis other countries.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Can you provide that information now, hon. Minister?

Sen. The Hon. Maj. Gen. E. Dillon: Mr. Deputy Speaker, no. I cannot provide that information now, but it can be provided at a later date.

Mr. Singh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the last occasion the undertaking was given by the Leader of Government Business to circulate the question for written answer—the same question—and it was not circulated. I would hope that, please—[*Interruption*—]you can answer it on another occasion.

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am not familiar with those details. Just before I came here, I saw a written answer to this question. I will make my best effort to have it circulated this afternoon.

DEFINITE URGENT MATTER

(LEAVE)

**Revelation of Foreign Exchange Recipients
(Government's Attempt to Manipulate)**

Mr. Ganga Singh (*Chaguanas West*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In accordance with Standing Order 17 of the House of Representatives, I hereby seek your leave to move the adjournment of the House at today's sitting of Friday, December 11, 2015, for the purpose of discussing a definite matter of urgent public importance, namely, the Government's attempt to manipulate the revelation of foreign exchange recipients by the Governor of the Central Bank in order to divert public attention away from the calamitous social and economic impact of the mass job losses in the public and private sector over the past two months.

The matter is definite because while the massive job losses over the past two months, coupled with the simultaneous tax and fuel increases are wreaking economic and social havoc on the population, the Government has manipulated public attention away from this most serious state of affairs, primarily by escalating its vendetta against the independent office of the Governor of the Central Bank.

It is urgent because if the Government is not immediately compelled to publicly acknowledge the plight of the unemployed workers and to state what measures are to be implemented to bring relief to them, the hardships currently endured by these citizens of Trinidad and Tobago would be further exacerbated due to Government neglect.

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It is of public importance since the domino effect of Government's refusal to give due aid and urgent attention to the plight of thousands of citizens and their families, can plunge these once productive workers into a state of poverty and can lead to economic stagnation and social instability.

I humbly submit, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, I am not satisfied that this matter qualifies under this Standing Order. I advise that the Member pursue his matter under Standing Order 16.

STATEMENT BY MINISTER

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have been informed that the Minister of Finance will make a statement later in the proceedings, so therefore this item will be deferred for an appropriate time later today in the sitting.

CUSTOMS ACT (EXTENSION OF BENEFITS)

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Let me say how pleased I am to be a visitor to this honourable House.

I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name to be debated in this honourable House:

Whereas it is provided by section 56(1)(a) of the Customs Act, Chap. 78:01, that the House of Representatives may, from time to time, by Resolution, provide that any class of goods specified in the Resolution shall be exempt from import duties of Customs if the goods are imported or entered for use by any person for any purpose specified in the Resolution during any period to be fixed by the Minister in each particular case, not being a period terminating later than the date prescribed in the Resolution as the last day on which such exemption shall be operative, and subject to such conditions as the Minister may impose;

And whereas by Legal Notice No. 11 of 2011, that allows for the offshore petroleum exploration and production operation sector, came into effect on January 01, 2011, and expires on December 31, 2015;

And whereas it is expedient that certain goods be exempt from import duties of Customs as of January 01, 2016;

Be it resolved that the House of Representatives in accordance with and subject to the provisions of section 56 of the Customs Act, exempt from import duties of Customs the classes of goods imported or entered for use in Trinidad and Tobago for the offshore petroleum exploration and production operation sector, for the period beginning immediately after the expiration of the last Resolution of Parliament and ending on December 31, 2017.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the purpose of this Motion is to seek an extension of the benefits granted, pursuant to section 56(1)(a) of the Customs Act. This coverage has been afforded to the offshore petroleum exploration and petroleum operation sector since 1970.

It has been over 40 years since our beloved Prime Minister, Dr. the hon. Eric Williams, opened the Point Lisas Industrial Estate and this triggered a wave of development that was never anticipated. Today, Trinidad and Tobago is a global leader in the petrochemical industry, and a major player in the oil and gas industry in the Caribbean. This is a vision that this Government had and will continue to have for our beloved country.

Just looking back, our focus was always on charting our own prosperous future, sustainable and long-term development, creating wealth for our people. We were able to build on our inheritance of basic institutions and systems and on our endowment, our people, our geography and our natural resources.

Together with our outstanding leadership from successive PNM administrations, our ideas and vision, we were able to grow our economy, reviewing as we went along, doing it better day by day, doing it right and getting it better.

2.30 p.m.

Along the way we took the right decisions, attracted foreign direct investments, focused on human development and added the right incentives and initiatives for this sector. And so it was from our asphalt to natural gas, to urea, to ammonia and methanol and an entire world-class petroleum petrochemical sector, the envy of neighbouring developing countries. Our economy grew and our people grew, our nation grew. However, with a heavy dependence on the oil and gas sectors, price volatility remains our biggest bugbear.

Over the last year and a half, energy prices have been volatile and unpredictable. In fact it has been on a steady decline over the last year. The current decline in crude prices has been due to several factors which impacted on

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the world market and created excess supply. The supply glut is probably now about two million barrels per day of crude oil. This has impacted negatively on our economy as the energy sector, as an average, always contributed close to 40 per cent of our national GDP. The sector's standing in the economy, however, has gradually been eroded with the decline in reserves and production. At present, oil production is at the lowest level ever in this country, approximately 81,000 barrels per day—I believe it might be under now—and natural gas production averaging quite low at 3.86 billion cubic feet per day. Quite naturally there is an imperative to stimulate and grow our economy and revive the energy industry to accelerate production to build back reserves, and to provide the certainty of gas supply to domestic industry.

We recognize that it is not business as usual and innovative changes are required to ensure that the sector remains viable and progresses in a sustainable manner. Plans for the sector will be addressed later in this debate. As a Government we shall be taking steps to ensure that the services offered by our institutions and our state agencies, both regulatory and commercial, are conducted in an efficient and effective manner and at a cost which is competitive by international standards.

The import duty exemption rate regime and other concessions offered have enabled companies to further their exploration and production activities and move beyond their traditional risk-averse behaviour. Such beneficiary companies over the years have significantly contributed to the economy through tax revenue generation, employment and continued growth and development of the energy sector and other sectors as well.

The Ministry of Trade and Industry has consulted with the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries and we are of the view that these incentives under section 56(1)(a) of the Customs Act must be continued as it facilitates new, as well as existing investments in the energy sector.

The discontinuation of this benefit will serve to further destabilize the energy sector, as without it offshore petroleum exploration will be reduced or even limited as companies will be unable to acquire their machinery, their equipment and supplies at internationally competitive prices.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the continuation of this benefit will result in some revenue loss for the Government, however this must be weighed by the benefits to be gained by assisting in sustaining and growing the energy industry. In the long run, it is the people, it is the country Trinidad and Tobago that will benefit most—

jobs, subcontracting opportunities to small and medium-sized businesses and other opportunities.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government therefore recommends that this Motion be passed in this honourable House of Representatives to allow the Minister with responsibility for industry to continue to grant exemption from customs duties to the offshore petroleum exploration and production operation sector. This exemption will make the environment more attractive and foster growth within the sector. And in this regard I beg to move that this Motion standing in my name be approved. I trust that we will have the Opposition's support of this Motion. I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I wish to now call on Members to proceed. I recognize the Member for Caroni Central. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie (*Caroni Central*): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is a rather straightforward Bill having to do with the provisions of section 56(1)(a) of the Customs Act and, in the specific instance, dealing with the offshore petroleum sector. It also has to do, of course, with the exemptions from import duties identifying the energy sector which is so critical to the economy of Trinidad and Tobago as an approved industry under legislation passed in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago.

This really, in the broad sense, is a Bill in support of investment and development, and in other parts of the Bill it is in support as well of trade, but the idea here is to support private sector expansion and growth in Trinidad and Tobago, and more particularly to stimulate the energy sector and to continue the stimulation of the energy sector.

We have no problem with this because this is something that represents a continuous framework over several governments over time. And the stimulation of the energy sector, continuity in the energy sector is something that we want for the country. In this particular case what we are being asked to support is exemptions for equipment, material and supplies, and we are being asked to do this for importation having to do with the use in offshore petroleum exploration and petroleum operations.

Perhaps the Minister would want to explain why the limit is to December 2017 because I would think that something like this you would want to extend for a more reasonable period of time since you are coming to Parliament to do this.

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And I simply want to go into the relevant law to say that under 56(1), basically we are talking about:

- (a) import duties of Customs if the goods are imported or entered for use by any person or any purpose specified in the resolution;”

And we have identified the purposes here.

Secondly:

- (b) export duties of Customs if the goods are exported after having been subjected in Trinidad and Tobago to any process specified in the resolution,”

I am not sure how this would apply in the energy sector. It may not apply at all, and it may be more relevant to the trade aspects of the second resolution. And then it does give the Minister discretion in the matter notwithstanding what the law or the exemptions might say after we pass it in this honourable House. So, the Minister does have a certain amount of freedom and flexibility in the system.

Now let us look at some of the things that are exempt and the industries they support. In this particular case it is petroleum. In an accompanying resolution—we are not allowed to do that, are we, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Just separate? Okay. In this particular resolution we are focused on the energy industry. And what we are looking at here is not just for stimulation of investment in the industry, but the implications for that for the rest of the economy. Because we know that the energy industry is something that is a central piece because of its export earnings and because of the significance of the size of revenue to the country. The challenges that we are facing now are directly related to the amount of production and the significant lowering of the price in the international markets for both oil and gas, and consequently related commodities in the system on a global scale, and with Trinidad and Tobago being a commodity exporter, we are witnessing the impact of that.

And the reason I focused on that is because this has significant bearing on the rest of the economy. It is not just a question of how much revenue the Government has, it is also a question of how connected industries that are not in the energy sector are affected by declines in the energy sector.

So that the price, the lowering of price or the reduction in revenue is one thing for the State, but the other part of it is that there is a direct connection between what is happening in the energy sector and the other connected industries in the economy. And that includes, of course, energy services which is a significant and

powerful element of the services industry in Trinidad and Tobago and a very important element in the services sector.

It also has implications for the manufacturing sector which becomes directly connected to the energy sector, and it also has implications for the non-energy sector outside of the manufacturing sector including construction, because what happens in energy has an impact—a fuel impact if it is doing well and a negative impact if it is not doing well—on the rest of the economy. [*Desk thumping*]

Now, when you look at this particular schedule related to the energy, it is really under the mining purposes and that is section IV:

“Machinery, equipment, materials for exploration and extraction of minerals, including natural gas.

Machinery, equipment and materials for mining, quarrying and finishing stone products.”

Well that is related to the quarrying industry. And:

“Machinery, equipment and materials for the liquefaction and transportation of natural gas.”

Now in the short presentation by the hon. Minister responsible for Trade and Industry, she framed her discussion, in talking about the continuity of vision, from the Eric Williams era, talking about Point Lisas and taking the point of view that what we have is a continuity of vision of the Government of the People’s National Movement at this time. And I have no problem with her articulating that position.

But I want to say something which this Government in the three debates that I have—this would be the third one that we have been involved in here. That is to say, the budget debate, the debate which asked for the increase of the allowable amount for the generation of debt which we did last week, and this particular debate in which only the Minister spoke, but the consistency of position is the same which is the recognition of continuity of PNM administrations and PNM vision.

2.45 p.m.

I want to say that there is a flaw in that thinking that undermines the national construct, and that undermines the notion of Trinidad and Tobago as a country. [*Desk thumping*] There is nothing wrong in articulating the point of view of continuity of PNM from 1956 to 1986 and connecting it to other PNM administrations that emerged after that. In other words, there is a reasonable case

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for arguing for consistency or showing the continuity between Williams, Chambers, Manning, and now Rowley, all hon. Prime Ministers of Trinidad and Tobago. But, it cannot be done without appreciation of the very real fact and the constitutional reality, and that recognition of the democratic process that there is such a thing as the continuity of Government. And I want to say that. It is a very important thing.

Because, you cannot cause a confusion between the continuity of party and the continuity of Government. And you would see for instance in this particular piece of resolution here before the House that there is continuity across Governments regardless of party administration in place. And it is important to understand this principle of continuity of Government. And I said that it became an issue, and in my view a flawed thinking on the part of the Members on the other side, consistently now in three debates. And I feel that it is important for the parties on the opposite bench to revise their thinking in the national interest. Because Governments come, Governments go, and there is need for accumulation of action, there is need for continuity of policy to some extent, and there is also need for freedom to alter or change that policy as Governments come, as Governments go.

And there are certain strategic imperatives of government policy, and we need to understand that. For instance, if your energy sector is the dominant economic sector, regardless of the price of oil or gas, and regardless of the price of attendant commodities, and regardless of the fact that production may be up or down, then that is a central piece of national policy, and that is not a partisan matter. That is a national concern. Because any error on the part of a party is going to cause a problem for the nation.

I want to say that there are certain strategic imperatives of government policy which we need to acknowledge and understand. And there needs to be some consistency of government policy and the policy framework. And, the development of a country, I want to say, is bigger than any prime-ministerial preference. It is bigger than any individual prejudices, it is certainly larger than any political party, it is broader than any notion of partisanship, and it is longer than the life of any administration. [*Desk thumping*]

And I want to say that because it is important for us to understand. Because, a lot of misinformation passes through this Parliament, a lot of misinformation passes through the intermediary, which is the media of Trinidad and Tobago, and a lot of misinformation passes through the platform, and again, through political supporters, but also through the media to the national population. And I want to

say that in the 10 years between 2000 and 2010, the normal expectation was that we would have had two Governments in 10 years, two five-year Governments. But, we did not have that. That was the reality of Trinidad and Tobago.

The normal expectation was that between 2000 and 2010, you would have an elected Government in 2000, you would have another elected Government in 2005, and so on, but we did not have that. What we had instead is that we had five Governments in that 10-year period. So that the cycle, the constitutional cycle of five years was broken. And, it is important to realize that. And when you look at the last 15-year history of Trinidad and Tobago you find that there are only two administrations which lasted their full five-year term. The first one was the Patrick Manning Government of 2002 to 2007, they lasted their full term; and then the second term was interrupted and elections had to be called earlier. But, he did have a full term. And the only other Government to have lasted five years for the entire period, and some were claiming on the platform that it was even more than five years, because it went beyond the date of the actual May ascension of office. But, the only other administration was the Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration. [*Desk thumping*]

Now, why am I saying this? I am not saying this for the politics. I started by talking that we should make the distinction between politics and policy, that we should make the distinction between party and Government, that we should make the distinction between continuity of parties and Government, and continuity of Government as part of the constitutional governance process. The reason why I am saying this is because policy was unstable between 2000 and 2010 for the very reason that you had so many changes in Government. In 2000 the Panday administration prepared a manifesto called the “Intelligent Nation”. But, by 2002 they were out of office. From 2002 the Patrick Manning administration operated on the basis of a high oil price, and that fuelled the economy and during that administration they focused on social welfare and government projects.

If you look at the period 2002 to 2008, which is the year before—the crisis came at the end of 2008/2009, which was a crisis of finance, of energy and real estate. When that crisis came, if you look at the period between 2002 and 2008, you will find an escalating size of the budget until the year 2008. [*Desk thumping*] And when the Minister of Finance said that in 2009 the budget was so and so and so and so, it was ignoring the fact that for the six years between 2002 and 2008, you had escalating budgets. Anyway, that is not my main point in this instance. The main point is that what you had was an economy that was basically focused on using the increased size of the budget for social welfare support, and that is

when the programmes having to deal with URP and CEPEP escalated in size, and in fact, CEPEP was introduced during that period. And, what you also had, besides the welfare support and the make-work programmes, is that you had an emphasis on government projects.

Now, Vision 2020 did not emerge until Prime Minister Manning's second term. And, by the time he had completed Vision 2020 he had demitted office in 2010. So, he never got the chance to implement 2020. So that what I want to say is that between 2000 and 2010, the gap between articulated policy positions and action on the ground was very wide indeed. There was a big, big gap. And there was a little alignment between policy and implementation or execution. In 2010 when we won the mandate on the basis of a prosperity-for-all manifesto, that was based on seven pillars that were very, very clearly articulated. This became the framework for Government, at the time, and out of that a policy document of the Government, medium-term policy framework was laid in Parliament together with the budget papers in September 2011.

Now, that medium-term framework articulated five priorities: it was crime containment and human security; poverty eradication and human development; health and hospitals; food security and sustainability, and jobs growth competitiveness diversification, entrepreneurship and innovation. And all the budgets, from 2011, were aligned to those priorities, and you can see it in the allocation of funds for education, higher education and the various social welfare areas, and clearly this was a period in which the social infrastructure received priority attention in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Now, we achieved significant success in all of these areas. We certainly reduced the amount of crime, although it remained at that time something that was not acceptable to us. We significantly and positively addressed the issue of social services and human development. This was an extreme expansion period, [*Desk thumping*] the health and hospitals you can see from preventative health measures to the construction of hospitals, and in terms of growth and the economy and so on, we brought unemployment down. That was the era in which we articulated the position for the growth poles, the industrial parks, all of these things, and this was part of our development policy.

Now, this was a very important period of policy formulation in the country. Because, it was a period in which we did the spatial development strategy in which people like Mc Kenzie and the Arthur Lok Jack Graduate School, and the trade unit at the University of the West Indies helped us to flesh out the economic aspects of the growth-pole thinking. We were committed through the spatial

policy to decentralization, and we built on what your Government, in the period before 2010 had done in terms of the regional plans prepared for the country. We focused on things like broadband, we identified seven areas for diversification, we targeted infrastructure development, we targeted human development and education, and, of course, we focused on the stimulation of entrepreneurship and innovation.

But, we did not forget energy. And I want to get into that. And if you think that that period was a period that should be ignored, I want to tell you something. I want to give you the numbers: in 2010 when we came in inflation was 10.5 per cent, in 2014 inflation was 5.7 per cent, [*Desk thumping*] in 2010 food inflation was 22.1 per cent, in 2014 food inflation was 10 per cent—[*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, could you quote where you are getting your statistics from, please?

Dr. B. Tewarie: These statistics, the 10 per cent inflation source is the Central Statistical Office. The food inflation source is the CSO, and I was going to quote—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: What source?

Dr. B. Tewarie: I can mention the source as I mention the numbers, if you wish.

3.00 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No problem, proceed.

Dr. B. Tewarie: The unemployment rate in 2010, CSO figures was 5.9. In 2014, 3.7 [*Desk thumping*]. The real GDP growth in 2010 was minus 0.1 and in 2009 it was minus 4.4. In 2014 it was 0.9.

And so, when you look—that is CSO figures—when you look at it and you take all around the issues, you begin to see that, in fact, policies had made a difference in the quality of life of people of Trinidad and Tobago, citizens of this country. [*Desk thumping*] And the reason I do that is because as I said on the last occasion, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I spoke here, that a narrative that is being constructive that is meant to deceive and to mask the truth. [*Desk thumping*] So let us talk about the energy sector which is the main focus of this particular resolution that the Minister presented, and which is the mainstay of our national economy.

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The Minister referred to the fact, for instance, that now the number of barrels of oil at 81,000 is at the lowest level and she also gave a figure for gas which she is indicating—but everything depends on context. And you cannot just present numbers like that and present facts and call it facts. You have to present the context.

So let us, Mr. Deputy Speaker, look at the context. In 2010 oil production had entered its fifth year of energy decline, in 2010. It had been declining steadily from the year 2005. In 2005 oil production was 145,000 barrels. In 2010 it was 95,000, a little more than that. Between 2005 and 2010 there were no new exploration or production contracts in the energy sector, none. I want to make that clear.

In the years 2005, and if I am wrong I ask the Minister of Trade and Industry and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries to correct me. All right? There were no new production or exploration contracts in the years 2005 to 2010. In fact, there was one deep-sea exploration investor that was here in Trinidad discussing with the then Government during that period, but something happened, I do not know what the facts are, and that investor packed up and left.

Between 2005 and 2010 those were the major oil production decline years. And those were also the years in which you had a number of ill-conceived projects, maybe well-intended, but ill-conceived. These were projects like the gas to liquid project at Petrotrin and that cost the taxpayers \$3 billion. [*Desk thumping*] There was also the gasoline optimization project at Petrotrin and that cost the taxpayers \$10 billion. [*Desk thumping*]

In 2010, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the upstream sector was dormant. Trinmar was involved in no drilling whatsoever. And in terms of working rigs there was one working rig offshore; one. BP and BG, the largest multinationals at the time in Trinidad and Tobago were not contemplating any new investment. This situation changed only when this Government, the Government of which I was part of over the last four years and which had been in office for five years, when that Government, the People's Partnership Government led by the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, when they changed the fiscal regime, [*Desk thumping*] and that is when investment began and drilling commenced.

These are facts which I do not think can be refuted. And I hope in the response, the response will not be to make allegations and accusations of all kinds, but to deal with the fact of whether there was drilling before 2005 to 2010, whether there was investment of any significance. I think I remember the

significance, I think I remember the number for the year 2010 in terms of investment in the energy sector being just under US \$500 million at the time.

And when this fiscal regime was changed between 2011 and 2012, thereabout, we did it. What happened after that was that we were able to have five competitive bid rounds, [*Desk thumping*] and these took place in 2012, 2013, 2014. During that same period up to 2014, we signed 21 production sharing contracts/exploration licences, 21 of them. [*Desk thumping*] We licensed nine blocks in deep water. [*Desk thumping*] And when drilling in deep water begins in mid next year, 2016, it will be because of what the People's Partnership Government did [*Desk thumping*] when we were in Government.

It is important to understand these facts in the face of the misinformation that passes for information in this country. And anything that I am saying here can be checked. Any point that I am making here can be verified by the historical fact. And I want to say that it is the fiscal regime which we changed between 2011 and 2012 that led to all the results that are going to yield any future finds in Trinidad and Tobago through drilling and exploration. And that nothing was done between 2005 and 2010. [*Desk thumping*]

Now that does not mean they did not run the Government when they were in office. That does not mean that they did not manage the economy, but what it said very clearly was that there was no thinking focused on planning a regime that had to do with the future energy resources of Trinidad and Tobago and the investment trajectory that was necessary and the terms and conditions for making that possible between 2005 and 2010. [*Desk thumping*]

Now BHP concluded during our tenure and under our watch the largest seismic survey by an international company in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] During the period 2011 to 2014 there were five major hydrocarbon discoveries which took place during our term and all of these will yield fruit later. That is the nature of the business. [*Desk thumping*] BP invested US \$2.1 billion or TT \$15 billion in the Juniper project which is the largest capital investment in upstream that Trinidad and Tobago has ever seen. [*Desk thumping*] And I had cause to say this—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, you have 10 more minutes of your speaking time.

Dr. B. Tewarie: I had cause to say this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you very much. If you would alert me two minutes before, I would be grateful, before I conclude. Yes, I had cause to say this in the budget but I will say it again because

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it is very important, which is that, if you think this Juniper investment and the continued exploration by BP is something ordinary, I would like Members of this august Chamber to do two things, go on the BP website and find out where else they are involved in the world on exploration of this magnitude. Find out what are the projects they closed, in what countries while continuing to focus on Juniper. And that will give you an idea of how Trinidad and Tobago features in the context even of declining conditions in the energy sector in terms of the thinking of a major multinational such as BP.

The other thing that I would like you to do is not BP alone, but go into the websites of the countries in their energy sector, all over the world and look and see where exploration is taking place, and you will begin to see that they are very few and far between. And what made this possible, what made Juniper possible were the fiscal adjustments that we made to make this investment and long-term, sustained commitment possible for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, energy investment in 2012, 2013 and 2014 was on average, US \$1.5 billion annually, the equivalent of about TT \$10 billion annually, 2012, 2013 and 2014. During this period we also pressed on an advanced negotiations on Loran-Manatee cross-border gas field. And we got it to a point now, and I want to advise the hon. Minister and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, as well, that this is something that should be pursued very, very, intensely. It needs to be brought to fruition. We need to bring that gas to NGC, and it takes a certain amount—[*Interruption*—you need to take that gas to NGC, it is very important. We need to process that.

Hon. Gopee-Scoon: I said beautiful. Not true? [*Laughter*]

Dr. B. Tewarie: Negotiations on that.

The other thing I want to say before I close, I may not have time to say everything else, but I want to say the Mitsubishi/Massy/NGC project which is US \$987 million project, gas to methanol, methanol to DME, methanol to manufacturing clusters, that is a project that should not be chased away on the premise that we do not have the gas to supply it. That is long-time thinking. And I want to say that this is something that needs to be pursued. It is a very important project. One of the issues, for instance, based on the revelations from the Central Bank is the extent to which the Massy Group consumes foreign exchange. But, a project like this will bring them into a situation in which they can be a foreign exchange earner, perhaps not net, but certainly an earner to supplement their demand for foreign exchange and more than that get them into manufacturing

which is linked to exports which changes the entire paradigm of restructuring of the Massy Group. So this is a project which should be pursued.

3.15 p.m.

Now, for production in the energy sector—and this is an important point—to be up in 2015—you say it is down now—decisions would have had to be taken for exploration and production in 2005, 2006, 2007 and for the latest, 2008. And the reason the production is down now is because of decisions not taken between 2005 and 2010. I want to make that absolutely clear.

The decisions that we took in 2012, 2013 and 2014 will begin to yield fruit from 2019. Properly pursued and brought to conclusion, the Loran-Manatee field can bear fruit in 2017, depending on how you manage it—2018, possibly. So we have a situation in which there was very little planning in the energy sector between 2002 and 2010, and I want to say that the reason we are in this position, in terms of the production side, is because of decisions not taken and action not taken, 2005 to 2010. And the reason we are going to go beyond the limited perspective of the Ryder Scott Report of seven years is because of decisions taken between 2011 and 2014 by our Government when we were in office. [*Desk thumping*]

I will close at this point, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have a lot more to say but I think I have said enough. I, basically, want to say that the energy sector is very important. These incentives that are being offered are very important in terms of exemptions. We want to continue to see the energy sector grow. We want to see the fruits of our decisions, from fiscal to investment, bear fruit for the future of the country, regardless of who is the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Because the people of Trinidad and Tobago—it is why the people go to an election and present a government to take office, and therefore it is the people that we must focus on in terms of anything that we are doing in the energy sector or elsewhere.

My position, very clearly, is that we have no objection at all to the provisions brought before this honourable House by the Minister of Trade and Industry. It is something that we did in our time; it is something that preceded us; it is something we should do now because it is good for the country, but we must get the facts right and we must get the narrative straight and we must be straightforward to the country about what has happened, what is happening and what is going to happen. It is very important to be transparent in that way.

And I simply want to close—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, you have two minutes.

Dr. B. Tewarie: Yes. I would close before that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I simply want to say that this is a good measure. We have no objection, and I hope—I trust—that the Minister, in her winding-up, will focus on the Motion and not politicize what is essentially a good Motion.

Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Minister, Member of Parliament for La Brea. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Hon. Nicole Olivierre): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I thank you for the opportunity to speak on this Motion, but before I begin my contribution I would certainly like to address some of the comments from the last speaker, the Member for Caroni Central. I note in his last statement he said that it is a good Motion, that they have no objections to this Motion. These are good measures. I wish he would have just started his contribution that way and ended it, instead of taking us all along on a garden path with some bits of misinformation. [*Crosstalk*] Now, you have to forgive me, I am new to this House so I understand that is the way things are done. But I would like to address some of the issues that he raised.

He indicated that during our prior term in office nothing was done, and he gave a lot of data to support his so-called facts. It is interesting that a lot of the data he gave, particularly some 2014 data, was information from the Central Statistical Office. Now, as the Minister responsible for the CSO in the most recent period, it is interesting to note that he made sure that the CSO did not even have a home to operate from.

Hon. Members: True. [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. N. Olivierre: So I find it interesting that he is now pointing to data from 2014 from the same CSO—[*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, Members. The first Member had the opportunity to contribute in silence, and let us continue with the second Member, please. Please let the Member proceed in silence, please. Proceed, Madam Minister.

Hon. N. Olivierre: So I move on. He also spoke about lack of initiatives that we would have done in our time and he touted some of the things that they did. But I seem to recall that prior to our departure from office in 2010, the

Government of Trinidad and Tobago had entered into an agreement with a small company called Cheniere—well, back then a small company called Cheniere Energy, which had a somewhat developing technology at the time, something called shale gas that they were interested in, which the Government of Trinidad and Tobago had recognized. We saw some future development in the shale gas and we had engaged into a memorandum of understanding with Cheniere Energy to develop that project. But, sadly, we unfortunately went out of office and the new Government which came in, in 2010, effectively killed that project. They did not see any value in it and they killed that project. [*Crosstalk*]

If you wish to go on line and research who Cheniere Energy is, you would see that they are, in fact, one of the largest producers of shale gas. Where could we have been if that project had not been killed by the last Government? And I am also reminded from my colleagues about another initiative which was well on the way in 2010 when we demitted office. Again, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago had several projects in the burgeoning frontier for the hydrocarbon industry which is on the African continent. We were well on the way to finalizing some agreements with Ghana, but then, again, we demitted office. And where are these projects today?

I also want to indicate, the Member for Caroni Central would have indicated that we did nothing in our prior period, but if you look at the data on the Central Bank website you would know that the same Government you accuse of doing nothing, would have successfully reduced our debt to GDP ratio to a low of 13.8 per cent in 2008, [*Desk thumping*] down from a high of 65 per cent. So it really is unfortunate that the Member for Caroni Central [*Desk thumping*] would tend to paint us with not having had any economic policy in place.

So now that I have addressed some of those slightly less than accurate facts that were presented by the Member for Caroni Central, I would like to continue with my contribution.

Dr. Tewarie: Name one that I made. [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. N. Olivierre: Now, there is no secret—there is no disagreement that the energy sector holds pride of place in the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. This is exemplified by the fact that the sector is an attractive employer as well as a significant supplier of foreign exchange to the country. The Member for Caroni Central would have gone on and on about that in his contribution. So the Trinidad and Tobago energy sector has, over the years, attracted a number of major international oil companies which continue to play an integral role in the growth

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and development of the country. Their engagements have transcended beyond just exploration and production of oil and gas, to encompass all aspects of our culture and traditions in keeping with their CSR as good corporate citizens.

The current reality is that we are now in an environment of low energy prices in the international marketplace. The corresponding reality of that is that as a small player in the marketplace, we are in no position to influence the price at which either crude oil or natural gas is traded. In economic jargon, we are, in fact, price-takers, and our production levels would have to increase astronomically from where they are today before we could have any impact at all on global prices.

Benchmark prices of crude are now below \$40 a barrel. If you look at current prices today, WTI has dropped to \$36.36. From Monday this week it fell below the \$40 margin. We have a forecast 2016 gas price of \$50.79. The forecast for December currently is at \$42, with a first quarter forecast at \$45.5.

Now, these benchmark prices represent the highest quality traded in the market and, unfortunately, not all crudes produced locally do fetch those prices. It stands to reason, therefore, that based on the current trends, the weighted average price of crude with which we produce will be less than the international prices quoted in the media. So one sobering aspect of this situation is we have been there before and we have weathered these types of storms in the past.

The world is now faced with an over-production of crude oil. Predictions by energy analysts as to when the market conditions might change are not encouraging. The analysts, as well as the laymen, seem to be in agreement that the current over-production has been seen in the context of a turf war where the OPEC producers are insisting on maintaining their production to maintain their market share. So in such an environment it is imperative that Trinidad and Tobago take all necessary steps to support our energy industry and put systems in place to allow us to survive and compete in the global context.

The US EIA notes that the OPEC members have indicated that they should continue to closely monitor developments in the coming months. This indicates that OPEC producers like Saudi Arabia are continuing their policy of defending their market share. OPEC production averaged 31.4 million barrels per day in November last year, 1.3 million barrels per day higher than the corresponding period last year, and increased crude oil production in Saudi Arabia and Iraq being the main drivers for OPEC's increased production.

Compared with this, we have low production locally with a tendency to fall even lower if action is not taken to address this trend. So to stem this potential negative development it is necessary that both the operators and the regulators act in tandem to put requisite systems in place, and this is precisely why we are here today.

Crude oil production would have averaged 81,000 barrels per day over the last few years or so, with last year's production averaging 79,000. Natural gas is currently being produced at a rate of 3.8 bcf per day, when we have a demand for as much as 4.2 bcf per day. So there is a shortfall that we are currently faced with. We cannot sustain an industry at this rate and the only way we can replace our reserves to increase production is by drilling.

The exploration and production costs in the oil and gas sector are quite high. The Member for Caroni Central spoke about the \$2.1 billion BP will have to expend on its Juniper project. Offshore rigs currently operate at upwards of US \$360,000 per day. Pipeline construction costs are also up in the—like NGC would have constructed offshore pipelines in 2012 at \$3.4 billion, onshore pipelines at \$36 million. So we see the high costs that are involved in the oil and gas exploration. And in a low production—in a low-price scenario—this gives us reasonable justification to support or to maintain the exemption of import duties under section 6 of the Customs Act, Chap. 78:01.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is important to note that offshore petroleum and exploration operations were included in the legislative provisions of section 56 of the Customs Act, Chap. 78:01, 1970. This current resolution that we are debating today to allow exemptions from import duties for persons involved in approved industry and offshore exploration and production operations is due to expire December 31, 2015.

Now, our research has shown that seven of the energy companies operating have benefited from incentives over the period 2011—2015. Now, we need to be mindful that most of these companies operate globally, and Trinidad and Tobago is in direct competition for their investment budgets.

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In drawing up their work plans and formulating their budgets, the locally operating companies would have taken into consideration these provisions contained in this specific piece of legislation and weigh them against what is offered in other jurisdictions. So this legislation, in fact, forms part of our enabling environment and it would be downright counterproductive of us to

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remove any such incentives, particularly at a time when all companies are trying to reduce their cost and we are asking them to increase their operations.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, another factor we need to consider is that these companies are engaged in ongoing operations and, in fact, some of them have already applied for continuation of their licence for the next period.

I would like to bring to the attention of this honourable House some of the work programmes that are intended to be done in the 2016/2017 period under which these exemptions would apply. In the case of BG, there is Starfish infill work to be done; there is Dolphin extension—there is a drilling campaign for the Dolphin extension platform and the Grenidia development well and compression are scheduled to be sanctioned between 2017/2018 period. There is also some workover work that is to be undertaken on the Carapal Ridge No. 1 well.

In the Trinity Galeota Field there is a forecast for 10 recompletion workovers to be done; EOG Resources, they plan to start compression on the Toucan platform by the second quarter of 2016, an estimated cost of US \$13 million, with five wells going on to compression. The intention is to recover some 18 bcf of natural gas; there is also the installation of the Sercan platform in the east Manzanilla joint venture area and the drilling of five wells within the Sercan Field which is expected to take place during the second half of 2016; and there is one exploration well which EOG proposes to drill in the south-west of the UA block. Petrotrin/Trinmar operations plans to drill three wells as well in 2016, and they have at least 20 workovers planned during the period, depending on the availability of their funds.

BPTT, Mr. Deputy Speaker, has a number of rigs which they will be currently using on the existing drilling campaign. A total of nine wells are expected to be drilled, and the company plans to undertake four workovers in 2016, which will involve one well in the Cassia Field and three wells in Amherstia Field. BHP Billiton in their gas development, they proposed three subsea wells to be drilled with first gas expected by September 2016. This project is expected to maximize oil recovery from the Angostura Field as well.

In the area of foreign direct investment, the exploration and production segment of the local energy sector, which includes the seismic programmes and exploration and development drilling, contributes significantly to foreign direct investment. I would have already alluded to some of the cost involved. Seismic surveys can range anywhere from US \$200 million to US \$500 million, depending on the area covered.

So based on our mid-year 2015 forecast received by the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, total capital investment by foreign and local companies in the energy sector is projected at over \$3 billion a year in 2015 and 2016. Investment schedules show that this projected expenditure upstream will count for 81 per cent and 92 per cent in 2015 and 2016, respectively, with the main drivers being bpTT, BG, BHP Billiton and Petrotrin.

It is clear that the offshore exploration and production operations of the local energy sector makes a significant contribution to business activity and revenue generation in Trinidad and Tobago. I believe, from all you have heard so far, you can see it clearly demonstrated, the level of operations by the major international companies that are ongoing and planned and the level of investment that continues to be attracted to the subsector.

Companies with major contribution to the generation of FDI also have significant investment in the local offshore environment. It is to be noted that exemption of import duties, under section 56 of the Customs Act, Chap. 78:01, specifically targets offshore petroleum exploration and production operations.

So I want to draw back again on the theme that ran through the contribution of the Member for Caroni Central. He spoke repeatedly about the continuity of government and he made constant reference to the strategic imperative of policy continuation, and based on his assertion that this is a good measure and they have no objections to this, I really see in this regard that we can see a clear justification for the continuation of this exemption and, as such, how much more time do we want to spend on debating this Motion, when clearly there is common understanding on both sides that this is in fact in the best interest of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Chaguanas East.

Mr. Fazal Karim (*Chaguanas East*): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Let me thank you for allowing me to join the debate on this Motion, particularly with respect to the exemption of certain goods from import duties of Customs as it relates to the petroleum sector. Mr. Deputy Speaker, before I go into my short contribution, I would just like to advise and to respond to the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries with respect to the Cheniere project. Cheniere, the one that you spoke about, Member for La Brea, I wish to advise that Cheniere is not a producer of shale gas. [*Desk thumping*] They are building—and let me set the records right, in terms of Cheniere—an LNG plant to use shale gas. [*Desk thumping*] The project the Minister refers to was a project by Cheniere to

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import LNG. Let me just conclude this aspect of Cheniere to say that Cheniere was set up to import LNG into the US, but after shale was developed they converted the project to export LNG. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I join with my colleague, the Member for Caroni Central, in saying that we support substantially this Motion but there are a few things that we would like to bring to the notice of the Government. Before I again continue into some of the things I want to make reference to, I will be focusing more so on the human capital development because it is my view that you must not decimate the factors of production. They are all very important that lend to production and productivity. [*Desk thumping*] And while equipment might be one and machinery might be a next one, that might constitute capital, but unless you have the requisite labour, talent, skills and competences you are going to have a declining sector. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to thank the hon. Minister, Member for La Brea, for recognizing the sterling work of the Government during the last regime of 2011 [*Desk thumping*] to 2014 when she enumerated, and I just quickly wrote down the 2016/2017 work programme, all of which and many of those already in train. All of these projects, and the results were because of the exploration that took place during the bid rounds that we had between 2011 and 2014, the fruits of which we are seeing now. [*Desk thumping*] So we thank the hon. Member for La Brea, hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, for identifying and recognizing the substantial work that was done.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I did indicate to you that I wanted to make a few comments with respect to the human capital resources, the development. As I indicated before, if you look at land, labour and capital—of course, the enterprise is very important—the whole aspect of managing these resources is very important. My colleague, the Member for Caroni Central, you would have heard him enumerate a lot of unfortunate experiences with respect to management and leadership in the energy sector of the current Government and past administrations.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you want to look at wastage, all you have to do is drive along the highway and turn to the right at the entrance of Petrotrin and you will see one other example in addition to which he quoted, apart from the World GTL project. [*Desk thumping*] What you will see there is scrap iron and concrete, hundreds of millions of dollars.

I just want to remind all of us, as we speak about productivity, it might be useful for us to refer to a book entitled, *People and Productivity* by Robert Sutermeister, and that—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Rambachan: 1973.

Mr. F. Karim: Dr. Rambachan is reminding me when we used that book in the diploma in management studies, in which he taught marketing and organizational behaviour. I want to also suggest that for those who are interested in reading about the issues of workforce, and today we are talking about building human capacity and talent, Harvard University refers to “talentism” as the new capitalism, but I also want to recommend another reading for many of our friends. It is called *The Future of Work is Already Here* by Prof. Lynda Gratton of the London Business School.

I could go on and on, but I think the point I want to make to connect to the petroleum sector is that we cannot only come to this honourable House and boast and pay lip service to the energy sector, to the petroleum economy. You could have read Dudley Seers for many years, the *Open Petroleum Economy*; you could have read George Beckford on *Persistent Poverty*; you could have read Gervernon Jefferson. But one of the things that you must not do, and you must read, is how to open a drilling school, [*Desk thumping*] a drilling academy. How to open a drilling academy under the Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration in 2013 at Usine Ste Madeleine. And since you raised Ste Madeleine [*Desk thumping*]—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member! Member—

Mr. F. Karim: Sorry

Mr. Deputy Speaker:—I am getting the impression that you are not addressing—[*Interruption*]

Mr. F. Karim: Oh, sorry, sorry.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am getting that feeling.

Mr. F. Karim: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will never do such a thing. You are always in my view. [*Laughter*] The Member for La Brea just indicated about Usine Ste Madeleine and she must be proud about that location. I want to tell you that we are proud of that location because what the PNM closed down, from the ashes we rose as a phoenix and we opened. [*Desk thumping*] We reopened and let me tell you what I am talking about, Caroni (1975) Limited.

Mr. Al-Rawi: You want me to reread Anand Ramlogan for you again?

Mr. F. Karim: Caroni (1975) Limited—My very good friend and I went to the same school, the alma mater of Presentation, San Fernando, so I would allow him to speak.

Dr. Rowley: You all went to the same school?

Mr. F. Karim: Same school.

Dr. Rowley: And you “ain’t” learn nothing yet?

Mr. F. Karim: Well no, I am now teaching some more on the other side. You notice all the books as I am calling, Mr. Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, let us keep focus, please.

Mr. F. Karim:—they are writing down the books and I am getting no commission for that. Let me make it very clear.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was making the point about Caroni (1975) Limited which was closed down by the PNM administration. I want to tell you something, they closed down Usine Ste Madeleine, we reopened it. The drilling academy is there; the NESC Technology Centre is there; Woodford Lodge in Chaguanas closed down; the state of the art—[*Desk thumping*]; at Couva, Point Lisas, the NESC Centre is there.

So I want to suggest to our friends and particularly my colleague, the Minister of Trade and Industry, and also the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries—and I know the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries is very keenly interested in the development of our young people. And, in fact, I am also proud to say that the constituency of La Brea is the only one that has two NESC facilities. [*Desk thumping*]

We do not discriminate [*Interruption*] and we are going to ensure as much as possible that we will assist as far as possible.

3.45 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to read for the records with respect to human capital development, what we have done with respect to the energy sector and the drilling school. Hon. Minister did make mention of the fact, and correctly so, that there is much interest in our energy industry from the African continent. Absolutely correct. We would have had for the first time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, earning revenue in a school that was not even one year old but trying to repay

itself by acquiring students and foreign exchange from Nigeria. [*Desk thumping*] We had interest from Uganda—[*Interruption*] Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is my friend. We also had interest from many other countries on the African continent. Right here on our doorsteps, you would see that the Canadian company, in Guyana, is drilling for oil. Guyana was also interested in what we were doing at the drilling academy; Suriname preparing also for oil exploration.

As a matter of fact, a lot of people are saying that Guyana is now into oil exploration. I remember when I did geography with my friend—he would have done that as well too, the same college. There was a book written by John Macpherson. It was called *Caribbean Lands*. And in that book, with respect to the country Guyana, we would have read since that time that Shell had drilled for oil on the Essequibo Coast to be exact in terms of Anna Regina. So we have a great potential here to explore market opportunities.

Trinidad and Tobago, you can find a citizen of this country in any of the major oilfields in the world. You talk about Saudi Aramco, they are there; you talk about Kuwait, they are there. We have been exporting talent for a long time, and even though we are facing volatile prices now, the fact is that we can still utilize the talent base of the country, not only to attract persons to come here, but for us to export that talent and to train others in their respective locations. When we trained and when we opened the drilling school—I would give you the testimonies of people who would have commended that idea—this country would have been in oil exploration for over 100 years and, to a lesser extent, in gas, and we never saw it fit to build that capacity. [*Desk thumping*]

You know what was happening, as Minister of Tertiary Education, I launched a programme with the NGC and with the NESC and with the Point Lisas Industrial Estate—much of which have been spoken about today—and that programme is called the PLIAP, the Point Lisas Industrial Apprenticeship Programme, where we have already started to train 700 technicians in seven years. As we spoke about and we listened to the trade school concept, we listened to apprenticeships, you would have heard in the past, the trade schools of Texaco, of Caroni, of T&TEC. A lot of the graduates of those trade schools, and even WR Grace, which was called FedChem at the time, would have been persons who contributed to the development of the Point Lisas Industrial Estate.

So that in terms of the Motion before us, I am proposing as well that it is not only the aspect of the removal of Customs duties and import duties, it has to be—how do we maximize and utilize the high-tech equipment and inventory that we are going to be getting to ensure that we have the requisite skills and talent to

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operate and to maintain that kind of equipment? If you do not have that, what you will have is a wasted asset, you will have under-capacity utilization and what you will really have is, in a sense, underemployment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are now training riggers, tool pushers, electricians and drillers, never before in the history of this country. [*Desk thumping*] Many persons have been clamouring for the advent of such an institution to ensure that we have the wherewithal to transfer the learnings and the technology. We talk about import substitution, we talk about the transfer of technology, we talk about multinational corporations, but a lot of that has been spoken of but not much has been done to the greatest extent.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me just give you another example before I get to the testimonials for the drilling school. In Trinidad and Tobago, like in other parts of the world, we are facing an ageing population. The whole aspect of gerontology is very much uppermost on the minds of many persons who have to ensure that their business strategies are very competitive. I had brought a Note to the Cabinet, which was approved but, unfortunately, it could not be implemented, where we would have taken the talent of those persons who are retiring and going home, but not at the expense of those who are being trained and graduating to enter the job market, which we call RRW or Retirees Returning to Work. [*Desk thumping*] It is easy for people to condescend on those who are retiring, to say it is time for you to go home, you have served your time; you are going to take the job of a young person.

I want to make it abundantly clear, that was never the intention and it is still not my intention even if I have the opportunity to implement such a programme. It was to identify, too, for example, through CWRD, not only the CSO, the CWRD, the Centre for Workforce Research and Development, to ensure that we have current labour market information and that is where we are going. And once you would have established the shortages, the skills deficiency—there is a difference between the skills shortage and the skills gap. One measures numeric value, the other measures deficiency in competence. That is what we are about, ensuring that people do not simply go home and waste all the talent that they have, but we could bring them back to mentor, to assist our young students, our young graduates, many of whom were coming out of the university.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, my father will always joke with me, not that I was an engineer. I remember him saying—I know some of my colleagues are engineers. He used to work at Caroni Limited as a sugar worker and he would say, “Boy, allyuh fellas, who come from university and you are called engineer, when you

come back to Caroni, I call them ‘enginefar’”, because they have to understand the rudiments of work, and that is what the RRW was about as well. The RRW was to ensure the transfer of this learning, of this attitude, of the aptitudes, because one must know, you must learn how to learn, you must learn how to live, you must learn how to love, you must learn how to lead and you must learn how to leave a legacy. [*Desk thumping*] For some people—[*Interruption*]

Maj. Gen. Dillon: Stephen Covey.

Mr. F. Karim: Stephen Covey. And my friend, Minister of National Security, we would have shared this conversation many times. In fact, as the Minister of National Security indicated, I want to also make another statement that will concretize what we would have been both exposed to, Stephen Covey. And you know, we come and we pay lip service—I am saying that again, because Covey also said, in his celebrated treatise *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*—or you can read it as well in *Principle-Centered Leadership*. He said in that, the things that are closest to you or to us, we take most for granted, to which I have added without his permission—God bless his soul, he has passed on—until something happens and it is too late.

You have to be careful how you fire people; how you dismiss people, how you lay them off. [*Interruption*] You have to be careful because you are destroying lives and I want to make sure—[*Desk thumping*] I want to ask you to be very careful because I will tell you something, when you fire people, you do not only destroy a human being, you destroy a family, you destroy a village, you destroy a community, but you have to be very careful. [*Desk thumping*] So with respect to the petroleum sector, I want to ask us to be very careful in how we embrace the human capital development in the energy sector and therefore, we are proud to say, we would have done as well our best.

I want to show you another example of a project that we took. Many people come here and they pontificate and they talk about what we would have done, I want to tell you what we have also done. There was a project that I launched in terms of those persons who would have had skills and competence but no certification. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will know as a man who lived in the St. Augustine area that there is a difference between education and schooling; there is a difference between certification and qualification. Therefore, there are many persons in our society, many of whom are in the energy sector who would have come up the ranks, who would have acquired those skills and competence by being trainees or apprentices and are now very superior in their job skills and their

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titles. In fact, many of them might be called engineers and plant managers but they did not have anything to do with a degree in that. And what we were doing, we had established what was called the Workforce Assessment Centres. I want to ask the hon. Member for La Brea as well to consider that very carefully and should you require any assistance, I will be happy to extend my advice too.

Let me tell you what it is. You develop national occupational standards of competence. That is, for a particular occupation, you will say that these are the competences that you are expected to perform to and therefore, in terms of the Motion before us, we have to ensure, as I keep reminding us, it is not only about the exemption of duties on Customs and bringing in that equipment, you must have the requisite trained and competent staff. [*Desk thumping*] I am repeating that. And therefore, how do you get that? You can also get that, by persons, while they work, they learn.

Many people will talk about education and training being lifelong and life-wide and all of that, very good theory, but what do you do to measure, to monitor, to evaluate the competence of people? What you do is you develop the standards and you take them to a Workforce Assessment Centre, very much like what you see in Angie's List on cable, where you take those persons—and we have the ability in Trinidad and Tobago because Trinidad and Tobago is foremost among the energy-producing countries in the world, and you develop the standards and you assess those employees and those workers on the plant, at the NGC, at Petrotrin, wherever they are in the private sector, and you certify them. You would have lifted their self-esteem.

But very importantly, at a time when we have declining oil prices and the potential for lay-offs, because of situations like that, we must be able to assess these people to certify them and to assist them with another E, not only entrepreneurship. I call that category the N-E-E-T. Those who belong to the NEET—what is NEET? Those who are Neither in Education, Employment or Training.

You see, I told you just now with respect to Stephen Covey, sometimes you go to people—Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am sure that would have happened to you. You go to a place where someone has passed on and you say the correct thing. You say, “I am here to extend my condolences to you, I know how you feel”. I want to tell you something, you really do not know that until you experience it; you do not know it. You are saying what is politically correct but you do not know it, I can tell you from my experience.

And that is why I am coming back, when some of my colleagues were warring on the next side about job lay-offs, those who have money, your parents and grandparents will tell you, you have friends; when you do not have money, nobody knows you. And therefore, I am using another cliché that sometimes there is comfort and solace when other people fire people, heartlessly we are doing so, and I will tell you the line and the phrase. Sometimes it is not what you do to them, it is what you do for them because greater and better opportunities might be in store that Almighty God has for you.

4.00 p.m.

Look where you are, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I commend you and I congratulate you. [*Desk thumping*] “You doh have to go to no assessment” and evaluation again. You are proving your worth right here. We are assessing you. We can certify you after, but I can tell you, the Member for La Brea will be very, I am sure—concerned—because there are a lot of projects in the energy sector there, and we have heard, year after year, about the level of depression of employment in La Brea.

I want to also say that while we want to ensure that there is development in a constituency or a few, there must be development across the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

I want to tell you, what we have done as well. We have expanded the programmes in UTT—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, just hold a second, please. I am hearing some pockets of—I am hearing some small pockets of discussions. Kindly, please, let us maintain the silence.

Mr. F. Karim: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you. It must have been with respect to the things I am saying that is causing the deliberations. [*Laughter*] Maybe they are also discussing the text and the books. [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

I have good friends on the other side. I want to tell you that what we are saying here is in the national interest. [*Desk thumping*] Whenever I make my comments and my suggestions, I am doing so with respect to the national interest. I want to tell you, you see what you would have inherited at the University of Trinidad and Tobago. You see what we have left at the UTT. We have taken it and improved it.

I remember a Member on this side, I was Minister on that side, and somebody was saying after I was finished talking about the GATE Programme, the person

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who is no longer on your bench said, “ah like what you do with UTT. Da’is we university. Ah say: I like what I doing with it too; it is the national university of the people of Trinidad and Tobago”.

That is why we developed as well the aviation campus in addition to the maritime campus that my colleague, the Minister of National Security, I know he would have visited, and must have been impressed with what he saw as well. In addition to that, we had the programmes at the University of the West Indies, in petroleum geosciences. We had the MIC, Institute of Technology, which was chaired by my colleague, the Member of Parliament for Pointe-a-Pierre, Mr. David Lee, as chairman. I indicated as well the energy institute which we would have formed.

I did mention to you that I wanted to substantiate the decision to establish the Drilling Academy in Trinidad and Tobago. I want to—I know you will ask the source. I will give it in advance. It is a *Newsday* article written by Cecily Asson, Saturday, August 18, 2012. The article starts like this in the newspaper:

“There is a huge demand internationally for Trinidad and Tobago nationals in the field of oil and gas drilling.

This was revealed yesterday by Managing Director of Tucker Energy Services Limited, Roger Packer. Packer who is also the President of the Energy Chamber was addressing a function yesterday at the NESC Skills and Technology Centre at Point Lisas in Couva to welcome a second batch of Nigerian students, who are enrolled in a six-month skills training programme at the recently established NESC Drilling School in Ste Madeleine.”

I, too, want to also indicate that we were in discussions with the Nigerian Government, hon. Minister, and through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to establish a facility in Nigeria and it might be worth considering, because we wanted to have a nucleus, a point from which we could service the other African nations. I am sure we will be able to pass on that information to you. So we were taking NESC and—I had coined the name of the institute already, Mr. Deputy Speaker, hon. Minister, and I called it Tringeria; Trinidad and Tobago and Nigeria.

Hon. Member: “I like de sound of dat.”

Mr. F. Karim: “Yuh like de sound?” [*Laughter*] Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to continue:

“Packer told his audience, ‘When you travel the entire world including Nigeria, you will find tremendous amount of our nationals working in Nigeria,

and every corner of the world. When you meet these people, in about 80 percent of the cases, these people started off on the land...”

And we are talking about offshore today:

“...and offshore fields in Trinidad and Tobago in the drilling aspect of our operations.’ According to Packer, because Trinidad has some of the most challenging oilfields, it has become the best training area in the world. He went on, ‘It’s a nightmare for geologists, a graveyard for geologists, it is one of the best training areas in the world. There is no better training ground.’ He said while Trinidad ‘is a brand’, enough nationals are not being trained in the sector.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Mr. Packer went on to say that this was:

“...a dream come true...”

But in addition to Mr. Packer, Mr. Deputy Speaker:

“The President of Petrotrin, Khalid Hassanali, said based on current level of activities within his organisation, there was a shortage of persons with drilling skills.”

And he went on to confirm that this is something that was very laudable.

I just want to make a quick comment now before I conclude, with respect to the Motion before us. You see, I am going to be reading from *Hansard* dated Friday, January 19, 2011. It is always instructive for us to remember what we say, you know; it is always instructive for us to know that when we say something, it is recorded and it could be repeated in the future.

Mr. Al-Rawi: I have the same *Hansard* for the rest.

Mr. F. Karim: And I know, you always, even from when you were here, you had a lot of *Hansard* pages.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is the current Minister of Trade and Industry—at the time Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon, Member for Point Fortin. I am going to read for you the very thing that the Minister of Trade and Industry is bringing for us here today, and asking us to support. I just want to read for our reminder what was said at that time:

“Mr. Deputy Speaker”—and I am quoting here from *Hansard*.

“Mr. Deputy Speaker, the list of conditional duty exemptions before us, Third Schedule, Part A, is really a list for approved industry—this is of the Customs

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Act—and what the Minister has done is he has brought before us the entire list from 2007...”

There has been no amendments since 2007 to the list that we are seeing here. I wish to continue. She says:

“...which tells me that there was absolutely no review of the list that was brought here today.”

The Member for Point Fortin at that time went on:

“I have looked at it, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I am seeing on it, for instance, in item 5—now, let me let you know that we are supporting this...”

Like we are doing:

“...because this is to help the manufacturers and to help the business people; but I think it was rather lazy, to put it simply, of the Minister to just bring the former list without any thought or any examination of what is on the list.”
[*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am not going to make any such statement about the Minister of Trade and Industry who has brought the same list today. [*Desk thumping and laughter*] I am not going to do that. I just want to go on:

“And it goes on, but, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will be surprised. In No. 48, it goes on to talk about machinery, equipment and materials for the manufacture of gramophones...”, and so on.

The whole issue is that it continues to say—she says that:

“Clearly, this is just a repetitive exercise—the way you see it is as a repetitive exercise—but there is more that we need to know with what is going on with your Ministry and the trade policy; how your relationships are working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs...”

And I see the hon. Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs is here.

“...and the Ministry of Energy and Energy Affairs...”

All I want to say, it is always very useful to remember what you say, that will come back one day to haunt you. As I conclude, I want to join with my colleague, the Member for Caroni Central, in saying that we on this side support, but we give and we proffer advice, suggestions and recommendations because, at the end of it, it is what is best for the country—not what is best for a party—what is best for the country. [*Desk thumping*]

When the tide rises, we expect all the boats to rise together and, therefore, we commend this. We support it. Again, I want to issue the offer that should you require any assistance, we are here to tell you what we would have done, and what we can support further to make sure the human capital development is not “ah ole talk ‘bout people is de best ting”, and the people are the most important resource. You must do it by your actions. Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I really wish to thank the hon. Members, our colleagues on the other side and also my colleague, the Member for La Brea, for their very healthy contributions which we have noted. Of course, I also note their support of the Motion which is for exemptions in the class of good, equipment, material and supplies imported for use in offshore petroleum exploration, petroleum operators as well, for two years.

I know the question was asked by the Member for Caroni Central, as to why the limit is only up to 2017? Why is it just for two years? I want to let you know that the Ministry of Trade and Industry is currently reviewing the efficacy and efficiency of the concessions regime. Based on our records, approximately 800 companies have been granted concessions since the passage of the provision. However, based on the current records, only 145 companies actually utilized the concession in 2014. Of course, this is the entire concession, only seven of those were energy. So obviously we want to examine closely to see how relevant the concessions are as well.

So the other matter is that when these companies are granted their concessions, they are allowed to import a list of items for the specific purposes of the concessions, and in this case for offshore petroleum purposes. But we have been reviewing the electronic records and we want to make sure that the concessionaires actually utilize the concessions for their intended use and purpose.

In particular, that the items allowed for duty-free treatment are not allowed to enter the domestic market for resale or for some other use or so. Let me give you the assurance that over the next two years, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, we intend to review all of the operations of all concessionaires, to ensure that the use of these duty-free licences adhere to their conditions of use, and it is not—you know, because it is there for a particular person, and we will want to be concerned about revenue. We will be concerned about revenue leakages.

So that in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance, we would review the provisions of the Customs Act. I give you that assurance, to modernize the Act; to modernize the legislation in particular, and all of the categories and the description of activities in the Third Schedule. That is why we have asked for the extension to make sure that we have a comprehensive look at this, particularly at this time where we are concerned about lost revenues. But again, we are concerned about stimulating all sectors and in particular, the energy sector for which there is still life ahead for that sector and for the use of Trinidad and Tobago. So we think that the two-year period is, in fact, enough. I think it is reasonable, and we will continue to monitor daily and so on. As I said, this is a relevant industry.

Someone asked the question about mining, the Member for Caroni Central, and we will deal with mining in the next debate, in the second Motion.

And then someone also brought up some issues about the manufacturing sector, and that, too, will be dealt with along with all the other non-energy sectors as well in the following debate as well.

As we go along, we will move to ensure that whatever we do in the energy sector, let me assure you, we would be doing the implementation of our plans and programmes. We would do so with transparency, with objectivity and we would do things with purpose.

I just want to go back to another comment which was made about escalating budgets between 2002 and 2008. Member for Caroni Central is that you? But I want to remind you that along with those escalating budgets, you had consistent economic growth in this country averaging about 7 per cent, and we were the envy of all of Latin America and the Caribbean as well.

4.15 p.m.

We had a very sound macroeconomic framework. You talked about human development, Member for Chaguanas East, we have brought the human development in Trinidad and Tobago up to the level where we are now exporting energy services right across the world, in Suriname, in Africa as well. So that is something that we had put purpose to and we are seeing the rewards of it. During that period as well you would have recognized the institutional stability which existed, this country was well-managed, there were many projects which realized sustainable jobs; it was a healthy period for Trinidad and Tobago.

Let me remind you that it is successive PNM administrations that really transformed this economy from agriculture to petroleum, to natural gas, and to

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other commodities as well. I mean, you talked about your medium-term framework, Member for Caroni Central, but your life was short-term, so most of it you never got implemented. You spoke about your performance but, to my mind, and into the mind of most of us on this other side, it was a lot of blind flying, and at the end of the day I am not sure that the country really benefited, because as far as was exhibited it was a question of management of a country on autopilot. In fact, the result is that the phoenix took a nosedive. [*Desk thumping*] The very phoenix which you spoke of took a nosedive.

I am not going to go down the road which you were leading to on wastage and discussions on leadership because we would be here until the wee hours of the morning on those topics. I am not going to digress and change the complexion of the debate. I am not going to do that. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Minister, please direct the Chair, please.

Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: You spoke about continuity across governments, continuity of governments; well, I asked the hon. Member for Caroni Central, how many times have the people of Trinidad and Tobago spoken in recent times? Seven times? Is he going to wait for them to speak seven times seven times? Time will show.

So, as I close, it makes no sense prolonging this debate. As I close, I want to say that our Government is working very hard to ensure that there is a clear vision of where this country heads. We are engaging all our stakeholders to make sure that their objectives are aligned with the Government's objectives as well, and that we all agree on a prioritized initiative. In the end, we will action all of our plans, we will implement and we will communicate, we will develop Trinidad and Tobago, all of Trinidad and Tobago, and we will give the energy sector the support it requires with these incentives and more. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the House of Representatives, in accordance with and subject to the provisions of section 56 of the Customs Act, exempt from import duties of Customs the class of goods specified in the First Column of the Schedule, being goods imported or entered for use for the purposes specified in the third column, but that this Resolution shall cease to have effect in respect of any class of goods specified in the first column that is manufactured in Trinidad and Tobago.

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SCHEDULE

FIRST COLUMN	SECOND COLUMN	THIRD COLUMN
<i>Class of Goods</i>	<i>Purposes for which goods are to be used</i>	<i>Period of Exemption</i>
Equipment, material and supplies	Imported for use in off-shore Petroleum exploration, Petroleum operations.	From 1st January, 2016 to 31st December, 2017

STATEMENT BY MINISTER

Mr. Deputy Speaker: At this time I would like to call on the Minister of Finance, as alluded earlier, he has a statement to make and I will call on him at this time. Hon. Minister of Finance, please. [*Desk thumping*]

**Government's Cash Flow
(Details of)**

The Minister of Finance (Hon. C. Imbert): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to share with this honourable House the status of the Government's cash flow and its financing operations in light of concerns being expressed by certain segments of the national community, especially with respect to recent statements about a recession. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I had outlined, during the course of my financial year 2016 budget presentation, an economic and financial programme aimed at restoring confidence and rebuilding trust in the national society. It is the view of this Government that consumer and business confidence was central to the stabilization of the economy, and the foundation for restoring a sustained recovery in growth. I had also laid out a road map which would bring the country's finances into approximate balance by the year 2018.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we initiated, immediately, the process for closing the fiscal gap. We established a programme of asset sales, one-time resources, revenue measures, and debt financing, including the reform of the value added tax regime with an improved efficiency in collection and the broadening of the base through adjustments and exemptions, and zero-rated items; the increase in the Business Fund Levy and the Green Fund Levy; the reintroduction of property taxes through the re-establishment of the old levels and old rates; the reform of

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the fuel subsidy, which has already begun; the receipt of the proceeds of one-time resources and asset sales, which is on course; and the planning for debt financing as outlined in the budget documentation, which can now be realized with the adoption by this Parliament on December 04, 2015, of the three resolutions to increase the borrowing limits under the three pieces of debt legislation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to assure all Members, and the national community by extension, that this Government is managing our fiscal finances in a prudent and responsible manner. [*Desk thumping*] However, it should be noted that a large portion of public revenues accrue to the Consolidated Fund on a quarterly basis, with the December 31 end quarter being the quarter with the largest receipts. Accordingly, while expenditure might be lower than receipts during certain months, the excess revenues in other months are utilized to fund those months when expenditure is greater than revenue.

Unfortunately, as the new Government, we have recently been confronted with a hitherto unforeseen cash flow challenge, and it is necessary for the population to understand what has happened so that we can move forward together to fulfil our financial obligations. Mr. Deputy Speaker, central government's expenditure in a typical month would be of the order of \$3 billion to \$4 billion, depending on the expenditure cycle. To illustrate, in October 2015, expenditure totalled \$3.2 billion, however, the total value of expenditure in September 2015 and October 2015, combined, totalled close to \$13 billion— [*Interruption*]

Mr. Al-Rawi: What?

Hon. C. Imbert: \$13 billion—representing expenditure in September 2015 alone of \$8.5 billion.

How did this unusual pattern of expenditure occur, Mr. Deputy Speaker? A number of commitments and liabilities were incurred under the previous administration in the months leading up to the September 2015 election. As the election drew nearer there was a mad rush to settle payments to contractors and other suppliers of goods and services, as well as some arrears of salary and wages before the election, even though the previous Government knew that the money was not readily available. They did this in the belief that after the election many of these payments might have been queried and audited, and subjected to greater scrutiny, and, thus, not paid immediately.

After election, before the new Government settled in, the mad rush continued in order to clear payments before the end of the financial year, which ended on

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September 30, 2015. Government cheques written prior to the election were also presented in October and November 2015. The end result of all of this is that instead of the normal expenditure of approximately \$8 billion in September and October 2015, combined, the cheques in cash for these two months reached \$12.9 billion.

A number of short-term borrowing arrangements entered into by the previous Government in the months before the election have also become due and payable. This extraordinary level of expenditure caused by liabilities incurred before the election has had a severe adverse effect on the Government's cash flow. The overdraft at the Central Bank, which had been reduced after the election through cash injections from the Phoenix Park IPO, and other budgetary measures, to less than \$6 billion, ballooned back up close to the \$9 billion limit as a result of the flood of pre-issued cheques arriving for payment after election and the rush of payments made in September. Without significant revenues from the oil companies due to the depressed price of oil, the overdraft has remained close to the limit since then.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is necessary to explain the overdraft. Within this cash flow framework the Government overdraft at the Central Bank is only utilized on a temporary basis. The overdraft is cleared at the end of the fiscal year and recalculated at the beginning of each year at 15 per cent of the budgeted revenue for that year. The Treasury Division moves the overdraft accumulated at the end of the previous year to the Exchequer II Account and as funds come in, and maybe utilized, it gradually clears the accumulated overdraft by moving funds from the pool to the Exchequer II Account.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the overdraft at the Central Bank is similar to a loan arrangement. The overdraft requires low interest to be paid by Government, but it is not a loan account. It should be used only as a temporary source of funding in the context of the nature of revenue receipts, which are received on a quarterly basis, and expenditure, which is effected on a monthly basis. This, notwithstanding, the overdraft facility is now consistently, and has been consistently utilized to the point where it has reached close to the maximum, or in the 90 per cent range for most of the last 12 months.

Accordingly, in the context of the technical and accounting financing arrangements related to the overdraft, the Exchequer I Account, the main operating account of the central government has been in deficit in the amount of \$30 billion. Given the fact that from that fund is fed all the other funds, including

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government cash balances, the Unemployment Fund, the Unemployment Levy, the Business Levy, the CARICOM Trade Sector Fund, the GATE Fund, the Green Fund; with an overdraft limit of \$9 billion there must, at all times, be an amount equivalent to approximately \$21 billion in these funds, including the Green Fund and the Business Levy, which funds cannot be used until the Exchequer I Account is replenished. Because the overdraft was mismanaged by the last government, all of these funds cannot now be accessed because they are pledged as security against the overdraft.

Access to the Green Fund and the Unemployment Fund is therefore impossible until the overdraft is cleared off, and access to cash to pay government bills is now severely constrained.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the context of the above, we are currently reconciling all arrears of salaries—that is back pay—owed to our public sector employees and to our protective services. The arrears to the various arms of the protective services that are payable alone exceed \$2 billion, in fact \$2.6 billion is what is owed to the various arms of the protective services: the army, the police, et cetera, while arrears owed to the health sector workers exceed \$1 billion.

4.30 p.m.

I got a call yesterday telling me it was, in fact, \$1.7 billion owed to health sector workers, as a result of collective negotiations that were settled just before the election. These are just two examples of what we have been saddled with in 2016.

Unfortunately, within the constraints of the overdrawn Exchequer account and the overdraft limit at the Central Bank, there is simply insufficient cash available at this time to pay these arrears of salaries and back pay at this time. The Government's focus at this time is therefore on ensuring that salaries, wages and essential goods and services are covered, while we make the necessary arrangements to go to the commercial banking sector to raise the necessary funds to get the Government's overdraft level down to a point where we can settle the outstanding arrears. In fact, it is our intention to raise special bond issues to settle the arrears of salaries and wages.

Today, I met with the commercial banks to initiate this process. It will require adjustment of liquidity levels and adjustment of reserves held by the commercial banks at the Central Bank, and for all those who do not know the law—let me repeat that—and for all those who do not know the law, in accordance with the

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Central Bank Act, section 50, I will give the Central Bank the requisite directives in due course so that the bank can, in accordance with the law, give effect to the Government's fiscal and monetary policy.

For this month, we will ensure that public sector workers receive their December salaries and wages well before Christmas. The target date is December 18, 2015. [*Desk thumping*] In 2016, we will do what is required to ensure that all of these payments of arrears in salary and wages and back pay, numbering in the billions, are made at the earliest opportunity in the context of our revenue raising measures, our debt funding activities and the commitment of this Government to settle all outstanding liabilities.

I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, I would now like to suspend the sitting for tea and we will resume—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Tewarie: Mr. Deputy Speaker 24(4).

Mr. Hinds: Where is Larry Howai?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed, Member for Caroni Central.

Dr. Tewarie: Did the hon. Minister of Finance take into account the \$12 million of revenues that were due during the course of the last fiscal year, and were these, in fact, collected? These had to do with the sale of assets. [*Interruption*] Well, I do not need to elaborate. Did you take into account the \$12 million?

Hon. C. Imbert: “Ask de question, man; doh make a statement.”

Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have heard reference to these alleged revenue streams. For the benefit of Members opposite, who were Members of a Cabinet and obviously kept in the dark, the necessary arrangements for these revenue streams, some of which are merely alleged, were never made. So that when we came into office, the paperwork was not done. The requisite opinions from the Attorneys General could not be done. None of the arrangements were made for these alleged revenue streams. They were figments of your imagination. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, I would like to now suspend this sitting until 5.10 when we will resume. Thank you.

Sitting suspended: 4.35 p.m.

Sitting resumed: 5.10 p.m. [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, let us resume this afternoon's sitting. We will go to Motion No. 2 and I call on the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry.

**CUSTOMS ACT
(EXEMPTIONS FROM IMPORT DUTIES)**

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name that it be debated in this honourable House:

Whereas it is provided by section 56(1)(a) of the Customs Act, Chap. 78:01, that the House of Representatives may, from time to time, by Resolution provide that any class of goods specified in the Resolution shall be exempt from import duties of Customs if the goods are imported or entered for use by any person for any purpose specified in the Resolution during any period to be fixed by the Minister in each particular case, not being a period terminating later than the date prescribed in the Resolution, as the last day on which such exemption shall be operative, and subject to such conditions as the Minister may impose;

And whereas by Legal Notice No. 10 of 2011 and Legal Notice No. 34 of 2014, the last Resolutions in respect of the goods identified therein came into effect on 01 January, 2011 and January 23, 2014, respectively, would both expire on December 31, 2015;

And whereas it is expedient that certain goods be exempt from import duties of Customs as of January 01, 2016;

Be it resolved that the House of Representatives, in accordance with and subject to the provisions of section 56(1)(a) of the Customs Act, exempt from import duties of Customs, the classes of goods imported or entered for use in Trinidad and Tobago, for the respective purposes set out in the list of Conditional Duty Exemptions in the Third Schedule to the Customs Act:

- (a) Approved Industry in Part A, subheading I;
- (b) Approved Agriculture, Livestock, Forestry and Fisheries in Part A, subheading II;
- (c) Approved Hotels in Part A, subheading III;
- (d) Approved Mining Purposes in Part A, subheading IV; and
- (e) Other Approved Purposes in Part A, subheading V,

for the period beginning 01 January 2016 and ending on December 31, 2017.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the purpose of this Motion similar to the previous one is to seek an extension of the benefits granted under the Customs Act, section 56(1)(a). These benefits have been applied to approved industry, approved agriculture, livestock, forestry and fisheries, approved hotels, approved mining purposes and other approved purposes since 1959.

This measure ensures that Trinidad and Tobago companies engage in all of these sectors that require important foreign inputs, can acquire these at world market prices without being required to pay Customs duties. This will ensure that local businesses are not placed at any international competitive disadvantage.

The vast majority of the concessionaires in the manufacturing sector have indicated that the exemptions from Customs duties have impacted favourably on their operations. It has enabled them to reduce their cost of production, thus resulting in an improvement of their competitiveness against foreign goods. Let us examine the process for the sake of the public, for their information.

Companies that wish to apply for these exemptions are required to submit an electronic application to the Minister with responsibility for industry through the Ministry of Trade and Industry's TTBizLink system. Items that are manufactured within the Caricom region are not eligible for duty-free importation.

Once the company is approved for a grant of import duty concessions, it is required to submit the list of items to be imported on an annual basis, to the Trade Licensing Unit of the Ministry of Trade and Industry for the grant of duty release licence. All concessionaires are mandated to store items imported duty-free under the terms of their concessions in a Customs approved bonded facility. Items that are removed for production are recorded in a drawdown book maintained by the company and monitored by the Customs and Excise Division of the Ministry of Finance—and that is how the system works.

There are approximately 808 local companies which would have benefited from these concessions since its inception. In 2014, however, 145 companies of varying sizes utilized the exemptions under this facility, and the respective sectoral breakdown for that year is as follows: Manufacturing, 126 companies involved in manufacturing food and beverage, wood and metal furniture, industry chemicals, construction products and textiles and garments; agriculture, livestock, forestry and fisheries, eight farmers producing vegetables and rearing animals, such as sheep, goats and cattle; hotels, 10: four in Tobago and six in Trinidad; and other approved purposes, one in the maritime sector.

The estimated revenue foregone from this incentive in 2014 amounted to \$597

million. In contrast, it is estimated that these companies have invested over \$6.3 billion in the Trinidad and Tobago economy over the years. So Mr. Deputy Speaker, the respective sectors which are eligible to be exempt from Customs duties are set out in the list of conditional duty exemptions in the Third Schedule of the Customs Act, and all areas on the list are approved by Caricom and include sectors in which member States have a vested interest.

I will briefly outline the Government's rationale for continuing exemptions in each of these areas. Manufacturing—we have a resilient and dynamic manufacturing sector, and today it is the largest and the most recognized in the Caribbean region. Government's interest and support for the manufacturing sector is leveraged particularly on the sector's potential to further expand, to earn foreign exchange and to provide employment for a large number of citizens.

Based on data available at the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the estimated cumulative sales of approved concessionaires in 2014 was approximately \$7.1 billion. The majority of these sales were made in the domestic economy, while export sales totalled in excess of TT \$2.1 billion. The largest export market as expected is the Caribbean region. The Government intends, however, to increase its effort to grow exports extra-regionally into new emerging markets which have significant potential for broadening our export base.

The Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association has, however, produced figures which indicate that between January and September 2015, total exports of locally manufactured goods declined by 30.7 per cent to \$5 billion, down from \$7.2 billion in the corresponding period for the previous year. Export to Caricom countries accelerated by 30.5 per cent to \$1.2 billion; however, this was not enough to offset the steep decline to exports in non-Caricom territories. Manufacturing exports to non-Caricom countries declined by 40 per cent to \$3.8 billion in the same period, as economic activity was subdued in major export markets like the United States of America.

So action needs to be taken to assist our manufacturers in penetrating international markets. As a responsible Government, we intend to improve our manufacturers' export capability and to gain greater penetration into the Latin American, the European and North American markets through trade facilitation strategies, negotiation of expanded market access, investment treaties and other government to government arrangements.

5.20 p.m.

The Government is working with our Caricom partners to support initiatives for commercial relations with extra-regional markets in Latin America, Asia and Africa. Recent consultations between the Ministry of Trade and Industry and private sector stakeholders suggest that we need to strengthen our presence in Cuba, and we are doing just that, and establish new trade facilitation offices in the Dominican Republic and probably Guyana or Suriname.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in order to facilitate our manufacturing sector further, we intend to provide the requisite infrastructure for the industrial production through the upgrading of all existing industrial sites and the creation of new ones. One was recently opened in Point Fortin. We shall complete and fully operationalize the Tamana InTech Park and the Piarco Aero Park, and these infrastructural upgrades will generate new growth areas with high-quality jobs and facilitate increased exports.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, currently the manufacturing sector employs 47,800 persons which represent 7.3 per cent of the national labour force. The Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association has identified that there are over 1,100 vacancies available in the manufacturing sector. The Ministry of Trade and Industry intends to work closely with the TTMA to ensure that these vacancies are filled. Employment within this sector is sustainable and will reduce the dependency syndrome often placed on the Government for temporary forms of employment. We are also hopeful that this sector can absorb persons who have recently lost their jobs as a result of contractions elsewhere in the economy.

Let me now turn my attention, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the agricultural sector. At present, the agricultural sector contributes just .5 per cent to our GDP, while the nation's food import bill is TT \$4 billion. Within recent years real production in the agricultural sector has declined by over 15 per cent. So that this Government recognizes the need to increase the nation's agricultural productive capacity for the purpose of reducing the food import bill and for achieving food sustainability.

Through cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the agriculture, livestock, forestry and fisheries industry will continue to be supported through this incentive regime. We intend to transform this sector into an area of economic growth. The Government will be taking active steps to redevelop the sector and has proposed strategic interventions within fiscal year 2016. The core implementation strategy advanced emphasizes the need to increase productivity, profitability and competitiveness through adopting improved technologies and

new commodities, improving efficiency and effectiveness of marketing, agriculture, health and food safety systems, and improve linkages within the agro-industry.

The core strategy is complemented by efforts to reduce constraints of infrastructure, land tenure, credit and production risks. The Government has taken the decision to exempt farmers from all duties and taxes on various inputs into the agricultural sector including approved chemicals, pest control, approved vehicles, approved fishing vessels and equipment.

In addition, land tenure will be given high priority and such lands will be delivered with access roads, drainage and irrigation systems. The Agricultural Development Bank will be adequately resourced to allow farmers readily accessed credit. Through the ADB, the Government will reintroduce the Prime Minister's Award for the best kitchen garden in schools and also introduce a number of national competitions and awards aimed at motivating farmers of different ages [*Desk thumping*] to strive for excellence in agricultural production.

Further, the development of the agricultural sector will enable greater linkages amongst companies and farmers which can lead to more value added goods through the process of transforming raw materials to intermediate goods. Moreover, significant value will be added and revenues enhanced thereby raising average earnings for input.

In addition to the measures previously outlined, the Government also intends to develop a comprehensive agricultural sector plan and hold consultations with farmers—and I know the Minister is doing this now—on changing the agricultural policy.

We shall enhance public sector investment and encourage private investment in agrotechnology and the creation and modernization of agribusiness infrastructure. We are of the view that such measures can strengthen the sector and significantly increase the sector's contribution to GDP and employment.

On the question of hotels, Mr. Deputy Speaker, diversification is not easily achieved in a small country of narrow market demand and limited land mass. It requires determined efforts to develop sectors which can be economically competitive, but more importantly supporting those which can generate foreign revenue.

In light of this, the Government is placing extra emphasis on developing our tourism product. The ability of the industry to generate new employment

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opportunities makes the industry a critical component in the country's development. We are of the view that the sector can unleash vast opportunities which will play a critical role in driving economic diversification in the country, and in this regard, Customs duty exemptions will provide an incentive to encourage investment in hotel development so we can have quality room stock suitable for all budgets in Trinidad and Tobago. This will enhance the revenue-generating type capability and assist in furthering the development of the sector. Later in the debate you will be apprised of our Government's additional plans for the sector.

With regard to mining purposes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, much like the tourism industry, the mining sector in Trinidad and Tobago has serious potential, but it has deteriorated over the last few years. It is a sector on which we have depended for much of our construction material for the development of our physical infrastructure. The Government intends to improve and modernize this sector to ensure that the value derived from our mineral resources redound to the benefit of all of our citizens.

At present, in Trinidad and Tobago there are close to 90 active quarries, both public and private, in operation. The Government intends to strengthen the legislative framework of the industry with the introduction of the Miscellaneous Provision Legal Mining Bill, and by the amendment of the Minerals Act 2000 to harmonize the areas of duplication in other pieces of legislation such as in the Environmental Management Act.

We will be embarking on capacity building within the industry as we move to improve the management and regulation of the mining sector. It is believed that the provisions under the First Schedule to the Customs Act will not only foster, but also further encourage the development of this sector by allowing companies to acquire the machinery and equipment at world market prices.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, under "Other Approved Purposes": those other areas for which import duties and exemptions are being sought include navigation equipment for boats; equipment to be used in sports and recreational activities; and public transport-type vehicles. These are areas which can in some way advance our economic development. Likewise, exemptions on sports and recreational equipment are aimed at encouraging a healthier population. Public transport-type vehicles, on the other hand, are intended to reduce traffic congestion and improve access to all areas of Trinidad and Tobago.

So that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government is of the view that the continuation of this regime is critical to the success of all of the sectors that I have outlined. We anticipate that new opportunities for business growth and expansion will be created which will provide much needed sources of employment for persons that have been negatively affected by contractions, as I said, in the other sectors.

We further anticipate that we can realize sustainable growth in the manufacturing, agriculture and tourism sectors of the economy. The aim is for us to take strategic intervention which will have a ripple effect in developing our economy. It cannot be, and I can tell you, it is not business as usual.

I know within the last debate, the Member had reflected on the *Hansard* of 2012 when the PNM was not in power and therefore, [*Crosstalk*] 2011, thank you for the correction—and therefore there was no way that any list could have been reviewed by the PNM. We simply were not in power and we had no access to the list. But it was the PP since 2012 who did no review of the list and therefore, we are in office for just three months—for the record, I am correcting you—and therefore, that is why we are going with the two years, so that we can in fact review the list comprehensively.

In concluding, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is recommended that this Motion be passed in this honourable House of Representatives to allow the Minister with responsibility for industry to grant import duty concessions to approved industry, to approved agriculture, livestock, forestry and fisheries, approved hotels, approved mining purposes and other approved purposes. These exemptions will make the enabling business environment more attractive and foster growth within the various sectors. More importantly, it will drive the diversification process and redound to the economic development of the country. And in this regard, I beg to move that this Motion standing in my name be approved. I thank you. I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I now invite Members into the debate. I recognize the Member for Couva North.

Miss Ramona Ramdial (*Couva North*): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Section 56(1)(a) of the Customs Act, Chap. 78:01, by resolution, from time to time, comes to this House so that we can renew this resolution to exempt from import duty of Customs, goods that are imported and entered for use by any person for any purpose specified in the resolution during the period fixed by the

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Minister. And in this way we have come here again today to support this Motion to go ahead, to allow for these conditional duty exemptions.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what is passing strange is that the Minister of Trade and Industry is here at this point in time with us in the Lower House and, of course, in her deliberations has failed to speak about the trade policy or her policy or her Government's trade policy for this country from now until the year 2020.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just want to refer to the *Hansard* and in previous incarnations of the said Minister being here in Opposition would have mentioned—and *Hansard* would, of course, attest to this—when we came here with the said Motion: what is your trade policy? What is the plan of the People's Partnership Government for trade in this country? So today, I am asking her again: Minister what is your trade policy for Trinidad and Tobago? [*Desk thumping*] And she has claimed that they have now entered Government, it is only three months, but that honeymoon period is over and it is time to take hold of the reins of management of this country and move forward; take charge. Take charge and do what you have to do, what you were elected to do for the people of this country.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of the conditional duty exemptions in the Third Schedule, Part A (III):

“For Approved Hotels

Building materials for first installation or approved extension and renovations.”

And secondly:

“Equipment and appliances for equipping hotels initially or for approved extensions and renovations.”

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is also very sad indeed when up to this date we have not heard, again from the Minister of Tourism, sharing her Government's policy on tourism and its role in diversifying the economy. We have heard, to date, from the hon. Minister that they are in charge: “We are in control of the House.” And that has been a memorable statement made by that particular Minister. However, we have heard nothing concerning her portfolio as Minister of Tourism on the policy, the tourism policy for Trinidad and Tobago moving forward.

And here it is we have the Minister of Finance coming to the House ever so often, and a little bit earlier on made a statement on the state of the economy and where we are going and what the previous Government did and where we are.

And he is coming here and really protesting to all and sundry about the dire state in which we have put them, and yet his Ministers and the Ministers who are holding other portfolios cannot come to the Parliament and account to the country as to what is their policy, what are their programmes, what are their plans [*Desk thumping*] moving forward.

5.35 p.m.

And it is very, very sad. And, I know another statement was made by the Minister of Tourism a couple months back. I think it was at one of the swearing-in ceremonies, when it was the media asked a question about what was your plan moving forward? And I think the Minister reiterated or stated that she did not shoot policy out from the side of her neck. Really, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Is that a comment to make to the media as a responsible Minister of Tourism, you do not shoot policy out from the side of your neck? So, not even a manifesto recommendation could have been made by this Minister. So, what does the PNM manifesto say for tourism? What does it say? What does the PNM manifesto say for your trade policies for this country? What are the plans moving forward?

So, let me try to edify the other side, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with respect to what the former People's Partnership Government would have done for tourism in this country over the past five years. First of all—and the Minister of Tourism would remember, of course, in 2011, when it is we were able to have an opening for, at that point in time, the newly refurbished Magdalena Grand Beach and Golf Resort. And this project was done under our tenure to promote the tourist industry in Tobago, and in 2011 this refurbishment of this hotel was opened. And in doing so, there is an article in 2015, and I quote from the *Guardian/Express*, Tuesday 15th, 2015, where that particular project now has brought so much benefit to the people of Tobago that it was quoted in this article that:

This hotel celebrated its fourth year successfully in a row with a steady history of double-digit growth since its reopening in 2011. The Magdalena Grand Hotel and Golf Resort was recently honoured with the Tobago Chief Secretary award for outstanding achievements in the sphere of tourism which was given by the Chief Secretary himself, Mr. Orville London, and the hotel was recognized for significant contributions to the growth of tourism in Tobago.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is a project that was done under the People's Partnership Government [*Desk thumping*] that sought to push that diversification thrust through that channel of tourism for the people of Tobago. So, I would really

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like to hear from the Minister of Tourism, when she speaks, about the benefits and the success of the Magdalena Grand in Tobago.

In addition to that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, sport tourism has been something that is being implemented throughout the world. Sport tourism has been seen as an economic driver in economies throughout, globally in different countries, especially the Caribbean islands.

“According to Zauhar (2003), sport tourism involves a number of activities. In addition to either participating and or observing sporting events, persons who travel for sport tourism may also have a vested interest in visiting state of the art sporting facilities...”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, during our tenure from 2010 to 2015, we were, of course, very fortunate to construct some of the best sporting facilities this country will ever see. [*Desk thumping*] And I make reference to the aquatic centre, I make reference to the tennis centre, and other sporting facilities that we have constructed during our tenure throughout Trinidad and Tobago. And, to the Minister of Sport, what is happening with these projects? Are you going to use these projects to drive that thrust of sport tourism in our country? If it is that we are looking at tourism as one of the diversification thrusts of our country, we must be able to accommodate and allow for these constructed facilities to be used so that they can generate revenue for our economy.

The Minister of Finance has been speaking time and time again about generating revenues for the economy, about going about and diversifying the economy, and we would have been doing the work that he is now speaking about over the past five years.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, sport tourists may not always be interested in traditional competitive sports, and may find adventurous activities far more inviting and appealing to their leisure taste. Some of these adventurous activities may include bungee jumping stations, zip line canopy tours, hiking trails, water adventure such as snorkelling and golf, and, of course, sport tourism offers several economic benefits to the local community, the region and the country. And why I mention this in terms of zip lining and bungee jumping, hiking trails and nature trails, is that again under the People’s Partnership Government, we were fortunate to see the development of the Chaguaramas Boardwalk. [*Desk thumping*]

And in developing the Chaguaramas area we were able to introduce that form of zip lining, that sport tourism, to attract persons to that area. And we have a lot of domestic tourism taking place also within Trinidad and Tobago, where we have

persons venturing to that Chaguaramas area to enjoy what is there in terms of the boardwalk, to enjoy the water-sporting facilities, to enjoy the zip lining, to enjoy the beach facilities that we now have in that area. And that was developed under the People's Partnership Government, and I am sure that MPs for Diego Martin West, Diego Martin North/East, Diego Martin Central, most of those constituents would be visiting that area very regularly from time to time being part of that diversification thrust.

In addition to that, we have had going on in our country with respect to the diversification thrust and dealing with tourism, is that, of course, of the former Minister of Tourism turning the sod and having Cabinet approve for a facility at Mayaro to be opened or to start very, very soon, a four star—and it is reported in the newspaper, Mr. Deputy Speaker, all-inclusive hotel and integrated resort will be built in Mayaro. And it went on to say that 510 acres of land at the Lagon Doux Estate in Mayaro owed by Cape Developers Limited, was confirmed by Cabinet, at the office of the Prime Minister and, of course, this project would see that diversification thrust going down into the constituency of Mayaro and that part of the country where, again, it would create 900 jobs for the people of Mayaro and environs, and it went on to say, Mr. Deputy Speaker:

“In 2001 the Lagon Doux Estate comprising 510 acres in Mayaro owned by Cape Developers Ltd was approved for the development of a major resort which at that time would have been the first of its kind in Trinidad. The project was envisaged to establish the credentials of Trinidad as a resort location similar to the sister island of Tobago thereby propelling the establishment of Mayaro as the node in the recreational corridor.

The Ministry of Tourism is of the view that the project which has been experiencing a long gestation period should now be expedited given that it could yield substantial private returns as well as contribute positively to the socio-economic benefits of southeast Trinidad by way of employment and income growth.”

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this particular project was, of course, sought after by the then Minister of Tourism as a public/private partnership arrangement, and we have heard the Minister of Finance talking about, you know, using that PPP model and moving forward to have investment and, of course, revenue generated from that moving forward.

And a little bit about this project, Mr. Deputy Speaker:

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“The project is expected to include a 300-room all inclusive hotel, 222 residential lots with the prime market being for retirees, 30 condominiums and 18-hole golf course, a mall and a 150-bed state of the art hospital.”

And at that point in time the people of Mayaro and environs would have welcomed that project. So, I wait to hear from the Minister of Tourism with respect to this project, where it is that this project has been held up, to date.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, another form of tourism that we have seen, of course, of lately generate in our country or coming to the fore within our country, is that of culture and heritage tourism. And I make reference to an article from the *Trinidad Express* newspaper on Thursday, May 19, when the tourism Ministry launched the Sugar Heritage Village. And, of course, that heritage tourism site was opened at that point in time with the then Minister of Tourism. And in there he stated that:

The economic importance of tourism is far greater than many people think, with 88,000 people accounting for some 14.9 per cent of this country’s employment working in that tourism industry.

And, of course, it went on to say that this particular Sugar Heritage Village launch would develop and preserve the country’s indigenous culture. He also went on to state that an advisory committee dealing with heritage tourism would be set up and that advisory body would then, of course, advise the Government of the day at that point in time in terms of expanding this type of tourism within Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in addition to that, the then Minister would have stated that the Sugar Heritage Village and Museum would become a new tourist attraction, an experience which cannot be found anywhere else in the world. He said it was also a fitting tribute and celebration of sugar workers’ contribution in developing this country. The tourism potential of the Sugar Heritage Village and Museum is phenomenal as it ensures that our sugar story is told to more people for many years to come, he said.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, these are some of the projects, these are some of the plans, these are some of the implemented working projects that the People’s Partnership Government would have done during its tenure in trying to push that tourism thrust in order to diversify the economy moving forward. So far we have not heard, again, as I reiterate, anything from the Minister of Tourism as to where we are going with our tourism thrust, and what are the plans and projects in place moving forward to diversify the economy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in addition, I would also like to add that at this point in time and earlier on during the question time, the Minister of National Security, of course, confirmed to me through my question that one of the vessels used in that latest \$5 million drug bust was, of course, purchased by the People's Partnership Government during our tenure. And, therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as many of the previous speakers have reiterated, these Ministers and Members of Parliament on the Government side are, of course, coming to the House and feeding wrong information to the general public. [*Desk thumping*]

We know what we did as the People's Partnership Government for the past five years, we know where the moneys are invested, we know that it is all for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to draw something to your attention, you know, in the same we have had previous PNM Governments would, of course, have been engaged in battles with certain public officials and individuals. I mean, like any other Government. But, the PNM Government has a history of hounding public officials out of office—

Mr. Al-Rawi: What?

Miss R. Ramdial: And I make reference to the former Speaker, Occah Seepaul, I make reference to the former Chief Justice, Sat Sharma [*Desk thumping*] and now they are using the same tactic for the Central Bank Governor. And I am very, very much concerned about this type of behaviour.

You know, you are talking about finance, you are talking about generating revenue for the economy so that we can move forward, we are talking about exemption of duties for different sectors in our country so that we can encourage revenue growth, and we can encourage economic development, but at the same time the very said public officials who are in charge—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Al-Rawi: Standing Order 41(1), Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Crosstalk*] Again, 48(6) as well.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, just keep on the topic, please. Keep focus on the Motion that is being debated, please.

Miss R. Ramdial: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Al-Rawi: Apologize. Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(6) as well. I did not get to catch your ear properly on that, the imputation of improper motive. "Hounding" a member out of Government, who? The Governor of the Central Bank? That is what she just said.

Mr. Charles: Nine says:

No Member shall impute improper motive to any Member—

Mr. Al-Rawi: Either House. To either House. [*Crosstalk*]

5.50 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Couva North, you care to clarify your statement that was made on the “hounding of persons out of office”? You care to clarify?

Miss. R. Ramdial: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was just drawing to the reference of where history is seeming to repeat itself right here with now having a new PNM Government in office. Anyway, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will continue my contribution.

Mr. Al-Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(6), specifically, insofar as you asked for a clarification. Perhaps I may assist you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with your leave.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It says:

“No Member shall impute improper motive to any Member of either House.”

Mr. Al-Rawi: Yes, thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and if I may, so that we can be guided properly. The hon. Member said that the PNM Government has a habit, historically, and then went on to say that the Government was hounding the Governor of the Central Bank out of office, thereby imputing an improper motive to every Member of Government sitting opposite to a very serious matter which affects the economy and financial stability of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] And that is a highly inappropriate—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Tewarie: Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the Member making a speech?

Mr. Al-Rawi: It is a highly inappropriate statement to make.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, I have given the okay for the Member to clarify the statement.

Mr. Al-Rawi: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is insofar as you have asked for a clarification that I have de-dusted what was specifically said on the record and which I take serious umbrage on behalf of each Member of Government opposite. That is a terrible imputation of purpose which is not only entirely false, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but it is a very grave condemnation for our

economy to be watching.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, hon. Members, the Member for Couva North shall proceed with her debate. All I would say on the matter is that the Member for Couva North, please stick to the relevance of the debate and with regard to making the statement of, “hounding members out of office”, we presently have no present situation of that. So just keep on track with the debate, please.

Miss. R. Ramdial: Noted, noted, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Thank you very much. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will continue to say that the state of the economy, of course, yes, it is declining, it is contracting as the economic critics have been saying out there. But at the same time, the people of this country elected you to government to assist and, of course, to manage the economy in a way where they will not feel the full brunt of the contraction of the economies that we are seeing around the world. And if it is that we have a Minister of Finance who is coming to this House ever so often at every sitting to make a statement about what we did and the excuses that he is giving us as to what we did and it is because of us we are now in this economic dead zone, so to speak, then I think we need a new Minister of Finance. [*Desk thumping*]

It is obvious, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the Minister of Finance is way in over his head. And if we are talking about exempting duties and all of that to encourage industrial activity—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, Members, please give the hon. Member for Couva North—

Miss. R. Ramdial: Thank you. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, my point is to say, of course, that we need to be cognizant as leaders, both the Government and the Opposition, and I am going to conclude at this point in time, we need to be cognizant of the statements that we are making. I mean, we all know how the politics of the day goes in Trinidad and Tobago, but at this time we really need to put the benefit of the people and we need to seek the benefit of the people first in Trinidad and Tobago.

What is happening here is that we are seeing a contraction of the economy. Yes, bringing this Motion to the House is all well and good. We are exempting duties to encourage a further diversification thrust in the different sectors. We are allowing for this to happen. This has been happening from previous Governments and this is just the continuation of such, and we will support this, but at the end of the day I want to say to the Government that responsibility has been placed on your shoulders to ensure the efficient and proper economic management of the country for the next five years.

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So when you come to this House, do not be laying blame on the Opposition Members for the position that you are now in. I have reiterated in my contribution earlier what we did for the tourism sector. I am yet to hear from the Minister of Tourism, what her policy is, what her plans are for moving tourism in this country. I am yet to hear from the Minister of Trade and Industry what the trade policy for Trinidad and Tobago moving forward is, what is going to happen, where we are opening up new markets, what is happening. The hon. Member quoted a lot of statistics and facts about the decline in exports and the decline in revenues.

So what are your plans as a Government to see this revenue increase? The diversification thrust: of course, we have started it during our tenure and I trust and I hope that this new Government will continue to do so. I have just reiterated that in Trinidad and Tobago we have many various opportunities for expanding our tourism sector. We have a new thrust in tourism that has emanated over the years—cultural heritage tourism—and therefore we are waiting for answers from this new Government, because they still claim that they are new after three months. We are waiting for this new Government to tell us as a population what they have in store for us to see us rejuvenate the economy.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with that I am in support of this Motion and I rest it on the shoulders of the Government to clarify and to be, of course, very much au courant with what is happening globally so that we can survive domestically and regionally as a nation. Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Tourism (Hon. Shamfa Cudjoe): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is with great pleasure that I join this debate at this time. It is always so pleasing to come after the hon. Member for Couva North because it is not too much to—[*Crosstalk*] Yeah, it is good to come after her. It is not too much to respond to: it lacks substance, it lacks essence, it lacks relevance, it lacks meat. [*Crosstalk*] Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to state from the onset—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members!

Hon. S. Cudjoe: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to state from the onset that when others are speaking I sit in my corner and I listen. So I would like the same respect to be paid to me also when I am on my feet. [*Desk thumping*] I will not be distracted and I will not allow anybody, anywhere at any time to walk through my mind with their dirty feet.

Hon. Member: Ooh!

Hon. S. Cudjoe: I am going to stand and I am going to give my contribution and make my speech. Mr. Deputy Speaker, allow me to place on the record, the hon. Member would have spoken about the People's National Movement does not have any policy. Yes, we are three months into government and I am very sure that the Government Policy Framework or, should I say, the manifesto, we would have said that information that was not stated clearly—as a matter of fact we say that, what is relevant in Vision 2020 we are going to use in going forward as we review tourism policy. And it is interesting that three months into government and three months when you are out of government, you spent five years in government without a tourism policy. You had a change of tourism Minister, four different Ministers. [*Desk thumping*] Four different Permanent Secretaries, not a tourism policy up to date.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, please, you are addressing the Chair, the Speaker, please.

Hon. S. Cudjoe: Sure, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They had no policy, absolutely no policy. The staff in the Ministry, the people in the TDC would tell you that they would have operated how they operated because there was no road map, no directions, no rules, no regulations, no policy.

Miss Ramdial: Where is yours?

Hon. S. Cudjoe: You listen. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am speaking to you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Couva North, could you join me here please, one second.

Hon. S. Cudjoe: Yes, you spoke already.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I would like you to join me here please, one second. Proceed, Member for Tobago West.

Hon. S. Cudjoe: Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There is this thing in Tobago that we say, “today they send you for me, tell them you did not see me”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member spoke about the Sugar Heritage Project. The Sugar Heritage Project went nowhere under the previous administration. They set up a steering committee and did absolutely nothing with that project. In May they had a launching ceremony. When you go down to that piece of land there is nothing going on there. They had \$10 million in the budget to treat with that project and they did absolutely nothing for five years. So to come here today and to ask me about what I am doing about the project and what I am doing about tourism policy, I am stunned.

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So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member would have also spoken about the project in Mayaro—Lagon Doux. This is among one of the many projects that these—one of the many commitments that this previous Government would have made and they had allocated no money in their budget, no money in their account, would have made promises, turn sod, take pictures. There are pictures of Members of the previous administration taking pictures with people saying that they are doing project with them and no money.

So now with this new Government installed you have stakeholders where commitments would have been made and they fill our inboxes day and night about these commitments saying that we owe them money. They turned sod up and down the place and no money, no allocation to treat with all these commitments that they would have made. So to come here and to tell me about policy and what you are doing in tourism—the same Magdalena, when we entered government in September, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Magdalena workers had not been paid for three whole months.

Hon. Member: Wow.

Hon. S. Cudjoe: And the list goes on and on. We could speak about even within the area of tourism, the BMX project, the Steve Harvey project, FB advertising. There is another one regarding Dyer-Griffith, that they have made commitments or claimed to have made commitments, with no money, no allocations. And the list goes on and on.

So much is said over and over about this whole—who is in charge, and who will take charge and that kind of thing. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to say here, first and foremost, that when you are elected to leadership you take responsibility, and I have learnt this from a good old school teacher, the hon. Orville Delano London, Chief Secretary of the Tobago House of Assembly. Now, when you are elected to leadership and when people have reposed their confidence in you to lead, you do that, you lead. Because after five years of their, I would not even say leadership, I would say occupancy because that is what they did. They occupied office. They did not lead.

So for five years this country was on autopilot. They paid no attention, no concern as to what was taking place in this country. There was mismanagement, corruption and waste, left, right and centre, and when you speak to the people who are supposed to be in charge or in leadership they do not know anything that is going on, they only been informed and been advised.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have no qualms in saying that this People's National Movement, these Ministers, these Members of Parliament were elected to take responsibility. We take responsibility for the very good and the very bad that we have inherited. Because when you go into office to lead you do just that rather than spend the whole five years like they had done complaining and spinning up and down in front of the media, Mr. Deputy Speaker. When you are in a position of leadership you lead. And my mother always said, "It is he who in the kitchen would feel the heat". When you are in the kitchen and you feel the heat you have the option to stay there and bawl fire, fire, fire, or take control of that situation and bring this place back to some kind of decency, some kind of state of normalcy, some kind of state of sanity. And the people of Trinidad and Tobago voted for leadership, not for the country to be on autopilot.

So I say today, yes, we are in leadership and we are going to take responsibility for the very good and the very bad that [*Desk thumping*] we have inherited. We could easily sit back and say, "oh no", we do not know what is going on. But we take responsibility for our actions and we take responsibility for all that is going on that we have to fix. There are many things that they would have done, but the time is too late for them to turn back the hands of time. We have to deal with it.

So I am not here to go back and forth with the Member of Parliament over those comments. That does not require any of my attention. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, allow me to proceed, please, with my contribution.

6.05 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the purpose of this Motion is to seek an extension of the initial resolution that was granted pursuant to section 56(1)(a) of the Customs Act. The extension will facilitate local stakeholders in the tourism industry who require important inputs for construction, for renovation, for expansions, for upgrade of accommodation and for tourism transportation, without being required to pay the Customs duties.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the exemptions that I would speak to today are concerning the tourism industry and Part A(III) of what we are proposing here today would have spoken to exemptions for hotels and for vehicles, or means of transportation for the purpose of tourism. Now, the first time this was instituted was in January of 2014 with an expiry date of December 31, 2015. So that facility expires in a couple weeks. And I feel like this facility—it continues to be of considerable benefit to the members of the tourism industry, to all our

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stakeholders and our service providers, and I think the continuation of this exemption is critical. This facility would allow tourism stakeholders in Trinidad and Tobago to compete more effectively with their international counterparts. This facility is important towards a sustainable development thrust and commitment to promote economic diversification.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the development of the tourism sector involves diverse actors, ranging from Government—which influences development through policy intervention, infrastructural development and regulations—to key private sector players. These include numerous small and large, local and foreign enterprises that provide supplies and services such as, hotels, restaurants, transport, local guides and various leisure and entertainment services.

Unlike other sectors that are inherently “enclaved”, such as the extractive sector, tourism generates employment opportunities and creates linkages across all sectors, for instance in the area of agriculture, in other sectors that provide many different services, such as the construction of roads, airports, ports and so on. I think we can all attest that tourism is indeed a very dynamic industry and it is one of the largest and fastest growing industries in the world.

Given its size, the sector bears considerable potential for economic growth, diversification and structural transformation of the economy. Against the backdrop of what we currently face in the economy, the Government has made a conscious and deliberate decision to sustain and improve its investment in the tourism sector to make the sector more promising, more profitable and more predictable. We are at a stage of our national development where we can no longer pay lip service to diversification, but we must take quick and serious action, not just for our holistic development but for our very survival.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is believed that we in the Caribbean compete among ourselves for the tourism dollar because we have similar products. And for the most part we all boast of sand, sea and sun, so we vie aggressively among ourselves for the tourism dollar. Over the years the landscape changed tremendously and the average tourist has matured and is looking for so much more. Today’s traveller wants more than just a pretty beach. The modern tourist is interested in local history, natural attractions, expressive culture, exciting local cuisine, and value for money, especially as it relates to comfortable accommodation.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, tourists are becoming increasingly demanding about the range and the quality of tourism products provided when choosing their

destination. We cannot grow as a destination if we fail to ensure the stream of our products and services offered meet the highest quality and standard of delivery. Accommodation is a vital component in this industry. Comfortable hotel and accommodation facilities play a very important role in popularizing any tourist destination. If a person who is far away from home gets to enjoy the same facilities and comforts as he enjoys at his home, then he is bound to become attached to the place.

On the other hand, if the tourist ends up at a place where the hotel and accommodation facilities are not satisfactory, it is quite likely that he might never return to that place. So therefore we must do our very best to provide maximum comfort to visitors at reasonable and affordable rates.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Customs duty exemption facility serves as an incentive for local stakeholders to construct and outfit their properties at an affordable price so that they would not be placed at a competitive disadvantage when compared to their international counterparts. Here we speak about cost-effectiveness and international standard requirement.

Now, I will share a little statistic with you, some information as it relates to this concession, or these exemptions in the hotel industry. During the years 2012 to 2015—that is October 2012 to September 2015—the total amount of capital invested by the hotel industry was \$250 million, 960-something thousand dollars in revenue—sorry, in capital investment. The total revenue foregone is roughly \$16 million to \$17 million. And the same could be said for the importation and exemptions for vehicles where we have processed 233 applications over the period of October 2012 to September 2015; \$30,275,000 had been the capital invested and we would have foregone \$13,557,000 in import duties and motor vehicle taxes.

Now, these are exemptions—or should I say incentives—that are practised, or would have been implemented in other countries throughout the region. This is minor compared to what Barbados is offering, compared to what Aruba is offering, St. Lucia, Dominica and Jamaica, and since we are vying and pretty much competing among each other, we have to keep up. We have to get in the game and we have to make our mark so we could be on the same playing field or even as close to, or even better than our competitors up the region.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the previous Government would have spoken glowingly about some of the incentives that they claim to have proffered to the stakeholders and the practitioners in the tourism industry. For instance, the previous trade Minister would have spoken about the Room Upgrade Programme.

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Now the Room Upgrade Programme was developed by the People's National Movement in 2009—early 2010, and when that Government came into office, they would have executed that programme and would have discriminated against properties in Tobago, because to this day, as much as they boast about that incentive programme, not one hotelier in Tobago had been able to benefit from it. And we are now, today, this new Government, this new administration, currently discussing ways and means to get hoteliers from Tobago to be able to get on board this Room Upgrade Programme.

So for your whole five years, all the policy and all the plans and all the bright you bright, you had found nowhere—and where is the Member for Couva North? She ran away. She ran away! You speak of all these things that you claim to have done and have not benefited Tobago in any way, form or fashion. What kind of policy is that?

Mr. Young: That is why Tobago run “yuh” out.

Hon. S. Cudjoe: And then when Tobago speaks to the UNC they are upset. So, she would have spoken about policy and so on, but I want to say to the people of Tobago and especially the small tourism hoteliers and practitioners, the stakeholders out here, thank God this is a new day, a new administration, a new Government that is serious about tourism investment [*Desk thumping*] and is serious about developing the industry.

So I would speak to some of the different initiatives that we are going to pursue aggressively to ensure that the stakeholders are well taken care of and we can raise the profile of tourism in Trinidad and Tobago. And I speak to the same Room Upgrade Programme that we are now working on to ensure that everybody gets their fair share.

I speak to, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the programme called TTTIC, which is the Trinidad and Tobago Tourism Industry Certification programme designed to ensure that tourism operators and service providers in Trinidad and Tobago conform to prescribed standards and quality operations. I am sorry that the Member for Couva North is not in the House to hear all this. You cannot pick a fight and run.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I speak now to the Blue Flag Programme. You would have seen pictures of members of staff up at Las Cuevas beach, because Las Cuevas beach has Blue Flag certification and we are working on extending that; working hand in hand with Tobago House of Assembly to have that certification at Castara, at Mount Irvine.

And the list goes on and on. The STAR programme for customer service; the STEP Programme to ensure that the entrepreneurs are well trained and could be more profitable and more competitive in the industry. We have a new board of the TDC and we are working with the Tourism Development Company to develop policy—a real board. So we are talking about transparency and accountability. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, over the past three months I have been meeting with stakeholders across Trinidad and Tobago. I have reinstated the stakeholders' programme to speak to stakeholders on a quarterly basis to hear what are their issues. And as we move into the next quarter, the Ministry of Tourism would be embarking upon a national consultation with an aim to improve tourism policy and to amend the Tourism Development Act of the year 2000. You sat there for five years with a Tourism Development Act of 2000 and come here today to tell me about policy?

Hon. Member: Hmm! Shame on you all. [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe: So the list goes on and on and on. And I want to speak finally about another initiative, because next week, December 22, I invite each and every one of you to the launch of the Tourism Baseline Programme.

Hon. Member: “Ah yai yai. Ah goin.”

Hon. S. Cudjoe: It is a survey. Let me tell you a bit about it. The Tourism Baseline Survey—this is an initiative that is geared to establish baseline data for the tourism indicators that will track changes in the sector over time to assess the economic impact of tourism on defined priority areas.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the list goes on and on. And I am so sorry that the Member for Couva South—

Hon. Members: North.

Hon. S. Cudjoe: North. Not my friend, the Member for Couva South, but the Member for Couva North has left the Chamber. So these are among the numerous policies, we are consulting, we are speaking to the stakeholders. At the end of the day, Mr. Deputy Speaker, tourism is a catalyst for change, for improvement, for development, for job creation, for human capital development and investment, for economic resuscitation. [*Desk thumping*] Because that is what this country needs at this time after five years under the UNC—economic resuscitation.

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So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, whilst we will be foregoing some revenue based on these exemptions, we must be rest assured that we are making an investment to improve—and we will regain, we would get tenfold back on these investments that we would have made. [*Desk thumping*]

I want to say one more thing about the two years that the Member for Caroni Central would have been concerned about. I am pleased that we are initiating or we are instituting this exemption for only two years because it gives us the opportunity to review our policy. Because the more we give local stakeholders the ability to bring in foreign goods, it may pose some challenge to the local entrepreneurs, so it gives us a chance to develop the different industries. I see like soap making and candle making and so on. These products should be showcased in the hotel room. I feel like the hotel room should be a showcase of many local products. So we need to improve local content and encourage economic activity so that local entrepreneurs and prospective private sector movers and shakers could have an opportunity to spread their wings.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with that said, I want to join my colleagues here on this side in supporting this exemption facility and I want to encourage my friends on the opposite side, including the Member for Couva North who has left the Chamber, to jump on board and lend your support.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, with those very few words, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

6.20 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Mayaro.

Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I rise to contribute to this Motion in this House as laid by the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to join in the debate on this most important piece of legislation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to focus my attention primarily, but not limited to the agricultural sector in Trinidad and Tobago, but more specifically under Motion No. 2, Approved Agriculture, Livestock, Forestry and Fisheries in Part A, subheading II. But before I get into the substance of my contribution, I just want to mention that every week that I come here into this Chamber I hear this mantra of waste, corruption and mismanagement. You see, it is like they do not believe their own propaganda. They have to keep reciting it like a rhyme, like a rhyme. [*Desk thumping*] Reciting is over and over and over. It is like kindergarten

children, hopping and skipping merrily, reciting this rhyme, but it is time to stop that now because you are the Government—you are the Government. You are in charge.

Hon. Member: And they have plans.

Mr. R. Paray: You are in charge. [*Desk thumping*] You have plans, you have policies. Get on with the work of running this country. Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, just for the record and I want to put it on record and— [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Come Members, let us listen to the hon. Member for Mayaro, please.

Mr. R. Paray: I would like to take the opportunity in this House to lay on the record some information that has been circling around in my constituency which I think I need to bring some clarity. For the record, my name is Rushton Paray and I am the elected Member of Parliament in this House for the constituency of Mayaro. [*Desk thumping*] There are those outside who are walking around saying otherwise, believing that they have ownership to the constituency. They are bringing chaos and confusion into the minds of the young children of my constituency. It is for them that I place on this record to bring clarity to this issue once and for all. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members! Members, please!

Mr. R. Paray: I will be happy to give way to the Member for Port of Spain North if he has something to say.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please! Hon. Member for Mayaro, please continue. [*Interruption*] Hon. Member for Mayaro. Members, Members, let us give the Member his speaking time, please.

Hon. Member: He is a PNM member. [*Laughter*]

Mr. R. Paray: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can clear that up too, but you see— [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, let us stick to the Motion at hand. Members!

Mr. R. Paray: The acting Prime Minister had previously asked if we could have been—they are taking up my time. But anyhow, I will go on. [*Laughter and desk thumping*]

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Mr. Deputy Speaker, having cleared that up, I wish to proceed with the matter before us here in this House. We are dealing with the substantive matter of exemptions from Customs duties and taxes in various areas of goods and services in our economic framework. The provision for exemptions on Customs duties and other charges on a wide range of goods and services are nothing new in terms of incentivizing the specific components of our economy.

The farmers in Trinidad and Tobago have been benefiting from exemptions for decades in one form or the other. What it means for our farmers, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that they have been enjoying the exemptions from duties and taxes over the years and today, in this House, we have come to extend the life of these exemptions. I support the Government in extending the tax exemptions on both plant and machinery and other related items. This will in no doubt continue to provide considerable relief for our farmers.

I have the distinct pleasure of speaking to farmers in preparation for this debate, more so because I live in the constituency of Mayaro where agriculture and livestock plays an important role in our local economy. There are many practitioners of this trade whose livelihood depends on the sector. So therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have no issue with the intent of the Bill and I see no reason not to support it, but what I must call into question is the *modus operandi* of this People's National Movement administration.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, less than two months ago we sat in this House and approved a \$63 billion budget, where the agricultural sector was allocated less than 2 per cent of that national budget. In the Senate debate, on 8th of the 12th, 2015, that was last Tuesday, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries got up and tried to justify, and he said—I am not quoting him here—that the \$50 billion loan that we approved in this Parliament on Friday last, he will be able to pay the salaries of workers in the re-forestation unit in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. Yet, less than 48 hours later, the country learnt that it is for the building of the rapid rail and for the very Government that is purchasing 10 paintings for \$3 million. It is in the newspaper.

I ask the question to the national community: are these two items priority at this time? I also question the logic of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. Why would the Minister have to wait on a \$50 billion loan to pay workers in the re-forestation programme when the allocation was already included in recurrent expenditure in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries? [*Desk thumping*] And earlier on, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and

Fisheries came here and he could not connect forestation to re-afforestation and forestry. So, that says something.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, several of my constituents in that programme have not been paid for over five fortnights. How are they to put food on the table for their families? Again, no planning, no vision. Government by vaps that is how I see it. [*Desk thumping*] We are today asking our agricultural sector to somehow miraculously leapfrog to the head of the line. The People's Partnership administration made the most advances in pushing the development of the agricultural sector over the last five years. However, the challenge has always been that the culture here in Trinidad and Tobago has always been anti-agriculture. We have always made the oil and gas sector our saviour and we heard it here today. I heard it here today.

The hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries made some statements to that effect that, you know, we are going to continue driving the sector, in the hope of resuscitating it and so on. But you see, the mantra that has been repeated in this country year after year is that if we cannot grow it, or we cannot build it, "we go buy it". "We have money, we go buy it." That is simple. That is the simple case here, but I will not use the blame game in this debate. I will steer clear away from that because it is really nobody's fault that we are scrambling economically to redirect our ship—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Gopee-Scoon: Nobody's fault.

Mr. R. Paray:—and ask the agriculture sector to be our hope and saviour.

It is nobody's fault. We collectively as a nation allowed the agricultural sector to be last on the table. We as a nation, all of us, all of us over the years, we disincentivized the administration of agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago to take risk and move with technological improvements in the industry. We ridiculed our technologists who offered modern methods of farming, discarding them for political reasons.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there was never a demand for the agriculture sector to become more productive as a matter of food security and even national security. We as a nation collectively buried our heads in the sand over the last 50 years thinking that God is a Trinidadian, or Tobagonian, as some may believe today. We as a nation turned a blind eye to the global economic turmoil, political instability in our wheat producing nations, global climate changes wreaking havoc on some of our international food baskets.

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More recently, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this administration has neglected to see the relevance of COP 21, the Paris Climate Agreement, by the non-attendance. [*Desk thumping*] But ramifications of that is another story by itself that I will leave for another opportunity to speak on. What worries me is that we will now lay the burden of this nation on the shoulders of our farmers, and we are going to do that via a series of knee-jerk reactions. Again, no plan, no vision.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has been the proverbial traffic branch. You know there is an old saying in the police service, when you give your seniors trouble in a police station they send you traffic branch to work and you end up in the Croisee somewhere burning in the hot sun for eight and 10 hours. Over the years, the Ministry of Agriculture has been used as a punitive Ministry. You give trouble somewhere in one of the Ministries, we will send you in the Ministry of Agriculture to work. The thing about it is that, how serious can we be for agriculture in this country? But that is how culturally we as a people saw agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago. The fact is, Mr. Deputy Speaker, administration after administration has attempted to change the culture in Trinidad and Tobago, but clearly the evidence proved otherwise. The culture continues to change administrations. This is a brutal reality that this administration will have to deal with.

The People's Partnership Government was in the process of gearing up to do more work in the rice and cassava industry, with the ultimate objective— [*Interruption*—and my colleague there opposite would say “huh” because he is not in the food basket. He does not understand what is happening in these parts of Trinidad where we are growing the food that feeds this nation. [*Desk thumping*] [*Interruption*] With the ultimate—no, no. Clarence only walking Mayaro and he has a Ministry to run. Sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Minister: Who is Clarence?

Mr. R. Paray: The hon. Minister. However, it is because of our romance in this country with the energy sector, agriculture was always placed on the slow lane. Beyond Customs exemption, a concerted effort is required to incentivize the rice farmers to assist with the reduction of our food bill. [*Desk thumping*]

Our national requirement for rice as a staple is 30,000 tonnes annually. However, we are producing between 6,000 and 8,000 tonnes. It is my understanding from consultations with the rice farmers in my constituency that we do have the capacity to produce the requirement as long as the land tenure, access roads and labour issues are sorted out, which the hon. Minister has spoken about

earlier on, that some focus will be put in that area in agriculture. So we look forward to that. So I plead with this Government to put some priority on these issues. The question still lies: will exemptions from custom duties do enough to aid the agricultural industry to move forward?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, under the partnership administration, the research around cassava production was accelerated due to the understanding of the volatility of the wheat market internationally. If Russia or China encounters any sort of turmoil, do you think that they will export their wheat? I do not think so. They will keep the product for their home market. Even with that knowledge, there are those in the administration of the agriculture sector here in Trinidad and Tobago who will not see cassava beyond the table requirements, rather than see it as a safety and security net for the volatile wheat market. Food security has to be the focus in terms of our reality.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, how will tax exemptions assist farmers with land tenure leases? There are farmers whose ability to access funds for capital injections was stymied by the lack of land tenure.

6.35 p.m.

There are farmers in Gandhi Village who have been waiting upwards of 20 years for their leases. Today, many of them have lost the family linkages as their children have gone on to UTT and UWI and have no intention to work the land. We have, again, strangled the growth and development because of these lapses and as I said, I am not blaming anybody, any administration, but this is how culturally we, in Trinidad and Tobago, have moved with the agricultural sector. Just to be clear, this did not happen from 2010. The Partnership administration started to clear that backlog since then but it was a very messy situation in the granting of leases over the period, the last 10 years before. It has, indeed, been a Herculean task for the Ministry to get in control of.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to just bring a bit of this conversation to my own constituency because I believe that when I stand here, I owe it to my burgesses to discuss the environment they are operating in. In my constituency of Mayaro, there lies—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Go ahead, hon. Member.

Mr. R. Paray: In my constituency of Mayaro, there lies a gem for livestock production in the Mora Valley Farm where there are over 900 heads of cattle inclusive of a commercial herd which was started under the Partnership

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Government to reintroduce buffalypso to the market with the hope of reducing the amount of beef and beef products imported, which is a key contributor to our food import bill.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, why not use this farm to develop a cattle breeding programme for the livestock farmers in the area? Yes, we know that there are some issues with that Mora Valley Farm, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries is fully aware of it, but a biosecure area can be set up and a calf-rearing scheme can be formulated as to ensure that the livestock farmers in and around Rio Claro and Mayaro, those areas are serviced and provided for. What we are doing with a lot of the tax exemptions is, it is being thrown left and right but there is no policy direction. I have not heard any policy direction of how these are going to benefit our farmers in terms of reducing the food bill, creating an alternative for the products that we are spending US currency for. There is no plan. There are a lot of activities but no plans.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, yes, we can speak about Customs and Excise duties but we cannot do so in isolation, because agro input is not just equipment or capital, it is also land. And whilst the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries is witch-hunting land “leasers”, one must ask what about those who received lands for agricultural purposes under their administration prior to 2010 and have never planted one seed to save a life? We must look at these things; we must take a holistic view and deal with it across the board.

When one thinks about Trinidad and Tobago and the incentivizing of the agricultural sector, one must not think it in isolation. When St. Vincent and the Grenadines was storm-torned and left with an economy in tatters, it was agriculture that saved them. Today, agriculture continues to be, particularly that area of the agro-industry and trade via their food crops have brought them out and are keeping them floating today. I am saying that the Small Island Developing States such as Trinidad and Tobago where seascape trumps landscape, we must maximize the landscape by minimizing the wastage and neglect, especially amongst livestock. Lease lands in areas such as Guaico, Carlsen Field, Wallerfield, and get them back into production in order to boost trade and investment into the sector.

The current agricultural incentives programme, while commendable, does not address the issues of agricultural inputs in terms of seed, some chemicals and fertilizers, which represent the major input cost in agricultural production after agricultural equipment and machinery. I would like to recommend that the Government consider much-needed relief to the sector in terms of the importation

of seeds and approved agricultural chemicals and fertilizers. [*Desk thumping*] For example, the Canadian sweetcorn is a crop that is in demand in this country. However, the cost of the seeds is between TT \$300 and TT \$400 per pound. There are some who want to sell \$2 per seed—madness. Surely the Government can do something about this and I urge them to look into this.

On this note, the Government should consider adding price controls into the agricultural input, especially where you have a lot of large importers and big agrochemical companies jacking up the prices to over 100 per cent. For example, a gallon of the imported weedicide, Swiper, prices range from \$99 to \$160 per gallon depending on where the local supplier is. These things must be addressed if we want to encourage our farmers to jump to the head of the line. [*Desk thumping*]

Another critical issue that needs to be addressed is some level of protection for our local farmers. For example, the importation of cabbage is allowed into this country by the container load while farmers in Tabaquite have to dump their locally grown cabbage. Given the fact that we do have peaks and troughs in the production—the Government can allow some importing for reasons such as flooding and so on—and because of that, our production continues to be minimal. But this raises another issue, that there is a requirement for a functional agricultural information system. I must say that the current system which is operated by NAMDEVCO is very inadequate and sorely lacking; it is of no use to anyone. No one really uses it. We need to revolutionize the use of information systems as a key driver in the decision-making process. It should no longer be how I feel or how you feel but the data should speak to what is the next move.

The exemption of which we are seeking to extend its shelf life today includes equipment and machinery in our fishing industry. I would like to ask the hon. Minister to engage the citizens of this country in explaining how some of these concessions will connect to a vision and policy in the fishing industry. A vision and policy in which this administration does not seem to have or cannot articulate it in real terms outside of the manifesto which is being bandied about from time to time.

We are providing incentives to do exactly what? Do you want people to buy more boats, buy more nets, buy more engines? Where is the market for the fish? Is it for domestic consumption? Are we going to process it for export? Are we going to cut it up and season it, rest two “bandhania” in it and a pimento and package it and put it in HiLo or Tru Valu and sell it? Say something! Say

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division, speak division but I am not hearing anything. Absolute silence from the other side.

Our fishermen have to bring in their catch from the sea, put it on a cart, roll it out in their vans, drive around the community with a mike in their hand shouting, “One slice to cover yuh rice”. That is what you have to say to sell the product. Those opposite are not creating an opportunity to move fishing into a real industry [*Desk thumping*] that can be a driver for our economy as a means of diversification. Fishing is seen as a hustle. It is a hustle for the daily survival of many fishermen in our country. [*Interruption*] Our incentives should be tailored to move fishing from a hustle to an industry that would add positive GDP to this country. No plan, no vision on the part of this administration or at least, I am not hearing any. [*Desk thumping*] Where do we go from here? Government by “vaps”.

So, I come back to the question of exemptions and incentives for this industry but there is no clearly defined developmental plans. The only piece of document that has been articulated by this Government is that the sector was allocated \$153 million but no plan, no vision, Government by “vaps” and we back to the beginning again. [*Interruption and laughter*]

In the context of the agricultural sector being promoted to be head of the line, I would like to see in the March review, when the hon. Minister of Finance pulls this nation back to the drawing board with a new budget, to look at improving the allocation for agriculture since we are asking them to go to the front of the line. Hon. Prime Minister, I am asking you to give the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries some more money that he needs in order to beg the farmers for forgiveness in this country. Yes, I am asking him to beg the farmers for the decades of neglect and to beg farmers to stand up in line and save this nation.

Mr. Hinds: Oh Lord!

Mr. R. Paray: Yes, we have to do that and it is nobody’s faults, “yuh know, dais how we are”. [*Interruption*] No, do not talk UNC, this has been around since 1950. It did not start in 2010. If necessary, if the Minister does not want to do it alone, I am willing to hold his hand, kneel down and beg the farmers to help save this nation [*Desk thumping*] and I will do it for the sake of my children and your children.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to also draw to your attention the farmer who has prepared his 50 acres of land with the interest of driving our economy forward. He is excited about all the exemptions being provided but when he goes to the bank, he now has a new challenge which nullifies his glee and excitement.

Hon. Gopee-Scoon: Time up. [*Laughter*]

Mr. R. Paray: The farmer now has to go through the rig—and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is the challenge we have had with agriculture. When we speak of agriculture, it is ridiculed and it is laughed at. So I will continue. The farmer now has to go through the rigorous and painful suffering of accessing foreign exchange to buy his machinery and plant and that is the reality of the matter.

Mr. Hinds: Can you give way?

Hon. Member: No.

Mr. R. Paray: This is not a cry only for the farmers in this country but for all small and microenterprise businesses in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Hinds: “Farmer, farmer, farmer. Yuh looking like a green guava.” [*Laughter*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Laventille West, please. Please, Member.

Mr. Hinds: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. R. Paray: Well, again, but it is okay. That is the type of respect because what I have written here today, I did not pull it out from the air, I sat with farmers in my constituency [*Desk thumping*] who are all tuned in to this channel today to listen because I promised that I will bring this before this House, to encourage the Government to put it into their policy to allow them to do their part in saving this country. If we do not believe that the agricultural sector has to save this country, well God help all of us.

Hon. Member: Devant remained so long there.

Mr. R. Paray: No, you cannot say Devant, man, this thing happening long time.

Hon. Members: For the last five years.

Mr. R. Paray: No, no, I am not buying that. Mr. Deputy Speaker, yeah, they do not want to discuss the farmers’ issues. That is what. So they throw the jabs left and right but the farmers will judge that themselves.

Another neglected area which can play an integral role in the increase of trade and earning of foreign exchange is the export of our local agricultural produce, for example hot peppers, pumpkin, pawpaw, dasheen, shado beni, to mainly the North American markets and the European Union. Everyone knows that our best cocoa in the world, Trinidad fine flavoured cocoa—well, colleagues, besides that,

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besides cocoa, we have other crops that are well known internationally. Remember our Moruga scorpion pepper which was ranked the hottest in the world, whatever happened to that? We should have capitalized on that but much like our agricultural sector, it has faded into oblivion.

6.50 p.m.

I ask, what is NAMDEVCO doing about that? Deputy Speaker, the demand for our local agricultural produce is tremendous, and can be a real source of foreign exchange earnings, but our state agencies must get off their rockers and do what they have been mandated to do, which is to facilitate agricultural trade. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this has been the longest honeymoon in recorded history. Three months later, two weeks before the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, we have thousands of families without bread on their tables. What is that to say about leadership, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Is that how we boost trade, investment and confidence in an economy by having thousands jobless today?

I am bombarded daily as the Member of Parliament for Mayaro. I meet my constituents every day. They come to my home, my place of business and my parliamentary office.

Hon. Member: And your air-conditioned office.

Mr. R. Paray: And I do not—“no, I walking de road”—I am not in any air-conditioned office. “Doh geh tie up.” I do not have one office day; I have seven office days—and there is one cry coming. There is one cry that is coming into my office: “MP, I cannot put food on the table for my children.” [*Continuous interruption*] There are those opposite who will never, they will never understand that. They will never understand or I feel they do not care.

Let me explain what has happened. What we are witnessing in this country today is a free fall in this economy. There are new pilots of the plane and they have failed to switch back on the engines after turning them off to review. So we have gone from a revenue-based economy to a review-based one. So we are reviewing everything, shut the engines off and “de plane” sliding. [*Desk thumping*] So, it may be too late. I hope that it is not too late, but by the time the reviews are over, when “dey ready to tumble de engines ah dat plane”, that we have sufficient time to climb back into the clouds. We are headed for disaster if these economic engines are not turned on right away. [*Desk thumping*]

So in wrapping up—[*Desk thumping*] That is all right. That is okay. Again, it is the respect for agriculture. So in wrapping up my contribution, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to remind the Government that they need to kick-start this economy today, today, tonight, if possible. Go beyond tax incentives and outline your plan and vision to take Trinidad and Tobago forward. I honestly hope, wish and pray that you are making the right decisions, because your success means—the future for my children will always depend on what you decide to do today.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, since this may be the last sitting of the House for 2015—[*Continuous interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You continue.

Mr. R. Paray: I wish to offer—[*Interruption*] I wish you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and your family, a Merry Christmas and a happy and productive 2016. To my colleagues opposite, like many of you, my first experience in this 11th Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago has been a memorable one so far. I want to wish you all and your families a Happy and Holy Christmas, and I look forward to seeing each and every one of you in the New Year.

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

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You have a question, hon. Member for Tabaquite? [*Interruption*] Well, actually the hon. Minister was on her feet. [*Desk thumping and crosstalk*]

Dr. Rambachan: I stood up. This is the second time you all are doing this.

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Thank you, Mr. Deputy.

Dr. Rambachan: You all do not want to hear what I have to say?

Hon. Members: No!

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I wish—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Rambachan: Shut down the Opposition.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—to thank all the contributors—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Rambachan: Shut down the Opposition just like you wanted to shut down Mr. Paray when he spoke about farmers. Shut down the Opposition. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Trade and Industry was on her feet before you proceeded to raise your hand, Member for Tabaquite.

Dr. Rambachan: Mr. Deputy Speaker, with due respect, you were looking there and I was standing here.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, remember, the debate has been going Government, Opposition, Government, Opposition. So from the time the Member—I started to identify. She was on her feet before, right. *[Interruption]*

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I give way to the Member for Tabaquite. *[Desk thumping]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. Minister, but as I said, she was on her feet before you caught my eye; go ahead hon. Member for Tabaquite.

Dr. Surujrattan Rambachan (Tabaquite): *[Desk thumping]* Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank the hon. Minister, *[Interruption]* but this is the second time—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay Members. I have ruled, proceed.

Dr. S. Rambachan: I am not querying the Speaker, but I need to make a statement.

Hon. Members: Noooooooooo! *[Interruption]*

Dr. S. Rambachan: So you want to shut down the voice of the Opposition. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members!

Dr. S. Rambachan: This is not a free Parliament again. *[Crosstalk]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members! Hon. Member for Tabaquite, kindly proceed please.

Dr. S. Rambachan: Thank you, *[Crosstalk]* Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is a free Parliament, and I have a right to be here because I was elected by the people to be here. I have a right to stand here and speak on behalf of the people. *[Desk thumping]*

It was very disconcerting a couple minutes ago—the kind of disrespect that was shown to the Member for Mayaro when he attempted to speak on behalf of farmers in this country, *[Desk thumping]* but was almost being laughed away and shouted away. *[Desk thumping]* This is very unfortunate because every

stakeholder in this country has a right to be heard through the voice of his Representative in this Parliament. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Al-Rawi: So when Moonilal say “stink mouth, what ’bout dat”?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members! Member for San Fernando West, please call them by their proper titles, please.

Dr. S. Rambachan: I would like to begin this afternoon by paying tribute to two persons whose names are very familiar in this country, and who would have had organizations that benefited from what we are debating here today, and whose lives are exemplary in terms of their contribution to business and to manufacturing.

I would like to pay tribute to Paul Quesnel and Tommy Gatcliffe, [*Desk thumping*] both of whom passed away recently. Tommy Gatcliffe, as you know, has been credited with making the Angostura brand an international brand, and spent 60 years of his life contributing to Angostura. And Paul Quesnel, of course, with Kiss and Bermudez and also in the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers’ Association. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to remind my hon. friends on the other side that rhetoric will not win you sympathy for too long. Rhetoric must be followed with reality. [*Desk thumping*] You are dealing with a very intelligent population. You are dealing with a very discerning electorate—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Hinds: Who voted you out.

Dr. S. Rambachan: And even if they have voted us out, they are entitled to vote us out, that is the democracy in which we work, and we have accepted that. [*Desk thumping*] We have accepted that, Member for Laventille West. We have accepted that, but the point is—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Hinds: And for good reason.

Dr. S. Rambachan:—they will have the opportunity to also vote you out in 2020. [*Desk thumping*] Because for 94 days you have been in office, you have been a Government of inaction and a Government of rhetoric, a Government of complaints, and no amount of political jabs would exempt you from answering the cry of those who are suffering under the PNM Government, who have been dismissed from their jobs, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and who continue to ask for some measure of relief.

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I speak particularly this afternoon in the context of what my friend from Tobago West, the hon. Member from Tobago West, was saying about tourism, that you know—I would like the Minister of Tourism to investigate, because if you are giving all these incentives to the tourist industry—even here in Trinidad, one of the things that tourists expect is quality food and quality service restaurants.

Maybe the hon. Minister is not aware that at the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development and the Ministry of National Security, that restaurants which are applying for work permits for specialized cooks, including the East Indian restaurants which are serving authentic South Indian food and Thai food, they are having difficulty getting their work permits to the extent that I have in my possession, which I am going to turn over to the Minister of National Security, three sets of applications which have been submitted—and people are getting difficulty in order to get the work permits for their specialized cooks to come into the country to cook. If you are arguing that you want to give all these incentives to the hotel industry and so on, you must also argue what are some of the impediments to delivering a quality service in the hotel sector. I think it is very important that I raise this issue here on behalf of the restaurateurs who contribute to the tourism sector in the country. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this debate today, while it may appear to some to be a very routine debate, given that it occurred in 2011, it occurred in 2013, and it seems to just be—maybe to some—repeating, repetitive—it is not to me a simple renewal of allowances and exemptions. I do not want to think that. For me, this debate comes at the time when it is necessary to increase output in the non-petroleum industry sectors—[*Desk thumping*] very, very much so.

In view of the decline in foreign exchange occasioned by low energy prices which the Minister of Finance would not be happy to hear, fell even further at the close of trading today to about \$36, which is not good news for Trinidad and Tobago. Therefore, it reinforces my point that we have to do everything in order to improve our ability to earn foreign exchange from the alternative manufacturing sector.

More than that, the debate comes at a time when there have been massive layoffs in the country, [*Desk thumping*] and particularly in the construction sector amongst others. Not only ArcelorMittal has laid off 600 persons, but industries associated with ArcelorMittal have also laid off people. People in the construction sector, the local contractors are also sending home persons at this point in time.

The economy, we are told, is in a recession. Now, personally I have great doubts about that: whether the economy is in a recession because I have always argued—even when I was a Member of the Government—I have argued that the calculation of GDP needs to be examined very carefully to see whether it excludes activities taking place, and whether, in fact, there is an underground economy in this country which is not reflected in the real GDP of the country.

The hon. Member for La Brea, in her contribution in the other Motion, referred to the fact they brought down the debt ratio from 70 per cent to 32 per cent and what have you. But the question I want to ask is, was that not also based on the higher oil prices that you got which would have reflected a different level of GDP and, therefore, a changed ratio? Or was it really due to you paying off the debts? Looking at the years when that happened, it had to be a function of the higher prices that you were getting for oil which was up to US \$150 a barrel at one point in time.

So to claim that you brought down the debt to GDP ratio by efficient management might not be telling all of the story or putting all the variables into context. But be that as it may, our policies and incentives, or what we are giving up here as almost \$592 million, I think it was the hon. Minister stated—the loss in revenue or you may want to treat it as an investment in the future if you wish—however, it is \$592 million. In the short run, we have to ask the question, to what extent is this loss of revenue on an annual basis or what have you, going to really lead to a diversified economy? You cannot speak diversification. In this country we need to make an instantaneous leap in terms of our thinking and our action in order to diversify the country. It seems to me that we are victims of our own wealth. We are victims of our own wealth at all levels, in that we are earning foreign exchange, therefore, we do not need to do anything else and we can spend foreign exchange like we want.

7.05 p.m.

Let me say again, the foreign exchange went down from where we left it in September of about \$12 billion to below \$10 billion right now, and, therefore, we are eating up foreign exchange in the country at a rate, if it continues, that will put us into great difficulty unless we have a situation where we begin, instead of just giving these incentives, to tie the incentives to foreign exchange earnings. [*Desk thumping*] In other words, to have a production centre, a reward for production in terms of what people earn as foreign exchange and how we tie these incentives to that.

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I will give you an example of what I am talking about. We have a teak industry in this country. We have a lot of teak. In fact, we have some of the best teak in the world, and at one point we were supposed to have one of the largest reserves of teak in the world, but people who do woodworking in Trinidad, their prices of woodworking with teak has become very high and exorbitant. So that it is not affordable to a lot of people who want to put in a nice kitchen, and, therefore, what the hardware people are doing, and so on, and specialists, they are now going to Florida, and going to Canada, and they are importing complete cupboards into Trinidad at a lower price than what the people making teak cupboards can do. *[Interruption]* Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like the hon. Minister to understand that I have a certain amount of time allotted to me in the Parliament, and I am going to try and use my time so that the population will have an idea of what I want to say.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Go ahead, hon. Member. Members, please. Member for Tabaquite.

Dr. S. Rambachan: Mr. Deputy Speaker, so that every time they import a set of cupboards into Trinidad to put in somebody's kitchen, rather than have the teak manufacturers, the teak people build it here, we lose about US \$3,000 in foreign exchange. Therefore, while we have these incentives for machinery and so on, and so forth, what incentives are there to make teak, for example, available at a lower cost so that we can have import substitution at an affordable price that makes the teak manufacturers competitive.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we import finished goods and we sell semi-finished goods, and add sometimes little value to it. We need, in giving incentives and concessions, I repeat, to link these with the earnings of foreign exchange, local value added, and, at this time, job creation. A dramatic paradigm shift is required. It may even necessitate a change in policy. Sometimes, you know, I think it appears that we have learnt nothing from the recession that confronted the NAR, and while Trinidad and Tobago today is in a more favourable position to ride out the economic hurdles, the imperative for diversification—like even the Member for Tobago West said, it is now imperative.

Let me say, I am not against the concessions or the incentives, but let me hasten to say that there must be a return for what is an investment for the Government and a possible deferral in other areas of services for the citizen. The key question is, therefore, how are manufacturers going to make use of the exemptions? During the administration of the People's Partnership Government several initiatives to deepen trade links with Latin America were concluded, and I

am asking the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry to perhaps reflect and to let us know, what use is going to be made, or has been made in the last 94 days of these bilateral arrangements and agreements we have with Panama and Guatemala, which have been signed? In the case of Guatemala, this means access to 20 million people, if such access is good.

Then we have the question of CARIBCAN arrangement with Canada, which remains unconcluded at this point in time with the Canadian Government going back to the WTO to have a 10-year extension of that arrangement. And maybe the Minister would like to say what is happening with that CARIBCAN arrangement, because that will have implications for our manufacturers accessing the Canadian market in terms of our exports. Now, that is important, Minister, because the Minister said here today that exports fell by about 40 per cent, extra Caricom exports; therefore, we would like to know what is happening with Caricom. And closer to finalization, of course, would have been the CARIFORUM Agreement, the EPA Agreement with Europe, which will allow us access to about 500 million people, with a purchasing power of about US \$31,000 per person, and the export of services also. So, we need to know what is happening to that, because if manufacturers are benefiting we need to know what the Government is going to do further than these Customs exemptions in order to get them into those markets, because if we have to earn foreign exchange we have to get new markets.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, and Madam Minister, the success of your incentives will also be conditioned by the ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago. In this regard, we made several attempts to reform the beaucracy while we were in office, and you made reference to BizLink, and so on, today, in your presentation. We need to reform the bureaucracy. A critical aspect in making the companies in Trinidad and Tobago export ready and export competitive will be minimizing additions to cost of production. The cost of production, we have to minimize additions to that. One of the major issues with regard to the cost of production, and increases in the cost of production, is the whole issue of beaucracy that confronts many companies in Trinidad and Tobago, right from the importation of raw materials throughout the system, from the port and Customs, and the regulatory agencies, particularly agencies like the Chemistry/Food and Drugs Division, the Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards, the very Ministry of Trade and Industry to some extent, and many of the agencies that add costs as the direct result of the delays in the system. Unless this beaucracy is dismantled, the cost of production will increase and will negate the benefits and exemptions that we are debating here today. [*Desk thumping*]

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Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2013, when the then Minister, Vasant Bharath was speaking on this very matter, he made reference for the need to strengthen our business institutions and provide the institutional framework for trade, and that requires the reorganization and refocusing of several of our institutions, which are now under the purview of the hon. Minister, investTT being one of them, exportTT, Chemistry/Food and Drugs Division, EXIMBANK, and the creative industry sector. In that debate on November 07, 2013, the hon. Minister, who was then the Member of Parliament for Point Fortin, blurted out “fluff, fluff”, in terms of her comment. Well, that Minister is now—that Member of Parliament is now the Minister of Trade and Industry, and I often say, karma comes back in a vicious cycle.

Madam Minister, you have the opportunity to prove that you will not be engaged in fluff, and that you will deliver, and you will dismantle the beaucracy, and you will make the ease of doing business better in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] While we were in Government, the hon. Minister would then remember she made quite a song and dance about our relationship with Caricom, and, in particular, Jamaica. Now, we are all aware of the importance of the Caricom market and we need to deepen our relationship with Caricom, but we need to go beyond Caricom.

For too long all governments have been talking about ethnic and diaspora markets. The People’s Partnership Government had placed emphasis on rearranging our embassies to focus on trade. We would like to know what is being done at that level to focus on trade. Mr. Deputy Speaker, while these incentives and exemptions are good, I will support the Government underwriting trade development missions in diaspora markets and other markets, and we can produce products in this country that can serve the diaspora markets.

You know, there can be so much import substitution if these incentives are tied to production. For example, why do we have to sit at a Hyatt table, or a Hilton table on a breakfast morning and get a little glass jar of jam made in England when you can make beautiful nutmeg jam, or some other kind of jam, right here in Trinidad and Tobago? Get the glass industry going, get the jam going, get your small creative sector going, why can that not be done?—and that is a big and vast market. That is just one example of many examples that can be given here, and which the Member for Mayaro was referring in terms of his farmers’ intervention.

Trinidad and Tobago boasts of the best flavouring cocoa in the world, but yet we have failed to develop an export market for the chocolate industry. You know,

in Gran Couva, which is part of my constituency—I want to take the opportunity to congratulate the small cocoa manufacturers there who have moved forward into chocolate manufacturing, San Antonio Estate in Gran Couva, and what have you. We have to help develop these people; really, really help to develop these people. You know the story of Asa Wright, and you know the story of the Wildfowl Trust, they started off with a strong vision of what they could become, and now they have become international, and tourists want to come to those places.

We have the best chocolate but yet you have to go and buy it in Belgium and see “Trinidad flavoured chocolate”, when we could develop that industry and tie it as part of our tourism industry. We must not have foreign manufacturers manufacturing chocolate with our product and making it under their label. We must change that. You know, in giving incentives to agriculture, that is fine, but, you know, you have to deal with the land matters, land tenure matters of farmers who are producing really, really millions of pounds of agricultural crops but they are on squatting lands, and therefore they cannot access benefits—delays in obtaining rebates and subsidies. You know, we must have a time, specify a time for the processing of applications. It is one thing to give them the incentives with their vehicles and equipment, and what have you, but they get trouble getting their subsidies, and they have to come into Port of Spain to do that. There is no government agency set up to give farmers advice on the use of chemicals. Instead, farmers rely on knowledge of the salesperson, and so on.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, these are some of the points that I wanted to make in this debate this afternoon, but I just wanted to say that, you know, the Member of Parliament for Tobago West, and Minister of Tourism, spoke about tourism, but, just to note, that last year, between January and June, arrivals in Trinidad and Tobago went up by 9.3 per cent compared to 2014, and that is very important, and cruise ship arrivals went up by 104 per cent, 2015 over 2014 for those six months. I hope that the policies that the Minister is talking about will in fact lead to an even higher increase [*Desk thumping*] in tourism arrivals and what we did when we were in office at that time.

With these few words I want to thank you, but I just want to say that in our manifesto of 2015 we had, for the manufacturing sector, the manufacturing on the economy, we had several great ideas which would have ensured that the manufacturing sector would have prospered, and that export-oriented industries would have developed, and the ability to earn foreign exchange and to secure jobs would have been made better under a People’s Partnership Government.

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

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Minister of Trade and Industry.

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and in wrapping up I wish, again, to thank all the contributors, and all of us, on both sides, for the support, the obvious support in approving these exemptions here today. I was a little disappointed, Member for Tabaquite, I eventually gave way to you and, of course, you did not even thank me. I was so generous. [*Interruption*]

Dr. Rambachan: I thanked you.

Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Oh, you thanked me? Okay, fine. I am happy about that.

But, listen, I wanted to let you know that our chocolates are on shelves in Selfridges in London, if you were not aware, and I think that is quite an accomplishment for Trinidad and Tobago and chocolate manufacturers. Member for Tabaquite, you questioned what we did with our high oil prices during the years of high prices, and the question I put to you is, what did you do with your high oil prices? I am talking about in the first three years of your being in office, oil prices were extremely high, over \$100, and this country really has not seen the benefits of anything that you all did with those kinds of revenues.

Member for Mayaro, you are still asking about plans and policies for the area of agriculture, I spent so much time explaining those. I spent, I mean, at least three, four pages of plans and policies. Did you not get a manifesto? As a Member of the PNM you should have gotten a manifesto. [*Desk thumping*] It is all there, and all of these plans that have been detailed in here have been made policy and they are being actioned. I articulated it today, and the Minister with responsibility for Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, he has been articulating them over and over and over.

7.20 p.m.

Member for Couva North, again asking me about what are the plans in the Ministry of Trade and Industry. You did not listen at all.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Minister, you address through the Chair also, please. Address through the Speaker, please.

Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you. Member for Couva North, I do not know if you were not listening, but I detailed plans. I spoke to plans about the manufacturing sector and how we are going to get them to ramp up their activities

so that we could increase our exports and, of course, increase our foreign exchange coming into Trinidad and Tobago as well, also increase jobs and that kind of thing. I addressed all of that; you were not listening. I do not know if there is some delay in processing or something, but I did go through that. [*Crosstalk*]

The PNM administration has a trade policy. The 2015 manifesto of the PNM included an entire section on trade and industry and, again, that is part of the official policy framework. I do not think at this time I need go into all of the details of our trade policy, but let us just say that I can identify at least a few core programmes which sit among our many objectives, and these would be: engendering the growth and development of exports—and I spoke about that—especially in the non-energy sector, to ensure that we can now penetrate new markets. I spoke to the new markets we were considering in Latin America. I spoke about the Dominican Republic, Guyana and Suriname. I spoke about all of these new markets that we were intending to penetrate extra-regionally, including the US, Europe as well and also Africa.

Then another core area under the Ministry of Trade and Industry, would be the strategic development of the targeted sectors for diversification. I do not think this is the time and place to detail all of these. We have said so—agriculture, tourism, it is all there, ICT. Certainly the Ministry of Trade and Industry will be involved in the development of these particular targets, these particular sectors that are targeted for diversification.

We will also facilitate the growth and development of domestic and foreign investments on a continual basis. I want to say that all Ministries will be engaged in facilitating domestic and foreign investments, but particularly in the Ministry of Trade and Industry and through investTT, which we are also revamping because I think you all did not think properly, when you were setting it up, about a proper structure, proper objectives as well. So in a sense it has not worked as it should have, especially with the kinds of funds that were invested into it at all.

So coming now to ask for policy, I am really disappointed in you. You guys spent five years in power, and I asked you all myself about the policies, the programmes and the outcomes of those policies and programmes; because at the end of the day, all Trinidad and Tobago was left with was an empty Treasury. That is the situation as it is, an empty Treasury. So whatever policies and programmes you had in place, it just did not work. It did not manifest into any success for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The only legacy you have left is callous spending, wanton waste, squandermania, and so on. [*Crosstalk*]

In the short three months that we have been in office, let me just tell you, in the Ministry of Trade and Industry, as with all other Ministries, we have all completed our action plans, just so you would know. But in the Ministry we have met already with stakeholders so that we could open channels of dialogue with regard to trade arrangements and how we would conduct our trading business, and how we would help traders and manufacturers to expand their markets as well. There have been private consultations with the private sector, in the Ministry as well, regarding market penetration.

The Point Fortin Business Park was opened. After languishing under you all for five years, within three months we opened the Point Fortin Business Park, and that was the work of e TecK in the first three months in office. [*Desk thumping*] We are at the stage of reviewing all existing policy and, of course, refashioning and having these policies put into action, once approved by Cabinet. We are going to do so in the most transparent and effective way possible.

Together with the resilient people of Trinidad and Tobago, as we go about setting this country on a growth path, we will be positive and we will rebuild our beloved country. There are many positives about Trinidad and Tobago. Some people choose not to speak of those, but all of these companies who we are assisting here today, they are all benefiting from, I would say, a system of no foreign exchange controls really; 100 per cent repatriation of profits, a highly skilled workforce, a competitive tax regime, low energy costs, robust telecommunications and a strategic location for market access and preferential access as well through several bilateral trade agreements. So the framework is there for success with businesses through all of the sectors that we spoke of today.

In closing I want to say that our Government will act responsibly. We are going to continue to listen, engage the minds of all, and be facilitative; to act prudently and transparently, and to undertake a position, of course, zero tolerance to corruption and corrupt practices. It is on this basis that we are pleased to bring forward these recommendations here tonight for incentives which will benefit a range of businesses and sectors.

Again, I thank you for your support, and I beg to move, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved that the House of Representatives, in accordance with and subject to the provisions of section 56(1)(a) of the Customs Act, exempt from import duties of Customs the classes of goods imported or entered for use in Trinidad

and Tobago for the following purposes set out in the list of Conditional Duty Exemptions in the Third Schedule to the Customs Act:

- (a) Approved Industry in Part A, subheading I;
- (b) Approved Agriculture, Livestock, Forestry and Fisheries in Part A, subheading II;
- (c) Approved Hotels in Part A, subheading III;
- (d) Approved Mining Purposes in Part A, subheading IV; and
- (e) Other Approved Purposes in Part A, subheading V,

for the period beginning 1st January, 2016 and ending 31st December, 2017.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to a date to be fixed. I will now ask the Member of Parliament for St. Ann's East, the Minister of Community Development, Culture and the Arts, to bring Christmas greetings on behalf of the Government.

Christmas Greetings

The Minister of Community Development, Culture and the Arts (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Mr. Deputy Speaker, distinguished Members of this honourable House, I thank you for the opportunity to address you very briefly on this festive season of Christmas.

This season has been traditionally celebrated with an emphasis on peace, generosity, humility and family togetherness. Over the years, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I must admit that I have found myself searching for the evidence that these values remain a part of the modern celebration of this season. I wonder if we have lost the spirit of Christmas. On the surface it may seem that this spirit perpetuates because our traditions still exist. The lights are up, the fruits are soaking and seasonal music is in the air, yet few of us take the time to contemplate the true message behind this festival, which tells of the joy of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Sadly, many of the songs which resonate throughout the country during this season, though possess of catchy tunes, link the celebration of this most holy festival with practices which are becoming increasingly lewd, crude and even debased. A strong spiritual foundation is critical to the development of well balanced citizens who contribute to the enhancement of communities and national growth.

Our hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley, has continued to impress upon this nation the need for a conservative approach to expenditure, as well as the importance of volunteerism and the return to traditional values.

During this season, we should place significant focus on helping the needy, spending time with family and friends and deepening our connection with God. The concept of evaluating and enhancing these relationships is a foundational element of Christmas and is more valuable than any lavish present.

As I close, on behalf of the Government, the People's National Movement and my own family, I wish Trinidad and Tobago a happy and holy season, and a prosperous 2016. Let us allow the true spirit of Christmas to resonate throughout this great nation of Trinidad and Tobago. a true Trinbagonian Christmas spirit which, as the author says, is not the things you do at Christmas time, but the Christmas things you do all year through. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you.

Mr. Ganga Singh (*Chaguanas East*): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you for this opportunity to bring greetings to my colleagues, both here and in the other place, and to each and every person and family in our country.

It has been quite a tumultuous year for all of us in Trinidad and Tobago, but as with every other moment in history, we rose to the challenges that tested us and we have overcome. In the last few months we have been repeatedly reminded of the grim prospects for the next year, on account of recent changes and decline in the national economy.

It is in this context that I want to frame my message to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. In over 50 years of self-determination, we have come a long way in defining ourselves as a nation, as a people, as individuals. Over that time some of the ways we define ourselves have really come to stand out, the things that epitomize what is to be a Trinidadian and Tobagonian.

We in this country love the energy and excitement of celebration, whether it is in sport, Carnival, religious celebrations or in academic and professional achievement. We treasure those glorious moments when we stand together as truly one progressive people. We in this country are also an innovative people who have stamped our identity around the world. We always choose to see hope and, more times than not, would choose to believe that good will prevail, even if it is a rocky road we must travel.

We in this country are a protective people. We work hard for what we call our own, and we defend it as strongly as we defend our fellow citizens. Most of all, we in this country are a peaceful, but strong people. The warm and welcoming demeanour of each citizen of Trinidad and Tobago serves only to shield a character that when tested becomes stronger. Just as we stand together in moments of victory and celebration, so too we stand resolutely in times of challenge and doubt. The Christmas season brings with it a magic that softens us, that reminds us that we should be grateful to God for what we have, and hopeful as we pray and work for the benefit of those who do not have.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, let us resolve to allow ourselves to be reborn by shedding that which burdens us and embracing that which will uplift us.

This year, I wish every person, every family, every child and all of our elders a safe and joyful Christmas season, and a 2016 of achievement and safety. I also urge Trinidadians and Tobagonians to stand tall and proud, even when obstacles stand between you and your ambitions. Do not be daunted by the challenges brought by changes. For even as we must sometimes come apart to rediscover ourselves, we must also renew ourselves and our resolve, a process that has already begun.

7.35 p.m.

As we all work together to overcome and walk forward from these challenges, we do so with God in our hearts, our goals in our minds and our feet firmly on the ground.

To my colleagues here and in the other place I urge you to return to the important promise you made to the people to be here. For there is no force on earth that must stir us into action, motivate our passion and preserve our comfort as the dignity of service to God, country and people.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish you, the staff, the Clerk of the House and the security forces, together with all of Trinidad and Tobago peace, joy and love at Christmas and strength, purpose and progress in 2016.

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

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Members, from both sides. Hon. Members, it is my pleasure to bring end of year greetings at this last sitting of the House of Representatives for the year 2015. This is always a hopeful time as we celebrate the end of one year and the beginning of another. We have achieved quite a considerable amount of work in a short space of time and it is my hope, as we

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start a new year, we continue in this spirit of cooperation and productivity. Although our challenges are great, each of us has the courage and determination to rise up and meet them.

Members, as you know the Christmas season commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ and fills our heart with gratitude for the many blessings in our lives. With those blessings come a responsibility to reach out to others in need. Therefore, I beseech you, especially in this season of warm tidings, to demonstrate the duty to love our neighbour just as we love ourselves.

Allow me, on behalf of the Office of the Parliament and of my own family, to extend season's greetings to you and your families. I extend warm season's greetings also to the parliamentary staff including the hard-working parliamentary CAT reporters, parliamentary attendants and the officers of the police unit, as well as the media and guests who are faithfully and religiously present in the galleries.

On behalf of all Members of this House I convey our prayers to the citizenry for a holy, joyful and safe Christmas season, and a bright, prosperous and peaceful 2016. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*] Please do enjoy the rest of the evening. Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 7.37 p.m.