THE

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE ELEVENTH PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO WHICH OPENED ON SEPTEMBER 23, 2015

SESSION 2015—2016 **VOLUME 4**

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, January 11, 2016

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PAPERS LAID

1. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Eastern Regional Health Authority for the year ended September 30, 2013. [*The Minister of Finance* (*Hon. Colm Imbert*)]
   To be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.
2. Commissioner of Police and Deputy Commissioner of Police (Selection Process) Order, 2015. [*The Minister of National Security* (*Hon. Maj. Gen. Edmund Dillon*)]
3. Appointment of the Commissioner of Police and Deputy Commissioner of Police (Qualification and Selection Criteria) Order, 2015. [*Hon. Maj. Gen. E. Dillon*]
4. Delegation Report of the 17th Biennial Conference of Presiding Officers and Clerks of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association of the Caribbean, Americas and the Atlantic Region, held in Paget, Bermuda from October 25 to 29, 2015. [*The Deputy Speaker* (*Mr. Esmond Forde*)]
5. Delegation Report of the 64th Westminster Seminar on Parliamentary Practice and Procedure held in London from November 30 to December 04, 2015. [*The Minister of State in the Ministry of Education* (*Hon. Dr. Lovell Francis*)]

URGENT QUESTIONS

Sangre Grande District Hospital (Stoppage of Surgeries)

Dr. Fuad Khan (*Barataria/San Juan*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Question No. 1 to the Minister of Health: Is the Minister aware that surgeries at the Sangre Grande District Hospital were stopped over the past two weeks?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Before I begin, Happy New Year to you, Happy New Year to colleagues and to the nation at large. Madam Speaker, I could state, categorically, that surgeries were not stopped and no patient in need of urgent and/or life serving surgery was disadvantaged. The facts surrounding the operations at Sangre Grande Hospital are as follows: As it is usual around the period of Christmas time it was usually done to reschedule elective surgeries, and this was done. During that period of the rescheduling of elective surgeries, the opportunity was taken to do repairs and maintenance in Theatre 2. The opportunity was also taken to do repairs to the ceilings of the female surgical wards where most cases of elective surgeries originate. So at no time was there any total shutdown of surgeries at the Sangre Grande District Hospital, only elective surgeries were rescheduled and are restarting tomorrow. I am happy to report. [*Desk thumping*]

Vital Medical Supplies (Shortage of)

Dr. Fuad Khan (*Barataria/San Juan*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Question No. 2: Is there a shortage of vital medical supplies in our nation's hospitals?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, drugs are purchased in this country according to what is called a VEN list, V-E-N, vital, essential and necessary drugs in order of priority, vital drugs being of the highest priority. I can report to you, Madam Speaker, there is no critical shortage of vital drugs as we have been sourcing these drugs from the local distributors and at the same time using alternate drugs where possible.

For example, in the ICU anesthetics, we have been sourcing drugs from the local manufacturers. Another vital drug which is required is Morphine; 2,000 vials have been ordered and have been delivered. In the case of a pregnant women, a very vital drug is that of hydralazine, especially used to treat the pre-eclamptic woman and we have no stock of that vital drug right now but a suitable alternative which is agreed upon to be used by the specialist and the consultants is currently being used.

So there is no critical shortage of vital drugs. We are either sourcing them from the local distributors or using appropriate alternatives. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Lengua Health Facility
(Pharmaceutical Supplies)

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Question No. 3 to the Minister of Health: Is the Minister aware that the Lengua Health Facility does not currently have pharmaceutical supplies for treating non-communicable diseases—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Imbert: You are not supposed to read the question.

Hon. Member: Yes, yes.

Dr. Khan: Yes, you can. They told him to read it the last time.

Hon. Member: For urgent.

Dr. Khan: I guess, yes.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, please, may we have some order. I recognize the Member for Naparima, please proceed.

Mr. Charles: Is the Minister aware that the Lengua Health Facility does not currently have pharmaceutical supplies for treating non-communicable diseases including diabetes, cardiovascular ailments and high blood pressure?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you, Madam Speaker for a further opportunity. Madam Speaker, the Minister of Health is quite aware that there are sufficient drugs at the Lengua Health Facility to treat diabetes and high blood pressure. The only drug which is currently short for cardiovascular ailment is Plavix and as stated earlier a suitable alternate is currently being used. So I urge Members to check their information before creating fear and panic. [*Desk thumping*]

Spike in Murders
(Urgent and Specific Measures)

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (*Siparia*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Question No. 4 to the hon. Minister of National Security: What urgent and specific measures are being put in place to address the recent spike in murders in the past seven days?

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Maj. Gen. Edmund Dillon): Madam Speaker, investigations thus far have revealed that the murders in the past seven days are gang and drug-related. Measures adopted include intelligence-led operations targeting known drug dealers and gang leaders through coordinated

search operations. One such operation recently resulted in the death of Steven St. Louis. We have also intensified patrols on both the coastal and maritime areas and are also looking at co-opting the use of the National Operations Centre, Special Services Agency to look at intelligence gathering to deal with the drug-related and gang-related offences.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Can the hon. Minister please say whether any of these measures are different from the spike that took place recently, or are they all the same that were being pursued before?

Hon. Maj. Gen. E. Dillon: Madam Speaker, there is not a spike—I just want to correct the Leader of the Opposition. There is not a spike in the murder rate, Madam Speaker. [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Could we please—hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan, please.

Hon. Maj. Gen. E. Dillon: The measures that are being adopted are a new initiative in a different focused manner, concentration of force at the right time and place to ensure that the operations are done effectively and efficiently.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Can the Minister say out of those murders that took place in the last seven days, how many persons have been arrested for those offences?

Madam Speaker: I cannot allow that question. That is a new question.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, if I may, I would like to indicate that the following questions will be answered today: question number 9, question number 11, question number 12, question number 20, question number 22, question number 23, question number 24, question number 27, question number 28, question number 29, question number 31, question number 32, question number 34, question number 35 and question number 37. Madam Speaker, may I indicate that question number 10 is a question for written answer and that will be circulated today also. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Could you indicate the questions that would not be answered, when will they be answered?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Certainly

Mr. Singh: Question number 19.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Or, sorry. Go ahead

Mr. Singh: You indicated the questions that will be answered. Perhaps it would have been easier to indicate the questions you will not be able to answer today.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: I will ask for deferrals for the others and I will list them.

Mr. Singh: You will ask for deferrals for those. Okay.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, I would like to indicate that questions numbers 19, 30 and 33, we are asking for a deferral of two weeks. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

WRITTEN ANSWER TO QUESTION

Coastal Protection Unit
(Details of)

10. Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

With respect to the Coastal Protection Unit, could the Minister indicate:

a) the budget allocation for rehabilitation work in the Manzanilla/Mayaro to Guayaguayare area;

b) what technical studies have been done to date in this area;

c) the recommendations submitted to the Ministry on this matter;

d) the consultants engaged and the cost of the consultancies; and

e) the time frame for implementation of the recommendations that have been accepted?

Vide end of sitting for written answer.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The following question stood on the Order Paper in the name of Mrs. Vidia Gayadeen-Gopeesingh (Oropouche West):

Total Budget Allocation Financial Year 2016
(Details of)

19. Could the hon. Minister of National Security state:

a) the total budget allocation for the financial year 2016 for acquisition and maintenance of patrol boats;

b) the total budget allocation for the financial year 2016 for:

i. the Boy Scouts Association of Trinidad and Tobago;

ii. the Girl Guides Association of Trinidad and Tobago;

iii. Police youth clubs;

iv. anti-gang initiatives; and

v. preventative measures targeting children at risk?

Question, by leave, deferred.

Newlands Community Centre
(Details of)

9. Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Minister of Community Development, Culture and the Arts:

With respect to the construction of the Newlands Community Centre, could the Minister indicate:

a) the reason for stoppage of works;

b) whether the design cost has been revised;

c) the date work will resume; and

d) the new completion date?

The Minister of Community Development, Culture and the Arts (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would like to state that construction works have been temporarily halted on the La Savanne, which is the Newlands Community Centre located on Warrick Street, Mayaro.

The second part of the question: I would like to state that the Palo Seco Agricultural Enterprises Limited, which is a special purpose company, was contracted by the Ministry to manage the implementation of the project in March 2015. However, upon demolition, a geotechnical survey was ordered and was submitted on September 30, 2015 and the official revised drawings were submitted in October 2015 to the Ministry. The design cost for the community centre has not been revised at this time. There are two options available to the Ministry and we agreed upon the one which included the backfilling to ensure that flooding did not take place and that is the one that would have incurred no further cost to the Ministry. We are expecting to resume work in 2016 on this centre and to complete it by 2017.

Mayaro Fire Station
(Details of)

11. Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

With respect to the Mayaro Fire Station, could the Minister state the reasons for:

a) the removal of the commemorative plaque (unveiled on August 30, 2015) from the Fire Station in October 2015;

b) the equipment, appliances and vehicles to be installed and stationed at the facility and the time frame for procurement; and

c) the number of fire officers, auxiliary and administrative staff to be employed?

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Maj. Gen. Edmund Dillon): Madam Speaker, hon. Members, the empty physical structure of the Mayaro Fire Station was commissioned on August 30, 2015 but the necessary furnishings, fittings and equipment were not procured to enable the station to be operational. The Ministry of National Security is in the process of making the necessary arrangements to furnish, outfit and staff the fire station. To this end, the UDeCOTT has been engaged to complete this exercise which is currently ongoing. Upon completion of the outfitting of the building and the procurement of the necessary equipment and vehicles, the stations will be officially handed over to the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service.

Mr. Paray: Supplemental, Minister. Could you tell me exactly when and if there is a date that we can expect that these furnishings will be ready?

Hon. Maj. Gen. E. Dillon: Madam Speaker, I am unable to provide a date at this point in time.

1.45 p.m.

Trinidad and Tobago Police Service
(Shortage of Bullet Proof Vests)

12. Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Can the Minister provide an update on what is being done by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to alleviate the shortage of bullet proof vests for Police Officers in the Eastern Division?

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Maj. Gen. Edmund Dillon): Madam Speaker, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service procures goods and services, including bullet proof vests for general distribution to all members of the service and not for individual divisions, units or sections. However, the actual strength of officers at the Eastern Division is 315 and presently 228 bullet proof vests are available. The shortage of bullet proof vests is 87 and to bridge the gap the TTPS has placed an order for bullet proof vests which is expected to be received at the end of January 2016.

Missing Persons (Including Kidnapping)
(Details of)

20. Mrs. Vidia Gayadeen-Gopeesingh (*Oropouche West*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Could the Minister state:

a) the number of citizens reported as missing (including kidnapping) from January to November 2015;

b) the nature of the assistance given to affected families of missing persons (including kidnapping) by the Minister of National Security and its agencies from January to November 2015;

c) the detection rate for crimes related to kidnappings during January to November 2015 and whether any charges have been laid; and

d) the number of cases of missing citizens which have been solved between January to November 2015 (other than kidnappings)?

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Maj. Gen. Edmund Dillon): Madam Speaker, hon. Members are advised that the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service has reported that a total of 731 citizens have been reported as missing from January to November 2015. During the period, January 01, 2015 to September 06, 2015, there were 576 cases, while during the period September 07, 2015 to November 30, 2015, there were 155 cases.

The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, through its anti-kidnapping unit, provides assistance to families of missing persons, including kidnappings, for the duration and following the incident through the services of the Negotiation Operation Centre which engages in negotiation and investigation with the main aim being to reunite the missing persons or kidnapped victims with his or her family. There is also a family liaison officer who is assigned to each case and has

the responsibility for the family's welfare and provides counselling and updates to the family accordingly.

The requisite medical procedures are also followed to ascertain the hostage's medical status upon his or her release or recovery. The Homicide Bureau of Investigations also assists in the overall management of missing persons cases. If the case is reclassified as a homicide, the family is then provided with a liaison officer. Additionally, Madam Speaker, the Victim and Witness Support Unit provides counselling for victims and family to begin the healing process.

Madam Speaker, the detection rate for crimes related to kidnapping during January to November 2015 are as follows: 98 kidnappings with 50 being detected, roughly 51 per cent. It should be noted that of these 98 cases, 84 were reported during the period January 01, 2015 and September 06, 2015, while 14 cases were recorded between September 07, 2015 and November 30, 2015; four kidnappings for ransom with nil being detected. No charges have been laid for kidnapping for ransom.

The total number of cases of missing citizens other than kidnappings that were solved during the period January to November 2015 was 575. Of this total, 457 cases were solved during the period January 01, 2015 to September 06, 2015, while 118 cases were solved in only three months during the period September 07, 2015 to November 20, 2015. A total of 54 cases remain outstanding, Madam Speaker.

Purchasing of Paintings
(Details of)

22. Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*) asked the hon. Minister of Community Development, Culture and the Arts:

Could the Minister indicate:

a) whether the Government has purchased any paintings since coming into office;

b) if the answer to part (a) is in the affirmative, which Ministry and Office was responsible for the purchase;

c) whether an agent was used in the purchase; and

d) if the answer to part (c) is in the affirmative, state the name of and fee paid to the agent?

The Minister of Community Development, Culture and the Arts (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Government has acquired a 10-piece painting collection of the works of prominent local artist,

Michel-Jean Cazabon since coming into office. The Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts, as the line Ministry for national museums, as well as the Office of the Prime Minister, were responsible for the purchase. The services of a local expert and art broker on the works of Michel-Jean Cazabon, Mr. Geoffrey Mac Lean, were used for the purchase and his fee was £14,362.50 , which represents a commission of seven and a half per cent of the cost of the paintings.

Mr. Padarath: Madam Speaker, if the hon. Minister would be inclined to advise us, what is the total cost of the purchase, including the fee to the agent?

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: The total cost of the purchase was £191,500.

Mr. Padarath: Madam Speaker, if the hon. Minister would be inclined to advise us of how many paintings.

Madam Speaker: Member, if I may, I believe the Minister answered that question already.

Mr. Padarath: Sorry.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: She said a 10-piece collection.

Malta Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting
(Details of)

23. Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*) asked the hon. Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs:

Could the Minister indicate:

a) whether Trinidad and Tobago participated in the youth and society fora for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting held recently in Malta;

b) if the answer to part (a) is in the affirmative, did the Government provide financial assistance for such participation; and

c) who were the persons selected to represent Trinidad and Tobago?

The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dennis Moses): Many thanks, Madam Speaker. Question 23, (a): yes, a Trinidad and Tobago national participated in the Commonwealth Youth Forum. Besides the spouse of the hon. Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, five Trinidad and Tobago nationals representing civil society participated in a Commonwealth Women's Forum and the Commonwealth People's Forum.

In respect of (b), there was no drawdown on the Exchequer of Trinidad and Tobago to fund the participation of representatives of non-governmental

organizations and civil society organizations at these fora. In the interest of minimizing the cost to the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago, the Government did not assume any liability for participation in the CHOGM, that is, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, and related meetings beyond that which arose in respect of the official delegation.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago played no role in the selection of persons either affiliated to, or representing the NGO movement or the civil society organizations in Trinidad and Tobago at the above-mentioned fora.

Should I go to question 24?

Mr. Imbert: No, no, no.

Sen. The Hon. D. Moses: Okay. Thanks, Madam Speaker.

[*Mr. Padarath stands*]

Madam Speaker: Is this a supplemental?

Mr. Padarath: No, Madam Speaker.

Prime Minister's Official Travel to London and Malta (Details of)

24. Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*) asked the hon. Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs:

Could the Minister provide:

a) the Prime Minister's itinerary for the recent official travel to London and Malta;

b) the cost for the Prime Minister's visit to London inclusive of hotel, transportation and per diem;

c) whether staff from the Ministry accompanied the Prime Minister to a People's National Movement fund raising dinner held in London;

d) if the answer to part (c) is in the affirmative, state the cost associated with respect to such accompanying staff inclusive of hotel, transportation and per diem in London; and

e) whether any diaspora events were hosted in London?

The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Dennis Moses): Madam Speaker, the following are the details of hon. Prime Minister's

itinerary: Outbound journey—the hon. Prime Minister departed Port of Spain on Sunday 22 November, 2015 on BA 2158 at 6.45 p.m, arriving in London at 8.55 on the morning of November 23 and connecting on that very date to Air Malta 117, departing London at 11.55 a.m. and arriving at Valletta, Malta at 4.00 p.m. on Monday 23 November. I wish to highlight that for all practical purposes the Prime Minister travelled continuously for 21 hours in order to arrive at the destinations, that is, Malta. Consequently, there was no overnight stay in London en route to Malta on the night of the 23rd of November, 2015. This conscious choice of itinerary resulted in cost savings on behalf of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

With respect to the inbound or homeward journey, the hon. Prime Minister departed Valletta, Malta at 8.40 a.m. on Monday the 30th of November, 2015 on Air Malta 116 and arrived in London at 10.55 a.m. on the same day. The Prime Minister then departed London on December 03, 2015 on BA 2159 at 10.05 a.m. and arrived in Port-of-Spain at 5.00 p.m. that said very day. The total cost of the Prime Minister's visit to London, inclusive of hotel, transportation, subsistence, was $206,240.70.

Relative to the disaggregation of the cost, as it were, in respect of the Prime Minister, the cost of travel was $23,476.99; Mrs. Sharon Rowley, $4,878.43; Sen. The Hon. Dennis Moses, $19,818.50; security officer to the Prime Minister, $15,346.44; security officer to Mrs. Rowley, $15,346.44; protocol officer to the Prime Minister, $15,346.44; director/producer, $15,346.44; photographer, the said amount, $15,346.44. The cost of transportation in respect of the leasing of two vehicles amounted to $12,293.12.

Madam Speaker, the approach adopted by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in constituting the delegation at the meeting—the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting—and to managing its operation, was to ensure that there are no hangers-on; no one who did not have a specific and necessary role in contributing to the attainment of the goals of the mission.

With respect to part (c) of this question, I wish to state that no members of the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs accompanied the Prime Minister to any People's National Movement fundraising dinner in London. Relative to (d), well, in this case a response is not applicable. And finally, in respect of (e), yes, the High Commissioner of Trinidad and Tobago to the United Kingdom hosted a meeting of the Trinidad and Tobago diaspora event in London on November 30, 2015. About 350 persons, nationals of Trinidad and Tobago, attended the meeting, which was held at the Chelsea Old Town Hall.

Outstanding Payments to Contractors

27. Dr. Fuad Khan (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Minister of Public Utilities:

Could the Minister state when the Community Based Environmental Protection Enhancement Programme will provide outstanding payments to contractors hired under the Health Sector Initiative?

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Brig. Gen. Ancil Antoine): Madam Speaker, the Community-Based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP) Company Limited's mandate was to use in-house registered contractors as a means of creating and developing entrepreneurs within communities. The Health Sector Initiative caused CEPEP to exceed its mandate by outsourcing contractual services to non-CEPEP contractors for construction in remedial work in the health sector. The CEPEP Company Limited is currently conducting a comprehensive audit of all works undertaken by the contractors who engage under this initiative. The assessment process started in November. It is expected to last approximately three months. Once this process is completed, the Government will undertake to provide the necessary payments to those contractors who were legitimately engaged under the health sector initiative.

Payment re: Doctors and Nurses
(Arrears and New Salaries)

28. Dr. Fuad Khan (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Minister of Health:

Could the Minister provide the date doctors and nurses will be paid outstanding arrears and new salaries?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity. Arrears payable to doctors and nurses will be paid before the end of fiscal 2016. Thank you.

2.00 p.m.

Re-opening of Schools
(Details of)

29. Dr. Fuad Khan (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Minister of Education:

Could the Minister provide the re-opening dates for:

a) Munroe Road Hindu School;

b) Chaguanas APS;

c) Montrose Vedic Primary School;

d) Lower Morvant Government Primary School;

e) Piccadilly Government Primary School;

f) Palo Seco Government Primary School;

g) South Oropouche R.C. Primary School;

h) Viii Santa Rosa Government Primary School;

i) Arouca Government Primary School;

j) Moruga R.C. Primary School;

k) Ramai Trace Hindu School;

l) Vistabella Presbyterian Primary School; and

m) Brothers Road Presbyterian Primary School?

The Minister of Education (Hon. Anthony Garcia): Madam Speaker, the Minister of Education is pleased to announce to this honourable House, as has already been presented in the local media, that all of our schools including those mentioned in this question were opened on Monday, January 04, 2016 following the three weeks—[*Desk thumping*] This was a significant achievement and was accomplished through great efforts on the part of the Ministry officials and our colleagues at the EFCL.

The most recent status report submitted to the Ministry is as follows:

- Munroe Road Hindu School: it was opened on December 03, 2015. Outstanding statutory approvals have been received;
- Chaguanas APS: opened on Monday, November 30, 2015. Repairs to the sewer system are currently taking place and should be completed by January 16, 2016;
- Montrose Vedic Primary School: this was opened on Tuesday, November 24, 2015. Skin irritation issues have been addressed through sanitization of all classrooms and the furniture;
- Lower Morvant Government Primary School: this was opened on Thursday, December 03, 2015. The air conditioning issues had been successfully addressed;
- Piccadilly Government Primary School: all teachers and the students of this school are now accommodated at the Tranquility Government Primary

School with effect from Monday, November 30, 2015. The existing Piccadilly Government Primary School structure has been deemed unfit for accommodation. The Ministry of Education is currently examining options for the construction of a new school building. It is envisaged that this construction will commence during the fourth quarter of 2016;

- Palo Seco Government Primary School: it was opened on January 04, 2016. Repairs to the sewer system have been completed;
- South Oropouche R.C. Primary School: opened on January 04, 2016. Repairs to the flooring and the ancillary works have been completed;
- Santa Rosa Government Primary School: opened on January 04, 2016. Some minor electrical works are still to be completed but the school is functional;
- Arouca Government Primary School: opened on Monday, November 30, 2015. Some minor electrical works are still to be completed but the school is functional;
- Moruga R.C. Primary School: this school has been demolished and students and teachers are currently accommodated at two locations. A contractor has been engaged by EFCL to put down and outfit a number of containers that can serve as classrooms on the compound of the school. It is expected that this work will be completed by January 31, 2016, and that all students and staff can be accommodated thereafter;
- Ramai Trace Hindu School: completion of the new school is targeted for the second quarter of 2016. Students and staff have been relocated at Hanuman Milan Temple in Penal Rock Road;
- Vistabella Presbyterian Primary School: it was opened on January 04, 2016. Electrical works have been completed; and
- Brothers Road Presbyterian Primary School: it was opened on January 04, 2016. Repairs have been completed.

Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited (Profit Margin)

31. Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*) asked the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries:

Could the Minister provide the profit margin of the National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial year 2015?

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Hon. Nicole Olivierre):

Thank you, Madam Speaker. For 2015 the National Gas Company has projected an after tax profit of 21.2 per cent.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam. Chair, just a supplemental to the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. That percentage is reflective of what in dollars and cents?

Hon. N. Olivierre: Madam Speaker, the question asked what was the profit margin? So the profit margin is 21.2 per cent. For the information of the hon. Member, the profit margin is based on the revenue on the tax. So this profit margin was based on a $13.2 billion revenue, an after tax profit of $2.8 billion.

Madam Speaker: Members, question number 30, the deferral has been vacated. May I now call on the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

Petrotrin's Fluid Catalytic Cracking Unit
(Health and Safety Status)

30. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) asked the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries:

> Could the Minister provide the measures taken to determine the health and safety status of residents of Marabella and environs affected by the white powdery substance that emanated from the Petrotrin's Fluid Catalytic Cracking Unit in November 2015?

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Hon. Nicole Olivierre): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Firstly, it should be noted that the catalytic material which was deposited was primarily a sand-based substance and presented a low health risk to residents based on the level and extent of exposure.

Notwithstanding, Petrotrin conducted an initial health impact assessment and devised a three part response strategy comprising a medical response, a clean-up plan and a communication plan. The medical response entailed provision of health care at Petrotrin's medical facilities in Pointe-a-Pierre—that is the Augustus Long Hospital—provision of an ambulance service, use of a 24-hour emergency hotline and personal visits by Petrotrin's medical doctor as required.

The clean-up plan consisted an impact assessment to determine which homes were affected, the use of clean-up crews to clean interior and exterior of affected homes in Marabella and the post clean-up assessment. The communication plan included interaction with affected residents before, during and after clean-up

activities, media releases and provision of updates to residents.

Petrotrin has indicated that all affected persons have been documented and provision has been made for them to avail themselves of a surveillance check within one year at the Augustus Long Hospital. Subsequent review frequency will be determined at that time and will be dependent on the results obtained.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental. Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

Mr. Lee: Thank you, Minister. Could the Minister say what caused that incident; what was the reason?

Hon. N. Olivierre: Probably that is a new question that—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: I will allow the question, hon. Minister.

Hon. N. Olivierre: Oh, you will allow it? Okay. Well, it was an upset with the Fluid Catalytic Cracking Unit.

Central Bank's Investigation (US $500 million Allocation)

33. Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (*Siparia*) asked the hon. Minister of Finance:

> Could the Minister state the findings of the Central Bank's investigation of the allocation of the US $500 million on October 29, 2015 and its use?

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam Speaker. In the last quarter of 2015, using the authority under the law, the Minister of Finance instructed the Central Bank to do a number of things with respect to foreign exchange. Including in those instructions was an instruction to clear the backlog of foreign exchange demand that was in the system. The Central Bank had calculated the backlog of demand at $500 million. So the $500 million injection went to clear the backlog of foreign exchange demand that existed at that time.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Supplemental. Sorry, hon. Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much. The question asked whether you have completed your investigations as to what use the foreign exchange was put—the specific uses.

Hon. C. Imbert: If so, I have no difficulty with the supplemental. The fact is that we had asked the Central Bank to do a number of things. One is to revert to the pre-2014 arrangements; the other as I have just indicated was to clear the

backlog. And yes, we received a list of the categories of traders who were beneficiaries of that $500 million. I would not want to say anymore at this time.

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni Central.

National Counter Terrorism Strategy
(Progress Made)

34. Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie (*Caroni Central*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

> Could the Minister state the progress made on the formulation of a national counter-terrorism strategy by the Counter-Terrorism Steering Committee and working group subsequent to Trinidad and Tobago's co-sponsorship of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (S/2014/688)?

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Maj. Gen. Edmund Dillon): Madam Speaker, in support of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the international community agreed to affirm its commitment to the global fight against terrorism by instituting the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 on September 24, 2014. Trinidad and Tobago co-sponsored this resolution and subsequently took steps to formalize a counter-terrorism strategy.

In December 2014, the Counter-Terrorism Steering Committee appointed by the National Security Council Secretariat prepared a draft counter-terrorism strategy subsequent to co-sponsoring the resolution.

In view of the changing international security landscape and the recent terrorist activities in Paris on November 13, 2015, the Ministry of National Security is reviewing the draft document to address relevance and implementation.

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni East.

Dr. Tewarie: Supplement—sorry.

Madam Speaker: Are you asking a supplemental question?

Dr. Tewarie: Yes.

Madam Speaker: You did not catch my eye. You will be permitted.

Dr. Tewarie: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I just wanted to ask: recently there was a statement which indicated that there are about 151 people from the Caribbean who have been abroad on terrorist activity, do we have an idea of the

Trinidad and Tobago number? You may or may not.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, I will not allow that as a supplemental question to question number 34.

Homework Centres
(Implementation of)

35. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*) asked the hon. Minister of Education:

> Could the Minister provide a status update of the homework centres implemented in over 400 schools throughout Trinidad?

The Minister of Education (Hon. Anthony Garcia): Madam Speaker, this question was listed for a written response, and as the Leader of the House said, this response will be circulated in due course.

Mr. Singh: No, no, no. That is question number 36.

Madam Speaker: This is in respect of question number 35, hon. Minister of Education.

Hon. A. Garcia: Madam Speaker, the homework centres formally known as the After School Study Centre Programme came to an end in May 2015 under the tenure of the last administration. The Ministry of Education is reviewing the programme with a view to determining whether it should be continued.

Thank you.

Moderators/Facilitators in Primary Schools
(Employment Status)

37. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*) asked the hon. Minister of Education:

> Could the Minister provide the employment status of moderators/facilitators who assist with the continuous assessment component in the primary schools?

The Minister of Education (Hon. Anthony Garcia): Madam Speaker, on December 11, 2015 the Minister of Education approved the employment on contract of 135 continuous assessment component monitors for a period of one year. These monitors are currently assuming duty and are being deployed to schools. That having been said, the Minister of Education wishes to advise that a report conducted in 2015 by the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit of the Ministry of Education has highlighted several challenges with respect to the CAC component. These include:

1. School staff, 60 per cent, felt that the CAC is not a good fit with the school's timetable and the calendar. The contact time needed to implement CAC is perceived to negatively affect teaching time for the mathematics and English components of the final SEA examination;
2. The training provided for the implementation was reported as inadequate by 56 per cent of principals and the 60 per cent of teachers. Management of the CAC implementation was categorized as informal, with limited collaboration, and reportedly unclear rules, responsibilities and reporting lines at the level of the Ministry.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Education intends to host a national consultation on education in February 2016 and expects that feedback will be provided on the above mentioned issues relating to the continuous assessment component of the Secondary Entrance Assessment examination and other issues.

Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Caroni East.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Supplemental to the Minister. Based on what you are going do in the future, in terms of a consultation again, are you aware that a consultation was done in 2011 with regard to the CAC, two national consultations and eight district consultations? And if so, if you are unaware of it I would indicate to you that you should look at what was—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, is the supplemental question—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Gopeesingh:—recommended then? Are you aware whether consultation was done in 2011 on that?

2.15 p.m.

Hon. A. Garcia: Madam Speaker, I am aware that there were consultations but the feedback that I have received from the Ministry of Education is that those consultations did not provide the requisite answers to the problem. And as a result, there is need to have a full-fledged national consultation on education where we review the entire education system. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Couva South.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Another supplemental.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Couva South. I recognized him as indicating that he wanted to ask a question.

Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, just seeking some clarification because—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Is this a supplemental question?

Mr. Indarsingh: No supplemental.

Madam Speaker: Okay, I am recognizing supplemental questions.

Mr. Indarsingh: Okay.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Caroni East.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Are you aware that 85 per cent of the participants in the consultation in 2011 expressed serious affirmative action for the Continuous Assessment Component?

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Caroni East, I would not entertain that as a supplemental question. Hon. Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Yes, Madam Speaker, thank you. I am seeking guidance and clarification because I could—if recollecting correctly, there was a deferral that was sought for questions 30 and 33.

Mr. Imbert: 33 was answered.

Mr. Indarsingh: I am seeking clarification on what has happened to the response for Question No. 32.

Madam Speaker: I am grateful and I am now going to indicate to Members that the response for Question No. 32 is ready. May I call on the Member for Couva South?

National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited
(Details of)

32. Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*) asked the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries:

With respect to the National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited, could the Minister state:

a) whether the board and management plan to restructure the company's operations;

b) if the answer to part (a) is in the affirmative, whether there will be a downsizing of its manpower requirements; and

c) if the answer to part (b) is in the affirmative, what will be the implementation process for downsizing?

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Hon. Nicole Olivierre): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The structure of an organization is usually informed

by its strategy. With the expiration of its strategic plan 2011—2015, NGC commenced preparation of a new strategic plan for the period 2016—2020. This plan is due to be finalized in the second quarter of 2016 and will inform the actions that NGC will take with respect to its structure and operations. In light of this, parts (b) and (c) are not applicable. Thank you.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, may I indicate that apart from Question 10 of the written answers, question number 36 will also be circulated today and I am asking for a deferral of two weeks for questions 6 and 18 of the written answers. Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Deferral is granted.

Laptops for Form 1 Students
(Distribution Date)

36. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*) asked the hon. Minister of Education:

> Could the Minister indicate whether Form 1 secondary school students for the academic year 2015/2016 will be provided with laptops and the distribution date?

Vide end of sitting for written answer.

FINANCE BILL, 2016

Bill to provide for the variation of certain duties and taxes and to introduce provisions of a fiscal nature and for related matters [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

Motion made: That the next stage of the Finance Bill, 2016 be taken later in the proceedings.

Question put and agreed to.

FINANCE BILL, 2016

Order for second reading read.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Madam Speaker, I beg to move:

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

Madam Speaker, before I make my presentation on the Bill, I would like to set the background on which I propose to speak. The Finance Bill being presented today is in line with Government's macroeconomic strategy geared to give priority to the much-needed fiscal adjustment, while at the same time, setting the stage for broad-based medium-term growth.

Madam Speaker, this administration, upon assuming office in September 2015, met our economy with significant fiscal and external imbalances caused in part by the dramatic fall in oil and gas prices, but also because of inappropriate macroeconomic policies. Since then, oil and gas prices have declined even further and currently international oil prices are at the lowest level since 2004.

If I digress, Madam Speaker, I would like to share with this honourable House information that I received from the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries today. And for the month of October, the weighted average of local crude oils: $45.22; for the month of November, the weighted average price of local crude: $41.04; and the estimate for the month of December is $36.05. The estimate, therefore, of the weighted average of local crude oil prices for the period October to December 2015 is $40.84.

Now, when one speaks about the price of oil in this part of the world, the benchmark crude that is usually used as a reference is West Texas Intermediate. So just for the information of hon. Members present and for the national community, I will also give the price of WTI for these months: in October, WTI, the average price was $46.36; in November, $42.60; and in December, $37.19—giving an estimated or actual WTI price for October to December of $42.05. I thought it was necessary to give this information so we can put our revenue situation into context. As we are aware, the budget was predicated on an oil price of $45, so that we are some way below that. In fact, just over $4 below the budget estimates at this time.

I would also like to share with this House some information prepared for me by the Budget Division which gives estimates, which are preliminary at this point in time, in terms of the effect of the decline in oil prices below the budget figures. The Budget Division has done a series of scenarios for me predicated on an oil price of $45, an oil price of $40, an oil price of $35 and an oil price of $30. And at this time, the information available to me is as follows—and I wish to give this House and the national community an assurance that as information becomes available, I will freely share this information with this Parliament and the national community.

Mr. Singh: We want the VAT list now.

Hon. C. Imbert: You will get it, do not worry. The total revenue estimate for fiscal 2016, $60 billion of which—and I think it is important that people understand this; that of the $60 billion estimated in revenue for fiscal 2016, the revenue from oil was only estimated at $5.5 billion, so we were very, very conservative. We do not operate by "vaps" on this side.

So that, that was broken down into petroleum profits tax, (PPT) and SPT of $3.2 billion; unemployment levy of $300 million; royalties from oil of $1.1 billion; withholding tax of $156 million; profit-sharing, $450 million; oil impost of $128 million and small signature bonus of $2 million, making a total of $5,000,000,449 estimated revenue with an oil price of $45 out of a total of $60 billion.

When the oil price drops to $40, it is estimated that the revenue from oil will drop from $5.4 billion to $3 billion. So you would have an approximate reduction of $2.4 billion. When it drops to $35, it is not a direct linear movement. As the price reduces, the revenues do not reduce in the same way. When the price drops to $35 a barrel, the revenue drops to $2.8 billion. It is not significantly less than $40. And when it drops to $30, the revenue drops to $2.75 billion. So the real issue is the drop between $45 and $40 where there is a significant drop.

So at this time, if the oil price averages $40 for fiscal 2016, we expect a shortfall of about $2.4 billion in terms of revenues from oil. Oil prices are volatile; none of us have a crystal ball, and we will have to monitor this situation as it progresses. And I give the assurance I will continue to update members of the national community and this House with respect to the effect of the drop in oil prices on government revenue. But at this stage, we are looking at a shortfall of about $2.4 billion if oil prices continue to be depressed as they are now.

Let me move on now, Madam Speaker. This dramatic energy price shock combined with the steady reduction in domestic production is having a debilitating impact on our fiscal and external accounts, and there will be spillover effects on the level of economic activity and employment. Madam Speaker, tax collections from the energy sector average $26 billion or 16 per cent of GDP over the period 2010—2014 but fell to $19 billion in 2015 or 11 per cent of GDP, and are now projected to fall further to $12 billion or 7 per cent of GDP. In order to explain any apparent discrepancy between the figures, these are for the total energy sector which, of course, includes natural gas and other energy-based industries.

2.30 p.m.

But the fact is that the contribution of the energy sector to GDP has fallen from 16 per cent—tax collections I am talking about—in the 2010 to 2014 period, to 7 per cent in 2016. The consensus at this time is that due to structural changes in the global energy markets, oil and gas prices are likely to remain depressed for some time. Together with uncertain prospects for our own domestic hydrocarbon production, it makes it urgent and critical that the economy in general, and the public finances in particular, reduce its dependence on the energy sector.

This is the context I spoke about, Madam Speaker. I thought before I went into the measures, it was necessary to put this debate into context, where we have an anticipated shortfall in revenues from oil of approximately $2.4 billion if the current average of $40 per barrel continues. So we need to put things into perspective. We need to understand that the paradigm has changed, because if one looks at the average oil prices over the 2002—2008 period and then again from 2010—2015, oil prices averaged between $80 and $100 in the period 2011—2015, peaking at $106 in the 2014 period. A decline began around mid-2014 from $106 down to the present figure which is in the 30s. In fact, those of us who study oil prices would have recognized that oil prices hit the lowest figures for the last 12 years within the last week or so. Oil prices dipped down to $32 actually—[*Interruption*] In fact, it has caused me to put an application on my smartphone that I now have the ability to tell you what the price of oil is. As of now, the price of WTI is $31.05, believe it or not. This is real time.

So—[*Interruption*] no, this is spot market. This is futures. We are talking apples and apples here. So that the WTI price that we use for reference, where we used $45, it is now $31. So I think everybody needs to understand what is going on with Trinidad and Tobago. The paradigm has changed, and this is the context for this Bill. This Bill flows from the Budget Statement and, in fact, it flows from some of the manifesto promises made by the People's National Movement in the last general election.

You will recall, Madam Speaker, in my 2016 budget presentation I underscored the need for fiscal stabilization in order to facilitate faster economic growth over the medium term. I also stressed the need for the poor and most vulnerable to be cushioned from the impact of the fiscal adjustment as much as is possible. To this end, several fiscal measures were announced to take effect from the beginning of 2016. We on this side undertook to have a comprehensive mid-year budget review by the end of March 2016, or April 2016, to make further adjustments in light of the prevailing domestic and international environment, after consultations with stakeholders.

Let me stress at the outset, because I would not wish to have any misunderstanding here today, Madam Speaker. This Bill is not the midterm review. This is simply implementation of budget measures announced in the October 2015 budget and, specifically, the Bill addresses the reform of the value added tax regime; the increase in personal allowance for lower income wage earners, a manifesto promise of the PNM; the increase in the business levy and the green fund levy; additional measures to provide relief to senior citizens. Again, fulfilment of a promise in the manifesto of the People's National Movement.

I also wish to signal at this point, I saw a newspaper report which indicated that the property tax would be dealt with during this debate. I have absolutely no idea where that idea came from. Property tax is not mentioned in this Bill, and there was no statement from me or any Member of the Government that we would deal with property tax at this time. So I just want to clear that up. This debate is not about property tax.

What I would also like to say, Madam Speaker, let me give some indication of the legislative agenda of the Ministry of Finance going forward into the first six months of the year, because this is Finance Bill No. 1. We are going to have a Finance Bill No. 2, and that, I am sure the Member for Tabaquite would like to know, will deal with the incentives to stimulate the construction industry, particularly to facilitate the participation of the private sector in the housing construction sector. So that would be Finance Bill No. 2 which we will address in February, where we would deal again with some of the measures we spoke about in the budget, in terms of stimulating the construction of multi-storey car parks and so on, and also new incentives for construction as indicated by the hon. Prime Minister in his address to the nation, with regard to inviting and facilitating the private sector in the construction of housing and land development for housing; that would be Finance Bill No. 2.

We also have the closing of the 2015 accounts from the previous fiscal year; that will take place later in this month. And in addition, Madam Speaker, we will be bringing amendments to the Property Tax Act to resolve the current misunderstandings, which I see outside there, with respect to what is the Government's intention with respect to property tax or land and building tax or whatever you want to call it. What is in the name? It is a tax on land and a tax on buildings. What is in the name?

So, Madam Speaker, I think I could express this in the clearest possible terms in this way. The commitment that we have given is that the amount of tax that persons who are owners of lands and buildings paid in 2009 on their properties,

will be what they will be required to pay in 2016. So if you paid $1,000 a year in 2009 on your property, whether it is a piece of land or whether it is a building or whether it is land and building, you will be required to pay the same amount in 2016. When I said at the same values and the same rates, what I meant is that it is the same amount of money that land and building owners will be required to pay in 2016, because I said in the budget that in the first instance we will be imposing, not reintroducing because it is already there, we will be causing the payment—requiring the payment of tax on land and buildings at the same rates and same levels. And I now clarify, and I hope that this clarifies it once and for all, because I see all sorts of things coming out in the public domain, it is the same amounts that people will be required to pay in 2016.

In 2016 we will continue with the valuation process. We will bring properties onto the rolls and we will adjust the percentages, the formula and the method of calculation—[*Interruption*] used in the property tax legislation to ensure that there is fairness and equity, Madam Speaker, and affordability and that those who are least able to afford an imposition of a tax, are relieved from this responsibility.

So let me just clear this up. We will be charging people the same amount of money that they paid in 2009 for the fiscal 2016, for the calendar year 2016—[*Interruption*] and the amended property tax legislation will come to this Parliament in March, Madam Speaker, if all goes according to plan, but that is our plan—that by the end of the first quarter of 2016, we will bring the necessary amendments to the Property Tax Act to make it crystal clear that we are charging the same amounts in 2016 as were charged in 2009. [*Interruption*] Well, we will deal with that at that debate at that time.

Madam Speaker, may I also say that we will also be bringing the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Bill to the House so that we can regulate that sector once and for all. That will also come in the first six months of 2016 and, as signalled by the hon. Prime Minister, we will also bring to this House in the first half of 2016, amendments to the Heritage and Stabilisation Act so that we can separate the Heritage Fund from the Stabilisation Fund. So I think I have covered everything. My colleague to my left has reminded me about the Insurance Bill. We will also seek, if it is possible, to bring the Insurance Bill within the first six months of this year.

So let me recap. We are now dealing with the Finance Bill, which I will call Finance Bill No. 1, which is to deal with budget measures. We have the closing of the accounts later this month. We have Finance Bill No. 2, next month, which is to deal with incentives for construction and housing. We have the amendments to

the Property Tax Act to resolve these misunderstandings outside there, which we will bring in March. We have the mid-year review which in all likelihood will be in April. We have the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) amendments which will come in the first half. I cannot say the exact month. We have the Heritage and Stabilisation Act, amendment again, which will come in the first half, and if time permits, we will do the Insurance Bill. So I just thought I will let people know what our plan is for the first six months of this year, and make it crystal clear that this is not the mid-year review.

Now, Madam Speaker, let me deal with the Bill before the House. The first clause, of course, is just the title. The second clause deals with the effective date of the provisions. We have a number of provisions here. They include the increase in the personal allowance from $60,000 to $72,000 that will take effect from January 01. The waiver of fees for driver's permits and passports for persons over the age of 60; that will take place from January 01. The increases in the Green Fund and business levy will come into force from the date of assent of this Act, and the value added tax changes will come into force on February 01.

Clause 3 of the Bill deals with the amendment to the Immigration Regulations. In our manifesto and also in our budget statement we had indicated that we are going to try to assist senior citizens, persons who have served their country, and introduce a suite of incentives to retirees and senior citizens similar to what is done in other progressive countries. It is therefore proposed to amend in clause 3 the Immigration Regulations, Chap. 18:01, to exempt senior citizens from the payment of any fee for the issue of a passport and other travel document. Madam Speaker, this will apply to persons who are over the age of 60, and this is not a misprint. This is 60, six zero.

Hon. Member: Many people will qualify.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, there are quite a few Members of this House, including your hon. self, who will now be exempt from the payment of fees for passports. So for anybody who has attained the age of 60 years, [*Interruption and laughter*] will now be exempt from the payment of fees for passports. Similarly, clause 4 of the Bill deals with driver's permits. And again, a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago who is 60 years of age and over, is now going to be exempt from the payment of fees for the issue of a driver's permit. Again, that is 60 years. It is not a misprint.

Madam Speaker, another measure in this Bill before the House is to again fulfil a manifesto commitment, and that deals with the personal allowance for taxpayers. Let me just give you some details with respect to how many persons would be involved and how many persons will be assisted by this measure.

2.45 p.m.

In order to provide relief to working families, in order to put additional income into the pockets of such families, we propose that with effect from January 01, 2016, the personal allowance under the Income Tax Act will be increased from $60,000 to $72,000. This means that persons earning less than $6,000 per month will no longer be liable for income tax. This will remove approximately 21,000 persons [*Desk thumping*] from the income tax roles at an estimated cost of $60 million. It will also facilitate an improvement in income tax administration, and it is a PNM manifesto promise made and delivered, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

The other features of this legislation are the increase in the business levy and the green fund levy. As I indicated at the beginning of my presentation, we need to spread the burden of adjustment. We are proposing to amend the applicable legislation, section 5A(i) of the Income Tax Act, section 3A(i) of the Corporation Tax Act, to increase the business levy from 0.2 per cent to 0.6 per cent on the gross sales or receipts of a person or company for each year of income. It should be noted, however, that a person or company is entitled to a tax credit against the business levy liability for any payment made in respect of an income tax or corporation tax liability for the year of income up to the maximum of the business levy liability. Let me explain what that means. You only pay business levy if you do not declare a profit and you do not pay income tax.

So this addresses businesses that simply do not declare profits. They have sales, sales could be substantial, but they declare losses continuously, they participate in the economy system of Trinidad and Tobago. When this tax was first introduced in 1993, and that is when it was, 22 years ago, and those opposite have administered this tax for the periods that they have been in government. The business levy is designed to target those companies that have sales but chronically do not make any profit, but they participate in the economy of Trinidad and Tobago and benefit from the services provided by the public by taxpayers.

You have businesses with very large volumes, very large turnover which mysteriously do not declare profits year after year after year. The Green Fund levy will also be increased. Clause 8 will amend section 62(1) of the Miscellaneous Taxes Act to increase the tax from 0.1 per cent to 0.3 per cent. As I indicated, these measures will take effect from the date of assent of this Act, which we expect to be around the 20th or the 21st January, depending on how things go in the Senate and how long it takes to get the Bill assented to, and so on. We expect by around January 21st or so, the business levy and the Green Fund

increases will come into effect.

Now, Madam Speaker, let me digress, I have been at pains in this Parliament over the last couple months to explain that the Government cannot access the Green Fund. Nobody seems to understand why— [*Interruption*]

Mr. Al-Rawi: They said it was not true.

Hon. C. Imbert: And, yes, I am hearing now that it even was not true. I think it is time to give an explanation of how the Government accounts work. The Government uses the Exchequer Account to run its business. The Exchequer Account has a series of deposits and has a series of withdrawals. As an example, there is $8.2 billion in deposits in the Government Unemployment Fund within the Government accounts. The Unemployment Fund is funded by oil companies. There is $3.8 billion in the special account for the Green Fund. However, Madam Speaker, all of the Government funds are pooled in one area so you have a series of deposits, and I can just list some of them; you have the Treasury Deposits Account, $11.3 billion; the Treasury Suspense Account, $5.1 billion; you have, as I indicated, the Government Unemployment Fund, $8.3 billion—these are all deposits—the Green Fund, $3.8 billion, and so on; the CARICOM Petroleum Fund, $240 million, and so on. Some of the smaller ones: the Infrastructure Development Fund, $921 million—these are all deposits, but the way the system is supposed to work is that you are not supposed to withdraw against the deposits to the extent that you cannot get access to the deposits.

So when you look at the total of deposits, including $3.8 billion in the Green Fund, and you look at the total withdrawals, you will see the Exchequer Account is withdrawn. Exchequer No. 1 is withdrawn to the tune of $43 billion, Exchequer No. 2 is in credit, $8 billion, so when you pool the two Exchequer Accounts together you find our Exchequer Account is overdrawn to the tune of some $35 billion. So that all of the deposits, the Green Fund deposit, the Unemployment Fund deposit, the deposits coming from petroleum, and so on, have been used as collateral against the withdrawals made from the fund. So that the Green Fund is just there, it cannot be touched, because we run on an overdraft system.

The overdraft allowed to the Government is $9 billion, 15 per cent of expenditure. So if expenditure is $60 billion, overdraft allowable is $9 billion. When you look at the deposits that have been put in, the withdrawals that have come out, plus the overdraft, it is just like a bank account. If you have a bank account with $200 in the bank and your overdraft is $100, and you are overdrawn by $300, you cannot touch that $200. I hope I have made it clear. So we cannot

touch the Green Fund because the Government has made withdrawals against the deposits in the Green Fund that as security, that go beyond the value so you cannot touch one dollar in the Green Fund. As I indicated, Madam Speaker, when we came in, the overdraft was almost up to the limit of $9 billion, it was $8.8 billion. There was $200 million left available to the Government in the Exchequer Account.

The way this country is supposed to run you were supposed to be in credit in your cash balances in the Central Bank to the extent of the deposits in the Green Fund and the deposits in the Unemployment Fund. So if you have $3.8 billion in deposits in the Green Fund and $11.2 billion in deposits in the Unemployment Fund, for argument sake, which together when you add those together you get $15 billion, we should be in credit to the extent of $15 billion which would allow us to fully access the Unemployment Fund and fully access the Green Fund. If we want to touch the Green Fund alone we should be in credit to the extent of $3.8 billion, the same amount of the deposits of the Green Fund, then you would be able to drawdown the whole Green Fund. But we are not in credit, we are in overdraft, and we came into Government almost $9 billion in overdraft. I hope that explains why, while the Green Fund is there, it has been pledged against the overdraft and you cannot touch it. I just want to make this absolutely clear, and one of the benefits of increasing the Green Fund is that it will increase the levy, it will increase the deposits and restore our credit balance in the Exchequer Account and allow us, finally, to get some access to the Green Fund.

So as you increase the amount of the Green Fund levy, and the earnings and the deposits from the Green Fund go up, then that improves our cash balance and we can get access to some part of the Green Fund. So that is one of the benefits of increasing the Green Fund levy. Again, the Green Fund levy is a levy against sales, it is designed to deal with the environment, Madam Speaker. It is the National Environmental Fund of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. The purpose of the fund is to provide financial assistance to community groups and organizations for activities related to reforestation, remediation, environmental education, and public awareness of environmental issues and conservation of the environment. So you have this $3.8 billion there that is for reforestation, conservation, remediation, and so on, and you cannot touch one cent of it because it has been pledged against the overdraft, in the same way if you have a fixed deposit and you pledged it against your overdraft and then you max out your overdraft you cannot cash in your fixed deposit. So I hope I have put this in the simplest possible terms. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Singh: Minister?

Hon. C. Imbert: Sure.

Mr. Singh: Thank you very much for giving way. I just want to indicate that the Green Fund you can only access, based on a Cabinet decision, a maximum of $150 million a year on an annual basis.

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, we cannot even access $150 at this point in time. [*Laughter*] We cannot even access $150. Okay? So we have one of the benefits of increasing the Green Fund levy is that it puts more money into the Green Fund, puts the fund back into credit so you could access even that $150 million you are talking about, Member for Chaguanas West.

Let us move on now. So we are increasing the business levy and we are increasing the Green Fund levy because we need to spread the burden of adjustment across the population. So these two funds are designed to deal with businesses that do not pay tax, Madam Speaker—well, the business levy in particular, not so much the Green Fund. Let me come now to value added tax. With respect to value added tax, the reform of VAT has three main features, reducing the incidence of zero rating, reducing the VAT rate, and increasing the VAT registration threshold. With respect to zero rating, value added tax is a major source of revenue in most countries of the world, developing and developed. The importance of value added tax in most countries reflects the need to strike a balance between the taxation of consumption and the taxation of income, since the taxation of income is more likely to serve as a disincentive to production and labour. In principle, the value added tax is meant to be a broad-based consumption tax that is simple to administer while being a major source of Government revenue.

Unfortunately, with our disproportionate dependence on energy taxes, successive governments in Trinidad and Tobago have deviated from the accepted principles of value added tax. We currently have a VAT system with an extensive zero rating of domestic supplies, and one with which a sizeable share of goods and services are VAT exempt. In 2010, in an ill-conceived attempt to reduce the cost of living, approximately 7,000 items were zero-rated. The latest available data indicates that 64 per cent of all sales are either zero-rated or exempt and 50 per cent of all imports are not subject to VAT.

Madam Speaker, an IMF study done in 2012 shows that the productivity of our value added tax—that is to say the ratio of potential to collections of VAT to actual collections of VAT—is only 0.4. In other words, we only collect 40 per cent

of the VAT that we could potentially collect, Madam Speaker. It is about half the average level internationally and lower than most Caribbean countries. We are way behind the Caribbean in terms of the efficiency of our VAT system. In the Bill before us today we are proposing to reduce the list of zero-rated items to include only those basic foods and other items that comprise a major share of the basic budget of the bulk of the population. Non-essential, non-basic and luxury items have and will be removed from the zero-rated or exempt list. We are still reviewing the list, as we speak, and any further changes to the list will be dealt with at the time of the mid-year review.

It is important that we understand the difference between zero-rated and exempt items. Zero-rated supplies of final goods and services are especially costly in terms of revenue foregone. This is because zero-rating removes all VAT, including any tax paid at earlier stages of production. In the case of exempt items refunds of VAT paid at earlier stages may not be applicable. Madam Speaker, the proposed list of goods and services to be zero-rated will be published on the Ministry's website later today. I have brought with me the list which I will circulate to hon. Members in due course.

3.00 p.m.

Let me just say that protection of lower income groups has been shown to be more effective by direct targeting. It is much more efficient to target directly persons in need, rather than to attempt to assist them through mechanisms such as the exemption and zero-rating of items for value added tax. So we are going to reduce the rate of VAT from 15 per cent to 12.5 per cent. This compares across the Caribbean to a rate of 17.5 per cent, with a reduced rate of 7.5 per cent for specific goods and services; 15 per cent in Antigua, with a reduced rate of 12.5 per cent for certain goods and services; 15 per cent in St. Vincent with a reduced rate of 10 per cent for certain items; 16 per cent in Jamaica with a reduced rate of 10 per cent for certain items; and 16 per cent in Guyana.

Just as an aside, Madam Speaker, let me just make it clear that even though we are reducing the rate of value added tax from 15 per cent to 12.5 per cent, this will not result in a decrease in the price of petroleum products. Instead, we will adjust the duty on petroleum products so that the prices at the pump will remain the same as announced in the national budget.

We are also proposing an increase in the threshold for VAT registration from $360,000 to $500,000. This increase will reduce the population of VAT taxpayers by 1,300, easing the compliance burden on the smallest enterprise and improving VAT administration. This increase in the threshold to $500,000 should not affect

revenues significantly since based on data the largest 10 per cent of VAT taxpayers account for 95 per cent of total sales, Madam Speaker.

Before I close, let me just give you an indication of some of the items that will now be subject to VAT. In my winding-up, after I have circulated the documents, I will provide further information for hon. Members opposite.

Dr. Gopeesingh: We want the list.

Hon. C. Imbert: You will get it.

The items that have been removed from zero-rating are as follows: rice, except parboiled and boiled rice; flour, except all-purpose and wheat flour; bread, except white and whole wheat bread; cheese, except cheddar cheese and rennet-free cheese; peanut butter; salted butter; pasta; cocoa powder; coffee; mauby; orange juice; herring; tuna; mackerel; icing sugar; biscuits; grapefruit juice; vanilla essence; tomato ketchup; orange drink; groundnut oil, and so on; sunflower seeds; yogurt; dairy spreads; tea; cereal grains; prepared or preserved meat; prepared or preserved salmon; crab; shrimp and prawns; cake mix; waffles and wafers; preserved vegetables and fruits; preserved tomatoes; preserved mushrooms; preserved vegetables, such as preserved potatoes, preserved peas and so on; homogenized preparations; jams; fruits, jellies; marmalades; fruit nuts; other edible parts of plants, otherwise prepared or preserved; fruit juices; sauces and preparations; soups and broths; flavouring powder for making beverages; coconut milk; artificial sweeteners; malt beverages; essence extracts and foods; spices; soya; tofu; gluten; edible seeds and mixtures of seeds prepared or preserved other than by natural means; all other fish and edible parts of fish, salted or in brine, and so on, Madam Speaker.

I shall pass this to the Clerk for copying and circulation to hon. Members, and I beg to move.

Question proposed.

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie (*Caroni Central*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

When we got the Bill it was in this version in which we had the arrangement of clauses and we had a very short two-line description of what it was, and then we had the various items and the amendments which we were being asked to debate. Today we got the Bill, and the addition that we got today had to do with an explanatory note which basically outlines what the amendments really relate to. Therefore, we had, in preparation for this Bill, to figure out exactly what was being asked of us and what would be the meaning of this Bill for the population at

large, because at the end of the day, it is a money Bill, it is a Bill about finance and it is going to impact on the population.

I must say I listened carefully to the Minister of Finance and I was not sure where he was going with the energy issues, but I realized that he was trying to give us some context, and I concede that. Then he got to the items themselves and he focused on certain issues there. Again he tried to lay blame on the former Government for the overdraft that he claims we ran up to $8.8 billion and therefore tied up the funds in the Unemployment Levy Fund and in the Green Fund. Then he went on to these items that he read and said he would now circulate for us.

So we had to figure out the Bill coming here. We had to listen to his presentation coming here, when we were here, and now we have to wait on this list of items to understand what ultimately is going to be the impact on the ordinary worker and consumer and person going into the marketplace. It is not a reasonable way to proceed, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Gopeesingh: It is abhorrent!

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Arrogance!

Dr. B. Tewarie: I think the thing that hit me most in the presentation by the Minister of Finance was that I got the impression as he went through his argument, that he himself was not convinced about what he was talking about. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Gopeesingh: Filibustering!

Dr. B. Tewarie: It is not that he did not know what he was presenting; he knew. He knew what he was presenting, but he was not convinced of the value of what he was presenting in the context in which he was presenting it to this House, and the difference it would make to the country, the economy and the population at large. [*Desk thumping*] In a way the process involved a kind of—not the presentation—but the entire process so far, it has involved a kind of sleight of hand and in some ways disrespect to the Parliament and to the country. [*Desk thumping*]

So the list of items we must now go on the website to read or get a copy later on during the day, and when you look at it you have to ask yourself, there is no purpose to the Bill. When I say so, usually in a Bill you say "the purpose of this Bill" is so and so. There is no such thing in this Bill. I will not chastise the Minister for that, but when you look at what is presented to us in this variety of pieces that have come here, some of it to give benefits to certain sectors of the population, some of it to raise taxes, it is very difficult to say ultimately what is the purpose of the Bill.

The question you have to ask is: What is the policy framework here that you are operating with? What is the context for this? It is not enough to say it was promised in the manifesto because, you see, on his own admission the Minister of Finance, when he presented the manifesto to the country, indicated that the manifesto was presented and prepared on the basis of 2014 oil prices. On the basis of that, without any consideration for the significant changes that were taking place, even as he was presenting this, in the economy at home and in the economy abroad, those promises now are brought here as promises to be honoured before the population. So what is the policy context? What is the framework for this? It is important to trace another element.

The Minister indicated what his agenda would be over the next six months in finance—and we are grateful for that; I will deal with that in a minute—but I think we must remind the population as well that the first presentation here by the Government opposite was for the budget in September in which there was a built-in revenue shortfall beyond the deficit. We stood up here on this side, many Members on this side, and we argued and said there is no way that you are going to get a $6 million additional revenue on the basis of the projected VAT receipts, and there is no way that you could get a total of $12 billion and, therefore, the deficit is going to be larger and your revenue targets are unrealistic; they are unattainable. [*Desk thumping*] So the first presentation we had by the Government was this budget, with a shortfall beyond the deficit that was, in fact, identified in the budget.

The second piece of legislation that was brought here had to do with the borrowings for the $50 billion and, basically, that was articulated in the context in which money had to be borrowed in order to proceed with projects and, therefore, it was important for the Parliament to address this issue and support the Government in being able to borrow this money. We supported the legislation, but we asked the fundamental question: why so much—and we also asked—what are you going to spend the money on? So far we have had no answer on those questions.

3.15 p.m.

We do not know what the priority projects are for the country. We have today that one of the priority projects is going to be housing, and we had that from the hon. Prime Minister who indicated in his statement outside of Parliament to the country, that that was going to be a major thrust of the Government. But it is the only thing we have so far in terms of the focus of the Government on the economy in Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, we had another piece of legislation which came here—this was by the Minister of Trade and Industry—in which the tax incentives for inputs into energy, agriculture and manufacturing were extended for an additional two years. But within that debate, try as we may, we could not get from her what the strategies for increase in production were, what the strategies for productivity enhancement were and what the strategies for export expansion were. So, we extended the incentives which were already there, but it is clear there was no concept on how these things were going to be deployed to economic advantage, growth and development of the country.

And we had another statement which had to do and which is reinforced here today by the Minister of Finance, with the necessity of dipping into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and the Prime Minister has identified $1.5 billion over 2016 and 2017, $1 billion at first and half a billion afterwards US dollars from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and this is the other measure that we know about in terms of government policy and action. And it is reinforced here today that legislation is going to come to make the separation of stabilization and heritage possible in order to make that act of dipping into the fund possible. And as I indicated before, all of this is being done without any priorities being declared.

And today we have a small amount being given to certain sections of the population, people over 60, people with incomes at $60,000 now 72,000 and they are getting small incentives, and what we have is really a piece of tax legislation in Trinidad and Tobago which is going to affect every consumer. It is going to affect every small business and it is going to affect the confidence level as well in the economy. [*Desk thumping*]

Now it is all right to give citizens who are 60 years and over a break on passports—the passport fee—and a break on driving permits. We have no problem with that. But what is the framework within which we are looking at senior citizens? You know, we had a comprehensive policy for this which the Leader of the Opposition now, then Prime Minister, articulated publicly about a silver economy that was related to the existence [*Desk thumping*] of 170,000 people over the age of 60 in this country, and that is articulated in the manifesto—I have it here with me. There is no need to go into the details of that. What I want to make very clear is that anything that we did in the context of people over 60 had a policy position having to do with an aging population that needed to be addressed both as an economic group, as well as a group of experience that could make a contribution to development in the society.

The second thing is that we have a tax increase from 0.2 per cent to 0.6, a .4 per cent increase basically affecting businesses in the country. Now it seems like a small amount and we have been given the explanation that it is for businesses that do not pay taxes, and we know that in the system you either pay your taxes, your corporate taxes or you pay the business levy. It is one or the other, but it means a higher payment for every business that pays business levy in this country. Now, it is a significant increase for some of these businesses. It is going to make a difference in cost to their business and it is going to have an effect both on the business and on the consumer who uses the products and services of those businesses.

We have the personal income tax relief for $72,000 instead of $60,000. And we are happy for those people. We do not have a problem with that. But when the VAT goes up for 7,000 more or less items, what is the $1,200 difference going make in the context of the consuming individual citizen? [*Desk thumping*] So that you are giving with one hand and you are taking with another, and you are giving to a small group, but you are taking away from everybody who has to go to the store. [*Desk thumping*]

The value added tax is presented to us as a reduction—15 per cent to 12½ per cent. And perhaps for some items it will be a reduction, but for most items, given what the Minister of Finance just read out to us, it is in fact going to be a 12½ per cent increase. And a 12½ per cent increase on multiple items in a basket and multiple services to an individual consumer is going to make a very big dent on the pocket. And I want the Minister to be aware and alert to that. I know he understands it, but he has said that this is their policy and we must understand the implications of the policy for ordinary citizens in the country.

And then we have the miscellaneous taxes, 0.1 which will be increased to .3 per cent for the Green Fund. And what we have then in this presentation here today, in this particular Bill, is the contradiction of induced revenue losses which are presented to us as benefits to small categories of persons with new taxation measures in the country. And the end result is that, when you look at what the Government has come to us to say so far, they have looked at the savings in the country to find out how can we get money from the savings to use for expenditure.

They have come to us to increase the amount of borrowings so that you can borrow money to continue the level of expenditure. And you have come to us today to take taxes both from the consumer and from businesses and basically to say this is an additional source of revenue, and by and large the policy is how to

find money in order to meet current expenditures and how to get money to spend. And basically that is what is driving the operating principle of the current Government.

These are presented here as provisions of a fiscal nature. Where does this fit—where do these items fit in the context of fiscal policy? What indeed is the fiscal policy of the Government? What is the macroeconomic framework for policy going forward? And I am going to come to some of the legislative measures that the Minister of Finance mentioned coming at us in the future. And the fact that these measures are based on manifesto promises do not make them valid, given the changed environment since January 2015 in this country and the time at which the manifesto was written.

Now this issue of the Green Fund and the unemployment levy being tied up because of the $9 billion overdraft. Now I know for a fact that the former Minister of Finance and the Economy went to meet with the new Minister of Finance when he came into office as an act of transition and on an act of goodwill. And he indicated to him that, in fact, the overdraft had been run up, but he also indicated to him how the overdraft would be wiped out. And he said to him that we expected $4 billion from TGU.

Now in subsequent conversations with the Minister of Finance he has indicated that for some reason that money was not collected. Perhaps he can explain why. But there was $4 billion waiting to be collected by the Minister of Finance before the end of the fiscal year. There was the IPO for Phoenix Park that would bring in and generate approximately $1.5 billion. And finally, there were the taxes due at the end of the fiscal year equivalent to $6 billion. When we add up all the money it was a total of $12 billion which would have wiped out an 8.8 overdraft. [*Desk thumping*] And you would have had cash in addition beyond the overdraft that was run up.

And to use your same principle—and Madam Speaker, with your permission I will use my time—if you use the same thing. If you have $100 in the bank and you run up an overdraft for $90 and you get $110 coming in, you are going to wipe out the $90. You are still going to have your $100 and you are going to have $10 more. And basically that is what the situation was and no amount of discolouration of the facts is going to change what the facts were. Now if you did not collect the money for whatever reason, if you postponed it so that you could bring it as revenue in March, which you may well be thinking about when you review your budget, then you must come straight and tell us so. [*Desk thumping*]

Now the other thing is that this country knew in January of 2015 what the situation and the scenario was likely to be. The Leader of the Opposition, then

Prime Minister of the country, spoke to the country in January and indicated that they were going to make on behalf of the Government through the Minister of Finance a $4½ billion cut, $1.5 billion in development projects and $3 billion in recurrent expenditure, and the Minister of Finance then began writing his letters, et cetera, to the Ministries in order to proceed to do that. And in subsequent statements we indicated where the cuts were going to take place.

In addition, we stated very clearly on many occasions that the challenge for us was to make adjustments to live within our means, but at the same time we could not do anything to prevent the economy from growing because growth together with management of the fiscal space were very, very critical and that they needed to go together. Because if you stopped the economy, if you halted things in the economy, you would bring the economy to a standstill and it would be much more difficult to initiate a recovery. [*Desk thumping*]

Those are the things that were said at the time, and that is the direction in which we were headed, and those things are documented in the manifesto.

3.30 p.m.

In terms of page 79, it outlines all the things we would have done in September had we become the Government. It outlines the 10 public/private sector projects which we call flagship projects, and it outlines the elements of the green, blue and silver economy. Now, why the green and blue and silver economy? It is important to understand that. Because we had a diversification strategy that was linked to seven areas or clusters. And the reason why we talked about green, blue and silver economy is because these things are based on alternative and renewable energy and sources, and were totally delinked from the existing energy economy.

In today's economy when something happens to energy it affects every other sector because they are connected, and the idea was to begin a thrust that would focus diversification delinked from the energy sector while you continued with the clusters that were already linked. And that was the focus. Look at what is happening in the world today, and none of this, I think—as far as I could see in any articulation by any Member of Government—is being taken into account. The fact that the Chinese economy has become the dominant driving economy in the world as the US was 20 years ago, and that with the slowdown in China, with the over-indebtedness of China, with the real estate bubble burst in China, with the stock market going down by 10 per cent last week in China and affecting every other stock market in the world, that a global recession is real in the world, and that it is going to take a lot more than politics in Trinidad and Tobago to address that situation. [*Desk thumping*]

Now, the other thing which is important is the business. At the end of the day development is about trade investment and the interventions that make development possible, and in all the things that we are doing we are not talking about what we have that we can export. We are not taking into account for instance that we sell a million dollars' worth of natural gas to Chile every year, but that Chile is now part of the trans-Pacific alliance, and that unless we did something with Chile that caused us to have a different kind of trade and investment framework with a country like Chile, all of these things are now going to be cut off from us in terms of a possible partner in the development process. So, we are not taking those kinds of things into account.

We are not even registering in our consciousness the fact that the US is now an exporter of energy because they have now passed the laws, and that the first shipment of energy just went to Holland, and this is only the beginning of their exports strategy which has implications for relations with Venezuela, which has implications for the relations of Petrocaribe with the rest of the Caribbean, which has implications for Trinidad and Tobago's role in energy going forward in the Caribbean and elsewhere.

So, we are not taking these kinds of things into account. Are we taking into account the conflict that has emerged between Saudi Arabia and Iran for instance, and what this is going to mean to the kind of economy we have and to the implications for recession in the world system. Are we taking those things into account at all? Are we taking climate change and the challenge of sustainable development identified by the UN and every other—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you are entitled to an extension of 15 minutes. I take it that you have asked for it, and it is granted. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. B. Tewarie: And I would not take all of it, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Member: Take all, take all.

Dr. B. Tewarie: And, in terms of the developments in climate change and the thrust of sustainable development which is being advocated by every major think tank in the world and driven by the United Nations, a country like Trinidad and Tobago has two major challenges. There are a hundred challenges, maybe, that you can identify, but I just want to identify two major ones.

The first is that we are going to lose our land mass, and you can see it evidenced in Cedros, you can see it in Mayaro, you can see it in Manzanilla, in other parts of the country. That is the negative side. But, the positive side of it is that in a situation in which water is a scarce commodity, we are going to become abundant in water because of the increase in rainfall in this part of the world

because of the changing climate. So, this has implications not only for what we need to do with our coast. It has to do with what needs to be done with our rivers and our water sources and courses—again, matters addressed in the manifesto that we presented to this country. And, more than that, it has implications for sustainable agriculture and the kinds of crops that we might be able to grow on a sustainable basis addressing the issue of both food security as well as foreign exchange.

Now, why do I raise these things? I raise these things because there is no evidence that everything that you are doing in these incentives being provided for small sections of the population, of a very small and limited nature, and these taxes that you are going to impose on the population at large and businesses in particular, there is no suggestion that this fits into any wider understanding of what is happening globally, where we are headed for a recession that we are into already and that is going to get worse, or that Trinidad and Tobago has to do certain things in our regional environment here, not just to survive, but to allow us to be able to thrive as an economy in this part of the world. This is very, very important.

And it is not enough to come and look at the way that you deal with development in the Parliament and in the country in terms of how much revenue you generate and how much you cut, and what you spend the money on. You have to do that, of course. Those things are very important. It is important to have money. It is important to spend the money on things that matter and that make a difference in development. It is important to manage the economy as prudently as possible. But, it is important to have a bigger picture of what you are doing in Trinidad and Tobago and where you are taking the country.

And I say, Madam Speaker, through you, to the Members on the opposite side in this House, there is not a person in Trinidad and Tobago who has a clue of where this Government is taking the country. [*Desk thumping*] You cannot come and say that the oil price is down and the last Government was imprudent in the management of the money, and that we are now trying to gain revenue and to manage expenditure. That cannot be the policy of the Government. [*Desk thumping*] Tell us where you are taking the country. Tell us where you are headed. Let us know where you are going.

And, I want to get now to some of the issues that were raised in terms of the legislative agenda. The legislative agenda, you said this is Finance Bill No.1. Okay, fine, so we are dealing with this. Finance Bill No. 2, you said is incentives

to the housing sector. I want to say that that is good. I have no problem with that. I just want to warn about one thing, which is that everybody who knows anything about housing knows that in the housing sector you have a high level of foreign exchange content that makes a difference in terms of the foreign exchange pool available to this country and I simply mention that if you are going into strategy for development and for creating jobs. You will create jobs. But I want to mention that and which is why I emphasized earlier the exports strategy of the Government.

The other thing is that you said that you would bring a Bill for property taxes, call it land tax you said, if you want, and it would be the same as 2009. But, I thought I heard something that was a sting in the tail there, in which you indicated that the methodology would be changed after the first instance—probably in March or April—and that methodology would then differentiate between properties, one against the other, et cetera. Now, this was the main reason for the objection to the property tax in the first instance. Because, it is not the differentiation that was the issue, but the arbitrariness and the lack of fairness [*Desk thumping*] that could emerge as an issue. And I am glad that the Minister of Finance raised that, taking a cue from the Member for St. Augustine who raised this issue publicly. And I want to say that this is an issue that is going to generate heated debate depending on how it is presented to this House.

You mentioned the Gambling and Betting Bill that would generate revenue, we have no problem with that. You mentioned the amendments to the Heritage and Stabilisation Act, we wait for that because we want to see what you will do. You have already stated your policy. You will separate it, you will take a billion and a half out of it. What I want to know is how you will replenish it? That is what I want to know.

And the second thing I want to know is when you reduce the import cover to six months, as indeed the hon. Prime Minister indicated publicly, how are you going to replenish that? Or, is this a strategy that you think is available to you between now and 2017, and on the basis of decisions that we made, you might begin to anticipate oil revenues and gas revenues again in late 2018, early 2019. But, let us hear. Let us see you present your case. The Insurance Bill, well, we wait on that, and you mentioned the mid-year review. This is going to be a very important mid-year review, because at that time you are going to have to tell the country what are you going to do with expenditure, what are your projections for revenue generation, what is your deficit, and you are going to have to tell the country how you are going to focus the country to live within its means and grow the economy.

The growing the economy is the hardest part of the equation I want to say. It was hard for us. It is going to be harder for you in this context. And it is a very tough challenge in a global economy in recession. And, therefore, this is the most important part of the equation for confidence building in the economy, and it is not enough to say that you are going to do construction.

3.45 p.m.

It is not enough to say that you are going to bring these measures here. It really requires us to look seriously at the Trinidad and Tobago economy and show how, without the revenues that had been traditionally available to us in good times from energy, how we are going to manage as a country and as a people and how we are going to grow as an economy in order to have a sustainable development for Trinidad and Tobago in the future, because that is the major challenge.

Madam Speaker, that is the limit of what I want to say today. I simply want to say that these measures, while they are straightforward in their intention are going to be unpredictable in their impacts on ordinary people. It is going to have a very negative impact on individuals who are low income. It is going to have a terrible impact on families, stretching their budget to survive in these very lean and hard times and it is going to put a lot of pressure on small businesses in the country. And that is going to have an impact, even, on the small employment that they create and it is also going to have an impact on the price of their goods and services on the consumer.

At the end of the day it is citizens that are going to be impacted on by this. I think that the revenue measures need to be thought of by this Government in terms of a much more coherent policy than simply getting the money from wherever you can to spend. Dipping into the heritage and stabilization, borrowing $50 billion, taxing people, either at individual level or at corporate level. The revenue measures need to be part of a coherent strategy that has to do with development, that has to do with investment, growth and ultimately diversification and sustainable development. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to participate. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Communications (Hon. Maxie Cuffie): Madam Speaker, it is with great honour and a sense of pride that I rise to speak on this Bill that is before this honourable House today. Now, I wish to respond to the Member of Parliament for Caroni Central who used to be my former MP in another administration. I think the country has passed that administration. The hon.

Member spoke about the green, blue and silver economy. I would just like to remind him that the country rejected the green, blue and all the other colours that they have. [*Desk thumping*] On September 7, the country only saw red. [*Desk thumping*] And the red was reflective of the country's balance sheet that we also found. Let me also assist the Member on the business levy.

Now the business levy is a tax that you do not pay if you declare profits. So once your business earns profit you do not pay business levy. So there is no chance of the business levy being imposed as an additional tax on the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance has gone into great detail in explaining the situation in which this country finds itself. [*Interruption*]

Dr. Tewarie: It is an additional tax by 0.4 per cent. [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. M. Cuffie: He has shown—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Member, please, may we have some order.

Hon. M. Cuffie: He has shown how this Bill will support the 2016 budget and our attempt to get us out of the economic and financial predicament in which our country now finds itself. [*Desk thumping*] This predicament has arisen from the dramatic collapse in energy prices which followed five years of the most profligate and corrupt administration this country has ever known. [*Desk thumping*]

My pride in this Bill arises from what it means for Trinidad and Tobago. He wanted to know the purpose. I will explain the purpose. This Bill is not just about lowering the level of value added tax to 12.5 per cent, or expanding the number of items which will now be subject to VAT; it is not just about the removal of fees for obtaining a passport and driver's permit for senior citizens or increasing the green fund and business levy; it is about these things which include increasing the personal tax allowance to $72,000, but it is also about so much more. It is about fashioning the new economy for Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, this country is fortunate to have as a Prime Minister the country's longest serving parliamentarian with the political acumen [*Desk thumping*] and the public support to guide us through this process. The rise and fall, boom and bust, energy-dependent economy is hardest on the most vulnerable in our society. Those lower income persons who comprise the majority of the population in my constituency. They face the hardest burden whenever there is any economic adjustment. We need to fashion an economic paradigm that reduces all vulnerability to these economic scenarios which we have witnessed several times in our history. We had them in the 1970s; we had them in the 1980s; we had them in the 1990s; we had it again in the 2009 and here we are again.

Regardless of whether energy prices rise or fall we need to understand that our economic policies, the way we as a country seek to create wealth and distribute it across Trinidad and Tobago, that economic policy is no longer sustainable. It is important for my constituents of La Horquetta/Talparo that it is changed. For it is the only way we will be able to mobilize the resources required to bring the real development which the country needs. What this Bill is about is fashioning that new economic paradigm for Trinidad and Tobago. This Bill is about the creation of a new economy where we eliminate wastage and promote efficiency in every aspect of Trinidad and Tobago economic life. [*Desk thumping*]

I am happy to support the Minister of Finance in this Bill which seeks to support the 2016 budget that ushers in this new economic era. Under the existing paradigm, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago relies heavily on taxes collected from gas and oil companies for the money to make investments in the economy and run the country.

Unfortunately, as the Prime Minister pointed out in his address to the nation two weeks ago, and has been restated by the Minister of Finance today, these gas and oil companies have been earning smaller revenues for the last year and a half. Oil prices have fallen about 70 per cent since 2014. Back then the price of oil was $110 a barrel. A barrel now sells for $33.

Mr. Imbert: Thirty-one dollars.

Hon. M. Cuffie: Thirty-one dollars I am being informed. That is the situation we now find ourselves in today. Imagine if you wake up one morning—$31.42, I stand corrected, imagine if you wake up one morning and find your income cut by 70 per cent, how will you be able to live, pay your mortgage, pay your car instalment, clothe and feed your children? That is the problem we face as a country. And the average citizen in Trinidad and Tobago, certainly those in La Horquetta/Talparo do not have the deep reserves of savings, I suspect that some of the Members opposite were able to accumulate while they were in government. [*Desk thumping*] And I am quite sure legitimately so.

Faced with that kind of situation, you could take the position as articulated by the Member for Siparia when she held the office of the Prime Minister, "that God is a Trini", that gas and oil prices will not fall forever and despite the fact that both gas and oil production are declining locally, somehow we will have another energy boom. We will just have to sit and wait it out and not make any adjustments to the economy and things will miraculously return to normal. That is a position deeply engrained in their political philosophy.

Let me give you an example. Last Saturday I was visited by one of my constituents who had been an employee of Hearty Foods, the supermarket which was burnt down in Arima last year. The gentleman was trying to find out what had happened to the $5,000 that was promised by the Prime Minister for the employees after last year. I told him I will be in the House today and I would ask the Member for Siparia who announced the initiative with great fanfare—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: "You in charge." [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. M. Cuffie: Although she knew or ought to have known—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Members, Members! May we have some order, please?

Hon. M. Cuffie: She knew that the country could not afford it. You see, Madam Speaker, what the action did was to create what economists call a moral hazard. That is, a lack of incentive to guard against with when one is protected from its consequences. It is started off with one fire at Hearty Foods and then included retroactively another previous fire at MDC-UM which occurred about a month before. Now that would have meant that any time your business suffered a similar loss the Government will have to bail you out and bail out your employees. That was their idea of good economic and social policy. Saving businesses from having to take care of their employees and in the case of fire or other priors normally covered by insurance.

Dr. Rowley: It is called the "Kamla 2015".

Hon. M. Cuffie: It is a policy based solely on political expediency. We were on the eve of a general election and there was not a care for what will happen in the future. So that although they have demitted office there has been no attempt to examine what was right or how they got it wrong or to do any kind of self-searching. That is why the Member for Caroni Central can come today and still be talking about green, blue and whatever colour economy.

Now, when we were in a similar position, we took time off, we reengineered our party, we changed our constitution and we faced the public afresh. They still do not even have a proper constitution. They do not have a home. They have no party structures. It is why they are incapable of planning for the future. Their only focus is the present. Now that we are back in office we intend to do the same thing to bring real change to the governance process. We have an engineer to reengineer the economy. [*Desk thumping*]

4.00 p.m.

We have already made the Government leaner by reducing the number of ministries by 10. That move will pay dividends long into the future. We have put policies in place to reduce the cost of official travel, to make the use of Government vehicles more efficient. And just as we are reshaping Government, we are also reshaping the economy to ensure our collection of taxes become more efficient, and that is the point of this Bill today.

We on this side know that any country that relies heavily on foreign exchange earned from gas and oil to balance its budget is in deep trouble. We also know that in Trinidad and Tobago both prices and production are in steep decline. To make matters worse, the Trinidad and Tobago economy experienced four consecutive quarters of decline in real GDP in 2015. Now, whether you want to call it a recession, contraction, downturn, we need to take action. Trinidad and Tobago is not earning the kind of income it used to. People have a harder time keeping or finding jobs and they are all making less money.

Additionally, Madam Speaker, it is not just energy prices and production that are falling. Even in the non-oil sector there are challenges. The World Bank recently reported in its Global Economic Prospects in Chapter 4 on Trade that global trade now grows by 3.4 per cent per year. Just five years ago, in 2010, global trade was growing by 13.5 per cent a year. The world is changing. Internationally, people are buying less from each other. This cannot be good news for our local exporters at this time.

So that between the reduced revenues from oil and gas, the local contraction and the global economic slow-down, Trinidad and Tobago faces several challenges ahead. My constituents are facing several challenges. All of the structural deficiencies in our economy will necessarily become more exposed. But while many are seeing this as an economic crisis, we on this side are seeing it as an opportunity. It is an opportunity to begin real economic reform, while at the same time changing how we, as a Government, do business.

Madam Speaker, I have great confidence in the Minister of Finance's ability to reengineer this economy so that we can avoid the problems we are just emerging from. Going forward, our policies must reflect corrupt economic principles. This is the only way we can mitigate and permanently reverse the ill-effects of the current downturn. It is the only way we will be able to reduce the vulnerability of our economy in the future to the kind of economic shock now being experienced.

We are not traversing virgin territory here. Other formerly mineral-rich countries have been able to overcome precisely the kind of crisis we now face by adopting measures to transform their economies. I heard the Member for Caroni Central mention Chile. In a 2010 lecture by economist Alan Guelph, which was reproduced in the *Centre for Global Development Journal*, the examples of Chile and Indonesia demonstrate that even mineral-rich countries like Trinidad and Tobago can experience windows of opportunity for good management which leads them to diversification. Let me repeat that. Even mineral-rich countries with a history of instability and fractious politics can experience windows of opportunity for good management to lead them towards diversification.

Madam Speaker, on September 07, by the election of the PNM to Government, Trinidad and Tobago took the first step in creating that window of opportunity for good management that leads towards diversification. [*Desk thumping*] The second step in ensuring good management that leads towards diversification, according to Guelph is also ensuring that we have good management in our state enterprises and at the Central Bank. This was an important element in Chile's ability to diversify from a mineral-dependent economy to a diversified one, and I am sure my friend from Caroni Central recognizes that.

So we need to ensure that we have the appropriate persons with the appropriate qualifications and experience leading the companies and organizations that are our key economic drivers. You cannot diversify an economy by putting your key institutions in the hands of people with false papers, or on-the-job trainees, as those on the other side tried to do. A key element in the transformation of the economy is getting the right people in the right jobs. It is the strategy which economists agree was very useful in Chile.

Madam Speaker, I am proud to say that not one official appointed under this administration has had his or her academic qualifications challenged. [*Desk thumping*] I think we can all agree, even those on the other side, that we finally have good people, qualified people, at the helm of the state enterprises and, importantly, at the Central Bank. [*Desk thumping*]

Let me give you an idea of the kinds of problems that were faced in Chile. According to Guelph, in the case of Chile, sustaining those policies required continuous efforts by the technocracy to reach out to elected officials and explain the implications of overspending. That is precisely what we are doing today in this Parliament. I keep hearing those on the other side complaining of the many consultations we have been having. They do not realize that this is an important part of building the consensus that is key to obtaining our economic objectives.

[*Desk thumping*] The only way we can diversify the economy is if we have the kind of buy-in from all sectors of the country for the direction in which we want to go.

The Ministry of Communications intends to be at the forefront of the communications process to ensure we get the buy-in from the population for the transformation process to succeed. I will not be distracted by the Member for San Juan/Barataria at any point. [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Members, may I remind you all of the provisions of Standing Order 53(1)(f) about engaging in excessive crosstalk.

Hon. M. Cuffie: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Trinidad and Tobago was never as badly off as either Chile or Indonesia and we do not have to take the kind of hard measures which they had to embrace. We saw us having oil and gas as not necessarily a bad thing, and Trinidad and Tobago has managed to avoid some of the worst aspects of the oil curse. Most countries that depend on oil and natural gas have weak institutions. Apart from leaving their economies vulnerable to the oil pricing, they tend to be less democratic, more susceptible to civil wars and more economically under-developed. Our performance relative to other oil-dependent nations is good and we should realize that we have the potential stability necessary to undertake true economic reform, and the population, on September 07, responded to our call that we should do this together.

With that said, the Government, led by the Member for Diego Martin West, has outlined a clear path, and I will restate it for the benefit of the Member for Caroni Central. We intend to incur less spending within Government Ministries, and even for Christmas we put a limit of $150 per person for Christmas parties or end of year parties. We have revised the arrangement for overseas travel and we have now put in a 7½ per cent cut across the board. We have less unnecessary and inefficient spending across the state sector.

We intend to use the Stabilisation Fund, supplemented by borrowing to facilitate necessary, inescapable payments and targeted investments. We intend to increase tax collection by the measures that we have today in this Finance Bill. And while we do these things, we are also targeting the unemployed, the poor, the vulnerable and disadvantaged citizens which we do in this Finance Bill by the measures aimed at removing the cost of passports and driver's permits for senior citizens.

Madam Speaker, the increase in the number of items subject to VAT, while lowering the VAT rate, will ensure that value added tax will now make a greater

contribution to the economy of Trinidad and Tobago in the foreseeable future and, to some extent, compensate for the fall in oil prices. But even as we do that, we ensure that the welfare of the most vulnerable is protected as we send a signal to our seniors that regardless of how bad things get, we have their backs. They can depend on this Government to protect their interest. [*Desk thumping*]

It is important this the Government protects the poor and vulnerable, even as it moves to increase revenue from areas where there has traditionally been high levels of tax avoidance and even evasion. We must all pay our way. We all know how we got here. Perennial budgetary expenditure that focused more on politics than economics has left us with an economy which cannot sustain the life to which we have grown accustomed. Money kept being thrown after every political problem, ignoring the fact that we were creating even greater economic ones.

4.15 p.m.

The Prime Minister had outlined a clear strategy to conserve foreign exchange, reduce expenditure and increase revenue collection. This was the focus when he addressed the nation two weeks ago. I am assured that my constituents in La Horquetta/Talparo are in full support of the Prime Minister's statement, are in full support of the budget delivered earlier this year and of this Bill which would bring this new economic paradigm. Some of the revenue raised in the methods that we are seeking to approve here today will contribute to the housing initiative announced by the Prime Minister two weeks ago, and which the Member for Caroni Central referred to, as one of key drivers for revamping the economy.

Madam Speaker, 30 per cent of the, approximately, 800 people who have visited my office over the last three months as the MP for La Horquetta/Talparo are in search of an HDC house, and if we add to that those who are seeking assistance in housing-related land issues and infrastructure support the figure can easily cross 50 per cent. Housing is the single largest problem in my constituency and I have heard similar reports from all of my colleagues. Any measure which will assist the Government in responding to the overwhelming cry of the population for assistance, while boosting the economy and providing employment, is to be applauded.

The second most pressing issue for those who seek my assistance, as MP for La Horquetta/Talparo, is unemployment. Of those visiting the office, 13.7 per cent come seeking employment. In our effort to solve the housing problem I feel happy that we will also be able to make a significant dent in the unemployment situation since in La Horquetta/Talparo we have a large population of contractors, tradesmen and labourers in the constituency.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, your speaking time has expired. Might I ask if you will need more than 10 minutes?

Hon. M. Cuffie: Thank you. Just 10 minutes. Madam Speaker, this Bill will give effect to some of the measures announced in the 2016 budget and will speak to the vision for the economy articulated by the Prime Minister in his address two weeks ago. It is a demonstration that we have a plan to raise the revenue that will assist us in getting the economy back on track, and we will do this together. I feel proud to support this Bill on behalf of the 26,031 constituents of La Horquetta/Talparo.

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

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, might I suggest that we break now and resume in the next 30 minutes.

4.18 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

4.50 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Good afternoon. I recognize the Member for Tabaquite. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Surujrattan Rambachan (*Tabaquit*e): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Let me also extend New Year greetings to my constituents and to all Members of the House.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo spoke a while ago he said that he was sure, he was certain, that his constituents were going to be in full support of the measures that this punishment-centred Government is bringing to the House today. This is what is happening here today. The people are being punished by the PNM for the support they gave to them in the election. That is what is happening—[*Desk thumping*]—and you will see in my contribution, I will point out in my contribution. He said they will support him.

Now, I really wonder, after they have had an opportunity to read the full list of the items removed from Schedule 2 in the zero-rating, whether they in fact are still going to support him in terms of the claim he made that they will support the measures being brought here. Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are some contradictions in the entire list that has been presented here today. For example, the poor man in this country, who enjoys his salt fish and rice, now he has to pay VAT on salt fish. It is here in the list of items removed from the Schedule. All

other fish and edible parts of fish, salted or in brine. Salt fish has always been regarded as a support food for the poor man in this country and what you are doing now is you are putting 12.5 per cent on salt fish, but on the other hand dog chow has gone down by 2.5 per cent in VAT. So you want to know whether the animal kingdom now is worth more than human beings in this country under the PNM. [*Desk thumping*] That is what you want to do.

Mr. Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption*] "Doh trouble meh, eh; do not trouble meh. You doh want me to trouble you, so doh trouble me, all right." Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the list of items, alcoholic beverages have now benefited from the reduction in VAT. They are down by 2.5 per cent. So the elite in the society who can buy $450 bottle of champagne or $2,000 bottle of champagne or Blue Label or what have you, they are benefitting now from this reduction in VAT and luxury items. But when you read the list of things that have been removed from the Schedule, mauby is now subject to VAT, orange juice is subject to VAT and your beautiful cup of coffee in the morning is now subject to 12.5 per cent VAT. [*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: Tea too.

Dr. S. Rambachan:—and tea also. Tea also.

So while you think that they are telling you that you are getting a good deal by maintaining some of the zero-rated items, on the other hand they are preparing the ground to support the elite in the society—their big time friends—the ones whom they are now hobnobbing with in cocktail parties, [*Desk thumping*] the same ones who they said before the election they could not stomach, those are the same ones now they are planning for how they are going to benefit, and they are putting the pressure on the little man in the society. [*Desk thumping*]

You see, for example, you have people buying million dollar cars in this country. I would have thought if you are really serious about raising revenue you would not want to tax the little man, you will want to tax the rich. You want to make sure that the little man does not suffer any further, but you reduced the VAT on all the vehicles and you bring it down by 2.5 per cent. So you leave the rich a little more money in their pocket, but what you also do at the same time is that you go on page 14 of the list of items removed from the Schedule and you removed vehicles that did not have motor vehicle tax and VAT, the CNG vehicle that a man could have gone and bought for $150,000—the Civic, I think it was. Now he cannot buy it. Now it is subject to VAT and it is subject to taxes.

Hon. Member: Parliamentary unfriendly.

Dr. S. Rambachan: This is the point and that is the contradiction I am talking about. On the one hand you are saying "oh we are for the green economy and we are for the environment" and what have you, and here was a measure which was intended to help with pollution in the environment and you lick it down. [*Desk thumping*] You lick it down—because it gives a truth to what we have been saying that you do not know what you are doing. You have no plan, [*Desk thumping*] you have no vision, you have nothing in terms of where you are carrying—

You know, if you look at the faces of our colleagues on the other side today when the Minister of Finance was speaking, you would recognize that they were all lost because they are just biding their time and going along. That is all they are doing because they have nothing concrete to say about how to reconstruct the economy.

The Member for La Horquetta/Talparo can get up a million times and say he is not going to answer question from the Opposition, but I tell you the real power lies in the hands of the people. And as of today [*Desk thumping*] they will have to begin to answer the questions from the people who are going to ask why are you punishing us by putting [*Desk thumping*] VAT on salt fish once again. But not only salt fish you know. Some basic foods that people eat: tuna, mackerel— [*Interruption*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Salt.

Dr. S. Rambachan: Salt. Table salt, you put VAT on. I mean tuna, mackerel and so on, but tuna in particular, cans of tuna, people buy that now. They make sandwiches and give it to their children to carry to school. That is not enough you know. If you look at it down here again, VAT is now going to have to be paid on anchar and kuchela and pepper sauce.

More than that, those of you who are vegetarians, the cost of being a vegetarian has suddenly increased by a minimum of 12.5 per cent because it is going to cost you more now to be a vegetarian in this country given what is there now in terms of what you have to pay. So, for example, soya, tofu, vegetarian meat substitutes in any form, flavoured or unflavoured, otherwise prepared or preserved whether or not dried or mixed with vegetable for consumption, people who are vegetarians trying to be a little more healthy, you too are being punished by this wicked PNM Government in this country. [*Desk thumping*]

I would have liked to take my entire 45 minutes and go through this list so that the people of this country will know what they are receiving today from the PNM.

Fresh butter, peanut butter, bread, except white and wholewheat bread; flour, except all-purpose and wheat flour. So cassava flour which we are trying to encourage people to use—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Al Rawi: Standing Order 48(6). [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, I rule. Proceed. Kindly proceed.

Dr. S. Rambachan: I did not say a wicked Attorney General. I have enough respect for the Attorney General. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what you are seeing here are measures which have implications for the cost of living of the average citizen in this country, for the business community in terms of the additional cost of doing business and hence for the overall quality of life of our fellow citizens. Because what is happening here with all of these additions to the list of VATable items, the bakeries, the groceries, people who are doing processed food, people making buns, making coconut bake and so on to sell, all of that is going to go up in the country now.

There is going to be an impact also on your restaurant bills. So those of you who are accustomed going out and eating a little bit and so on, buying a roti and what have you, buying a sandwich, all of that is going to go up right now.

5.00 p.m.

And the burden upon the citizen as a result of this piece of legislation will be in the increase in the cost of food, the increase in compulsory taxes due to the return of the land and building taxes which is—I want to remind people—only until 2016. But the real taxes, the real property tax, the Minister of Finance indicated, the recalculations will come in 2017 so you are not exempt. [*Desk thumping*] And you know what is worse? These additional burdens are coming at a time when families who are the backbone of the society are already under pressure as a result of other services and allowances being denied to them and their children.

Earlier today, we had a question posed in the House and there was a response given in written form:

> "Could the Minister indicate whether Form 1 secondary school students for the academic year 2015/2016 will be provided with laptops and the distribution date?"

And in the written answer circulated:

> "The Ministry of Education is collecting information on the laptop distribution initiative undertaken during the period 2010 to 2014 and is reviewing studies

> both locally and internationally, many of which indicate…there is no evidence to suggest…the distribution of laptops to students has improved student performance."

I wonder if this is why our students have done so well across the Caribbean and winning all the prizes and so on. [*Desk thumping*] And:

> "As a consequence, the Ministry of Education"—is—"seeking the views of stakeholders as to the best way forward utilizing technology in the curriculum at a Consultation on Education…February 2016…"

Children of the country, parents of the country, wave goodbye to your computers that you got under the People's Partnership Government. [*Desk thumping*] Wave goodbye. So that the poor CEPEP worker and the poor URP worker who could not buy a computer unless they save money for about a year to a year and a half, who got a computer so that it could be in their home where their child could learn the new technologies and be part of the global competitive communities, that child no longer has that opportunity. [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: And now 12.5 per cent VAT for computers.

Dr. S. Rambachan: Yes, and 12.5 per cent VAT is now being placed on computers. The digital revolution of Trinidad and Tobago that was started by the PP Government has gone. [*Desk thumping*]

What are you doing to your human resource potential when in a knowledge-driven global environment, your people cannot compete? You are driving them back to the dark ages; that is what you are doing today. Is that what they got for voting PNM? Is that what you mean by red and ready? Red is a dangerous colour [*Desk thumping*] and the PNM is a dangerous institution when it comes to the people. "They like scissors", cutting everything. Cut, cut, cut, cut, cutting everything. Yeah, Scissor hands. Like Scissor hands, cutting everything.

Dr. Khan: "Was like razor blade", cutting on both sides.

Dr. S. Rambachan: Mr. Deputy Speaker, children are not receiving book grants but you are putting 12.5 per cent on computers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please give your colleague the opportunity to make his contribution, he is doing a good job. [*Laughter*] Please, please, "he doh need no assistance".

Dr. S. Rambachan: In addition to all of the denials, the PNM denials, in terms of what the people should be getting, we have the hon. Minister of Education, Member of Parliament for Arima, in the *Trinidad Guardian* of January 01—first day of the year this is published, eh, first day— "Scholarships to be cut by 15 per cent".

Yesterday, you know, I sat down with a gentleman. He had a broken leg and he came to get some work so he could feed himself and I was speaking to him. He said to me, "You know, my daughter is at the university and do you know she benefited from a computer that one of my other children got when they got into Form 1 and she was able to use?" Why are you destroying the human potential and resources of your country by these very punitive measures? What will happen to the knowledge economy which you, yourself, boasted about but which you have done—everything you are doing now is to destroy that knowledge economy and destroy your competitiveness as a nation? [*Desk thumping*] The Minister of Education, to quote the article by Rhondor Dowlat, he said:

"…scholarships"—will be cut— "by 15% in 2016."

He admitted that there was need for discussion but—

"The…cap will reside in the area of about 400…" people.

You know what, in 2015, our Government, the Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government, gave 470 scholarships. [*Desk thumping*] It means to say that in the Minister's estimation, 70 students, who may very well qualify for scholarships, will not get scholarships in 2016. And what is happening—I wish to repeat—by such PNM actions of denial, the human potential of the nation is being negatively impacted upon and the ability of this nation, our nation, to be a global competitor in the knowledge-driven, techno-savvy environment is being destroyed.

And look how far they have gone, eh. I want to read something for you to hear. This is now going to be VATable, eh. Books, namely literary works; you want to buy a Naipaul, "you ha tuh pay for it". Reference books, directories, collection of letters or documents permanently bound, schoolwork books and other educational texts in question and answer format with spaces for insertion of answers, children's picture and painting books, exercise books, other paper and paperboard of a kind used for writing, printing and other graphic purposes—all of these are now VATable.

Mr. Imbert: Oh no! [*Laughter*]

Hon. Member: "And he laughing. And he laughing."

Dr. S. Rambachan: Maybe the Minister of Finance does not have children to take care of. Maybe he does not, so he does not have the heart; he does not have the heart for children or for poor people. You see, sometimes when you live in your nice castle, you forget about the world outside of you. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members. Member for Barataria/San Juan's statement—just get it off the records, please.

Dr. Khan: I apologize.

Dr. S. Rambachan: With such books and so on being put on the VATable list, tell me, tell us as a nation, tell the people of this country: how will you assist the bright and best brains to develop our country? [*Desk thumping*] This is a retrograde step, Minister of Finance. A retrograde step in terms of what you are putting VAT on. And what will happen to the poor man who has aspirations for his child to be somebody in this society and he cannot buy those school books, because he has to bear the burden of the additional VAT on those schoolbooks? This is very serious. This is very, very serious.

On the wider economic front, while you do all this, you have not said one thing in this Parliament today that gives an assurance to the country, whether they are businessmen or whether they are citizens or what have you, that there is going to be confidence in the country. Jobs are being lost on a daily basis. The construction sector, which in recessionary conditions, in my view, has to be Government-driven, has come to a virtual halt with little or no new activity taking place. And as well, with existing projects either being halted by contractors who are cash-strapped, given that they have not been receiving payments for work completed or because projects are being stopped by the PNM Government for spurious reasons, people are going home. This is why on the *Trinidad Guardian* of today, there is a big headline:

"Govt debt to foreign contractors a worry

Unpaid bills to companies could worsen recession"

Look, and the Chinese Ambassador is beginning to get worried about money owed.

You know, they could talk how much about the UNC or what and the People's Partnership, the one thing you cannot deny is that when you look at the physical face of Trinidad, everywhere you go, you can see a manifestation of how the

money has been spent in this country. A manifestation, you could see it. But in the wickedness that you have, "you gone and you take down the word 'Children's Hospital'" and you do not let it be shown in blue in the night again. Right? What you did that for? To send a message what? Is that the message you are sending in what you did in Biche and suffer the children for how many years, you are also going to do with the Children's Hospital or the Debe campus? Tell us what you are going to do with all of those projects that are people-centred projects because we are a people-centred Government.

Mr. Hinds: You were. "Get yuh grammar right". Was. In the past, never again.

Dr. S. Rambachan: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the PNM Government claimed up to last week that the highway to Point Fortin will continue and they are quick to claim that the PP Government did not put in place a finance plan. Well I want to ask something today. If we did not put in place arrangements to finance the highway, how did it progress to where it is today? [*Desk thumping*] How did it get there? And secondly, you have been in office for about 125 days, you have 55 months, 26 days and a few hours to go again. [*Laughter and interruption*] Hopefully. Why is it that you have not moved to put in place the finances to ensure the continuity of the project? Why?

Let us look at where we are, hon. Minister of Works and Transport, my colleague from Laventille West. Work on the highway today is less than 25 per cent of what it was prior to September 07, 2015. The OAS appears to have scaled down the operations. Dozens of their personnel have gone back to Brazil and overseas. If you go there, it is like a ghost town around the Golconda area right now. Worse than that, it has gotten so bad—and it is because of your doing that it has gotten so bad—that local contractors have now gone to the courts. And one contractor, KJS, went to the courts and the court awarded $6 million owed to him by OAS and another one, a welding contractor, also has a matter before the court.

Now, why has the main contractor not been able to pay the local contractors? Why is it that the local contractors are engaging in litigation to get their money? And I venture to suggest, and do so boldly, that it is a kind of vindictiveness—I would not use the word "wickedness", I will use the word "vindictiveness"—a kind of vindictiveness on the part of the PNM Government to try and carry on with its tear-filled eyes that the PP left the Treasury empty.

Hon. Member: Of course, of course.

Dr. S. Rambachan: Hold on, hold on. The PP Government left over US $5 billion in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. [*Desk thumping*] We left that. We left over $10 billion in foreign exchange reserves. [*Desk thumping*] We left TT $1.5 billion in the IPO from Phoenix Park gas [*Desk thumping*] and Dr. Tewarie spoke about the other US $600 million from the TGU and the $6 billion in quarterly taxes that was supposed to be collected.

If it is that you fail to collect these sums and apply it to the business of meeting the financial obligations of the country and, worse yet, if you are doing so deliberately to carry out your vindictiveness and your wicked campaign of

saying that the People's Partnership Government was wasteful, then that—I do not want to use the word and if I do, I use it guardedly—is a kind of criminal offence, because it amounts to a denial of basic human rights of citizens to ensure that they can receive services and remuneration for work that they have legitimately done in this country. [*Desk thumping*]

You cannot escape your duty and your obligation and your responsibility to make the arrangements. We came to this House and when you asked for $50 billion more in terms of borrowing limits, we did not say no because we knew that you wanted the money, and up to now, you have not told us what you are going to do with it. Here, we are telling you some of the things that have to be legitimately done.

Because, to me, because of your incompetence, because of your inability to manage in crisis conditions, you are trying to distract the minds of the citizens by engaging in a blame game and creating dissonance against the former People's Partnership Government. That is what is happening. You see, the PNM has never had a history where they have had to manage a crisis. When the PNM left Government in 1986, they had left the country in a state which was inherited by the NAR and we had to clean up the mess. [*Desk thumping*] In 1995, the same thing happened and in 2010, we also inherited difficult situations. Perhaps it is the first time you are inheriting a situation in which the energy prices have brought about a crisis but you do not have the ability to manage a crisis [*Desk thumping*] and that is why you are mismanaging the country. You are mismanaging the country and you are doing a very bad job of managing this country.

5.15 p.m.

Look, no one is going to deny, and I would not stand here and deny, that you have a cash-flow problem due to falling energy prices. I would not deny that, but

it is the duty of the Government of the day to ensure that the country is not perceived as bankrupt, and that is what you are creating. You are creating a perception in the national community, that this country is either on the verge of bankruptcy or is bankrupt, and when you do that and when you demonize the People's Partnership Government in trying to do that, you are affecting the perception of the international community about Trinidad and Tobago and its international ratings, and you are going to find that this perception that you are causing is also going to affect how Moody's and S & P and so on, rate the country.

You know, it was very important for us to recognize when S & P—Standard & Poor's, gave their recent rating of Trinidad and Tobago, what they had to say about the way the People's Partnership Government managed this country during the years. [*Desk thumping*] And you know one can refer to several important factors in the rating affirmation given by Standard & Poor's, and I want to just refer to three:

The strong financial buffers which the People's Partnership Government left behind in the form of sizeable foreign exchange reserves;

A manageable debt level 46 per cent; and

A substantial increase in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund.

So you know, there were some things that Standard & Poor's recognized that we did well as a Government, and we have to be proud on this side; proud. [*Desk thumping*] No matter how much they try to demonize us. [*Laughter and interruption*]

As Members of Parliament you can say what you want. You can throw how many abuses you want. You know, abuses are not going to affect me. The abuses you throw at us on this side are abuses you are throwing to the people out there because you are showing [*Desk thumping*] how contemptuous you are of the people out there. You are showing how arrogant you are of the position. You bring the most vicious set of VATable items, and you stand there and you are throwing—[*Interruption*] abuses at us, directed at people we represent, and not just the 340,000 who voted for us, but all the people of Trinidad and Tobago [*Desk thumping*] who are feeling the pinch, the pinch, like they will feel with the table salt that you have put VAT on in these items here today.

You know, this is a good time you know, to remind fellow citizens that when the crisis first occurred in this country towards the end of 2014, we as a Government did not take months to react. Within days, January 09, the then hon.

Prime Minister came to the Parliament and made a clear statement of what the People's Partnership Government was going to do, and by how much we intended to review the budget. I believe on yesterday's *Sunday Guardian*, Hamid Ghany pointed out—[*Interruption*] that we actually cut by about $5.4 billion [*Desk thumping and interruption*] the budget was cut. If I call the name Keith Subero you will not be lying too. If I call the name Selwyn Ryan you will not be lying too. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, please! Please proceed.

Dr. S. Rambachan: You know, what we have seen here today is that despite the energy crisis falling like it is, the PNM Government remains like *Alice in Wonderland*, caring more about not answering Opposition questions than dealing with the strategies to manage the recessionary conditions.

The hon. Member of Parliament for La Horquetta/Talparo used some buzz words, economic reconstruction, et cetera, et cetera. I was making a list of them and I got tired of it. [*Crosstalk*] But he has nothing to back it up. It is just a matter of using language, but there is—after that there is an emptiness, because they do not know what to do. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Cuffie: I will colour code it for you so you can understand it. [*Laughter*]

Dr. S. Rambachan: You know, the Minister of Finance, Sunday, January 10th edition of *Newsday*; that was yesterday, and I quote:

> "This Government"—referring to them—"when in opposition, was highly critical of the then administration for its vaps and vie-ki-vie approach to the crime situation.
>
> The shoe being now placed on the other foot, Dr Rowley and his team must know that the patience of the same people who voted for them overwhelmingly is wearing thin.
>
> We will not be unfair and say that we expected them to have dented the situation more significantly.
>
> But silence in the face of rampant lawlessness can well result in the belief that they do not know what to do." [*Desk thumping*]

This is the *Newsday* editorial [*Desk thumping*] which is read by 54,000 persons on a Sunday. In 54,000 homes you will have that newspaper. Right? So it is not me now saying you do not know what to do. It is not me now saying that you are *Alice in Wonderland*. It is the newspapers now which is now beginning to say that you are *Alice in Wonderland*. [*Crosstalk*]

So, as the PNM Government continues to wonder and wander about, as they attend weddings and play golf with their friends in far off places, [*Laughter*] as they attend poolside cocktail parties with their new friends, whom while they were in Opposition, they said they could not stomach. The Unit Trust Corporation, Mr. Minister of Finance, is now selling a US dollar at TT $6.80. If you go to the airport, you will pay $7.50 at the *Bureau de Change* for a US dollar. Right?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Your time has expired.

Dr. S. Rambachan: I am using my 15 minutes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right. So you have your additional 15 minutes.

Dr. S. Rambachan: Sure, thank you. You know, and you talk about $6.80 and so on. I just want to let Members know and let the public know, that people play their little cricket on a Sunday, you know what? This PNM Government, they have removed the following things from non-VATable items: cricket requisites, athletic requisites, soccer requisites, golf balls, sports footwear, golf requisites, lawn tennis balls, inflatable balls for soccer; the poor man's game. What are you doing to the sporting community? [*Crosstalk*] You are putting all this under VAT, and the Member for Moruga/Tableland laughs. He laughs at this.

Dr. Francis: Because you are demented.

Dr. S. Rambachan: You laugh at this. You can call me demented. You can call me what, I represent the people of Trinidad and Tobago and they know what I am saying here today. [*Desk thumping*] They know what you are doing to them. You can laugh at them and you can call me whatever name you want to call me. Let me tell you something—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Singh: Mr. Speaker, the hon. Member for Moruga/Tableland mentioned a certain word. I will request that he withdraw that from the *Hansard*. [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: No. Oh Lord!

Mr. Singh: Offensive language.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, Member for Chaguanas West, could you repeat what you just—and quote the relevant Standing Order?

Mr. Singh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is offensive language.

Hon. Member: Which Standing Order is that?

Mr. Singh: Standing Order 48. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Al-Rawi: "Moonilal could ah do ah better job than dat."

Mr. Singh: For sure. "Ah agree with dat." [*Laughter and desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members! Hon. Attorney General, call the Member by his correct title, please. Member, actually in terms of what was said, it was not audible for the Deputy Speaker to hear at the time, right?

Mr. Singh: But the *Hansard*. I heard it. Just for your information Mr. Deputy Speaker, he referred to the hon. Member for Tabaquite as being demented.

Hon. Member: Standing Order 48(4). [*Laughter*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member for Moruga/Tableland, was that said, Sir?

Dr. Francis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can withdraw the word, if not the sentiment.

Dr. Deputy Speaker: Right, withdraw please, kindly?

Dr. Francis: I withdraw the word.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you. Can we proceed? And Members, before we proceed, please, the allocated time for each Member, you will have your turn to speak. Let us keep the debate orderly, please? Go ahead.

Dr. S. Rambachan: Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is what you call the double contempt. Mr. Deputy Speaker, $6.80 for a US dollar. You know what that means? That means that the Government is somehow allowing the dollar to slip and slide precipitously, and with that, the quality of life of citizens is going to also slip precipitously, because the devaluation of the dollar. If a Government agency can be selling a dollar for $6.80, it means to say that devaluation or depreciation is taking place right in front of our eyes. It has not been formally announced, but it seems that the dollar is being allowed to fall.

And one wonders whether this advice about falling dollar is advice that has been received by the PNM Government from their newly appointed advisors at the Central Bank, as well as their other highly touted economic advisors resuscitated from the past and now re-clothed in red PNM garb? But we are seeing what red and ready means, red is a very dangerous colour, and we are seeing that dangerous PNM when it comes to the welfare of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. By their arrogant attitude epitomized in their "We are in charge here, and you have to deal with it" attitude, they have already become dismissive and they have demonstrated here this afternoon, of over half of the country—I really

wonder whether they care about all the citizens, or whether they care about some of the citizens? It seems that they really care about nobody, only themselves, because today we have seen it in terms of the VATable items.

The Minister of Public Utilities will tell you that there is no VAT on water in one of the documents that was relayed to us, and you know what was more contemptuous? These documents were circulated to us while the debate was going on; because why? Is it because you thought that we would not have time to read it and debate it? But we are intelligent people on this side, and we can read and we can understand quickly, [*Desk thumping*] and we are able to debate it.

What the Minister of Public Utilities will also tell you is that he said that citizens can expect an increase in the rates of utility services sometime in the coming year. He was speaking at the installation of the new board of WASA and TSTT, and questioned the news that Government was considering increasing the existing WASA and T&TEC rates. The Minister said it had become a matter of necessity in the light of the current economic situation. Do the math he said, but he said something had to be done. So, T&TEC rates are going to go up. And when T&TEC rates are going to go up, and everybody has to pay more for electricity, then all your food bills are also going to go up, and all your costs are also going to go up.

The Minister of Finance said that 21,000 or 22,000 persons—Minister of Finance you can correct me—are going to benefit from the $72,000 in terms of the tax break. So that is $3,000 a year more in their pockets; $250 a month. But $250 a month has already been eaten up in terms of the increase in the VAT. [*Desk thumping*] They do not have it, but you know what is interesting? I tried to get some figures from the CSO about how many persons in this country earn less than $6,000 a month. They sent me some figures which showed that 50.76 per cent of persons earn less than $6,000 a month 50.76 per cent, right? When you recalculate given the numbers who did not say how much they earned, it is about 64 per cent. So already 64 per cent are earning less than $6,000 a month. So they are benefitting from your tax break that you are giving to them. You are not doing that. So the people are lost already. So you have given with one hand, and you have taken it back with the other hand. So there is zero benefit for the people. In fact, it is even going to cost them more. What you are doing is deepening the impoverishment of the already poor in this country. That is what you are doing, [*Desk thumping*] deepening the impoverishment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the goal of good governance is to project a future which is hopeful and realizable, not a future that people fear like citizens are fearing

today. Most of our citizens having listened to this part of the debate, do not see a future in which their children will do better than they have. Too many persons are no longer dreaming about the future, they are fearing it.

A few month ago for voters, the PP Government was the problem, not the solution. So they thought just by getting rid of the PP Government that will be a solution to the economic ill. Now they know differently, because we are faced with a Government who is showing that they do not know how to manage, and they are clueless. Like headless chickens running in all directions and then falling down lifeless and inactive. [*Desk thumping*] You know, the famous economist, Keynes—Mr. Deputy Speaker, how much time do I have, please?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Seven minutes.

Dr. S. Rambachan: Seven minutes? Thank you. [*Crosstalk*] The famous and celebrated economist Keynes—John Maynard Keynes—argued that the solution to the great depression was to stimulate the economy. In other words, create an inducement to invest. Show me where they are creating an inducement to invest in this time? He suggested two approaches which still remain valid: a reduction in interest rates, monetary policy or Government investment in infrastructure; fiscal policy. Well, we see what is happening with Government investment infrastructure; fiscal policy. Well, we see what is happening in Government investment in infrastructure. It is dying. Nothing is happening. School projects have stopped. The buildings have stopped. The Children's Hospital is now being used as a political football in the country. Although we have millions of equipment, modern equipment, the best equipment in the hospital there, millions of dollars of equipment there, but you are refusing to use it, and the children have to continue to suffer for proper health care in the country.

Mr. Hinds: It has not been paid for as yet.

Dr. S. Rambachan: Mr. Deputy Speaker, he argued that if the interest rate at which businesses and consumers can borrow is lowered, investments which were previously uneconomic become profitable, and large consumer purchases which are normally financed through debt, such as houses, automobiles and historically, even furniture and appliances, become more affordable.

5.30 p.m.

What has happened to the interest rate under the PNM? The interest rate is going up, businesses are paying more for money. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Hinds: Why? Why?

Dr. S. Rambachan: What you have to do—is not about why, it is what are you prepared to do and how are you prepared to intervene as a Government—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Laventille West, please give the Member his opportunity to present.

Dr. S. Rambachan: It is the right, it is the duty of the Government to intervene in this economy in order to stimulate the economic activity and grow the economy. What you need is an expansionist monetary policy in the country in order to get this country going again, but they do not have the brainpower to do it. [*Desk thumping*] They do not have it. All they think about is cut, cut, cut, but when you cut, cut, cut and you send home people and they do not have money to spend, what do you do? What do you do? You are collapsing the economy more and more everyday by the way that you are managing things. You are collapsing the economy, it is not going to happen.

Look, there are a couple of things that this Government should be doing. One, they should be setting certain objectives. Firstly, they should be setting the objective we set when this crisis first occurred in December of 2014—protecting jobs. How are you going to protect jobs so that people will be able to meet their mortgage payments? They will be able to put food on the table, they will be able to buy baby food. Secondly, they should be working how to stimulate investment by the private sector; thirdly, creating a more secure national environment by aggressively dealing with crime and criminals, and; fourthly, ensuring food security by growing more food and supporting the fishing, meat and farming community. Where are the strategies that we are hearing from the Government to deal with these four objectives at a time in recessionary conditions? And these four objectives should be at the top of your agenda.

It will appear that the policies of the Government are running contrary to what Keynes had suggested, and that the policies of the Government are out of sync with these objectives that are required. Interest rates, as I said, are not falling; the cost of business is rising, so what you are doing is you are pushing the businessmen away, you are pushing the entrepreneurs away, the very ones who have to create the jobs and get the economy going again. This is a time when you should be strategically spending money in the country and stimulating the economy. It is unfortunate that the Government is not demonstrating the imagination and creative leadership that is required in this particular economic downturn. [*Desk thumping*] It is unfortunate. Instead, what they are choosing to do, to party, play golf, and live in the paradigm that "God is a Trini". The

abandonment of duty by the leadership of the PNM Government reflects the state of mind with which the nation's business is being managed.

The images of holidaying in Miami for a family wedding, while I agree it shows commitment to family, is also a strategy intended to create a false sense of calm in a troubled nation. [*Desk thumping*] And while the frolicking goes on and the abuses are thrown at us, and the contempt is shown for the population while we speak, the murders go up day by day. The anger of the society is so marked that one person kills another one because he ate his gyro. Domestic violence, bullying in schools, attacks upon teachers by students, lawlessness on the roads is all part and parcel of the decline in respect and values living in the country. [*Crosstalk*]

You are in charge. You said you are in charge, then deal with it. [*Desk thumping*] Deal with it. Deal with it. It did not occur overnight, I agree, but it requires a level of intervention which you are incapable of doing, [*Desk thumping*] incapable of implementing. I would agree that you need some overhaul in consumer spending. I will agree you need some overhaul in lifestyles, and so on, with the foreign exchange being what it is, but, at the same time, it is a false sense of security to suggest, as some of your advisors are suggesting and writing in the newspapers, that because we have $9 billion in foreign reserves and US $5 billion in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund that we are in a better position than we were in 1986. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you have one more minute, I trust that you will wrap up, please.

Dr. S. Rambachan: The reality is that the rate of foreign exchange consumption, like which you are using, without putting in place strategies, strategies to ensure that you reduce that and, at the same time, maintain a very good quality of life for your citizens, it is something that you cannot do. You do not have the capability. You do not have the intellectual resources to do it.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to thank you for this opportunity. I want to thank you for this opportunity and to tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that what we are seeing here today is a punishment-centred Government, punishing people in a way that they have never been punished before in this society. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for San Fernando West, the Attorney General. [*Desk thumping*]

The Attorney General (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Interruption*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: You thumping for everybody, boy. [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: The speak across the floor is your thumping for everyone, and this Bill is in fact a thump for everyone. We are here on the 11th of the first month of 2016. We have now started the fifth month of this Government's passage through 60 months of regular term. We on this side count the tenure that we have in months. Why do we do so? Because it is for a fixed time with a fixed responsibility.

Earlier in this debate across the floor a statement was made that we stand in a continuity of governance, and that is in fact the truth. We do not speak about us and them. We have been elected on September 07, 2015, as the Government of Trinidad and Tobago [*Desk thumping*] and we accept that responsibility and carry out the obligations entrusted upon us. The people of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, do not want to hear histrionics. They do not want to hear us and them. They want to hear the reality of where we stand today, what the prognosis is, what the potential solutions are, and they want us to get on with the job. That certainly is the edict from our Prime Minister. That certainly is the manner in which we approach this job.

So, let us deal with this debate. We are dealing with Finance Bill No. 1. This is a money Bill before this House. This money Bill deals with six pieces of law: Immigration Act, Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act, Income Tax Act, Corporation Tax Act, Value Added Tax Act, Miscellaneous Taxes Act. For the record, I remind that the Minister of Finance has already spoken to the fact that the incentivization measures, which this Government will implement after a process of consultation, after a process of review, will be coming in Finance Bill No. 2. That is on the record already. He has already spoken to the fact that that will happen by way of describing incentives into the housing sector and the manner in which the private sector enters.

But what do we hear from my learned colleagues opposite, Mr. Deputy Speaker? The last speaker stood up—where is the inducement to invest? He comes, he says, the wicked PNM, property tax still to come, wave goodbye to computers, what will happen to the poor man—not said one thing in relation to confidence. He said jobs are being lost on a daily basis, little or no activity by contractors, no payments, projects stopped. Why do you take down the lights at the Children's Hospital? Why has OAS not been paid? He said they left a lot of

money to be collected; he said TGU, IPO. He said no ability to manage in a crisis. He said the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund they left in a fat state, well, let us deal with the reality. What is this Bill about? The Government has come to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The Minister of Finance has set out the fact that we are in an economic climate where we do not have the revenue to meet our expenditure.

When you do not have the revenue to meet your expenditure you must ask yourself, how do I pay for my recurrent expenditure and how do I also, at the same time, build my economy through sensible spending in my projects? How do I stimulate an economy? The first thing that one needs to do in terms of establishing confidence is to understand the reality of the situation you are dealing with. This is the first time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in my now sixth year in the Parliament that I have heard a Minister of Finance stand up, face the nation, and tell the truth, [*Desk thumping*] and let us take the argument from the Member for Tabaquite. [*Desk thumping*]

Let us take the argument from the Member for Tabaquite. The Member for Tabaquite says to the country, we left you all of this money, IPO, we left you TGU, et cetera; the record is that the Exchequer Account—the Government's main bank account—was overdrawn by $34 billion in September, 2015. That is a fact. If I take TGU, IPO, every bit of cash sale that the government did, fire sale of assets; one-off, tax amnesty: one-off, TGU collection. If I take all of these one-off sales and I triple them I still cannot meet $34 billion. [*Desk thumping*] Is that to say that we have not accepted the payments? No, because the philosophy is really very simple. The hon. Member for Tabaquite is asking, why are the lights moved at the Children's Hospital? I do not know when last the hon. Member reminded himself that electricity costs money, and that an empty building opened for an opening ceremony in a rush, partially equipped, no human resource manpower plan done, nobody hired to run the hospital, is going to be a burden on the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and your $150,000 electricity bill a month needs to be saved. [*Desk thumping*]

The hon. Minister, I wonder—the hon. Member, I wonder if he appreciates that when one outfits the San Fernando General Hospital, Teaching Hospital, and one puts a Cabinet floor on the 17th floor where you have an elevator reserved only for the Members of Cabinet, going there once every three or six months, an entire floor occupied, passengers cannot travel in that lift other than the Members of the Cabinet once every three or six months, that you are denying the people a benefit that they are paying for. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I had to go down to visit the Registry of Births and Deaths in San Fernando. I walked in there—this is a division of the Ministry of Legal Affairs—no ticket counter, no numbering system, computers not working, no telephone line, backlog in the system, people crammed up, people who are nursing the tragedy of death together with the celebration of birth rammed together in one place, and the 17th floor of the Teaching Hospital spread out, glorious as it is. You should see the bathroom. The bathroom on the 17th floor for the office of the Prime Minister is larger than the entire Registry for Births and Deaths two times larger.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that does not seem to matter. The fact that an elevator is required for people to travel does not matter, so I want to say that there is a dot connection exercise afoot. VAT is being reduced from 15 per cent to 12.5 per cent. The benefit of having the raise in the income ceiling from $60,000 to $72,000 is to affect those most in need of savings; 21,000 people. $60 million is not a sum to sneeze at. But what do we tell people? Tragedy, tragedy, tragedy. Do not take the increase in VAT. But what is the consequence if you have no revenue? Five years of this Opposition, when in Government, saw budget after budget with not a single item reflecting revenue generation. [*Desk thumping*]

Long on expenditure, short on revenue, not one revenue-generating project out of nearly $400 billion of expenditure. [*Crosstalk*] They are saying 288, forgetting the contingent liabilities and spending which we have tabulated and brought to the people, and the state enterprises, $400 billion. Well, you know what, it matters that you have no revenue-generating assets, that one-off sales only take you so far, and then what do you tell the people? We will spare you the tragedy of VAT—and do what? Cut jobs? Is the focus upon job preservation not a laudable one in this country? And let me tell you what my office with responsibility for managing the Attorney General's Office and the Ministry of Legal Affairs is able to do in context. Let us speak in real terms. I am the Attorney General and the Minister of Legal Affairs—very competently assisted by my brother, compatriot, Stuart Young. [*Desk thumping*] I could not have asked for better a person than he. So what do we have? One thousand, nine hundred and fifty employees.

5.45 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what did the Prime Minister of this country do upon entry, as a Government policy? The first thing we did was to take 33 Ministries and drop it to 23 Ministries. People might think that that is a small thing you know, but let us look at that. [*Interruption*] You are talking about five advisors, I will come to that in a minute. I will come to that. We merged down to 23. What is

the effect for the people of Trinidad and Tobago? Is it just a whimsical thing that this happened?

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Madam Speaker, let me say to you that the cost savings of a reduction in Ministry—in one action alone, I want to tell you some of the cost savings in the Ministry of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs. We no longer have two information officers, four communication officers, double accounting positions, et cetera, where there are similar services going on. Without loss of jobs in any substantive position, we were able in simple manoeuvres, Madam Speaker, to produce for Trinidad and Tobago's benefit, the merger of accounts department, facilities management, communications, human resources, office management and records, Service Commissions Department. We were able to make sure that there was a relocation of offices to be had beginning with possibility January of this year, at the end of this month, filling of vacant offices and positions. But let me give you an example.

Rental alone, by making a shift in manoeuvre, we will achieve a savings of $5,705,258.72. We are giving up a building over to the Judiciary that has been outfitted for four going on five years now, with no occupancy rented by this Ministry at a cost of $115,000 a month. The Judiciary needs space, has been begging for space for five years, they can use it. We are able to take the DPP's department and finally, once and for all, deal with accommodation provision: north Trinidad, central, south Trinidad, and Tobago. We are able in the period of telephones alone—comparing between 2014 and 2015—I have dropped the telephone bill without any loss of service to the Ministry and, therefore, the quality of governance, from $279,348.38, to $72,719.77.

We have cut out exorbitant catering services, grocery items, office supplies that were just bought as if there was no tomorrow. This month alone, being the month of Carnival, we would have saved on Carnival tickets. The last year spent in the Ministry of the Attorney General was $81,200 in Carnival tickets. This year the sum is zero dollars and zero cents. [*Desk thumping*] But let me tell you more.

On going into the Ministry and in dealing with the administrative disaster zones that we inherited—and they are ours now, so nobody else's own. I will take responsibility. I had a report prepared on the Ministries that are under our purview. Forty per cent of the staffing on short-term employment: three months and six months—forty per cent. Human resources running from one office and human resources running from just next door into the head office that the Minister occupies. What did we come across? Ghost employees; officers who turn up for a

couple of hours per week; persons entirely unqualified for positions; persons who did not possess technical skills; persons not assigned to specific tasks; people who could not even identify their supervising or reporting officers—cannot identify them. Who do you report to? No clue. Variances in salaries for similar job positions; and I want to drill down into these in a moment.

A person employed in part-time services in one Ministry receiving a full-time cheque in another Ministry—employed in another Ministry. Ministry vehicles leased and given to people all over the place.

Dr. Rowley: "La blash" you call that.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: "La blash". Madam Speaker, 300 people on short-term employment. We called them in. And I want to put onto the record today—they give this impression sometimes, those opposite, that there is this slashing and burning, et cetera I want to let you know, my secretary at my office was hired by a previous Attorney General. There are special advisors to the Ministry hired by a previous Attorney General. Not a soul lost a job on us entering into office. Some of them were relocated into different areas. People kept their salaries; they kept working; there is a continuity of governance. And we would never become the thing which we have labelled as something to be despised in the treatment of people's lives and their support for their families. But what happened?

We called in our people—and this is to address with plans, and this Ministry being one example of how this is going across 23 other Ministries. We said to them, "Come in, report; bring your qualifications; bring your return of personnel. Fill out contracts, be retained on contract; do not go home". We inherited a situation. I want to give you an example of how the psyche of productivity—and "productivity" is an important word in a bad economy. How do you make people more productive in the daylight hours? How do you inspire them? Tell me if you think inspiration is to be found in this example. I just want to give you a few examples.

I have a project coordinator in my Ministry earning $7,000 a month in salary, and a project coordinator doing the same specifications for $12,500. I have an information systems specialist earning $13,200, another one $17,700 and five people in between, all doing the same job, in the same Ministry at totally different prices. I have a legal officer—a legal officer—one doing the same job for $12,000, the next one doing the same job for $24,000, but that is parity in the system. I have another one, Legal Officer I, $12,000, Legal Officer I, $20,000. I have one, a research officer, $9,800; another research officer, side by side, $17,500. Same position, same scope of work, same jobs.

I have tabulated so far 19 ghost employees. We know them by name: legal officer, legal officer, legal officer, Legal Officer I, seven research officers, eight information technology specialists, salaries ranging from $24,000 to $17,000, to $13,000. Nineteen of them cannot be found. When the circular went out and said, "Turn up, bring your qualifications, keep your job", 19 men and women disappeared. They are on the payroll, short-term contract for years at hand.

I have here paralegals—not a legal officer, not a lawyer—here paralegals: 12 of them—paralegals earning a salary of $19,900; paralegal learning officer, $24,000 for a paralegal; $16,000, $12,000. And legal officers who went to law school, who qualified, earning $12,000 and $13,000. But that is inspiration; that is management; that is gravitas. "Leave it so"; come with plans; tell us what you are doing. Well, I could tell you this, where we come from elimination of waste, corruption and mismanagement, [*Desk thumping*] leading to savings, is the first order of sensible management. Why? Because we have not sacrificed a job. We have not dismissed anybody. If contracts effluxed and people had no qualifications, well then too bad, because if you want to engender and encourage a productive society, you must have a sense of merit and meritocracy. You must reward merit. Why tell your children, "Study hard, go to school, get grades", when we have a chronic underemployment situation. People with two and three university degrees cannot get a job as a clerk in the hospital, but a paralegal could earn more than a lawyer.

Mr. Hinds: More than a MP. [*Laughter*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Let me tell you more. When last I spoke in the budget I told the country that we were headed up to $1 billion in expenditure; that is what I said. I said $900 million and counting. They tell me, "No, it cyar be so." As of today, 21 out of 33 Ministries—21 Ministries out of a total of 33 Ministries having reported their figures, still checking as well and, in fact, with a total of—if I just find my notes so that I am accurate—60 out of 107 state enterprises, that is 12 Ministries not yet reporting, 47 enterprises not yet reporting—so 12 Ministries not reporting, 47 state enterprises not reporting, listen to what we have spent in legal fees, Madam Speaker: $1,432,040,590.73—$1.433 billion in legal fees, in the period 2010 to 2015, ending with this Government. That is legal fees and still counting. Ghost employees; fraudulent activities.

Now it is not as if nothing is being done about this, because I can tell you, this information did not happen by magic. These gentlemen operating in the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs, the place we see least is behind our desks, because we are on the ground in the Ministry, in the offices. The other day the problem in San Fernando, I went to the mortuary myself. I went to see the

bodies in the mortuary. I went to see how people's living conditions operate, because our Prime Minister says if you cannot see it yourself and know for a fact what the situation is, do not come to him.

So tell me: Productivity does not matter? Efficiency does not matter? Eliminating waste, mismanagement does not matter? Electricity bills do not matter? I heard earlier in the debate the hon. Member for Caroni Central say, "What does $1,200 matter? Tell us what it is going to do." Well, you know what, $1,200 is a lot of money across 1.3 million people, you know.

When you hear that your efficiency for VAT collection is 40 per cent—40 per cent—there is room for improvement. Why? Is this happening in a vacuum? Has this Government not said to the good people of Trinidad and Tobago, "Listen, the plan is quite simple. If all of us pay our fair share, if all of us pay our taxes and if we make sure that our tax dollars are seen to be spent in a transparent and efficient fashion, then we believe that people would be prepared to pay their fair share." And we have said that specifically in the context of a local government reform, so that the expenditure is closest to the point of expenditure.

How does the person in the Ministry of what was then "the People" now social services—how do you spend a dollar on the Abercromby Street in Embacadere or on the Train Line, and know that it is hitting the targets correctly? The world literature is replete with the fact that targeted expenditure by way of assistance in a proper fashion is the right way? The consultations have begun; we have given a commitment time frame. Is there not merit in what Moody's had to say? Is there not merit in recognizing that unless you have an expenditure under proper supervision of a revenue management authority that you are wasting time? Is that to be married with public procurement legislation? Is it not important to insulate a procurement regulator from the capriciousness that one may perceive a Cabinet at some point may exercise?

Is it not important to also recognize that the protection of the valuable asset, the finite asset in Trinidad and Tobago, is land? Is it important that land ought to be protected in a disposal of public property?

6.00 p.m.

There is a connection. There is a line of sight. Speaking about continuity and crime, was it not a responsible thing, notwithstanding the fact that it was those opposite when in government had procured vessels without armament, under-capacity in circumstances where they were delivered without any mechanism to pay them? No loan! No boats arrive. No weapons where you could have fit

hundreds of people into an OPV vessel with weapons for the same cost that you bought fishing vessels for. What do we say? We said, Madam Speaker, accept the vessels, put them to work and close off your borders. No cancellation of contract. No witch hunting.

The information that I have given you, so far, have I called a name? Have I disparaged any individual across, personally? Do I need to claim a piano is missing and find it under a sheet? There is a difference of approach, Madam Speaker, and the difference of approach is, "make sure yuh know what yuh saying, and if yuh going to court, go to court". Get your freezing orders. Lock down assets. Deal with it with aplomb in a demure fashion and get on with due process and transparency. There is a court for that reason. [*Desk thumping*]

We know we have a job to perform. I stand in a so-called marginal seat. You would never guess by the results, but the fact is, it is marginal. People will vote you out as fast as they vote you in. As a politician you stand as a person in a revolving door. The people want production. The way I look at the 6,000 votes versus my near 11,000 votes is that I still have to win the favour of 6,000 people, not that they are my enemies.

So, Madam Speaker, what do we say? Simple. We want to preserve jobs or we want to lose jobs. You want to afford the expenditure and move your economy forward or you do not want to pay taxes. Why is taxation a bad word? Since when taxation is a bad word? *IRC v Tomlin*, the classic case on taxation law—there is no certainty other than death and taxation. The question is what you put it to in terms of its use. I do not think it is a dirty phrase. I am hearing the talk across about property tax, property tax, property tax as if it came out from a vacuum somewhere. Madam Speaker, for the record, this Government inherited a position of the law, it is a continuity of the law. The law as it stands right now in Trinidad and Tobago is that the Property Tax Act 2009 is the law. Why is it the law? Because those opposite when they were in charge of the law left it as the law. They, in fact, went further than leaving it as the law, they implemented the law.

The hon. Minister of Finance and the Economy then, Sen. Larry Howai, a gentleman I have a lot of like for, implemented the law. In 2014, Minister Howai indicated the People's Partnership Government would start first with industrial properties to implement the property tax. He acknowledged that the Government had been losing about $180 million a year by not collecting taxes. He said the new property tax system will begin immediately with large corporations such as state oil companies, Petrotrin and Atlantic, which operate on large acreages of industrial land. He said the Government will begin with valuations of all

industrial land. So what is all of this drama and histrionics about a property tax? What is it? You met it when in government last, Members of the Opposition, through you, Madam Speaker. You left it in place. You came to the Parliament with two Bills which you allowed to lapse. You went to the Cabinet about 10 times on the issue and you implemented the property law. Why frighten people about property taxes?

Dr. Rowley: How else to get St. Augustine seat?

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Exactly. Trying to frighten people.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Listen. A government earns revenue by taxation, whether it is by the sale of oil, supplemental petroleum taxes, royalties, call it what you want to call it. The fact is that your fair share in an equitable system is administered by the Board of Inland Revenue and other entities under it in a system called taxation. The objective of a government is to make it efficient, transparent and meaningful in terms of expenditure. We have articulated the plan to implement it through a local government reform so that jobs can be created close to source; so that people in San Fernando West could work for the City Corporation of San Fernando; that they can build their own schools; they can repair their own schools; that our waterfront will continue in its development. And I am proud to say that the Minister of Planning and Development has received the renewed list for the implementation of the waterfront committee to carry the project forward. Because this Government's view—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, your speaking time has expired. You can avail yourself of an additional 15 minutes.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: May I, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker: You are.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Thank you. So, Madam Speaker, if I take the arguments of those opposite, behind the rather high tenor of the tone—I do not want to say high-pitched screech—behind the high tenor of the tone, I would say, what is the gravamen of the argument? What is the argument that is coming? Do not raise VAT. Do not raise taxes. Do not do that. I heard the hon. Member for Tabaquite say a moment ago, he said, tell us about four things: protection of jobs, stimulate the investment in the private sector, crime and criminals, food. Four things you said we should be talking about.

One, I have just told the hon. Members through you, Madam Speaker, that protection of jobs, as I have indicated in my own Ministry, we are able to do by

savings of moneys. Because I can tell you, I have certainly not spent a cent on legal fees since we have entered into office. I can tell you that savings of rental, savings of electricity bills, savings of ghost employees turning up to work, all of these savings are being poured into keeping jobs. The hon. Member wants to know our protection of jobs. That is protection of jobs.

The hon. Minister of Finance was asked and he said in his delivery that the stimulation into the private sector would happen in Finance Bill No. 2. May I remind those opposite that finance Bill after finance Bill had incentives for construction of car parks, construction of homes, building developments? What has happened of it? Do you know what? They could not work out the rubric for the implementation of it, and despite three finance Bills back to back speaking about it, not one project came out of it. Not one. Three finance Bills opposite.

Transfer tax. We heard about it three budgets in a row coming from them. Not one mechanism put into effect. You know what that is? Selective memory, Madam Speaker. That is, "do so eh like so". Do as I say, not as I do.

Madam Speaker, the hon. Member spoke about crime and criminals. I can tell you that the Minister of National Security and the Office of the Attorney General are hand in hand in the National Security Council and that we will be coming to the Parliament very shortly to speak to some very certain and precise measures legislatively that will deal with some of the solutions. I can tell you, by way of addition and supplementation to the legislative agenda spoken from the finance perspective by the hon. Minister of Finance, that the Ministry of the Attorney General is awaiting right now the outcome of the national review, our national risk assessment, and the outcomes of the National Anti-Money Laundering Committee, NAMLAC as it is called, following the fourth round mutual evaluation of Trinidad and Tobago to publish in the first quarter of this year its precise legislative agenda. And I can tell you right now that it will include amendment to the Proceeds of Crime Act, amendment to the Finance Obligations Regulations, amendment to the Financial Intelligence Unit Act, amendment to the Financial Intelligence Regulations, amendment to the Anti-Terrorism Act, amendment to the Companies Act, amendment to the Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters Act, amendment to the Customs Act, amendment to the Firearms Act. It will involve the credit unions and cooperative societies, Insurance Act, gambling and betting and the non-profit organizations.

But I want to mark in history right now in this Parliament, certainly for the last six years, you have just had a listing come out from the Attorney General's Office and the Ministry of Finance, when we are telling you that work is afoot,

but this is the first time in six years that you have heard two Ministers stand up back to back and tell you the legislation we are going to deal with. So, I do not know if that is lost upon Members opposite: the ability to stand up and say we have taken stock of what we are doing; these are our areas of risk and assessment. The Ministries are pouring in their policies, each of them to the office, but the work must be done. One thing I can guarantee you, Madam Speaker, is that all people of Trinidad and Tobago are important to this Government. There is no PNM and UNC and the jabs. There is nothing other than the red, white and black. Full stop. [*Desk thumping*] And when we deal with that, Madam Speaker, we accept that we have inherited a position, but it is the country's position. We accept that the population does not want to hear.

I hear them talk about this statement, "we in charge now", forgetting that the comment came across the floor from the Members opposite—not the "stink mouth" comment. The other comment came the same day saying, "all yuh in charge. Show them who in charge. Tell them you in charge". [*Crosstalk*] It was the same way.

Hon. Members: No. No. No.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: It was the same way, Madam Speaker, when dealing with the Salaries Review Commission—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: I would like to hear the contribution from the hon. Member for San Fernando West.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I do not have much more to say, but what I do have to say is that we were appointed to do a job. We have 55 months and counting. The constituents of each one of the 41 seats present expect us to do a job. We are not interested in witch hunting, but we are certainly interested in applying the law. Uncontrolled fires, procurement practices, crime, removal of documentation, removal of state assets, I just want to warn the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago that it is a very vigilant Government in the saddle, and that they can expect due process.

We can expect an application of reasonableness and proportionality in the laws and approaches, and we hope that the Members opposite will just calm the histrionics down in the country. Agree that the country is in a difficult position. Agree that we must take measures to get there. Agree that we must cooperate with each other to achieve a perspective. Keep a Government honest indeed by way of proper attack in the Westminster style, but the fact is, Madam Speaker, this country should not shy away from examples such as other countries exemplify. In

the United States you hear simple talk, time to tighten our belts, time to roll up our sleeves, advertisements on how you cut your energy bill, advertisements on how you save a dollar. Why is that a dirty concept in Trinidad and Tobago? Why must every light in every building be on all day, all night, big sign flashing? If you opened a hospital and you did not have the equipment, you did not have the doctors and you have an electricity bill of hundreds of thousands of dollars a month, turn off the lights until it is ready. It is as simple as that.

Madam Speaker, I wish to endorse wholeheartedly the hon. Minister of Finance's approach of delivering the Government's statement. I wish to commend him in particular through you on giving a very honest and forthright position. I wish to remind the nation that histrionics are good theatre, but the fact is that we need to ensure that we are paying attention to the reality of our situation. The focus on job preservation is by far more the important task than wild spending and wild ideas. I thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for St. Augustine

Mr. Prakash Ramadhar (*St. Augustine*): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Let me refer to a statement that I regularly make in open court when I stand to cross-examine, that there are at least two sides to every story. But the one story we heard my learned friend from San Fernando West start off with was that the population was sick and tired of finger pointing into the past and they are looking not in the rear mirror anymore, but into the windscreen to see where we shall go.

What did he then proceed to do? Do exactly what he said we should not do, which is to find blame, some with merit and a lot without because as I say, for every story there are at least two versions, two sides. There is one truth. There is one truth. So that I find it somewhat disconnected to hear of the improvements we had made under the People's Partnership to the registry for births and deaths in the San Fernando Hospital.

6.15 p.m.

But I was very pained over the weekend to have seen what happened there on TV, where as you have so poetically put it, and he is born into that breed for language and the arts, and I want to say he has honed it to a fine art here. So that to suggest whether it is the pain of death and the joy of birth, all suffer there now. I could not understand why until I heard that it was because staff members there, their contracts were not renewed. But I know my friend is an honourable gentleman. So that if no one lost their jobs, no one was removed, how is that ghost created in San Fernando?

So, we have an inconsistency with what my friend has said, and I believe he believes what he has said. But, what is the reality? Something happened in San Fernando where before it took a year or two to get a birth certificate in San Fernando under the People's Partnership, under the Prime Ministership of Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government, we were able to deliver it in three minutes. [*Desk thumping*] To have heard of all these ghosts and persons who are not appropriately appointed or may be getting too much of a salary and so, congratulations Sir. These are things that we had struggled with for more than a generation. Before we came in there was effort to deal with it, and certainly because of the habits that had been entrenched into the governance under the PNM successive regimes it was difficult to deal with. So, congratulations on that, Attorney General. [*Desk thumping*]

But, you know, to have heard all of these things, whether real or unreal, from very early on in the term in 2010, and forgive me because I am coming in your wake, to suggest, as they did in the campaign, that the Partnership Government was the most corrupt ever seen, the most inefficient. I want to say that if that is so, well then where could all the concrete evidence throughout the length and breadth of this nation have come from? The very Children's Hospital we hear about, how was that built? How was it that we were able to provide 250,000 of our citizens with water that they never had before? How is it that 200-plus grounds were developed with lighting for all, so that the community is the people who were given back their space? How is it that we were able to provide 800 police vehicles to reduce—not by what we say but by the Commissioner of Police has said repeatedly under the People's Partnership, look at the numbers. Statistics sometimes could lie, but when the Commissioner of Police says so, the dramatic decrease in crime under the People's Partnership—[*Desk thumping*]

How could we then have opened and built new health centres throughout the length and breadth, and in particular Diego Martin West? How could we have improved in the health care everywhere? How could we have created a First World teaching hospital? We speak about the 17th floor, what about the floors below it? [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deyalsingh: It is not a hospital.

Mr. P. Ramadhar: Well, whatever you call it, I beg your pardon, it is a caring hospital. It is for the care of our citizens. [*Desk thumping*]

So, as they speak, when we said people centred governance, that is what we spoke to. When every child in this nation approaching the age when they could go

into high school could look forward to a computer which is the new—what you call it, slate, of the old days?—copybook. You are taking away the copybooks from the hands and from the book-bags as Dr. Eric Williams told us, it is the future of this world for them to being electronically prepared. A student in Trinidad and Tobago does not compete only here. They compete internationally. And we have been able to show and the former Minister of Education I am sure could furnish me with all of the material to show that our students and the present Minister of Education, I am sure, would be very proud of the capacity and capability of our students. That did not just happen. Of course it started with a good foundation under the PNM, but further to a finesse quality under the Minister of Education in last regime, and brought to full birth under the last five years. [*Desk thumping*]

We have some of the best in the world. Where I sit next to my friend here from Chaguanas East, we talk about diversification and I get the goose pimples ever I say it, when we can go from cutting cane to flying plane. That was a vision of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] We have heard the Member for Caroni Central speak about the coloured economies. Change do not come easy. It was easy on September 7th. The people expected something different. They expected, because of the propaganda and the unrelenting attack from voices that have gone silent since, everything that this Government—sorry, the People's Partnership did, we could not do right. Nothing they do they do wrong. I wonder where the voices of FIXIN' T&T and other places are? Where have they gone? [*Crosstalk*]

Listen, listen, forgive me, I too, whether we agreed with the political campaign of 2015, whether we agreed that they red and they ready. Well, they ready for what? I do not know. But, I really want to give you the benefit of the doubt and I have repeated it and I shall say it today. As a Government in place, constitutionally elected in a time of great difficulty, financially and otherwise, we want you to succeed. Because when you succeed all of us, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, succeed. But, you know I remember it was joked off that you have no plan, you have no plan, you have no plan. I tell you now my suspicions are growing very strong that that campaign was correct. [*Desk thumping*]

Because, you see, to raise tax is not a plan; that is a reaction. [*Desk thumping*] It is no mystery that, yes, in any democracy there will be taxation, and we believe there should be no taxation without representation. And that is why they want to talk about the Member for St. Augustine, the axe-the-tax programme. Let me tell you why we did it. We did it because we were jeopardizing the homes of persons.

If you do not understand the culture here—the culture of this nation is that you work hard, you buy a house; get a house; fix it is up; pretty it up; and you know what, even the former Prime Minister had to go through the infamy of an attack on her efforts over many, many years to put up a great structure.

But, that is a cultural thing in this nation. To own a home and make it comfortable, make it good, make it very, very accommodating to you and comfortable, especially for the elderly, Milady, is something that we have all known, and the property tax as was disclosed to this nation in 2009 had a serious, serious danger to it. There was the valuation that could have come either from an annual rateable value, which is a percentage, of what you could possibly rate the property at, or from the capital value. And that question still looms large as to how will you do the valuation on properties, and we will have a lot of other occasions because there is great ambiguity as to when that legislation with amendments or without, I do not know, will come back to this Parliament.

But, the questions are now raising their heads. They have not been answered properly then and they do not now have answers to give, whether you would be using the annual rateable value or the capital value for the taxation of property. Because if you do under the past legislation I am informed that you can charge the property tax on the capital value. If it is 3 per cent, and they will joke about this, but if it is so, because that is under the old law, a 3 per cent on a million-dollar property that sounds like a fantastic thing, it is not. Every decent home in this nation, if one is only to go through the classifieds, is a million and up. So, 3 per cent of a million is $30,000 per year. Just understand what we are talking about. And there are persons who bought or built many years ago in areas that have developed to a point that their neighbours' homes could sell for three and four million dollars.

And these are the important and real issues that are in our windscreen and ahead of us. And we wait with bated breath for clarity on these matters, because, you see, as we hear now about saving jobs, and I congratulate the Attorney General for that sense of heart to not want to make people lose their jobs. But, what about losing their homes? I am hearing now about the benefit of allowing the elderly or the not so young to get free driving permits, when some of them do not have cars, and if they have cars they done raise the price of gas; I am hearing about the removal of the cost to a passport which is a great thing. But, for those who can barely afford to live in this nation and they wish to go they cannot even afford a plane ticket. So, the passport is only for fanning purposes, and no foreign exchange, you see.

Madam Speaker, back to the property tax, because this is going to be—and luckily in 2009 where, you know, by the hand of God, given the opportunity as the people of Trinidad and Tobago for an election to be called shortly thereafter. There is no election ahead of us for some time, I imagine, and I hope it were otherwise, because this is something that the nation is extremely worried and troubled about. We are not about fear mongering, we are about clarity, about education, about learning, about finding out and spreading the truth. Do you know one of the real dangers that many persons expressed then and are expressing today? It is this, what if I cannot pay? I am working, yes, but my expenses are just there.

We have something called the working poor. Even middle class persons you could call them working poor, in that they have very little disposable, and dispensable in a way, incomes, and they cannot pay it. Do you know there is a provision, of course, a little pressure cooker point where you could go and make an application for a deferral? You know what the deferral does? It does not remove your tax, you know. It kicks the can down the road and it attaches to the property. So another very crucial cultural thing in this nation is that we build our house, we make it good, and when we die we intend to pass it to our children. Instead of an inheritance now there is a real possibility for those who cannot pay the tax in their lives that instead of passing on an inheritance, they pass on a debt that turns on its head the very culture of many, many generations before us.

These are important things and the nation needs to know. So, to say that taxation—of course we must have taxation, but how do you do it? But, in taxation they are missing a whole new or whole large percentage of another part of the equation. What about wealth creation? There should be no taxation without wealth creation. Because to take and squeeze, to expect blood out of stone, as we have already heard, things are getting very hard in the country, to have heard the Member for Tabaquite speak about contractors contracting, where employees for builders are being sent home, these are things that we are hearing on the ground already. We appreciate the acknowledgement of the need to secure jobs in relation to probably CEPEP and URP, but we need to fix that into putting it into meaningful employment just as agriculture. Where is it in all that they have said, this thrust for the creation of new wealth for the earning of foreign exchange for the prevention of expenditure of foreign exchange, for instance, in terms of building a capacity in agriculture?

You would be shocked, Madam Speaker, to see the quality of produce that is now available in Trinidad and Tobago. Because, I remember in St. Augustine, I

was invited under the People's Partnership administration to a launch, if I may call it that, of new lands made available to farmers. And as I walked to the head table I thought I was looking at a basket of plastic produce. Perfect as it was, the corn, the pepper, the banana, you name it, the tomatoes, the onions that the People's Partnership put as a priority, the quality of that, is exceptional. Not only for local consumption, but possibly even for export. God has given this nation great wealth. Oil and gas, yes. But in terms of the fertile lands—well, I want to tell you something, agriculture has been given a bad name from a long time ago, and I will share with you personal experiences.

I grew up in central Trinidad, but I also grew up on a farm in Mc Bean. My father owned it, and how hard it is to mind animals, to plant corn, to plant peas. I did it all, before school and after school. I know what hard work is. But you know what has happened? We were moved away, that connection from the land, because of praedial larceny. One night 12 animals stolen, the other night six. It broke your heart. You had no choice. And that is why the People's Partnership put a thrust into agriculture and put a new praedial larceny squad to prevent these things so that when you work hard, you sweat, and then it is stolen from you, we tried to mitigate these things. Agriculture is one aspect that is replenishing. It is not damaging to the environment. In fact, it enhances it, and these are the things we must go towards.

6.30 p.m.

We must let our children know that agriculture is not the old "buss-up tall boots and buss pants." No. It is a millionaire's future if you do it right. And we do not need to speak of this only and say "look we will give certain incentives," but do not then take the next step. We need governance that says, we will take you from putting the seed into the ground to putting the food on the table or on the ship for export. And that is where we have fallen short. We will have initiatives without continuity.

That is one aspect. In Trinidad and Tobago we have to look at intrinsic wealth. Why do we not in this nation have a Len "Boogsie" Sharpe centre at the university for those who wish to learn about pan? They should not have to go to Japan. They should not have to go to anywhere else if you want the real thing. We need to start certifying things as authentic and real. There is a great value to these things. Why is it that we import, today, mas costumes? Because they are mass produced, when we have the real thing, the talent of our people. And this really enhances the civilization of Trinidad and Tobago, because it takes from our people what they naturally have, encourages it and makes it a wealth-generating effort.

So, Madam Speaker, my friends could speak as much as they want about taxation, about why it is necessary; we agree, there must be some level of taxation. But you know a Government gone wrong when we start taxing the salt of the earth. How could you, [*Crosstalk*] yes, the salt of the earth, and it is very philosophical if you do not have a clue.

When Mahatma Gandhi started, it was about salt. It is God's given right to us for salt, but they tax that. And if you go back into the—I shall not be too biblical or too religionist in any way, but for those who wish to learn, go and look and see what has happened to those who attack the salt or attacks the salt. Something is wrong with them, terribly wrong to hear now that you put tax on computers, so if you cannot get it from the schools you cannot buy it for the home. To blind our young people and all of our citizens from the opportunity to be a citizen of this world where we need our intellectual ability to open itself for innovation to truly become our own.

Hon. Member: Knowledge economy.

Mr. P. Ramadhar: Knowledge economy is the future and if it is that we are doing these things, to even be taxing books, we are returning to the dark age. But I am not surprised now, because you know what, when we heard about new governance and the people voted for it, they expected so much. You know what we have gotten, a removal of the Post-Cabinet Press Conference. That is a serious thing. There was almost no voice—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Except when the Minister of Finance was Acting Prime Minister.

Hon. Member: Yeah, he talked. Yeah, yeah. He would make a good Prime Minister. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. P. Ramadhar: So, Madam Speaker, that was a serious blow to democracy. But that is not all; that is not all. As we start playing now with the financial aspects of the economy, the issue of devaluation and the fiscal policies, what happened to an independent office holder in this nation? The Governor of the Central Bank, surreptitiously, and possibly illegally, removed. [*Desk thumping*]

So I want to warn now, because I will tell you something. People say, you know, I am partnering with the PNM; nothing could be further from the truth. I partner with the people and you know what, the very people who supported them in the election saying—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: What about Sat?

Mr. P. Ramadhar: Well I cannot say all of the things, it is too crude for here. But they are also saying that they do not now believe the hype of the campaign of the PNM in 2015. [*Desk thumping*] There are many regretting, because there is always another way, there is always a softer way. Because you know what, my friend from San Fernando West who I knew long before the politics and will remain my friend, I hope, long after the politics—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: I doubt it. I doubt it.

Mr. P. Ramadhar: Well, I do not know. I could just be hopeful and optimistic.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: I doubt it very much.

Mr. P. Ramadhar: Gentlemen and Ladies, please, please, please, I want to give you a little secret. It is a little secret that happened here for the whole world to have known, but we seem to have forgotten. They came to this Parliament and asked for a $50 billion borrowing ability. Do you know what the bigger secret is? We do not know where a single dollar of that will be spent. [*Desk thumping*] Why is that so, and you are talking about tax. You know what you are taking but you do not know what you are putting.

Madam Speaker, where is this $50 billion to go? Are we hearing it is borrowed to pay debt? Have we heard that it is borrowed for—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: Consumption.

Mr. P. Ramadhar: Consumption. What is it? We have heard before about this rapid rail. Yes, "axe the tax" and rapid rail. Bad combination. Toxic for you because you see—I heard the Prime Minister, I respect him, and I heard he was going to give his great seminal statement that was in the Christmas week and when he moved it I said, "oh God, we in trouble", because he did not want to be Grinch—Scrooge, sorry—or Grinch who stole Christmas, so he put it for the following week. I said: "This is the worst news yet." We are going to get devaluation, we are going to be shafted; we are going to get all kinds of things. But you know what happened, I realized the psychology, and they are brilliant at it. I would like to know who are your political advisors You are geniuses at this.

What you do is that you prepare the ground for absolute failure—blame it on the past Government and that anything less than absolute failure will be seen like a success to you. [*Laughter*] So that when they delivered the speech, even I said, thank you Prime Minister, no devaluation. [*Laughter*] But I woke up the next morning and I said, "Wait nah, that was just a con game. Ramadhar, you fell for

that?" But I was not the only one, as I spoke to so many others, they are waking up to the reality.

Member for La Horquetta/Talparo, the country is waking up and smelling the coffee. So that they are understanding the communication, sorry, sorry—[*Crosstalk*] 12.5 per cent on you.

Hon. Member: On Cuffie.

Mr. P. Ramadhar: The truth, I shall always repeat, cannot be subdued for long. Now, as I repeat this, I want you to succeed brothers and sisters, I really do, because there is no election ahead so therefore this is not politicking. This is about resetting. We will work with you.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: "A-A."

Mr. P. Ramadhar: Yes. I know you do not want it. [*Laughter*] Because I remember in this very Parliament—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Because you all told us you would not work with us.

Mr. P. Ramadhar:—when an error was being made—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Hinds: "He cyah even geh a party to work with him."

Mr. P. Ramadhar: Yes, of course, "boy", all time it take one. When a serious error was being made I hailed out to my friends who I always consider—whether they consider me as something else is another matter—I said, "Listen, you cannot do that." Sub judice, "doh be ridiculous" was the response.

Hon. Member: That was the Wade Mark thing?

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Yes.

Mr. P. Ramadhar: "Shhh, shhh, keep he out of this." [*Laughter*] And do you know that is the attitude, "doh be ridiculous", and I was totally right.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: With what?

Mr. P. Ramadhar: I will tell you privately. So that, you know, we are still, all of us are invested into the future of this nation. But we are invested for the betterment of this country; not for the failure of this country. And until you tell us, Minister of Finance, that $50 billion you want to borrow, what are you going to do with it. Are you going to run with this rapid rail, and up till today you have not told us whether it is TT $10 billion or US $10 billion. The irony of which is the horror of the thing is the alignment that we had fought in 2009, ran through the most densely populated areas of the East-West Corridor.

So the very homes that you intend to tax with your property tax will be used to finance the thing that totally derails them. And you know I am so happy that you came with pomposity, sometimes saying, "ah", I have made myself so clear, land and building taxes, 2016. If you paid $1,000 in 2009, you are paying $1,000 in 2015. Hooray, hooray. Crystal clear. But it is also equally crystal clear that 2016 fiscal year ends September. A whole new regime will come that will start from the end of 2016, into 2017, into 2018 and if by the grace of God we get an election sometime after that, you know what is going to happen. But if we do not, if we do not, many of our citizens will be traumatized and the very persons you are talking about giving what, driving permit for free, and passport for free, they could take their homes. And that is not a statement of fear mongering. That is a statement of potential reality.

And that is the function of this Parliament to warn and alert [*Desk thumping*] the nation and indeed yourself because sometimes you may be doing things with the best of intention without understanding the consequences of your action. We have seen alot of that in the past. To hear that the Children's Hospital, wow, what a thing, because we forgot about the Children's Life Fund, you know.

I remember—Minister of Health you are a good soul, but I remember having gone to former PNM Minister of Health asking for money to save children's life, hem and haw. You know what, $60,000, we want $2 million, you know, $60,000. You are a good man, you will not kill the life fund I am sure. But there is a danger that the Children's Hospital may not be initialized, if I may use that term loosely, and be put to use. The equipment, I have been advised, is already installed, world class, state-of-the-art, could be left to rot. And you know why I could say this with some level, certainly of trepidation, and hopefully some level of hope, that it could not happen, but it happened here already.

Many have forgotten, Mount Hope: 70-odd buildings, former Minister of Health. At the time, cutting edge technology, the latest of equipment when they were taken out of their boxes, 10 and 15 years after, could not be used. Let us not look—Attorney General you are there and I trust you, you know. Make sure they do not do things like that. Please, there are good souls, I look across, but there is an underlining sense of malaise that I am sensing and seeing coming before this nation. And what is more worrying than anything else is that there is really no vision. There is really no plan to cut, yes, but what about the growth of the economy. What about the new world that this nation now goes into that it cannot depend on oil and gas? You can build how many homes, but where is it that the material—a lot of it is imported—comes from?

Whatever we do, every cent we spend, every cent we save to spend must be on income-generating efforts. Condemn us, if you will, as you have that we did not—but I could tell you many great efforts were made. Some succeeded and some did not, but the intent of the former Government was good. I cannot say all who populated it were good, but I could tell you this former Prime Minister sitting in Cabinet with the Cabinet whenever a decision was taken—and I say this honestly to you—was always with an underling belief that what we did or attempted to do was in the interest of each and every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*].

Mr. Hinds: With all the bad decisions we just did not know better.

Mr. P. Ramadhar: To hear something that I know could not be true falling from the lips of the Attorney General, I know he is being misled, to be told that the vessels, and I shall use that term, that were bought by this Government to secure our borders came with no guns. Of course, they did not come with guns because they could not be shipped with them. They needed a different regime. But the guns were to come separately to be installed. Folks, folks, listen to this one. They had to be brought in by a civilian crew, therefore they could not be armed. [*Desk thumping*] That is the reality. So the other side of the story could be more—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, your speaking time has expired. You are entitled to additional 15 minutes. Do you intend to avail yourself of it? [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. P. Ramadhar: Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*] Thank you, Madam Speaker. I will not be much longer except to point out a few things. I am hearing on the underside of what the Minister of Finance spoke about, this thing called business levy. [*Interruption*] I thought it was well made but maybe I should make it again. The vessels could not come armed because they had to be brought in by a civilian crew. When they become militarily armed then they could install the gun. I would ask the question and maybe we should get an honest answer from whomever, and I know the hon. Member for Point Fortin; and if not he, of course, the Attorney General, and if not he, the Minister of Health; and if not he I could go down the line, could tell us—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: What about me?

Mr. P. Ramadhar: What are you again? [*Laughter and desk thumping*] The guns are here and whether they choose to bolt them on is another matter because we know they have a history of not putting things together.

6.45 p.m.

But I was making the point—and thank you, Member for Siparia—that the business levy moving from .2 per cent to .6 per cent on businesses that do not show profits, assumes, the underlying statement in that is that it is fraud. Well, fix the fraud! Because there may be businesses that genuinely cannot afford to pay these things. And what is the effect of that? It is better you have a viable business that is non-profitable rather than to squeeze it and kill it and lose jobs.

Hon. Member: Gas stations.

Mr. P. Ramadhar: Yes, gas stations. I "doh" want to go through that inglorious list of potential businesses that could do these things. So the other issue—I mean, you know, when we were told that there will be a reduction in VAT from 15 to 12½ per cent, I said, "This can't be PNM". It turned out to be just them. [*Laughter*] Because, really, look at the amount of items here. To hear coffee, tea, juice—

Hon. Member: Water.

Mr. P. Ramadhar: Water?

Hon. Member: Kool Aid.

Mr. P. Ramadhar: Mauby, tofu—

Hon. Member: Biscuit, Kool aid.

Mr. P. Ramadhar: Tofu—I was vegetarian for 14 years. I "woulda dead."

Hon. Member: Maraschino cherries.

Mr. P. Ramadhar: No, well, "dah good. We could do without dat." No, no, we laugh and joke but these are real world consequences on the working poor; 12½ per cent more across the board. We forget basic economics—the domino effect. It goes across the board! So that what this nation has to look forward to in this next several years, until a next election, is more VAT, more tax, less accessibility, less communication, and cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, cut. As a friend jokingly told me, he said, "You know, things bad, you know, so that the bitter medicine that has to be administered to this country should be administered by Dr. Rowley, but, you know, if the medicine gets too bitter and gets too intense, it becomes poison."

And I am of the view here, honestly, that if we are not very careful and create that opportunity and hope that there is a brighter tomorrow because of investment that we have put in for the last many years, an investment that this Government we had hoped would continue in our children, and in new economies, then all we would have is a very suppressed, oppressed and abused community of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, without hope for many years. We cannot afford that. The time is not yet over for us to put these initiatives, and if you want them we will share them with you. It is not about ownership; it is about sharing. And the former Minister of Planning, the Member for Caroni Central, will speak to you, and you already have the ideas. It is just about the will, the political will to do things.

You have shown in the past the lack of it. You are a new Government still, but the honeymoon ended last year, if you did not realize it, and that come the next few days, as this news goes out that all this caring, "Yuh red and yuh ready", that the VAT is not to help but really to hurt—because you need not have put it on all of those items. You need not have taken things from zero and put it at 12½ per cent if you cared. There are some things, yes, you can put VAT, and some from 15 to 12½.

I could not believe to hear now that—I love cars, yes, of course—but to hear some cars, the price will drop? And you talk about gridlocking? And you want to have a new transit system but you are cheapening the cost of vehicles? Did I hear right? That the one vehicle that was available with CNG already original equipment manufactured, you put VAT on that? Where is this? This across-the-board cut of 7 per cent when you should have used some reason and intelligence to say, "Look, you know I could cut the 7 per cent here, buh yuh see dat investment in the children's future and education, that investment in serious tourism—medical tourism, CNG, yuh cut all ah dat, vip vap, and you talk about vapsy government of the past?" No, no, no.

I did not mean to be "insultive" to anyone and if it felt as such, please, it was not intended. It was just really me speaking my heart, having come into the wake of a most eloquent colleague and friend, the Member for San Fernando West. So we look forward, Madam Speaker, to an improved collaboration. We are willing to do it, but all I say—because the power, you have to be careful with power, eh. It has an ability for you to ridicule anything that you do not agree with. It blinds you—

Hon. Member: You will know.

Mr. P. Ramadhar: Yes, and you must know. It blinds you to the reality; it blinds you to truth and it blinds you to opportunities. We have difficulties ahead but we have serious opportunities. As a friend yesterday told me—and I shall not use the word he used—"cut tail brings clarity." Necessity is truly the mother of invention. Things "doh" happen unless there is a need to change. We are at a point where the country needs to change. Let us really do this together. Let us do it with a sense of equity and equanimity.

Madam Speaker, I thank you so much for the opportunity. Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs (Hon. Stuart Young): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, fellow colleagues. I rise here today, recognizing it is an opportunity once again to have the privilege to address this House. I did not intend to speak today, Madam Speaker, but having heard the contributions from those on the other side I feel somewhat compelled to speak and to bring a level of assistance to the population listening on at large.

First of all, Madam Speaker, the contribution of the Member for Tabaquite seemed to suggest a continued behaviour as though there is a bottomless pit of money. It is very difficult to sit here today and listen to such a contribution, especially after in each of our Ministries we have begun to gather evidence of what can only be called an abuse of the Treasury. Listening to the Member for Tabaquite talk about the non-payment of contractors, I rise here and ask that they tell the population why it is that they paid out hundreds—and I repeat—hundreds of millions of dollars in the months of August and September 2015 to certain preferred contractors.

I ask the question, whether these favoured friends, financiers and contractors of the People's Partnership Government have gone on to pay the legitimate subcontractors who actually did the work. Because there is a suggestion that those who did the work have not been paid by those who were, in fact, paid by the PP government. Furthermore, Madam Speaker, on an almost daily basis, we are being faced with schemes by certain contractors attempting to hide their ill-gotten gains and to avoid the legitimate claims of certain claimants and the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago.

The question arises, with the greatest of respect, Madam Speaker, that the population should ask, whether the economic problems that we are now addressing arose in the past four months since September 2015. I have heard a

claim that they reacted to the crises in January 2015 of lower oil and gas prices, but, Madam Speaker, with the greatest of respect, this is indeed a fallacy because the facts will show, and history reflect that they continued to abuse the Treasury. For example, the National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago. They took unprecedented dividends during the period 2010 to 2015.

The records would also reflect that they took retroactive dividends, meaning that they declared a dividend for a certain period and in the following year went back and increased the dividend from the period that they paid before. They paid contractors, as I said, in August and September 2015, hundreds of millions of dollars, some under the cover of mobilization fees which were above the normal and accepted 10 per cent rate, and no work was done, or has been done for those hundreds of millions of dollars of cash of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, paid out to these preferred contractors.

We have heard from the hon. Attorney General that to date—and we are still compiling—over $1.4 billion paid out to a handful and a selected amount of attorneys-at-law. They leveraged and mortgaged the Green Fund. They maximized every single overdraft available to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. We heard $34 billion in overdraft in the Exchequer Account. We know that the overdraft at the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago was also maximized.

They took short-term loans by certain state enterprises just before August and September 2015 to get cash—short-term loans—that we now have to repay. They entered into billion-dollar projects—a few select billion-dollar projects—without any money in place to pay for these projects.

Hon. Member: Recklessness.

Hon. S. Young: We have just heard the Member for St. Augustine talk and attempt to refute the allegations of ghosts. Madam Speaker, I would like to put on record here for the population of Trinidad and Tobago, that the hon. Attorney General, whom I have the greatest pleasure of working with, when we went into our Ministry there were over 372 short-term employees, as he referred to. When an investigation began, we found ghost gangs in the attorney section and in the IT sections; attorneys-at-law that no one could identify. They had never turned up for work. In the IT section, these people could not be found in the Ministry of Legal Affairs. There was a complete annihilation of the human resource department and this was done by the Permanent Secretary.

These are some of the difficulties that we faced. When you are faced in a professional Ministry with a number of attorneys who do not exist but pay checks

being cashed every month of over $20,000 a month per pay check; an IT personnel who, again, no one in the IT department could identify during the period, being paid over $15,000 a month, and then to sit here and listen to us being attacked when we attempt to cut expenditure, and we attempt to now correct a ship that was overturned. [*Desk thumping*]

Water—I must rise to speak about water as well, Madam Speaker. We heard about "water for all". The truth that has not been told to date is that WASA was instructed in the months prior to the election to keep all water flowing to the detriment of the aquifers of Trinidad and Tobago and the reservoirs of Trinidad and Tobago. When the experts at WASA were saying we needed to conserve water as a country, the election ploy of "water for all" left us post-September with dry reservoirs and some aquifers that may not recover.

The increase in borrowing limits that we heard reference to, of an increase—a few weeks ago we came to the Parliament and asked for the ability to increase our borrowings by up to $50 billion. And I think it is important that we do not mislead the population, that this is only an opportunity or something that can be used in case of difficulties, because we have come in with every single overdraft at maximum limit. We have come in at a time when our normal recourse of revenue is down from oil and gas, and as we attempt to find means to increase our revenue, we need to ensure that there is now a sufficient ceiling for us to borrow and to utilize overdrafts in a time of need.

At no stage did the Minister of Finance indicate to the population an intention to utilize in the immediacy this $50 billion increase in borrowing. I heard my friend from St. Augustine talk about sharing initiatives. We will always welcome any citizen of Trinidad and Tobago providing us with solutions, because we are a solution-oriented Government. Solutions are the only way we can take this country forward.

But I question myself as I listened, well why were these solutions for revenue generation not put into place during the years 2010—2015? [*Desk thumping*]

7.00 p.m.

Madam Speaker, with the greatest of respect I think it is important to share with our fellow citizens and to continue what we heard from the hon. Attorney General as to what it is we have been doing in the short four months that we have been in government. At our Ministry, in addition to what we have already heard, we have negotiated with contractors and consultants up to and over 30 per cent discounts on the market rate of fees. We have cut wastage in the manner that the

Attorney General has talked about by simple efforts, such as a reduction in the purchase of paper, a reduction in electricity and a reduction in the catering services used. We have also reduced the amount spent quite easily on legal fees and other items of recurrent expenditure.

As a Government, we also took decisions very early o'clock at a Cabinet level to reduce the amount of travel by public servants. In the last four months we have saved hundreds of thousands of dollars of taxpayers' money by refusing travel. [*Desk thumping*] Every single travel Note that comes before the Cabinet is questioned. There is a reduction in numbers and also sometimes a complete eradication of the travel plans. We have also limited the types of tickets and travel that can be done by public servants, meaning the classes of travel.

Madam Speaker, mathematically, the 7 per cent cut that has been mandated by the hon. Prime Minister in his speech to the nation, when translated, should eradicate or go a long way towards the eradication of the expected deficit. If one takes 7 per cent of $56 billion, which is $7 billion of capital expenditure, minus from the $63, 7 per cent is $3.92 billion. So that is what this Government is working towards, the reduction of almost $4 billion of an annual budget by a mandated cut of 7 per cent.

Madam Speaker, we have sat here and we have heard for the last few months about cut, cut, cut and these talks about the cutting of employment, and I would like to add to what was said by the Attorney General. Certainly, in our Ministry what we immediately did was call in for the qualifications of all of the contract employees to ensure that they were properly qualified for the positions that they held. Then, with the assistance of the CPO rates, we ensured that for the respective positions persons were paid what they were supposed to be paid. And I question once again as a member of the public, who is fortunate enough to have the privilege to serve in this House and to serve the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, how could anyone, any right-thinking citizen of the Trinidad and Tobago question and criticize the cutting of expenditure? To hear an eradication of expenditure being ridiculed is beyond any common sensical position.

They talk about spending and that the country needs to understand that we as a Government need to increase spending. How can one increase spending in a time when your revenues are down and in a time when we have found wanton wastage and abuse? That would be with the greatest of respect completely, completely wrong.

To turn very quickly, Madam Speaker—because I do not intend to be very long in my contribution to the Bill—I would like to take the opportunity to hopefully explain for the last time how the business levy tax works. The business levy tax is taken as a percentage of one's gross sales or the receipts from the preceding year. Income tax is paid on profit. So if a company is not running a profit, it pays no tax. This is not a doubling of taxation. Income tax on profit is at 25 per cent. What you are doing here is taking .6—I repeat it, .6 of a per cent of gross sales and taking it as a taxation on someone who is declaring no profit.

We have found statistically that many persons are having hundreds of millions of dollars in some instances in revenue and declaring no profit. So, Madam Speaker, a way of increasing revenue is to take .6 per cent of that and this either does one of two things: forces them to become profitable; or ensures that the coffers gain revenue through inefficient or persons who are doing a little more than hiding in their books. So to stand here today and attack the increase in business levy and to sell it as though it is a double taxation is to once again mislead the population, [*Interruption*] and as my friend has whispered, it is disingenuous.

The VAT list will become publicized now and right-thinking citizens of Trinidad and Tobago are encouraged to look at the zero-rated items that have been retained, and I will quickly touch on some. There will continue to be no VAT on unprocessed food of a kind used for human consumption; on parboiled and brown rice; on all-purpose and wheat flour; on whole, skimmed and lactose-free milk; on margarine; on white and whole wheat bread; on baby formulas and baby milk substitutes; on cheddar cheese and rennet-free cheese; on corn beef; on curry; on tin sardines; smoked herring; toilet paper; yeast; baking powder; uncooked or unstuffed pasta; brown sugar; many other items; pure white vinegar; and importantly, on medicines and drugs of any kind available only by prescription. Also, on any of the following medicines for human use: cough and cold preparations, antacids and anti-flatulents, laxatives, oral rehydration preparations, diabetic drugs, amongst many others. And the list continues to go on for pages of those that are exempt. So, Madam Speaker, to suggest that this is an attack on the less fortunate is once again disingenuous.

Madam Speaker, very briefly I would like to talk about some of the good that has taken place in the last four months in the constituency of Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West. Within the first four months of being in office I was able, through the assistance of corporate Trinidad and Tobago, to offer 10 scholarships as a start to those who are less fortunate to attend Servol. [*Desk thumping*] We

have started homework supervision centres. Just this weekend gone, we followed the lead of Laventille West and Laventille East by having at the Queen's Park Savannah, at the Grand Stand, a gathering of UTT, UWI, COSTAATT and many of these other institutions under one roof, maximizing your potential, developing human capital. We had a very successful day [*Desk thumping*] when people came under one roof to learn what opportunities were available to better their lives.

I am happy to say that I have started back walking in the constituency and being told that this is the first time, in a long time, that post an election period, we have returned to walk. It is something that I know my fellow colleagues are intending to do as well—[*Interruption*] [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Members: Already doing.

Hon. S. Young:—and already doing as they correct me. I am about to start town hall meetings through the constituency.

Madam Speaker, as one example of how our hon. Prime Minister has led from in front, a couple months ago he assembled a team of his Ministers and told us we must go to the St. Michael's Home for Boys. In going to the St. Michael's Home for Boys we listened to the woes and the inadequacies they have been facing over the last few years; and then each of the Ministers who attended were mandated within a short space of time to improve the lives of not only those who live there but also those who work there.

Madam Speaker, we are committed in Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West to working with the homes for battered women and children, and to generally making our best attempts to make the lives of the less fortunate an easier life and an improved life. All of this has happened within the first four months of being in government, when we are faced with difficulties and workloads. [*Interruption*] Madam Speaker, I am being reminded by my colleagues to utilize this opportunity, as well, to remind the population that within the first four months this Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago took a decision to give up and to sacrifice for good causes 5 per cent of our salaries. [*Desk thumping*] Each Member's 5 per cent contribution, starting this month, will go to a worthy cause of his or her choice.

So to sit here and to listen to those on the other side criticize without any merit, I found myself compelled to just spend a few short moments today to correct, hopefully, some of the record and to provide the public of Trinidad and Tobago with the continued assurance by those on this side, that we will do what is right and we will work hard and work for the full benefit of Trinidad and Tobago regardless of who you may support politically. There can be no allegation or accusation with any merit of us not doing so in the first four months.

So, Madam Speaker, with those few short words, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to contribute here today. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Caroni East.

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Today, this is the second opportunity we have to speak on issues related to the financial situation of the country. The first time was the Appropriation Bill, and subsequent to that we spent about five days assessing the expenditure of the present Government, what they proposed to be doing over the fiscal 2016.

There were lots of questions that we asked and remain unanswered, and up to today the Minister of Finance has not provided these answers to many questions that we asked and are still lingering. So, Madam Speaker, I think it is incumbent upon the present regime, who speaks of transparency and accountability, must account to the nation, through the Parliament, for answering the questions that were asked and remain still to be given the answers for during the Standing Finance Committee over the five days.

Madam Speaker, today saw an example of what we had been accused of when we were in government. The same person who always accused the People's Partnership Government of trying to railroad legislation and bringing on legislation quickly and giving them little time to study, today was an example of what he used to be accusing us of, which we never did and which he in fact did.

So here it is we have this Finance Bill—we got the Order Paper first and then we got the Bill on January 07. That is fine, but we kept asking for the items related to VAT. It is preposterous and abhorrent that you will have a debate on a Bill which includes VAT as an issue, and when he is completed, that has not been circulated as yet.

And it is only when a Member of the Opposition of our team was on his feet, then the first area of the items of zero rating began to be circulated. That is arrogance displayed by the Government; it is unacceptable. It is something very saddening that you could treat this House and the Parliament with the contempt that you treated this Parliament today in circulating things which have to be discussed while the Opposition is speaking.

7.15 p.m.

So the first is the zero rating so the Member for Tabaquite would not have even seen the items except during a little bit of the tea time to be able to understand what items were for zero rating and which items were being left at

12.5 per cent. So the transparency and accountability for this Government leaves a lot to be desired and this Parliament has been treated with deep disrespect and some degree of arrogance.

Madam Speaker, this Finance Bill that is brought today can be appropriately termed the hardship Bill because everywhere you look on it with the taxation, the business levy, the green fund levy, the VAT, this is a hardship Bill because it introduces the latest version of the PNM's repressive and harsh slash and burn governance. The reintroduction and increase in the Green Fund levy and business levy are typical PNM knee-jerk reactions to economic difficulties which they found themselves in difficulties in previous PNM administrations. Then that administration called an election in four years and subsequently, in 2007–2010, they called an election in three years. This is an administration unable to govern this country from an economic perspective. They cannot run a country when the chips are down, when the financial aspects are not as good they would like it to be and what we are seeing here are knee-jerk reactions in the face of the economic difficulties.

They have no plan and as one of my colleagues said, when we told them that they had no plan, it is quite evident. You had an Appropriation Bill debate, you had a Finance Committee meeting for five days, you now have this Finance Bill, you are in January and the real appropriation and the expenditure and revenue for the Government will be in March. So six months would have elapsed between September and March, and this Government would not have presented any fiscal policy and what they are doing and what they are planning to do. It seems as though they were surprised to come into Government and they were caught red-handed. They said they are "red and ready" but obviously they were not ready.

So for them to have a period of six months now to tell the population what their fiscal policies are and we do not know what they will tell us in March. So far they have not told us anything about what they want to do, where they are going. They want to collect money as much as they want, they want to spend it in a way to satisfy the population so that the population will feel comforted and they will keep them in power. But that is not going to work. The population is already seeing that you all have betrayed them. There has been a massive betrayal of the people in this country. [*Desk thumping*] You lack the integrity. You have not come clean with the population. People are speaking out, they are hurting. It is pressure on the poor and now you are putting on the VAT, what you are doing with the business levy and the green fund levy, you are putting pressure on the lower-middle income group and the small entrepreneurs.

Madam Speaker, there are about 16,000 young microenterprises and small businesses in the country. You have raised the business levy and the Green Fund levy by 300 per cent each. So those companies that were making small profits, you are eroding the profitability—well you say that they will be able to claim back the thing by the tax by virtue of those who are making profits. But what about those who are struggling to make a profit and they have not been able to make a profit? So, by you imposing this 300 per cent increase in the business levy and the Green Fund levy, you are even worsening their situation so that they would not even come to a degree of profitability.

And what are the consequences of that? There are loss of jobs; pressure on the poor people; small businesses going into receivership. It is betrayal of the people. It is a state of inertia for economic activity. There is decrease in economic activity across the board because these 16,000 small businesses are mainstays of employment across the country. Some of them are small exporters so we would be deriving some degree of foreign exchange from them. That is going to be lost and they even have to pay the corporation tax. Some of them have to pay corporation tax. So business levy, VAT, corporation tax—all these areas are pernicious to the successful achievement of small and microenterprises.

Let me speak about the VAT. The Minister of Finance indicated that the budget is predicated to $63 billion. He was unable to tell us conclusively how he was getting the $63 billion, but he mentioned that they are going to get $12 billion from VAT. He said that on January 01, a new VAT regime will be introduced. Today is the 11th and we are now debating the introduction of the VAT. So he has misled the Parliament, he has misled the population, in terms of the timing for the reintroduction of the VAT. A number of businesses would have probably taken that into consideration and began to make the adjustments and we do not know when he is really going to implement the new VAT regime, the 12.5 per cent and those zero-rated items. He spoke about that today but businesses now have to go and do all their work.

So how is he going to get that $12 billion? We were able to get $5.6 billion in 2014/2015, and he has estimated that he wants to get $12 billion and five months have gone already. No way is he going to be able to materialize that $12 billion for VAT, particularly when the VAT is coming down to 12.5 per cent. Those which are on the high-income earning for VAT, they are now being reduced from 15 per cent to 12 per cent. So a reduction from 15 per cent to 12.5 per cent and the late implementation of this programme and, as he said, there is only a 40 per cent success in the VAT situation, how is he going to generate that $12 billion? The

Minister of Finance has to tell this country how he intends to generate that $12 billion. He cannot do it; he will not be able. So what will happen? Where will he borrow, get the money from to make up the $12 billion that he is predicating the expenditure for $63 billion and he cannot reach the $12 billion in the VAT? What is he going to do? So I see a degree of incompetence, incapable of doing what they really think they can do and they do not have the capacity to do it. They have no direction and no plan.

Now, my colleague spoke about the zero-rated items and made some important contributions as far as the type of foods which are being taxed now to 12.5 per cent and which ones have gone down from 15 per cent to 12.5 per cent, and we spoke about the motor vehicles, the high-end areas, where that should be increased rather than being decreased from 15 per cent to 12.5 per cent. So the have and the haves are getting better and those who do not have will be taxed with all these 7,000 possible items which were zero-rated previously and are now being taxed. So, Madam Speaker, history is repeating itself with the PNM's tax and spent measures in the face of a decline in international energy prices.

I just want to take us back a bit. When we had the first energy windfall, you would remember former Jamaican Prime Minister, Michael Manley, said that money was gushing through like a dose of salt. And subsequent to that when we had the austerity time, that was followed by PNM administration with punitive and onerous taxation measures. And this now, this PNM regime is dishing out similar, burdensome and oppressive measures to what a predecessor PNM Prime Minister, Mr. George Chambers, did during an earlier period of austerity.

Prime Minister Chambers had exacted a litany of taxes on the small man and we are seeing a repetition of that coming here now. There was an inclusion of a tariff on the borrowing of video movies and an exit tax toll for international travel. That is where they had reached, the previous PNM administrations. Are we getting there now? Are we coming close to that again? The people have to be aware of this administration. They are misleading the population, they are fooling the population, they are betraying the population and the people now are realizing what a big mistake they made by putting them into Government. [*Desk thumping*] They cannot govern and they will not be able to govern.

My colleague, the Member of Parliament for St. Augustine, raised the issue of the property tax. I just want to give an illustration, a mathematical illustration, of how punitive this property tax can be when it is brought back again and we have to see some significant deviations and changes that would not affect the citizens

of Trinidad and Tobago in the manner which was legislated in 2009. If we take the literal sense of the legislation where we use capital value—and my colleague spoke about a $1 million home will exact to $30,000 property tax. Then, agricultural land, 1 per cent on agricultural land. So if a piece of property is worth $1 million, they will have to pay about $10,000 on that. Just one piece of land.

But more so is the commercial property. A 5 per cent tax on a commercial property. So if a commercial property is worth, let us say, $5 million, the tax is going to be $250,000 on that commercial property. So a person with a small business place where their assets are not difficult these days to come to $5 million, will have to pay in $250,000 in tax. And what is more punitive, the plant and machinery and equipment, this piece of legislation, that the property tax brings in plant and machinery and those of us who were in the House at the time would remember, and the Minister of Finance would remember, that there was a lot of discussion on this plant and machinery tax.

So a business place that is manufacturing, that is exporting and valued $20 million, for example, the property tax, the plant and machinery tax on that is 6 per cent. So 6 per cent on the $20 million plant and machinery, which is a small one, they will have to pay $1.2 million on taxation in that property tax. So we need to look at that very carefully and we want to urge the Minister of Finance before he considers bringing that piece of legislation that has to be amended, he must be considering what he is going to do about the issue of the capital values or the annual rateable values, which ones they are going to use. So there is going to be far outcry even this time than we had in 2009, six years later.

7.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, we come here time and time again, and we hear every Member from the other side speaking about the past administration with mismanagement, corruption and nepotism and so on. You want to repeat that all the time, because you feel that it will stick. Let me just take you back to what we met as a Government and what it is you are meeting now.

You would remember that we had about $20 billion in Clico to deal with, and the now advisor to you, Minister of Finance, the former Central Bank Governor who presided over the downfall of Clico, that caused the taxpayers of this country to lose $20 billion. We had to pick up the burden of that. [*Desk thumping*] It was not you. So two Ministers of Finance, Minister Dookeran and Minister Howai had been struggling for five years to meet the commitment to what you in the PNM left as a burden to us and to the population. It was shame on you all that you presided

for years knowing that Clico was faltering along the way, and the now advisor to you who was the Governor of Central Bank, and he did nothing about it during that period of time.

So we met $20 billion from there, $2 billion from the HCU, about $5 billion owing to contractors. So we met almost $27 billion in debt and we had to now during our period of time take over from UDeCOTT, a $3.5 billion on the Government Campus. We had to continue to pay for the rapid rail. During our Finance Committee Meeting we showed where we had continued to pay for the rapid rail—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Singh: The prefeasibility study.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—the prefeasibility study which was over $550 million.

We continued to pay for the Brian Lara Stadium, and we continued to pay for this waterfront project. Madam Speaker, this waterfront project was supposed to cost $2.1 billion. It cost $4.2 billion, twice the amount it was supposed to cost. So we are paying $256 million per year for 17 years. So we have mortgaged the lives of our children and grandchildren to pay for this waterfront project of $4.2 billion, and what we left in September? As my colleague indicated, about $4.5 billion in TGU, $1.5 billion from Clico and $6 billion from taxes.

So whenever they say that we left the Consolidated Fund empty, that is misleading, Madam Speaker. It is giving the wrong perception; that is not so. They were supposed to collect this money in September. It is their fault that they did not collect it in September. [*Desk thumping*] They did not do the work because they were unprepared to deal with the issues. So we did not leave any $9 billion in overdraft. In fact, we left them more that what the overdraft was. We left them with a credit. [*Desk thumping*]

Let me speak about value for money. Every day they are questioning and talking about mismanagement and corruption. Let me give this House some examples—value for money. What is happening to the Scarborough Hospital under PNM? For nine years the Scarborough Hospital was supposed to cost $200 million, and at the end of it, PNM, in nine years, could not complete it, and then we had to complete it at a cost of about $800 million. So it went from $200 million to $800 million. Is that value for money? That is PNM—nine years. So you have no moral authority to come into this Parliament and speak at any time [*Desk thumping*] on any issue regarding mismanagement and corruption.

The waterfront project, I spoke about it. The Brian Lara Stadium went up from $200 million to $800 million and still unfinished, and the contractor—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Hinds: What about LifeSport?

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: LifeSport is about $25 million/$30 million? I am talking about close to $1 billion. [*Desk thumping*] I am talking about the Brian Lara Stadium, Madam Speaker, is not finished yet, and we have spent close to $800 million already, and it is not finished.

The NAPA and SAPA both are supposed to cost US $200 million on loan from the Chinese Government. The NAPA alone ended up costing more than US $200 million and now, it is in a state of disrepair. That is PNM management for you. It was built under the PNM, and we inherited. They put a hotel inside there and—a hotel of 50 rooms and there is no service elevator for the thing that is what.

So when the Member for San Fernando West wants to talk about they saved $200,000 and $400,000 and so on, we are talking about billions of dollars. [*Desk thumping*] We are not talking about hundreds of thousands. So they saved "ah lil bit here", that is good, but what they squandered away for years, nine years—so they cannot come to this Parliament and talk about the People's Partnership spending and so on.

Where do we go with the World GTL? The World GTL, Madam Speaker, if we had lost that case with the World GTL—they want to condemn the former Attorney General. The former Attorney General worked day and night to ensure that we won that case for the World GTL because if we had lost that—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: Oooooohhhh!

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: We would have had [*Desk thumping*] to put out close to $12 billion. That was brought up in the Parliament when we were in Opposition. We brought them before a joint select committee. The World GTL people did not invest one cent, but Trinidad and Tobago's Government had to take the financial responsibility of that, and we spent billions of dollars on that, and where is it today? Nothing, but luckily we won the matter or else we would have paid about $12 billion for it.

The Petrotrin debt moved up from $3 billion to $12 billion under their watch. [*Desk thumping*] "I eh talking" about $500,000 or $5 million or $100 million.

Mr Hinds: Tell us about NGC. How many billions?

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: It went from $3 billion to $11 billion, Madam Speaker, $300 billion—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: Tell us about NGC nah.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I will come to that. You all want to lock up people and escort them out with police and so on, political victimisation, that is a la PNM. So Petrotrin from—[*Interruption*] what is that Minister? Member for D'Abadie /O'Meara, behave yourself. Petrotrin from $3 billion to $11 billion, yes. So where are we? Six hundred million more on Scarborough; waterfront project, $2.2 billion, that is $3 billion; Brian Lara Stadium, $600 million more, that is $3.6 billion; NAPA and SAPA, US $200 million more, that is $4.8 billion; the World GTL, about $3 billion, that is $7.8 billion; and Petrotrin from $3 billion to $11 billion; that is nearly $16 billion misspent, misappropriated by the last PNM regime, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hinds: No wonder why—[*Laughter*]

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: "Doh interfere with our business." That is our business. Stay out of our business. [*Laughter and crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Members!

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: And, Madam Speaker, they spread their myths all the time. The Member for San Fernando West kept on repeating what others had said before, that we spent $400 billion during our five years. We spent close to $290 billion in our budgetary allocations, Madam Speaker. Let me indicate that more than 55 per cent of that expenditure went to paying salaries and wages. So 55 per cent of $290 billion is at least $150 billion for salaries and wages.

So you are left with $140 billion to manage everything for goods and services over the five-year period. So, where did the money go? We had the Chancery Lane Teaching Hospital. We built the Couva Children's Hospital. We completed the Scarborough Hospital. We did major works on the Sangre Grande Hospital. The Point Fortin Hospital, we started. We refurbished over 100 health centres. We continued the oncology centre. We built an administrative block, Minister Khan at the Mount Hope Women's Hospital; that is just in health alone.

We had water for all for 70 per cent of the population, and the last speaker, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West [*Desk thumping*] tried to mislead the population. The Minister of Works went on and worked hard and assiduously

to get the Point Fortin Highway going. Hundreds of bridges were built; thousands of roads were repaved; box drains across the country; over 160 savannahs were lit across the country, brightening up the environment; recreation grounds were improved all across the country.

We built eight police stations; four new libraries and the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo had the pleasure of going to open one of the libraries in Rio Claro—or two you opened.

Mr. Cuffie: With pleasure.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Right, that we built. We built them and it was a pleasure for them to go and open it. We have four libraries. [*Interruption*] Fire stations, they took down the plaque from the fire station that the Member for Oropouche East put up there when the fire station in Mayaro was completed. There is a little amount of work to be done to do that. We had a 70 per cent participation in tertiary education, Minister Karim moved that from 42 per cent to 70 per cent. [*Desk thumping*] That does not come easy. We had marked improvements in the management of UTT, COSTAATT, NSDP, MIC—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Hinds: Could the Member explain why you were voted out after all of that? [*Laughter*]

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: We gave scholarships to nearly 2,000 young brilliant students across the country. [*Desk thumping*] We provided over two million text books to children across the country for the five years; over two million text books; [*Desk thumping*] 95,000 laptops were given to students over the last five years and over 6,000 to teachers.

And, Madam Speaker, I attended an international world global education forum in London about three years ago, and over 102 Ministers of Education came there.

Mr. Hinds: Yes, what was the cost?

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: In including—listen, Tim Gopeesingh does not even need anybody money to go abroad. [*Continuous laughter and desk thumping*] "I doh need any money." I can travel on my own any time I want. I worked for 41 years as a doctor. You know that Faris. [*Laughter*]

[*Mr. Hinds indicates he wants the Member to give way.*]

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Sit down. Sit down and wait. [*Laughter*] It was a world education conference which I was proud to represent the county.

Mr. Hinds: Is that an admission of some sort?

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Sorry?

Mr. Hinds: Is that an admission of some sort?

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: That is right.

Madam Speaker: Direct your comments to the Chair, please.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Sorry. I have 41 years working as a doctor; 35 years as a gynaecologist and 25 years as gynaecologic oncologist. [*Interruption*] I have 31,000 private patients in Trinidad. [*Contentious desk thumping and crosstalk*] and that is private patients.

Mr. Hinds: "And what 'bout de paper bag?" [*Laughter*]

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Madam Speaker, built over 6,000 new homes constructed by the Minister of Housing and Urban Development, yes.

Mr. Hinds: He did not tell us about the one brown paper bag.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Our achievements in education—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Hon, Member, your speaking time has expired. You are entitled to 15 minutes. Do you intend to avail yourself of it?

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Yes, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: May I just call on the Leader of the House.

PROCEDURAL MOTION

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I wish to indicate that I would like to move a Motion in accordance with Standing Order 15(5) that the House continue to sit until the completion of the business before it at this time.

Question put and agreed to.

Madam Speaker: Might I please remind Members with respect to the House bulletin on the use of mobile devices. I think some people are causing some vibration, and if they can please remedy that? Thank you.

FINANCE BILL, 2016

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Let me just give some illustrations and some examples of the PNM administration achievements in the four months in Government, or non-achievements. They

delivered a $63 billion budget while perpetuating the fallacy that there was no money. So you go on to have a $63 billion budget, saying that there is no money, but you decide to still carry it out, and you continued to say that the country is running out of fumes. Those were the words of the Minister of Finance, Mr. Colm Imbert.

The PNM confessed, Madam Speaker, that there existed US $11 billion in reserve, $5.7 billion in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, along with savings held by several state agencies.

7.45 p.m.

It is we who ensured that we move the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund from $3.4 billion when we came in to $5.6 billion, so US $2.6 billion more, equivalent of nearly TT $15 billion we increased the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. We had almost 13 months of import cover with foreign exchange of $11.5 billion. So together with the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and the foreign reserve, we had close to US $16 billion, that is about TT $105 billion we left for that Government, for the Government there now. They had to admit that we left that for them. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Young: Thank you.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Yeah.

Madam Speaker, the level of anxiety that this Government is creating in the society by continuing to make negative statements and unfounded accusations, they are driving the society mad. They have no clear fiscal and monetary policy in response to the current economic realities. They pursued legislation to increase borrowing limits by $50 billion. We held—the Minister of Finance held the borrowing to 45 per cent debt to GDP. He did not want to go up there, but here, in one fell swoop, you are moving it from 45 per cent debt to GDP to now 70 per cent.

You quarrelled when Standard & Poor's said that they were downgrading us by just one A, you could imagine what is going to happen when you have that debt-to-GDP ratio, move it from 45 per cent to 70 per cent? What would Standard & Poor's do and what would they tell this country? You have no espoused policy for diversification of the economy. You had to undertake similar adjustments to revise having pegged the national budget at US $45 a barrel and you decide that you are going to cut by 7 per cent.

Our Prime Minister had indicated then in January 2015 that we have to cut to bring down expenditure in every Ministry and every state enterprise. At the end of

it we were able to save $5.6 billion [*Desk thumping*] today as a result of that. You want to cut this by 7 per cent but hear what the social commentators are saying, even your own Gerry Brooks; your own Gerry Brooks said 7 per cent cut not enough. You cannot cut this by 7 per cent and expect to achieve anything. Follow what our Prime Minister did by taking certain austerity measures and ensuring that we saved at least close to $6 billion. [*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: "Dat eh go get yuh back up on this side". [*Laughter*]

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: "Doh" interfere with our business. [*Crosstalk*]

What is your proposal for stimulation of the economy? A private/public partnership they keep talking about. Where is the confidence in the private sector to move into a public/private sector partnership? There is none, so there would be no investment in public/private sector partnerships across the country, so we are living in a fool's paradise, nothing will happen.

Madam Speaker, what about dismissals? Non-renewal of contracts of the former Ministry of Tobago Development, non-payment of forestry workers, threat to an eventual hounding out of the office of the Central Bank Governor, victimization of URP and CEPEP workers—this is what the PNM is doing for the last four months—initiate and continue a sustained programme of witch-hunting, victimization, slander and malicious imputation of former known or non-known PP operatives or sympathizers. You promised public servants the negotiated increase in salaries in October, but you reneged on this promise and deferred payment to sometime in 2016. The hon. Prime Minister appointed himself as the anointed financial advisor to the old public servants by telling them, see the unilateral delay as savings; that is the self-appointed financial advisor.

Employees at Petrotrin, half their salaries unilaterally frozen, and benefits will indefinitely be discontinued. The executives at HDC, CDA, WASA and EFCL were sent on leave for a purported audit, and I can go on and on—threat to an eventual hounding out of the office of the Governor of the Central Bank. And today, Madam Speaker, you have the Minister of Finance on the question of what is our financial position, and the former Minister Tewarie, and Member for Caroni Central reminded me that all the information the hon. Minister gave about, the oil price from $45, $40, $35, $30, what will happen with the variations in income. Never for once spoke about the gas price. Why? Is it deliberate? Because he knew that he could not go there, because when we told them that they are pegging the Henry Hub price too high, at $2.75, when in 2015 the hon. Prime Minister brought it down from $2.75 and re-pegged it at $2.25, we told them that they should price it at $2.25, but today it stills stands at $2.75. He did not go there at

all, and he is trying to mislead the population to make the population believe that you have the money so that we can spend the money at a $63 billion budget, but he will never realize that, because what they are pricing the Henry Hub price at $2.75, today the Henry Hub price is about US $2. It went down to US $1.92. So that is what it is, Madam Speaker.

So this is where we are, and they always wanted to crucify us on the issue of the Standard & Poor's statement. But hear what Standard & Poor's had said about us when they brought it down recently from stable to negative, they said:

> Timely implementation of additional fiscal measures, along with steps to boost non-energy resources of growth, will largely determine whether the Government can contain fiscal deficits and stabilize the debt burden.

We know that could never happen. That will never happen. This is what Standard & Poor's is saying they should do but they know that they are not going to do it.

> The Government has external assets of nearly $5.7 billion, or 20 per cent of GDP.

It is we who carried it to that level in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund.

> The HSF fiscal assets are invested abroad and should sustain long-term external and fiscal flexibility.

Standard & Poor's are saying that, but this Government decides they are going to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. In 2016 and 2017, they are going to withdraw US $1.5 billion, close to TT $10 billion, which successive governments saved; they are dipping their hands in the coffers of the HSF. Let me just indicate today, I saw an article written by Michael Harris, and Michael Harris is a person of renowned integrity, and he pounded us many times, and here is what he said:

> While the issue of the Government's intended withdrawal of more than US $1 billion from the fund is rightly a cause of concern in the context of the fact that the Government has thus far failed to announce any credible strategy of structural adjustment—so you have no credible strategy—it would be unfortunate if that concern prevents us from engaging in a more comprehensive discussion on the future of the HSF.
>
> In this context, our concerned citizens, both corporate and individual, should insist that the Government not withdraw a single penny from the fund until and unless it brings legislation to the Parliament to effect the dissolution of the present HSF and the creation of two new separate funds.

He ends by saying:

So that we should be very careful not to take Prime Minister Rowley's declared intention to separate the two funds as gospel. Given the ambiguities and uncertainties in the legislation, unless we are very vigilant and insist that legislation be brought to Parliament before any withdrawal, we may soon find that all the funds in the HSF become subject to withdrawal as the Government seeks desperately to maintain unsustainable levels of expenditure—the $63 billion. Madam Speaker, how much time do I have again?

Madam Speaker: You have four minutes.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Right.

So, Madam Speaker, we as the People's Partnership Government had reached the stage where, if we were elected in 2015, we had anticipated a period of prolonged, depressed energy prices, and had thoughtfully introduced several specific measures by our Government. There was a sharp revision on public spending and state enterprises, and we were mandated to become viable, but essential education and social programmes were not sacrificed. The PNM has already withdrawn the provision of computers/laptops for students, shut down the Children's Life Fund, and sent home thousands of vulnerable minimum wage workers across the country.

The People's Partnership administration is the only one to actively pursue diversification of the economy [*Desk thumping*] to foster less reliance on the energy sector. There were also plans to double exports of manufactured goods by 2020, and to facilitate a dramatically higher contribution of the manufacturing and services sector to GDP. A 50 per cent increase in employment in those sectors was also anticipated. GEO economic growth poles were planned. The former Minister, Minister Tewarie, now Member for Caroni Central, had done a tremendous amount of work. Seven clusters were indicated as a specific initiative towards economic diversification. They were finance, ICT, tourism, marine industries, food sustainability, creative industries, and energy and related services. There were proposals for a green economy to boost new businesses and create jobs. A blue economy was designed to foster development in coastal communities. A silver economy was earmarked towards measures involving senior citizens, and the PP administration had already introduced fiscal reform in the energy sector, which had led to increased land and offshore exploration.

So, Madam Speaker, our track record of creating 56,000 jobs, reducing poverty, boosting healthcare, providing shelter and access to land, and generally improving the quality of life of the population cannot be contested. We moved the

economy from decline to growth, from crisis to recovery, and we had historic levels of goods and services, and we introduced a number of measures from 2010 to 2015. The response of this PNM regime to the decline in revenues lacks reference to the manner in which other countries in similar circumstances are handling the issue. I advise the Minister of Finance to look at what Nigeria is doing, what other countries are doing around the world, and to bring about some degree of comfort to the people of Trinidad and Tobago by indicating what your fiscal policy is, and then speaking about our fiscal policy and monetary policy.

The address to the nation by the hon. Prime Minister was crammed with clichés and generic terms, and devoid of enlightenment in how the PNM plans to ride out this period and to emerge with a stronger and more diversified economy. Instead, the Government has responded with typical tough taxation, job loss, reduction in social and education spending, all brutal and ugly hallmarks of PNM's crisis management. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: The Member for Moruga/Tableland. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of State in the Ministry of Education (Hon. Dr. Lovell Francis): Madam Speaker, good evening. Good evening to all the Members of the House. It is late in the day if not in the evening, but it is not too late to wish you, Madam Speaker, a Happy New Year, and to extend the same to every Member of the House, regardless of the side on which they sit. It was not my intention to speak today. In fact I was not carded to do so, but once again I admit to being inspired, particularly by the speakers on the other side.

I sat and I listened attentively to the hon. Member for Caroni Central and then the hon. Member for Tabaquite give their contributions during this debate, and I recall, in particular, the hon. Member for Tabaquite insinuating that the Members of this side lacked the intelligence to guide the nation forward during turbulent times, which is a bit quixotic and a bit—I do not want to say amusing, but at least an unusual statement that a Member of a party which has made very minimal impact on this nation's growth and development should castigate Members of the party which have built every single institution in this nation [*Desk thumping*] is more than a bit ironic.

8.00 p.m.

However, subsequent to their speaking, I listened more attentively to the hon. Attorney General—also my friend—and then my good friend, the hon. Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, and their responses struck a very sober tone. So whereas I was gearing up to get into a fight over who is intelligent and

who is not intelligent, the manner in which they responded has set a precedent that I feel constrained to follow. So I will chart a different course compared to what I had intended to do. [*Interruption*] It happens every now and then; not too often.

There is an attempt to make a case that somehow the PNM is divorced or disconnected from those who are less fortunate in our society, and that is amazing and ironic. I just heard the hon. Member for Caroni East—who I love speaking after I have to say—mention that he is not constrained by financial problems and does not need a government subvention to travel anywhere. So clearly he is not poor; he is far richer than I am, and I am very poor compared to him. But ironically, Members of his side are suggesting that the PNM has become so "enriched" in such a short time that we have lost connection with what we call the "grassroots" in Trinidad and Tobago. I find it amazing because I have made the case before in this House that my constituency, Moruga/Tableland, remains the most underdeveloped in this nation, and I have lived there all my life.

At one time I was—I want to use the word "ignorant" in the English sense, not the colloquial sense, as to what poverty really means in that constituency because I was aware, and I remain aware, that there is poverty there. But I once held the belief that abject poverty was not something that could be found in Trinidad. Now, I have travelled all over the world as a lecturer during my stint at UWI. For example, I have been to the Philippines, and I thought I saw there something I had never seen or I thought did not exist here: real abject poverty.

Walking the entire constituency during the campaign educated me in ways that I did not expect, so now I see things that I did not think existed before that were just a few miles away from me. On Saturday I had cause to revisit one of those places, and I was intrigued that my friend, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, is mentioning that he is walking his constituency again, because I started doing the same thing as well.

So on Saturday I returned to a community which is on the fringes of Moruga/Tableland called Platinite. To get there you have to pass through Penal Rock Road which is itself in a terrible state and needs fixing. It is actually closer to the constituency of Siparia. I went to visit a particular small community within that Platinite community. I have to admit it is not a place I like going because when I went there during the campaign I got depressed. I am not the type to be depressive, because they lived—I cannot say "lived"; I wish I could say "lived"—they live still in a situation that would make more sense in the 19th Century than in the 21st Century.

It was the norm for my parents and grandparents who grew up in Moruga to live in what might have been called "tapia houses", where there was mud and wattle and the floor was something called "lipay" where you would mix some mortar and you would have a floor. Even though it was earth, it was a decent floor. The people I am talking about—and I will not call their names, not because they would hear, because they might never find out, but out of respect to them I will leave their family names out of this. In this day and age they still lack running water; they still lack electricity. They have houses that do not have floors, and by floors I mean any kind of structured floor or even a "lipayed" floor. Their floor is the earth.

Most of them do not go to school. They live almost disconnected from the rest of their community in a sort of semi-forested area, and they still are dependent on pond water as their only source of water. The geography of their little enclave, to use an accurate term, is so difficult that it is hard to conceive of how one would be able to get any of these amenities to them, because where they are located is so very far away and disconnected it is hard to even think how am I going to get enough poles to get current to them at a reasonable cost, how am I going to get them a water supply? So I really do not like going there, but I am compelled to go because they are constituents.

So on Saturday I returned with some friends of mine and we carried some clothes, some food and some toys for them. [*Desk thumping*] Not to score any cheap points or to make any kind of political overture to them, but because they are constituents, they are human beings and I would very much like to do something better for them. In speaking with them the first time I went, they told me that the last person they remembered doing something for them would have been Minister Franklin Khan who would have dropped a water tank for them, so that they had at least some supply of water, and that would have been in 2002. We are now here 14 years later and they are still in the same state. Madam Speaker, that is poverty.

As an MP and as a Minister, I cannot be disconnected from that, because when I went to that community the first time I got a pain in my chest. When I went back again on Saturday I got that same pain. At the end of the day it is very easy for me to stand here and score points, or attempt to score points, and argue back and forth about this and that and about who stole this money or who stole that money, or who could account for this and could not account for that. But at the end of the day there are people like that who absolutely need us to do something. I do not know how I will do, because I have been actually asking my friends to assist, and

there are people who would volunteer, so very soon I will have another pain in my chest because I have to go back and see this again. The disturbing part is that there are so many young children there running around barefoot, half-clothed, most of them not attending school.

Madam Speaker, these are not the only people like that in my community. There is another community which is closer to my home called Samuel Cooper. I went up there as well just before the Christmas season. I just decided on Thursday—I am not a member of Cabinet so I do not have Cabinet on Thursday morning. I have decided that I would just go and randomly walk through a community, and I happened to choose that community to walk in.

I went up there, and a young lady asked me to speak to her personally, and she brought me into her home because she wanted to show me the mattress that her children were sleeping on, and the meals she had prepared for her children. It is not a reflection on her, it is maybe a reflection on me and how I react to negative situations. I could not stay in the house. I actually walked out and I asked my assistant to go make her some groceries which would make me feel better, but it does not really solve the problem that she is facing. At the end of the day these two examples are not discrete onto themselves. There are hundreds of people like this in my community.

So as a PNM MP, as a person who has been elevated to a Minister of State, I cannot become disconnected from them, and our party cannot become disconnected from them because they are in our faces. I live in Moruga/Tableland and knowledge is a very powerful thing. I know that they are there; I cannot close my eyes to them. So I understand that tinkering with the VAT price which deals with food and other basic necessities is a tremendous thing to do in the sense that it has an impact. I understand that; we understand that. We also understand that it might have a larger impact on those who are less fortunate. This is not something that as a PNM MP I am divorced from or I misapprehend. It is not something that our party misapprehends. It is not something that the Government misunderstands. It is indicative of something else. What it really says is the dire nature of the situation that we face. More than anything else it exemplifies that we have a concrete and realistic understanding of the economic circumstances facing Trinidad and Tobago. That I can in one breath explain to you the levels of poverty I see in my face, and at the same time stand and support this Bill is not cynical. It really just exemplifies that we are aware of the circumstances facing us. Where I start having a problem with those on the other side is when they behave in a manner that is inconsistent with the circumstances that we face.

The other issue that I want to talk about very briefly, because I do not intend to be long, is this notion that somehow, not only are we disconnected as a party, but the PNM for some reason has had no historical track record of dealing with adverse circumstances in this nation. That is patently historically untrue. The PNM presided over Trinidad and Tobago during two of its worst economic periods in our post-independence history, and to be perfectly frank, 2015/2016 does not constitute one of those.

During the period 1970 to 1973, this nation went through perhaps its most difficult economic period in its post-independence history, more so than the 1980s, or the 1990s or the early decades of the 21st Century more so. In fact, few people understand that by 1973 our situation was so dire economically that Dr. Williams, our first Prime Minister, considered retiring to allow someone else to come to the helm of this nation. The situation was so dire. The PNM not only survived, it guided the nation through that difficult phase into its greatest boom period in our history.

During the early 1980s, the NAR—and there are two Members of that party here, the hon. Member for Tabaquite and the Member for Caroni Central, of the National Alliance for Reconstruction—gets a lot credit for saving—[*Interruption*] oh yes, the Member for Siparia as well, my apologies, Madam Speaker, gets a lot of credit for saving Trinidad from a difficult period. [*Interruption*] Clearly I am not as old as I thought I was, my apologies. Anyway, there are a number of Members of that regime here and they get a lot of credit for saving Trinidad during a difficult period during the 1980s, and a lot of that is deserved. I truly believe in giving historical credence where it exists. However, what is often left out of that discussion is that all—and I am saying this definitively—all of the groundwork that went into allowing the NAR to save Trinidad from 1986 onwards was actually done under the George Chambers' regime of the PNM. Yes, really.

Even the most cursory research beyond the political propaganda, beyond the easy sound bites—even the most cursory research—highlights that fact. If you look in a library for a document called *The Imperatives of Change*. If you look at the budget speeches from 1981, 1982—[*Interruption*] *The Imperatives of Adjustment*, thank you. I was testing you. Thank you very much, hon. Member for Caroni Central, *The Imperatives of Adjustment*. So you know the document, which was created under the PNM. Thank you, hon. Member. Thank you very much for the clarification.

Dr. Tewarie: It was done by Williams Demas.

8.15 p.m.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: If you read budget speeches for 1981, 1982, 1983 what becomes patently clear is that the PNM party which had been enjoying, honestly, the largest of the boom, adjusted very quickly to what were global difficulties in 1981. In fact, there was a world recession in 1981 even though Trinidad was still booming, there was an immediate slowing down of expenditure, an immediate attempt to analyse the nature of our economy, and an immediate attempt to start that difficult process of diversification.

So if one knows one's history, you will know, for example, that in 1982 under the PNM there was a thrust to, for example, diversify Caroni. That is where the buffalypso and all that came to the fore and sugar was supposed to become less significant. It never truly happened in the way that it was envisioned, but at least there was an understanding of the circumstances and there was the ground work of the kind of intervention that we made by the NAR after oil prices collapsed in 1986.

So it is historically incorrect to say that the PNM has had no experience governing Trinidad during difficult times. [*Desk thumping*] It has done it twice before and it is doing it this time, so it is a third time. And just like the first two instances, Madam Speaker, I am sure the party would do quite well.

Added to that, the final thing I will talk before I sit down again, Madam Speaker. There has also been the suggestion that since September 07 that the PNM has done nothing to better the status of Trinidad and Tobago. And in this I want to talk about not the overarching national circumstance, I could simply talk about my constituency. I could rehash the difficulties facing Moruga/Tableland, but instead I could talk about one or two of the initiatives that have been started or will be started to make circumstances better in my constituency.

There is a plan, for example, as stated in the PNM manifesto to construct a port at Moruga. If you know Moruga at all, it is economically underdeveloped. What were the existing agricultural industries, mainly cocoa, coffee, citrus—have that. The other main industry, fishing, is on the verge of dying. That leaves a rural community without a serious economic base.

The PNM, Madam Speaker, plans to resuscitate that by constructing a fishing port at Moruga. Why? Because even though the fishing beds are dying and fishermen have to go miles and miles and miles to have a decent catch—whereas when I was a child I could stand on the beach and see them fishing and they would come back with 2,000 pounds of fish. Now they travel many miles and they are lucky to get 200 or 300 pounds of fish. That is the reality. But despite

those circumstances, Moruga still has the largest fishing fleet in the entirety of Trinidad and Tobago, a full 97 boats. Building a fishing port at Moruga gives a chance to a lifeblood to the one significant industry that still exists in the community. I could argue—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Gopeesingh: Get it done.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis:—I can argue—it shall be done. It has been assured that it shall be done. I could argue that there is some question with this in terms of the fact that the fishing beds are dying, but even that can be resuscitated. We cannot leave our rural communities bereft of some kind of an economic base.

I can talk about the fact that at least there is one project in the PSIP for my Ministry that would be built in my constituency in the year. That is the Holy Trinity Anglican School which I have been assured will be constructed. And it is ironic that that was the primary school I taught at not so long ago. So that is a happy coincidence that I can actually say that in the Parliament.

I can talk about the fact the Minister of Works and Transport has assured me that in very short order 30 roads, which are in serious need of an intervention, will be repaired. I can talk about the fact that since the PNM has come into power, Madam Speaker, people in communities like Marac and Penal Road who once dreamt of pipe water on a regular basis are at least receiving water once or twice a week.

Now, these might sound like trivial things, but two weeks ago I had a lunch time meeting with the Minister of Finance and he basically asked me, in Moruga what do you want? And whereas I could rattle off a number of grandiose plans and I have written some of them, the fact remains—and this is something all Members of this House should understand—that in my constituency the basic still has traction. Water is still important. Lights are still important. These are things that people have lived long without, and these things are still required to bring them into the comfortable living that many of us expect to have. So that these things still have traction.

Madam Speaker, I am not going to stand here and suggest to you that in four months Moruga/Tableland has been transformed, but I am going to stand here and say that in four months they have probably more hope than they have had for a while. And I can give you a very sound example of that. During Christmas it is habitual for all MPs to have Christmas treats. I am sure every single MP here had one. But one of the interesting things I did during my campaign was that I, sometimes, despite myself, happen to inspire a lot of young people to become

involved in politics, and they have taken whatever I gave them, whatever it was, and some of them are doing something beyond my expectations with it. Some young people who work in my office organized a fair during the Christmas period. The idea was that they would have the normal treat where we distribute toys, but that they would also organise a fair where local entrepreneurs could come and sell something on the day and there is some kind of economic interaction.

Now, at first I was sceptical because I was not sure how well this would work. In fact, on the day I was still sceptical. I was not sure it would work. Madam Speaker, I am happy to report that a number of people who had come to my office asking for assistance was so motivated that they actually came on that day and were able to sell something—food or handicraft or whatever. So that maybe through their actions, if not my actions directly, we may have created a number of small entrepreneurs on that day. And that kind of thing holds tremendous hope for constituencies like mine that for far too long had been left behind.

So if I want to convey anything during this short discussion it is that the PNM has not lost traction, has not lost its connection with the people of this nation. We have not lost our connection with those who remain unprivileged. We understand that the measures that we may have to implement will adversely affect them, but we also understand the dire situation that we face, and given a responsibility to chart a course for a nation at some point sometimes, some difficult decisions must be made. To not do so would be to misuse our mandate. Thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Members, I am to advise that the supper is now available and there will be no formal break, but Members are invited to stagger their departure, mindful of the quorum, to refresh themselves. I now call on the Member for Naparima.

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I listened to my colleague, the MP for Moruga/Tableland, and I wish to inform him that it is a constituency with which I am very familiar. My father was born in Fifth Company. He is actually buried in the cemetery at Fifth Company Baptist School. And the question I would like to ask him, hearing him speaking from his heart—and by the way, we on this side wish him all the best in his tenure.

But does it not bother you that the PNM has been in power for most of the years since Independence and Moruga and Naparima, the constituency of which I

am the MP, as rural communities, have been treated with such callous—and Princes Town—disregard that it almost begs the question, why it is we speak about a disconnection with the sufferings of the people of Moruga and the people of your party.

I would remind you that the Fifth Company Baptist School when it was built in 1995 to 2000 was one of the best primary schools in Trinidad and Tobago at the time, and that was done under the United National Congress Government. [*Desk thumping*] I would remind you also because I was involved with the UNC at the time and I lobbied—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: I thought you were PNM.

Mr. R. Charles:—now, I changed a long time—I lobbied for Cowen Hamilton Secondary School to be number one in the World Bank loan for refurbishment of secondary schools. Unfortunately, the PNM came to power after the 18/18 situation that we had and it was put on hold, notwithstanding the fact that the Minister of Education at the time, her father was an honoured and revered representative of Moruga. I speak of Boysie Huggins, the old author of the *Saga of the Companies*. Forgive us for the view we have that the PNM is disconnected from the poor in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

It is why it bothers me also that it takes you to become an MP for you to understand the dire poverty in your constituency. And it is why we are arguing here today to ensure that there is a concern for the poor as you put, as you make items subject to VAT. And therefore, we cannot understand, and I think my colleague from Tabaquite did an excellent job in presenting the humanity—the lack of humanity in the kinds of decisions that we see emanating from the other side.

How could you, for example, put VAT on books, literary books, reference books, et cetera, and that will not affect the poor people of your constituency? Why are we putting VAT on veterinary services supplied in respect of animals when we thought that agriculture was a means towards the diversification of the economy?

My colleague/friend from San Fernando West who, I think, his heart is in the right place and he also has the concern of people from San Fernando I live there, and he asked the question: what is wrong with a tax? And we are saying nothing is wrong with a tax, but why not agree to the amendment made by the Member for Caroni Central to institute public procurement legislation before taxing people and before raising the debt ceiling so we will have a sense of transparency and accountability for the moneys you raise. There is nothing wrong with that. [*Desk*

thumping] Why not tell us what you are going to do with the $10 billion that you propose to borrow. Let us know. It is a question of, as I say, all of us went to school. All of us passed our O and A Levels. All of us have degrees. All of us bright. Why can you not tell us that we are spending money on a, b, and c? And therefore, when we come to the conclusion that you have no plan, that you are just vaille-que-vaille and ad hoc critically borrowing money, then you say that we are not supporting you—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: Ad hoc critically?

Mr. R. Charles: Ad hoc critically.

Hon. Member: What?

Mr. R. Charles: And if you read Toffler and whatnot you will learn about that. It is a big word.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, I have to remind you that your comments are addressed to the Chair. So when you say when you—[*Interruption*]

Mr. R. Charles: Thank you very much.

Madam Speaker: So, I hope you understand.

Mr. R. Charles: I understand and I am guided thereby. Tell us why you said that VAT will be removed on non-essential and luxury items and yet you take it off on mauby and salted fish products, et cetera, products that are used by poor and the disadvantaged? Tell us why you said that the PNM will remove VAT—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, the "you" would be the Chair.

Mr. R. Charles: Okay.

Madam Speaker: Right? The Speaker.

Mr. R. Charles: I take the point.

Madam Speaker: Thank you very much.

Mr. R. Charles: Right. We would like to know, Madam Speaker, how increasing VAT registration threshold from 360,000 to 500,000 would indicate concern for the small businessman? Bearing in mind that small businesses will no longer be able to recoup input VAT through the VAT system, and as such increase the price of doing business for them, some of them will go out of business.

8.30 p.m.

But, before getting into the gist of my contribution, I wish to emphasize that the major cause, if not the sole reason, for the difficulties in which we find ourselves today is the significant reduction in Government revenues as a result of low energy prices, and the inability of the Government to have an effective plan to deal with this challenge. However much the present administration would like to blame the UNC and the past People's Partnership Government for the present crisis, they are absolutely wrong. That is a falsehood and it is inconsistent with the facts. We are facing a global crisis. We admit that. And if you read the *New York Times*, and there is Neil Irwin—and just about three days ago he had this to say about the global nature of the crisis to show that it is not a creature of the People's Partnership, in part as they would like us to believe. It says and I quote:

> "Oil prices fell to $37 a barrel from…$53…over the course of last year, and…now under $34."—it says it is even in China—"The Shanghai composite index fell sharply starting in June of last year…"

It continues:

> "Economic growth has been slowing not just in China but across many emerging markets, including Brazil and Nigeria, for two years now. Europe and Japan are growing only barely, and even formerly hot advanced economies like Canada are suffering from the commodity glut."

This has nothing to do with waste mismanagement and corruption. This has to do with a global crisis that is prefaced upon low energy prices. [*Desk thumping*] The article continues:

> "Already, oil producers and their suppliers are suffering. The American industrial sector is groaning under the weight of a strong dollar, which drives up the price of exported goods."

So, therefore, the present crisis, as I said before, has global dimensions. But the PNM apparently does not know that. They came to power in September last year apparently oblivious to the potential destabilizing impact of exceedingly low oil prices. It is as if they only became aware of the global energy crisis after September 07. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the best Prime Minister this country has seen since 1962, [*Desk thumping*] great, all powerful and visionary as she is, did not cause the global recession in the Russian Federation, in Canada, in Azerbaijan, or in Trinidad and Tobago. No waste, mismanagement and corruption caused the global recession.

In fact, Kamla Persad-Bissessar's Government left this PNM Government over $117 billion in current assets when it demitted office last September. [*Desk thumping*] Let me repeat for the benefit of the Ministry of Finance who is fond of repeating the PNM lie, about waste, mismanagement and corruption, that Kamla Persad-Bissessar's Government left this PNM administration with over $117 billion as follows:

- Heritage and Stabilisation Fund US $5.8 billion or TT $37.12 billion;
- Foreign Exchange Reserves, US $10.4 billion or TT $66.56 billion;
- A projected total of TT $13.4 billion which the 2016 budget said would come from, and I quote, it is their budget:

  "…partial repayment from CLICO relating to…Government's financial support; proceeds from the IPO of Trinidad and Tobago NGL Limited;

  capital repayment from Trinidad Generation Unlimited; and dividends from the National Gas Company."

Total $117 billion solid liquid cash. But this is not the entire story. The IMF board concluded inter alia after its fourth consultation with Trinidad and Tobago in July of this year—

Hon. Member: Last year.

Mr. R. Charles: And we are talking about the fourth year of the Kamla Persad-Bissessar's Government. It says, and this is not Rodney Charles speaking. It is an international organization. It says and I quote:

> Headline inflation is trending down…while core inflation remains contained at 2 to 3 per cent. The unemployment rate has fallen to 3 and 3/4 per cent…
>
> …the fiscal balance is likely to improve in fiscal year 2013/2014 with the deficit falling to 1 and 1/2 per cent of GDP...
>
> The external current account surplus has rebounded to 10 per cent of GDP and reserves are 12 months of imports.

That is excellent Government by the People's Partnership as indicated by an international agency. [*Desk thumping*] These are all excellent macroeconomic indicators in the fourth year of the Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration. And all that was achieved under the enlightened leadership of the former Prime Minister. Serious people and institutions do not glibly talk about waste, mismanagement and corruption, as those on the other side seem addicted to doing every time they come here.

A report from the World Bank last updated in September last year concluded that growth in Trinidad and Tobago has average 6 per cent per year since 1994, among the highest levels in Latin America and the Caribbean. And after a weak performance in 2009 to ’12, GDP growth reached a five-year high of 1.7 per cent, thereby demonstrating a modest recovery. It continued in the context of reduced commodity prices over the years, that our country needs to pursue its efforts to diversify the economy by improving the investment climate, not cutting expenditure and taxing people, but by pursuing a diversification of the economy, and by improving the investment climate and broader financial sector.

I submit that the past Prime Minister governed with compassion, intellect, forthrightness, prescience, concern for all, empathy, strength, fortitude and enlightenment. [*Desk thumping*] So today we hear quiet murmurs—we got a taste of it in La Brea last week—that in a few months will rise to a crescendo that Kamla Persad-Bissessar was the best Prime Minister this country ever had. [*Desk thumping*] Oh, how we long for the days of caring, enlightened governance. Barring the precipitous drop in oil prices, the PNM would have inherited perhaps the best managed energy economy in the world. No comparison whatsoever with Nigeria; nothing with Venezuela; nothing with Azerbaijan, which devalued its currency significantly last week; nor the Russian Federation.

Let us compare what they left us with in 2009. According to the *2010 Review of the Economy*, headline inflation rose to 14.1 per cent year on year in July 2010, measured by 12 months increase in the index of retail prices. When they left us they had 14.1 per cent headline inflation. The prime contribution to this headline inflation was a 33.3 per cent increase in agriculture in July, food prices. The construction and quarrying sector contracted by 7.9 per cent in 2009. They come here crying how we have left them an economy that has been mismanaged. If they are honest and they deal with facts, and President Reagan made the point, “facts are stubborn things, they don’t go away”. They cannot deny it. They cannot heckle it away. [*Desk thumping*]

The construction and quarrying sector contracted by 7.6 per cent. The output service sector contracted by 7.9 per cent in 2009. On page 30 of the *Review of the Economy* we read finance, insurance, real estate sector contracted by 4.7 per cent in 2009. Airline visitors to Trinidad and Tobago during the first 10 months of 2009 decreased by 7.8 per cent. During 2009 we are told that yacht arrivals decreased by 9.5 per cent, and there were 550 murders in 2008 and 508 murders in 2009. That is what we inherited. Those are facts that cannot be denied.

We inherited an economy in crisis. But that was not all. We were left with 83 outstanding wage negotiations—those are facts—a Clico crisis estimated in excess of $20 billion which threatened a systematic collapse of our economy; an outstanding $9 billion to contractors—they come here crying and how we do this and we do that, and whatnot. Read the kinds of dilemma that we faced. Massive evidence of waste, mismanagement and corruption with Calder Hart, UDeCOTT, and even the purchase of non-performing water ferries. We did not cry and seek to blame the previous administration at every opportunity which presented itself. Like a true leader, Kamla Persad-Bissessar got down to work, developing people centred data-driven plans and policies to stabilize the economy and put it on a growth path. [*Desk thumping*] We were not red, but we were exceedingly ready. [*Desk thumping*]

So today we meet to increase the business levy from 0.2 per cent per quarter to 0.6 per cent; to increase revenues by $327 million; and the Green Fund levy from 0.1 per cent per quarter to 0.3. The latter measure according to the 2016 budget presentation will increase revenues by $544.5 million. We meet also to reduce the VAT from 15 per cent to 12.5 per cent, and to widen the base of applicable items in a move which would yield approximately $4 billion. These measures and others announced to date by this administration bear all the hallmarks of a Government that is ill-prepared to navigate the turbulence of significantly reduced energy prices.

They engaged essentially in bookkeeping, tax, increased revenues, as we do it today, cut expenditures and borrow. And, by the way, I think the point has been raised by my colleague from Tabaquite, I went to the Unit Trust on December 31 to purchase US $100 and the equivalent, and it is here and I could pass it to them, it is TT $680 to purchase US $100. So, the question is, do we have a devaluation on the cards? [*Desk thumping*] And the second question is, is the devaluation proposed likely to be $6.80? And they cannot deny facts. I could circulate it. It is $6.80 to $1.

Mr. Young: You know what is a floating currency?

Mr. R. Charles: To date, the seemingly ad hoc measures include raiding the Stabilisation Fund to the tune of $10 billion in 2016 and ’17.

They tell us that they will separate the heritage aspect of the fund from the stabilisation segment. They have raised the borrowing limit by $50 billion without telling us how it will be spent, or without introducing procurement legislation to

ensure that this borrowed money will spent transparently and with maximum accountability. [*Desk thumping*] They have fired the Central Bank Governor presumably because he would not subordinate our monetary policies to that of a politically appointed Minister of Finance. They have mandated an across the board reduction in expenditures at Government Ministries and state agencies by 7 per cent. This is without regard to the fact that some Ministries like agriculture are expected to lead the diversification effort and reduce demands for foreign exchange on our exceedingly high food import bill.

And lastly, the Government intends to increase taxes on the citizenry left, right and centre. This is the sum total of their strategic effort, increase taxes, reduce expenditures and borrow to the max. Is this what they spent five years in Opposition doing? [*Desk thumping*] They could have gone to Ming Rum Shop on Leotaud Street in San Fernando and come up with the same policy prescription. Is this the best shot?

Hon. Member: Spin the wheel.

Mr. R. Charles: Clearly the PNM hoodwinked the population into believing that they were red and ready to hit the ground running.

Hon. Member: Spin the wheel.

Mr. R. Charles: And if this is the best of which they are capable, then heaven help us. No "spin the wheel" will distract me. Where is the overall strategic plan to deal with this crisis? Where is the architecture? Where is the calculus and the trigonometry? Where is the silver lining at the end of this austerity? Spin the wheel and whatever comes up becomes policy, total reactive and adhocratic.

They know we cannot take the pressure in one dose, so they are coming in series, and after we get accustomed to the pressure then we have the mid-year review coming at us in March. So, the PNM proposes to borrow $10 billion from the stabilisation fund and borrow another $50 billion from Lord knows whom and when. They do not like to hear about best practices in borrowing. If you mention Singapore, perhaps the most successful small economy in the world, they simply laugh. Because in their view, the PNM have nothing to learn from successful people.

8.45 p.m.

So a senior Minister from Singapore, Goh Chok Tong, advised years ago about dipping into Singapore's reserves. And hear the kinds of serious countries when they come up with serious prescriptions, Madam Speaker. Quoting him, this senior Minister from Singapore who they do not like to hear about. I quote:

> "We must continue to exercise great discipline and not dip into our reserves at the first sign of difficulties. We should tap it only as a last resort and when there are compelling reasons…"

The senior Minister said that:

> "…he is in favour of putting up three 'No' signs when drawing the reserves"—or savings.
>
> First, no use of—savings—"to support social assistance programmes. As a general principle, the Government must continue to fund such programmes out of revenues raised in the current term of government…
>
> "Second, no draw for permanent programmes. Permanent programmes like"—Workfare, which that is just a programme they have to increase innovation in their society, we are not hearing that on the other side—and he says:
>
> "…no matter how meritorious, should be funded by current revenues and reserves."

And he said thirdly, do not touch your savings:

> "…except under dire circumstances when one-off extraordinary measures are required…"

So as of today, no one in Trinidad and Tobago knows how the $10 billion will be spent. Serious countries set guidelines for drawdowns from their reserves. This Government just informs us that they will be borrowing, possibly, they "eh" sure, $10 billion. When we ask, how and on what will the $50 billion be spent we are informed in not too sophisticated language that is none of our business.

So we know, I know, how Singapore spends its reserves in a crisis. In PNM-governed Trinidad and Tobago we are told that, in quotes: "fast and out of place". From Singapore we learn, and here is another example of a country that borrows for the future. They say:

> "The global recession will end and"—we spoke today about recessions in the past, lead up to 1970. We had another recession in the time of the NAR Government. We had one a couple of years ago and then we are facing one now. They say:
>
> "The global recession will end and we will bounce back. So invest in our future. Upgrade our knowledge and skills…to ride the upswing which will surely come."

So you do not cut computers, you do not cut books in a time when you are planning for long-term—[*Desk thumping*] cyclical returns of development in the country. And this is what Singapore is saying, and you do not hear that from that side. Singapore says:

> "You will notice that we are revamping our primary school education and pouring…billions…into…education"—in Singapore—"training even though these do not directly help…solve our short-term…problems. This is to build…our"—capacity—"for the future."

And they usually send the Member of Parliament for St. Joseph after I speak to distort our message. But the hon. Member for St. Joseph was a former student of mine at the Open University at the UWI.

Hon. Members: Ohhh!

Hon. Member: Well, that explains a lot.

Mr. Deyalsingh: Shame, shame.

Mr. R. Charles: I cannot recall him of being a distinguished student as those who won gold medals at the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Hon. Member: LCCI.

Mr. R. Charles: It is LCCI. In fact, I cannot recall whether or not he even passed the course, but—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Member, Member, please—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: "Oh God, man."

Hon. Member: He talked about spinning the wheel—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Member, Member, I am on my legs. Members, I would ask you to refrain from going down that course, please.

Mr. R. Charles: I withdraw the fact, Madam Speaker, that he was a student of mine. I withdraw that. But I made the point and I sought to make the point, on the last occasion, that selected banks in TT reverted to being majority owned. I need to clarify that. I was subsequently given an unnecessary discourse on the operations of the stock market, et cetera. But Eric Williams in "Perspectives for a New Society", I know this is relevant to the discussion because it leads to outflows of foreign exchange which forces this Government to come here and raise taxes.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, if it is relevant it will speak for itself. So I am giving you a little latitude for you to show us the relevance.

Mr. R. Charles: Former Prime Minister and father of the nation, Eric Williams, in "Perspectives for a New Society" mandated that the commanding heights of our economy, especially the banking sector must be primarily under local control. And it came to pass that the Bank of London and Montreal became the national commercial bank. And by 1998 locals owned slightly more than 50 per cent of the shares of the former Bank of Nova Scotia. Dr. Eric Williams ran things.

In June 2008, however, when the PNM was in office, the Royal Bank of Canada acquired RBTT for US $2.2 billion. Dividends are repatriated to Canadian shareholders making a not inconsiderable drain on our foreign exchange. But they would not understand that a whole of government approach is needed not only to deal with crime but also to deal with our foreign exchange challenges.

So if any one of us wishes to purchase a broadcast licence in Canada it will not be allowed. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission has been directed by the Canadian Federal Government to allow only Canadians to own radio stations. And I say this to say, that when we look at the profits that the banks make in Trinidad and if they are wholly owned or majority owned by outside, non-citizens, it means that we are going to have a drain on foreign exchange. It means that in their scramble to raise money they will come and tax everything they could get under the sun rather than take the enlightened kind of comprehensive overall decisions to deal with the challenges we face.

So if a PNM Government reverses a decision on local ownership of the banking sector and this facilitates large amounts of foreign exchange being repatriated annually to shareholders abroad in the form of large dividends, then do not deny the fact that you, meaning the PNM Government, allowed it to happen. [*Desk thumping*]

So I want the hon. Minister of Health, if I am permitted to do so, to tell us when will the Couva Children's Hospital—which I understand is fully equipped with state-of-the-art equipment—when it will be opened? I want him to tell us when the Lengua Health Facility, the only one in my constituency, will get supplies. He said today that they have supplies except one drug, and I was there last week and my constituents, I sat with them, it was 60 of them, and many of them left without drugs. So I will be going back next week with the media to find

out what is the true reason why they are not getting the drugs that I understand today was supplied to them. I want him to tell us about the ambulance services, whether or not we have adequate supplies of swine flu vaccines, what we are doing to reduce maternity deaths. Tell me about reduced waiting times in the Accident and Emergency Department in our hospitals.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Naparima, your speaking time is expired. You are entitled to 15 minutes. Are you taking—

Mr. R. Charles: Yes, I will take—thank you very much, Madam Speaker. The constituency of Naparima, the great constituency of Naparima, the food supplier to all of Trinidad and Tobago, notes the incessant allegations of waste, mismanagement and corruption and audits by the present Government. We, the 27,000 voters are saying, if you do not have the facts, if you are not prepared to take action, then put up or shut up. You cannot just come here day after day.

Hon. Member: Madam Speaker, "oh gosh man".

Madam Speaker: Please, Members, please. Hon. Member for Naparima, I want to make the observation of how unusually full your notes are. I was waiting till after your contribution to make that, but I will make it now. And I would also, one, remind you that in reference, and all Members, in reference to each other it is "hon. Member" for whatever constituency or "hon. Members opposite", and I would also want to remind you in your contribution the rule against insulting and offensive language. So that, please, you are very much on the border.

Mr. R. Charles: I withdraw the comments, Madam Speaker. I would just say that it should be equally applied when comments are made on the other side.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, I would also remind you that there are orders with respect to imputing motives and unparliamentary language as it relates to the Speaker. I am the one charged with the responsibility of managing the Standing Orders. And with all due respect to you and all Members, if I need assistance the assistance will be granted to me from the Clerks who manage this House. Please be careful.

Mr. R. Charles: Would you tell me how much time I have, Madam Speaker?

Hon. Member: Fifteen minutes.

Mr. R. Charles: Fifteen minutes?

Madam Speaker: You had 15 minutes from 8:53:09. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. R. Charles: We note that how would we have handled it differently and I say that instead of tax and borrowing and spending we would have done—you would have seen a greater investment component in the kinds of plans we present.

In terms of savings, as an aside, and in the context of foreign exchange savings, we may need to look at costs associated with our missions abroad. And I only say that because I worked as the ambassador. I found a situation where Trinidad was one of the few countries in Caricom that was renting chanceries. We were paying upwards of US $60,000 per month, close to US $800 million annually in rents only for our main offices in Manhattan. Barbados, Bahamas other Caricom states, not to mention Singapore, owned their chanceries while we were renting.

During my tenure we purchased a property valued at US $12.8 million. That floor was valued in excess of US $20 million in 2014 and prior to my leaving we tenanted part of the premises and forwarded close to US $1 billion. I am just suggesting that we may need to look at the kinds of outflows that go there.

Hon. Members: US $1 million.

Mr. R. Charles: One million, I meant. Sorry, it is $1 million. There is absolutely no reason why the consulate in New York and the mission to the UN cannot share one place. This would free up one property for rental purposes to defray operational costs and save foreign exchange. We also need to proactively engage on the green economy to identify investment opportunities and ensure that our Point Lisas Industries do not fall afoul of emerging global emission standards. There are endless opportunities in the blue economy from increasing our protein intake through adopting fish farming in our surrounding waters, promoting sea sports as part of a well-thought-out sports tourism thrust. Building of marinas and yacht repair facilities and seeking to promote our trans-shipment capabilities in the context of developments on the Panama Canal.

The silver economy has opened up immense opportunities for us to take advantage of opportunities arising from the world's ever growing ageing populations. In Trinidad and Tobago there are opportunities for first class senior citizens homes to deal with our ageing populations. There are many of our citizens who migrated in the '70s to the US and Canada who wish to spend their last days in our country. We need to develop business plans around this idea that can provide jobs for our citizens and meet a need that will continue to expand.

Basically, a Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government would have sought out more investment opportunities to develop our human resources. She would have completed the Point Fortin Highway and the energy corridor to Mayaro so that the City of San Fernando would become a hub for the agriculture and other supplies from the hinterlands of Rio Claro and the south-west peninsula. The waterfront project would have been the icing on the cake in creating jobs, improving quality

of life for southerners and the myriad investment opportunities. This is how we would transfer a crisis into opportunities.

As an aside, we need to quantify how much foreign exchange leaves Trinidad and Tobago for education institutions abroad. It must be in excess of hundreds of millions of US dollars to fund O and A level exams, City and Guilds, a thousand and one MBA courses and degree courses, including LLB courses from the University of London. Many institutions abroad have targeted our country as an easy source of external funding. If we knew the quantum of foreign exchange, which years ago I was informed we do not measure—I was the senior policy advisor at COSTAATT and I was seeking to get information to justify more expenditures at that institution—if we get that information we might then make informed decisions to beef up our tertiary institutions to reduce the millions of foreign exchange that leaves our shores annually.

9.00 p.m.

In the context of challenges which we face, it might be prudent to place more emphasis on encouraging more innovation and entrepreneurship. For example, significant financial awards can be provided to students in our MBA classes who develop and succeed with start-up businesses. They do that at Harvard, Yale and Cornell. Engineering students should be rewarded for patents which can lead to innovation in our buy-and-sell business culture.

In closing, today we witnessed an example of the most simplistic way of dealing with a recession: increased taxes, including the business and green fund levies; reduced expenditures and borrow to the hilt. If this is the best that this Government can come up with, then heaven help us. Lord graciously help us. I thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: The Deputy Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Esmond Forde (*Tunapuna*): Good evening, Madam Speaker. I stand this evening to represent the constituents of Tunapuna and I would really like to bring back this debate to Trinidad and Tobago. At one time I was wondering you know if we were in Singapore, because the last speaker, my honourable colleague for Naparima, you know, sort of skewed his debate on everything with regard to Singapore and Singapore. But let us bring it back to Trinidad and Tobago.

I can simply say that I now see why, clearly, you know, from the Member for Naparima, why they are on that side—[*Desk thumping*]—because who was the campaign manager in the last 2015 election? Okay. So I could now see why.

He mentioned that facts are stubborn things. They do not go away. Thank God, the UNC People's Partnership Government was not stubborn. They have now gone away to the other side and we—

Mr. Imbert: They were not factual.

Mr. E. Forde: They were not factual and they are now on that side and they went away. All right? So thank God, so that we can now bring back good governance to Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

But I want to stick to my prepared speech and I would like to make my contribution towards the Finance Bill, 2016 and the issues contained therein, and some of the facts. The proposed exemption from passport and driving permit fees for persons 60 years and over; that is a fact. The corporate tax: business levy increase from 0. 2 per cent to 0.6 per cent; the Green Fund increase from 0.1 per cent to 0.3 per cent; value added tax, reduction from 15 per cent to 12.5 per cent VATable items as defined in the Schedule, and secondly, increase of the threshold entities required for VAT registration, from $360,000 to $500,000. Those are facts that we can talk about, of the Finance Bill, 2016.

In my mind, as I was surveying the environment with regard to some of the opinions expressed and being expressed on the issues before us today, some of those that I have noted and dwelled upon included: the ways of raising alternative funding for government delivery of public goods and services in Trinidad and Tobago; two, the prevailing national and international economic environment; thirdly, the still fresh spilled financial milk of Trinidad and Tobago; fourthly, the pronouncements of our Government regarding the 2015/2016 Appropriation Bill and the need to raise funds without imposing hardships on those least able to withstand same, while trying to achieve equity in terms of the distribution of these effects; the call by all and sundry for the stimulation of the economy and renewed growth, and last but not least, the old talk and the rantings of the now Opposition Leader and her team over the last 12 months and our present position today.

Madam Speaker, as I was deliberating, my eyes fell upon a 2016 calendar and what struck me was the fact that approximately four weeks from today some of us may be resting from J'Ouvert celebrations, preparing for Monday night mas. Others like myself may be engaging in a camp or retreat experience with their church, community or family, while others may be totally out of it from exhaustion over the last month or two or just relaxing at home or elsewhere.

Madam Speaker, nevertheless, it brought to my recall a song from my much youthful days by the Mighty Shadow. The 1979 release song is entitled: "If I

coulda, I shoulda, I woulda." The song basically speaks of how people, or persons, make nonsense excuses for their failings, failure, procrastinations, inaction or downright neglect. In the words of the Mighty Shadow, and I quote: "If I did do so or do the same thing like you, I woulda end up in the same place like you."

Madam Speaker, it is not our intention to do the same things like our colleagues on the other side. Therefore, we are seeking inter alia to reduce the rate of VAT on VATable items from 15 per cent to 12.5 per cent. That is a reduction of 2.5 per cent. Madam Speaker, my learned colleagues on the other side have scoffed at this measure and have tried and continue to label this measure as a bad move, poor strategy for revenue generation, given the fall and continued downward slide of the oil and gas prices, coupled with our production decline.

Madam Speaker, the measures have been well thought out and empirical evidence exists, though not in our jurisdiction. Maybe there is some work here for the University of the West Indies and other institutions. Nonetheless, the documentation and research exists in the Organization for Economic Cooperation Development countries, the OECD. In the United Kingdom, a study was undertaken by Crossley, Phillips and Wakefield and published in the House of Commons library. Paper No. 701, page 6 showed that for a rate cut of 2 per cent there was an increase of retail sales of 1.2 per cent. Further, the action did bring about stimulation in the economy, according to the UK study.

Madam Speaker, in pursuing the literature available with regard to our learned friend opposite in their 2012 attempt at VAT reduction and the so-called lowering food prices and inflation, a promise was made to improve the agricultural sector. However, a cursory review of the food items which were reduced ensured the degradation of the agricultural sector. Not a percentage of growth or development transpired.

Madam Speaker, the Opposition Leader was then quoted as saying, and I quote: "Increased food pricing was artificially created" but still proceeded to increase the number of zero-rated items from 59 to an overall total of 7,000 items. We on this side are not interested in creating loopholes or suck holes for the favoured few, but ensuring equity, total distribution of goods and services and improved economic performance for the whole of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister of Finance has indicated that the measure would provide some $4 billion in revenue. This is apart from improving our dietary habits and reducing our medical bills for chronic diseases, diabetes and

coronary diseases by reducing the availability of processed, non-critical foods now available by way of the present Opposition's failed 2012 budgetary measures—measures that were based on unsound principles and misinformation.

Madam Speaker, the Members opposite in 2012, in undertaking their VAT reduction measures, knew but maybe did not care, the operational collection mechanisms for VAT collections needed a tune up or a reorganization and ensured it was done. However, this Government would ensure such reorganization is done. In keeping with this goal, we are also amending the qualifying requirement for VAT registration, thereby improving the conditions for both compliance and detection of compliance failures.

The requirements for VAT registration, as mentioned before, is now $500,000, an increase from $360,000, thereby ensuring the services needed for compliance could be hired and implemented, and for improving the services sector of the economy at the same time. Presently, only 40 per cent of VAT compliance exists in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, we on this side acknowledge that these are hard times and would be so for some time to come. However, we have among us an increasing—should I say, a more mature population who have been impacted by the increasing cost for the delivery of public goods and services. Our measures regarding the VAT reduction would also impact on their lifestyles in a positive manner, on their wallets and pocketbooks.

Madam Speaker, we have also proposed in the 2016 Finance Bill to remove the fees chargeable for passports and motor vehicle driving licences for persons 60 years and above, a change from the previous 65 years. We are cognizant that our mature citizens are today more mobile and less dependent on their offspring for transportation and other tangible benefits. This is apart from measures introduced by past People's National Movement governments for senior citizens; no fees/access to public transport services internal to Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the PNM, the People's National Movement, as a party and a Government has always been involved in proposing and enacting tax and taxation measures beneficial to the nation of Trinidad and Tobago. It is in this same vein that we have proposed the increases in personal allowances from $60,000 per annum to $72,000 per annum, another one of our election 2015 benefits to our population as stated on the hustings.

Madam Speaker, our honourable Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance and my fellow parliamentary colleagues on this side have praised this virtue for

this increase to the population of Trinidad and Tobago. My Tunapuna constituents are anxiously and graciously looking forward to the positive aspects of these benefits on the fiscal changes as recommended in this Finance Bill, 2016.

This Bill, the Finance Bill, 2016, also impacts on the business community. These measures propose to increase the Green Fund, chargeable on companies' revenue from 0.1 per cent to 0.3 per cent and the business levy from 0.2 per cent to 0.6 per cent. These are revenue measures that would yield some $544.5 million in the case of the Green Fund and approximately $327.5 million in terms of the business levy, giving us a total revenue of $872 million to our much needed Trinidad and Tobago at this time for strengthening our economy.

Madam Speaker, the increased revenue proposed from these fiscal measures could, should, and would, surely contribute to the reduction of Government's overdraft at the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago and the release of funds for economic growth and much needed sustainability for continued development. But unlike the Mighty Shadow's song of 1979, we on this side could do, should do, would do, restore; by the revised fiscal measures in the Finance Bill, 2016—be active to restore the much needed economic stability and development growth on an ongoing basis in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, in conclusion, I therefore have no hesitation in voicing the total support of my Tunapuna constituency for this Finance Bill, 2016 as presented by our hon. Minister of Finance in this House today.

I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

9.15 p.m.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Mayaro.

Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and good evening to everyone in this Chamber. I rise to contribute to this debate on the Finance Bill, 2016. It seeks to provide for the variation, certain duties and taxes, and to introduce provisions of a fiscal nature. Today, the country marks 125 days, a little over four months, of this administration, where, since coming into office, this country has basically been in a shutdown mode.

Madam Speaker, hundreds of workers at regional corporations all over the country were sent home mere days after this administration wound their way into office on September 07. Today, most of these corporations can barely pay salaries to the existing workforce. Everything is being reviewed and audited across every Ministry and state enterprise as we speak. We are now generating reviews rather

than generating revenue. By the actions and inactions of this administration, investor confidence, both locally and internationally, is at its lowest. History will record this administration as delivering a mighty blow to the stomach of this economy, knocking the wind out of it. Up to today, this country has yet to inhale.

Madam Speaker, since coming into office this Government passed a budget of $61 billion and they then wrote a cheque for themselves for an additional $50 billion with no clear details and direction to how this money will be spent on what. Will it be spent on consumption items or investment? With this Government we are left in abeyance. No plan, no vision, and I dare repeat myself, Government by vaps. It is absolutely clear in the haste to point fingers and to pin fault, the Government continues to shoot itself and sabotage any hope of preserving economic stability in Trinidad and Tobago. This Bill before us today is no different to the other actions executed by this Government to assist in its own self destruction. [*Desk thumping*] While I have no problem with that, I am concerned with the collateral damage which this administration will deliver to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, with regard to the reduction in the rate of VAT from 15 per cent to 12.5 per cent, how was this arrived at and by whom? Under the People's Partnership Government, we had held several consultations with stakeholder organizations such as the Supermarket Association of Trinidad and Tobago. Manufacturers, suppliers and distributors were all part of this change in the policy and they made the necessary adjustments in advance of the removal of VAT on these 7,000 basic food items. Today, this Government is doing the reverse. No consultation, no discussion, no communication because they are in charge of what I would say is, perhaps, destabilizing this economy. I hope it is not something that is planned. [*Desk thumping*]

Today, this Government is taking away that precious benefit given to the poor, the working class, the single parent household, to those living below the poverty line under the pretext that persons will have more disposable income from the increase in their personal allowance. But, Madam Speaker, with the VAT ceiling moving from $350,000 to $500,000, more small businesses will have VAT as an additional expense burden to them. They will no longer be able to claim VAT on their fuel, electricity and communication cost. This will now be a direct cost for them to do business for these low margin operators.

Madam Speaker, business levy and the Green Fund levy impact the bottom line in a significant way to small businesses with low margins, business levy

taxes, sales or what we call turnover. Because of this, a lot of small businesses paid business levy all the time rather than corporation tax since the latter is a tax on profits. Green fund levy is a direct tax. So for many businesses who are making a small profit based on their turnover, their taxes will now go up by 300 per cent and they will now find themselves in a loss making position.

Madam Speaker, this will ultimately have the effect of several small to medium size businesses going out of business. I ask this question: who benefits when these SMEs come crashing down? What will happen to the hundreds of workers who support these businesses? It is abundantly clear to the citizens of this country that this Government is not acting on behalf of the people. This Government is looking after a select few with due neglect to the ordinary citizens of this republic. [*Desk thumping*]

Those opposite will continue with the charade of being red and ready. They will continue to mislead and misinform this population. But you know, Madam Speaker, the former administration, under the leadership of Kamla Persad-Bissessar, will always be remembered as a people-centred Government. The people always came first not this Government. The select few, perhaps friends, perhaps family. The rest of us are being asked to stand at the back of the class. I ask the question: why was the VAT removed in the first place from the 7,000 items under the previous administration? I will tell you why.

At that time there was already a long list of items that were on the basic food list that were already zero-rated. In order to extend the strategies in terms of bringing relief to a wider sector of the population, the consensus was that we should bring some relief to the sector of our society who continues to bear the tax burden here in Trinidad and Tobago. These 7,000 items were to bring some relief to the middle working class of our population. Madam Speaker, this is where the people-centred governance came in. We were looking after all the people. This decision was to bring a measure of equity of state benefits across all sectors of our society.

Madam Speaker, bringing back a 12.5 per cent tax on these 7,000 items are to return the taxation burden on the backs of the working middle class in Trinidad and Tobago. This measure will convert the working class to the working poor in this country. [*Desk thumping*] The Government would argue that the tax allowance of an additional $12,000 is being implemented to bring more disposable income in the hands of the working class. This works out to $250 per month, 15 per cent of which has already been eaten away by the reduction in the fuel subsidy.

Madam Speaker, the reintroduction of the 12.5 per cent tax on everything with salt and sugar will have very little bearing on the ham, lamb and jam for a lot of our bourgeois class in this country. But for the small man, he now has to go home and plan, and jot down in his diary based on his income, when it will be a good time to share in that ham, jam and lamb. Where is the heart? The removal of the VAT was a decision of the then Prime Minister, now Leader of the Opposition. Today we stand before perhaps a heartless administration—I am asking: Where is the heart? The impact that this VAT, this 12.5 per cent on this 7,000 items, where is the heart in that, I ask?

Madam Speaker, when the VAT was removed, food price inflation was minimized at the core. This action assisted with balancing the economic fundamentals at that time. Has this Government really thought the impact that this measure will have on headline inflation and our economic fundamentals based on our consumption habits in this country?

The rise in food prices from February 01, 2016 will simply ice the inflation burden since property tax, business levy, Green Fund levy will be passed on to the consumer. If the hon. Prime Minister feels that having tripartite discussions with labour and business will keep profit margins low, well then I guess the hon. Prime Minister may be in for a very rude awakening.

Madam Speaker, there is also a buzzword being peddled consistently: buy local. What are we producing locally? What are we manufacturing locally? We are packaging locally, but the majority of our inputs are of foreign origin. So just by taxing these inputs we are going to add insult to injury. There will be a multiplier effect on the final price of the goods or service to the consumer.

This Government is going to put the economy in an uncontrolled spiral of inflation that could lead us down a rabbit hole. They are interfering with the economic fundamentals in this country with no strategic counter-measure plan. For years, while in Opposition, they complained about food price inflation, but the Government comes today to reintroduce VAT which is an inflationary tax on thousands of items. Will this erode the disposable income of the—sorry. This will erode the disposable income of the small man on the street, the CEPEP worker, the URP worker, the domestic helpers, the handymen, part-time labourers, just to list a few. One can then argue that they will continue to benefit from the basic items remaining on the zero-rated list. But, Madam Speaker, will they eat dumplings every day, will they eat roti and bhagi every day? They cannot. At times they will want to eat something else that is going to carry the VAT and it is going to bring the burden on for them.

I thought that the role of Government was to look after its people, navigate the rough waters by keeping citizens safe and comfortable. I thought the collective intellectual capacity of an administration was to be innovative and strategic in times such as this one. If this administration continues to chant the mantra that it is Kamla Persad-Bissessar who has this country in this economic crisis, they will never allow the invention and innovation which is required in creating a new strategic direction in a sub $30 barrel of oil environment. The focus will not be there to find a new direction forward.

I dare ask: was this country hoodwinked by the People's National Movement into believing that they had a better plan for this country? They removed by their actions a Government imperfect as they were—I would admit to that—but a Government whose vision saw the development of one of the most modern Maritime training facilities in the western hemisphere. [*Desk thumping*] We had a vision in building an aviation school with a hanger and its own fully functioning 737 jumbo jet; a drilling school which had the capacity to reach a world audience.

Just to name a few, Madam Speaker. On September 07, 2015, we in this country removed a tertiary driven Government, with tertiary level thinking in exchange for what I would think perhaps may be a preschool Government that has failed to think beyond recess and lunch time. [*Desk thumping*] They have done nothing in the past four months, but to hold their hands and beat their only rhyme to death: waste, mismanagement and corruption. Nothing else has come out of this administration up to today.

9.30 p.m.

I dare ask, Madam Speaker, is the Economic Development Advisory Board driving all these uninspiring and failure-driven measures? What exactly has this board submitted to the Government in order to stimulate and stabilize the economy and to drive the diversification thrust forward? The actions and utterances of this Government continue to have a devastating impact on the confidence of this economy. At the end of August 2015, businesses were willing to take risk in this country. One week later, that devastating blow to the stomach of this economy has created an environment where the economy cannot recover. Something is wrong there. Confidence is eroded over time, not within seven days. No business in the world can withstand a lack of economic confidence.

In my constituency of Mayaro, people are crying out for jobs. Hundreds have been dropped from the food card programme without notice. This Bill today will deliver another blow to our citizens. Where is the compassion towards the people

who have elected us to this House? We must never turn a blind eye to the cries of our people. If we do that, we are doing a disservice to our family and to ourselves. Why are we then arguing this Bill in this House that, in my respectful view, will in no way benefit the working class, the poor people in this country? And do not get me wrong, the Immigration Act and Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act amendments are in keeping with some level of caring, but I cannot, in good conscience, agree to these amendments that are going to put more burden on our working class in this country. [*Desk thumping*]

I come from an impoverished constituency. I fear for my constituents. How will this additional burden that will be imposed on this country resonate in the hearts and minds of our people? We are putting this tax back on the poor people of this country. The funny thing in this scenario is that the bourgeois in this country will benefit tremendously from the 2.5 per cent reduction in VAT on the luxury items. They can now save as much as $30,000 on a luxury motor car when it is purchased. Why could we not charge 25 per cent VAT on luxury vehicles over a particular cc value? Why could we not be more aggressive or put a more aggressive tax on gambling and casinos? What about alcohol and cigarettes? Why not raise VAT on those items?

Barbados is taxing talk. Mobile operators in Barbados will soon be seeing a 25 per cent tax on mobile calls. But, Madam Speaker, instead of those creative ways of finding a way to fill the gap as the Minister of Finance alluded to, we are going to have poor people line up in groceries in this country with a 12.5 per cent tax ready to jam their wallets come February 01, 2016. And to round off the hurt, when you get in the line, the food card may be rejected since you were dropped out without notice. Where is the equity? Where is the caring? [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, the escalating crime in this country is a direct result of a lack of confidence in this Government. Our state agencies have lost, according to the Minister of Health, their mojo. I am hoping that the mojo comes back or I do not know if this measure is going to help bring back mojo. But nobody cares and this is a situation because they have lost confidence in this administration and the criminals in this country are taking advantage of the depressed state of the minds of people in this country. [*Desk thumping*]

After 125 days of this regime, the picture is, indeed, a gloomy one. There is an ambulance crisis in our hospitals. There is, perhaps, an influenza/swine flu/all the other mosquito-driven epidemic which is being swept under the mats by the Ministry of Health. Textbooks in schools have been curtailed. Laptop computers

for Form 1 students is now a thing of the past. Scholarships have been terminated, it has been reduced. GATE is now being melted down to the disadvantage of tertiary level students and fostered to frustrate successful tax-paying families. Reafforestation workers, in my constituency, are still clamouring up to today for their money which was owed to them since last year and, on a more personal note, dialysis patients are now traumatized by the Ministry of Health non-renewal of contracts with private medical facilities dispensed dialysis treatment. This is the state of where we are and we are going to drop a bomb of 12.5 per cent tax on food to people in this country on February 01. That is going to impact people's lives directly.

In early January 2015, the Partnership Government, under Kamla Persad-Bissessar, activated a process of adjustments to the budget of 2014/2015, which had been pegged at an oil price of $80 a barrel which was then revised to $45. These fiscal measures were made with the direct involvement and input of leaders of the business community showing confidence in stabilizing the economy which saw a 30 per cent reduction in operating expenses of the State and the realization of at least $5 billion in capital expenditure savings. No harsh measures were implemented to impact upon the working class. Gasoline prices were not high; VAT was not tampered with; GATE was not tampered with. No one was dismissed from their jobs. We did not freeze wages or bonuses for workers.

How much is the Government hoping to save by this so-called 7 per cent reduction in operating expenses of state agencies and Ministries? Madam Speaker, I will not be very long again, but exactly how much will these measures impact upon the tightening and improving the management alertness and innovativeness in these sectors, according to the words of the hon. Prime Minister in his address to the nation.

Madam Speaker, I continue to wish this Government all the success in their endeavours. If they are successful, we, in this country, will be successful. As I close, I wish to thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity of bringing the views of my constituents to this honourable House and I trust that I have brought some clarity to the matter before hand. Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of State in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Let me take this opportunity to extend New Year's greeting to the House and the citizens of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. I am thankful for the opportunity to serve the people of Tobago East and the people of my beloved country and I am indeed very grateful for the opportunity to contribute on this very important Bill.

Madam Speaker, I wish to commend the Minister of Finance for his prudent management of the economy, especially taking into consideration what he would have inherited from his predecessors. We are here today to examine the Finance Bill, 2016, and as such, I will start my discourse by focusing on the various clauses presented in the Bill before I address some of the issues raised by those on the other side. Madam Speaker, I would also crave your indulgence at the close of my contribution to have a very frank discussion, through you, with my colleagues on both sides of the House and the citizens of this nation as my spirit is so moved.

This Government is one that is committed to honouring its commitments to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Despite the current economic decline, the Government has taken steps to deliver on manifesto promises and moved to implement measures outlined in the budget statement read in September of last year. Even though this Government is faced with declining oil prices, today prices plummeted to a low of approximately $31, the hon. Minister of Finance honoured his commitment to senior citizens by amending the Immigration Regulations to exempt persons 60 years and over from passport fees. [*Desk thumping*].

Madam Speaker, this Government is foregoing revenue from fees associated with issuing passports to a sizeable portion of the population to ensure that we do what we say we will do. The exemption for citizens over 60 years old is particularly helpful to those senior citizens who may be unemployed, have been unemployed and are recipients of public assistance, retired or near retirement, at low to middle income wage levels. This group, a significant percentage of our population as I mentioned previously, would have the benefit of one less charge against their finances when considering a passport renewal or a first time application for a passport.

Madam Speaker, the proposals at clause 4, the amendment to the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act, is also a noteworthy measure proposed that will redound to the benefit of our senior citizens even while this Government faces a loss of revenue from the fees associated with the issue of a new driving permit. This clause in effect reduces the cost of independent living for our senior citizens who would continue to use their personal vehicle to conduct their personal and family business and similarly, those who would continue to serve the nation.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the proposed amendments to the Income Tax Act and the Value Added Tax Act are commendable. Increasing the threshold to $72,000 of personal allowance before personal income tax is to increase the disposable

income of citizens. This, in turn, enhances their discretionary spending. Similarly, a reduction in value added tax from 15 per cent to 12.5 per cent makes the citizen and, indeed each consumer, better off by reducing the overall cost of living for each consumer and, by extension, their family and household.

More disposable income in the hands of families always increases the overall economic activity in communities as the spending tends to circulate among small shop owners and the other service providers operating at a community and household level. This area of benefit, with the reduction of VAT and high-income level before personal income tax is charged against wages, helps improve the socio-economic profile of the household in the intermediate to medium and long-term spheres.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, please allow me to illustrate. A family who has more disposable income can open an education saving plan with a credit union for one or two of their children and place that amount, that would have otherwise been paid in personal income tax, into that special fund. Alternatively, the family could take a decision to start a mortgage savings or purchase shares in other investments at the UTC, for example, for a child. Such long-term saving will contribute to the future socio-economic development of the particular child and ultimately their family and community.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, our proposed rate of 12.5 per cent of the value added tax places Trinidad and Tobago in a more competitive position than that of a number of our Caricom neighbours.

9.45 p.m.

Barbados has a 17.5 per cent, Jamaica has 16.5 per cent, St. Lucia, 15 per cent and Guyana 16 per cent, as quoted by Ernst & Young in their review of the 2016 budget presentation. Additionally, KPMG notes that the proposed increase in the threshold for value added tax registration is likely to reduce the tax compliance burden on both taxpayers and Board of Inland Revenue, which administer the tax.

I have listened attentively while those on the other side protested about taxation measures. Mr. Deputy Speaker, at a time when our main source of revenue is threatened, Government must utilize various strategies to raise revenue. The current situation we are in did not happen post September 07. As a matter of fact, we have an old proverb in Tobago that is quite applicable to this situation. My grandmother used to say:

"An ah same day bush fall ah water, it go rotten."

Our current economic circumstances are a result of five years of poor fiscal policies. It did not happen during the last four months.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in his contribution, the Member for Caroni Central noted that China's economic slowdown is indicative of a global recession that not even Trinidad and Tobago's politics could stop. That may be true, but good leadership and sound fiscal policies at the first sign of global recession and falling oil and gas prices could have set us on a different course. I want to reassure the public that this Government and our able Minister of Finance, will see us through these very hard times. [*Desk thumping*]

The Hon. Member for Tabaquite spoke of double contempt in his contribution. Double contempt to me is the wanton waste, mismanagement that occurred under their tenure. Also, it is those on the other side having the gall to come and sit in this House all pious and proud, acting holier than thou, when it is they who drafted the plans for the economic mess we are currently facing.

I listened in awe, Mr. Deputy Speaker, while the Member for Caroni Central misled the House and indeed the public, when he insinuated that the measures proposed in the Bill was Government's way of getting money to spend on random dreams and recurrent expenditure. The measures proposed are simply meant to drive the socio-economic development of our nation, using principles endorsed by economists worldwide and even the *Bible*. The *Bible* tells us to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. Taxation is not evil, it is something that is necessary at times in our society.

The revenue collected from taxes will assist in the delivery of some of the social safety nets that will benefit our children, women and the vulnerable in society. The revenue will assist in development of rehabilitation centres. The revenue will assist in the building of homes. The revenue would assist in the building of workshops. The revenue would assist in ensuring that our children who are abused are placed in a safe and nurturing environment. The revenue will assist us in establishing a sustained, a rigorous public education programme, so that we could reduce the level of abuse and incest in our nation's homes. This is something that I am very, very, very passionate about, because almost every other day I would get a message coming to me about some child being abused or some woman facing abuse. The revenue would assist us to put measures in place to safeguard the vulnerable in our society, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Yes, some of those on the other side, they cry out about the tax dollars, they cry about it, they fussed and they fussed about it. I listened, but while they are

crying about it, we have to look at it as a sustainable way for us to earn revenue. Oil and gas prices are very volatile. We do not know when they will go lower, so we have to ensure that there are alternatives in place; this is one option. But while we are looking at that, we are also looking at cost-saving measures and ways we could reduce expenditure.

So, for example, at Central Administrative Services Tobago, through our collaboration with the Tobago House of Assembly, we have been able to reduce a number of duplication that would have been taking place. For example, some programmes that were being run by the Tobago House of Assembly, the former Ministry of Tobago Development was doing those same programmes. Now that we have a very close working relationship with the THA, we have those programmes going back to that authority.

In addition, we at CAST have been in discussions with NIPDEC to try and complete the long anticipated building well within the original budget or even lower. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is a project that would have been started under the former regime. It has been ongoing, however we are working closely with our project managers to ensure that we deliver that particular project within or under budget.

While I am on CAST, I want to clarify a point made by the Member for Caroni East. The Member spoke about the non-renewal of contracts, but as I mentioned before, CAST is now operating under a different schedule to that which the former Ministry of Tobago Development had. We are not a Ministry. We are a unit within the Office of the Prime Minister and as such we require a smaller workforce. And the fact that we now respect the Tobago House of Assembly, and respect the authority given to the Tobago House of Assembly under the Fifth Schedule, means that we are not duplicating programmes, creating units and employing people within CAST to do the work of the Tobago House of Assembly.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I did my maiden contribution in this honourable House, I would have admonished all of us, both sides, to work to serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I would have said to both sides that we have an honour to serve the people and honour God. Sometimes we come here and in our bid to play politics, we forget to serve those who elected us and we forget to honour God.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Bill is about setting our people on a strong footing. It is about setting out framework that would speak to our strength in a time that is very challenging. I want to encourage those on the other side to not play politics,

but really look at the Bill and look at what it can do to put Trinidad and Tobago on a better stead.

I want to encourage my colleagues in developing policies, let us always work to formulate policies that will benefit the wider majority and not just a few. As we work in this honourable House, I really want us to honour God, because it is God who placed us here, God who placed us in Government; God who placed us in Opposition. Opposition is not about opposing. Opposition is about examining policies that come to the House to ensure that all would benefit.

So I want to stretch out an olive branch to my colleagues on the other side. Let us, going forward from today, work in earnest to serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago with a level of integrity and decency, and most importantly, let us work in this honourable House to serve God by whatever name you may call Him, let us honour Him. Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to contribute. [*Desk thumping*]

Miss Ramona Ramdial (*Couva North*): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I would like to make reference to the hon. Member for Tobago East and some of the comments that she made, but before I do so, I would like to quote from Winston Churchill who said:

> "We contend that for a nation to try to tax itself into prosperity is like a man standing in a bucket and trying to lift himself up by the handle."

This is what this PNM-led Government is trying to do today, trying to tax this country into so-called prosperity knowing fully well that they will fail. Why I say that, is that, at this point in time, within our society we, of course, have to be very cognisant of the global challenges ahead of us, and what we are going to be faced with in the upcoming years.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, included in this Finance Bill are the increases in the green fund tax and business fund tax, and small and microenterprises in this country will feel the full force of such increases in taxes, as this move will result in cutbacks, loss of jobs. There will also be a scale back on capital machinery which will also affect other businesses. Therefore, in general, overall business operations will be affected negatively in Trinidad and Tobago for a long time to come.

I want to go back to the Member for Tobago East, and that Member spoke about commitment to the citizens of our country. This Government is busy auditing every single state entity, but it is really strange that the THA is not being

audited especially since the last time they were audited was in 2002. [*Desk thumping*] So I say to the Member for Tobago East, if it is that you want to be believed and be credible, then step up to the plate and allow for a forensic audit of the THA to be carried out, and that is the only way the credibility will be brought back to you. [*Desk thumping*]

The Member also mentioned in her contribution that we do not determine the oil and gas prices and, of course, it is a global recession, but the Member also went on to state that it was the People's Partnership Government that is responsible now for this so-called financial mess that we are in. I want to remind the Member that it was the People's Partnership Government who grew the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund to $5 billion under our tenure, [*Desk thumping*] and it is this same healthy fund that you are now going to dip into. So do not accuse us of mismanagement. If anything at all, we saved for the rainy days ahead, and this is what you are going to be monopolizing on.

The hon. Member for Moruga/Tableland, Mr. Deputy Speaker, spoke about being at pains when the Member visited certain communities within his constituency, and the abject poverty that he witnessed. But you sit in a Government that has now, today, increased the food prices in this country. The VAT has increased by 12.5 per cent on zero-rated items that the People's Partnership Government removed during its tenure, to make food more affordable to the population of this country.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the People's Partnership Government did something about food prices. I do not know if the Government is asleep and probably they are not aware, but our food import bill to date is at $4 billion, and what is the plan that this Government has to decrease our food import bill? Again, is it about increasing VAT on the said basic foods that we are now seeing here? Seven thousand zero-rated items we took VAT off during our tenure, and now we have most of these items being subjected to an increase of 12.5 per cent. The people of this country they are not foolish, they are most educated, they are aware of what is taking place, and they have been commenting on it. One only needs to go up to social media and you would see the comments far and wide of this action, this austerity action that this Government has brought today in our country. Therefore, to the hon. Member for Moruga/Tableland, the next time you visit your constituents, I am sure they will be enquiring and will be asking, why did you bring back that 12.5 per cent on the zero-rated items, which will now be more expensive at the supermarkets?

10.00 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in addition to that, and I go back to the small and micro enterprise sector in Trinidad and Tobago. There are about 18,000 registered small and micro enterprises in Trinidad and Tobago employing about 200,000 persons and contributing nearly to 28 per cent of the GDP in recent years. We are looking again at massive job losses within this sector because of these increases in the business levy and the Green Fund. Another issue or challenge faced by the SMEs, as they are known, of course, is the non-availability of loan financing where only 11 per cent start-up funding comes from the banking fraternity, with 70 per cent coming from personal savings.

So getting any sort of financing from the banks now is going to be harder than before, and only big businesses will be given preference for financing. This is something that we need to look at very carefully, and I hope that the Minister of Finance has some sort of strategy to deal with this, because here you have a sector from within the business community being affected by the increase in taxes, and now when they go for help at the commercial banks they will also be at a disadvantage where being small in nature they will not be given preference for financing, and, therefore, the Minister of Finance needs to deal with this issue.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, another challenge that we are hearing from economists in our country is that of there being no confidence in the economy, especially after the firing of the Central Bank Governor. [*Laughter*] Whether they believe it or not, it is a sentiment being discussed out there, and how it is are we supposed to encourage and attract foreign investment and investors if it is that we have now gone and interfered with an independent institution and an independent office, someone who, of course—and an office which of course is looked upon as that of safeguarding, and, of course, working in the best interest of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. And, therefore, foreign investors will not come to this country after seeing this instability within our financial sector, especially, again, as I said before, through the firing—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Hinds: Would the Member give way?

Miss R. Ramdial: No—of the Central Bank Governor.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in addition to that, what is also happening at this point in time, and of course we were informed this evening, that as we sit here and we debate this Finance Bill, it is reported through media that 200 workers were sent home from CENTRIN (Central Trinidad Steel Limited). Again, I make an appeal to the Minister of Finance, and, of course, to ask, what is the plan of this Government through the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development,

through the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries as to dealing with these massive job losses across the board in Trinidad and Tobago?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for San Fernando West spoke about taxation and why is it being looked upon as something negative within our economy, and I want to ask the hon. Member for San Fernando West, why is taxation the only strategy that your Government has at this point in time? Why is it the only strategy? Why are we not hearing about diversification of the economy? We all know that we are so dependent on the prices of oil and gas, yes, and I must say, as a Member of the previous Government, we put structures and plans in place for diversifying the economy in agriculture, in tourism, within the IT sector, sport tourism, cultural tourism, and we have laid the groundwork under various Ministries just for this new Government to continue. It is really disingenuous of the Member to come and defend taxation to a population and not have any other long-term sustainable strategy in place to speak about. So, I would really like to hear the hon. Member for San Fernando West explain that.

Again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West spoke about the business levy not being imposed on businesses not making a profit, but what about businesses struggling to make a profit? What is going to happen to those businesses? Are you still going to enforce these high taxes on them? And if they cannot pay it what are the possibilities of staying open over a long period of time? It is more or less nil, so we are now faced with small and micro enterprises in our country being forced to shut down because they cannot afford these increased taxes. And, of course, the hon. Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West also did not come up, or was bereft of a plan or a policy to deal with these challenges in light of these new taxes coming to the fore.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is really important to deal with the fallout that would emanate out of these increased taxes, both for the business sector and also on the individual citizen of our country, with respect to the reintroduction of 12.5 per cent VAT on zero-rated items. In addition to that, the hon. Member for La Horquetta/Talparo spoke about a new economy that this Government was trying to create, but how are you going to create this new economy with a short-term plan of taxation and, of course, increased taxes, which does not speak to any sustainable long-term planning? I heard nothing again from the hon. Member about the diversification into other sectors that would allow for new revenue streams to be developed.

Throughout our five years in government, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we always had a plan in place to deal with fallouts with respect to our economic sector, and,

really and truly, it is very disappointing for this Government to not have any sort of strategy in dealing with the fallout from these increased taxes on the population of Trinidad and Tobago. It would be very soon before their very own supporters would be rallying against them. It is very, very—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Padarath: They are already—

Miss R. Ramdial: Well, I am being informed by the Member for Princes Town that it is already happening. You are interfering with resources, and in light of our economic challenges you have job cuts, so you have thousands, hundreds of thousands of people who are now unemployed and on the breadline—you have increased taxes in food, basic items, basic food items. How are these families going to sustain themselves? How is it going to happen? There are other mechanisms, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that could have been implemented.

You had borrowed $50 billion, have you told us what you are going to do with it? Where is it going to go? Are you going to generate new revenue streams? Is it going to be invested in new sectors? Or are we just going to continue with the taxation? Because after this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is property tax. It is the unreasonable property tax of 2009 that is coming to the Parliament, and let us see what is going to happen. As all of my previous colleagues said previously, 2016 would be the same rates as the Government has reiterated, but what happens after? What is going to happen in 2017 and 2018? So they have failed to communicate to the population, not only to the Opposition, but they have failed to communicate to the entire population as to how we are going to continue to weather this storm that we are in for the next five to six years.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, before I conclude, this Government's legacy so far—in what?—in 125 days has been 19 murders in 11 days, and silence from the Prime Minister, silence from the Minister of National Security, again, an absence of how we are going to deal with this spike in crime in our country. Mr. Deputy Speaker, increased taxes by the business levy and the Green Fund, another legacy of this Government that would forever be embedded in the minds, and, of course, the economic sector of Trinidad and Tobago. Increase in VAT by 12.5 per cent on goods previously zero rated, again, harsh times for the poor in this country, and, in general, every single citizen.

Proposed increases in our utility bills, water and electricity, as mentioned by the Minister of Public Utilities some months ago; unreasonable rates of property tax on the citizens, continued closure of the Couva Children's Hospital, and no word as to how soon it will be operationalized, rise in maternal deaths at our

hospitals, shortages of vital medical supplies, massive job cuts across the board, allegations already of corruption by PNM state board chairmen, and, of course, the very infamous, PNM "big people party" that was reported in an *Express* article on December 12, 2015, where a PNM Deputy Political Leader hosted a party where you had corruption accused Jack Warner and businessman Ish Galbaransingh were in attendance, and both men are wanted in the US to answer charges to the Government for money laundering and racketeering, and contesting their extradition request by US authorities.

The Prime Minister mentioned in an article that it was no problem in going and partying with these guys, but the shoe is on the other foot, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because when we were in Government, we were chastised publicly by the Attorney General, by the then Opposition Leader, and others, of fraternizing with these people, but when they do it, it is all right; it is accepted; it is okay; it is no problem. So it is very hypocritical of this Government at this point in time, knowing what they said in Opposition, and the population is looking on. They cannot be trusted. They cannot be held to account for anything, and they cannot be looked at as a credible organization because people are watching and people are commenting, and they will not forget.

At this time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have of course on the listing, on the VAT listing on items that were once zero rated and now subjected to 12.5 per cent, we have effects on the poor citizens. Items such as peanut butter, herring, tuna, mackerel, yogurt these are foods that are of course deemed or classified as healthy foods, and now with the increase of 12.5 per cent VAT we are of course going to have citizens not being able to afford these foods. Under our tenure they could have afforded it, and, of course, now it is going to be problematic. Increase of VAT on sports and footwear: really, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what is this country coming to? It is really something that we need to be mindful of because it is predicted that oil and gas will fall lower on the market as we proceed, and we need to understand that by pinching and by having austerity measures placed on people first will not bode well for our country.

I really think it was a poor strategy on behalf of the Government to look to introduce that 12.5 per cent on the zero-rated items. I also think it was a very poor strategy on behalf of the Government to increase the Green Fund and the business levy, because, no matter what they say, in our country once taxes increase and new taxes are introduced it is going to fall—or the onus or the burden of that tax is going to fall—on the individual citizens of our country, whether you believe it or not. Therefore, there is going to be a very negative fallout and a spill over on

all business operations in our country. We are going to continue to see a spike in crime, because if unemployment and job losses continue, and then now we have higher taxes, it is going to be a negative effect all across the board.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with that in mind, I have of course asked some pertinent questions and I hope that the Minister of Finance will be ready, able and willing to clarify. Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the hon. Member for Princes Town. [*Desk thumping*]

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*): Madam Speaker, let me take this opportunity like my colleagues before me to wish Members of this honourable House a very bright, prosperous, and safe 2016. Madam Speaker, at 10.14 p.m. in the night, I know it has been a long debate, but I hope that the Government is prepared and committed to working on behalf of the citizens in Trinidad and Tobago after a very lengthy Christmas season, which many of them saw as an extended vacation on their honeymoon that they continue to enjoy since being elected into Government.

10.15 p.m.

Madam Speaker, we have seen over the past few months the priorities of this Government and its leadership. Dare I say, it has been a very sad, sad state of affairs in this country. Instead of a reassurance to the nation, we saw excursions to Barbados and to Miami for weddings. Instead of a clear plan and direction for Trinidad and Tobago, we got $3 million in paintings as we heard today. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Hinds: "Why you doh get married?"

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, instead of a leader and Prime Minister for Trinidad and Tobago, we got a wedding planner and a pro-golf enthusiast. [*Desk thumping*] That is what Trinidad and Tobago has been saddled with since this PNM Government came into office.

Madam Speaker, the hon. Member for Siparia warned this country in the run up to the 2015 general election that this PNM administration had no plan and no vision for our nation, and while the Members for Diego Martin North/East and St. Joseph and Diego Martin West beat their chest loudly that they are in charge, in over four months of being in office, they have nothing to show for it. They have instead brought destruction, gloom and despair to our nation.

Madam Speaker, the Bill that is before us today deals with several matters regarding the finances of this country, but let us really see this for what it is. While it may appear on first sight that the Bill addresses matters that may assist some of the most vulnerable in our society, it is a hoax that is being perpetrated by the Government. Madam Speaker, this is a classic case of giving with one hand and taking back with the other. Madam Speaker, who is really fooling whom?

The amendments to the Immigration Regulations brought by the Government today is foolhardy. It has not been clearly thought out and it demonstrates the Government's inability to understand what is happening in the nation. This Government has clearly indicated today what their real priorities are, which is to raise tax, achieve new forms of revenues through taxation, but to ensure that the most vulnerable persons in our society, the senior citizens and the elderly, face the brunt of their taxation.

Do not get me wrong, Madam Speaker, I am certain that this amendment may have been a good one, had we addressed the more serious concerns that are really affecting the senior citizens in this country. The senior citizens in this country are under siege. They have been placed under siege by the part-time Prime Minister and also the de facto Prime Minister in the Member for Diego Martin North/East. Today, we are putting what in local parlance you would "say is putting the cart before the horse."

Madam Speaker, in Trinidad and Tobago today senior citizens are scrambling every day for medication. They are being turned away from health institutions, as my friend, the Member for Naparima told you, because the hospitals have no drugs available. The situation is so dire that they are rationing Panadol in the health sector, while the Member for St. Joseph plays down the real situation.

What we are seeing is a continuation of an election campaign. It is all public relations, fluff, smokescreens and mirrors. Madam Speaker, let me remind the nation, through you, that the part-time Prime Minister, together with the Member for St. Joseph closed down seven dialysis centres when he assumed office. Their position as a government has never been to build, open and facilitate anything. It has always been to shut it down, close it down or do not open it at all.

Mr. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(1).

Madam Speaker: Member, I will uphold the alleged breach. I will ask you to please observe what we consider parliamentary behaviour in terms of your address.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Members, by the same token I would like to hear the contribution of the hon. Member for Princes Town.

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, their position as a government has never been to build, open or facilitate anybody.

Mr. Hinds: Madam Speaker, I would like to draw your attention to Standing Order 44(10) and to enquire as to whether the Member sought your leave in his obvious conduct in breach of this Standing Order.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, many other Members have not complied with this order. The Speaker has already indicated that some Members have unusually full notes. [*Laughter*] It will be an observation that the Speaker will make at the end of this session as regards most Members. I allow the Member for Princes Town to continue.

Mr. Hinds: If I may, Madam Speaker—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Singh: No, no, do not question the Speaker!

Madam Speaker: No, no; excuse me, please, Member for Princes Town. Minister of Works, is it with respect to the point that I have already ruled on?

Mr. Hinds: It was not a challenge to your authority, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Is it already on the point that I have ruled on?

Mr. Hinds: Madam Speaker, I merely wanted to—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, please.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, that still does not change the fact that this Government has always had a history of never being able to open, build or facilitate anything. That has continuously been their modus operandi while they have been in government.

Madam Speaker, the *Trinidad Express* on December 08 told us of the shutting down of seven dialysis centres. It said that in March former Minister of Health, Dr. Fuad Khan, had authorized 16 private health institutions to provide dialysis treatment within five days of the Ministry's receipt of an application from a patient. He said patients could apply through the external patient programme or the Regional Health Authority, and they would be referred to a private centre close to their location.

The *Express* went on to say that they interviewed several patients from dialysis centres that were closed down across the country. I quote patient Dave Harrikissoon, 52, where he spoke about the Sangre Grande Hospital where he continued to get treatment despite his living in Mayaro, and the treatment that he received was satisfactory. However, several patients quoted in that article from south and central Trinidad indicated that the dialysis centres they used to go were now closed down by the People's National Movement Government, and instead they were being referred to dialysis centres in north Trinidad.

Madam Speaker, it is interesting to note that the dialysis centres that were closed down were all in south and central Trinidad. The PNM has always been known to be a party that purposely suffers those who do not support them. [*Desk thumping*] Therefore today, if you cannot get proper health care in the state institutions or you cannot get medicine in the hospitals, what use is the free passports to our elderly citizens? This regulation that we are being asked to amend and support is a retrograde step in the scheme of our current situation here in Trinidad and Tobago.

The elderly are dying. People cannot get proper health care. There is no medication. We have a Health Minister who speaks more than the Communications Minister, so much so that on social media they have created memes that says when the Government does not know what to say they "Deyalsingh the country". Madam Speaker, this is in direct reference to the Minister's ability—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Can we have some order, please. Member for Princes Town, may I just caution you with respect to parliamentary language, please.

Mr. B. Padarath: Sure. Madam Speaker, that is actually not my words, but I was just quoting the words of several social media persons.

Madam Speaker: Member for Princes Town, I have already indicated the caution. Please be guided accordingly.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Members, may we have some order, please!

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, when the People's Partnership assumed office we did not try to mamaguy the senior citizens and provide them with false hope and handouts. What we did was real tangible things that affected the quality of their lives. I know that the PNM Government, especially the Front Bench, the front line Members do not like to hear the truth, as they jump out of their seats on

a point of order every time they hear the good work that the Partnership Government did under the best Prime Minister, in Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the Member for Siparia.

But I feel compelled to remind the national community that today, the first sitting of the New Year when the PNM comes with bravado with free passports for senior citizens, it was Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the hon. Member for Siparia who ensured that her administration put $3,500 in the pockets of senior citizens in this country through the pension. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, the audacity of this Government, and the Prime Minister continues to amaze me. I will share with you the reasons why. You would recall that it was this same Prime Minister and this same Minister of Finance who sat in previous Cabinets and changed the old age pension to a grant, making the senior citizens in this country, one of the most vulnerable groups—that could have been easily taken away at the whim and fancy of the Government.

The Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration provided the senior citizens free transportation on buses and public transport. The Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration revolutionized the C-DAP programme to make it more efficient and accessible. The Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration removed VAT on all food items in this country. Madam Speaker, the Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration started to implement a higher subsidy on water and electricity for the senior citizens who could not afford to pay exorbitant rates. Today, the PNM comes to tell the country, "Well, mammy, pappy, uncle, tanty and nennen, once you are over 60 you will get a free passport courtesy your Prime Minister." However, the Minister of Public Utilities sits quietly, salivating over higher rates for water and electricity in the new year.

On Wednesday, December 16, Yvonne Baboolal in the *Trinidad Guardian* wrote and I quote:

> "Brace for more crime and an increase in the cost of goods and services. This is what members of the public and business community are predicting with expected higher electricity rates in "the not too distant future".
>
> As a result, a call is being sent out from the business sector to the Government to hold its hands for now on plans to increase utility rates.
>
> Liaquat Ali, owner of the Trinidad Parboiled Ltd and Old Mac Agro Supplies and president of the Couva Chamber of Commerce, responding to questions…"—from the same Yvonne Baboolal—"from the *T&T Guardian* on the matter"…said, and I quote:

"…we are in a recession, I think they could defer.'

Ali said increased electricity rates would send up the cost of production at his companies and that would impact on consumers."

10.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, the:

"President of the Greater Chaguanas Chamber of Commerce, Richie Sookhai, owner of Sookhai's Diesel, feared citizens already burdened with other price increases and job cuts, would turn to crime.

'Six hundred people were laid off at ArcelorMittal. People may turn to crime if they cannot pay for basic…'"—necessities.

"'And businesses will have to spend even more to beef up security,' Sookhai said."

Madam Speaker, Yvonne Baboolal went on to tell us that the business community indicated that

"…obviously, increases in the electricity rates at businesses places would be passed on to"—the consumer.

Mr. Sookhai in the article "insisted the idea was not a good one at this time." And I quote:

"Recently, fuel went up and some businesses absorbed the extra cost, but there's only so much we can do. Remember, businesses have to sustain and pay themselves and their workers.

Other business owners echoed Ali and Sookhai's…"—comments.

Angostura said in a recent bulletin that an:

"…increase in the electricity rates would impact its cost of production and, possibly, customers."

'Water and electricity are used in all areas of our production to produce our products. Any increase in…'"—the—"'…rates will impact our unit cost of production.

The rate of increase will determine the spike in our overall operating cost,' Angostura's public affairs and communication senior manager, Giselle La Ronde-West said.

She said when the company knew what the increases would be, it would determine whether it needed to increase its product prices and customers would then be advised."

Madam Speaker, Minister of Public Utilities and the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara said that:

"…there would be a review of electricity rates 'in the not too distant future.'

He made the disclosure in response to questions from the media after the new board members of the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission received their instruments of appointment.

Asked if a review of electricity rates was coming, he said:

'There will be a review of the rates and tariffs in not too distant future.'

Members of the public were angry when asked to respond to the proposed increase in their light bills."

Madam Speaker, I will share with you some of the responses in that *Guardian* article.

"Sarah Jack, of Edinburgh 500, Chaguanas, in a telephone interview said T&T was one of the few recession countries in the world where prices of goods and services were being raised. She said in Greece, which had gone bankrupt, the price of commodities had declined.

A mother of three of Arima, who asked to withhold her name, was also angry.

She said: 'We in a recession. Give us some slack. Food prices increased. A box of cereal I buy for my son jumped from $23 to $47.'"

Well, Madam Speaker, I share with that lady from Arima that it jumped from $23 to $47 and add 12.5 per cent in VAT to that $47.

"'Cooking gas raised. I am paying more for transport and we not getting no back pay.'

She said people may consider kidnapping and robbery as means of earning an income.

Robert John, of Port-of-Spain, said raising the light bill was not the wisest thing at this time.

'People are being laid off. All the macro economic indicators, like inflation, unemployment and the GDP are negative.

> The Government is trying to raise revenue from taxpayers but how is the guy who lost his job going to pay for his lights? This could lead to more crimes like kidnappings and stealing', he said."—in that article.

Madam Speaker, I think it is only fitting that the Government comes clean with the population on water and electricity rates and what their intentions are. They must not play smart with foolishness. They owe this country a clear and decisive answer on the issue of higher water and electricity rates. While the Government comes and waves free passport and jump up in the midst of the Carnival season, it is of very little use to the senior citizens of this country when it is a time of tax, tax, tax, cut, cut, cut. [*Desk thumping*].

Madam Speaker, the Government also seeks to exempt senior citizens from the payment of fees with respect to driver's licences. This is clearly another tactic, another ploy and another hoax on senior citizens. Dare I say that this measure is really meant to be brought in at this time to cushion the blow. It is really the calm before the storm. And you heard from the Member for Diego Martin North/East today. He could only speak about 2016 the property tax and the land and building taxes rates remaining the same for 2016, but could not give this population any idea what sort of evaluation will be done with respect to property taxes and land and building taxes post 2016.

Madam Speaker, the storm that is to be unleashed on the citizens of this nation is a storm that will see the prices of not only food and utilities go up, but also things like motor vehicles and houses. This measure at this time is most insulting to the senior citizens of this country. The Government just raised the prices of fuel in the last budget. At this time in our country and also while many countries are also experiencing contractions in their economy due to the shortfall in oil and gas prices, it is very difficult for senior citizens to maintain vehicles and their own vehicles. Therefore, Madam Speaker, the point that I am making is clearly once again the Government's priorities are mixed up.

I am sure you will agree with me that there is a general feeling in this country that today the Government should have come to the Parliament to bring serious, tangible relief to our nation's most vulnerable and at the same time providing a plan for the economic challenges ahead. Instead, what we are seeing is again cosmetic enhancement being performed before they unleash the storm. [*Desk thumping*] I am often impressed especially when I meet constituents who are senior citizens and how astute and judicious they are in the way that they analyze what is happening in the country.

Madam Speaker, this amendment to the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act is nothing more than gimmick and mamaguy and senior citizens of this country see right through this window dressing that is being promoted as governance. The country is currently facing a myriad of issues and while the Government is intent on playing the blame game by continuing their election campaign at every opportunity they get, they are being less than honest with the population. The population understands fully well that they do not have a vision and they do not have a plan. Today, the Government remains silent on major projects that could seriously change the way how the motor vehicular and licensing authority in this country operates.

The current Minister of Finance when he was in Opposition, spoke highly about the MVA as a means of revolutionizing the licensing department. He was quoted as saying that the full completion of a project of this nature can see significant changes in the way that we do things and could weed out a lot of the inefficiencies that we see existing today.

Madam Speaker, since coming into office the Government, the Minister of Works and Transport and the country's Prime Minister continue to remain silent on the Government's position on the MVA. The People's Partnership Government completed the MVA headquarters in Frederick Settlement in Caroni with the hope that over 700 persons would be employed especially in the field of information technology. Today, the only comment you hear from the Government on the MVA is, "why is the MVA in Caroni? Who going down Caroni?" Once again we can see that this Government is not interested in creating employment and providing better facilities and conditions for the population. This Government is typical of true PNM form which is to discriminate and victimize those areas that they believe are not in support of them.

Madam Speaker, last month the country celebrated Christmas and the Members on this side kept asking the Government: what measures are you going to put in place to assist MPs in relieving the burdens of the underprivileged in their constituency? The Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West gave the undertaking that the following week she would bring a statement to this House. It is my respectful view that she misled the House and she misled the nation. Four days before Christmas because of the pressures applied by Members of this side of the House, that constituents who belonged to Opposition areas were able to get temporary food cards to assist them over the Christmas season.

Madam Speaker, when they want to talk about good governance and they are helping the people and they are helping the underprivileged and they are helping

the senior citizens in this country, truly it is really a hoax. And my friend from Diego Martin North/East said, "none for yuh next year". And that is typical of PNM because they do not understand that it is not the Member for Princes Town suffering. It is not the Member Chaguanas West suffering. It is not Naparima suffering. It is not Couva North suffering. It is not Tabaquite suffering. It is the people, the constituents that we represent. But again, if you do not support the PNM, then "crapaud smoke yuh pipe".

Madam Speaker, you know I heard the Member for Port Spain North/St. Ann's West—and my friend from Laventille East was so enthusiastic for me to speak without the speech. And my friend from Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West and I see Port of Spain South is not here, and the Member for Laventille West and the Member for Laventille East/Morvant. You know, they come and they tell you week after week what the problems are in their constituency. Today, you hear the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West telling you that the Prime Minister sent them to homes to look after underprivileged children to understand and get a greater appreciation of the conditions that exist there. But, Madam Speaker, I asked the Member for Port of Spain South and Laventille East/Morvant and the Member for Laventille West and the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West: how many years has the PNM been in office? And yet they continue to keep their supporters in bondage. [*Desk thumping*] They do not like to hear the truth.

Mr. Young: Madam Speaker, 48(6)—48(6), please.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, I would allow the Member to continue.

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister's speech on election night gave some hope that the legacy of the PNM discrimination would end and that they would work in the best interest of all the people in Trinidad and Tobago. Now let us be serious. Let us not bury our heads in the sand and pretend that the Prime Minister and the Government are actually living up to those ideals and pronouncements.

I have no problem working across the aisle in the interest of the people of this country. I agree, as parliamentarians we must put country before party, however, I cannot stand here today and be a hypocrite. I cannot stand and sign on to working across the aisle when the evidence is there for all to see the Government that has returned to the same old ways of nepotism, cronyism, corruption and mismanagement.

If the nation tells me to work across the aisle in their interest I would gladly do so. I cannot work across the aisle when you have a Prime Minister and a de facto Prime Minister as well and a Minister of Housing and Urban Development and a Chairman of UDeCOTT embroiled in public fiasco that may have legal implications domestically and internationally. You see, Madam Speaker, and we can ask our friend from San Fernando West, when they were in opposition they had all the answers.

They called on the population to measure us by a bigger yardstick. Every Monday morning when the then Opposition Leader was not scolding Hema Ramkissoon on CNC3, the Member for San Fernando West was running up and down the country calling on public officials and Government Members to resign.

10.45 p.m.

Madam Speaker, you hear not and you see not from this Government. But, I put them on notice that we in the Opposition will not rest until the Prime Minister acts. The Prime Minister owes a duty of care to this country. He has brought all the novel and new public relations that helped them to get into office. However, he has brought us back the same failed public officials to run the oil and gas industry in Ken Julien and Malcolm Jones, and now he has given us another one of his failed blue-eyed boys, Noel Garcia.

Madam Speaker, I call on the Government to indicate what are the plans with respect to the MVA? If there are any at all. Also, Madam Speaker, I ask the Government to clarify whether the facility in Frederick Settlement, in Caroni, will be utilized for the MVA or whether it would be used for another purpose? And if so, for what purpose? There are concerns in the public domain that the facility might be used for other purposes such as office space and so on, and these are rumours that you are hearing in the public domain and that is why I am asking the hon. Minister to clarify the Government's position on that.

Madam Speaker, there is a general feeling in this country that the Government wants the entire nation just to "move on". Let us move on. Do not be saddled with the issues of the past, do not be saddled with the corruption under the PNM, only talk about the People's Partnership. So, they are hoping that they come week after week with the rhetoric and that it will stick. They have failed to do so, because the people of this country have seen time and time again that we have had a leader who has acted when she has been called upon to do so in the interest of the people and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. We cannot say the same for the Member for Diego Martin West.

Madam Speaker, you know, recently I saw on the newspaper, and I made the comment, instead of us having a Prime Minister in this country who was dealing with issues that were affecting the country like the taxes and the property tax, and the spiral in the downturn in the economy, instead you had a Prime Minister coming to tell the country what really are the plans, sympathize, hold the hands of the population and say, I am here with you. He flies out every Monday morning, whether it is in Barbados or Miami, to attend weddings.

And, interestingly, I saw in the *Guardian* a young lady called Ravina Rampersad and her family extended an invitation to the hon. Prime Minister to attend that wedding. And, Madam Speaker, my friend from Arouca/Maloney is not here right now, but recently she was speaking at a PNM meeting and talking about what a "matikor" is, and she wanted to school those that she was speaking to at that PNM meeting.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Member.

Mr. B. Padarath: The hon. Member, Madam Speaker, I am sorry. She wanted to school those persons about what a "matikor" is. Well, Madam Speaker, a "matikor" is a Hindu tradition in a Hindu wedding.

And, I am advised that while the "matikor" was going on in Ravina Rampersad's wedding, instead of what they call the "pooah", they were calling for the Prime Minister because they know that he likes weddings so much. But, that tells you how the population is viewing the Prime Minister if something like that could make the newspaper.

Hon. Member: Disrespectful.

Mr. B. Padarath: And, Madam Speaker, they shout "disrespectful" on the other side.

Mr. Young: Madam Speaker, I would not sit here and hear him insult the Prime Minister.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, the Member is on his legs. Yes, hon. Member.

Mr. Young: Standing Order 48(4), please, Madam Speaker, the insulting language towards the hon. Prime Minister should not be allowed to continue.

Madam Speaker: Member for Princes Town, may I say to you that you are reminded of the Standing Order with respect to offensive and insulting language, and this is the second time that I have spoken to you about it. Please do not push me to invoke the relevant Standing Order. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, earlier this evening the Member for San Fernando West said to me, try and wrap up in 30 minutes, just "pelt blows, pelt blows". And while Government is telling the country, let us get on with the business, they hounded the People's Partnership Prime Minister—

Hon. Member: Opposition Leader, you mean.

Mr. B. Padarath:—now the current Leader of the Opposition and Member for Siparia, on her hair, on her shoes, on her dress, and dare I say maybe even if she had wigs like some of the other Members they may have hounded her on that too.

But, Madam Speaker, the point I want to make is that we cannot continue to be silent on the double standards that continue to exist in this country when it comes to that Government. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, this Government is telling us tighten our belts, tighten our belts, but then the Member for San Fernando West is throwing a fete, entitled Faris, for $1,250 which made the newspaper yesterday.

Mr. Al-Rawi: Charity for children. What is the big deal?

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, telling us now it is for charity. Maybe you should take a page out of your former leader's book, where the Manning fete is $125. But, in the article it went on to say that the fete was targeting the upper class and the powerful and the movers and shakers in this country, and that is their modus operandi. They will say one thing, they will say what they think the population wants to hear, but in reality they do something completely different. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo gave us a few words from one of Shadow's calypsos. Was it?

Hon. Member: Nah, nah, the Member for Tunapuna.

Mr. B. Padarath: The Member for Tunapuna. My apologies hon. Member for La Horquetta/Talparo. The Member for Tunapuna, one of the constituents of the constituency of La Horquetta/Talparo got a "lil bit" excited and sent me a short while ago what he believes is a calypso that is most appropriate to share with you and Members of the Government, and Madam Speaker, as I wrap up I wish to share with you one of Shadow's songs called "Snake in the Balisier". And it goes on to say, and I am quoting the song sung by Shadow.

I want to invoke the Doctor and then write him a letter,

I want to ask him a question, if he knew what was going on...

The other day I was passing I hear people complaining,

He is the man with the answer but he quite over yonder,

They saying snake in the balisier, snake in the balisier, snake in the balisier and they biting hard.

Snake in the balisier I sorry for Trinidad.

Big snakes in the country.

Man they worse than mapepire.

When they making their racket they does dress up in nice jacket.

Some big fat macajuel drain out the oil in the oil well.

I don't know how they found the key but I hear they empty the Treasury.

Snake in the balisier, snake in the balisier, snake in the balisier and they are biting hard.

Snake in the balisier destroying Trinidad.

I want to question the hunters who does hunt down the squatters.

They does cut down yuh hammock.

They don't care if you sleep on rock.

While them snakes in the country only fulling their belly.

I want to ask what causing that but I fraid they shoot me off meh heart.

I tell yuh snake in the balisier, snake in the balisier, snake in the balisier and they biting hard

Snake in the balisier I sorry for Trinidad.

Madam Speaker, earlier today we had the opportunity of having one of Trinidad and Tobago's most prolific calypsonians join us in the Parliament in the person of Kurt Allen. And I would like to end my contribution with the lyrics of Kurt Allen's song from 2010 where he said:

The PNM is too bright that is why dey nah run this country right.

And, Madam Speaker, day after day after day, the population is becoming more and more wary of the Prime Minister, of this Government who continues to

remain silent, and surely as night follows day the sun will rise again, we will return the Member for Siparia as the Prime Minister of this country. But more importantly, we will return with good governance to this country and remove the inept, the silent Diego Martin North/East, the silent Diego Martin West and now they are not only silent, they are numb—

Mr. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, point of order.

Mr. B. Padarath: I thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Hounorable Member for Diego Martin West.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I rise at this late hour to support the measures brought by the Minister of Finance who, in his ongoing journey to hold body and soul together, has brought to this Parliament some measures which are absolutely necessary at this time in our development.

How we all would have preferred to be in a different situation, and regardless of whether there was a lot of money available in the country or whether we are in the current circumstance, we more than likely would have had political differences and you might have had two or three or four or five political parties participating in the political process. What I find absolutely amazing is that we are being encouraged to acknowledge that our circumstances have changed and there is a requirement for us to respond to the changed circumstance. I know that a lot of theses can be advanced as to whose fault it was, why we have not got a diversified economy and why we cannot be oblivious to the changes in oil and gas prices outside and so on, but those discussions may be more useful for another time.

But tonight, in Trinidad and Tobago, what we are trying to do is to respond to our current circumstance. And it is against that background that I will ignore completely the "phewings and the musings" of the last speaker. Because, clearly he enjoyed the last general election, and clearly he thinks the campaign is still going on. And clearly he thinks that he has been hard done by, that all this wonderful thing that should have come his way did not, and the country has made a mistake. That might very well be so. The bottom line is, the country of Trinidad and Tobago like the rest of the world is observing changed circumstances.

Only this morning I was watching a programme by some economic experts talking about the difficulty that the Chinese leadership is facing now. And the reason why it is important to observe what the Chinese leadership is going

through is because it is so important to the rest of the world including Trinidad and Tobago. And the point they were making is that the Chinese leadership is very nervous about the country's inability to maintain the standard of growth required to keep the population of China comfortable in the expectation that they had only a year ago. And one of the others, an American, was saying, maybe the Americans should be happy that China is stumbling. And then the third person pointed out, no, the Americans have to hope that the Chinese succeed, because if China fails, America will doubly fail. That is the level of interdependency existing in the world today.

I have been around a lot longer than my colleague from Princes Town, and most of you in this Parliament. So, I think on that basis I have a slightly different perspective. I understand very clearly that the quality of life in Trinidad and Tobago, as it improved over the decades, was improved on the basis of funding available from the hydrocarbon sector. Whether we want to admit that or not, that is the fact. When we expanded the intake at UWI dramatically to allow more people to have access to tertiary education at UWI, it was because we were in a position to fund that initiative by the inflows. When we decided to increase the number of scholarships from a few tens to a few hundreds, to now we are averaging about 400, it was because—

Mr. Imbert: Four hundred and fifty.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Four hundred and fifty—we had inflows again coming from hydrocarbon fortunes to fund it. When we decided to subsidize fuel, gasoline, it is because there was funding coming.

11.00 p.m.

And virtually every single thing that we do in this country is of significance, required those inflows to be available. And that can be analyzed as an economy that was over dependent on hydrocarbon. But the bottom line is, that most countries are dependent on something or, in some instances, overly dependent on something. In our case, we are lucky that we have hydrocarbon to be dependent on and over dependent on, because if we did not have it we would have to depend on something else.

So, the bottom line is, we have moved ourselves to a situation where we are funding a certain quality of life from our hydrocarbon resources, fact. We have engaged certain liabilities to do that, fact. And then we find ourselves with the price of these materials in the marketplace that we have no influence whatsoever declining from approximately $100 to $31. And we had some savings, we spent

most of it, we did some borrowing, but the bottom line is, today, when we are being asked not to do this or not to do that I have to assume that my colleagues on the other side are saying to us, continue doing what we had been doing when we were in government.

I heard nobody say that, but that was being implied. Because every change that we mention, that we had to do in response of the decline, was today criticized. Imagine we are facing this very serious situation and a Member of the House gets the opportunity to take part in a debate and he talks about "matikor", he talks about who playing golf, who going to wedding and absolute irrelevant rubbish [*Desk thumping*] that has absolutely nothing to do with what is in front of the House. And, in fact, if it has any effect it is to try to tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago that we should not be responding to our changed circumstance and it is some wrongdoing on the part of the PNM. The one good thing about that, Madam Speaker, is that I have confidence that the people of Trinidad and Tobago have more sense [*Desk thumping*] than—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deyalsingh: You sure right.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And choosing between the two positions, one that says leave it in the perfection, and he went on to praise his Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition on what a wonderful job. You see, sometimes when you do such a wonderful job and it is not recognized, you probably get the feeling, hard done by, to so wonderful, that you were here, you end up there. [*Desk thumping*] And from there you want to tell us where to go, because if we did not change what was happening, one of the effects they are saying to us is to bankrupt the country a little further, because if you do not have the ability to fund the liabilities that you have created or you are creating, then it is going into bankruptcy.

I do not think that they are advising us to go to bankruptcy. I think because they are in Opposition they just have to say something. They cannot just come here and sit down quietly and say I agree with you, because, that I mean will surprise me too. They could never come here any day and say, well, listen "fellas", I mean the circumstances have changed, what you all are saying makes sense, what you all are doing is what should be done and let us go home. They could never do that. They are the Opposition, they have to say something. But for heaven sake at least let it sound a little bit related to our circumstance. [*Desk thumping*]

It is possible to oppose and make sense. It is possible to take a position that is not entirely in sync with our position on this side and give the population an idea that another option is available and if we try that option it might give us a better chance.

How do we respond to the changed circumstance? We say, "okay, one, we will cut out waste." They have a problem with that if we mention that we are cutting out waste. Well, I want to plead guilty that we are embarking, we have embarked [*Desk thumping*] on cutting out waste. To my surprise today, I heard my colleague from Tabaquite making in part of his contribution an argument that we have turned off lights in an empty building on the highway.

Dr. Rambachan: No, no, I said—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: You pass—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Rambachan: The sign that mark Children's Hospital.

Mr. Young: So it is not lit?

Dr. Rambachan: No.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Listen, we pass there every night and there are these two empty halls. Some people refer to it as a "self-service hospital". You go in and you serve yourself because there is nothing in there, nobody in there, right. The two halls lit up from bow to stern, but it is not only that building.

Once a week, early in the morning I go to golf in Moka. I get there at daybreak and I start to play just at the break of drawn. And something struck me. Every time I come here you cannot help but notice that Trinity College is lit from top to bottom, every floor—hundreds of thousands of lights, paid for by somebody, probably taxpayers. And that happens every night. And it dawned on me that this has to be a waste and then it also dawned on me that it is happening in every other school—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Members: And Ministries and public buildings.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And when I enquired why this is so, I am told it is for security purposes. I have instructed the Minister of Education, in 2015, that if you are concerned about security, security is not putting on every light in the building, it is finding the appropriate technology to install on the compound to determine if any intruder has entered the compound, not only to see who is there but to take their picture and know who it is. You could do that. It is probably cheaper than burning lights all night, and the Minister of Education is under that instruction from me as Prime Minister. [*Desk thumping*] It has nothing to do with any malice

or not wanting to open somebody hospital. It has to do with eliminating waste, sheer simple commonsense. And I expect that in the not-too-distant future to pass schools and public buildings that are in darkness but secured by some appropriate technology. [*Desk thumping*]

We did not make any bones about the fact that we thought that the last Cabinet was too large. A Minister of Government is a charge on the public purse, it is an expense to the taxpayer. Even when the Manning administration was in office there was talk in this country that the Cabinet was too large, and that was coming from the then Opposition. When they got into Government, every man jack was a Minister of some kind, and the Cabinet was 33 people, Trinidad and Tobago. And while we campaigned before the voters voted we told the voters that we will operate a smaller Cabinet because it will be more efficient and the Cabinet will be more effective for it to be cheaper.

One thing has struck me, Madam Speaker, I do not know what went on in the last Government, because in the same Cabinet room that we are using now, we have 23 Members.

Hon. Members: Yes.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And the room is full. And I keep asking where did the other 10 go? Because the rooms are of fixed size, they have 23 Members in there now and the Cabinet table is full of Ministers. And when I asked where the other Ministers were, they said, well at any given point in time at least 10 of them were out of the country and therefore they did not have to be in the Cabinet room. [*Desk thumping*] And that reduction—you heard today there is one aspect from the Attorney General where in combining the Ministry of Legal—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Al-Rawi: Affairs.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And that Ministry was actually three—it had spawned a Ministry of—

Mr. Al-Rawi: Justice.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Of the prison. So three of them were there. I was in this very hall, in this very place when your predecessor called on the Minister of Local Government and three of them got up. [*Laughter*] And I kid you not, three of them got up, and that was not the difficult part. When it was realized that three of them got up they did not know which one to sit down because there were just so many Ministers, right, and there was confusion in their Government as to who

was supposed to do what. In the Parliament that happened. We are saving by the computation of the reduction in Ministries, off the bat, cost of Minister and entourage, $44 million a year, [*Desk thumping*] over the five-year life of the Government—multiply 44 by 5 you are talking about almost a quarter billion dollars. [*Desk thumping*] That is savings. So we are attacking waste and we are trying to make savings where we can.

We have given an instruction that for the fiscal year in front of us, that you cut, we have instructed the managers to cut 7 per cent out; not because we do not like people, and in fact, we instructed that that cut must not be at the expense of employment.

Hon. Members: Correct.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Find other mechanisms within your budget to make that 7 per cent cut. And one or two people might have difficulty with it.

But you know, Madam Speaker, many, many years ago when I was a young man at UWI just earning a decent salary, a friend of mine who was an insurance agent said something to me as an advice to a younger man. He was an older man talking to me. And he said to me, "it matters not what you are working for. Whatever the figure you are working for, you should be able to save something from it. You might tell yourself that you do not have enough to meet your wants and whatever, and you do not have enough money on you, but if you are working for $10 and you are saying you cannot save a dollar from the $10, what if your salary was $9? Would you not have survived?" And I pondered on that and I have lived it ever since, that regardless of where it is at the circumstances could have been different and you could have been $1 less and that could be your savings. And that is where this country needs to be at this point in time.

There were times when things were better, we made choices, we had options, we had priorities, not every one of them was sensible. Not everyone was successful, but by and large this country has had a good quality of life funded by the hydrocarbon sector. And whether you like it or not, the reality today is that that sector in 18 months has moved from an area of plenty to an area of deficiency.

Today it is the oil companies that are complaining about the loss of inflows. It is the oil company shares and the underperformance that is dragging down stock exchanges around the world. And the joke about that in some quarters is that the future does not look very good in the short and the medium term for improved prices. You see, it is one thing to think that it is temporary, I will get over it. You

go under a waterhole, you hold your breath for a while, you will hit the surface. What we are being told and what we are seeing is that this is going to last for a while. And I addressed this nation Christmas week and I spoke about oil at $36 a barrel. Today, the Minister of Finance talked to us about oil at $31 a barrel and we are being told it is on the way down, because if that harbinger of decline in China plays out and the Chinese growth is not continuing then the demand for oil, and oil fix the price of gas because they link, the demand for oil is not going to be on the increase.

11.15 p.m.

The next very large market that used to interfere with the world market price for oil is the United States. They, very quickly, in a short record space of time, moved from being an importer of oil and gas to now only being an exporter. And what is worse, for decades the US government's policy, from a national security point of view, was to ensure that they buy and store oil. Now they are changing that policy to allow the United States to be an exporter. And what is worse, the gas export is targeting the Caribbean market—the Caribbean market. So it was not bad enough that Venezuela came in with Petrocaribe and supplied part of our market within the Caricom, we are now facing possibilities in the not-too-distant future—possibilities of facing competition.

We made a lot of our money in the last decade in the sale of LNG, and at one time we were getting about $13 a unit for LNG—$13 MMBtu. And at that time I distinctly recall persons opposed to the PNM whose policy was to monetize natural gas; in other words, bring it from the ground where it was for the last how many million years and sell it now on the market—some of those experts were saying to us, "No, leave it". The PNM did not listen. We got LNG Train 1 and Train 2 and we got sales at $13 a unit. That same gas now is selling for $1.90 a unit, and the moneys we made from that sale when the price was $10 and $12 and $13, that is what is in the storage now in our reserves.

Had we not made those sales at the time that we made them, fortuitously, we would have been up a creek now without a paddle because it is that little bit of savings in the reserves that we have that is keeping us away from the IMF right now. And the political stories around that have not yet been told because you talk all kinds of thing about the PNM today. The one thing you did not talk about, it was PNM policy in monetizing gas that caused us today to be where we are even—[*Desk thumping*]

So I will not engage the neophytes about the PNM. I did that between June and September, and that is why you are there and we are here, [*Desk thumping*] because the population had a choice to make and they made it, not on how many insults you throw at us—and what they want now, Madam Speaker, is to be able to understand that there is a certain amount of seriousness in government and that good governance is taking place in Trinidad and Tobago. But good governance means different things to different people. Good governance means different things to different people.

When I hear my colleagues on the other side talk—and I am sure they are talking about good governance because some of them genuinely believe that what they were doing was good governance. Good governance: I give you everything you want. Just find out what "dey want an ah give you". That was the style of the last Government. The Government wanted to be all things to all people and to be loved and to be adored, and they set out to give what they did not even have.

My friend from Tabaquite, he, in the lead-up to the general election, overseeing the Ministry of Works and knowing, as I did—because I was a public servant since I was in my teens and I always knew in the public service, if you are spending money, the authorizing officer, the accounting officer, the people in charge, you cannot spend any money that was not in your vote. You cannot incur any expense that there was no money to back up. Ask him. Ask him.

The $200 million in contracts that they awarded when there was no money in the URP vote, they thought that was good governance. They genuinely felt that. At least, I think so. I do not want to think otherwise. There was no money in the vote and they awarded—the Member for Tabaquite in the Ministry of Works—over $200 million because an election was due in a few weeks' time and it mattered not to him. And you see, if it was one Cabinet Minister "doing that, you coulda say, well he was an aberration". It was the entire Cabinet. Because when that was done in the Ministry of Works, a Note then went to Cabinet to cover it and the last Cabinet Note that came out in that area was for the Cabinet to approve $250 million to cover what was spent in the Ministry of Works when there was no money in there.

And you know what? It was left for this Government to pay. It was not paid before the election. Debts like that are still there to be paid.

Hon. Member: Wow! We have to borrow now.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And I heard one—I was not paying attention to the speaker because I just put my ears and listened to the whole side because they all

said the same thing. They all say the same thing. It did not matter which one was talking. You know, "What you borrowing money for?" And oh, it was my friend from Caroni Central. He was the one. I just saw the chin. [*Laughter*] He was saying that he asked during the budget debate, or whenever we came to borrow money, "What you will do with the money, and we have to date"—and, you know, he sounds impressive, you know. He asked, what we are going to do with the money, and in great indignation, we never said what we are going to do with the money, as though we are going to take it and carry it up to WASA and set it alight.

Let me tell you, Madam Speaker—[*Laughter and desk thumping*] And you know, when they go through these performances, to a stranger who is visiting this House, they might think there is such passion in the Opposition; they are so upset about what the Government is doing and they so want to represent the people. What they do not know, it is all a show. It is all a show because my friend from Caroni Central was a Member of the Cabinet and I am sure that he knows what the money is for. We never told him what the money is for, what it is going to be spent on. Let me give you a couple examples. Huawei, the Chinese company, has a $500 million contract that has to be paid.

Mr. Imbert: No financing.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: They put people to work, incur liabilities, building some system to see Trinidad and Tobago from Knowsley building—

Hon. Member: To spy.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Some say it is to spy, I do not know. It is some part of the national security apparatus costing $500 million. No previous arrangement to pay for it. It is there to be paid for. Every time a bill comes in to pay, they scrimp and scrape and pay a few dollars worth of it, but the $500 million contract is there to be paid.

And you know, they love this 500—it is a nice, round figure. Helicopters—you see the price of oil collapsing, you see you had to cut the national budget, you see the budget was put at $80 a barrel of oil, you see oil at $40 and going down, you go, you order a whole fleet of helicopters.

Mr. Imbert: Five hundred million.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Five hundred million dollars more to be paid. That is there to be paid, and it is not being paid by the PNM or the UNC. The contract binds the Government and people of Trinidad and Tobago and they go on forever.

[*Desk thumping*] When a government, or when the Government of Trinidad and Tobago enters into a binding contractual arrangement, it binds the people of Trinidad and Tobago and it matters not who is in Whitehall; it matters not who is in the Parliament here. It binds the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So the $500 million for Huawei, the people have to pay it. Your $500 million for the helicopters, the people have to pay it. And you all know that and you come here and sit down there every day and jump up and down, and they are not telling us, what we are doing with the money! It is paying the debts that you have incurred, that you bind the people of Trinidad and Tobago with! [*Desk thumping*] And that is coming in this fiscal year.

Mr. Imbert: Five billion in hospitals.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Eh? On this little island, a hospital for boys, one for girls, one for old men, one for—it is a good thing they did not win the election. There would have been 35 Ministries because during the election campaign they offered to build two more. There would have been a Ministry of Defence and a Ministry of Homeland Security. Two more Ministries were promised in the election campaign, but at least John Public say, "Nah".

Mr. Imbert: Enough.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Enough is enough. How many Ministries you are going to have? Because they were giving out Ministries like treats.

Mr. Hinds: Three Cabinet offices.

Miss Cudjoe: You move fast and "geh" a Ministry.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And you see the sums might sound small because when you get accustomed to playing with billions, millions sound like chick feed, like petty cash. So billions here, billions there, billions there. We are saying we are foregoing approximately a few hundred million dollars—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Diego Martin West, your speaking time has expired. You are entitled to 15 more minutes.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Thank you very much. We are saying that, you know, your ability to fund has changed and $200 million in the current circumstance is a serious amount of money. Forty million dollars is a serious amount of money, and in the current circumstance where we are setting out to cut out waste, to make savings deliberately and certainly to eliminate corruption, you are coming here—my friend from St. Augustine, pitiful. He got away with it in 2010. He has no

party. He has no support anywhere in the country. He is a COP sitting in the UNC seat, and imagine—you know, they are so "confofelled". UNC people "dong so, yuh know, COP inside there. He eh movin." [*Laughter*] Right? To give the facade that there is some partnership. The man declare himself out of it, you know, sitting here in this seat in front of us, while my colleague from Oropouche East, he "musee gone through de door".

Hon. Member: Yes, yes, yes.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And they come here and the only thing that they are versed in is the PNM, the PNM, the PNM. Well, this year the PNM is 60 years old this month. [*Desk thumping*] And we will be celebrating for the whole year, 60 years of public service to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deyalsingh: Uninterrupted.

Mr. Hinds: Oh yes!

Hon. Member: And we never change the name yet.

Mr. Deyalsingh: Uninterrupted service.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And you cannot even decide where your Members should be in your own organization but you want to give us advice. Our advice to the people of Trinidad and Tobago is that, do not take people seriously who make a career of trying to frighten you over land and building taxes.

I was paying land and building taxes since I was 17 years old—$1.44—but I always knew if I did not pay it, that the Government could take my land. But today, 2016, you are hearing the Member for St. Augustine trying to keep his career alive to fool people, that if the Government collects—not impose, eh—collects the tax under the land and building tax arrangement, that people could lose their house. Well, of course, if you do not pay your appropriate tax and you are a property owner, not only now, it has always been so; that is the law. If you do not pay it, then you can be levied upon and the property could be forfeited.

Why does it take a politician to come and waste so much time in the Parliament? It sounds good. "Axe the tax." What a dotish statement. "Axe the tax." It got you into government. It could not keep you there because it is the law. You had five years. We are being told now that we did not do what and we did not do—things that they did not do in five years, in four months they are saying we did not do it.

The last five years the Government was going to do some dramatic changes in the licensing office. I am not even talking about regularizing PH taxis. I am not talking about that! I am talking about the Motor Vehicle Authority. That arrangement that started under the PNM at $40 million is a $1 billion construction project, and contrary to what we are told this evening by my friend from Princes Town, it is not a finished project. The appendages have not been put on. That thing was supposed to be arranged by a centralized unit in Frederick Settlement and a number of other out—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: Satellite stations.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Satellite stations. Not one of the satellites have been built and the cost of the entire programme was used up on the building—

Mr. Al-Rawi: And the contractor run. He in Panama, and he "geh" sued by Procom Co.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: That is for another day. But if you heard the parliamentarian talk this evening you would have thought that this—[*Interruption*]—and accusing us on this side, who never said anything but let us move on. Because it is difficult to move from where they left us—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: Exactly.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—and accusing us of saying, "who want to go down to Freeport".

11.30 p.m.

Where have you heard anybody say that? Trying to give the impression that the people in the country have a problem with the unit being in Freeport, in Frederick Settlement.

Hon. Member: Caroni.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And that is his point of view only, but puts it in the mouths of the rest of the population and the next thing he would say is racial. That is where he is heading, you know. That is where he is heading because every time they start by the PNM, they fabricate stories and it end up by race. That is it.

Nothing that we could deal with in this country for some politicians ought to come to an end to our conclusion without angling down that road. Sixty years they carrying on that foolishness and it has not worked, and it will never work because the people of Trinidad and Tobago—[*Desk thumping*]

When we talk about priorities, waste and just general back behaviour, the last Government take the cake. Madam Chairman, I have moved in to the Prime Minister's residence up there in St. Ann's—Diplomatic Centre and residence. Last Christmas we had a series of functions up there—children functions, staff function, a public function—and every one of those functions, except the children function, had an alcohol bar, and you will be surprised to know that all the alcohol for those functions we did not buy a bottle. It was used from the household, from what was there.

Hon. Members: Ooooooooh!

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: When Christmas was over we had a valuation done on what was left; $400,000 of liquor on the compound there, and that is what they left when they went. That is what they left and that should tell you what the priorities were for those who were there before the PNM. That should tell you what their priorities were.

Right now in that compound up there, there is $400,000 in alcohol, and the interesting thing about it is that in the records we cannot find how it was sourced. There is no paper trail towards its sourcing. So it leaves us to wonder how all that alcohol got into that compound. But if I understand how they ran the country, it might have even been paid for by X, Y, Z, or Mr. A, B, C. You know, we had a very good Christmas last Christmas. We did not have as much as the Christmas before, but the one thing we did not have, it did not have a Prime Minister running up and down the country on the back of trucks playing Santa Claus for two months.

What I demonstrated last Christmas is that it is possible to have Christmas and have a Prime Minister working too. [*Desk thumping*] And as for the Member for Princes Town who has a problem with me and weddings, we had some discussions and when you are betrothed let me know. If you invite me I will come to yours, [*Desk thumping and laughter*] but I suspect that there have to be some serious discussions before you invite me.

So, Madam Speaker, all I will say to my colleagues is that what is required of us is not that you become PNM or we become UNC. We are on different sides of the political divide but we have the same responsibility, which is to serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago [*Desk thumping*] and we can serve them from both sides of the House. It is your job to keep this Government in check. It is your job to keep this Government performing at the best that a Government of Trinidad and Tobago can perform. And when we fall short—because all Governments

eventually become unpopular. All Governments in democratic societies end up in failure and then you move to the other side. But in the meantime, let us not pretend that we do not know that the country is in serious financial difficulty. And if you know that, do not come to the Parliament and tell us to spend more and get us into more trouble. Let us spend wisely. Let us spend wisely.

Hon. Member: Well said, Mr. Prime Minister. Well said. [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: You very well know what the financial position is; and you know that if we continue doing what you did last year we will bankrupt the country. I will tell you one thing. I am leading this Government in one five-year term and then we will go to the polls after, but between now and then I have a responsibility to you, your children and the country to ensure that this country does not become another IMF case— [*Desk thumping*] that is the commitment I give to you—once you could avoid it. [*Desk thumping*]

The reason why we set out to do that is that as difficult as it may seem—today, some of you outlined some of the difficulties that come with the increased prices and the changes and so on. If you think that is difficult, it will be 10 times more difficult if the IMF starts to call the shots in Trinidad and Tobago. You are much better off calling your own shots and setting your own pace, [*Desk thumping*] and the number one priority under the current circumstances of this Government is to keep Trinidad and Tobago out of the jaws of the IMF while making the best of a bad situation.

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

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I want to thank all those who have contributed to this debate. I particularly want to single out the hon. Prime Minister, the Member for Tunapuna, the Member for Tobago East, the Member for Moruga/Tableland, the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's East, and all Members opposite who spoke during the debate. And how could I leave out the Attorney General for the spirited intervention that inspired the motivation. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I am a bit disappointed that Members opposite did not avail themselves of a document put out by the Secretariat Unit of the Parliament, and that is, Bill Essentials, the Finance Bill, 2016, and I want to compliment the staff of the Parliament for this document. If Members opposite had taken the time to read this document, which I am certain they received—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: This morning.

Hon. C. Imbert: Whether this morning or this afternoon—they would have seen that the Finance Bill, 2016 provides for the variation of certain duties and taxes. It seeks to amend several pieces of legislation, namely: the Immigration Act, the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act, the Income Tax Act, the Corporation Tax Act, the Value Added Tax Act, the Miscellaneous Taxes Act.

This document explains everything that we have been about today. For example, it explains that Part III of the Bill amends the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act in order to exempt senior citizens from the payment of fees for driving permits; it indicates that we are increasing the chargeable allowance for individual taxpayer from $60,000 to $72,000 per annum; it indicates the changes to the business levy and the Green Fund; it speaks to the changes in the Immigration Act where we are exempting persons over the age of 60 from payment of fees for passports; it gives the commencement dates and so on. I am rather disappointed that Members opposite did not avail themselves of the excellent research done by the Parliament and the excellent guidance.

Madam Speaker, we did not come here by vaps. This debate today is merely another step in the journey towards dealing with the issues facing Trinidad and Tobago. The measures that we have discussed today were announced by my good self in the 2016 budget statement. It is all part of an orderly progression, it is all part of a plan and, therefore, when I hear Members opposite just making wild statements about there is no plan; this is part of our economic restructuring plan. The increase in business levy, the increase in Green Fund, it is all part of economic restructuring. The removal of fees for permits, for passports, it is all part of fulfilling manifesto promises.

The changes to the VAT regime are necessary and I will explain why. So this is all structured. We are very serious, Madam Speaker, and if I can borrow from—there is a particular speech in a particular movie that I always return to. The movie is called the *American President*, and this is what he had to say. He said:

> "We have serious problems to solve, and we need serious"—problems—"to solve them."

Hon. Member: "Serious people".

Hon. C. Imbert:—"serious people to solve them."

We have serious problems to solve and we need serious people to solve them, and the Members opposite are not in the least bit interested in solving the

problems that face this country. If I can paraphrase that speech from the *American President*. We on this side are serious people. [*Desk thumping*] We have been given a job, we have been given a mandate for five years to rescue this country and we intend to do so.

Let me explain what has happened in this country over the years because it is necessary to reinforce the facts. I go now to the *Review of the Economy 2015*, a document that was laid in this House during the budget debate of 2015, and it is noteworthy that in 2010 the total expenditure by Government was $46 billion. Remember that number, Madam Speaker, the expenditure under the last administration, $46 billion. And when you look at oil prices and you go to oil prices in the 2010 period, oil prices averaged around $75.

So the PNM was spending $46 billion with oil prices averaging $75. Let us look at what happened when the UNC came in. Expenditure went from $46 billion to $49 billion, to $53 billion, to $58 billion, to $62 billion, but revenues did not keep pace with expenditure. So what the Members opposite did, is that they grew Government expenditure from $46 billion—PNM was managing this country with an expenditure of $46 billion. They escalated Government expenditure from $46 billion per annum to $63 billion per annum, but were the revenues in tandem with the increased expenditure? No, Madam Speaker. Not at all.

When you look at the prices of oil during that period, during the period from 2010 down to 2014, Madam Speaker, they were getting oil prices in the vicinity of $80. So they were just getting prices just maybe $5 more than the PNM in the PNM era, but they escalated expenditure from $46 billion to $63 billion, and this is what this country finds itself in today. We are dealing with public expenditure in the $60 billion range, but we only have $40 billion revenues. That is the trap that we have been placed in as a country and Members opposite need to understand that. This country was running at a $45 billion level. When they demitted office they had it up to $63 billion.

12.00 midnight

So taking that valuation for $4,500 a month for a $1 million property which is typical in Trinidad and Tobago, today, I can say that without any fear of contradiction, that a property valued at $1 million will rent for about $4,500 a month. Do the calculations, deduct the 10 per cent for voids, you get $48,600 is the annual rental value and then you multiply the 3 per cent by that and you get $1,458 a year. So it is not $30,000 a year for a property valued at a $1 million. It is $1,458 is what the property tax will be, if it is implemented as is, where is. It is not $30,000. It is $1,000. I am absolutely tired—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Al-Rawi: Just over $121.00 a month.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, just $100 a month. I am absolutely tired of this scaremongering that comes out of that party called Congress of the People. Why can they not get their mathematics right? Why can they not get the law right? Why can they not speak the truth? [*Desk thumping*] Why are they harassing people in this country?

Hon. Member: "Frightening dem."

Hon. C. Imbert: Why are they trying to frighten people? Why? When you know the tax is less than $1,500 a year, and you are saying it is $30,000. We have given the commitment—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Al-Rawi: Six minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Do I not have extra time?

Mr. Al-Rawi: No.

Hon. C. Imbert: No extra time?

Hon. Member: No.

Hon. C. Imbert: Okay, no probs. Madam Speaker, that we are going to revisit this Property Tax Act, do the calculations, look at formula and see whether it is fair, equitable and transparent, because even at $1,500 on a $1 million property, we might consider that might not be just and equitable in all circumstance. We have given that commitment.

So what is all this scaremongering all about? That is why the people did not buy your rhetoric in the last general election. The population just did not buy it, and I use the example of Barack Obama. When Barack Obama went for the American presidency for the first time, "dey called him all kinda ting. Dey say he is ah terrorist. Dey say he is ah Muslim. Dey say he has no religion. Dey say he not born in the United States. All kinda ting de say about de man." You know what happened? The American public did not buy it. That is why he won the election. And the Trinidad and Tobago public did not buy your rhetoric. That is why we are the Government and you are the Opposition. [*Desk thumping*] I do not say that in any way to be offensive. I state facts. They did not buy your rhetoric. They did not buy it at all.

Now, let me just speak about the VAT in the few minutes left to me. Any I have in my possession a document that was presented to the last Government, and that is a Trinidad and Tobago Country Report dated March 2013, produced by the

International Monetary Fund, entitled: *Enhancing Revenue and Non-Engery Growth, an Agenda for Comprehensive Tax Reform*. It states as follows at paragraph 26:

> The efficiency and administration of value added tax in Trinidad and Tobago is strongly compromised. In 2012, 64 per cent of all sales were either zero-rated or exempt; 50 per cent of imports were not subject to VAT; 73 per cent were zero-rated; 27 per cent exempt. Numerous tax preferences have largely deteriorated the VAT tax base, seriously undermine VAT revenue productive, opening avenues for tax evasion and leakage.

This was presented to your Government in 2013.

> This is reflected in the VAT efficiency ratio. The ratio of actual VAT collection to the potential VAT, if all domestic consumption were taxed at the standard rate, despite a growing economy and improvements in tax administration. The ratio has not improved.
>
> Indeed, it has fluctuated around 0.4, this is significantly lower than in many other countries of similar development level. Lower than many Caricom States. Lower than international countries like New Zealand, which is at 00.9. Recent expansion of zero-rated supplies of food is most likely to further decrease VAT efficiency in the coming years.

So, the IMF told you that the VAT system was completely compromised, you were only collecting 40 per cent of the VAT that you had the potential to collect, there was tax evasion; there was tax leakage, but because you were a populace Government, and because you were not serious, and you are not serious people, you could not face the serious challenge of dealing with the reform of revenue collection in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

We on this side are serious, Madam Speaker. This country has serious problems, and it requires serious people to solve them. We in the PNM intend to solve the problems of this country. We will be in it for better or for worse. We intend to confront the challenges that face this country frontally. We are not going to hide anything. I came into this Parliament and I told you the prices at the basket of crude oils in Trinidad and Tobago have attracted over the last three months. It is below our budget projections. I told you we are facing a revenue shortfall of $2.7 billion. I am not going to hide anything. This Minister of Finance is going to level with this Parliament and come clean with the population. [*Desk thumping*]

This PNM Government will do whatever is required to put this economy back on track, to make this economy resilient, to diversify this economy and to build a strong and prosperous Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] I beg to move.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Bill committed to a committee of the whole House.

House in committee.

Clauses 1 to 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 5.

Question proposed: That clause 5 stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Imbert: Madam Chairman, it has been drawn to my attention there is a minor typographical error in clause 5(b)(a). It should read: an individual to "whom" section 17 applies rather than "who".

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 5, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 6 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

12.15 a.m.

Question put and agreed to: That the Bill, as amended, be reported to the House.

House resumed.

Bill reported, with amendment, read the third time and passed.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Madam Speaker, I am deputing for the Hon. Leader of Government Business who is unavoidably absent, and I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Wednesday, January 20, 2016, at 1.30 p.m., at which time there will be a meeting of the Finance Committee in preparation for a debate on Friday, January 22, on the closing of the accounts for the 2015 fiscal year, which will involve a variation of appropriation to deal with unbudgeted expenditure in the 2015 fiscal year. I am sorry, Madam Speaker, there is agreement we would not deal with the matter on the adjournment.

Madam Speaker: Much obliged. So that, Members, the matters to be raised on the adjournment have now been deferred to the next sitting of this House.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 12.18 a.m.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Coastal Protection Unit (Details of)

The following question was asked by Mr. Rushton Paray (Mayaro):

10. With respect to the Coastal Protection Unit, could the Minister of Works and Transport indicate:

a) the budget allocation for rehabilitation work in the Manzanilla/Mayaro to Guayaguayare area;

b) what technical studies have been done to date in this area;

c) the recommendations submitted to the Ministry on this matter;

d) the consultants engaged and the cost of the consultancies; and

e) the time frame for implementation of the recommendations that have been accepted?

The following answer was circulated to members of the House:

The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds):

a) Along the Manzanilla/Mayaro to Guayaguayare the Coastal Protection Unit (CPU) through the Critical Coastal Protection Programme (CCPP) is implementing a mix of rehabilitative works and consultancy services.

The rehabilitative works will provide an immediate line of defence providing short to medium term benefits for areas that are critically impacted by coastal erosion and/or coastal flooding.

The consultancy services are geared towards developing sustainable coastal management strategies along the Manzanilla Bay, Mayaro Bay and Guayaguayare Bay. These strategies will be developed into programmes of works to deliver sustainable coastal protection and management. Under the Critical Coastal Protection Programme an allocation of $149.82Mn has been provided to implement rehabilitative works and consultancy services along the Manzanilla/Mayaro and Guayaguayare areas.

A breakdown of the projects is listed hereunder:

REHABILITATIVE PROJECTS MITIGATION OF COASTAL EROSION AND FLOODING

Project	**Scope of Works**	**Status**
Manzanilla Beach Facility Seawall Stabilization Works	Rehabilitation of the existing seawall through the installation of 252 linear metres of vinyl sheet pile bulkhead	Completed
North Cocos Shoreline Stabilization Works	Construction of 100 linear metres of vinyl sheet pile defence with rubble mound toe	Completed
South Cocos Bay Shoreline Stabilization Works	Construction of 800 linear metres of rubble mound revetment and 400 linear metres of artificial sand dune	To commence in fiscal 2015/2016 subject to availability of funding.
Cocos Bay Flood Alleviation Project	Construction of 800 linear metres of a sand dyke and revetment toe	To commence in fiscal 2015/2016 subject to availability of funding
Manzanilla BeachCoastal Protection Works	Construction of 1500 metres of rubble mound revetment	To commence in fiscal 2016/2017 subject to availability of funding.

PROJECTS (TECHNICAL STUDIES) FOR THE DEVELOPMENT FOR A LONG TERM COASTAL MANAGEMENT STRATEGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION POLICY

Project	**Scope of Works**	**Status**
Mayaro-Guayaguayare Coastal Studies	Consultancy services to determine sustainable coastal protection solutions along the Mayaro and Guayaguayare shorelines	Ongoing. To be completed August 2016
Shoreline Management Plan for Manzanilla Beach (Manzanilla Point to Point Radix)	Consultancy services for the feasibility studies and detailed design of sustainable coastal protection solutions for Manzanilla Beach	To commence in fiscal 2015/2016 subject to availability of funding.
Comprehensive National Coastal Monitoring Programme	Consultancy services for the design, implementation, transitioning and sustainment of programme for monitoring coastal processes parameters – waves, currents, beach profiles, sediments, bathymetry, LIDAR, satellite imagery etc.	To commence in fiscal 2015/2016 subject to availability of funding.

b) Technical studies to design sustainable coastal erosion protection measures along the south-eastern coastline have been done to date.

Project Objectives

The objective of the study is to design sustainable coastal erosion protection measures along the south-eastern coastline of Trinidad. These measures must be technically feasible, environmentally sound and economically viable; and be consistent with the

Government's policy, strategic objectives and immediate priorities. The objectives of the project are to:

- Reduce the frequency and severity of coastal erosion and inundation, thereby reducing the risk to lives and preventing damage to public and private properties, and infrastructure.
- Reduce losses in the productive sector as a result of traffic and other disruptions.

c) The Mayaro/Guayaguayare Coastal Studies is currently nearing the completion of the Solution Identification and Impact Assessment phase. During this stage, the areas recommended for coastal intervention/protection works have been identified and a preliminary list of solutions developed. In this regard, a public consultation was held on 17th November, 2015 where the activities undertaken to date were presented. The Member of Parliament for the Mayaro was present at this consultation. Further, the presentation to the public has been placed on MOWT's website. The presentation can be found through the following *link:*

http://www.mowt.gov.tt/documents/Mayaro-Guayaguayare%20Coastal%20Presentation.pdf

d) The consultant engaged is Halcrow Group (Trinidad and Tobago) Limited a CH2M Hill Company at a cost of $13,951,302.97 (VAT Inclusive)

e) The solutions that have been recommended are currently being assessed for social, economic, environmental and technical merit. Once it has been satisfactorily proven that the recommended solutions meet the project objectives, these solutions will be taken forward to detailed design. It is expected that all detailed designs will be completed by August 2016.

The recommended solutions carried forward to detailed design will be packaged into a programme of works for implementation within the next 1-20 years (2016-2035).

The following question was asked by Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (Caroni East):

Laptops for Form 1 Students
(Distribution Date)

36. Could the Minister of Education indicate whether Form 1 secondary school students for the academic year 2015/2016 will be provided with laptops and the distribution date?

The following answer was circulated to members of the House:

The Minister of Education (Hon. Anthony Garcia): The Minister of Education is collecting information on the laptop distribution initiative undertaken during the period 2010 to 2014 and is reviewing studies both locally and internationally, many of which indicate that there is no evidence to suggest that distribution of laptops to students has improved student performance.

As a consequence, the Ministry of Education will be seeking the views of stakeholders as to the best way forward for utilising technology in the curriculum at a Consultation on Education to be held in February 2016, both in Trinidad and Tobago.